

The Uniform

Addition

It's already mid-February, and as has been the case for over six weeks now, I'm sitting on the bus from my new school on my way home. It's so boring and kind of mean, too. I'm the last student on the bus and have to sit strapped into my seat for over 90 minutes. Basically, I spend the whole day on a seat like this, because the seats at school are designed similarly and equipped with the same straps as on the bus. Here, you even have the advantage that the seat is more softly padded than in the classroom. Still, the five straps keep me firmly in my seat. I'd even say it's even tighter and more restrictive on the bus. I can't lean forward at all, and the strap between my legs pulls uncomfortably backward. In the classroom, you'd have to be really unlucky for the teacher to tighten it manually as much as they do here on the bus. But here, the bus's automatic system seems to be set precisely for that.

Here, too, we have to fasten the straps ourselves to the loops on our uniforms, and the bus driver then presses a button on the dashboard—after that, the rest happens automatically. However, the bus driver or the supervising teacher then comes around to each of us again, checks the straps on our uniforms, and also fastens the bus's seat belt over the uniform.

The ride is terribly boring because we're not allowed to do anything and can barely move. We're not allowed to play Switch, and I didn't get a cell phone for my birthday or for Christmas.

Finally, the bus turns into the residential area where our house is located. The bus driver doesn't exactly take it easy over the speed bumps at the beginning of the street, and I get shaken up pretty good again. In the first few days on the bus, that was a strange feeling. You're strapped so tightly to the seat that you can't be lifted off it, as would surely be the case without the seat belts. It feels a bit like being on a roller coaster and would probably even be fun if it weren't for that seatbelt between my legs, which uncomfortably prevents me from sliding forward on the seat whenever the bus hits a bump. The same goes for hard braking, which the bus driver, of course, does again just before we reach our house.

On top of that, the supervising teacher—my homeroom teacher—is also on the bus today, and he's now finally "helping" me off the bus. Technically, I could do that myself after the button on the dashboard was pressed, but the teachers want to attach a leash to my uniform right away. Once again, Mr. Stone is the one doing that today.

Then he leads me to the front door, holding the leash. This is even more embarrassing than I'd imagined at first.

When I had to put on this stupid school uniform for the first time on my birthday, I couldn't even imagine walking out the front door in it. And now, almost every day, my teacher leads me from the bus to the house, almost like a dog. Fortunately, the leash is attached to my hip and not around my neck like a dog's. I'm afraid, though, of the day when one of my friends from the village will see me like this. Fortunately, that hasn't happened yet now that it's winter.

As we approach the front door, it opens, and my mother greets me joyfully with a kiss on the forehead.

"Hello, sweetheart, how was school?"

I just mumble something like "pretty okay" and want to get inside as quickly as possible to take off the uniform that's been constricting me all day and getting on my nerves. So I hurry past my mother.

"Good evening, Mr. Stone. This service is so great—thank you so much for your help."

With those words, my mom takes the leash from Mr. Stone and holds it tight.

"Good evening, Mrs. Müller. We're happy to do this for Maik and his development."

"It's nice that you're on duty today. How fitting."

"Yes, the teachers take turns, but what do you mean by 'fitting'?"

“Well, after Maik’s little nighttime adventure last week, the new garment you recommended arrived today. How has Maik been behaving at school these past few days?”

It’s always the same: Whenever Mr. Stone, the escort teacher, is on the bus, my mom can’t resist stopping him—and by extension, me—at the door to ask him questions. Slightly annoyed, I tug at the stupid leash that’s keeping me from going to my room.

But what are my mom and he talking about? I’m stopped by a slight tug that spreads across the entire surface of my tight-fitting uniform.

“Maik, don’t be so impatient—I’m talking to your teacher,” my mother scolds me.

“Well, Ms. Müller, Maik is making normal progress, in line with expectations. He hasn’t quite settled into our school yet, but Maik is on the right track. However, we could already clearly notice his fatigue last Thursday. That’s why I very much welcome your decision to implement further disciplinary measures at home as well. Maik simply has to understand that he must follow the rules. And I’m sure the new purchase will help you.”

“Yes, we think so too. Thank you very much for your valuable recommendations.”

“You’re welcome. Goodbye, Ms. Müller. And to you, Maik, I wish you a good night.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Stone.”

Then my mom tugs on the leash again to remind me to say goodbye to my teacher.

“Bye, Mr. Stone, see you tomorrow,” I mumble.

“See you tomorrow, and stay fresh, Maik,” Mr. Stone says to me before turning around and walking back to the bus.

I have a really bad feeling about this. He’s never said goodbye like that before, and what kind of weird piece of clothing were the two of them just talking about?

I should probably mention that last week I couldn’t fall asleep, so I secretly brought my Switch to bed that evening after I’d already been lying awake for an hour. Then, unfortunately, it got so late that I left the Switch in bed and overslept. My mom noticed, of course, in the morning. She was a little mad about it. But this new school is really stressing me out, and I just needed to relax a little.

“Mom, what kind of clothing were you guys just talking about?” I ask cautiously as my mom leads me to my room on a leash.

“Maik, you’ll find out after dinner. You know how disappointed Dad and I are in you for breaking the rules last night,” my mom says in a very calm voice as we reach my room.

I immediately start to feel a little bad about the whole thing again.

“Yes, Mom, I promise to try harder to follow the rules. But there are so many rules right now, and it’s not that easy,” I say, my head hanging slightly.

I’m still curious, so I keep trying to figure it out.

“Does that piece of clothing have anything to do with it? Is it a punishment for that?” As I say this, I’m immediately reminded of my school uniform, which is still tightly wrapped around my body. Almost every day, I feel like it’s a punishment for my bad behavior at my old school. And every day I look forward to the moment when I can finally take it off—which I hope will be soon. Because sometimes I have to keep the uniform on even while doing chores if I’ve misbehaved.

“Maik, it’s not a punishment. It’ll help you and support you in your resolution to follow the rules.

But you’ll have to be patient a little longer. I want Dad to be there when you get it. Okay?”

I don’t have a good feeling about this, especially if it’s a recommendation from the new school. So I decide to wait until Dad comes home.

“Yeah, okay. Can you unbutton my uniform now, Mom?”

“Sure, sweetheart.”

My mom unfastens the strap from the ring on my hip and places it on a chair next to my bed. Then she pulls the little remote control out of her pants pocket. I still remember my birthday, when it happened for the first time. I’d foolishly made a mistake, and that stupid uniform was even a little tighter back then than it is right now. I’d already been trapped in it for many hours, just like now after a long day at school. Mom presses the first button, and the lock at my hip releases with a slight rattling of the clasps. I immediately grab the metal straps and impatiently pull them out of the front of the overalls. It’s an indescribably wonderful feeling when the constant pressure around my

stomach from the day eases, and I automatically take a deep breath. Even though the pressure on my shoulders—and especially in the crotch—is still there, it’s still a nice relief.

My mom watches me and probably senses what I’m thinking. We’ve already had quite a few discussions about these overalls—or rather, the school uniform. And about the fact that I see them as pure harassment and humiliation. But Mom considers them a necessary and important lesson meant to make me a better person, or something like that. I don’t believe in that.

After taking two deep breaths, I look Mom in the eyes again, and she presses another button on the remote. Instantly, the metal strips on my chest come loose, and the pressure on my shoulders eases. The edge of the bib, which has been rubbing against my neck all day, slides down as well. But the best part is the relief in the crotch. I then pull on the side of the bib so that the strips slide all the way out of it and I can fold the bib down. The metal straps dangle on my chest for a moment until I can finally pull the pants all the way down. As I do, the straps fly over my shoulders and land loudly on the floor. Mom watches me until I neatly drape the pants over the chair, where the leash is already lying. The metal straps rattle against the chair for a short while longer, until I’m finally free of any reminders of my school uniform for the day.

“Okay, sweetie, I’m going to start making dinner now. In the meantime, you can go play in your room and change into something comfortable. Tonight we’ll have a family cuddle night with Dad until it’s time for you to go to bed. I love you,” my mom says as she leaves my room.

I call after her, “Yeah, Mom,” and run to my closet to grab a loose-fitting and very comfortable house suit.

I would have loved to lie down on my bed with my Switch and play a round of Minecraft, but unfortunately, I’m banned from using the Switch for two weeks after that fateful night last week. So I grab a comic book and read a bit.

But I can’t concentrate on it at all, let alone enjoy it. I can’t get Mr. Stone’s words out of my head: “further disciplinary measures at home as well.” That can only mean it’s going to be something just as annoying as the school uniform.

I cast a quick, scornful glance at the overalls lying on the chair next to me, staring at me maliciously. “How can a pile of fabric get on my nerves and annoy me so much?” I think to myself, hoping it won’t be even worse than the school uniform.

Mom said I can play in my room. I’m not grounded, am I? At least she didn’t say that—why would she? I didn’t do anything wrong today. I need to take my mind off things, so I decide to go to the kitchen to see how far along Mom is with dinner.

“Well, sweetie, what are you up to?” my mom asks as I walk into the kitchen.

“I was reading a comic, but I already know it. It’s boring,” I say, peering into the pots on the stove.

“What are you cooking?”

“Spaghetti with tomato sauce and cucumber salad on the side.”

“Oh, that’s delicious—I like that. ... Except for the salad, of course,” I say, grinning mischievously at my mom. It’s not that I don’t like the salad, but I just think the spaghetti is better.

My mom gives me a quick hug and squeezes me. That feels nice—I actually like it—but lately, the relationship between my parents and me has been a bit strained. This whole thing with the new school and the weird customs there is really getting to me.

“Maik, sweetie, can you please set the table? I think Dad will be here any minute.”

I’m grateful for the distraction the task provides and set about bringing the dishes to the table. It takes my mind off things, because I realize I’m getting more and more tense because of this new piece of clothing. On the one hand, I don’t want it at all and don’t want to know what it really is. But on the other hand, I realize that I can’t avoid it either, so I want to get some clarity as soon as possible.

“Hi, I’m back home, everyone!” my father says as he walks into the kitchen, first giving my mother a kiss and then hugging me.

Then he turns back to my mom: “Didn’t the package arrive today after all?”

“Yes, of course, it’s in our bedroom. Why do you ask?” my mother replies, stirring the spaghetti in the pot. I realize immediately that he’s referring to the package that must contain the new thing for

me.

“Well, because Maik isn’t wearing his new house suite yet. We’d agreed that he should always wear his house suit when he’s at home. And that’s how I understood the school’s recommendation, too.”

I stand at the table with my mouth hanging open, trying to follow my parents’ conversation. Unlike Mom, Dad doesn’t seem to be making a secret of the whole thing at all. So I’m supposed to wear some kind of suit, and always when I’m at home. That really sounds just like the overalls uniform at school. Maybe I won’t be able to take the suit off by myself either, just like the uniform. I just hope it’s a little more comfortable and not so tight. But why do I always have to wear the same thing at home? That’s annoying and boring.

“Yeah, I know, but it just arrived today, and I thought you’d want to be there to explain everything to your son—and those two hours don’t really matter at this point, do they? But you’re welcome to do that with Maik; I’ll finish making dinner in the meantime,” says my mom.

“Sure, my motto is: get it over with quickly. Come on, Maik, this seems like a guy thing. I’ll show you what nice new things there are for you,” says my dad, putting an arm around me and practically dragging me out of the kitchen. It sounds to me like explaining the new suit to me and giving it to me is a chore for him.

“Dad, what is this thing, and why do I have to wear it?” I ask as we walk down the hallway.

“Has Mom not told you anything yet?”

“No, just that the school recommended a new piece of clothing. And to be honest, it scares me a little that the new school recommended it.”

“Maik, you don’t have to be afraid of change. These are challenges you have to face. It’s about helping you stick to the rules. And that’s exactly what the house suit is for. It’ll come with certain restrictions, but it’ll help you follow the rules. Right now, for example, it’ll help you not play on the Switch at night.”

“Yeah, but I can’t do that anyway if you take the Switch away from me. Besides, how is that supposed to work? Isn’t it just as uncomfortable as a school uniform?” I ask as we reach my parents’ bedroom.

My dad grabs a fairly large package and tears it open.

“Sure, you have a lot of questions. But I think it’s best if I just show you and explain everything step by step. Here, take this and go to your room with it. I’ll change quickly and then come join you,” my dad says, handing me a large plastic bag from the package that obviously contains a piece of clothing. There’s also a small cardboard box inside the package.

As I take the bag, I can feel how heavy it is. I have to grab it with both hands and then press it against my body to carry it. As I do so, I notice that although it’s flexible like fabric, it’s very stiff because you can barely compress it. A thick winter suit would be almost the same size, but much lighter and easier to compress.

“Should I open it already, Dad?” I ask before heading to my room with it.

“Yes, Maik, you can take a look at it now. I’ll be right there.”

I leave the room and head to my room with a strange feeling. What on earth could this strange thing be?

In my room, I toss the bag onto my bed and rip it open. A neatly folded blue-gray bundle comes into view. The outer layer is smooth and feels like high-quality plastic. The surface is very slightly rough, and somehow it reminds me of those old rubber air mattresses. There must be something mixed in inside, like sand or something coarser.

My heart is pounding. How am I supposed to put this on? That’s the first question that crosses my mind. So I start to unfold it. It takes an unusual amount of strength because it’s so stiff. After unfolding a few layers, the full extent of the thing is revealed to me, and I lay it out flat on my bed. It’s actually a pair of overalls similar to a school uniform, only made of this strange material and with the padding inside. Another difference that immediately strikes me is that there are three of these snap-on strips on each side. All six strips—including the two on the shoulder straps—are already half-snapped in.

I immediately try to see if they can be opened, but as I suspected, they can only be snapped further shut—not opened. The fact that there are more of them on the sides tells me that these overalls can be fastened much higher up on the sides, possibly almost up to the armpits.

Both startled and fascinated, I continue to examine the garment. It appears to have exactly the same surface on the outside and inside. As I look more closely at the structure, it seems there's a division into many small chambers inside the material. I pinch the fabric at the legs between my fingers and feel the inner structure. One layer of the suit is a good half a centimeter thick, and I can feel the padding, which obviously accounts for the heavy weight.

Then I notice that there's a zipper on the back of the legs that runs from the calf to the bottom of the leg, and its slider ends in some kind of mechanism that prevents me from opening the two zippers. I then turn the entire suit inside out so that the back is facing up. There, I immediately notice a compartment located quite high up, just before the two shoulder straps split. It's made of sturdy plastic and is only slightly thicker than the material of the rest of the suit. The inner structure of the blue-gray material is noticeably finer near the compartment, as if some kind of wires or cables are hidden inside. The compartment also has an opening into which you can insert something flat. I don't know what to make of this part, but given its resemblance to a school uniform and my experiences with them in school, I suspect it's nothing good. I'm not going to like this part.

"Well, Maik, I see you've already looked everything over. Then you can go ahead and slip into it. Should I help you?" my dad says as he walks into my room.

"Uh, Dad, what is this thing? And why am I supposed to wear it?" I ask.

My dad sets the box he brought from the package on my bed and looks at me.

"Well, Maik, from now on we'll call that 'thing' a 'house suit.' It's meant to monitor you, so that we always know, for example, where you are and if you're okay. And yes, it can also restrict you. That works very well at school, too."

I'm shocked—my worst fears have been confirmed—and my eyes start to well up a little. I haven't seen any D-rings on this thing, though, like the ones used to strap me to my seat at school.

"Dad, please, is this really necessary? I don't want this thing. School is so long every day, and I'm always cooped up in my uniform there—and often strapped in, too. Please don't make it like that here at home as well."

"Maik, the actual restriction you'll face depends on your behavior. So if you're well-behaved, it's just a threat—or rather, a reminder—to behave yourself."

I look at the house suit and then back at my father. It's so mean. And it feels like I'm about to be punished for something I haven't even done yet. This thing looks so monstrous that it can only be uncomfortable. But there's nothing I can do about it.

My dad then opens the box, takes out a small, flat object, and inserts it into the slot on the back of the suit. A red LED immediately starts flashing.

"Oh, looks like we have to charge the battery first," my dad says, pulling his remote control for my school uniform out of his pocket. He uses it to open all the fasteners on the loungewear, including the two zippers on the legs. Then he takes the battery out of the compartment again, grabs a charger from the box, and sets it on my desk to charge.

I have a glimmer of hope that, because the battery is dead, I won't have to put it on before dinner.

"Dad, why does it need a battery, and how do the buckles on the overalls work without a battery?" I ask.

"Well, Maik, your school uniform also has a battery, but it's sewn into the bib and only needs to be charged once a week. The house suit, however, has other functions that require a bit more power, so you can swap out the battery and charge it externally."

"What kind of functions are those?" I ask, more shocked than curious.

"For one thing, there's the vital signs monitor and the tracking feature, which is a bit more sophisticated and accurate than in the school uniform."

"The school uniform can track my location? And what's a vital signs monitor?"

"Yes, the uniform transmits your location, but not as precisely or frequently as the house suit. And

vital sign monitoring means that your heart rate, temperature, and other bodily metrics are recorded. The uniform doesn't do that at all."

My dad talks about it as if it were the most normal thing in the world for a piece of clothing to do such crazy things. Even though I don't know what all this is supposed to be good for—and I don't really care, either—I just find it absurd.

"The disciplinary functions take up the most energy," my father adds almost casually.

"What does that mean, Dad?"

"Well, Maik, I think you should put on the suit first and get used to the feeling a bit. The battery can charge in the meantime, and Mom and I will show and explain everything to you tonight. You don't need to be afraid. I think the restrictions you've experienced at school are more intense than what the house suit does."

I still can't imagine what my father means by that, and his explanation doesn't reassure me either. But he picks up the suit and holds it out for me to slip into. Somewhat reluctantly, I slide one leg in after the other. Around my hips and thighs, I immediately feel the tightness I recognize from my school overalls. Except that the material is much heavier and sturdier. Then Dad slips the two shoulder straps over my shoulders, and the heavy part on my back—with the box inside—bangs against my back.

"Maik, you're not three anymore—could you please help out?" my father says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I reach for the bib and flip it up onto my chest. Here, too, I become aware of the full weight of the material. Dad then snaps the fasteners at the top of the bib into place a few notches, and now the entire weight of the suit rests on my shoulders.

"Please spread your feet apart a little, Maik," my father says, taking a step back to check how the suit fits. I obey reluctantly. For now, these overalls aren't pulling uncomfortably in my crotch, even though I can already feel the thick fabric there. As I spread my legs outward, I notice how the heavy fabric, with the open zippers on the legs, slaps against my lower legs.

Then Dad reaches for the top zippers, pulls the bib firmly upward, and lets the zippers snap into place.

"Dad, no, please don't—that's enough already. I won't be able to get out of this thing anyway," I complain. As I do, I feel the thick fabric pulling further into my crotch. But unlike the uniform overalls, it doesn't dig into the crack of my butt; instead, it pushes my legs slightly apart. That's because the fabric is so stiff and shaped in such a way that it isn't pointed enough to do that. On the one hand, this is much more comfortable than the uniform, but on the other hand, it results in an unusual leg position.

"Maik, it has to fit just right," my father says simply, and begins to fasten the side clasps into the slots on the front of the suit. Since I'm still wearing my very baggy sweatpants, they look very untidy underneath, and there's a lot of fabric getting in the way on the sides. But Dad just tucks them under the suit at the front and back and fastens the clasps.

The clicking of the fasteners almost echoes in my ears, because I'm aware of the finality of each individual click. I can feel the suit tightening around my upper body with every click. Dad first connected all the fasteners and then pulled them tighter and tighter, bit by bit. Basically, it's not much different from the uniform overalls. But as I feared, the top fastener is only a few centimeters below my armpits, so the pressure on my chest is much stronger.

When Dad is satisfied, he crouches down and pulls the zipper on my right leg down, which isn't so easy, though. The loose fabric of the sweatpants gets in the way here, too, and Dad has to tuck it in every few centimeters. I can feel the pant leg of the loungewear set wrapping tighter and tighter around my leg as it goes down. Finally, my leg is just as tightly covered by the thick, heavy material as my torso, and I realize that I would never have been able to get my foot through the pant leg without the zipper. I can already feel the folds of the sweatpants digging into my skin like foreign objects.

Meanwhile, my father is working on my left leg, and soon it's just as tightly enclosed as the right one.

“Okay, Maik, that’s done. I’ll just quickly take this to the bedroom, and then we can eat. We’ll discuss everything else after dinner,” my father says, grabbing the box—which obviously contains additional accessories for the loungewear—and leaving my room.

I stand there, shocked and frozen. So now I’m supposed to wear this monster every time I come home from school, and possibly even on the weekends. I almost feel like crying. Every day I’ve been looking forward to finally coming home and getting out of that stupid uniform, and now it’s even worse here with this thing than it is at school.

I try to bring my legs back together and realize that the thick material in the crotch is actually pushing my legs apart a little. First, I run my hand over my chest and feel the stiff, thick material, which, with its strange padding, feels almost like armor. I’ve never felt anything like it.

Next, frustrated, I try to sit down on my bed, and even in the two steps it takes to get there, I can feel that walking in the suit requires much more effort to move my joints. When I sit down, it’s even more pronounced, and whatever’s inside the material obviously has to rearrange itself in the area where I’m moving, which requires a certain amount of effort. Every movement in this thing makes you extremely aware that you’re moving. Is that already part of the intended function of this thing? I don’t know how I’m supposed to sit on the floor to play in it, or run around the yard in it. But maybe I’m only supposed to wear it indoors—in which case, what’s the point of all this monitoring?

“Honey, will you please come to dinner?” my mother says suddenly, standing in the doorway of my room.

I look up and reply dejectedly, “Yes, Mom!”

“Maik, it’s not the end of the world. Let me take a look at you,” my mom says, taking a step closer. As I slowly stand up and struggle against the house suit, trying to change its shape, the pressure on my shoulders builds again, just like it always does with overalls.

Mom runs her hand over my chest, which I barely feel.

“Interesting. I’m curious to see how it looks. Is everything okay, sweetheart?”

“I don’t know, Mom. It’s almost worse than the school uniform. It’s even tighter up here and on my legs. Why do I have to wear this at home, too? It’s already annoying at school.”

“Maik, I know how you feel about the school uniform. But it gives us even more control over you, and you keep showing us that it’s necessary,” my mother says, heading toward the kitchen.

I follow her down the hallway and stop just in front of the mirror. Now I understand why it’s called a “suit” and not “overalls.” It looks like a sleeveless jumpsuit. The lack of pockets or other details like belt buckles also makes it look less like a normal piece of clothing. At the top of my neck, I can see how untidy the house suit is underneath, and I can feel the excess fabric pressing against my skin in folds. Maybe I should wear something else underneath.

Then I walk into the kitchen with my legs slightly apart and sit down on my chair, immediately feeling the house suit’s restrictive fit again. While eating, I notice that you automatically move less when wearing this thing. It’s especially noticeable when I lean forward to serve myself some spaghetti from the pot onto my plate. I’m especially quiet while eating, but Mom and Dad aren’t saying much either. I feel like I’m being watched the whole time.

Since I don’t have much of an appetite after everything that’s happened, my plate is still not empty when Dad has already finished eating and says, “I’ll go check on the battery. Maik, please stay in your seat and finish your meal first.”

“But I’m not hungry anymore,” I say, a little more defiantly than I actually intended. It’s annoying that this is still all about that house suit. Secretly, I wish the battery had exploded or at least that the charger hadn’t worked. But unfortunately, my dad comes back just a moment later, holding the battery in his hand.

Then he walks behind me. “Please lean forward a little, Maik, so I can insert the battery.”

Annoyed, I resign myself to my fate and lean forward until I'm at the edge of the table. I feel the thick, stiff material against my chest press against the table, spreading the pressure over a large area. After Dad has inserted the battery, I'm allowed to lean back again. But nothing about the suit has changed. My dad returns to his seat and, before sitting down, takes the remote control out of his pants pocket. I'm a little confused, because up until now, whenever I've seen that remote, it's always meant I could finally get out of my school uniform. But Dad puts the remote on the kitchen table and then asks me, "Are you done eating, Maik?"

"Yeah, I'm not hungry anymore," I say, still annoyed, because I don't get the feeling that Dad is going to use the remote to unbutton my loungewear so I can take it off.

"Maik, please. Be a little more open. You know we won't force you to finish your meal if you're full. But just because you don't feel like wearing your loungewear right now doesn't mean it's okay not to finish eating. You won't be getting anything else to eat today. So be honest," my mom says.

"Yeah, I get it, and I'm still not hungry. Can I get up now and go to my room?"

"No! Weren't you listening, Maik?" my father says, unexpectedly sternly, and I'm immediately a little intimidated. So I just stare at my plate, startled.

"All right, Maik, you wanted to know more about your new loungewear," my father says, his tone softening again. I just shake my head, because I'd rather get rid of this thing right away and never hear another word about it.

"But that didn't sound like it before dinner. So I'm going to explain it to you and show you now. Do you know what a vacuum mattress is?"

I've never heard that word before. I just know there's a mattress in my bed. So I shake my head again and don't understand what this has to do with the loungewear.

"It's a device you can use, for example, in an accident to stabilize a broken leg so it can't be moved. Do you know why you do that?"

I still have no idea what any of this has to do with that stupid pajama set, but I'm definitely more interested in technical topics like this, and we actually took a first-aid course back at my old school.

"Yeah, so it can heal," I say.

"Almost. That's what the cast you get at the hospital does later. But that's not the point right now. At the scene of an accident, the emergency medical services need a device that can quickly and easily immobilize a broken bone without having to spend a long time applying a cast before the patient gets to the hospital. And that's exactly what a vacuum mattress is for. It's made of a large, airtight, double-layered fabric and can be easily molded to the shape of the leg or body part that needs to be immobilized. Are you following so far?" my father says.

"I suppose so, but how is this material supposed to immobilize the leg?" I ask, curious.

"I'd be happy to explain that to you. There's a simple principle of physics behind it. The space between the two layers of fabric is filled with granules. As soon as you suck the air out of that space—that is, create a vacuum—the granules lock together and become rock-hard, and the two layers of fabric compress them even further due to the external air pressure," my father explains.

"But where does the vacuum come from?" I ask my father.

"Well, Maik, the emergency medical services have an external compressor for that, which can be connected to the fabric with a small hose and disconnected via a valve for transport to the hospital. But with your house suit, the compressor is integrated into the battery compartment on your back."

It's only when my dad says that last sentence that it clicks in my head, and I understand why he told me the whole story about the vacuum mattress in the first place: The whole damn house suit is one of those weird vacuum mattresses. The "sand" I felt between the layers must be the granules. So Dad or Mom can make the suit as hard as a rock. This realization slowly sinks into my brain, and I stare at Dad and Mom in horror, my mouth agape.

“Maik, judging by your reaction, I take it you understand what this means. Do you have any questions?” my father asks with a friendly smile.

I’m afraid I haven’t quite grasped what that means yet. I can feel how stiff the fabric already is, and I have to assume it’s going to get much stiffer—or, as Dad calls it, rock-hard. Will I be completely unable to move in this thing? Will it get even tighter? Will it hurt? What parts of my body will I still be able to move?

My heart starts racing, and I feel like I’m about to panic. But the only question I can ask my father is, “Why?”

“Well, Maik, I already explained that to you beforehand. It’s about monitoring and also restricting your range of motion. It’s similar to what they do at school, just a little more precise,” my father says.

I try to gather my thoughts and need a moment before I can ask a more specific question.

“Okay, okay... at school, we get strapped in, like in a car or bus. But what will this thing be like? Does it hurt, or does it get even tighter when the air is sucked out?” I ask, hoping to finally get an idea of what’s going to happen.

“Maik, we’d never intentionally hurt you. Could it get a little tighter? Yes, I think so, but only very slightly, since the process takes place inside. The idea is that, for example, your legs might stiffen up so you can’t walk around when we don’t want you to. Or that you’ll have to stay seated in the chair when we think it’s appropriate, and your hips will be immobilized for that. But I think we should just give it a try so you know what to expect,” my dad says, immediately reaching for the remote control.

“No, stop, please not yet, Dad!” I shout, sliding back in my chair to jump up.

“Maik, please sit back down. There’s no reason to panic. We’ll start very slowly, and you can tell me right away if it gets uncomfortable. You don’t have to be afraid of it,” my father says calmly, still holding the remote control in his hand.

I’m standing at the table, trying to figure out how to stop him from pressing the remote. Because one thing is clear to me: running away won’t work.

“But that’s mean. I don’t want to be stiffened from head to toe. Please... Mom, say something,” I say desperately.

My mother then calmly gets up, comes over to me, and hugs me, and tears well up in my eyes.

“Maik, like Dad says, you don’t have to be afraid. Besides, you probably haven’t realized yet that it’s selective. It won’t stiffen the whole onesie all at once. There are four areas we can select individually, depending on what we think makes sense,” my mom explains to me. I don’t quite understand what she means, but luckily it calms me down a bit.

“Okay, sweetie, let’s just try one area. Please sit back down in your chair,” my mother says, gently nudging me toward the chair.

So I sit back down in my seat and look anxiously at my father.

“Okay, Maik, first we’ll start with your hips. This should make it harder for you to stand up.

Because afterward, you won’t be able to straighten the 90-degree angle between your upper body and your legs. So you won’t be able to stand up either. Are you ready?” my father asks, while my mother stands behind me and places her hands on my shoulders.

“I don’t know—can you stop it at any time, Dad?” I ask him. But he’s already pressed the button on the remote, and I feel a light, quiet hum on my back.

“Yeah, sure, there’s a cancel function that lets me stop or turn it off. But it also takes a moment for the vacuum to build up. The compressor in the suit isn’t exactly very powerful. It can take up to 30 seconds,” my father explains.

I can feel something changing around my hips and thighs. I don’t yet feel like it’s actually getting tighter, but the fabric is pulling together. The pressure exerted on my body is minimal. Because I’m still afraid of it, I’m barely moving at all. My dad looks at me expectantly, but I don’t know what to

say. My mom soothingly strokes my shoulders, for which I'm grateful. But somehow nothing else seems to be happening, so I cautiously glance to my side and have to turn slightly to do so. It feels a bit like my hips are sitting in a bucket seat or back in my child seat that was too tight—which, thankfully, I haven't needed for a year now. I can also see that the granules are much more visible under the fabric in the hip area. Suddenly, the pump on my back stops, and I look at Dad in alarm. "And Maik, was it really that bad that you had to make such a fuss about it? Is it really uncomfortable?" my father asks.

I have to admit that basically nothing has changed. The house suit is still disgustingly tight, and when I turn my upper body to the side, my hip seems to bump into something hard. So I move my hand to that area of the house suit and touch it there. To my alarm, I realize that the fabric there is almost as hard as a Lego brick. And when I tap it, it sounds almost like a wooden board. Startled, I look back at my father.

"What is that? It's really as hard as a board, Dad!" I say, my eyes wide, and immediately want to jump up reflexively, pushing the chair a little further away from the table.

"Slow down, Maik, don't panic. If you do something rash right now, you could fall off the chair onto the floor," says my mother, who's still standing behind me and is now holding me by the shoulders.

"But... what is that?" I ask frantically, wanting to get rid of the thing right away.

"Maik, technically, I just explained all of this to you in detail. But I also understand that it might be a bit overwhelming for you. So let's figure out together what it means for you, but please stay calm and level-headed," says my father.

"But how am I supposed to do that?" I ask, not understanding what he means by "figuring it out."

"First of all, you need to realize what it means to have your hip essentially in a cast. Then you can try to move around. But keep in mind what your mother said: You could fall out of the chair, and for this test, we'd catch you so nothing happens to you. So you can test your range of motion now, but please do it slowly and calmly," my father says, coming over to my chair as well.

I'm a little overwhelmed by the situation and am trying to imagine what it would be like to try to stand up with this rock-hard grip around my hips. So first, I feel around with my hands the area that has become stiff. It covers both my thighs down to a hand's width above my knees, and the suit extends upward all the way to about my belly button—almost to the second buckle on the side. So I try first to spread my legs apart. But I realize that the material is so tight that I can barely move them at all. I can't move my legs together or apart. But I can still swing them forward and backward. The feeling is strange and restrictive, but not as bad as the seatbelt at school that pulls me into the desk.

So I try to lean forward, just as I would if I wanted to stand up, but with less momentum. That still works pretty well, though I can already feel my stomach hitting some resistance. It's really strange. Then I try to lift one leg—or rather, one thigh—off the chair, and I run into resistance there, too. The effect is much stronger here; it feels as if my legs are inside rigid tubes connected to the seat shell I'm sitting in.

"Dad, what's going on? This is weird. Please make it go away," I say to my father.

"Maik, the idea here is that you can't just get up from your seat and walk away—you have to ask us for permission first. So I'd like you to try getting up and taking a few steps right now. But please keep in mind: This is just a test, and you should never do this again later," my father says.

I look at my dad questioningly. "Then why should I try it now?"

"So we can see how effectively the loungewear stops you from doing that. We'll also make sure you don't fall over—I promise."

I still don't quite understand why Mom and Dad keep saying that I might fall over or fall off the chair. I can move my arms and hold on, after all. So I lean forward with a little more momentum and try to stand up as I always do. But as I do, I feel that I can't lean my upper body far enough forward, and my bottom only lifts briefly off the chair before I fall right back down. At that moment, I realize what my father had said earlier: that I can no longer straighten my body. But this little setback only spurs me on even more, and I try again with more momentum.

This time I land on my feet, and my natural reflex is to straighten up, but this is prevented by the stiff part of my loungewear. It feels as if my lower abdomen and upper legs are encased in a solid block. Since the momentum is now propelling me further forward, I try to compensate for the movement by squatting deeply. While this is possible with my knees, it's not possible with my upper body. As if in slow motion, I notice that I'm tilting further forward. So I frantically brace myself with my arms on the table and try to take a step forward. But even that I manage only very poorly and awkwardly, since I can only move my knees and ankles.

Fortunately, Mom and Dad immediately grab my upper arms and hold me tight, so the momentum comes to a halt and I come to a stop in front of the table with my upper body bent forward and my legs slightly apart. I hadn't realized that the stiffness of this stupid loungewear would make all my movements so unnatural and difficult. But I'm still able to stand on my own two feet.

"So, Maik, do you understand now why you shouldn't try this on your own?" my father says. I take it as a challenge and say to my dad with a grin, "I was able to get up, wasn't I?" That might not have been the best idea, because my dad lets go of my arm and picks up the remote again.

"Yeah, sure, but I don't think you'll get very far like that, Maik," says my mom, who's still holding onto my arm.

I have to admit that I'm standing very unsteadily and can barely take a step. Being able to move my legs so limitedly isn't good, and Mom is probably right. Still, I try to take a step and have to concentrate extremely hard on keeping my balance so I don't fall forward.

"Okay, Maik, I've seen enough, and I think it'll help you in the future to remember to stay seated when we tell you to. But now I want you to wash the cookware and put the plates in the dishwasher," says my mom.

"What... like this?" I ask, horrified.

At that, my mom glances at my dad, and he presses the button on the remote.

"No, of course not like that," my mom adds.

Then I hear a soft hissing sound behind me. But it takes quite a while before I can slowly sit up again with a lot of effort, though it gets easier as time goes on. I'm also able to bring my legs together enough to walk somewhat normally, even though the thick fabric in the crotch is still pressing against my legs and I feel like I'm waddling more like a duck than actually walking. I don't say anything more about the whole thing to my parents and get started on the task I've been given. I have to think about it myself first. This whole house suit seems more like a tool—or rather, an instrument of punishment—for my parents. But why do I have to wear it all the time, then? It's not like I'm always being punished—at least, I hope not. Especially since I really didn't do anything wrong today. Just having to wear this tight, stiff, and heavy thing on my body all the time is a punishment in itself for me.

First, I move everything from the table onto the kitchen counter, and my mom wipes down the table with a rag. Then I open the dishwasher and hear that humming sound on my back again. Startled, I glance at my dad, who's sitting at the table holding the remote control.

"Dad, what's going on? What did I do wrong now? Stop it, that's mean!" I call out to him.

"Maik, please don't be so sassy. We decide when the house suit gets activated. It usually has nothing to do with whether you've done something or not. Besides, we're just testing all the functions right now," my father says firmly.

"But can I please finish my assignment first before you keep testing?" I say, upset.

"Well, Maik, I'd be happy to explain the next test to you. I just gave the command for the house suit to stiffen around your legs. Since you're standing right now, this will prevent you from bending your knees," my father explains.

I stand completely still and wait until the humming stops again. But even now, I don't notice my legs actually getting any tighter. However, I can already feel that something is happening to my legs.

"Dad, but then I won't be able to walk anymore—and how am I supposed to wash the dishes like this?"

"Yes, Maik, that's exactly the idea. But I think you'll still be able to walk, even if it's very limited and maybe a bit of a struggle. So be careful not to lose your balance," my father replies.

"But why are you doing this if it's harder? That's mean," I say, trying to stomp my foot on the floor to emphasize my point. But as I do so, I realize I can no longer bend my knee, and I try to get closer to the kitchen counter by taking small, shuffling steps. It's really awkward, but possible.

"That's not mean—it's the whole point of the house suit. It's meant to help you focus on your tasks and stick to set rules."

"But how is it supposed to help me if I can barely move like this?"

"First of all, you can still move around just fine, and you'll surely learn to handle it better. Second, you're not supposed to stray from the task. That way, you can't just sit down and take a break. That's especially important when we can't supervise you all the time," my father explains.

I'm shocked by what he says. I'm already 13 years old, and he says it as if I weren't capable of completing such a task without supervision.

Since I don't know what else to say, I continue working as best I can and load the dishes into the dishwasher. Because I can no longer squat, I have to hold onto the countertop with one hand and bend forward at the waist. It's really awkward.

After I close the machine again, I turn toward the sink and start cleaning the pot. In this position, it's not quite as bad. I do notice every now and then that my leg is held completely stiff and that every movement in my hip is transferred to the softer part of the suit, but other than that, it's just annoying and silly.

When I'm done, I look back at Dad, who's obviously been watching me the whole time.

"Dad, can I walk normally again now? This thing is annoying... please!"

"Maik, it won't do you any good to keep emphasizing that you don't like it. You should try to get used to it and see it as a help," says my mom, who has also just finished her work in the kitchen.

"Please sit back down in your chair, Maik!" my dad says again.

I'm about to complain that I can't do it that way, but I already hear the hissing behind me and wait just a moment until I can walk somewhat normally again. Then I walk over to my spot and sit back down in the chair.

"Okay, Maik, we want to test which mode we'll use when you're supposed to sit—for example, when you're eating or studying in your room," my mom says again.

"What? All the time?" I ask, horrified.

"Time will tell, but the house suit was very expensive, and we're going to figure out how it will help you. Using it sparingly wouldn't make sense, especially at the beginning," my mother explains.

I sit there stunned, and immediately I hear the hum of the vacuum pump again. Annoyed, I rest my arms on the table and let my head sink into my hands. As I do so, I'm sitting slightly bent forward, and I suddenly feel not only my legs and pelvis stiffening from the suit, but also a change in the area around my chest. This is especially noticeable with each breath.

Startled, I try to lean back against the chair's backrest, but the movement is already so difficult that I can't quite manage it. It suddenly feels as if my chest is trapped between two walls, and I can no longer move my upper body back and forth.

"Mom, Dad, what is this? Turn it off. I can't move anymore. No... I can't eat or do my homework like this. Please turn it off. Please."

"Maik, don't be silly—it's been on for less than a minute. At least try to go along with it a little. It's obvious you still have to get used to it. And we, too, need to gain some experience with your house suit. So if you want to voice criticism, please do so thoughtfully and take a second to think about what meaningful contribution you can make. But just saying 'I don't want to' or 'I can't' isn't enough," my mother says sharply.

I feel restricted and treated unfairly. When I look at it more closely, this thing really is mean and restrictive. I feel extremely helpless in it. But it's no worse than at school. There, I can barely move on the desk either, and some of the straps there are even more uncomfortable. This thing here doesn't pull you tighter against anything or pinch you in the crotch like the strap on the school desk does. So Dad might have been right when he said it wasn't quite that bad. Still, it's a major deterioration of my situation here at home. I can only hope that Mom and Dad don't activate it too often. Especially when wearing this thing is already a pain.

Mom snaps me out of my thoughts and places a notepad and a piece of paper on the table. "All right, Maik, now please write the sentence 'I will be good and follow the rules' 10 times on this notepad. And I want to see your best handwriting, okay!"

I'm even more confused. Classic detention? What did I do wrong this time? I briefly consider asking what the hell this is all about, but hold back. So I pick up the pen and try to lean forward further to get into a comfortable position for writing. But the suit keeps me in an almost upright position, just short of leaning back against the chair's backrest. The position is so unfamiliar that the first sentence looks absolutely terrible, and I can't even read it myself.

On top of that, Mom and Dad are watching me closely, which makes me even more nervous. Before I start the next sentence, I briefly consider whether I should complain again about the awkward situation the house suit is putting me in. But luckily, Mom's words are still ringing in my ears, so I say to her, "Mom, the position this suit is holding me in isn't good for writing neatly. Could you please deactivate the upper part so I can move more freely? My handwriting isn't good like this."

"Oh, Maik, this suit really works like magic. You've made a truly constructive suggestion. I'm proud of you," Mom says, stroking my head. Shortly afterward, I hear the hissing sound of air flowing into the suit again.

"Thanks, Mom!" I say simply, leaning forward just enough to write comfortably. Then I write the next sentence, which has already turned out much better. As I'm almost finished with the third one, my mother says, "Please don't let yourself get distracted and just keep going as usual—you're doing great."

I turn my head briefly and don't understand what she means, but I start on the fourth sentence anyway. As I do, I hear the hum of the compressor again. Before I can say anything, I already hear my father say, "Just keep working, Maik. We just want to test whether it's easier for you to work in a fixed position."

I'm distracted by that comment because it doesn't make sense to me. I just said that I can write better this way. But another argument with my parents would probably just drag the situation out, so I try to keep writing. But the humming and my upper body stiffening up again make the current sentence look terrible once more.

After finishing the fourth sentence, I take a short break and realize that I can no longer lean back. This is really annoying and frustrating, but there's nothing I can do about it right now, so I keep going. Now, though, I'm at the ideal angle to the table to write neatly. So the last few lines of that stupid sentence turn out quite well.

When I set the pen aside and look expectantly at Mom, I still can't lean back—which is annoying, but not necessarily uncomfortable.

"Okay, Maik, you're making truly amazing progress. I'm proud of you. This exercise was, of course, just a test, and you did a great job. We still need to discuss how much we'll use this feature, but we now know that you can work this well."

"Mom, it's really restrictive, though, and now that I'm done with the task, I can't lean back," I object.

"Yes, Maik, we're aware of that. But that's also part of the idea behind the house suit. The restrictions are meant to remind you of your tasks and rules."

"But the test is over now. Can you take it off again, please?"

"Sure, in a minute, sweetheart. But we'd still like to know how secure you are in your chair if we ever have to leave you alone for a moment. Please try to stand up from the chair now."

As I try to stand up, I quickly realize that it's almost impossible. I can still move my legs a little and pull myself forward with my hands on the table, but my body remains far too restricted. At that very moment, my father realizes it's getting too risky and ends the test. I'm relieved when the house suit softens again and the strap is loosened.

Afterward, my parents fetch a booster seat from the car so I can't slide forward so easily in the chair. When I sit down on it, my feet are lifted off the floor, and the suit immediately stiffens again. Then my father also fastens a tension strap around me and the backrest so I can't tip over to the side. I can barely feel the strap because the suit was already as stiff as a board to begin with.

When I try again, I can barely move from my seat, even with my hands and arms. It's as if I've become one with the chair. This frustrates me completely and reminds me of school, where I can't get up from my desk during class either.

Before I can think about it any further, the suit softens up again. Mom and Dad are satisfied with the test and now want to wind down the evening in peace. I'm still annoyed, but at least I can move around a little more normally again. When Mom asks me to watch another episode of *The Flintstones* with them, I finally get up and go with them to the living room.

"All right, please, try again," my father urges me.

Since my feet are hanging helplessly above the floor, I can only try to push myself away from the chair with my hands and arms. But that doesn't work, since I've become, so to speak, one with the chair and can only push it across the floor.

The whole thing is extremely frustrating and totally reminds me of my new school, where I can't get up from my desk during class either because I'm strapped in.

Is this what's in store for me at home, too?

Before I can think about it any further, I hear the hissing sound and feel the loungewear getting softer again. At the same time, Dad unbuckles the strap that was holding me in the chair.

"Okay, Maik, this is all working out just great, and I think the suit is going to be a big help to you," Mom says with great enthusiasm. I'm not happy about this thing at all and let my head hang down without saying a word. Luckily, I can lean forward a little again.

"Maik, don't hang your head like that. Come on, stand up and let's all watch another episode of *Fred Flintstone* together," says my mom, patting me on the shoulders.

I take a deep breath and stand up. Somehow I find Fred Flintstone pretty funny, but on the other hand, it's also totally silly and meant more for younger kids. Still, Mom and Dad think it's totally great, and it's probably so old that they watched it themselves when they were kids.

Anyway, I'm glad those stupid tests with the house suit are over, and I hope I won't have to wear it that often and that it'll be used even less frequently. So it's nice to watch an episode of The Flintstones with Mom and Dad on the couch now.

In the hallway, my mom is walking right behind me, and as I turn into my room, she says:

"Maik, don't you feel like watching TV? Do you want to go to bed right now?"

"Of course not, Mom."

"Then why don't you come with me to the living room?"

I turn around, confused, and look at my mom. Then I say, "So I can take this thing off first. It's super uncomfortable to watch TV in."

I can tell right away from her expression that something's wrong.

"Maik, sweetheart. I'm sorry if you still haven't understood. The point of this suit is so we can monitor you at all times. But that only works if you're wearing it. So you'll have to wear it while watching TV, too."

I briefly consider whether I'd rather just go to bed without watching TV so I can get out of this damn suit again. But that's stupid, too, and not a long-term solution. So I lock my bedroom door from the outside again and mutter under my breath, "This is all bullshit!"

"Maik, please, I don't want to hear that word! ... Do you understand me?" my mom says, her tone harsher again.

"Yeah, Mom," I say, flopping down in the middle of the sofa.

As usual, I take off my slippers and try to pull my legs up into a cross-legged position. But that's not so easy with this stupid suit. I have to bend my knees really sharply to do it, and the thick material—or rather, the sand inside the suit—gets in the way like crazy. It takes me quite a while—during which I have to keep bending back and forth—until I find a somewhat comfortable position. The whole time, I curse that stupid loungewear more and more.

When I finally decide I can sit like this for a while, I look up to see where Mom and Dad are. I see Mom standing in the doorway; she must have been watching me the whole time with a smile. And I can see that she's holding the remote control in her hand.

"Mom, no, please, this is already totally uncomfortable. I've been really good and did everything you said. Please don't turn it on... please!" I start begging, almost in a panic.

"Maik, Dad and I still need a few more minutes before we get to it. Until then, I want you to stay right where you are. That's all—it's not a punishment, and you haven't done anything wrong. It's just the new routine you need to get used to... okay?" Mom says, and I can already feel the hum.

"New routine?" I ask, confused, and my eyes start to well up again.

"Yes, sweetheart, we love you—see you in a minute," says my mom, and she disappears from the living room.

This thing is so mean. I can't get out of it, and Mom and Dad can just activate it remotely, and there's nothing I can do about it. I feel both my legs and everything up to just above my stomach getting totally hard. After a short while, the pump stops again, and once more I can't move. I'm sitting comfortably, but I can't uncross my legs anymore, and I can only lean my upper body forward just a little bit. The area above my chest doesn't get hard. But I quickly realize that I can't reach the TV remote on the table.

Frustrated by this, I lean back and can do nothing but wait for my parents. As I do, it becomes increasingly clear to me just how much control my parents have over me with this house suit.

Without their permission, I can't get off the sofa. I could maybe crawl on the floor using my hands and arms, but I think that would be very exhausting and difficult—and how far would I even get?

All these thoughts make me ponder. Am I really so bad that I deserve this? School with its strict rules, which you're basically forced to follow. And now this thing, too, that Mom and Dad can use to force me to stay sitting here, even when I'd rather get up. Can I get rid of it again if I always follow all of Mom and Dad's rules from now on?

After what feels like an eternity—though it was probably only three or five minutes—Dad comes into the living room wearing very comfortable clothes.

“Hi, sweetheart, are you ready?” he says, sitting down next to me on the sofa and putting his arm around my upper body. I lean slightly toward him and snuggle up against him. Since I can still move my upper body fairly freely and the stiff part of the suit that keeps me in a cross-legged position gives way on the soft sofa, it’s actually quite comfortable.

“How are you doing, Maik?” my father asks, pulling me a little closer to him.

“Hmm... fine...,” I reply slowly and quietly.

“But?” he asks. And it takes me a moment to answer.

“That... uh... thing... uh... the house suit... it’s no fun. How long do I have to wear it?”

“Well, Maik, it’s only the first day. We understand that this is a big adjustment for you and that it’s not easy. But we think it’s important for you to have strict boundaries and rules. The house suit is well-suited for that. But if we see that you’re following the rules and sticking to our agreements, then we can gradually phase out the suit. Maybe someday you won’t need it at all. But right now you’re just getting started, and the first step is getting used to it. Can you try to understand that, Maik?”

“Do I have a choice, Dad?” I ask, looking at my father with a smile, since I basically already know the answer.

“Yes, of course, Maik. You always have a choice. If you decide to give it a try, you’ll see results faster. But if you say you’d rather keep doing things the way you are, then it’ll just be more uncomfortable and take longer. It’s your decision.”

“Oh, Dad, that’s not what I mean. I mean, can I choose not to wear the house suit?” I say with a hint of indignation.

“Oh, Maik. There are decisions, and there are challenges. The loungewear is definitely a challenge for you, but you have to face challenges because you’ll encounter them again and again in life,” my father says, hugging me tightly one more time.

Then Mom comes in, dressed in very comfortable clothes, and sits down next to me. I’m almost jealous, and I still think it’s unfair that the two of them can wear something so comfortable while I’m stuck in this stiff thing.

Mom puts her arm around me, too, and Dad turns on the TV. The episode is really funny again, and we laugh a lot. It helps me forget about the thing I’m stuck in for a bit. But just before the episode ends, the position of my legs becomes more and more uncomfortable, and I try to stretch them out again—which, of course, is prevented by the pajamas. I get more and more restless and squirm harder and harder in the thing.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” my mom finally asks.

“It’s uncomfortable to sit with my legs in this position for so long,” I say, while continuing to watch the TV because I don’t want to miss the ending.

After a while, I feel the onesie getting softer again, and I stretch my legs out a little almost automatically, without taking them completely off the sofa, though. When the Flintstones episode is over, Dad turns off the TV, and I have to yawn really big and already feel pretty tired. Mom gives me another big hug, and I stretch my legs out all the way. As I do, it occurs to me again that either Mom or Dad must have actively unlocked the loungewear so I could move again. Given what Dad said before the movie, I didn’t want to ask about it right away, and I’m all the happier that they did it on their own.

“Thanks, Mom, for loosening it,” I whisper to her while she’s still holding me in her arms. But I can also see Dad, who’s smiling at me with the house suit’s remote control in his hand and then says:

“You’re welcome, my angel. See, it’s not a punishment, and if you’re patient and well-behaved, it’s not half as bad as it seems.”

Since I'm already very tired, I just smile back at Dad, but I immediately feel a little scared again of the remote control he's holding.

"Okay, you're really tired, and I want you to get ready for bed now, okay!" my mom says. So I lean forward a little and then stretch my arms up to really stretch out. As I do, the straps of my pajamas on my shoulders immediately remind me again just how tight they are. So I decide to obey, just to finally get out of it. I stand up and look at my mom.

"Mom, can I take it off to brush my teeth?" I ask cautiously.

"Yes, of course, Maik. I want you to take a shower tonight, too. And please don't dawdle in the bathroom—you're already really tired, and your teacher said he wants to see you well-rested tomorrow. Do you remember?"

"Yeah, Mom," I say, slightly annoyed, since I really don't want to be reminded about school right now.

Then I hear the click on both sides of the pajamas and the clatter of the fasteners as they open. It's a huge relief when the pressure around my stomach and upper body eases, and I feel like I can breathe much more easily again.

"Honey, please put your feet here on my knees," my dad says.

Slightly confused by the relief and the surprise that I'm already getting out of the house suit right here in the living room, I comply with his request, and Dad then unzips the legs one after the other. When I'm standing in front of him again, I can see him pressing the button for the shoulder straps, and the suit opens up in that area as well, releasing the pressure there. Because of the suit's heavy weight, the metal strips detach from the bib on their own, and the bib sags downward.

Overjoyed, I immediately pull the rest of it down myself and kick my legs free from the suit.

"Not so hastily, young man. You'll end up falling over," my mother comments right away.

I feel air flowing through the house suit again, and only now do I realize how warm it was inside the house suit. I shake out the now completely crumpled house suit a bit and am about to run straight to my room. But when I see the crumpled house suit lying on the floor, I think to myself that it might not be a good idea to just leave it there, even though I'd rather never see it again.

So I pick it up and plan to drag it to my room, because I don't feel like carrying it.

"Maik, please just give me your house suit. I'd like to take a closer look at it, too. But don't dawdle—go brush your teeth and take a shower right away, and I'll bring you some pajamas."

"Yeah, Mom!" I say, handing her the stupid thing and running straight out of the living room.

I'm so glad to be rid of that thing for today, and I don't want to give my parents any more reason to complain. So I go straight to my room and strip down to my underwear. Then I run to the bathroom to brush my teeth. After a quick trip to the toilet, I'm already in the shower.

While I'm still in the shower, my mom comes into the bathroom.

"How far along are you, sweetie?" she asks.

"Almost done, Mom!"

It's a bit unusual for Mom to do this—she usually only does it when I'm dawdling. Did it really take me that long? So I rinse off the remaining soap and turn off the water. When I step out of the shower, Mom is suddenly standing in front of me with a towel, ready to dry me off.

"Mom... I'm 13, I can do this... on my own!" I say with feigned indignation. Because even though it's a little embarrassing to have my mom dry me off, I've actually missed it a bit since she stopped doing it. So I let her help me, and she dries me off thoroughly.

"Did you go to the bathroom, Maik?" Mom asks casually.

"Yeah, sure," I reply. But when she tries to push me out into the hallway while I'm still completely naked, I protest.

"Mom, weren't you supposed to bring my pajamas? And my underwear isn't here either."

"Maik, come on, it's not even three meters to your room—you can handle it."

Reluctantly, I go to my room, and my mom follows close behind. When I get there, I'm even more confused. Because my dad is there, too, fiddling with the charger for the power suit's battery. My bedding is folded into a pile at the head of the bed, and the rest of the bed is empty. On the chair next to the bed, my house suit and my Minecraft pajamas are folded up. I'm happy about that, but I have a bad feeling about it, because it's not normal for Mom and Dad to be in my room when I come out of the shower to get ready for bed.

"Okay, Maik, please lie down on your back on the bed," my mom instructs me.

"Mom! I'm not wearing any underwear yet! Why?" I complain.

But since Dad is already giving me a serious look, I reluctantly obey and sit naked on the edge of the bed. It feels weird, since I don't usually do that. Besides, I'm not used to being naked in front of my parents anymore, unless I have to show Mom a rash or something like that. But that's super rare.

So I cover my crotch with my hands and look at Mom anxiously and questioningly. Then my mom picks up something white from my desk, which I first recognize as a folded towel.

"Maik, please lie on your back—this isn't working."

"What's the problem, Mom? What's that?"

"Those are your new nighttime underwear, Maik. And it's better if I put them on you!"

As if in a trance, I lie back and stare at the white thing Mom is holding in her hand. Instinctively, I keep my hands over my crotch. It's not until my mom unfolds it that I realize what it is.

"Mom, no, that's for babies," is the only thing I can say.

Actually, it's been so long since I've had anything to do with diapers that I basically don't even know what they are anymore. But at my new school, I've learned that there are kids who can't make it to the bathroom in time for the scheduled breaks, and those poor kids have to wear a diaper under their school uniforms. In my class right now, that's Lucas and Luise. Not only is that extremely embarrassing, but they're also not allowed to use the restroom during the designated times, which is totally gross on top of everything else. You're not allowed to use the restroom at school again until two months have passed, and you have to keep the diaper dry for another month before you're allowed to go to school without one.

All of this is racing through my mind when my mom interrupts me.

"Maik, please move back a little on your bed and take your hands away from there. It's just a safety precaution," my mom says, still quite patiently.

I push myself further back on the bed with my hands and slowly lie back down, but quite unconsciously bring my hands back to my crotch.

"Mom, why? What kind of safety measure is that? What kind of safety?" I ask, completely overwhelmed.

"Maik, from now on, we want you to stay in bed all night, even if you have to go to the bathroom urgently. That's why it's safer for you to wear a diaper. You know this rule from school, don't you?"

"Yeah... yeah... but... I don't have to go to the bathroom at night. I don't need that at all."

"Maik, I know you very rarely have to go to the bathroom at night. But rarely isn't the same as never, so we have to play it safe," my mom says, leaning toward me to gently spread my legs apart. Then she gently pushes my hands aside, too. I'm so shocked that I can't do anything about it. As I lie there in front of her, completely naked with my legs spread wide, I feel my face start to flush. This is so incredibly embarrassing.

Even when she tells me to lift my bottom, I obey slowly, but without being able to think about it. When she then fastens the thing around me and secures it, I'm surprised at how pleasantly soft it is, and also grateful to finally not be naked anymore. But I'm not yet fully aware that I'm now wearing a baby diaper.

Then I'm allowed to stand up again, and I notice that Dad has been watching the whole procedure, too. He's just handing my Minecraft onesie to my mom, who holds it out for me so I can slip into it. As I'm putting it on, it feels strangely tight, which is confirmed when I get my arms into the sleeves and try to pull the jumpsuit over my shoulders. Mom even has to help me with that. This pulls the diaper tightly across my crotch, which fortunately doesn't feel too bad because it cushions everything softly. Unfortunately, that doesn't make it any less embarrassing.

When my mom zips it up, it's clear that something's wrong with this thing. It's tight around my chest and upper body, and the legs fit almost completely snug against me, too.

"Mom, why is it so tight?" I ask, confused.

"Those are last year's pajamas, Maik, not the new ones. I thought it would be better if they fit snugly. When I saw earlier how wrinkled your loose-fitting house suit was, I thought these would be much better," my mother says.

At first, I don't understand what she means, but when I see that my father is holding the loungewear in his hands again and has already unfolded it, I begin to realize what's actually going on here. I'm supposed to wear it at night, too. And then I really won't be able to go to the bathroom anymore. And probably not get out of bed either, if it's actually activated at night.

My heart starts racing, and my knees go so weak that I have to quickly sit back down on the edge of the bed. This can't be true—will I not even be able to move or turn over at night?

"Mom... Dad... please, no... I'll do anything you want. But please, not the pajamas at night. Please," I stammer, and instantly the first tears roll down my cheek, which I wipe away with the sleeve of my pajamas.

Then my father bends down toward me and hands me a tissue.

"Maik, do you remember what I told you about challenges? You have to face them—they make you strong," he says, holding my hand while I continue to wipe away my tears with the other.

Then he continues: "The sleepwear is meant first and foremost for nighttime. It's supposed to make sure you stay in bed at night and get a peaceful, restful sleep. And that you can't bring any more toys into bed with you. The part about homework and mealtimes is just optional. "Come on, chin up, and rise to the challenge!" says my dad, and then he starts slipping my legs into the pajamas.

I'm pretty apathetic the whole time and obey when I'm told to stand up. I don't really notice much as Mom and Dad put the thing back on me. It's only the click of the buckles that makes me realize I'm trapped in it again. I also imagine that they've made it even tighter, because the diaper is pulled extremely tight across my crotch, though still not as tight as the school uniform.

I can only see things quite blurry through my eyes, since a tear keeps running down my cheek. I feel so helpless. Even when Dad hugs me and squeezes me tight, I notice it, but it doesn't mean anything to me right now.

Then Mom takes the comforter off the pillow and tells me to lie down. As if in a trance, I obey and lie down on my bed. This is totally unfamiliar and feels strange. I've never slept in pants or anything like that before. And this thing is even thicker and stiffer. Because of it, I can barely feel the bed. I lie on my side and bend my leg slightly, placing my hands under my head. I don't feel like I need the blanket either, because I probably wouldn't feel it anyway through the suit.

I also immediately notice that, when I'm lying down, the diaper gently but inevitably pushes my legs apart at the crotch. That instantly brings the diaper back to mind, and I hope I'll never have to actually use it. When it's dry, it's soft and not uncomfortable, but that doesn't make it any less embarrassing to have to lie in bed with it.

Then Mom sits down on the edge of the bed and places her hand on my shoulder.

“Maik, this won’t work, and it won’t be good for your back either. Please lie on your back. ... Yes,” my mother says softly and empathetically.

All I want is for this to be over, and I slowly comply with her request without looking at my mother. I don’t want any of this, but Dad has made it clear that I can’t avoid it. Mom wipes another tear from my face, and then Dad adds, “Maik, please spread your legs a little wider. You shouldn’t be able to roll out of bed.”

Sobbing, I ask quietly, “Are you going to tie it completely tight?”

“No, Maik, not at first. We want you to be able to get used to it slowly. But of course, you shouldn’t be able to get up either. So it’s up to you a little bit, too. But once you’ve gotten used to sleeping in that position all night, we’d like to fasten everything down. Because then you’ll be able to sleep even more peacefully.”

I can’t think straight anymore and, lying on my back, spread my legs slightly apart. It feels unnatural, but it makes the diaper between my legs feel even softer and less constricted. Then I feel the pump in my onesie and how the middle section stiffens. It feels like a sentence, as if a final punishment were being imposed on me. I long for some kind of comfort, but words or a gesture from Mom and Dad wouldn’t give me that right now anyway. I can’t even look at either of them.

When the pump falls silent, I try to move my legs, which, as expected, is no longer possible. My knees and lower legs aren’t affected, but since I can only bend my knees backward, that’s almost useless when I’m lying on my back. My upper body isn’t stiff either; I notice that I can turn my chest slightly to both sides. But I also feel that I can no longer turn my whole body with my legs now firmly fixed to the side. And that means I probably can’t get out of bed either.

Then my father leans toward my head and kisses me on the forehead. But I don’t look at him as he does this; I turn my head away because I still find all of this so cruel.

“Good night, Maik, sleep well and have sweet dreams,” he adds.

To me, that sounds almost like sarcasm, but I’m afraid he really means it.

Then Mom takes the comforter and puts it over me. I awkwardly place my arms along the sides of my body on top of the comforter. In that position, I don’t know where else to put them. When I’m lying on my side, I often put them under my head or under the pillow. I also try putting them behind my head, but I quickly stop doing that because I immediately feel the straps on my shoulders tighten when I raise my arms higher than my head.

I see Mom watching me for a moment as I try to find a comfortable position.

“Maik, we’re going to put a baby monitor on your nightstand so we can hear you anytime if you’re in trouble. But please try to sleep now.”

The word “baby monitor” makes me cringe inside. Is the diaper more than just a safety measure after all? I feel the embarrassment of the situation welling up inside me again. I wish for some kind of distraction or comfort. The first thing that comes to mind is my favorite stuffed animal, Leo. But for a while now, he hasn’t been in my bed—at least not during the day, when I might have friends over. I hide him in the closet and only take him to bed when I’m not feeling well or when there’s trouble with Mom and Dad again. Asking for him now would be way too embarrassing.

Then my mom sits down on the edge of the bed again and gives me a kiss. After that, she holds my hand tightly and says, “Maik, I know it’s not easy, especially on the first night. I understand that, and I hope you get used to it quickly and accept it. ... I wish you a good night and a peaceful sleep. ... We love you.” Then I get another kiss, and Mom turns off the light.

Before the door closes, I hear my closet door rattle and feel Mom place something on my chest. Through my pajamas and the blanket, I can't tell what it is. But Mom whispers, "I know you need him, sweetheart."

I reach for it and immediately feel that it's Leo. I'm so grateful, but I can't bring myself to thank Mom. Instead, I press Leo tightly against my face, and he has to soak up all my tears. It takes a while before I've calmed down enough to lay Leo right next to my head.

It's completely dark in my room, but my eyes are dry again and have adjusted to the darkness. I can make out a faint light on my nightstand. It's a circle made up of many tiny dots glowing very faintly in shades of yellow to red. That must be the baby monitor Mom was talking about. Am I really a baby again now—one who has to lie in bed in a diaper and can't get up on my own?

Frustration is slowly getting the better of my embarrassment, and I try to test my range of motion. First, I lift my upper body slightly and support myself with my arms bent. Although my stomach bumps against the stiff part of the pajamas around my waist, I manage to lift my upper body surprisingly high. I could probably even crawl to the edge of the bed and get out that way, but standing up and walking will hardly be possible with my legs spread apart like this. So I let myself fall back onto the bed.

As I do, I sense that Leo must have ended up under my back. Because of the rigid back section with the battery and vacuum pump, I can't even feel exactly where he is. In a panic, I try to roll onto my side to save him. In doing so, I realize what a major obstacle my spread-apart legs are. It's almost as if a crossbar had been attached to the rigid part clamping around my lower body, preventing me from turning onto my side.

I can't reach Leo like this. So I sit up a little and slide to the side until I'm no longer lying on top of him and can reach him. Happy, I pull him close to me again and let him comfort me. After all that, I'm not exactly sure where I'm lying in the bed, but when I feel around for the edge of the bed with my hands on both sides, I realize I'm no longer in the middle of the bed. The blanket also seems to have slipped completely out of place. But since I'm not cold, I just leave it as it is.

I'm so agitated that I'm not tired at all anymore, and I have no idea how I'm supposed to fall asleep like this. The limited freedom of movement frustrates me to no end. It was like that at school at first, too, but there I also have classes and have to concentrate on them so I don't get scolded for not paying attention. But here it's dark, I have nothing to do, and it's unbelievably boring.

But I quickly decide that it's not a good idea to keep dwelling on this predicament and my pajamas, because I'm afraid Mom and Dad might hear me if I fall out of bed, and then things will definitely get even worse. So I decide to cuddle with Leo a little longer. He doesn't demand anything from me, and he always listens to me. So I whisper my situation to him.

This makes me tired again, but I still can't fall asleep. My body keeps trying to turn over to find a different position, but my pajamas prevent me from doing so every time.

I must have fallen asleep at some point. When I wake up again, it's still dark in my room. At first, it's just like any other morning when I wake up—I rub my eyes a little and stretch; but the next moment, I'm immediately reminded of the straitjacket. I quickly bring my arms back down when, as I stretch, I feel the straps tightening across my shoulders.

It's so frustrating to feel that as the first thing after waking up and to be reminded right away that I'm trapped in the house suit and can't—or aren't allowed to—get up. I'm forced to wait for my

parents, and I don't even know what time it is, but I feel surprisingly well-rested.

Then it dawns on me that I can't have even turned over once all night and must still be lying exactly as I fell asleep. That's a strange realization: Could this stupid pajama suit really be helping me sleep better and more peacefully?

I don't have much time to think about it, because suddenly something starts itching in my crotch, and I instinctively reach my hand down there, wanting to scratch where it itches. But my hand is firmly rebuffed by the stiff surface of the loungewear. Since the itching is getting worse, though, both my hands wander over the stiff surface, searching for a way to reach the spot where it itches. But unfortunately, the entire area is smooth and firm, and I can't even feel any sensation on my body by pressing against it.

Logically speaking, of course, I understand this, but being confronted with it right after waking up is something else entirely. So my hands continue to move upward across the entire suit. Since the loungewear extends up the sides to just below my armpits, there's no end or edge I can reach into from above. It feels as if I'm trapped in a suit of armor that completely surrounds me.

The itching hasn't really subsided yet, and I'm getting more and more restless and start squirming inside this thing, but my hands are still moving up the suit. On my chest, I suddenly notice that the suit is as hard as a board there, too. But it wasn't like that when I fell asleep—I'm sure of that. As this realization sinks in, my heart starts racing, and I try with all my might to move and turn inside the suit. This only leads me to discover that my legs have also stiffened at the knees. Before falling asleep, I could still move my lower legs slightly to the side, as far as my knee joints would allow, but now that's no longer possible either.

Didn't Dad say he didn't want to do this at first and that I should get used to it slowly? This is so mean again. I try, just like last night, to lift my upper body to look at my legs. Aside from the fact that it's dark, I immediately realize that I can't do that anymore, because my entire pajama set is now as stiff and straight as a board from my neck to my feet—and so is my body. So if I push myself up with my arms, I have to lift not just my upper body but my whole body, which isn't possible while lying on my back. Frustrated, I pull the blanket off my body and start patting the onesie randomly, hoping to somehow relieve the itching in my crotch. As I do so, I also try to wiggle around inside the onesie. This works to a very small extent, and as I do so, I feel again how softly the area where I'm itching is wrapped. It also reminds me of the diaper my mother used to put on me. The soft feeling is pleasant on the one hand, but on the other, it's also incredibly frustrating, since it reinforces the barrier created by the pajamas.

By now I'm a little out of breath from wiggling and tapping on the pajamas when, thankfully, the itching finally subsides. I can't say whether it's because of my attempts to relieve it or whether it went away on its own. But I'm glad it's subsiding, and I calm down again and reach out for Leo to let him distract me a little.

Just a short time later, I hear my bedroom door open and a bright glow of light from the hallway seep into my room.

"Good morning, sweetheart, how did you sleep?" my mother asks, sitting down next to me on the edge of the bed.

I look at her for a moment and have to think for a second about whether I should give an honest answer or immediately complain that the suit is now completely stiff after all.

"Um... Good morning, Mom," is all I say at first. Then Mom takes my hand and strokes it gently.

"Uh... I think I slept pretty well," I say hesitantly.

"And what was going on just five minutes before I got here?" she asks, calmly but very directly.

Startled, I look at her. “What do you mean, Mom? I was here in bed—what else?” I say, with a hint of reproach in my voice.

“Maik, I’m talking about the way you’re tapping the crotch of your pajamas. That’s not like you at all, and I hope you haven’t gotten to that point yet,” my mom says.

I have absolutely no idea what she means or how she knows it was itching.

“Mom, it was itching in that stupid diaper. But how do you know?” I ask, confused.

Mom looks at me searchingly, the way she does when she wants to figure out if I’m telling the truth. “Maik, the baby monitor also has an infrared camera, and I saw you throw the blanket aside and then start hitting your onesie like crazy. And I’d like to know why, because I’m worried about you,” my mom says, still holding my hand tightly.

I’m confused, but also a little annoyed.

“Mom, why are you spying on me? Besides, it was itching like crazy, and I couldn’t scratch myself in that stupid thing. This is all so mean,” I say angrily, looking at the wall.

“Maik, first of all, we told you about the baby monitor, and it’s for your safety. Imagine if you choked or had to throw up—we need to keep an eye on you. That goes without saying. Second, it’s not mean—it’s an offer to help you—and it must have helped you, since you said you slept well.

Third, I want to know what that itching was all about, just to make sure you’re okay. Because I don’t want you banging and patting on your onesie like that,” my mom says calmly, but firmly.

“It suddenly started itching really badly in my diaper and I had to scratch. It’s not my fault. And why can’t I try to scratch when it itches? Besides, you promised not to use the suit all the way, but now it’s stiff all over,” I argue.

“Okay, Maik, one thing at a time. So, where exactly did it itch? On your little pee-pee?”

I look at my mom in shock because she’s suddenly asking so directly. “No, Mom, right next to my leg. But why is that so important? It was just itchy—haven’t you ever had that? And I couldn’t reach it because of that stupid suit,” I say, annoyed and puzzled by Mom’s strange question.

“Okay, Maik, it’s fine—these things happen. But I just wanted to know,” my mom says, suddenly much calmer and gentler again.

“And unfortunately, the pajamas were necessary, sweetheart. Last night you were still trying to sit up and crawling around in bed. There was a risk you might fall out of bed, so when we went to bed ourselves, we had to fully fasten your pajamas. That eliminated the risk of you moving around any further—as you noticed this morning, didn’t you?” Mom says, stroking my head and smiling at me contentedly.

“But you said I could get used to it gradually, not all at once,” I continue to complain.

“Well, Maik, that’s true. You didn’t even notice that we turned it on because you were already asleep. That’s surely the very best way to get used to it—when you’re asleep and don’t even notice it. Hmm?”

“But... now...,” I try to argue, but I realize it won’t do any good.

“Can you please turn it off now so I can get up, Mom?” I ask quietly.

“In a minute, Maik. I’m just going to get myself ready quickly. You still have plenty of time to doze a little more or wake up fully. Then I’ll help you change into your school uniform, and the day can begin,” my mother says, getting up from my bed. I remain lying in bed, immobilized in my completely stiff pajamas, and have to wait until Mom comes back.

Author's Note

Technically speaking, the house suit also has the function of allowing Maik to be held in place magnetically on a metal surface, such as a magnetic bulletin board or something similar, like a refrigerator. But since the text has already gotten so long, I didn’t go into detail about this part. Readers are welcome to let their imaginations run wild regarding other possibilities and accessories for the house suit. And feel free to share your ideas in the comments.