

In a Napping House

On beige paper within the parameters of the turquoise lines—a solid line, then a perforated line, then a solid line—my six-year-old daughter wrote her class work. The piece of paper came home in her backpack this afternoon. On this paper, in pencil, she has carefully printed the following words:

There was a wakeful flea on a slumbering mouse on a snoozing cat on a dozing dog on a dreaming child on a snoring granny on a cozy bed in a napping house where everyone is sleeping.

Now, while she sleeps upstairs, I sort through all of the papers clumped together—announcements from the principal, drawings, math problems, and then this piece of paper with an orange star that has been drawn by her kindergarten teacher, Ms. Cohen, at the top. I wonder how these words came together. Is this a faithful rendering of a story they read in class?

I would ask her, but am reluctant to do so, not only because she is sleeping now, but also because if she were awake, we might end up in one of those bungled conversations. Over the last few years I have become aware how it difficult it can be to ask a child how her day has gone. I have since discovered that often I become the inadequate inquisitor and she the reluctant respondent.

“Hey Blake,” I would begin, “when did you write this piece and where does the idea come from?”

She would respond, in her literal fashion, *“at school, in Ms. Cohen’s class.”*

I would try again, *“Yes, but where did you get the idea for the story. I really love the image you construct here.”*

Shrugging, she would respond, *“I don’t know.”*

Giving it one last try, I would say, “*Why did you receive an orange star on the piece? What were you asked to do?*”

Moving away, she would respond, “*I just did what Ms. Cohen asked me to.*”

Thus, for now, I stand admiring how she has written her class work. Each word is printed with great care. There are no misspellings. The print moves, uniformly, from left to right. The rendering is so precise that there are no margins. I am charmed by what she has written as well.

The careful order of smaller creature to larger is pleasing. I like how the images are built into one sentence, beginning at the top of the pyramid and ending at the bottom. I savour the words: slumbering, snoozing, dozing, dreaming, snoring, napping, sleeping.

I would, however, like to rid the piece of the wakeful flea. I know what it means to be the wakeful flea—the one unquiet being who seems bothersome in such a peaceful pyramid. Unbidden, in my mind, I hear wakeful conversations and see unquiet images. I hear a friend of mine, who lost her 12-year-old daughter in an unexpected, split-second horseback riding accident, saying, “You know, even if your child dies, you never stop being a parent.” In my mind, I see another woman I know who lost her teenaged son in a car accident. She was on the evening news the day her son’s best friend went to trial. The friend’s reckless driving through rush-hour traffic had resulted in Lynn’s son’s death and severe injuries to two other passengers. Standing on the steps of the courthouse, with multiple microphones in her face, she said, “He needs to remember that his best friend’s final moments were filled with fear and terror, and he was the cause.” Every time I see this woman, in my mind I see an image of her son, and hear the words, his “final moments were filled with fear and terror.”

These are the best times, I have been told, when your child is with you still, under your care, in your house. I pick up Blake’s lunch box, in which I have packed a peanut-butter sandwich, a juice box, a snack-pack of pretzels, and an apple. The lunch box is tin with a black and red plaid print. It is a gift from Clark whom she likes to think of as her father. Every time I look at the lunch box I am reminded of Anne Frank’s diary; the cover of her diary was decorated with the same plaid design. How do you keep the horror away; how do you banish the thoughts of children dead in horse-riding accidents; children dead in their best friends’ cars; children dead, casualties of genocide? How do you keep the horror away from your child?

Will I ward off danger by standing here in the living room thinking of the worst that could happen? My hand smooths the piece of paper, and I read the words again:

There was a wakeful flea on a slumbering mouse on a snoozing cat on a dozing dog on a dreaming child on a snoring granny on a cozy bed in a napping house where everyone is sleeping.

Wakeful as the flea, I remind myself, this is a good moment, looking at Blake's classwork, examining the evidence of her day, as she sleeps upstairs. I remind myself it is good to be here, now, in the security of a napping house, and tell myself that these wakeful cogitations are deep reminders of how much I love my dreaming child. I also realize that such cogitations are, in part, the product of magical thinking. These thoughts are a carry over from my own childhood when I believed if I just imagined the worst fully, deeply, completely, then I could prevent it from coming to pass. Watchful, vigilant, and wakeful I try to imagine the worst, hoping the magic formula will work and my daughter will remain forever safe.