



Source: Steven Erlanger, 'For children, nothing but fear', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 07/07/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [home](#), [seasons](#)

Writer/s: [Declan Kelly](#)

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Looking over the ruffled edge of the doona Helena saw a spirit oval of condensation in the centre of her bedroom window. At its widest point, it was six inches to the edge of the window frame allowing her a partial view outside. Winter's softest rain began at midnight and continued unabated; a methodical soaking of the world, the rain's gentle descent masking the depth of its infiltration of the earth. As she roused herself she tangoed with the steam windows, lucidity coming on apace as Michael's burgeoning sleep apnoea broke the bedroom's stillness. First she imagined the fog as a spot on her glasses (she had never worn them), then as an obstruction to something forbidden, as the impetus for the memory of first year uni, the windows in Jason Abrams' 1962 Falcon station wagon steaming up, way up, so that it was a half hour until they could drive again, as a grey hole in which she might fall through forcing Michael out of bed to manage Dora and Julius and Samuel for the entire Saturday, not just until midday when he would fly out of impenetrable sleep into a ball of manic energy, barely a kiss before taking one to Soccer and the other to see a game of football, the near invisible flurry of boys and their balls. She was thinking about a suburban version of Alice who fell through a portal in downtown Fairfield, nighty and all, and came out the other side as a young and innocent, a woman with no charge and a great outfit.

Out of the bed, she takes a moment to enjoy the feeling of the air over her body after the cloying enclosure of sheets. She slides the door open, lifting it so it doesn't drag on the floor, compensation she doesn't even notice anymore. The hallway boards creak under her step, despite her dance along the 'quiet' route. From the skylights and windows light breaches through, white and bright but dull at once. She switches the heater on and stands in the middle of the living room listening to its steely murmurs. She is still distracted by the pouring light. How is that she thinks? How does the light feel so tired like that, so sad? She knows when she gets out of the shower the three heat panels will glow a much more impressive shade of red than these feeble beginnings.

In the shower Helena turns on the hot water, shivering, as she waits for it to heat up. In her urgency to be covered in it she has taken off her clothes too early. Climbing in, she stands under the stream, exhales loudly and then urinates, enjoying the warmth of her urine and feeling as if she can discern it from the shower by its temperature and the sheer fact that it is of her.

Seven-year-old Dora knocks on the door and asks if she can come in. In a moment she is under, her sleepy smile is charming as she tells her mother about the dream from which she woke and which she still cannot shake. She was

lying on a beach with Jerome Jenkins from down the street and they were trading cards, cards handwritten with foreign words like poussin and eldorado and occhi. Helena tells her what they all mean and marvels at the fact that Dora had remembered their spelling let alone that there was one word from each of the romance languages. She squeezes a small amount of shampoo into her hand and lathers her daughter's head with a fierce vigour that brings the simple, nostalgic odour of baby shampoo sharply to Helena's nose. Pictures of childhood fly through her mind as Dora rests against her stomach. They stay like that for some time, steam around them and on the windows.

They get out and dress, Helena taking care with the knots in Dora's hair. They are sitting in front of the heater in the living room and it seems like it will never get any brighter. The uncoiled whine and sudden deadbolt of the front door is the last sound in the house. Within fifteen minutes they're at the markets; Dora slips on a mushy leaf as they enter the throng. She doesn't know what to make of the burly, unshaven men who pinch her cheeks and then turn away screaming about vegetables. Her mother negotiates through the stalls, she knows the Greek man from whom she will buy her tomatoes, the toothless Asian lady with the best Bok Choy and the Italian man with the organic fruit. They eat donuts and watch their breath plume, pigeons expectant at their feet as they take a respite before the meat and fish hall.

The sounds echo mercilessly around the tiles and the odour of blood and meat is at once enticing and repulsive. Again Helena is quick and Dora is overwhelmed. She asks her mummy if the butcher's flashing light is a special ambulance for cows and Helena laughs, not knowing what to say.

It is 11:30 when they arrive home and the house is still quiet, the boys still asleep but now the light has changed. Helena feels like she can walk right through it, and she takes the hall in great heavy strides, allowing the bags to brush her bedroom door and the door of her two sons. She wants to wake them, vigorously, wants to drink in their yawns and hear their desires for the day. She lifts the bags up on to the bench. They sag in all directions as they are no longer being held at the handles and a pineapple rolls off the bench, falling spectacularly to the floor. Helena moves over to the radio and switches it on, louder than necessary. Dora is looking quizzically from the pineapple to her mother who seems not to notice. She is busy making noise, making heat, making love, and thickening the air so that the windows steam up.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Declan Kelly.*