

Nighttime Vigil

And so here I am, 2:30AM, curled around my five-year-old daughter, who has called “Mama!” rather than addressing me by my first name as she’s been doing recently. She’s probably had a bad dream. I won’t inquire until morning, when I’ll learn that owls were trying to gobble her up – trial and error has taught me that quiet cuddles get us both back to sleep more quickly.

Her golden-brown hair falls over her face. Only her nightlight – a red and black Gila monster; a hand-me-down from my brother’s youth – streaks light across the pillow. My mind can’t avoid it anymore. Yesterday, as I made tomorrow’s lunch and swept crumbs from under the kitchen table, a disturbing feeling hung in the background. But in the nighttime, the shadows sweep down upon me. Outside on the playground as I supervised the kindergartners, a truck jumped the curb, swerving onto the soccer field. Engine roaring, wheels spinning donuts. My coworker’s class was exiting the building, running towards that same field. He made a barrier with his arms. I yelled. He made a phone call. The students stopped. The truck drove away. I yelled to my class to run back towards the school. He got them all inside. We watched PBS Kids instead. My coworker spotted a police car out the window.

As the clock continues its ticking, my daughter rolls closer. Now both of my arms encompass her, hold her tight.

She’s just started kindergarten, at a school not far from where I teach. Already been initiated into the world of “lock-up” drills as she calls them. In case someone is in the school who’s not

supposed to be, we tell her. *Like a pig running free in the halls*, my husband says. Her eyes twinkle, adding scenarios of barking dogs scaring the kindergartners. *So they have to stay in their classrooms*, she says, her eyebrow arching. But already she's had a real code yellow, not a drill. A situation at a nearby high school, they said in a text to all the parents.

In her half-sleep, my daughter reaches down to my arms. She pulls at my wrists, loosening them, and then puts them back around her body. I stay with her until the rhythmic *shush* of her breathing turns to faint snores.

I inhale. The scent of her childhood surrounds me. Her bear is in her hand. Will its neck hold on for another day? These nights of soothing her with my mere presence are exhausting, magical, and finite. Sniffling, I kiss her peaceful cheek, then wipe it dry.

In her sleep, she flings herself face down on her pillow, arms out over head, owls forgotten.

Fearless once again.