



Query

My daughter's five now, and she just started school. She's in French immersion kindergarten and has learned the words for all the primary colours, how to count to *vingt*, and she knows the word for family. School happens only on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. She's in day care on the off days. She tells us she likes school better, that it's "more funner." There's artwork with glue, with sparkles, cut-ups and punch-outs. There's even a book each child gets to take home once a week that contains all the photos of their classmates.

All this sounds cute, and that's because it is. But there's an undercurrent here: my marriage is nearly dead. My wife and I live in the same house, yet we sleep in separate rooms, and there seems to be an arrangement for cohabitation only. We still do the same arguing half, we've just retired the loving half. When my daughter comes home with the word *famille* and the instructions to bring a family photo to school, I feel a pang: Is it fair for her to have this kind of family, a *faux* family, a pantomime?

After work I come home and do my best to avoid my wife. I play with my daughter in the park, or we go looking for bugs on the railroad tracks. I take her to dance classes and swimming classes. We catch butterflies. Anything to get out of the house, the place where the word *famille* turns to *terrible* and, I can't help but think, a place that affects my daughter in some way. She's five, and vivacious, and there are no signs I

can detect so far except when the arguments turn cataclysmic and she tries to intervene in the fights, acting as a referee.

No fair for a child, I know. That sight usually sobers both my wife and I, and we withdraw to our corners. But the fights start again, they inevitably start again, and they are always trivial: a damp towel left on the bed, a dirty sink, putting clothes away after they have been laundered. I know these are mere symbols, that the larger issue is that we aren't in love anymore, but it seems these subjects are all we care to discuss.

For me, it's like living next to a bomb: I never know when it will explode. For her, I'm sure it's like living next to an insensitive slob.

It's not that I think just my daughter deserves a better *famille*; I've long thought that. It's that I think both my wife and I do, too. But after this thought come choices: Who moves out, What will the custody arrangement be? The finality of legaldom. And part of me fears that change even more than the minor torture of this stable purgatory.

I know I will be part of my daughter's *famille* no matter what happens to the marriage; perhaps the picture for school next year will have only one parent in it. Both child and parent will be smiling. Perhaps there'll be something to smile about.

— Dr. Ursus