

For Real:

How lucky can you get? I will be seeing the amazing Ella again in a few days. It was only a couple of weeks ago that I last saw her. I get smiley and gooey at the same time just thinking about the prospect. This is beyond anything that tugs at my heart, even music. I never thought I would let it happen. I have trained long and hard not to be needy. Isn't life grand? Don't you love surprises?

Ella is a startlingly beautiful six year old who lives in California where she has a dog and a rabbit and America Girl dolls and blond curly hair and a real gymnastics outfit, for real. I hear her tiny voice from the next room and I assume she's talking to some dream that just passed, spending some time with her thoughts and a fairy or two. She loves to let the words flow, especially if she just made them up. But she's not speaking in kidstream where words tumble out and rhyme and go where they will. She is speaking in ordered sentences, one after the other, following on to conclusions and making sense. She is reading out loud. Honest to goodness reading. She can read all the small words and lots of the big ones.

How this happens I will never know. It is one of the great and wonderful facts of the human condition that children learn to speak and then to read. It starts one day and then it seems that it was always so. Like a stream. The notion that a child can sit down and open the thoughts of another human who wrote the words maybe a hundred years ago and treat it as if the words were coming from her mother is startling to me. What power there is in the idea that someone can write words for another someone, millions of miles away, who repeats it exactly as it was written. You can see it in Ella's eyes. You can see that there is a force working, a new force, something that makes her feel so strong and so smart and so solid. She may not be able to speak it yet but she knows that she now has the tool to learn anything she wants to learn. She is free to be brilliant. It's a choice now. What an awesome moment.

I don't remember much about my own learning to read. I remember being precocious and that school was easy. But there was a thorny, persistent problem I had in the early days of words and sentences and books. There was a word, a simple word that just threw me. The problem was that it is a common word. It's kind of difficult to talk without it. I invite you to try it

sometime. I would slam the book shut, probably "Dick and Jane", and stomp up to my father for the umpteenth time to be told, once again, that the word was..."the"... Yup, that's the word that was killing me. "The." It was my enemy and I hated it. Come to think of it, I don't care much for it now. Stupid little word.

Where was I? Ah, yes. Ella. Did I mention that she is smart and beautiful? She has a way of looking at me when she is trying to discern whether or not what I'm saying is factual or...a story. I tend to tell Ella a lot of stories because it's so much fun. She smiles and I smile when we tell stories to each other and then we dissolve in laughter. Can it get any better?

Anyway, so many stories can make for problems with one's credibility. When I tell Ella that I've invented toys and games that millions of kids have played with (true) and tell her in the next breath that Tiger comes to me for golf tips (not) you can see why a certain healthy skepticism takes hold of her. There is a fine line between the world you make with kids, the one you invent together, and the world that exists around all of us. They are really part of the same grand scheme. Either world alone, a world without facts or a world without story, is a silly world, a world not worth inhabiting. Since I blur the line occasionally, she has invented mechanisms to deal with it.

The most reliable, and I can see this one working forever, is for her to look at Veronica and say "For real, Grammy. Is that true?" Oh, by the way, Ella is my granddaughter. Did I mention that? If Grammy says it's true, it is. Period. But then there are times when Grammy is not around and Ella has to rely on her own instincts. She'll let me run on for a while, going wherever the story takes me. When she's had enough she'll say, "Grampy, sometimes you crack me up." Then we smile and laugh like crazy.

I will see her soon. We will invent farms and princesses and a life with horses and a world in which we will never, ever be apart. For real.