

Letters

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From the moment of birth, they said 'This one is different.'

They were right. Compared to Ben and Alia, this one had such strong preferences: took to certain faces and against others; spat out foods that should have been tasty.

At age three, would not sit at the table; insisted on wearing shoes to bed. And this one grew but refused to speak.

Around age four, messages appeared in plastic letters on the children's favourite toy, their magnetic easel. NO. SLEEPIE PUFF. PORRY.

On the fifth birthday, one parent bought a dollhouse as a gift. It was quite perfect: white and ornate, but solid. Perhaps, in the backs of their minds, they were saying 'This is how a house works. A child in each room, a dog in the yard, and a car in the driveway. See how they all live together, and how all the parts interlock?'

The dollhouse was set up besides the magnetic easel, and soon objects began to appear in strange places around the house.

A baby piano on the windowsill.

By the dog's food, a little bowl of plastic fruit.

A tiny door against the back door.

Only Alia picked up the nature of the utterances. Gazing at the piano as she guzzled her breakfast, the dog's bark suddenly sounded in her ears. It had been barking morning and night, but now it was as if she had tuned into its frequency.

'Oh, it's that dog,' she said absently. 'It's keeping us awake.'

The next morning, the piano was gone.

Then Ben had his own realisation. 'It's the fruit!' he announced. 'We don't like it. We want something else for snacks. Something sharp, and salty, and tasty.'

The fruit bowl disappeared.

But the door against the door remained a mystery for many months. Then the magnetic letters appeared.

A tiny ladder, M and E on either side, confounded them for several weeks – until a favourite ball was found when cleaning out the gutters. Down it tumbled into grateful hands, happy to see the earth again. The letters disappeared.

One warm, windy morning, the entire dollhouse family appeared inside a pot plant, with N O W placed jauntily around the edge. That day, after puzzling it out together, they all went for a picnic in the reserve.

Still, one parent was not happy. One day, they stood on a tiny plastic terrier, piercing their foot. All at once, they released their angry words and cloudy thoughts and the impulses humming through their nerves. Like a terrible storm, they shook and they grabbed and they lurched, until this one ran away and hid. Still, they roared, over and over, 'Why won't you talk to us!'

But there was only silence.

For the next several weeks, in a quiet mood, the family collected letters hidden in strange places. When they found the final letter propped behind the tiny door, they gathered around the kitchen table to assemble the message. Together, they read:

THIS WAY IS MORE FUN.