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389 conversations with my three kids

BY DAVID BROADBENT

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In these incredibly sensitive and often litigious times, all names apart from family members have been changed to protect personal privacy.

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acknowledgements

Even though I was the one who recorded all these conversations over the years, if it weren't for the encouragement, advice, passion and support of many others, I'm sure I wouldn't have started out on this long journey. It certainly involved a lot more than I originally thought.

There are a number of people I want to acknowledge for their time and patience in reviewing the book and suggesting improvements. You each provided different perspectives and helped shape the conversations into a form that's now fit to read. You not only demonstrated real commitment to the book, you also proved to me you have the same love of childhood I have.

To Michaela Chopping, our inhouse grammarian, whose honed eye found more than just a few missing commas, thanks for the grammar lesson I should have received at school.

To Fiona McMullen, who, despite having three children as well to look after and enough to do besides without helping me out, thanks for encouraging me to make sure I always sounded like a dad. I can't pretend I always remembered exactly what I said in response to the girls. That would have been impossible, as I was mostly focusing on what they were saying to ensure their words were as accurate as possible. Apart from a few composite conversations, the book is a faithful account of what the girls and I said to each other. However, as many of them weren't written down until a few days later and as many had been quickly scrawled on old envelopes or tattered bits of paper, I was sometimes only left with parts of a conversation to go on. It's not easy piecing together, quite literally, things that had either been in a pocket for days or had sometimes gone through the wash. Fiona, you were the pair of eyes that saw, more than anyone else, where I'd strayed from being authentic. Thanks for believing in this project.

To Pete Wheeler and Michelle Ridley, thanks for your sanguine appraisal of the book over Skype one afternoon. I think my kids are hilarious, too. But then, so are all children.

To my sister, Jenny Broadbent, who, like Fiona, had a lot on her plate at the time with her thesis, thanks for encouraging me to explain the process of writing this book. As you are aware, I would have preferred to have remained invisible, but you're right, I needed to explain the book's origin.

To Jed Cameron, whose assiduousness in telling me which conversations he thought worked well and which ones didn't (or at least needed a lot cut from them), most of the time you were right. You, along with my partner, were the most thorough and helped more than you probably realise.

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To Stevie Bee, who back in March 2008 thought the book was worth doing, your indefatigable effort in sifting through more than half a million words to find just sixty thousand that truly summed up childhood was a remarkable effort. Thanks for being the person to whom I'm most indebted. As editor, you have been Gibraltar. The book would never have happened without you.

To Karin Godecke, my partner, you have your own story to tell. But I'm glad you still appeared often enough to show that you existed. Thanks for your numerous editorial improvements and especially for allowing me the time and space to write all this down over the past ten years or so. I'm so glad I've been through everything with you and that you're in my life. Your temperament, not to mention your understanding throughout and disciplined approach to life, is a wonderful example to our children.

And finally, to Holly, Isabella and Amelie. I knew you three would change my life; I just didn't realise by how much. Your words have made me laugh and reflect, but most of all they made me human. Can any of us grown-ups ever find a way back to where it all began for us? I hope so. Even if only for a short while before we have to resume again our everyday responsibilities. That would do me.

— *D. B.*

introduction

I must admit adolescence was not a threshold I remember crossing. However, once I became an adolescent, and closed the door on my childhood so to be accepted among my friends who'd largely done the same, children soon disappeared from my life. Well, not entirely. Even if I tried to ignore them, I could still hear their little voices, in the same way I would hear trees and animals, only in the background. That was about it. Those little voices wouldn't return for another twenty years when I became a parent for the first time.

That's some hiatus. To be thrust into the uncontrollable exuberance of childhood after such a long break, was, at times, a difficult baptism of fire. I had to learn, very quickly, how to be present all over again. Picasso said he'd spent his entire life trying to paint like a child. I would, by comparison, simply suggest that I've spent the last ten years of my life trying to listen intently to my three daughters – even during moments when their recalcitrance drove me to despair.

This book then is the fruit of all that intent listening, as hard as it sometimes can be. By 2008, after a decade of writing down some* of the things my children were saying to me, I was urged by many of those who were reading these conversations as emails, to “do something with them”. They were telling me I'd created something appreciably bigger than the simple chronicling of my three daughters' lives. They were saying they were once again able to revisit their own childhoods. A time when we spoke and thought without censure, and before our minds began to fill with other people's ideas. Whereas adults often protect their real motives and pretend they're something they're not, children rarely do. What you see is who they are.

So, perhaps, vicariously, through just a few of the things these three emerging minds of this new century have said over the last few years, you might revisit your childhood. Holly, Isabella and Amelie may inhabit a different world to the one you once inhabited when you were a child, but I think in many ways they will still embody much of who you once were. Like them, you too were probably unwittingly wise. Like them, you too might also have said things that endeared you. And like them, you were probably outrageously funny without even realising it.

My motivation for writing this book

It was never my intention to write this book. Planning, forethought, all those sorts of things I wish I was better at, played no part. Indeed, I have to admit I had no idea the way my kids saw the world would fascinate me the way it has. Like most parents, apart from the expectation that I'd need to be very involved in bringing up my children, I didn't know what to think.

I don't know exactly what inspired me – or care to really. I don't think I always know what motivates me. I suppose I've always found my children's imaginations irresistible. Being free from all the conditioning I've had and being unhampered by all the pruning my mind has undergone since puberty, I think what I love about them is their candidness. I think they're still incapable of speaking, for instance, in euphemisms. With the exception of an occasional fib to escape my wrath, they've always told me exactly what they're been thinking. As George Orwell would have no doubt hoped, and Don Watson must be wishing, I think many of us could do with a trip back to the playground so we can learn again how to speak it as it is.

The process

This book begins in 2003 because, up until then, Holly and Isabella hadn't been saying much. All I'd been writing down were mainly my own thoughts on what it meant to be a father and only snippets of conversation between Holly and me would ever end up in those musings. Since 2003, though, and despite a limited vocabulary even then, Holly, and later on Isabella and finally Amelie, haven't stopped talking. Like most children, I suppose. As they learned more and became more articulate and more expressive, I added more of their conversations, to the point where they're now the lion's share of my writing. (Those early musings on fatherhood – and I continue to write them – might end up in another book one day.)

Writing this book, while thoroughly appealing most of the time, hasn't always been easy to pull off. Even though I only worked part-time between 2003 and 2008, the demands of having three small children at home meant I didn't have the luxury of choosing when I would write. Instead of being able to write down things when it suited me, I always had to wait. Often until it was very late at night, when they'd gone to bed and all was quiet. Not that I lamented those days. How could I? If I wanted to say anything about my children with any authority, I first had to be around them and involved with them – something I did then, as I do now.

Still, for the most part, I did enjoy the challenge of juggling the desire to both be with them and to scribble down the gems of our conversations. About the only thing I ever allowed to briefly interrupt a game in the park or one of the 'snuggle-cuddle' chats I often had with my three daughters at night before they fell asleep, was a piece of paper and a pen. If I thought I wouldn't remember something, then I'd quickly jot it down. Or, at least the key words they'd said.

In time, those scribbles turned into long scrawls that, together with their drawings, began to fill scrapbooks. Quite often, pen and paper would get caught up with the usual things kids like their parents to keep safe for them while they're playing, just in case they wanted to look at them later. Such as a shell, or a crab's nipper, or a dead insect, or, much later on, an interesting advertisement from a newspaper. And, invariably, they and my scrawls would meet in a shirt pocket and my scrawls would sometimes end up the worse for it. This always annoyed me; these were, after all, my kids' voices! But, an inevitable part of being with kids.

This book has been both my creative outlet and, in a sense, my way back to my own childhood. Indeed, reading back over what has survived has been such a delightful experience that I've fallen in love all over again with the springtime of life. I hope, then, that these conversations can be one way to acquaint yourself with your own childhood. If it was a pleasant one, that is.

If you've picked up this book because of the title, you've probably either left your childhood behind some time ago and wish you could get it back, or you're still a kid. I sincerely hope it's one of them and that this book of conversations keeps you enamoured of childhood no matter how old you are.

See you in the springtime.

— *David Broadbent*
June 5, 2010

*protecting the children's privacy has meant I've left out vast chunks of their lives.

A NOTE

The dates refer to when the stories were emailed to family and friends, so a particular date may cover a number of stories that were recorded on different days on or near that date.

CHAPTER ONE

2003-2005

**“Dad, do you know what
the people at the back do?”**

**HOLLY, WATCHING THE OLYMPIC MARATHON
AND REFERRING TO THE RUNNERS
AT THE REAR OF THE RACE.**

AUGUST 25, 2004

2003

Holly, aged 4 • Isabella, aged 1

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 19

Just checking

DAD, coaching Holly before she went into hospital where her mother, Karin, was recovering from a minor procedure: “Now remember, Holly. When you go in, give Mum a big cuddle and say you love her very much. She’ll love to receive that.”

HOLLY, a little anxiously: “Yes, alright, Dad.”

Two minutes later

HOLLY, about to enter the ward: “Dad . . . I love her a lot, don’t I?”

MONDAY JUNE 16

Right on the money

DAD, quickly spooning breakfast while watching Holly and Isabella play with their toys: “I wish I didn’t have to go to work today, Hols.”

HOLLY, without looking up: “But you have to, Dad. You have to get the money.”

DAD: “I don’t care, Holly. I just don’t want to go.”

HOLLY, finally looking up: “Well, just go for a little while and get a little bit of money and then sneak home, Dad. That’s what I’d do.”

DAD: “I like that. I don’t know if it’d work, but I like the way you think. So, would you like to be a grown-up one day?”

HOLLY: “Oh no, Dad. I want to be a kid. Kids have all the fun.”

DAD: “Well, can I be a kid again?”

HOLLY: “Sure, Dad. Just go into a dream and ask God to make you a kid. That’s what I do. I tell God to keep me a kid forever.”

SUNDAY AUGUST 3

A wealth of good ideas

HOLLY, after a long silence whilst walking in Kalamunda National Park: “Dad?”

DAD: “What’s up, Hols?”

HOLLY, pensively: “I don’t know why I’m here.”

DAD, surprised and a little perplexed: “Don’t you?”

HOLLY: “No.”

DAD: “Well . . . have a think about it and see if your thinking can tell you.”

HOLLY, after a short pause: “Well, maybe it’s because the Universe wants me to be here.”

DAD: “You might be onto something there, Hols. Who knows?”

HOLLY, after another short pause and now far less contemplative: “I’m *glad* I’m alive, Dad.”

DAD: “Are you?”

HOLLY: “Oh yes, I wouldn’t want to be a tree or something like that. Or a rock.”

DAD: “Wouldn’t you? Why not?”

HOLLY: “Because they, they just stand there. But if you leave some food on the rock it can lick it, I suppose.”

DAD: “What with? It doesn’t have a tongue.”

HOLLY, smiling: “With its imaginary tongue.”

DAD: “I hadn’t even considered an imaginary tongue. Great idea, Hols.”

HOLLY: “I have lots of good ideas, Dad.”

THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 18

Think nothing of it

Snuggle cuddles are an almost indispensable part of getting the girls to sleep at night. No exceptions, even when you’re tired, as was the case when I climbed into bed with Holly tonight to give her what I hoped would be a quick cuddle before she went to sleep.

DAD: “Hols, this has got to be short, alright?”

HOLLY: “But, Dad.”

DAD: “No, Holly. Look at all the things I’ve already done today. I’ve run six kilometres to and from work; I’ve walked you home from school; I’ve played games with you; I’ve helped you eat your dinner; I’ve laid on the grass and watched the planet Mars with you; I’ve made sure you played your violin properly; I’ve got you ready for bed and read you a story . . . I’ve done a lot of things today, Hols. And now I don’t want to lie next to you in your bed to make your bed warm. I have to wash-up!”

HOLLY: “But, Dad, you can get to sleep eventually.”

DAD: “Is that your answer, Hols? That’s all you’ve got to offer?”

HOLLY: “Yes, Dad.”

DAD: “Oh great! So, when’s eventually, Holly? Soon?”

HOLLY: “It’s pretty soon, Dad. It doesn’t matter.”

DAD: “Oh thanks, Hols. Thank you for being so thoughtful.”

HOLLY, smiling: “At school we’re learning all about that.”

DAD: “About what?”

HOLLY: “About being thoughtful.”

DAD: “Oh.”

HOLLY: “Yes, and I’m going to keep thinking about the word ‘thoughtful’, Dad.”

DAD: “Yes, it’s much easier than actually *being* thoughtful, isn’t it, Hols?”

HOLLY: “What?”

DAD: “I said, It’s—”

HOLLY: “Hey! My bed’s all warm. Thanks, Dad.”

SUNDAY DECEMBER 14

The good planet

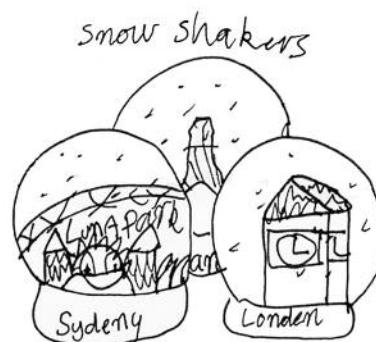
HOLLY, as I was reading to her from her *Junior Encyclopaedia*: “Dad, how did we get here?”

DAD: “How did we get here? Oh, that’s a good question, Hols, but I don’t think I have a great answer. All I know is that we came from this planet. Something that is supposedly not alive – the Earth – was able to make things that are alive. Like us. (*Thinks aloud*) Which makes me think what isn’t alive and what is alive are closely linked in some way. What do you think, though?”

HOLLY: “Oh, I think the Earth was lonely and wanted someone on its back.”

DAD: “Do you?”

HOLLY: “Yes. It wanted to be the best planet, Dad. That’s why it made snow-shakers, toys, friends, animals and water. The Earth is a good planet, Dad. And it goes around the Sun nice and warm.”



2004

Holly, aged 5 • Isabella, aged 2

MONDAY JANUARY 19

It's your own fault

Another day when I didn't want to go to work.

DAD: "I don't feel like going to work today, Holly."

HOLLY: "Well, you shouldn't have started in the first place, Dad."

WEDNESDAY JANUARY 21

The subject of pets

HOLLY: "Dad, can I have a pet?"

I knew this would happen eventually. A few days ago, Holly had asked for a horse. I'd said no to the horse but Holly was undeterred.



DAD: "Alright Holly, yes, you can have a pet."

HOLLY, elatedly: "Yes!"

DAD: "How about a pet ant?"

HOLLY: "An ant?"

DAD: "Yep. There's plenty of them walking around on the bricks out the back. Just choose one that looks cuddly and adorable, and that can be your pet."

HOLLY: "Oh, Dad. An ant can't be a pet!"

DAD: “Why not? They’re fantastic under a microscope. What, do you have something against small creatures?”

HOLLY: “What about a guinea pig, Dad? Can I have one of the them for a pet? Please?”

DAD, whispering to Karin: “How long can they live?”

KARIN, whispering back: “About five years, I think.”

DAD: “Oh . . . er, maybe.”

HOLLY, about to run off: “Issy, Issy!”

DAD: “Wait a minute. Don’t go yet.”

HOLLY: “What?”

DAD: “So, will you look after the guinea pig for five years without complaint, feeding them and loving them?”

HOLLY: “I will, Dad. I promise.”

Oh sure, I thought to myself. Two weeks max. Then I bet it’s our job. And I bet the guinea pig breaks all records for guinea pig longevity, too. And who’ll look after it when we go on holidays?

DAD: “I don’t know, Holly. I’m having second thoughts. What about a rather large worm instead?”

HOLLY to Isabella, a few minutes later: “Dad’s trying to get me not a pet, Issy. But I know he will soon.”

We now have a cat, a dog and two guinea pigs.



WEDNESDAY JANUARY 28

Keeping abreast

HOLLY, asking Karin about breasts: “Mum, how big did yours get?”

KARIN, incredulously: “How big did mine get? (*Points to her breasts*) This big, Holly.”

HOLLY: “Oh! So, how big will mine be?”

KARIN: “No one knows, Holly.”

HOLLY, moving on: “Mum, can you have babies when you’re thirteen?”

KARIN: “Yes, you can, sweetheart.”

HOLLY: “Will I?”

KARIN: “Well, we’ll just have to wait and see.”

I’d been in the next room listening in. Karin quickly realised what she’d said. When you’re trying to do five things at once and a five-year-old asks a question, sometimes you can walk into problems.

WEDNESDAY MARCH 3

Small price to pay

DAD, whilst riding with Holly to school, about three kilometres away: “Holly, it’s News today. Are you ready to talk about your News item at school this morning?”

HOLLY: “Yes, Dad.”

Holly pulled out a picture of some horses (what else?) and handed it to me.

DAD: “Oh, that’s right. It’s about pets, isn’t it?”

HOLLY: “Yes, Dad.”

DAD: “And these are your pet horses, are they?”

HOLLY: “It’s only pretend, Dad.”

DAD: “Yes, I can see that. Good old pretend. So much better than the real thing, isn’t it, Hols? Far less work.”

HOLLY: “Yes, Dad. For you.”

DAD: “That’s what I’m talking about.”

HOLLY: “Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Holly.”

HOLLY, digressing: “If I got run over I’d get into the newspaper, wouldn’t I?”

DAD, suddenly racing off into the future and envisaging Holly looking for an accident: “Well, possibly. I mean accidents do make it into the newspaper. But I wouldn’t count on it. Not everyone does. Newspapers, and the TV, do love a good accident, Hols. But they usually want something more than just a collision. They like extra things like the person causing the accident to have, say, 120 previous driving convictions. Or something like that. It’s called an angle. Oh, what am I saying? You probably don’t understand a word of what I’m talking about?”

HOLLY: “I’d still like to be in the paper, Dad.”

DAD: “Yes, but there’s a problem, Hols. If you get run over, you won’t be around to see yourself in the paper. Do you see what I mean? You’d just end up in hospital and for a very, very long time, I think. And with all kinds of horrible things attached to you as well. You might get in the paper, but so what! You’d be so uncomfortable and in so much pain that you’d be lucky to be able to read, let alone enjoy any praise you might get. People might read about you for a little bit, but the next day the paper’s in the bin. You see, it doesn’t last very long.”

HOLLY: “But I’d only pretend to die, Dad. I wouldn’t really do it.”

DAD: “Well, that makes me feel good. However, papers are funny about things like that. They usually require proof of someone’s death before they go ahead with a story. You might be able to pretend with some of your friends, but do you think you could trick all the ambulance people, the doctors, and the police?”

HOLLY, disappointedly: “Hmm, no. But I’d still love to be in the paper, Dad.”

DAD: “Oh, Hols! Fame is so short-lived. People usually only show interest in you for a while and then forget all about you – especially these days. These days you can be famous for doing absolutely nothing—”

HOLLY: “Nothing? Oh, that’d be good.”

DAD: “Well, it’s less painful than being in an accident. Anyway, where was I? Oh that’s right. Or they never leave you alone. You get pestered all the time. Very famous people often complain they can never get any peace and quiet. Would you want to be like them?”

HOLLY: “Oh yes, Dad. I would. I don’t like peace and quiet.”

SATURDAY JUNE 5

Too old to matter

HOLLY, passing an old white-haired man on the way home from school: “Dad, he shouldn’t be smoking. That’s bad for you.”

DAD: “Yes, that’s right, Hols.”

HOLLY: “But I guess it doesn’t matter that much for him.”

DAD: “Doesn’t it? Why not?”

HOLLY: “Because he won’t be living much longer.”

DAD: “So, you think he should just smoke then?”

HOLLY, chuckling: “Well, he shouldn’t. But he’s so old now it doesn’t really matter, does it?”

FRIDAY JUNE 18

Always together

HOLLY: “I don’t think dead is fun, Dad. I think it’s boring. All you ever do is lie around forever.”

DAD: “But you wouldn’t know that you were lying around forever, Hols. You wouldn’t have a brain to know that. You need a mind to know something.”

HOLLY: “But how does your mind *know*?”

DAD: “I don’t know. I think it just gets used to things, and knows that way.”

HOLLY: “When I die, Dad, I’m going to be everywhere with you. Then we can always be together.”

MONDAY JUNE 28

Self-fixer

DAD: “Holly, why were you just then closing your eyes and looking toward the sky with your two hands pressed together?”

HOLLY: “I just asked God when my birthday was.”

DAD: “Did you?”

HOLLY: “Yes. I wanted him to put it in my mind.”

DAD: “So you could always know when it was?”

HOLLY: “Yeah. I like my birthday.”

DAD: “So, did he do it for you? Did he put it in your mind?”

HOLLY: “No.”

DAD: “Oh well. Not to worry.”

A few seconds later.

HOLLY: “Dad, why does he do that?”

DAD: “What, Hols? Why does he do what?”

HOLLY: “Why does he sometimes help you, and other times he doesn’t?”

DAD: “Does he help you sometimes?”

HOLLY: “Yeah, I asked him to make Isabella good and he did. But I asked him to do it again, and he didn’t. I don’t know why he does that. He could have made it [the bad behaviour] just a dream, but he didn’t.”

DAD: “Ah, so you think God can make the real unreal, do you? So that it fits in a dream?”

HOLLY: “I ask him to sometimes.”

DAD: “Well, there’s an idea, Hols. The complete opposite to making your dreams come true. Look, I don’t know why God acts the way he does. And I certainly don’t know why he sometimes answers your prayers, and at other times he doesn’t.”

HOLLY: “I think God lived a long time ago. You could see him then. Then he died and became invisible. That’s why you can’t see him. But if you’ve got a problem he tries to fix it up for you. Everything is God, so it fixes itself eventually.”

SUNDAY AUGUST 8

I’d freeze everyone

HOLLY: “Dad, why did Walt Disney want to freeze his head for?”

DAD: “I don’t really know, Hols. To be honest with you, though, I have no idea whether the guy is frozen or not. I think it’s probably just a story, honey. If, though, he had been frozen, it most likely would have been because he was hoping someone could unfreeze his head one day and bring him back to life with a cure for whatever disease had him believing he was about to die.”

HOLLY, disappointedly: “Oh. Well, I still hope that when I die I get frozen.”

DAD: “Do you? Why?”

HOLLY: “Because I don’t want to die. I want to live forever.”

DAD: “Well, you would. You’re a kid, and life’s fun. Well, most of the time it is. Why wouldn’t you want to live forever? Tell me, though, Hols, who else, beside yourself, would you like to freeze? Isabella?”

HOLLY: “Yeah, Issy. Also, Mum, you, Amelie, the guineas.”

DAD: “What? The guinea pigs? You’d freeze the guinea pigs before six billion other people on this planet?”

HOLLY: “Oh no. I’d freeze them, too. I’d freeze everyone.”

DAD: “What? Even the mean boy who punched you last week at the park?”

HOLLY, laughing: “Oh . . . yeah. I think that boy would only get a few ice cubes, Dad. If he was lucky.”

DAD: “Hols, if we freeze everyone as they’re about to die, the whole planet will be full of refrigerators! You’d go to get a packet of frozen peas out of the freezer one day, and instead you’d get Walt. Or someone like him. Do you still want everyone to get frozen, Hols?”

HOLLY, yawning: “I’m a bit tired now, Dad. Can I have a story?”

What do you think that was?

MONDAY AUGUST 16

No one’s perfect

HOLLY: “I don’t believe God and Jesus are always good, Dad.”

DAD: “Don’t you?”

HOLLY: “No. Everyone’s bad at least one day.”

MONDAY AUGUST 23

The role of those up the back

HOLLY, watching the Olympic marathon and referring to the runners at the rear of the race: “Dad, do you know what the people at the back do?”

WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 1

Changing rules mid-game

HOLLY: “I spy with my little eye something beginning with T-E.”

We’d been playing I Spy with two letters where you have to use an adjective first and then a noun.

DAD, after three or four attempts to get it right: “I give up, Hols. What is it?”

HOLLY: “Tree Enormous.”

DAD: “But it’s the wrong way around.”

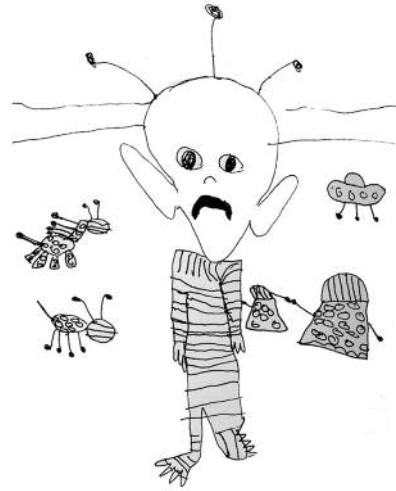
HOLLY: “I know. I tricked you. That’s how the Spanish do it. They put it the other way around. Mum told me.”

DAD: “Oh thanks, Hols. It makes life so simple.”

WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 29

Aliens

HOLLY: “If you don’t believe in them [aliens] they shine light on your car while you’re driving. If you do believe in them they just leave you alone.”



THURSDAY NOVEMBER 4

Isabella straightens her dad out

ISABELLA, telling me her toy fishing rod was no longer straight: “It’s bent, Dad!”

DAD: “Yes, you’re right, Issy. Do you want me to fix it for you?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Alright then.”

Using my knees as a vice, I bent her fishing rod back a bit so it was straight again.

DAD: “There. There you go. It’s straight now.”

ISABELLA: “No it isn’t. It’s still a bit bent.”

DAD: “Is it?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Well, look, it’s the best I can do, Issy. I tried very hard.”

ISABELLA: “No, it isn’t. It isn’t the best you can do, Dad.”

DAD: “I’m afraid it is, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Well, I’m afraid it isn’t, Dad.”

DAD, intently: “Issy, I’m afraid it is.”

ISABELLA, just as intently: “Dad, I’m afraid it isn’t . . . And I’m also afraid of Voldemort [from *Harry Potter*], too.”

FRIDAY DECEMBER 24

A long way off

ISABELLA: “Dad, why is Father Christmas so old?”

DAD: “Well, when you become a grown-up you get old, Issy. Actually, everyone gets old. You’re not a baby anymore, are you?”

ISABELLA, clearly ignoring the last bit: “And then you die, don’t you?”

DAD: “What? . . . Oh . . . Yes.”

ISABELLA: “Benny’s* old, Popi’s old, but Nona isn’t, Dad. She says she isn’t. She says she’s not going to get old . . . Are you old, Dad?” (*Isabella’s grandmother’s pet dog)

DAD: “Well, I’m older.”

ISABELLA, strangely upbeat: “I think you’re going to die, Dad. Then we’ll have to get a new one of you.”

DAD: “That’s the spirit, Issy. No use dwelling on the past. Best to get on with things and help Mum pick out a new dad, isn’t it?”

ISABELLA, a little later on: “We’re going to die, Holly.”

HOLLY: “Yeah, but that’s a long way to go, Issy.”

2005

Holly, aged 6 • Isabella, aged 3

MONDAY FEBRUARY 7

Details, details

DAD, in response to Isabella announcing she'd found her first friend at kindergarten: "What was her name again?"

ISABELLA: "I don't know."

DAD: "Oh, I thought you might have known her name being a friend of hers. Well, have you been sitting next to her?"

ISABELLA: "No."

DAD: "Oh. Well, what does she look like then?"

ISABELLA: "She has brown hair like Holly's."

DAD: "Right. Brown hair. So, is there anything else you remember about her?"

ISABELLA: "No."

DAD: "What? Nothing?"

ISABELLA: "She has an earring."

DAD: "Good, now we're getting somewhere. Anything else?"

ISABELLA, a little more animatedly now: "She has blue eyes, and, and, and . . . she had a little pony in her hair. And a nose that was just like mine. She also had a ribbon in her hair."

DAD: "That's better, Issy. Something for me to go on. Did she say anything to you?"

ISABELLA: "No."

DAD: “Oh. Well, did she call you her friend or did you say she was your friend?”

ISABELLA: “I called her my friend. Dad, it doesn’t matter.”

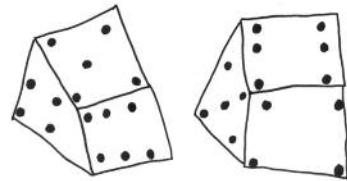
DAD: “Doesn’t it?”

ISABELLA: “No. Because if we ever invite her to our place we can get her name off her then.”

THURSDAY FEBRUARY 17

Heads or tails?

ISABELLA, after I informed her she had yet again put her shoes on the wrong feet: “Can we throw a dice or something?”



SATURDAY FEBRUARY 26

Dream management

HOLLY: “Dad, when I go to sleep at night I start off by dreaming a nice thought but then another one comes along and bumps it out of the way. The bad stuff gets in the road. I wish I could get my brain out and squash all the princess thoughts in and get all the bad stuff out.”

SATURDAY MARCH 5

I only love you

ISABELLA: “Dad, why does Mum have to go to French?”

DAD: “Well, she wants to learn how to speak French, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Well, I think it’s sad when someone goes away and they leave someone behind. It’s very, very sad for me.”

DAD: “Yes, that’s true. But what about me? Is it very sad when I go away? Are you sad when I have to leave you, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “No, silly. I don’t miss you. You’re only a Dad. I only love you.”

DAD: “Oh, is that all?”

ISABELLA: “It is all, Dad.”

SUNDAY MARCH 20

Who needs school when there's advertising?

DAD, after being away for work for three days, during which Holly had sneakily tried some wine from a bottle Karin uses for cooking: “Holly, have they taught you anything at school about alcohol yet?”

HOLLY: “No, Dad. Nothing.”

DAD: “Oh come on, Hols. I bet they've told you something about it.”

HOLLY: “They haven't, Dad, honestly. And besides, I don't even drive.”

SATURDAY APRIL 2

Married with a kiss

Holly is really into the whole idea of being married at the moment. Or so it seems. And not just the idea of it, either. She believes in the doing part, too. Well, as in a kiss on the lips. And as often as possible. Over the last few weeks, Holly's been getting married at the rate of two or three times a day. Approval, for instance, from the other person isn't necessary. Nor is a period of engagement. She's married thirteen people alone in the last few days, including Isabella and me this afternoon, as well as Annie, her very unsuspecting friend who'd just come over for a play.

HOLLY: “Dad, I kissed Arrika on the lips today.”

DAD: “Did you?”

HOLLY: “Yes. Now we're married.”

DAD: “Oh, that's lovely, honey. But there's more to marriage than that. It's a commitment between two people, who, on their wedding day, probably loved each other and wanted to spend the rest of their lives together.”

HOLLY: “Well, I love you and Issy and want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

DAD: “Yes. I know you do, sweetheart. I know you do.”

HOLLY: “Well, then that’s what I’m going to do.”

It’s not easy arguing with a determined pair of lips.

SATURDAY APRIL 30

It’s only in the middle

DAD, irritated: “Issy, don’t drink the bath water, sweetheart. Amelie has done a wee in it.”

ISABELLA: “No, it’s alright, Dad. She’s only weed in the middle.”

WEDNESDAY JUNE 8

Hardly

ISABELLA: “Dad, can we watch TV?”

DAD: “Oh hardly, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Yay, yay, yay. We can watch TV, Holly.”

DAD: “What are you talking about, Issy? I didn’t say you could watch TV.”

HOLLY, running frantically towards our TV: “Yes you did. Get the remote, Issy. You said ‘hardly’, and hardly means a little bit.”

MONDAY JUNE 13

How to make friends

Sometimes when a child isn't well, a little bit of small talk can help while away the time and stop them thinking about their illness.

DAD, as Isabella was resting in bed getting over a cold: "Isabella, so where do you think all your friends would be now?"

ISABELLA: "Um . . . At kindy, Dad."

DAD: "Oh. And these friends, could they be my friends, too?"

ISABELLA: "No!"

DAD: "Oh, couldn't they? Well, where can I get a friend from, then?"

ISABELLA, cheerfully: "You can get a friend from a house, Dad."

DAD: "Oh. So all I need to do is go to a house and get one, is that right?"

ISABELLA: "Yes."

DAD: "Any house?"

ISABELLA: "Yes."

DAD: "Oh good. So, will you come with me to a house then and help me get a friend?"

ISABELLA, her lower lip stuck out: "No, Dad. I can't. I'm sick."

DAD: "No, I mean after you're better, Issy. Will you do it then?"

ISABELLA, pausing: "Yes, Dad."

DAD: "Good. And what shall we say to the people when they answer the door?"

ISABELLA: "We'll just say, 'Do you want to be Dad's friend?'"

DAD: "But what if they say no?"

ISABELLA: “Well, then you tell the teacher.”

DAD: “Miss Andrews? We tell Miss Andrews?”

ISABELLA: “Mmm.”

DAD: “Oh. So, we’ll write down all the people who refuse to be my friend and give the list to your teacher. Is that right?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “And then what? What will happen after that?”

ISABELLA: “The teacher will put them in the corner.”

DAD: “What corner?”

ISABELLA: “Any corner.”

SATURDAY JULY 23

You wouldn’t look silly

HOLLY, at the supermarket: “Why don’t you bounce and skip along sideways and tap your head like me, Mum? It’s fun!”

KARIN: “Because I’d look silly, that’s why.”

HOLLY: “No you wouldn’t.”

WEDNESDAY AUGUST 31

Not good at friendship

HOLLY, talking about two kids who were fighting in a park: “They’re not good at friendship, Dad.”

TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 20

Even tucking-in has to be fun

ISABELLA, as I hurriedly tucked her in: “Oh! That’s not fair. It wasn’t any fun, Dad.”

Fun has now reached a point where Isabella thinks she even has to go to bed in a way that makes her giggle.

FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 23

No missing herself

ISABELLA, reacting to Karin leaving for overseas: “Dad, I’m going to miss Mum.”

DAD: “Are you, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Yes. But at least she’s not going to miss herself because her self is always with her.”

THURSDAY NOVEMBER 10

Who *wasn’t* in there?

A story told to me by Nona, Isabella’s grandmother, while she was looking after Isabella and Amelie when Karin was overseas in September. Isabella had noticed Nona was giving Amelie special attention.

ISABELLA: “Well, if you love Amelie so much, Nona, why don’t you go and get your own bubba?”

NONA: “Because I can’t, Issy. I’m too old. And besides, I’ve had two bubbas already.”

ISABELLA, sceptically: “No, you haven’t.”

NONA: “Yes, I have.”

ISABELLA: “Okay. Where are they?”

NONA: “They’ve grown up, Issy. One was your Mum. She was once in my tummy—”

ISABELLA, incredulously: “Nona, she wasn’t. Mum wasn’t in your tummy!”

NONA: “Yes, she was. And your uncle Tone was, too. He was in my tummy as well.”

ISABELLA: “Nona, he wasn’t in there! Next you’ll be saying Poppie was in there, too!”

WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 30

It just happens

HOLLY, on the subject of women having babies: “Dad, it just happens to them.”

DAD: “Does it? What just happens to them?”

HOLLY: “Babies. Women just get them. Even women who don’t want one get one.”

DAD: “So, what you’re saying, Hols, is a woman could be walking down the street, or she could be playing tennis, or about to catch a bus, when, without her realising it, and without thinking about having a baby, she becomes pregnant. Is that what you’re trying to say?”

HOLLY, in a moment of great gravitas: “I think it can happen, Dad.”

DAD: “But that’s so unfair. She might have had other plans for those nine months.”

HOLLY: “It doesn’t matter, Dad. She still has to go and have the baby. It’s in her tummy, and it’s got to come out.”

DAD: “Well, what about the man, Holly? What is he doing when all this is going on? What does he have to do with all this?”

HOLLY: “Not very much, I think. But he does drive the car. Even through stop signs if he wants to.”

DAD: “But couldn’t he be more useful than that? Especially when he’s in the hospital as his partner is screaming in pain and the baby is coming out?”

HOLLY: “Well, not really. Although he could tell her a story, I suppose. I like stories when I’m scared.”

DAD: “Do you? Which ones?”

HOLLY: “*Harry Potter*, stories about when you were a little boy . . . stuff like that, Dad.”

DAD: “Good idea, Hols. I might even suggest that to the nurses at St John of God Hospital.”

HOLLY: “Yes, you should, Dad.”

TUESDAY DECEMBER 20

The day Holly stopped believing

I was playing Santa at a work function, to which the family was invited.

HOLLY, pointing to me: “Mum, that looks like Dad.”

KARIN: “Oh, I don’t think so, Holly. I think it’s Santa.”

HOLLY, later on that night: “Dad, did you know there are fake Santas? There are people who dress up in costumes and pretend to be Santa?”

DAD, pretending to be angry: “What? Where, Holly?”

HOLLY: “Oh, Dad. You know. In shops. There are fake Santas all over the place.”

DAD: “Are there? Well, what about the Santa tonight? Don’t tell me he was a fake, too?”

HOLLY, gorgeously rolling her eyes to the back of her head: “Oh, Dad. It was you! I know it was you.”

DAD: “You picked me, did you?”

HOLLY, sniggering: “Oh yeah. You were so easy to pick. But I won’t tell Issy. I won’t let on. That way we can keep fooling her.”

DAD: “Looks like you’re one of us grown-ups now, Hols.”

HOLLY, eagerly: “Yeah, I know.”



CHAPTER TWO

2006

**DAD: "Issy, what do you talk about
with your friends at school?"**

**ISABELLA: "I don't know.
They won't tell me."**

SEPTEMBER 13, 2006

Holly, aged 7 • Isabella, aged 4 • Amelie, aged 1

SATURDAY JANUARY 14

The no-fun, matter-of-fact afterlife

DAD, reading a passage from *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire* to Isabella and Holly:
“Harry remembered how touchy Myrtle had always been about being dead, but none of the other ghosts he knew made such a fuss about it. “Sorry,” he said impatiently. “I didn’t mean – I just forgot—””

HOLLY: “I think I could be a ghost, Dad.”

DAD: “Do you, Hols?”

HOLLY: “Yes. I don’t think Myrtle should be too upset. At least she’s a ghost. At least she’s not nothing. I’d hate to be nothing.”

DAD: “You think it’d be fun, do you, Hols, going around spooking out people?”

HOLLY: “Yes.”

DAD: “Yes, I think it would be, too. I used to imagine being a ghost when I was a kid. What about you, Isabella? Would you like to be a ghost?”

ISABELLA, staring absently: “You just die . . . they just bury you.”

THURSDAY JANUARY 26

Sensible woo-hooing

ISABELLA, talking to me on the South Perth foreshore at the Australia Day celebrations:
“All the teenagers are woo hoo hoo with alcohol, aren’t they, Dad? But I’m not. I hate alcohol because I’ve never tried it.”

HOLLY: “No, I don’t like it either, Dad. I’d rather be woo hoo hoo with water.”

MONDAY JANUARY 30

Anything with four letters

HOLLY: “I’m not really sure what a swear word is, but it’s something teenagers say when they’re trying to be cool, I think.”

DAD: “Oh. Well, what’s an example then of a word teenagers say when you think they’re swearing?”

HOLLY: “‘Dude’. ‘Dude’ is one. A girl at school said that was a swear word. And ‘cool’. I think that’s swearing as well. There’s just so many, Dad.”

MONDAY FEBRUARY 6

Grown-ups know everything

DAD: “I wish I was a kid, Issy.”

ISABELLA, after a very long silence: “Yes, but it’s best if you’re grown-up, Dad, because then you know everything.”

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 15

Only I’ll know

HOLLY: “Dad, why do teenagers go all wobbly on their legs for after alcohol?”

DAD: “Um, I’m not really sure, Holly. It’s quite complex, I think. And even if I did have a good answer, it’d still be difficult to explain to someone of your age. Alcohol is just something that ends up messing up the brain. Just know that.”

HOLLY: “Oh I never want that to happen, Dad. I’m never going to have any alcohol. Never ever.”

DAD: “Well, that will be your choice to make later on, Holly. Although it won’t be as easy as you think. Do you want to know why?”

HOLLY, tentatively: “Hmm, I suppose so.”

DAD: “Because many of the friends you have now, and who may be your friends later when you get to make that decision, will probably be drinking alcohol. That’s why. What will you do then?”

HOLLY, thinking for a moment and then in a crafty tone: “I know what I’ll do, Dad. When they’re all drinking alcohol I’ll sneak some red blackcurrant juice into my drink and say it’s wine. That should do it. Then no one will know the difference except me.”

THURSDAY FEBRUARY 16

But it’s my birthday

HOLLY, on her bike on the way to school: “Dad, can we stop and climb that tree over there? I’ve always liked that tree; it’s my favourite tree in the whole wide world.”

DAD: “What? But, Hols, we have to get to school.”

HOLLY, intolerantly: “We have to get to school, we have to get to school. We’ll get to school, Dad. Don’t worry.”

ISABELLA: “Yes and, Dad, it doesn’t even matter.”

DAD: “Issy, it does matter. You have to learn things, sweetheart. You can’t just climb a tree. What will your teacher say?”

ISABELLA: “She’ll say to tell me all about it in News, like she always does.”

DAD: “You think so, do you?”

ISABELLA: “Hmm-mm. She likes to hear about trees and stuff like that. Dad, I really want to climb the tree. Please?”

Now Isabella wanted to climb the tree as much as Holly did.

DAD: “I don’t think it’s a good idea, Issy. It’ll make us very late.”

ISABELLA: “Look, Dad, it really doesn’t matter if we don’t end up going to school. And besides, it’s my birthday soon.”

DAD: “So! What’s that got to do with it?”

ISABELLA: “Well, you get what you want on your birthday and climbing a tree is definitely much more what I want than going to school.”

THURSDAY MARCH 2

Tall buildings are boring

HOLLY, resisting my urge to have her join me on a bike ride into the city that morning: “No, Dad. Tall buildings and cars and stuff like that are too boring. I hate going to the tall buildings. They stink and they’re too noisy.”

DAD: “Oh, well what about you, Issy? What do you think? Will you come with me into the city if Holly won’t go?”

ISABELLA: “No, I think they’re stupid, too, Dad. There’s no fun in tall buildings. You can’t even scream or do anything in them. You have to be so quiet in case you disturb them when they type. You have to be really quiet while they work.”

SATURDAY MARCH 11

The worst day of my life

HOLLY, on the way home from her violin practice as we were about to pull into a shop to pick up some groceries: “Where are we going, Dad?”

DAD: “To the shops, Holly.”

HOLLY: “Oh, who cares about shops, Dad?”

DAD: “You will, Holly, when there’s no food in the house.”

HOLLY: “No I won’t, Dad. C’mon, why don’t we just have fun instead?”

DAD: “Soon, Holly. We’ll have fun soon. In about half an hour, after shopping. Alright?”

HOLLY, dramatically: “This is the worst day of my life!”

Not on my own I don't!

DAD: "Isabella, would you like to go to Anna's house today?"

ISABELLA: "Oh, no way, Dad. I don't know where she lives."

Isabella was under the impression that, at the age of five, she'd be expected to make her own way to Anna's, all of three suburbs away.

Could we dig a hole to see it?

ISABELLA: "Dad, if the Sun is a star, why doesn't it come up in the night?"

DAD: "Well, it is up there, Issy. It's just on the other side of the Earth to us now. We've spun around and that means we aren't facing it at the moment." (*Demonstrates the Sun's rotation using an orange and a little bouncy ball*)

ISABELLA: "So, is it in London?"

DAD: "Yes. Very good, Issy. Right now it would be over London."

ISABELLA, after pausing for a moment to think: "So, Dad?"

DAD: "Yes, Issy."

ISABELLA: "Would we be able to dig a hole to see it?"

FRIDAY MARCH 17

Wouldn't know him if she fell over him

HOLLY, referring to a dad at her school who's away so much with his work that he apparently hardly knows his daughter: "Dad, she's never even seen her father, I think."

DAD: "Oh, Holly, she must have seen him. It can't be that bad."

HOLLY: "Well, a couple of times she has. She sort of knows what he looks like."

TUESDAY MARCH 28

The **big** crash

Isabella and I were about five minutes into a long bike ride when, as we approached a bridge, I quickly moved to the front. By taking the lead, I wanted Isabella to feel as though she had someone who was looking out for her. At that point, however, everything went awry. Being ahead of her I hadn't realised I couldn't see where she was going. And as we came near the incline to the bridge, disaster struck.



CRASH!

DAD: "Isabella! Isabella! Are you alright?"

She wasn't. Isabella had fallen off her bike and skidded onto a section of sharp rocks off to the left of the bridge and was now sobbing uncontrollably. I'd somehow forgotten Isabella didn't have the leg muscles to climb the bridge. She began to wobble, then suddenly stopped and fell into a heap off to the side of the path.

DAD: "I'm so sorry, Issy! I'm so sorry. Dad was a complete idiot, honey."

Isabella wasn't seriously hurt, just a little scratch on her leg. Nevertheless, to a child millimetres are centimetres, centimetres are metres, and everything over that is a cliff face. Now what was I going to do? After all the work I'd put in to get her riding, how was I going to undo her lost confidence? What was I going to do to restore her faith in me?

We sat on a patch of grass to rest for a while. I didn't say anything for some time. In truth, I really didn't know what I could say. As we sat watching the clouds together, I could tell there was a risk Isabella and I would have to walk home together, wheeling our bikes. Clouds, though, are wonderful to stare at so it's easy to be distracted from your problems when you're looking at them on your back as a child is cosily pressed against your chest and your arm is lazily wrapped around them. There are few better feelings in the world than staring into the blue of a sky with your five-year-old daughter close by. The clouds easily formed all kinds of objects, including whole menageries of animals. So much so, they ended up distracting us from our dilemma altogether.

DAD: "Isabella! Can you see a bear in that cloud?"

ISABELLA: "Where? Where, Dad?"

DAD: “There. See?”

ISABELLA: “Oh yeah! I can, Dad. And I can see a fish, too. Look, over there. (*Points to a clump of billowing white puff directly above*). There’s his eye, there’s the fin, and there’s his tail.”

I couldn’t see anything that looked even remotely like a fish, but I went along with it anyway, of course. After all, as she had gone along with me – even at her peril, as we both found out only a few minutes earlier – it was the least I could do.

DAD: “Yes. I can see it, Issy.”

We continued identifying shapes in the clouds for the next half hour.

DAD, eventually: “Ready to ride back home now, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Dad, I don’t want to ride anymore today. I want to wheel our bikes back.”

DAD: “Do you, darl? But what about if we just ride back a little bit of the way?”

ISABELLA: “No, Dad. I don’t want to.”

And then she began to whimper. What do you do? I couldn’t undo the past. I couldn’t put things back the way they were. I decided to think of a way out of the mess I’d created.

I don’t know how it happened. I don’t think I was seriously even thinking about it. Nonetheless, within a minute, no more, I was doing it. I was talking to Isabella in an absurdly idiotic, and, I would have thought, unconvincing puppeteer’s voice. What was I up to here, I caught myself momentarily thinking? What did I think I was going to accomplish with this banter? I started to pretend I was her bike.

DAD, squeakily, much like a tiny mouse: “Oh please, Isabella!”

ISABELLA: “Oh, you’re just saying that, Dad. You’re not the bike. You’re just making it say that.”

DAD, as Bike, persisting in an asinine tone: “Oh, Issy, I wish you’d ride me again. It wasn’t my fault; it was that silly old bridge’s fault. Please don’t blame me for you falling off. *Please.* I really like you.”

DAD, as Dad again: “Oh, Isabella, you don’t want to hurt Bike’s feelings, do you? Why don’t you ride him? He wants you to.”

ISABELLA: “Because he’s a naughty bike.”

Good, I'm off the hook, she's blaming the bike now.

DAD, as Bike: "No I'm not, Issy. I'm a good bike. The bridge is the naughty one."

DAD, now playing the bridge and switching to a deep-sounding malevolent voice: "I'm not a naughty bridge. I'm a good bridge. I'm only mean sometimes."

DAD, as Dad again: "Issy, did you hear that? It was the bridge. I just heard the bridge."

ISABELLA: "No it wasn't. That wasn't the bridge, silly, it was you. *You* were the bridge."

DAD: "No I wasn't. I'm not a bridge, Issy. Look at me! I don't have a span or a bit of a rise on my approach and a bit of a downhill slope at the other end of me. See?"

ISABELLA, indignantly: "Oh, Daddy."

DAD, as Bridge: "Who's saying Dad is Bridge?"

ISABELLA: "Isabella."

DAD, as Bridge: "And who is Isabella?"

ISABELLA: "I'm a little girl."

DAD, as Bridge: "A little girl?"

ISABELLA: "Hmm-mm."

DAD, as Bridge, in a conspiratorial tone: "Oh, I like little girls. Why don't you go over me? I'd like you to do that."

ISABELLA: "No way."

DAD, as Bike: "Hey, Issy?"

ISABELLA: "Yes."

DAD, as Bike: "I've got a plan."

ISABELLA: "What is it?"

DAD, as Bike: “We could go over Bridge together. He doesn’t like it when you are on a bike. He leaves you alone.”

ISABELLA: “He doesn’t! He threw me off.”

DAD, as Bike: “Yes. But that’s only because you didn’t ring your bell as you were riding over him. You have to ring your bell when you go over Bridge. He hates that and leaves you alone. Ask Dad.”

ISABELLA: “Does he, Dad?”

DAD, as Dad again: “Hmm-mm.”

ISABELLA: “Alright. But he’d better be good this time.”

And with that we were home in fifteen minutes.

THURSDAY APRIL 6

Best friends, good friends and worst friends

HOLLY, as we were about to ride home from school: “Dad, Gemma is my best friend.”

DAD: “Is she?”

HOLLY: “Yes. I made her laugh in the toilet today by saying ‘shit, shit, shit’ as we heard someone’s poo go down. You’re not allowed to say ‘shit’ at school, Dad.”

DAD: “But you just did, Holly. The toilet is a part of the school.”

HOLLY: “Yes, but no one can hear you saying it in there. And if they can’t hear you say it, then you can’t get into trouble.”

DAD: “Politics awaits you, Holly. Politics awaits you. You know what, I don’t have a best friend.”

HOLLY: “Don’t you? Why not?”

DAD: “Because I just have good friends.”

HOLLY: “Yes, I have good friends, too.”

DAD: “Like who?”

HOLLY: “Like Olivia.”

DAD: “So, why isn’t she your best friend?”

HOLLY: “Because I don’t play with her as much as I play with Gemma.”

DAD: “And Annie? How about Annie? Where is she on your list?”

HOLLY: “She’s my best friend, too.”

DAD: “But you can’t have two best friends.”

HOLLY: “Why not?”

DAD: “Because ‘best’ means nothing else equals it. Although you could have equal best, that’s possible . . . Anyway, Hols, how do you decide one friend is better than another?”

HOLLY, ignoring me: “I want two best friends, Dad. I can have two best friends if I want to.”

DAD: “Alright. Alright. Have two best friends then if you must. But it doesn’t make any sense to me.”

HOLLY: “A lot of things don’t make sense to you, Dad.”

DAD: “You’re right there, Hols. By the way, are the ‘mean’ girls in your class friends of yours?”

HOLLY: “No way! They’re my worst friends. They hate me.”

DAD: “Hate you? That’s quite severe, isn’t it, Holly? Hate is as bad as it gets, you know. Are you sure they hate you?”

HOLLY: “Yes, Dad. They were whispering but I heard them. They said (*Speaks very softly*) ‘I hate Holly’.”

DAD: “Oh, I really thought everything was going well in your class.”

HOLLY: “It is, Dad. It’s just that some kids hate other kids.”

DAD: “Is that right?”

HOLLY: “Hmm-mm.”

DAD: “You need to watch the word ‘hate’, Hols. It’s a powerful word and it sometimes ruins people, even entire countries. In fact, sometimes people can even hate all their lives. Try not to hate those girls back if you can.”

HOLLY: “I don’t hate anyone, Dad.”

DAD: “That’s lovely, sweetheart. You just seem to have best friends, good friends and worst friends, don’t you?”

HOLLY: “Hmm-mm. And silly friends, like Gemma. She said I was her only friend in the world. And she said she only wants me at her birthday party next week.”

DAD: “What? Just you? That sounds a bit sad.”

HOLLY, hardly concerned: “Hmm-mm.”

DAD, changing direction: “Oh, okay then. So, how about you, Issy? How’s your class going? Are you friends with everyone?”

ISABELLA: “No, not everyone.”

DAD: “Oh no. Not you, too.”

ISABELLA: “I’ve only got three friends, Dad.”

DAD: “What in the whole wide world?”

ISABELLA: “Hmm-mm. Anna, Cloe S and Sonia.”

DAD: “Is that all? Just three?”

ISABELLA: “Yes. Only three.”

DAD: “Well, what about all the other kids in your class?”

ISABELLA: “I like everyone, Dad, but I only play with three girls. Three’s enough.”

DAD: “Oh, now I understand. So, you only play with three girls. What about Tia and Mia, though?”

ISABELLA: “They rhyme, Dad.”

DAD: “Yes, I know they rhyme, Isabella. But apart from their names showing you a rhyme, do they have any other use?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know, Dad.”

DAD: “Okay, fair enough. Well, how about Brittany then? What about dear little Brittany? You used to play with her quite a bit a month ago. Is she still your friend?”

ISABELLA, indignantly: “No! She pushed a swing into my stomach and made me sick on purpose . . . It doesn’t matter anyway, Dad, because I am my own best friend.”

By now the conversation had shifted to the dining room and Holly had written out a list of her best friends, all 20 of them.

DAD: “I thought you told me you only had two best friends.”

HOLLY: “I know, I know. But it doesn’t matter now, Dad.”

DAD: “It doesn’t matter? Oh, alright then, forgetting all that, I see you’ve got Zoe T in. What about Zoe G?”

HOLLY: “She stuck fingernails into my hand.”

ISABELLA: “Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Isabella.”

ISABELLA: “You would love us even if we got into trouble, wouldn’t you?”

DAD: “Yes, I would, Issy. I will always love you, my sweet.”

HOLLY: “What if I shot you?”

DAD: “Well, even then I’d give it a shot, Holly. Get it?”

She said “yes”, but her unfilled expression suggested otherwise.

DAD: “No. Look. That’s a little trickier, what with blood going everywhere. Um . . . Look, I’d like to think I could forgive you, Holly, even if you did shoot me. But I think it might be a bit hard with a bullet in me.”

ISABELLA: “Jesus forgave everyone, Dad. Even the nailers got forgave.”

DAD: “Well, who knows what he thought of the ‘nailers’, Issy. That would have been a lot to ask of anyone, I think. Nails going through flesh are up there with bullets going through flesh, I think.”

HOLLY: “Well, I wouldn’t shoot you anyway, Dad, because I love you.”

ISABELLA: “So do I, Dad. I’d never shoot you either.”

DAD: “Oh, thanks, you two. I can cross that one off then.”

SATURDAY APRIL 8

Ever resourceful

ISABELLA, running in quickly to tell me urgent news as I was cleaning up a mess Amelie had made: “Quick, Dad. A bumblebee has just tipped over and he needs you to roll him back. C’mon! Quick!”

DAD: “But I can’t, Issy. Can’t you see? There’s poo all over my hands, and the floor, too.”

ISABELLA: “Don’t worry, Dad. Don’t worry. The bee can use the poo to climb onto. C’mon! Let’s go!”

THURSDAY APRIL 13

Always sometimes

ISABELLA, about a kilometre from school, as we heard the school bell ring: “Dad, that’s the bell.”

DAD: “Yes, I know. Pedal faster, Holly. We’re late.”

HOLLY: “We’re always late, aren’t we, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, that’s pretty close to the truth, Hols. Although there was that day in March, wasn’t there? That wonderful day in March when everything went according to my plans and not yours.”

HOLLY: “Oh yeah, I remember that day.”

DAD: “Oh you do, do you? So, do you think it will ever happen again that mistake of yours? I’d like it to.”

HOLLY, clearly misunderstanding: “I think it could.”

DAD: “Oh, you do. So, how will it happen?”

HOLLY: “Ah, you’ll just have to wait and see, Dad.”

DAD: “Wait and see? Oh, come on, Hols. That just means you think it won’t happen again, doesn’t it?”

HOLLY: “Oh, Daddy. Don’t give up.”

DAD: “Don’t give up? That’s all you can say, isn’t it? There’s no more to it than that, is there?”

HOLLY: “No. Not really.”

DAD: “Well, what about you getting dressed in the morning when I want you to get dressed? That would help.”

HOLLY: “But I do.”

DAD: “No, you don’t.”

HOLLY: “Yes, I do.”

DAD: “No, you don’t!”

HOLLY: “I do, Dad. I always do it sometimes.”

MONDAY MAY 1

A hard choice

ISABELLA to Karin: “How come you chose me to be your middle child, Mum?”

Is that it?

HOLLY: “Mum, how tall did you get to?”

KARIN: “What do you mean?”

HOLLY: “In your life? How tall did you actually get to when you were younger?”

KARIN, putting her hand on her head: “This tall, Holly. As tall as I am now.”

HOLLY: “Is that all? Is that as tall as you got?”

KARIN: “Yes, this is it, I’m afraid.”

HOLLY, disappointed and surprised: “Oh.”

FRIDAY MAY 12

I’d rather read forever

HOLLY: “I think it’s so unfair dying. No one deserves to die, Dad. I’d read forever rather than die.”

And Holly *detests* reading.

THURSDAY JUNE 1

The problem of being a teenager

HOLLY: “I only want to be eight or nine, Dad. I don’t want ten or the other numbers. They’re too big.”

DAD: “Are they?”

HOLLY: “Hmm-mm.”

DAD: “But why?”

HOLLY: “Because when you get to be big numbers, you do silly things, Dad.”

DAD: “Do you?”

HOLLY: “Hmm-mm.”

DAD: “Like what?”

HOLLY: “Well, you drink alcohol and then you drive, you say silly things to boys, and sometimes you even kiss people on the lips. That’s what teenagers do.”

DAD: “Yes, but, Holly, you can choose not to do those things, can’t you?”

HOLLY: “Well, not really. You can’t help yourself when you’re a teenager.”

WEDNESDAY JUNE 14

Untried knowledge

DAD: “Isabella, would you like to try some sushi?”

ISABELLA: “No. I’ve never tried it so I don’t like it.”

SATURDAY JULY 1

Beyond measure

ISABELLA: “Dad, did you know one hundred is not the biggest number in the world?”

DAD, feigning ignorance: “No, I didn’t, Issy. Really? So, what is the biggest number in the world?”

ISABELLA: “It’s a googol, Dad. A googol is even bigger than a thousand.”

DAD: “A thousand? Is it? And how big is a thousand, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know.”

Just as long as I’m getting something

HOLLY, showing me a slip of paper that said she would be receiving an award at Assembly that week: “Guess what, Dad? I’m going to be getting an award!”

DAD: “Are you? That’s wonderful, sweetheart. So, what kind of award do you think it will be?”

HOLLY: “I think I overheard someone saying it will be a Citizenship Award.”

DAD: “Really? How exciting! Were you kind to someone recently or something?”

HOLLY: “No.”

DAD: “Well, you must have been, Holly. Think. Have you done anything kind to anyone over the last little while?”

HOLLY: “No, Dad. I haven’t. I swear. I haven’t been kind to anyone. I’m really sure about that.”

DAD: “Oh!”

HOLLY, reflecting: “Well, I guess I always hug Annie a lot. I remember doing that last week. But we’re always hugging so I don’t think it would be for that.”

DAD: “Well, it sounds as though it’s going to be a bit of a mystery then.”

HOLLY: “I really don’t care what the award’s for, Dad. I’m just glad I’ll be getting something.”

WEDNESDAY JULY 5

A tall story

Overhearing **ISABELLA** to one of her school friends: “My Dad’s really, really tall. He can go through a ceiling if he wants to . . . But he’d need a ladder.”

Wasn't born yesterday

ISABELLA, after Karin had left to do some shopping: "Dad, when is Mummy coming back?"

DAD, dishonestly: "Soon, Issy."

ISABELLA: "Oh, that's not true, Dad, and you're not even believing in yourself."

THURSDAY JULY 6

A time to forget

Holly, Isabella and I were just about to board a plane for Sydney.

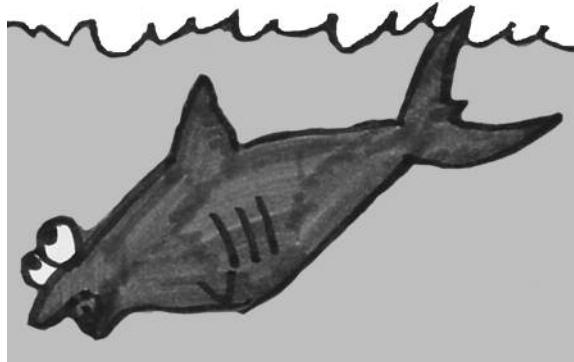
DAD: "Don't worry too much girls if you forget something. It won't be the end of the world."

ISABELLA, adamantly: "But when it is the end of the world, then we can forget something, can't we, Dad?"

SATURDAY JULY 8

Well, you would

HOLLY, at Stockton Beach, Newcastle: "Sharks are the scariest things, Dad, but not in pools. If I saw a shark in a pool coming at me, I'd be very shocked."



SUNDAY JULY 9

One-more-sleeps

ISABELLA: "Dad, it's only nine more sleeps until we go back home. I can't wait until it's only one more sleep. I always get excited about 'one more sleeps'."

DAD: "I know you do, sweetheart. Wouldn't it be good if every sleep was a 'one more sleep'?"

ISABELLA, elatedly: "That would be great, Dad! But not if you're dead the next day."

FRIDAY JULY 14

A big day out

Familiarity breeds . . . more of the same

At Sydney's Maritime Museum with Holly, who'd been continually tapping me on the shoulder.

DAD, annoyed: "What? What is it, Holly?"

HOLLY: "I want to go to the souvenir shop."

DAD: "Yes, I know you do. So, what do you want this time?"

HOLLY: "A horse that gallops around."

DAD: "But you'll be bored of it in no time, Holly."

HOLLY: "No, I won't. I play with you in no time and never get bored of you."

Only for my feet

Holly, Isabella and I had spent the better part of a day walking around some of the sights of Sydney.

DAD: "That's quite a lot of walking for two little kids – across The Bridge and around the Opera House."

ISABELLA: "Yes, but only for my feet it was, Dad. Not me."

The purpose of marriage

ISABELLA: "I'm glad you and Mum got married because now I have all this fun."

In the beginning . . . someone must have been around

ISABELLA, just before bedtime: "I am always thinking who was alive before everyone else, and I don't know who was."

MONDAY JULY 17

What makes a train . . . and what unmakes it

ISABELLA, on a Sydney train: “What makes a train, Dad?”

DAD: “A *train*? Oh . . . well . . . I’m not completely sure, Issy, but I think you get a train when you have this big hot pot of iron – the pot’s called a blast furnace – and it moulds the iron into the shape of a train, and when the iron cools down, people like you and me can then climb inside the train and sit on its seats. What do you think of that?”

ISABELLA: “So, can you fit a train into a pot?”

DAD: “Well, sort of. That’s one way of looking at it.”

Thirty seconds later

ISABELLA: “Dad? Can a train come apart?”

HOLLY, butting in: “Only if something big falls on it, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Like Qantas?”

HOLLY: “Yeah. Or a Virgin.”

FRIDAY JULY 21

The power of the News

ISABELLA, while eating breakfast: “I don’t want to die, Mum. I want to live forever.

KARIN: “Do you?”

ISABELLA: “Yes. (*Short pause*) Who do you think’ll die first?”

KARIN: “What?”

ISABELLA: “In the family?”

KARIN: “I don’t know, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “I reckon it’ll be, Dad. I don’t want him to, but I think it will be him.”

Thirty minutes later, after Karin told me what Isabella had said, I thought I’d see if I could get Isabella to change her mind about the short straw she’d drawn for me.

DAD: “Issy, I don’t want to die.”

ISABELLA: “Well, you tell the News [the TV News], Dad. Maybe it can make you live to infinity.”

TUESDAY AUGUST 1

Fairly sure

ISABELLA, knees bent and ready to jump from the end of our lounge: “Dad, how does it know where I want to go?”

DAD, baffled: “How does *what* know where you want to go, Issy?”

ISABELLA, ignoring my question: “It doesn’t let me do all the things I want to do.”

DAD, still at a loss: “Really? Like what? What doesn’t *it* let you do?”

ISABELLA: “Well, it never lets me fly. I flap my wings and I never go anywhere. Watch!”

Isabella flapped her arms up and down but nothing happened.

DAD: “I think you need real wings, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Yes but, Dad, why can’t I do what I want to do? Birds can fly, planes can fly, but I just go like this.” (*Flaps arms, but this time with less enthusiasm*)

DAD: “Because life is usually dull compared to your imagination, sweetheart. That’s why. And there’s not much you can do about that, I’m afraid. Holly, seeing you’re here, why do you think she always goes straight to the ground?”

HOLLY: “Because the lounge looks inside her head, Dad, and sees that’s where she wants to go.”

ISABELLA: “I think the Earth just wants you to go down, Dad. It says, ‘Down!’ and you go down.”

DAD: “Are you sure about that, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Yes. Fairly.”

MONDAY AUGUST 7

A better fit

ISABELLA: “Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Amelie’s head is getting smaller. Her body’s fitting into her head now.”

DAD: “You think so?”

ISABELLA, ebulliently: “Yes, she’s getting much better, Dad. When babies get bigger they get better because their heads don’t wobble as much on their bodies as they used to.”

More on fame

HOLLY, concerning her friend, Emily, whose surname she saw in the newspaper a few weeks earlier: “Why can’t we be famous, Dad?”

DAD: “Famous? Well, we can be, Holly. We just have to do something that a lot of people think is out of the ordinary. That’s all.”

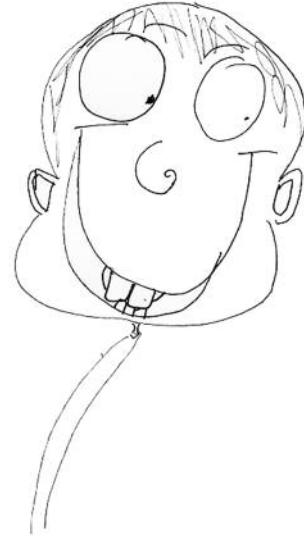
HOLLY: “Like what?”

DAD: “I don’t know. Use your imagination. But please choose something lawful. You want to be well-known for doing a good thing, not something that causes others trouble. By the way, did you know I was once famous?”

HOLLY, disbelievingly: “You? What for?”

DAD, simulating disbelief: “I can scarcely believe my ears, Holly. If I say ‘seven for eight’, or ‘nine for forty-one’, does that help in any way?”

HOLLY: “It helps in no way, Dad.”



DAD, ratcheting up the incredulity: “Holly! They’re bowling figures from when I was a little boy about your age. For goodness sake!”

HOLLY: “Oh no. Not again. You’re always going on about ‘seven for eight’. ‘Seven for eight’, ‘seven for eight’, that’s all you ever say.”

DAD: “And ‘nine for forty-one’, Holly. Don’t forget my ‘nine for forty-one’.”

HOLLY, holding her face in her hands: “Oh no, not all your bowling again.”

DAD: “Hols, when I was your age, I bowled out seven batsmen for only eight runs. I was famous. I was in the paper and everything.”

HOLLY, rolling her eyes: “I know. You tell me that all the time.”

DAD: “Of course I do. That’s what being famous is all about. You need someone to talk about you. That’s why, for instance, I go on and on and on about my trophies to you. So you’ll talk about me to other people. That’s how I became famous. The newspaper talked about me.”

HOLLY: “But you aren’t famous now, Dad.”

DAD: “Yeah . . . true. But I was very famous back then. My name even made it into the *Newcastle Herald*. It was squashed in between the Junior Netball scores and Ladies Bowls, from memory. Thousands of people must have read about my seven for eight that day. Such triumphs as the ones I achieved as a boy don’t fade away easily, Holly. For example, November 3, 1973 against Beresfield in the Under 10s Newcastle cricket competition. That was one special day, honey.”

HOLLY, laughing: “Dad-dy!”

DAD: “You don’t believe me, do you?”

HOLLY, still smiling, “No, Dad.”

DAD: “Alright. That’s your choice, Hols. By the way, why do *you* want to be famous?”

HOLLY: “Because people will know me if I’m famous.”

DAD: “No they won’t, Holly.”

HOLLY: “Yes they will.”

DAD: “No they won’t. Think about it. They’ll just know a story about you. It won’t actually *be* you. You don’t read the paper yet, but trust me, in the gossip section – that’s the section that talks about famous people – they just make stuff up about a person. And people believe it.”

HOLLY: “Do they? But why, Dad?”

DAD: “Because they’re probably so bored with their own lives that they want to read about people who they think are more interesting. Can you see what I mean?”

HOLLY: “I’d still like to be famous, Dad.”

DAD: “I don’t think you would, though, Hols. You wouldn’t be left alone. People with cameras would want to photograph you eating at a restaurant. They’d want to get a picture of you with someone they think you shouldn’t be with. And also, how would you like it if you were asked to answer questions all the time?”

HOLLY: “Well, I wish I knew someone famous then.”

DAD: “Like your dad?”

HOLLY: “Dad-dy!”

DAD: “I’m telling you, Hols, fame just isn’t important. I wish I knew someone who was famous. Other than me, that is. Just so I could get them to tell you that fame isn’t worth it.”

HOLLY: “You’re just tricking, Dad.”

DAD: “Alright then, Hols. How about this? There’s a show on TV – and this is the truth, I’m not making it up – that just films a group of people ‘living together’ in a house. The people from this TV show become famous for doing absolutely nothing, Holly. Do you want to go on it?”

HOLLY: “That’s stupid, Dad.”

I can understand why she wants to be famous. I certainly wanted to be celebrated as a child. It’s almost to be expected, I think. The recognition and adulation looks so appealing. Unless you’re Isabella, that is, for whom nothing could be more unappealing.

Earlier that morning

DAD: “Issy, do you want to be famous?”

ISABELLA: “Who with?”

DAD: “Just by yourself. Do you want to be famous all by yourself?”

ISABELLA: “Never, Dad. I want to be just me and not famous. Ever!”

DAD: “Oh.”

ISABELLA, looking across at my trophies on the mantelpiece: “Did you win races, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy. But only a few.”

ISABELLA: “You didn’t win the ones you didn’t go in, did you?”

DAD: “No, Issy. I decided not to win those ones.”

After ten minutes of looking admiringly into the reflective plastic on some of my low-priced trophies, Isabella broke one. Off came the little man at the top of one of my running trophies. To her credit, she was there to comfort me. She was over in a stroll, and soon had her arm around me. Not that I needed her consoling to suppress my pretend sobbing.

ISABELLA: “Don’t worry, Dad. Now you have two trophies instead of one. The wooden bit can rest here (*Points to a shelf*), and the fast silver you* can go here on the ground. (*Starts to make him run*) Now he can run and run and run like you did when you won all your races. He doesn’t have the wood on him anymore.” (*a Pompeii-like statuesque running figure that used to be on top of the trophy)

TUESDAY AUGUST 8

More on fame, 24 hours later

HOLLY: “Dad, did you know Annie gets trophies for doing tap? I think I’d like to do that.”

DAD: “Oh, Hols, trophies shouldn’t be the reason for doing something. You should only do tap if you like doing tap. Not so you can get an award. Speaking of awards, don’t you think I deserve one?”

HOLLY: “What for?”

DAD: “For all the things I do for you.”

HOLLY: “Like what?”

DAD: “Like what? Where do I start? Being your dad is a wonderful experience, Hols, but it isn’t easy. I haven’t just been lounging around, you know. Looking after you, Issy and Amelie takes quite a lot of effort. I mean, it’s enjoyable – well, most of the time it is – but you’d never call it easy. Incidentally, did you know Father’s Day is just around the corner? I wonder what you will get me this year. Have you got anything in mind?”

HOLLY: “Hmm-mm. I sure do, Dad. But I’m not telling you. It’s a surprise.”

DAD: “Well, how long will I have to wait for your surprise, Holly?”

HOLLY: “I don’t know. Not very long, Dad.”

DAD, persistently: “How long?”

HOLLY, thinking for a moment: “How about I tell you when to open your eyes?”

DAD: “You want me to shut my eyes, do you?”

HOLLY: “Yes.”

DAD: “Alright then.”

I closed my eyes and after about five minutes Holly returned.

HOLLY: “You can open them now, Dad. SURPRISE!”

I was presented with my very first ever Great Dad certificate.

DAD: “Oh thanks, Hols.”

HOLLY, kissing me on my cheek: “You’re very welcome, Dad.”

About an hour later.

HOLLY, forgetting that I’d only explained what I thought about fame the day before: “So, Dad, what do you think of fame?”

DAD: “Me?”

HOLLY: “Yeah. What do you think of being famous?”

DAD: “Oh . . . well . . . I guess fame is sort of like a frame, Holly.”

HOLLY: “A frame?”

DAD: “Yeah. You know, famous people always seem to be in some sort of frame. Like when they’re on TV – that’s a frame, or like when they’re in a big poster on a wall – that’s another frame. But the biggest frame of all is when they’re inside someone else’s head. People actually think they know them. But how can they? They can’t. Not like you know your best friend. Your best friend you know very well, but you can’t really know famous people like that. That’s because when someone is famous all you ever know about them is what you read in a magazine. They have all these security people around them and they won’t let people like you and me get near them. All we ever really get to know about a famous person is just a made-up idea of them. They’re simply marvellous or horrible, depending on what a magazine or TV show wants to tell you. It’s not really the person, Hols. That’s not their real self. It’s just an exaggerated version of them. Do you understand what I’m talking about?”

HOLLY: “I think so.”

DAD: “You don’t have to say that. You can say you didn’t understand a word I was talking about if you want to. I won’t be upset.”

HOLLY: “Oh good. I didn’t really get much of what you were talking about, Dad.”

The know-all Dictionary

ISABELLA, after seeing me with a dictionary in my hand: “Dad, how did the dictionary know all those words?”

DAD: “Well, I guess people wrote the dictionary. It knows all those words because people told the dictionary what the words mean.”

ISABELLA: “What? Every single person wrote it? Even you?”

DAD: “No, only a few people wrote it.”

ISABELLA, incredulously: “What, the whole book?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Dad, people shouldn’t tell dictionaries all those words.”

DAD: “Shouldn’t they? Why?”

ISABELLA: “Because then they’ll have all the words and we won’t have any.”

SUNDAY AUGUST 13

Luck of the dream

DAD, after Isabella was beginning to become engrossed in a *Dr Who* episode: “I don’t care, Issy. *Dr Who* is going off. Otherwise you will have a nightmare for sure.”

ISABELLA: “But I didn’t the last time I watched it. I got something nice.”



DAD, somewhat perplexed: “What do you mean you got something nice? What did you get?”

ISABELLA: “I can’t remember for sure. A fairy dream, I think.”

DAD: “Well, that was just lucky. You probably won’t get lucky like that again.”

ISABELLA: “Yes I will, Dad. I like getting lucky.”

WEDNESDAY AUGUST 16

Lost

ISABELLA: “Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “I got lost today.”

DAD: “Did you?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, in a line at school.”

DAD: “You got lost in a line? How on earth did you get lost in a line?”

ISABELLA: “I just did, Dad. One minute I was standing in line, and then I wasn’t. The line went and I stayed. Luckily, there was a Year Twelve close by. She stood with me until a pre-primary girl came and got me. That was lucky, wasn’t it?”

DAD: “It sure was. How very naughty of your line to do that. So, what are you going to do in the future then?”

ISABELLA, self-assuredly: “The line is going to remember me next time, Dad. The teacher said it would look out for me. I said that would be good, and I also said I would look out for the line. I’m going to watch where it goes now, Dad.”

DAD: “Very good girl, Issy. That’s very wise.”

ISABELLA: “Who’s wise, Dad?”

DAD: “You are.”

ISABELLA: “I’m wise?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA, exuberantly: “Oh good!”

War is too hard

HOLLY, as she happened to spot something on the News about the Middle East: “Dad, why do grown-ups do stupid things for?”

DAD: “I don’t even know where to begin, Holly. Um . . . let me see. How about I start with this? Usually in our stupidity, we are just like you and Issy are when you fight over a toy. Many grown-ups want what somebody else has and are prepared to fight over it. And, many grown-ups want to be right all the time so they fight over that, too. That’s probably the biggest problem of all, Holly.”

HOLLY: “War is strange, isn’t it, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, it is. If you ever work it out one day, if you ever work out why we seem to get into so many wars, can you let me know?”

HOLLY: “Oh, I don’t think I will be able to work that out, Dad. It sounds too hard.”

MONDAY AUGUST 21

Deprivation

ISABELLA, solemnly, about ten minutes after she’d had a discussion with Karin about birth abnormalities: “Mum, there are some children who are born without any toys.”



Always the spoiler

HOLLY, as we were hurtling at 110kms an hour on the way from Nannup to Busselton as Amelie screamed in the back seat: “Dad, can you stop for a minute or two so I can jump in that puddle over there?”

DAD: “What?”

ISABELLA: “Yes and, Dad, if we do, I want to get a stick.”

Dad, in a threadbare yell trying to be heard over Amelie’s far more compelling screams: “THAT’S ABSURD, YOU TWO. NEITHER OF THOSE TWO THINGS WILL BE HAPPENING FOR AT LEAST THE NEXT 100 KILOMETRES. ALRIGHT?”

HOLLY and **ISABELLA**, in chorus: “I knew he would be like that.”

THURSDAY AUGUST 31

You can if it’s a test

HOLLY, on when to cheat and when not to, after she discovered the six times table was on her school desk’s placemat: “It’s not alright if it’s a race, but you can if it’s a test, Dad.”

WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 13

They won't tell me

DAD: "Issy, what do you talk about with your friends at school?"

ISABELLA: "I don't know. They won't tell me."

I'll turn it up

DAD: "Isabella, what are you doing?"

ISABELLA: "I'm making pancakes."

DAD: "Yes, I can sort of see that. But may I suggest something?"

ISABELLA, derisively: "Ye-es. What is it this time?"

DAD: "Did you know pancakes are usually made on top of a stove instead of in front of a fan heater?"

ISABELLA: "Dad, I'm going to turn it up."

SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 23

Climbing Bluff Knoll

1.50pm

DAD, after Holly wanted to stop again even though we'd only just stopped five minutes earlier: "Holly, don't blame me if we end up taking hours to climb Bluff Knoll."

HOLLY: "Well, I am going to blame you, Dad, because you took us."

2pm

ISABELLA: "How many Bluff Knolls are there, Dad?"

DAD: "Just the one, Issy."

ISABELLA: "Only one?"

DAD: “Yeah. Just one. Why?”

ISABELLA: “Oh, well, I wanted to see a family of Bluffs, Dad. I thought Bluffy was part of a family of mountains and we could see his brothers and sisters if he had any.”

2.05pm

ISABELLA: “Dad, for my birthday, can I have a Bluff Knoll cake?”

DAD: “A Bluff Knoll cake? I’ll see what I can do, Issy, but I’m not promising anything. Alright?”

ISABELLA: “Oh, but you should promise something, Dad. Dads *always* promise something.”

DAD, knowing full well she’d forget all about such promises: “Alright. We’ll get a Bluff Knoll cake for your birthday. How’s that?”

ISABELLA: “Hooray! I’ve always wanted a Bluff Knoll cake.”

DAD: “Have you? Since when, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Since always, Dad.”

DAD: “Oh, that long ago. So, when did ‘always’ start?”

ISABELLA, looking at me intently: “So so so long ago, Dad. Before you were even little.”

3pm

DAD: “Issy, what do you think? Do you think it would be a good idea having an ice cream shop on Bluff Knoll?”

ISABELLA: “No, it’s too rocky and the wind would blow the ice cream off the cones, Dad. You would need lots of sticky tape, I think.”

4pm

HOLLY: “Dad, was Bluff Knoll around when the dinosaurs were?”

DAD: “Yes, Holly.”

HOLLY: “Really? Well, I bet Brachy [Brachiosaurus] would have only taken a few steps to go up Bluffy. He would have just crunched down all the trees and stuff in his road and sped up there.”

DAD: “Actually, no, Hols. Brachy was way too big for that sort of thing. He wouldn’t have even gone up a boat ramp, let alone a mountain.”

HOLLY: “Well, what about T-Rex, Dad?”

DAD: “No, he wouldn’t have gone up either because he didn’t have a path to go up. Humans built this path and we weren’t around when T-Rex was.”

HOLLY: “Dad, imagine if T-Rex was around today. I think we’d have to shoot him.”

DAD: “Oh. Why?”

HOLLY, ever the pragmatist: “Because he would step on us all the time.”

ISABELLA, interjecting: “Or rip us up and eat us. We’d have to get a gun and put gun things inside it and shoot at him.”

DAD: “Do you mean we’d have to use bullets? Is that what you’re thinking, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

HOLLY: “I’d get him extinct if he was alive today, Dad.”

DAD: “Either that, or you’d become extinct, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Oh no, I wouldn’t want that. I wouldn’t be able to play or have fun anymore if I was extinct.”

SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 24

Treasure

ISABELLA, after finding a fifty-cent piece under a sea-saw: “Dad, I found a piece of money with a queen on it. It think it could be very old or something.”



THURSDAY OCTOBER 5

Withdrawing the line

ISABELLA: “Dad, I’m not ever going to smoke. I might get silly as a teenager, but I’m never going to smoke a smoke . . . well, I’ll try not to.”

The waiting

HOLLY, waiting for the Royal Show: “I hate hours. I don’t mind minutes and seconds, but I can’t stand hours.”

Cute turns ugly

ISABELLA, in front of Karin: “I love Mum best.”

HOLLY, giggling: “Stop trying to be cute, Issy. You’re very ugly when you try to be cute.”

Different kisses

HOLLY: “Dad, Emily [Holly’s friend] said that when a person marries another person they have to put their tongue inside the other person’s mouth. Do they?”

DAD: “Well, it’s not compulsory, Hols. They don’t *have* to do it.”

HOLLY: “Oh. Well, why would anyone want to do it?”

DAD: “To get closer to a person, Holly. When someone really likes another person, they want to get very close to them.”

HOLLY: “Oh. Well, why don’t you ever put your tongue inside my mouth?”

It’s so easy to set yourself up when you’re attempting to explain something as complex as intimacy to an eight-year-old.

DAD: “Because it’s a different kind of close, Hols. People who want to get married feel different to how a father feels about his daughter. A father doesn’t want to do that with his daughter. I only ever want to cuddle you and give you kisses on the cheek.”

HOLLY, digressing: “Dad, I wouldn’t want to marry a cow. They have such large and disgusting tongues. It would be sloppy and awful being married to a cow.”

DAD: “Well, there’s a simple way to avoid a cow’s sloppy tongue, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Is there? How?”

DAD: “Don’t marry one.”

HOLLY: “Oh, I’d never marry a cow, Dad. No way! No one would come to my wedding if I married a cow.”

ISABELLA: “I would.”

DAD: “You would, would you, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Yes. I’d bring a sheep.”

The Royal Show

Blindly go

HOLLY, wanting to go on the Ghost Train for a second time: “Dad, can we go again?”

DAD: “But why? What’s the point, Hols? You don’t open your eyes.”

HOLLY: “I don’t care, Dad. I still want to go on it again. It’s fun.”

Oblivious

HOLLY, unsympathetically to Karin who’d been lying motionless on her own on a small patch of grass for twenty minutes because she was feeling sick after going on the Gee Whiz ride: “Mum, when are you not going to be feeling sick again? (*Points to Gee Whiz*) It’s about to go.”

Too much fun? Never.

DAD: “Girls, can you have too much fun at the Royal Show?”

HOLLY: “No! Of course you can’t.”

ISABELLA: “I *always* want to have too much fun, Dad.”

TUESDAY OCTOBER 17

Just go somewhere else

HOLLY: “I don’t know why people go to war. Why don’t they just visit other places, or go somewhere else for a holiday?”

I can’t see it

Never overestimate the joy of playing I Spy for an hour with two kids under ten.

HOLLY: “I spy with my little eye something beginning with ‘U’.”

KARIN: “Oh no, not I Spy.”

HOLLY: “‘U’, Dad. Can you guess it?”

Five minutes later, after numerous attempts to come up with an answer

DAD: “Alright, Hols, I give up. What it is?”

HOLLY: “It’s a unicorn, Dad.”

DAD: “What? A unicorn? Where?”

HOLLY: “Where what, Dad?”

DAD: “Where did you see the unicorn?”

HOLLY: “I didn’t see the unicorn.”



DAD: “Yes, I know you didn’t see the unicorn, Hols. That’s because there aren’t any unicorns out here. In fact, there aren’t any unicorns anywhere on the planet. That’s why you didn’t see one. It just wasn’t possible for you to have seen a unicorn, Holly, was it? And that’s something the people who dreamt up I Spy weren’t counting on. I Spy with my little eye . . . Do you see what I mean? You have to be able to see it, Holly. Out of the car window if possible.”

ISABELLA: “I’ve seen a unicorn, Dad.”

DAD: “No, you haven’t, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “But I have, Dad. In my room.”

DAD: “No, that’s just a toy, Issy. Toys aren’t real. And, besides, even if the unicorn was real, it isn’t in the car or outside the car.”

ISABELLA: “But toys *are* real.”

DAD: “Look, I’m getting out of this conversation with you, Issy. Time to do something else.”

ISABELLA: “But it’s my turn, Dad.”

DAD, frustrated: “Alright. Have your turn, Issy. But I’m not playing. Play with Holly.”

ISABELLA: “Alright. I spy with my little eye something beginning with . . . ‘K’.”

HOLLY, after ten minutes of guessing: “I give up, Issy. What is it?”

ISABELLA: “Car.”

DAD, rolling eyes and momentarily coming out of retirement: “Car? Oh, yes, of course it is, Issy. ‘K’ for car. Why didn’t I spot it sooner?”

ISABELLA: “Because you don’t think like I do, Dad.”

DAD: “That’s an understatement.”

ISABELLA: “Underpants?”

DAD: “No, understatement. Oh don’t worry about it, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “I’m not, Dad.”

Hopeless at nappies

HOLLY: “Dad, some people say God is your father. He’s not really, is he? He can’t really be a dad. You’re a dad, but I can’t see how God is one. God is just a god, I think.”

DAD: “Yes, I agree with you, Holly. He’s never changed a nappy, has he?”

HOLLY: “No, he’d be so hopeless at nappies. He’s never even come out of the sky.”

Thank goodness for small murkies

ISABELLA: “Dad, you aren’t allowed to say toilet-talk at my school.”

DAD: “Really? So, you’re not allowed to say, for example, ‘toilet door’, or ‘toilet bowl’?”

ISABELLA: “Well, you can say those words, Dad. You just can’t say ‘poo’ and words like that. Unless you have to do one.”

DAD: “Unless you have to do one? What do you mean, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Unless you have to go to the toilet.”

DAD: “Oh! Then you can say what you like, can you?”

ISABELLA: “No, you can only say you’re going to the toilet. That’s all. Nothing else.”

DAD: “Well, all I can say is thank goodness for small mercies in your toilet, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad, thank goodness for small murkies in my toilet.”

Nothing will just have to do

HOLLY: “Dad, can Annie [one of Holly’s friends] and I busk one day?”

DAD: “Yes, I think that would be alright, Hols. You’ll need a permit, though. What do you think you’ll play if we get permission?”

HOLLY: “The violin, Dad.”

DAD: “Good choice. And you, Issy? Would you like to busk as well?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, I would, Dad.”

DAD: “Good. And what would you like to play?”

ISABELLA: “A slide.”

DAD: “A slide? What’s a slide?”

ISABELLA: “You know, what you go down.”

DAD: “Oh, a slide. No, I mean, what would you like to play when you busk?”

ISABELLA: “I want to play on a slide and a swing, Dad.”

DAD: “No, I don’t think you quite understand, Issy. No one is going to want to pay to watch you slide on a slide or swing on a swing. When I say ‘play’, I mean what do you want to play, as in a musical instrument?”

ISABELLA: “Oh, I know. How about a piano?”

DAD: “Too big, sweetheart.”

ISABELLA: “Then I won’t play anything and just see what happens.”

DAD: “Well, my guess is if you do that, nothing will happen.”

ISABELLA: “Alright then. Nothing will just have to do.”

Only bent

ISABELLA, referring to Holly: “She bit my fingers, Dad.”

HOLLY: “No I didn’t. I didn’t bite her fingers. I only bent them. *(Points to Isabella’s fingers)* See? No teeth marks.”

Religious test

HOLLY, to her friend, Emily, as they were on a tractor ride: “Are you a Christian?”

EMILY: “No.”

HOLLY: “No. I’m not either. As if you could live in the sky.”

That was the talk

ISABELLA, after I accidentally knocked something down she was playing with in her room: “Oh, Daddy!”

DAD: “Yes, I know. I’m sorry, sweetheart. But it was an accident.”

A few seconds later after Isabella's sobbing had died down a little

DAD, buoyantly: "How are you feeling now, sweetheart? What are you feeling inside?"

ISABELLA: "Sadness."

DAD: "Oh. Well, that's understandable, I guess. After all, it was a good wall you built. Would you like to talk about it?"

Silence

DAD: "Issy, would you like to talk about it?"

ISABELLA, assertively: "That *was* the talk."

DAD: "Oh. So, do you want me to go, do you, Issy?"

She didn't budge, so I decided to wait her out. Why not? If she was going to behave like a five-year-old, then so was I. After thirty seconds that felt more like ten minutes: "So, do you want me to go, do you, Issy?"

ISABELLA, pointing to the door: "That's where you're going, Dad."

One minute only

About ten minutes later

ISABELLA, referring to Holly and Amelie with whom she'd been fighting: "Dad, stop them! I'm getting less hair now because they keep on pulling it out."

DAD: "But I thought you didn't need me."

ISABELLA: "Alright. I do. For this minute only!"

Keeping watch

ISABELLA: "Dad, Nicole's Mum says when you die you turn into an angel. I don't think you do. I think we lie down on the ground for lots of years and never live again when we die . . . Dad, I don't want to die. That's why I'm keeping my eyes out all the time for dangers."

I was thirsty

HOLLY: “Dad, yesterday I played Kiss and Tell with Rebecca.”

DAD: “Did you?”

HOLLY: “Yes. I asked her if she had a boyfriend so she kissed me.”

DAD, quizzically: “Oh. That was a little odd, wasn’t it? All she had to do was tell you if she had a boyfriend or not.”

HOLLY: “Yes, I know, Dad. But that’s embarrassing. That’s why a lot of girls kiss other girls. If they have a boyfriend, a lot of girls don’t want to say they do. They don’t want to answer the question.”

DAD: “Oh, I get it. So, what about you? Have you been asked whether you have a boyfriend or not?”

HOLLY: “Yep. Rachel asked me the other day.”

DAD: “Did she? So, what did you say?”

HOLLY: “I said I’d do the dare.”

DAD: “Oh, so did you kiss Rachel, did you?”

HOLLY: “No, I drank water out of a pond.”

DAD: “What?”

HOLLY: “That was the dare.”

DAD: “So, you got a different dare?”

HOLLY: “Yes.”

DAD: “Hols, water from a pond is not safe to drink.”

HOLLY: “But it was very clean, Dad.”

DAD: “It may look clean, Hols, but it isn’t. Please don’t do that again . . . Hey! So, do you have a boyfriend, do you?”

HOLLY: “No.”

DAD: “Well, why didn’t you just say you didn’t have one?”

HOLLY: “Because the water looked good for my thirst.”

I’ll just run till I stop

DAD, regarding Isabella’s upcoming athletics carnival: “Hey Issy, what race are you in?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know, Dad. It had a six in it, I think.”

DAD: “Was it sixty metres by any chance?”

ISABELLA: “I’m not sure, Dad. It might have been. I’ll know next time when I listen better. I think I’m just going to run until I stop, Dad. The teachers will know when the six or something has gone past me.”

MONDAY NOVEMBER 6

Long-term illness

ISABELLA, slightly embellishing the sore throat she had: “I’ve had a sore throat since I was three, Dad. I didn’t want to tell you that, but now you know.”

In my lifetime, it will

HOLLY: “Dad, could a wave ever hit our place?”

DAD: “No, Hols.”

ISABELLA: “Even if it was a salami?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy. Even one of those waves . . . Although, if it were one caused by, say, a meteor hitting the Earth, like the one that killed off the dinosaurs. Maybe then. But those meteors aren’t likely to hit Earth in your lifetime.”

ISABELLA: “What about in your lifetime, Dad?”

DAD: “Oh yes. It’ll happen in my lifetime. I’m going to live for at least another 60 million years.”

ISABELLA: “Oh no!”

The heavy tread of a beetle

ISABELLA: “My foot’s sore, Dad. It’s like a beetle’s walked over it.”

But which is sooner?

Isabella had been continually tugging on my shirtsleeve.

DAD: “Wait a second, Issy! Alright! Just wait a second.”

ISABELLA: “Well, how long is a second, Dad? When will it be over?”

DAD, impatiently: “Very soon, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “But which is sooner, Dad? Soon, or a second?”

DAD: “It’s usually too close to call, sweetheart. They’re always neck and neck. Okay? Even Stevens.”

ISABELLA: “Even who?”

DAD: “Even Stevens.”

ISABELLA: “Who’s Steven?”

WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 15

Nicer than mud

AMELIE: “I love you, Dad.”

DAD: “Oh, that’s very sweet of you, Ams.”

AMELIE: “And berries and mud.”

ISABELLA, butting in: “She likes you like she likes berries and mud, Dad. She’s sweet, isn’t she?”

DAD: “Yes, you’re right, Issy. She is.”

ISABELLA: “But I think you’re sweeter than that, Dad. I think you’re nicer than mud.”

DAD: “Oh thanks, Issy.”

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 19

Favourite subject

ISABELLA: “I like Art, Dad. I almost like it as much as I like Lunch.”

Better out than in

HOLLY: “Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Hols.”

HOLLY: “I have a secret.”

DAD: “Really?”

HOLLY: “Yes. And it’s about you. Do you want to know what it is?”

DAD: “No, not really, Hols. You can keep it to yourself if you want to.”

HOLLY: “But, Dad. Please want to know what it is.”

DAD: “Why?”

HOLLY: “Because secrets are my fat thoughts, Dad. They make me burst if I don’t let them out. I like secrets, but I only like them inside me for a little while because they start to hurt me if they stay inside too long. That’s why I have to get them out. I feel better when I let them out.”

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 28

Brain drain

DAD, after looking at Holly's maths homework: "Holly, you've got just about all of them wrong, honey."

HOLLY: "Well, that's because my brain has been working all year, Dad, and now it's tired and near the holidays. It'll be new again in Year Four."

Jaw dropper

HOLLY: "Dad, can your top jaw move?"

DAD: "No, sweetheart. It's fixed to your head."

HOLLY: "So, it can't move then?"

DAD: "No."

HOLLY: "Oh. Well, if it did move, would it be able to tip back and drink rain?"

DAD: "Yes, I suppose it would be able to do that. But I'd much prefer using a cup."

HOLLY: "I'd love to be able to put my head back. It'd be fun. You could catch anything in it then."

DAD: "Yes, you could. That's right, Holly. Even bird poo."

HOLLY: "Bird poo?"

ISABELLA, chiming in: "Yeah, bird poo. A lot of bird poo comes from the sky, Holly."

HOLLY: "Oh, I thought it came from their bums."

What about a sprain, then?

HOLLY, enquiring about Isabella's sore leg after she took a tumble on our trampoline: "Do you think it'll be a fracture, Mum?"

KARIN: "No, Holly. It definitely won't be a fracture, sweetheart."

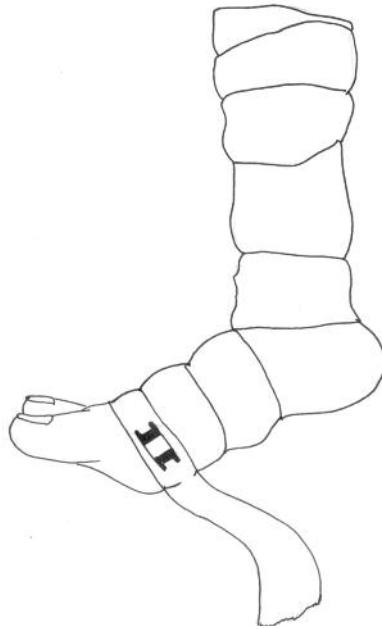
HOLLY, expectantly: "Well, what about a sprain then? Can it be a sprain? Sprains need a bandage, don't they?"

DAD: "No, Holly. I think it's just a bruise."

ISABELLA, interjecting: "But if you get a fracture, Dad, it needs a bandage. When Cloe S fell over she got a bandage."

DAD: "Yes, I know. Wasn't she lucky to get a bandage? Unfortunately, though, you won't need one."

HOLLY, disappointedly: "We never get bandaged."



Just see a bank

HOLLY: "Dad, I think you're already enough of a number. You're forty now. That's why *you* have to work and I don't because I'm not enough numbers yet."

DAD: "But I don't want to work, Holly. I want to get money some other way."

HOLLY: "Well, see a bank. That's a good way. Banks give you money. You don't have to work if you don't want to because they can give you all the money you want. All you have to do is poke a card into a bank and it gives you whatever you've typed in, Dad. That's what I'm going to do when I grow up. It's better than working."

Leave them both out

ISABELLA: “I don’t like cheese in my [grated] carrot, Mum.”

KARIN: “Good. I only put it in there in the first place to get you to eat the carrot. I’ll leave it out in future.”

ISABELLA: “And I also don’t like the carrot.”

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 6

Santa’s definitely real

HOLLY: “Dad, I don’t know whether I believe in God or not now. I think I’m yes-and-no. I’m not sure whether he’s real or not real. Holy people are sure, aren’t they? I don’t know why they are that way. They will be very disappointed for wasting their time on him if he isn’t real.”

DAD: “Well, what about Santa then? Do you believe in Santa?”

HOLLY: “Oh yes. He’s definitely real.”

DAD: “Why?”

HOLLY: “Because he gives me presents and answers my letters.”



FRIDAY DECEMBER 22

Different in the old days

ISABELLA: “Dad, How old were you when you were my age?”

CHAPTER THREE

2007

“Mum, lots of kids were saying they hate Sara. It’s really mean to say that, isn’t it? . . . That’s why I told Sara everyone hates her so she could tell the teacher.”

ISABELLA, OCTOBER 10, 2007

Holly, aged 8 • Isabella, aged 5 • Amelie, aged 2

TUESDAY JANUARY 2

Bedrooms are for cartwheels

HOLLY, pleading her case as to why she should get to move into the front room, the largest bedroom in our house, instead of Isabella and Amelie: “But, Mum, I want to do cartwheels and that room is the biggest.”

The good ‘soon’

HOLLY, stressing her desire to spend some separate time with Amelie: “But, Dad, I just want to spend some time with Amelie on my own. Isabella gets to do it.”

DAD: “But what about Issy? She feels left out, Hols. She wants to play with the both of you. If you and Amelie play together, who will she play with?”

HOLLY: “I don’t know and I don’t care, Dad. I just want to do craft with only Amelie.”

DAD: “Well, why don’t you take turns playing with Amelie? Have a go each. I have to tell you, this does make a change. You two were ignoring Amelie only a few months ago.”

HOLLY: “Oh, alright. But if Issy throws Amelie out of her room then I get to play with her.”

ISABELLA: “Well, I’m not going to throw her out, Holly. I’m going to keep her when she’s my turn.”

DAD: “Girls, you can’t treat her like that. She’s not your hostage to use as you wish, you know.”

HOLLY: “Yes, she is, Dad. She doesn’t care. She doesn’t even know we’re doing things to her. We can do whatever we like to her and she doesn’t even notice.”

DAD: “Well, she will soon.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, but not now soon, she won’t.”

DAD: “You probably have a point, Issy. Although what it is I’m pretty sure I’ll never know. I said Amelie will soon know what you’re doing to her. She’s going to work it out soon.”

She's not going to be two forever. I was warning you to be prepared for when she does know what you're doing to her."

ISABELLA: "But soon doesn't always come, Dad. It does occasionally, but not every time."

DAD: "Oh dear. Even for you, this is getting very silly. In fact, I should walk away right now. But before I do, Issy, tell me about 'soon'. What's your favourite 'soon'? The 'soon' that comes or the 'soon' that stays away?"

ISABELLA: "Well, I usually like the 'soon' that comes, Dad. But it depends. When it's a bad thing, then I don't want 'soon' to come. But when it's a good thing and the good thing is a long time away, like Santa, then I do want that 'soon' to come. It just depends."

DAD: "Yes, I suppose 'soon' can be a little like that, can't it? So, if you could change 'soon', what would you do, Issy?"

ISABELLA: "I would love 'soon' if it was about good things all the time and it came right away, Dad."

HOLLY: "Yes. Me, too."

Isabella's **Guest List** for her Sixth Birthday Party

Invited 

The 'In' crowd (or Top 10 list)

SABRIN "She's funny and tries to eat my food at school, Dad. (*Laughs*) I don't let her but I think she is very silly when she tries to get it."

SARAH "She loves fairies like I love fairies. She also plays with me and hasn't hurt me yet."

ANNA "She's my second best friend."

BRITTANY "She thinks she looks pretty and so do I. She has shiny hair, Dad. It shines all day sometimes."

TIA "She sits with me sometimes."

TEAGAN “She is a nice girl who plays with me. She also gave me a lolly once that I didn’t eat.”

NICOLE “She likes fairies and sucks her thumb with me.”

CLOE S “She’s my best friend. She was my first ever best friend at school or anywhere else, Dad. We’re also married.”

SASHA “She plays with me and loves Tia like I do.”

LOUISE “I can’t remember what she does, but I want to her to come anyway.”

Uninvited

LAURA “She copies me and shows off with her acrobatics. She also taps her lip like this.”
(Demonstrates)

ELIZABETH “She’s a bit scared of me I think and she also doesn’t like Cloe S. Or our pets. Especially Sooty [our cat]. She thinks Sooty will bite her. She also usually plays with other girls and learns naughty things off them, Dad.”

KATHERINE “She won’t let me play with her.”

SONIA “She won’t let me play with her either.”

STEPHANIE “She tried to cut my hair with scissors.”

GABRIELLE “She once tried to steal my toy. But I caught her, Dad.”

Holly took over at this point, while Isabella sat close by, nodding approval.

FLEUR “She took Issy’s toy bus off her and ran off with it.”

TESS “She always wants to be the unicorn in the game, Dad. She also cries a lot and gets Issy into trouble. Oh, and Issy gets into trouble for getting her into trouble as well.”

RENAE “She’s gone to Bunbury and won’t be able to travel to the party, Dad. It’s too far.”

The rest on the list can be more easily pigeonholed as the hitters, once again as told by Holly.

JENNA “She hit Issy over the head with a saucepan, Dad. It was about a unicorn costume, I think. Issy thinks she’d be mean to the guinea pigs.” (Isabella: “She also hit me over the head with a spoon once.”)

BETH “She hit Issy over the head with a donkey and a shoe. But it was only a toy donkey, Dad.”

ANGELA “Mean, Dad. She’s very mean. She once hit Issy with a tin box. And then there was another time when she ran over her toe with a bike on purpose for no reason. Issy doesn’t want her to come in case she gets on her bike or something.”

FAYE “She plays by herself a lot and once hit Issy with a pretend tomato paste bottle.”

MIA “She hit Issy with a lunchbox, and sometimes Issy doesn’t understand her because she has lots of colds and talks with snot in her nose.”

Touché

DAD, after coming across yet another felt-tip pen on the floor minus its lid: “Kids, please. You have to make sure you put the lids back on the textas. Otherwise, as I’ve told you a thousand times, they’ll run out.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad. We know.”

DAD: “You may know, Issy, but you still don’t do it.”

ISABELLA: “I know I don’t, Dad. But I will. Okay? I’ll do it next time.”

DAD: “That’s what you always say, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Yes. And that’s what I always mean, Dad.”

WEDNESDAY JANUARY 24

I like mine straight

ISABELLA: “Mum, you know when you go to guitar?”

KARIN: “Hmmm.”

ISABELLA: “Well, I sneak juice.”

KARIN: “What?”

ISABELLA: “I sneak juice. I go to the fridge and drink it straight from the bottle. I like my juice really rough, Mum.”

KARIN: “What?”

ISABELLA: “I mean strong.”

I ask good questions, don't I?

ISABELLA: “Dad, is the Sun in space?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, well how did they know about space when they hadn't been there?”

DAD: “Issy, you see space when the Sun goes down. They would have been able to see all the blackness of space when the Sun was shining on the other side of the Earth. You know, the stars and all the other planets would have been visible to them when it was nighttime. And then, after that, they would have seen it even better when they invented the telescope.”

ISABELLA: “So, how does a person get into space then, Dad? Do they go around the Earth and then up?”

DAD: “No, they just go straight up, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “And then they hit it?”

DAD: “Well, ‘hit’ is probably a little too solid-sounding. Let's just say they go into space.”

ISABELLA: “Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Why isn't there any air in space?”

DAD: “That's very complex. Let's just say you need an atmosphere for there to be air. And atmospheres tend to like nice solid planets like our Earth.”

ISABELLA: “But the Earth is in space, isn’t it, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, that’s true. However, the atmosphere is around the Earth and not space.”

ISABELLA: “I ask good questions don’t I, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, you do, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “I thought so.”

You can never have too much of a good thing

HOLLY: “Dad, has anyone ever died and then come back?”

DAD: “No, sweetheart.”

HOLLY: “But Mum said they have.”

DAD: “I think she would have meant that people have nearly died and come back. People have gone very close to dying – their heart has stopped or they’ve been unconscious or something – but they haven’t actually died. When that happens to someone then, yes, they can come back.”

ISABELLA, interrupting: “Dad, I don’t think I want to die.”

DAD: “There’s nothing new in that, Issy. People have been not wanting to die ever since they knew they could.”

HOLLY: “Well, why do we have to die?”

DAD: “It’s not so much why, Hols, it’s more just a fact that we do. Our cells, once we’ve stopped growing, often begin to misfire, and the result is that our bodies start to wear out and then we finally die. Some people, though, believe one day we won’t have to die because scientists will work out how to stop or reverse this ageing or wearing out process. Do you think that would be good if they could learn how to do that?”

HOLLY and **ISABELLA,** almost in chorus: “Oh yes!”

DAD: “I knew you’d say that. But what will happen to the Earth? Won’t it fill up with people if we continue to have children? Or do you think we should force people to not have children so we can stay around forever?”

HOLLY: “Well, I don’t want any children. They’re too stupid and they smell too much.”

ISABELLA: “But I do.”

HOLLY, in an easily discernible whisper: “Say you won’t, Issy, and then we can live on the Earth forever.”

DAD: “I heard that, Hols. Look, I don’t think you’ll ever be faced with the dilemma, girls, but think about it, wouldn’t you get bored being alive forever?”

HOLLY: “No.”

SATURDAY FEBRUARY 3

Judging a book by its cover

HOLLY, sticking pictures of animals and mostly lovely things on the covers on her school books: “. . . and I’m going to put a lion on my art book, a seahorse on my Smart Words book, and, and, I’m not sure what I’ll put on my maths book because I hate maths. I know, a witch.”

Still unsure

ISABELLA, finally at the beach, after a whole morning of ‘where-are-we’s’: “Is this where we are, Dad?”

SATURDAY FEBRUARY 10

Start spreading the . . .

HOLLY’s first words on the phone to her friend, Annie, that day: “Annie, guess what? I’ve got the worms again. The whole family has. I’m itching and itching right now. Hey! Do you want to come over for a sleepover?”

Marriage made simple

DAD: “Isabella, is it true your old Kindergarten teacher, Miss Andrews, is getting married?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad. It is. Mum said Mrs Knight said she was.”

DAD: “Well, that’s exciting, isn’t it, Issy? So, what do you think will happen on her wedding day?”

ISABELLA: “Well, she’ll go down a line in a dress and then, after that, someone will say she’s married.”

DAD: “Oh, that’s pretty easy. So, who will she be married to then?”

ISABELLA: “To the person – it has to be a man – that’s at the end of the line.”

DAD: “Really? But what if the man who’s at the end of the line is someone she doesn’t know? Will she still have to marry them?”

ISABELLA, with her nose all screwed up in disbelief: “Da-ad, they always know them. You have to know the person if you want to marry them.”

DAD: “Oh! So, what kinds of things do you have to know about them then?”

ISABELLA: “Oh all sorts of things, Dad. You have to know their name, what they look like, whether they want babies or not—”

DAD: “Their name? Really? You have to remember their name? But what if you’re like me and aren’t very good at remembering names?”

ISABELLA: “Well, then you can write it on your hand.”

DAD: “You’re absolutely right, Issy. I hadn’t thought of that. Holly, what about you? What do you think Miss Andrews will do when she gets married?”

HOLLY: “Oh, she’ll kiss and do stuff like that. She’ll probably kiss for hours and hours and hours, Dad. That’s what you have to do when you get married.”

DAD: “Really? Gee. But wouldn’t that hurt after a while?”

HOLLY: “I don’t know because I don’t go around kissing people. All I know is if you can’t put up with kissing then you shouldn’t get married.”

DAD: “Fair enough. What about the groceries, though, Hols? Can the kissing stop long enough for someone to get the groceries, or will they have to keep on kissing until someone dies and then the person left over is free again to eat instead of kiss?”

HOLLY, chuckling incredulously: “No, Dad. It doesn’t go on forever. It stops in the end.”

DAD: “I thought so, Hols. Otherwise people could pass away, couldn’t they?”

HOLLY: “No one dies when they get married, Dad. You can kiss for hours and hours and hours and still eat after that. All that happens that’s different when you get married is the kissing.”

DAD: “Is that all?”

HOLLY: “Pretty much, Dad. People who get married kiss and then do all the normal things other grown-ups do. That’s about it, really. You get married, kiss, do grown-up things, and nothing else.”

DAD: “What about fun? Do you have any fun?”

HOLLY: “Not really. Not like kids do.”

DAD: “But I’m married, Hols, and I do fun things with you, Isabella and Amelie.”

HOLLY: “Yes, but that’s because you have us. Otherwise you would be boring.”

DAD: “What about babies? Don’t married people get babies?”

HOLLY, authoritatively: “Yes, they do. People get married, kiss, do normal things, and then they get a baby in a week or whenever they say they want one. It all depends on whether people want one or not. If they do, then they get one and it’s done; but if they don’t want one, they don’t get a baby and they don’t have to look after it.”

DAD: “Sounds reasonable enough to me. Thanks, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Well, that’s just how it is, Dad.”

MONDAY FEBRUARY 12

I swear, Dad!

DAD to one of Holly’s friends, Matilda, as she was leaving school today with a heavy load of bags: “Gee, you’re loaded up, Matilda. I’d say, overburdened, if you ask me.”

ISABELLA, whispering in my ear: “Dad, don’t swear at her. You’re not allowed to swear at school.”

DAD: “But I wasn’t. What word did I use that was a swear word?”

ISABELLA, ever-suspicious that many big words might be swear words and clearly mishearing: “I don’t know. It was ‘overlapped’ or something.”

DAD: “But that’s not a swear word, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Yes it is. I’ve heard lots of people saying it and they always get into trouble for it.”

THURSDAY MARCH 1

The promise of dessert

HOLLY, after Karin had served up tea for her and left the room: “Oh, that’s disgusting. It’s so disgusting, Dad. It’s the worst yet.”

ISABELLA: “It is, Dad. I can’t eat it. I have to stop the vomit coming out when I eat this. I vomit in my mouth but keep it inside with the food so it doesn’t come out all over the table.”

DAD: “That may be so, Issy, but can you keep it down a little? Mum doesn’t need to know how hard you have to try to keep her cooking down. Alright?”

HOLLY: “But it’s terrible, Dad.”

DAD: “Yes. So you say, Holly. You’ve mentioned that at least ten times tonight. Look, it’s true. If parents are trying to give their kids healthy meals, most kids will dislike some of the food. In fact, when I was your age Holly and Issy, I used to spit some of the food Grandma cooked for me over our back fence or down a manhole in our laundry. There are lots of kids who have to eat food they don’t like. It’s just the way it is. But because I know you’d try to spit out the food you don’t like, just like I used to do, I’ll be standing next to you when you eat your meals from now on. You have three beans to go, Holly, and I’m going to make sure each one goes down your throat.”

HOLLY: “But I hate beans, Dad.”

DAD: “It doesn’t matter, Holly. It doesn’t matter how much you detest beans, they still have to go down and not come back up again.”

HOLLY: “But I want to vomit when I eat them.”

DAD: “Hold your nose then. Most kids hold their noses when they eat beans.”

HOLLY: “I already do, but it still doesn’t make them taste good.”

DAD: “My worst meals when I was a boy of your age, Holly, were mince, steak and kidney meat, and stew. You should have tried eating those meals. I hated those meals. But your grandmother was shrewd because she always had waffles, creamed rice or custard waiting for me if was able to get through the main course.”

HOLLY: “And were you able to, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, of course. I wanted the sweets. With the help of the laundry and our next-door neighbour’s backyard, I always managed to get through anything that was dished up to me, Holly. So eat up and you’ll get a treat. How about some sago after the beans?”

HOLLY: “Oh, yum.”

ISABELLA: “Yum, Dad.”

The tradition continues . . .

FRIDAY MARCH 2

Keeping all options on the table

ISABELLA, on a design she had for a new house that we had no intention of getting: “. . . and I want a rope, a slide, a ladder, and a five-storey house so I can go down all my options.”

SATURDAY APRIL 7

What they don’t know about sex isn’t worth knowing

ISABELLA: “Only a boy can kiss a girl and get a baby. Not a girl and a girl. A lady can’t kiss a girl and get one. It *has* to be a man. And the kiss *has* to be for a long, long, long time if she wants the baby to be born. Then the baby is happy. A baby feels very good if its mum and dad do a long kiss. It wants to grow then because it knows it has a mum and a dad on the outside waiting for it.”

DAD: “So, does a man need to do anything other than kiss the girl to make a baby happen?”

ISABELLA: “No, just kissing is all he has to do.”

DAD: “Oh. So, can he just lie around and watch TV if he wants to? I mean, after he’s done a long, long, long kiss, that is.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, if he wants to. Or he can do other things.”

DAD: “Like what?”

ISABELLA: “Well, he can go to work. Or he can read. Or he can fix something that’s conked out if he wants to. It’s up to him.”

DAD: “How on earth do you know all this, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Oh I just know, Dad.”

HOLLY, butting in: “Boys have willies, too, Dad.”

DAD: “What?”

HOLLY: “Boys. They have willies, too.”

DAD: “Yes, I know they have willies, Hols. But what are they for?”

ISABELLA, interjecting this time: “To tell you apart. Boys have willies and short hair so you know they’re boys.”

HOLLY: “And a deep voice. Men have deep voices, too.” (*Mimics the deep bass sound of a man’s voice*)

DAD: “So, that’s how it works, is it? A man has short hair, a deep voice and a willy and a woman who wants to have a baby would be able see that he’s a man if he had those things and therefore good to kiss. Is that what you’re trying to say, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Yes. A man can have long hair if he wants to, but he can’t marry. He’d need to cut it all off if he wants to kiss a girl.”

DAD: “That’s fascinating. I still have one question, though. Why can’t a man’s body make a baby? Why does it always have to be a lady’s body?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know.”

HOLLY: “I do.”

DAD: “I thought you would, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Well. A boy’s willy only has a tiny little dot on the end of it. A baby could never fit through that dot, Dad. Only wee can get out of a little hole like that. If a boy was to try and have a baby then his mushroom – that’s what I think a boy’s willy looks like – would just explode. It would blow up and then his wee would go everywhere like ours does.”

DAD: “How did you ever work all that out, Holly?”

HOLLY: “I don’t know, Dad. I just worked it all out. We have willies like venus fly traps, whereas your willy only has crinkles and a dot on the end of it. You need a big hole if you want to have a baby.”

SATURDAY APRIL 14

A day out at Adventure World

Bricks and water

ISABELLA, crashing into the water after she went down a water slide: “Dad, that was so much fun!”

DAD: “Yes it was, wasn’t it, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Hmm-mm. But it wouldn’t have been if there were bricks at the end.”

DAD: “No, that’s true, Issy. Well pointed out. I’m glad they didn’t put bricks at the end.”

ISABELLA: “Or rocks.”

Passing interest

HOLLY: “Dad, boys don’t go ‘arrggghhh’ much on rides because they think girls won’t like them if they do.”

DAD: “Really, Hols? Is that what they think? So, what about you then? Would you still like a boy if he went ‘arrggghhh’ on a ride?”

HOLLY: “Well, I’m not interested in boys, Dad, so it doesn’t matter what they do.”

Kids have more fun

HOLLY: “We can fit into tight spots and not be seen in Hidies. Grown-ups can’t. They just stick out and you can see them easily. Like you, Dad. We like fun parks. Grown-ups don’t. Well, not as much as we do. Except for Uncle Steve. We like getting scared on rides. Grown-ups don’t. They just get scared and go ‘Oh dear or something’. We also like to go on things that go whiz. Grown-ups don’t. They just get dizzy and want to lie down on some grass for ages and be sick. Kids get stronger. Grown-ups don’t. They get weaker. And also kids have more life to go than grown-ups. You might live to 99, but I might get bonus numbers. I might go all the way to one thousand.”

SUNDAY APRIL 15

So good I’ll marry her again

ISABELLA, ‘uxoriously’: “Dad, I love everything about Cloe S. That’s why I’m going to marry her again.”

What *isn’t* advertising?

HOLLY: “Dad, I’ve had Milo before and I’ve never wanted to swim or run after it. Why’s that?”

DAD: “Because advertising is all made-up, Hols. It’s pretend.”

HOLLY: “Oh! So what isn’t advertising then?”

Handy

ISABELLA: “Dad, I don’t know why the person who made up the hand thought we only needed five fingers, sometimes I’ve needed six.”

Mind control

HOLLY: “Dad, If I ever drink alcohol I’m definitely going to control my brain instead of letting it control me.”

DAD: “Really, Hols? So, what part of you are you going to use against your brain? You can’t use your brain against your brain. That wouldn’t work. It would know what you’re up to.”

HOLLY: “I don’t know yet, Dad. But I have years to go before I’m a teenager, so I think I’ll wait till then.”

Deserved

DAD: “Holly? Issy? Can you come here please? Look, I don’t want to be disturbed now, alright? This is *my* time. Do you think you can not disturb me for thirty minutes?”

HOLLY and **ISABELLA** together: “Yes, alright, Dad.”

Five minutes later

ISABELLA: “Sorry to deserve you Dad, but can I . . . ?”

Colour-bind

HOLLY, after watching a World Vision ad on TV: “Dad, why’s it always black people for?”

Dads are younger

DAD, in jest: “Issy, I’m tired of being a dad. I want to be an uncle for a change.”

ISABELLA: “No, be a dad, Dad. They’re younger.”

All the girls’ three uncles are older than me.

Can’t be swearing

ISABELLA, referring to the ‘c’ word: “Why is ‘can’t’ a swear word for?”

ANNIE: “Well, it’s because either you can or you can’t and if you can’t then it’s not a good thing, is it?”

ISABELLA: “Oh.”

Fuzzy-headed

ISABELLA, watching a news item that featured a man whose identity had been obscured: “Why does he have to have a face like that for, Dad?”

DAD: “What do you mean? Why does who have to have a face like what?”

ISABELLA: “The man on the TV. Why does he have to have that fuzzy face for?”

DAD: “Oh, that’s what they call a pixelated face, Is. He’s only been accused of a crime so they’re doing the right thing and pixelating his face in case he’s found to be innocent.”

ISABELLA: “Oh. Why? For punishment?”

DAD: “No, like I said, it’s to hide his face in case he’s found to be innocent.”

ISABELLA: “Oh. So will he have to wear the fuzziness for a long time or a short time?”

DAD: “No. He’s not wearing the fuzzy face.”

ISABELLA: “Well, how did the fuzzy stuff get on his face then?”

DAD: “Oh, that’s what they call a camera trick. You know, remember how I make you go black and white in photos sometimes?”

ISABELLA: “Oh yeah. Now, I get it. Because he’d look stupid if he had to wear the fuzzy stuff.”

TUESDAY APRIL 17

Then you’ll know

ISABELLA, after answering the phone: “It wants to speak to Dave, Dad.”

DAD: “Is that me, do you think?”

ISABELLA: “I think so. Just speak to them and then you’ll know for sure.”

WEDNESDAY MAY 9

On Rottnest Island

Who will know?

DAD: “Hols, why don’t we do a Ride of Passage this year? Remember Alice? She rode all the way around the island last year. Why don’t you and I do that?”

HOLLY: “No, I don’t want to, Dad. I only want to do a Ride of Passage to the shops and back.”

DAD: “But that’s so easy, Hols. Wouldn’t it be better to do a Ride of Passage that was more of a challenge to you?”

HOLLY: “No, I don’t think so. We can just say I did it. No one will know. I can just write in my journal that I did ride around the island. The teacher won’t know the difference. She just wants me to do a journal.”

Complete mystery

ISABELLA, regarding a man who jumped off the Rottnest ferry a week earlier: “Maybe he jumped in to get his thong, Dad.”

DAD: “Hmm. Possibly. But I don’t think so, Issy. I don’t believe anyone needs a thong *that* much.”

HOLLY: “Well, maybe it was for a thousand dollars.”

DAD: “I doubt it. A thousand dollars just doesn’t go floating by a ferry that often.”

HOLLY: “Well, then why did he jump off for?”

DAD: “No one knows, sweetheart. It’s a complete mystery.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, I like complete mysteries, Dad.”

Economics made simple

ISABELLA at the checkout counter in Rottnest Island’s General Store: “Three dollars! Do I put that up for a little book, do I?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy. *The Little Mermaid* costs \$2.95. Are you sure you want it, though? Once the three dollars has been spent it will be gone forever.”

ISABELLA: “No it won’t, Dad. I’ll just get another three dollars.”

DAD: “From where?”

ISABELLA: “From you. You have lots of three dollars.”

DAD: “Yes, I know. But you have to earn that money, Issy.”



ISABELLA, who'd seen a few point-of-sale transactions in her time: "I know, I know. But earning's easy, Dad. All you do is just put things under things and stuff things into things and then you get money. It's pretty simple."

There are other ways of telling

DAD, after checking the letterbox and finding it empty: "Nobody loves us, Issy. That's what my pop used to say to me when I was a little boy. He used to say nobody loved us if we didn't get any mail."

ISABELLA: "But mail's not just about love, Dad. It's about banks and little postcards, too, you know."

DAD: "Yes, I know that, Issy. But if you don't get any mail at all, even from a bank, then surely that proves no one loves you."

ISABELLA: "No, it doesn't. People still love you if they don't send you a letter. Cloe S loves me and she never sends me a letter. She just tells me I'm the best person in the world with her voice."

FRIDAY MAY 18

Love is stupid

HOLLY: "Dad, Katy told everyone she has a boyfriend."

DAD: "Really?"

HOLLY: "Yes, Dad. It's Stephanie P's brother, Daniel."

DAD: "Is that so? And how does Daniel feel about this? Does he like Katy?"

HOLLY: "No, he's not interested in her at all, Dad."

DAD: "Oh, poor Katy."

HOLLY: "I think it's all very silly, Dad. Love is a very stupid idea, I think. Especially weddings. You can slip in a puddle and get black dirt all over your dress and then have to start all over again."

THURSDAY MAY 24

Mum's the word

KARIN to Holly (and to a much lesser extent Isabella and Amelie), just before she was about to make a dash in and out of a local shop: “Now stay in the car everyone. Okay? Stay in the car and don't talk to anyone. I won't be a second.”

ISABELLA: “What? Not even to each other?”

MONDAY JUNE 11

Plane talking

Black does that

DAD, as Isabella was drawing during a flight from Perth to Sydney: “What's that, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “It's the night sky.”

DAD: “But the black has gone all over the nice bird you drew.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, I know. It does that. But not over crows because they're already black.”

DAD: “Or black balloons. It doesn't go over black balloons.”

ISABELLA: “No. They're black, too, so it doesn't have to.”

DAD: “It's easier if things are already black when it's night, isn't it, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Only if you're drawing, Dad.”

What, just for money?

ISABELLA, referring to an attempted takeover of Qantas by a private equity group: “What Qantas plane are the people going to buy, Dad?”

DAD: “All of them.”

ISABELLA: “What, every plane? Even the one we're going on?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy.”

ISABELLA, about ten seconds later: “But, Dad, they can’t have all of them. Other people should have a Qantas plane, too.”

DAD: “No, you don’t understand, honey. What they’re trying to do is own them so they can make money out of the planes. They’re going to buy them all, and then allow people to go on them so they can get money off them for flying on the planes.”

ISABELLA: “What, just money?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy.”

ISABELLA, unenthusiastically: “Oh, that’s pretty boring, Dad.”

Well, they don’t need boats

ISABELLA, after reading the flight safety information: “Dad, how many boats do Qantas have?”

DAD: “None, Issy. They don’t own boats. They have planes, not boats.”

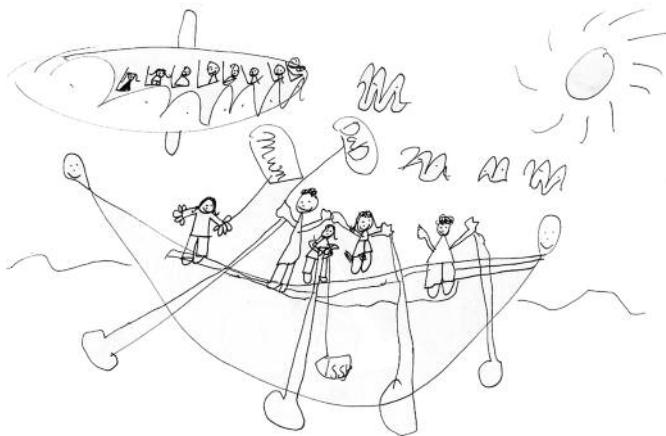
ISABELLA: “But, Dad, they do have boats.”

DAD: “I’m afraid not, sweetheart. They might one day, though. But for now, they don’t have boats.”

ISABELLA, exasperated, pointing to the life rafts on the Safety Instructions: “No, Dad! They *do* have them. Look! See? Boats. Little ones. Eight little brown ones.”

DAD: “Oh yes, you’re right. I forgot all about those little boats. You’re right, sweetheart. Qantas do own boats. Well spotted.”

ISABELLA: “It’s good, isn’t it, Dad?”



DAD: “Yes, I suppose so.”

ISABELLA: “They need them for when they go in the water.”

DAD: “Well, they could come in handy then. Not that Qantas has been in the water yet.”

ISABELLA: “Haven’t they? Why?”

DAD: “Well, they haven’t crashed yet.”

ISABELLA: “What, never?”

DAD: “Nope.”

ISABELLA: “Then they don’t need boats.”

THURSDAY JUNE 14

The purpose of a husband

HOLLY: “The best thing about having a husband is they have to go out to work instead of you.”

Fun beats watching TV or sleeping

DAD, at Sydney’s Luna Park and after learning why the Big Dipper was removed: “They [the people living in the apartment buildings behind Luna Park] didn’t want all the screaming, so they closed it down.”

HOLLY: “But kids should be able to scream where they like, Dad. The people who complained should have just gone to bed early or moved. The Big Dipper was at Luna Park first!”

ISABELLA: “Yeah, kids screaming and having fun is much better than people just watching TV and sleeping in an apartment, Dad.”

Won't really miss you

HOLLY: “Dad, you know when people say they’re going to think about you when they go on holidays?”

DAD: “Yes, I’ve heard that before, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Well, they don’t. I don’t. They say they’re going to think about you, but really they only think about the scary rides they’re on or what they’re doing. That’s all. I never think about my guinea pigs, friends or family until I stop doing what I’m doing. Even if people are not having fun they don’t think about other people *that* much.”



Could be a woman

HOLLY, referring to the Green Man you see on lights at pedestrian crossings:

“I don’t know why people call it a Green Man. It could be called a Green Lady with short hair and long pants.”

It’s all about ‘now’

DAD, in an attempt to get Holly to leave the park we were at: “Oh, c’mon Hols, you’ll have lots of opportunities at this park another time.”

HOLLY: “But I don’t want lots of opportunities at this park another time. I just want this go.”

You can count on me

ISABELLA: “Dad, can I go and play with Amelie?”

DAD: “Yes, I suppose so. As long as you promise me you’ll be back in ten minutes. Is that a deal?”

ISABELLA: “But I don’t know ten minutes, Dad. Do I have to count up to ten or something?”

DAD: “No, it’s a lot more than that, Issy. You have to count up to six hundred.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, good.”

And with that she cheerily ran off to find Amelie.

DAD, yelling out to her as she was running off: “But, Issy. Do you know how to count up to six hundred?”

ISABELLA: “Noooooooooo!”

FRIDAY JUNE 22

It's a good century

HOLLY: “Dad, I don't want God being my father. And nor do I want him fixing me if I get injured, either.”

DAD: “Oh, and why's that, Hols?”

HOLLY: “Because he does mean things to people, too.”

DAD, feigning ignorance: “What? Does he? What do you mean?”

HOLLY: “Well, he doesn't help everyone. When you pray, he doesn't fix all people or feed all the children who are starving. And my teacher also says if you're Catholic, a man will sit inside a room and pretend to be him as well.”

DAD: “That's called a confessional, Holly. A priest takes on a sort of in-between role between God and the people who worship him.”

HOLLY: “But I don't want a confessional.”

DAD: “Then you don't have to have one. We have a choice in the twenty-first century.”

HOLLY: “Do we? I like that. I like having a choice, Dad. Our century is good, isn't it?”

DAD: “Yes, I think it is. It's not perfect. It's certainly not great for everyone living today. But I think it's still better than all the other centuries.”

HOLLY: “Yes, I know. We don't have Horrible Histories in the twenty-first century, do we, Dad?”

DAD: “Well, that’s not exactly true, Holly. We do have our horrible bits. You just don’t see them.”

HOLLY: “Don’t I?”

DAD: “No.”

HOLLY: “Oh good.”

DAD: “I wish it was, Hols. I wish ‘good’ was as easy as that.”

TUESDAY JUNE 26

Keep the willies in

ISABELLA: “Dad, why are nudies R-rated for? I like seeing nude people. I like the way their willies look funny.”

DAD: “Really? Is that so? Alright, then I’ll let the censors know they need to keep willies in so six-year-olds can have a jolly good laugh at them. How would you like me to do that for you?”

ISABELLA: “That’d be good, Dad.”

WEDNESDAY JULY 4

A trip through south-west WA

Just the hair

HOLLY, referring to Olivia, a friend of hers of Chinese ancestry, who was travelling with her to Bluff Knoll: “Dad, with Chinese hair you don’t have to brush it. It’s not knotty so it stays straight and ready to go.”

DAD: “So, do you wish you were Chinese, then, Hols?”

HOLLY: “No, not really. Just my hair can be Chinese. I’d like that to be Chinese but all the other parts of me can be as they are, Dad.”

You're kidding, aren't you?

DAD, feigning excitement as we entered our accommodation in Porongurup National Park: "Look, Holly! An upstairs. Hooray, hooray, hooray, hooray, there's an upstairs."

HOLLY: "Don't, Dad. Stop it! I already know most of your excitement is about being sarcastic."

Go to blazes

HOLLY: "Dad, I'm never going to go to a school that has the word 'saint' in it."

DAD: "Oh, why's that, Hols?"

HOLLY: "Because they're too hot."

DAD: "Too hot?"

HOLLY: "Yes. They always make you wear a blazer all day, Dad. Even in summer. It's really horrible."

Dual-purpose

KARIN, referring to Denmark, a small town we were about to drive through: "Holly, did you know Denmark is also a country?"

HOLLY: "Is it? Are we going to be going through a whole country?"

KARIN: "Well, no, the Denmark we're about to drive through now is only a country town."

HOLLY: "So, Denmark can be both, can it? I like that, Mum."

There are some advantages

HOLLY, at dinner: "I wish I were a grown-up. Then I could taste wine like a grown-up does and not throw up."

What, we pay?

ISABELLA, after the theatre usher had torn our movie tickets: “Why did they take a bit of the ticket for, Dad?”

DAD: “So they know we’ve paid, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, did we just pay, did we?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, why did we do that for?”

DAD: “To get in.”

ISABELLA: “Wouldn’t they have let us in if you didn’t pay?”

DAD: “No, honey.”

ISABELLA: “Well, what will they do with all the people’s money?”

DAD: “I’m not sure. It’s up to the people who own the theatre what they do with it.”

ISABELLA: “We should get a movie theatre, Dad.”

DAD: “Sure, Is. I’ll put it on the list just after a bag of mushrooms, two loaves of bread and some hand soap.”

ISABELLA, rolling her eyes: “Do we *even* have to buy soap, Dad?”

DAD: “I’ll make this a lot simpler for you, Issy. Except for the air you breathe, you just about have to pay for everything. How does that sound? Simpler?”

ISABELLA: “No. Bad!”

World record bid

HOLLY, giggling: “Dad, Issy thinks God is Jesus’s dad. It’s really Joseph, isn’t it?”

DAD: “Well, in a way she’s sort of right, Hols. Some Christians do believe God put Jesus in Mary’s womb, so technically that does make God Jesus’s dad.”

HOLLY: “Well, I don’t believe that. You’d be in *The Guinness Book of World Records* if you could put a baby in someone’s stomach.”

DAD: “You think so?”

HOLLY: “Yes, definitely. You’d be in for sure, Dad.”

DAD: “Really? So, what do you think the category would be if someone could do that, Hols?”

HOLLY, without hesitating: “Magic Persons Who Can Put People In Other People’s Stomachs.”

Getting her head around it

HOLLY, as to why she’s only able to hear the teacher from the back of the class some of the time: “The tall kids’ heads in front of me block the teacher’s sound waves, Dad. They’re not able to get around all the big heads between her and me. I do try to hear. I put my head off to one side sometimes. That’s when it works the best.”

MONDAY JULY 30

Splinter overdue

ISABELLA, tenderly, after two months with a new teacher: “Dad, I’ve never had a splinter with Miss Anderson. I did with Ms Jamieson. Lots of times. (*Perplexed*) But I haven’t yet with Miss Anderson.”

TUESDAY AUGUST 7

Be careful what you wish for

DAD: “I wish I had a kid’s brain again so I could enjoy toys, Hols.”

HOLLY: “No you don’t, Dad. Because then you’d *really* hate work.”

Can’t you just guess?

HOLLY: “Sixty-two?”

DAD: “No.”

HOLLY: “Sixty then?”

DAD: “No.”

HOLLY: “Oh! Forty-five?”

DAD: “No.”

HOLLY: “Sixteen?”

DAD, wearily: “No.”

HOLLY: “Was I getting warmer, Dad?”

DAD: “It’s a maths question, Hols. They’re not interested in you getting warmer. It’s either right or wrong.”

HOLLY: “Awww!”

MONDAY AUGUST 13

Indignation

AMELIE, as Karin took away some seaweed biscuits: “You can’t do that to people.”

No idea, easy or difficult

DAD: “Holly, do you have a simple explanation as to why I can easily find pieces of crust and old apple cores in our house whenever I want to but not a school diary or a music folder?”

HOLLY: “No, Dad.”

DAD: “Well, how about a difficult explanation then?”

HOLLY: “Nope. I don’t have one of those either.”

Only wondering . . .

ISABELLA: “Dad, will an electric toothbrush make the bath go all frizzy?”

DAD: “Well, for starters, Issy, we don’t have electric toothbrushes. Ours are only battery-operated ones. So, if they were to ever go in the bath, the rechargeable batteries would most likely not work anymore. Do you understand what I’m trying to say? Toothbrushes don’t go in the bath. Ever!”

ISABELLA: “I wasn’t getting any ideas, Dad. I was just wondering, that’s all.”

DAD: “Good.”

About five minutes later

ISABELLA: “Dad, would suds go everywhere if you put a battery-operated toothbrush inside them?”

DAD: “I thought you weren’t getting any ideas, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “I wasn’t, Dad. But then I thought of one.”

TUESDAY AUGUST 21

The funny brain will take over

HOLLY, reassuringly: “Dad, I’m never going to get a boyfriend.”

ISABELLA, interrupting: “Well, it won’t matter, Holly. Your funny brain will make you get one when you’re a teenager even if you don’t want one.”

I suppose I’m responsible for this. I did say to Holly and Isabella that when you become a teenager your thinking changes and, for want of a better description, I called the teenage brain a funny brain.

Just means they were run over

ISABELLA: “Dad, when people get run over by a car, it doesn’t mean they were too slow because they were fat. It only means they were run over by a car.”

Emotional

HOLLY, referring to Nona [Holly's grandmother], after she completed an unblemished rendition of *Humoresque* by Dvorak on her violin during her school's Eisteddfod: "She was very emotional, Dad."

ISABELLA: "What's e-moan-ashal?"

HOLLY: "It's where you cry, Issy."

ISABELLA: "Oh, then I get e-mo-shen-an-al a lot then."

One'll do

DAD: "Holly, I'll count to ten. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten . . . Right! Good. And see you continue to behave yourself, too!" (*Turns to where Isabella was standing*) "Why does it *always* have to go to ten with her, Is? Why does she always make me count all the way to ten before she does what I want her to do?"

ISABELLA: "Well, just count up to five then, Dad. Or one."

No band-aid solution

ISABELLA: "Dad, one girl in my class wants to marry her gym teacher."

DAD: "Oh, does she?"

ISABELLA: "Yes. She's not going to. She says she's not tall enough. I think she's going to wait until she's the right height, Dad."

DAD: "Oh, well that's very wise of her, I think. There's no point rushing into these things, you know."

ISABELLA: "Yeah, I know. And Dad . . . did you know, there's another girl in my class who is also going to marry. She's going to marry her grandfather because he lost his wife a year ago."

DAD: "Oh. So do you think she might be trying to be a sort of Band-Aid for her grandfather?"

ISABELLA, mirthfully, "Oh, no, Dad! A person can't be a Band-Aid. She's just going to be a marrier. That's all."

FRIDAY AUGUST 31

At least measles stop

ISABELLA: “Dad, measles aren’t as bad as work, are they? I mean, measles end up stopping. I’d have measles any day before going to work. If I had a choice, that is.”

HOLLY: “Me, too, Dad.”

Babies aren’t boring after all

ISABELLA: “Dad, there’s hardly anything that’s funny about being a grandparent. All they get to do is nothing. Or sit down.”

DAD: “Well, what about babies then? They’re at the other end of life, but they still have a boring time of it, don’t they?”

ISABELLA: “Oh, no Dad! Babies aren’t boring. They get to spill things, which is really funny.”



Like breeds like

HOLLY: “The Leaning Tower of Pizza (sic) is interesting to me because it leans, Dad. And a leaning building is always exciting because it makes a building look like it’s fun. Straight up and down buildings don’t have any fun because the people inside them are always straight up and down, too.”

And that makes them happy?

DAD: “It’s not my idea to be there at that time. It’s just something my work wants me to do. They just need me to be there right on nine o’clock to start work, so they can talk to me about the day ahead. It’s as simple as that, sweetheart.”

ISABELLA: “And *that* makes them happy?”

You should have already known that

HOLLY: “Dad? Guess what? We had an incursion* today and two girls in my class said they thought the presenter was very handsome. I just said they were too young to know what handsome is.” (*the opposite of an excursion)

DAD, feigning interest: “Did you, Hols?”

HOLLY: “Hmm-mm. I said, ‘How would you know what handsome is? You’re only nine!’ It didn’t matter, because they just said they *do* know what handsome is. I couldn’t believe it, Dad! How would they know if a man was handsome or not? I told them they won’t know what handsome is until they’re all grown-up. When girls are nine or ten, Dad, they sometimes think a boy is cute because they think he looks cute. I just tell them they’re not cute unless they have a pretty personality. Some girls in my class can also be really funny around boys. They hardly know anything about them, but they still think they have to love them or something. I just think boyfriends are stupid, Dad. That’s because boyfriends think they have to lie or do fast driving to impress you.”

DAD: “What do you mean, Hols?”

HOLLY: “Well, if, say, a girl’s favourite colour is pink, but the boyfriend’s isn’t – let’s just say his favourite colour is yellow or something – then the boyfriend will simply say his favourite colour is pink just to impress the girl.”

DAD: “That’s very well worked out, Hols. But a boy’s lie is usually a lot more careful than that, because he’s trying to be tricky with his fibbing. I think you’ve done very well to pick up on a boy’s cunning at your age, Hols. In fact, I’d say if ever a boy becomes interested in you, you’ll be able to tell if he’s being honest or not. If you ever do have to say no to a boy, though, I only hope you’re gentle with him.”

HOLLY: “Oh, Dad, that won’t happen because I only want a friend, not a boyfriend.”

DAD: “What’s the difference then between a friend who is a boy and a boyfriend?”

HOLLY: “Oh, that’s easy, Dad. A boy who is a friend is like a girl who is a friend. He just says hello to you and stuff like that. A boyfriend doesn’t do that. He’s never like that. It’s all slobbery kissy-kissy with a boyfriend, Dad. It’s *just* awful.”

DAD: “Oh, now I see, Hols. Thanks for sorting that out for me.”

HOLLY: “You’re welcome, Dad. But you should have already known that.”

TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 4

It's all in the look

I'd been pedalling very hard to arrive on time at Isabella's school to pick her up.

ISABELLA: "Dad, you look really late!"

Oh, not that!

DAD: "Hi, Issy, how are you?"

ISABELLA, grumpily, as she was leaving her classroom: "Oh! Why do you have to ask me those sorts of questions for?"

TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 11

The easy trade-off

ISABELLA, as a storm was brewing and we were about to get on our bikes to ride home from school: "I wish cars were good for the Earth and bikes weren't."

You just know you know

HOLLY, attempting to explain how her toys come to life at night when she takes them to bed with her: "Sometimes when you're nine you know things and you don't know how you know them."

Abundance

ISABELLA: "I've got lots of cuddles in me, Dad. In my head, in my body, definitely in my body. Even in my bot. I just have them in there as well because there's no room left in all my other places. You can't use up all your cuddles because you have too many of them inside you."

DAD: "Is that why you give Miss Anderson so many? Because you know there'll still be plenty left over for me?"

ISABELLA: "Oh yes, Dad. I could cuddle, cuddle, cuddle her all day and still have millions left for you."

Defining 'cute'

HOLLY: "Dad, Rebecca says Isabella's cute."

DAD: "Oh, does she? So, what's cute then, Hols?"

ISABELLA, interrupting: "I think it's where . . . it's hard to say, Dad. It's hard to say without using 'cute'. Um . . . it's nice . . . and sweet . . . and . . . small, I think."

Get the drift?

HOLLY: "Dad, when did Great Britain grow apart? During the last Ice Age?"

DAD: "Oh, no, Holly. It happened long before that."

HOLLY: "Did it?"

DAD: "Oh yes."

HOLLY: "Well, when then?"

DAD: "No one knows for sure, but it happened many millions of years ago. Most scientists, who know about these things, say that. Everything is moving, Hols. Everything in the entire universe. And that means all the continents on Earth are always moving. Australia, for instance, is moving about two centimetres a year in a northerly direction. I think that's right. In millions of years time Australia's going to crash into India."

ISABELLA, in an alarmed voice: "But I don't want to crash into India, Dad."

DAD: "You won't, Issy. You'll be dead. We all will be. You'll miss the collision by millions of years."

ISABELLA: "Dad, Sabrin went to India."

DAD: "Yes, I know she did. But not by continental drift, she didn't. She went by plane, didn't she?"

ISABELLA: "Yes, Dad."

DAD: "Well, she can go back and forth to India on a plane a billion times over if she wants to. It doesn't matter, sweetheart. Because while she's doing that, none of us will have even banged into Thailand, let alone India. That's how long away it is."

ISABELLA: “Oh. That’s lucky for us then, isn’t it? I wouldn’t want to be on Australia when it does hit India. It’ll be a big crash, won’t it, Dad?”

DAD: “No. Not at two centimetres a year it won’t be.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, yeah. That’s so slow, isn’t it?”

DAD: “Yes, it’s very slow. In fact, if you were able to live for, say, another fifty million years and you didn’t cut your fingernails and your home was where Darwin is now, your fingernails would probably get to India before everyone else on Australia did.”

HOLLY: “Well, I’m not going to cut my nails then, Dad, because I want to get to India first.”

DAD: “Mmm, I guess you can try, Hols. But I think your teacher will have something to say about it.”

HOLLY: “Oh yeah. She’ll probably make me cut them.”

DAD: “I think you can forget all about having five thousand kilometres of nails, Hols. Your school doesn’t even like nail polish, so they will definitely make you cut them off.”

HOLLY: “Awww!”

WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 12

It’s only a game

DAD: “I spy with my little eye something beginning with . . . ‘W’.”

ISABELLA: “Well?”

DAD: “No.”

ISABELLA: “White?”

DAD: “No.”

ISABELLA: “Window?”

DAD: “No.”

ISABELLA: “Can I have some more letters, Dad?”

DAD: “It starts with ‘W’ and ends with ‘L’.”

ISABELLA: “Wer...wer...wer. Can I have one more letter?”

DAD: “Yes, alright. You can have the second letter. It’s ‘A’.”

ISABELLA: “Wa . . . wa . . . wa. Can I just have one more letter?”

DAD: “Yes you can, Issy, but I think it will spoil the game somewhat because then it will be the whole word.”

ISABELLA: “Oh . . . that’s alright, Dad.”

MONDAY SEPTEMBER 17

Double standard

ISABELLA: “Dad, she’s riding it like a horse.”

DAD: “What?”

ISABELLA: “The broom.”

DAD, vehemently, to Holly: “Holly, please don’t ride the broom like a horse. You know it upsets her. And besides, you’re supposed to be sweeping up with it.”

HOLLY: “But, Dad, I wasn’t riding it like a horse. She’s lying.”

ISABELLA: “She was, Dad. She rides it that way when you’re not looking.”

DAD: “Well, look, I’ll be watching Holly from now on, Issy. Alright? If she does it again, then I’ll put a stop to it.”

A little later on that night . . .

HOLLY: “Dad, Isabella isn’t sweeping up properly. She’s only sweeping up little eensie weensie bits of dirt.”

ISABELLA, unaware of the double standard: “No, I’m not. When I ride the broom I get big bits, Dad.”

MONDAY SEPTEMBER 24

No repercussions either

ISABELLA, in the midst of a tantrum: “I’m not doing any more work, Dad. I’ve already cleaned up all my mess and I’m not doing anything extra. Alright? Don’t expect me to do one thing else because I won’t be doing it no matter what you say. And that goes for repercussions, too. I’m not having any repercussions, either.”

Ambulances need to be careful

ISABELLA, as we were driving home from a birthday party: “You have to be really careful if you’re an ambulance with a siren, don’t you, Dad? If you crash then they have to send another one. And then another one if you crash that. And then another one if you crash that. And then another one if you crash that—”

DAD: “Yes, alright, Isabella. I get it.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, but, Dad. After all the crashes they eventually run out of ambulances and that means all the people that wanted them start to *really* die. That’s why it’s very important ambulances are careful, Dad.”

Joy

ISABELLA, on the back of my bike as I carried her home from her sleepover: “Going on the bike is best because then you can get fun out of a hill, Dad. You can’t get fun out of a hill if you go in a car. It just goes over and down hills without you even knowing. You also can’t go alongside a buzzy bee if you’re in a car. They go the same speed as a bike.”

Lying gets results

HOLLY: “Mum, it’s not fair! Lauren gets to lay on the rug at school because she lied about being allergic to the carpet. I wish I could lie about something.”

SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 29

The end of splinters?

DAD: “Issy, have you had a splinter with Miss Anderson yet?”

ISABELLA: “No, Dad, I haven’t. I’d have to go near wood and take my shoes off to get a splinter but they don’t let you do that anymore, Dad. You’re supposed to keep your shoes on.”

DAD: “Oh dear, are you sure? If that’s true, Issy, it’ll mean the end of splinters.”

ISABELLA, in a concerned voice: “I know.”

So be it. It is done.

HOLLY, as she and Annie were bouncing on our trampoline: “I want to live all my life being twenty until the day before the Sun swallows up the Earth. Then I want to turn old and die.”

ANNIE: “Yes, me too, Holly.”

HOLLY: “Then we shall.”

Hidies

ISABELLA: “Dad, you shouldn’t teach Amelie to hide behind glass windows or doors. That’s like seeing a tree through the window.”

DAD: “But I didn’t teach her to do that, Issy. She just went there all by herself. She didn’t need any help from me.”

ISABELLA: “Little kids are such bad hidiers, aren’t they, Dad? Why do they talk and say ‘Here I am! Here I am!’ for? Amelie doesn’t understand hiding. She’s out too quick.”

DAD: “Yes, I know that, Issy. That’s why I let her stay in sometimes. She likes that.”

ISABELLA: “I know. I know you do. But you shouldn’t. She has to learn it’s just a game and that she won’t always win.”

DAD: “Yes, alright, Issy. I’ll try and remember that for next time.”

HOLLY: “Dad? Why does Amelie have to play for?”

DAD: “Well, it’s because she’s part of the family, Hols. That’s why.”

HOLLY: “Yes, but she’s so silly, Dad. She doesn’t even know what she’s doing.”

DAD: “Holly, if only you could’ve seen yourself at her age. Sometimes you used to ‘hide’ by just standing in the middle of a room without even going behind anything. Right out in the open you used to be. Now aren’t you lucky I didn’t ban you from Hides?”

HOLLY: “Oh, did I?”

DAD: “Yes, you certainly did, Holly.”

HOLLY: “Oh, alright then. She can stay in.”

DAD: “You’re very kind, Holly.”

ISABELLA, interrupting: “She is not, Dad.”

THURSDAY OCTOBER 4

Illusion

ISABELLA, elatedly, after opening her *Barbie* showbag from the Royal Show: “Dad, look at this!”

DAD: “What is it, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know.”

HOLLY, joining in: “Dad, I think as you get older you don’t want much. The only people who do, love junk.”

WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 10

Excuses get lamer

The older Holly gets, the lamer the pretext becomes for getting out of wiping-up.

HOLLY: “Dad, I’m just feeling restless. That’s all. I think I need to bounce on the trampoline a bit first to get the restlessness out of my legs.”

Election cuddle

HOLLY, watching Opposition leader Kevin Rudd on TV, cuddling up to a baby in the run-up to the federal election: “Dad, is Kevin Rudd going to adopt that baby?”

Icypole spin

ISABELLA, in anticipation of my reaction to her having a second icypole so soon after her first: “It’s only my *first* second one, Dad.”

Just trying to be helpful

ISABELLA: “Mum, lots of kids were saying they hate Sara. It’s really mean to say that, isn’t it? . . . That’s why I told Sara everyone hates her so she could tell the teacher.”

Forced to be healthy

HOLLY to Isabella during breakfast: “The worst thing about being in this family is they make you be healthy.”

TUESDAY OCTOBER 16

Just the cheek

HOLLY: “Issy, have you ever kissed anyone and seen stars?”

ISABELLA: “No.”

HOLLY: “Are you sure? What about when you kissed Cloe S on the cheek?”

ISABELLA: “No, I didn’t see any stars.”

HOLLY: “Well, what did you see then?”

ISABELLA: “Just her cheek really close.”

Artistic licence

AMELIE, insisting I look at her painting: “Dad, look at my picture!”

DAD: “Alright, Amie. I’m looking. Now what do you want me to do?”

AMELIE: “What is it?”

DAD: “I don’t know, sweetheart. You have to decide what it is going to be, darling. Not me.”

AMELIE: “Can it be a mountain?”

DAD: “Sure, it can be a mountain.”

AMELIE: “But it can’t be a mountain, Dad. It’s a house.”

WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 17

Answers that sneak

ISABELLA, waiting to go into class: “Dad, what’s the time?”

DAD: “It’s a quarter-to-eight, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Oh. So, when does class start?”

DAD: “At a quarter-past-eight.”

ISABELLA: “Is that a long wait or a short wait?”

DAD: “It’s half an hour.”

ISABELLA: “So, is that long or short?”

DAD: “It depends on what you mean by long or short. What’s long or short for you?”

ISABELLA: “Short is one minute and long is half an hour.”

DAD: “I think you already have your answer, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Oh yeah, I do, don’t I? I like those kinds of answers, Dad.”

DAD: “Do you? Why?”

ISABELLA: “Because they’re a surprise. They sneak.”

MONDAY OCTOBER 22

Narrowing the possibilities

Isabella was trying to find a little torch that Cloe S had given her. It was 9.45pm.

DAD, after a very long day: “Issy, we can find it in the morning.”

ISABELLA: “But, Dad, you don’t understand how important that torch is to me. If you did, you’d let me keep looking for it.”

DAD: “Oh, Isabella. But you don’t know where it is. It could be anywhere.”

ISABELLA: “No, it can’t be anywhere, Dad. It’s somewhere for sure. In fact, I know it’s in the laundry.”

DAD: “Alright then. Go and have one more look for it.”

ISABELLA, after checking the laundry: “It wasn’t there, Dad. That means it’s either everywhere else or outside.”

DAD: “Is that what you’ve narrowed it down to, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad. At least I now know where it *has* to be.”

Don’t get the kissing bit

ISABELLA: “Dad, what’s important to you?”

DAD: “Hmm. What’s important to me? That’s a good question, Issy. Let me see. There’s you,

Holly, Amelie, Mum, the rest of my family, my friends and—”

HOLLY: “And all the girls you’ve kissed?”

DAD: “What?”

HOLLY: “And all your old girlfriends you’ve kissed, Dad. They’re important to you, aren’t they?”

DAD, stumbling: “Well, it’s not that they’re unimportant to me. I just don’t see any of them now.”

HOLLY: “Well, why did you kiss them for then?”

DAD: “Because I was attracted to them.”

HOLLY: “But you aren’t now? Is that why you’re not with them?”

DAD: “Well, it’s not as though they suddenly became unattractive to me, Holly. Quite often you just end up moving away from people you once knew. That’s all. It happens all the time.”

HOLLY: “I never want that to happen to me, Dad.”

DAD: “No. You never do when you’re a kid.”

HOLLY: “I never want to move away from anyone, Dad.”

DAD: “Well, no matter what you want, Holly, people will still move away from you.”

HOLLY: “Well, I’ll just move close to them again.”

DAD: “But it won’t work, Hols. If lots of people you know started moving away from you, you’d need to split into many yous to make that happen.”

HOLLY: “Oh yeah. I would, too. Now I get it, Dad.”

DAD: “Do you?”

HOLLY: “Yes, I think so. I understand everything except the kissing. I’ll never get the kissing.”

DAD: “Well, you don’t have to at your age.”

HOLLY: “Oh, good.”

Plain-speaking

The text of Isabella's card to her grandfather, who was about to have a heart operation: "Next time don't eat too much."

See if I float first

Isabella was resolute. She would be in Level Four, the same swimming group her good friend Cloe S was in. The only problem was, on the day she was supposed to be assessed, it was cool and overcast and she didn't want to get in the pool.



ISABELLA, dangling her legs over the side of the pool to first get used to the water temperature: "Oooh! It's a little bit cold, isn't it, Dad?"

DAD: "Well, yes, it is a bit. However, once you're in, you'll feel fine, honey. You'll warm up really quickly once you're in."

As she sat on the edge of Lane One, Isabella watched a lady with a white clipboard and whistle in her hand.

DAD: "That's your Swimming Instructor."

ISABELLA: "Is it?"

DAD: "Yes."

ISABELLA: "Oh!"

DAD: "Would you like me to talk to her?"

ISABELLA: "Yes, could you?"

And so over I went. Isabella stayed right where she was. And then I came back.

DAD: "Come on, Issy. I've said hello to your Swimming Instructor. Let's go and meet her together."

ISABELLA: "Soon, Dad."

DAD: “Soon? Issy, we don’t have all afternoon.”

ISABELLA: “I know that, Dad. But I just want to sit for a bit first.”

DAD, impatiently: “Is-sy. Come on. Nothing’s going to happen. We’ll just go and meet her, that’s all.”

Isabella just stared at me and kept on splashing the water. Finally, she stood up, shrugged her shoulders and reached for my hand.

DAD to the instructor: “Hello, this is my daughter, Isabella, and she would like to see if she can be placed in the Level Four group so she can be with her friend Cloe S.”

KYLIE: “Hello, Isabella. My name is Kylie. How are you?”

ISABELLA, softly: “Good.”

KYLIE: “So, you want to be in Level Four, do you?”

ISABELLA: “Hmm-mm.”

KYLIE: “Well, let’s have a look at how you swim first. Just jump in this lane for me will you, Isabella.”

ISABELLA, quivering, as she timidly lowered her body into the cold water: “It’s been a little while since I’ve had a go so I’ll just get into the water and see if I float first.”

She really wanted to be in Level Four, but it would take more than floating to get there. Fortunately, though, it wasn’t long before she was swimming again just as she had done the year before.

KYLIE: “Level Three.”

Level Three! I thought for sure she’d be in Level One or Two. Not bad.

ISABELLA: “Dad? I think I’ll get in Cloe S’s level another time. I need to stop going into walls first.”

THURSDAY OCTOBER 25

A brain for different occasions

HOLLY: “Dad, I only want an adult’s brain for tests. I don’t want one for games or playtime.”

ISABELLA: “Or going on rides.”

A sheep can be a main character

ISABELLA, discussing her role in the upcoming nativity play: “Dad, I don’t want to be the Inn Keeper’s wife. It’s not a main character.”

DAD: “Well, who would you like to play then, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “A sheep.”

HOLLY: “A sheep? But a sheep isn’t a main character. It just goes ‘baa’.”

ISABELLA: “So?”

HOLLY: “Well, ‘baa’ is nothing.”

ISABELLA: “No, it’s not. A sheep can be a main character if you want it to be.”

HOLLY: “Well, it’s not a main character in the nativity.”

ISABELLA: “I *know* that, Holly.”

HOLLY: “Well, why did you say it was then?”

ISABELLA: “Because Dad asked me what I wanted to be, that’s why.”

HOLLY: “And you said you wanted to be a main character.”

ISABELLA: “I know, Holly.”

DAD: “C’mon. This is going nowhere, you two. I think you should change the subject, girls.”

ISABELLA, whispering: “Dad, I’ll talk to Miss Anderson about the sheep. Okay?”

DAD: “Yes, okay.”

ISABELLA: “Don’t tell Holly.”

DAD: “No, there’s no chance of that, Issy.”

Bottom of the list

ISABELLA to Holly: “Cloe S knows she’s my last best friend now.”

HOLLY: “Is she? Why?”

ISABELLA: “Well, on the sleepover the other night she didn’t get me a towel. I was in the bathroom and she said to me, ‘Don’t worry, just go nude’. I also got hit on the head about ten times and she didn’t even notice.”

DAD, interrupting: “Ten times? How on earth did you get hit on your head all those times, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know, Dad. There were all these things in the house. I banged into lots of different things that I hadn’t noticed before. And, she also said she got four showbags at The Show when she didn’t. I said I got one, so she had to say she got four, which I know isn’t true, Dad. She also says she rides to school like we do but I know she goes in a car every day.”

DAD: “Well, I hope she isn’t too upset about being your last best friend, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “No, she won’t be. She knows if she’s better to me she’ll be my best friend again.”

DAD: “Simple as that, is it?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad.”

FRIDAY NOVEMBER 2

The Athletics Carnival

Thanks for coming

HOLLY, apathetically: “Da-ad?”

DAD: “Yes, Hols. What is it?”

HOLLY: “I got one of those ‘I ran in a race’ things. Gee, I hate those ribbons, Dad. They’re not much use, are they?”

DAD: “No, I have to admit they don’t do a lot for me.”

HOLLY: “Annie ripped hers in two.”

DAD: “Did she?”

HOLLY: “Yeah. She’s got so many of them now she couldn’t be bothered keeping any more.”

DAD: “Really? Well, maybe the ribbon should say something different then. I know, how about this? It might be a little long, but at least it’d be a lot more honest. Instead, it could say ‘I ran in a race but obviously I didn’t do that well because all I got was this ‘I ran in a race’ ribbon.’”

HOLLY, laughing: “Oh, Dad! It couldn’t say that.”

DAD: “Why not, Hols? It’s what you, Annie, and I’m sure a lot of other kids are only thinking when they get one. Why do they have to give you a ribbon that simply says what everyone knows, even those who didn’t go? Of course you ran in a race. Big deal! If you entered a piano or maths competition and didn’t get a place you wouldn’t receive a ribbon that said, ‘I played a piano or did some sums’, would you? You’d just get nothing, hopefully. I don’t think it’s unkind to get nothing, Hols. Ribbons are meaningless because they usually take little or no effort to get. They’re just thrown away because the child already knows the ribbon isn’t important.”

HOLLY: “Yes, I know, Dad.”

DAD: “So, what do you think is going to happen to your ribbon?”



HOLLY: “I think I’ll give it to Amelie.”

DAD: “Why?”

HOLLY: “I don’t know. I guess it’s because I don’t want it.”

At a loss for words

ISABELLA, about a secret she wanted to tell me without me knowing what it was: “It’s hard to put the words I want to use into words, Dad.”

Inappropriate behaviour

ISABELLA, in an easy-to-hear whisper in the backseat of our car: “Holly, did you know Teagan did something rude today? Even though she knew it was wrong, she looked under the toilet door at Katherine with a ‘K’.”

HOLLY, excitedly: “Did she? So, did she get into trouble for it?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, she did. She was told it was inappropriate.”

HOLLY: “Is that all? Is that all she was told? That it was inappropriate?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

HOLLY: “I bet she doesn’t even know what ‘inappropriate’ means.”

ISABELLA: “So? She still knew it wasn’t good.”

HOLLY: “I can’t believe that’s all that’s going to happen to her. Are you sure that’s it?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, I think so.”

HOLLY, disappointedly: “It’s not that much, is it?”

ISABELLA: “No. But I’m still not going to do it.”

HOLLY: “No. Neither am I.”

You've gotta be joking

ISABELLA: "Dad, why did the gate leave his friend alone for?"

DAD, despondently: "I don't know, Issy. Why did the gate leave his friend alone for?"

ISABELLA: "Because he wasn't a best friend."

DAD: "Oh, Issy. That's yet another one that doesn't make any sense to me. Look, I'll admit a joke has to be silly for it to work, but that joke is just *too* silly."

ISABELLA: "I know that, Dad. But it doesn't matter."

DAD: "It doesn't matter? What are you talking about? Of course it matters."

ISABELLA: "No, it doesn't. Now, tell me your next joke."

DAD: "Oh, alright. Let me think of something equally stupid. Okay. Why did the chair eat itself?"

ISABELLA: "Because it was hungry?"

DAD: "No, because it had teeth."

ISABELLA: "Oh, that's a good one, Dad."

DAD: "Issy, how long do we have to play this game for?"

ISABELLA: "Ten more goes, Dad."

DAD: "Oh, but that'll be too much for me, Issy. What about three more goes?"

ISABELLA: "No. C'mon, Dad. Your go again."

DAD: "What? But I just had a go. Oh, alright then. Why did the dad feel he had too much to do?"

ISABELLA: "Because he thought he had to do ten more jokes with his daughter?"

DAD: "Yes, you got it, Issy. I didn't know if you'd get that one."

ISABELLA: "Ah! See. It is a good game, isn't it? Right. Your go again."

No weatherman

HOLLY: “Dad, I asked the God that Christians pray to what the weather would be but he didn’t tell me. I don’t think he knows weather, Dad.”

FRIDAY NOVEMBER 16

I’m fun, aren’t I?

ISABELLA: “Dad, watch this feather.” (*Lets go of feather*) “See, it floats like a baby in a cradle, doesn’t it, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, sweetheart.”

ISABELLA: “Do you think the bird that lost it will be missing it still?”

DAD: “I don’t know, Issy. Maybe.”

ISABELLA: “I wouldn’t miss a feather if I was a bird and I lost one. They’re too light, Dad. Feathers are too soft to miss, I think. But I’d definitely miss a bag or something if I was a bird. Not that I’d probably have a bag on my back.”

DAD: “No, good point.”

ISABELLA, after a short pause: “It’s fun being with me, isn’t it, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, sweetheart. Always.”

Asleep on the job

ISABELLA, referring to two pieces of crust by her bedside: “Dad, don’t take them away. I like leaving crust by my bed so I can eat it in the morning. It’s easier that way.”

DAD: “For you or for the rats?”

ISABELLA: “For me, of course. I wouldn’t let a rat have the crust.”

DAD: “Issy, rats aren’t into ‘let’. They’re just into nibbling and gobbling.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, but I’ll keep a sneaky eye out for them, Dad.”

DAD: “Not when you’re asleep, you won’t.”

ISABELLA: “Oh yeah, that’s right! I’ll be asleep in the night, won’t I? Ohh!”

FRIDAY NOVEMBER 23

Imaginative excuse

HOLLY, explaining why one of her overdue library books was under her bed: “Dad, the granny was just too frightening. That’s why in the end I had to put it under my bed with a big encyclopaedia on it. I had to keep the granny from coming out of the book and scaring me, Dad. I think my imagination was trying to play tricks on me again.”

FRIDAY DECEMBER 7

Only in tests, just like her big sister

ISABELLA, singing in her room: “We three kings of orry and tar. Tried to catch a robber’s cigar—”

DAD: “Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, what is it?”

DAD: “I don’t think that’s it, sweetheart. It’s ‘We three kings of Orient are/Bearing gifts we traverse afar—’”

ISABELLA, in a high-principled tone: “Dad, it doesn’t matter. Right words are only important in tests.”

Wayward whisper

HOLLY to Isabella, as Isabella was whispering a secret to her: “Don’t whisper it into my forehead, Issy. It goes everywhere when you do that. Get it in my ear. Otherwise that big dad over there (*Points to me*) will hear it.”

Relief

ISABELLA, after we'd just pulled over next to a house under construction so I could look in our street directory for directions to one of her friend's birthday party: "Dad, don't tell me *this* is it."

DAD: "What? Oh no, Issy."

ISABELLA, unaware of the difference between a house under construction and one being demolished: "Good, I'm glad about that. I'm glad we're not going to a crashed-down house."

THURSDAY DECEMBER 13

A trip to Denmark

Only because you're cute

ISABELLA, very sternly to Amelie after we'd asked her to secure Amelie in her seat: "Now come on! It's only that you're cute that you're even on this trip. Go in the booster seat or Mum and Dad will go to jail."

Marital mystery

HOLLY, as we were travelling through Mandurah: "Dad. Look! There's a hoon."

ISABELLA: "No, it's not a hoon, Holly; he's got a wife."

HOLLY: "So. Some hoons get wives (sic), Issy."

ISABELLA: "Do they? How?"

FRIDAY DECEMBER 14

The great indoors

It was the morning after a cool, wet first night of camping in Denmark and I was seeking suggestions from my three daughters as to what the family should do that day.

DAD: "So, girls, what do you think we should do today?"

HOLLY: “I don’t know, Dad. We could go to Green Pool. I’d like to go there and play.”

AMELIE: “Yes. Green Pool. I want to go to Green Pool, I want to go to Green Pool, I want to go to Green Pool—”

DAD: “And you, Isabella? Would you like to go to Green Pool, too?”

ISABELLA, as she lay stretched out in her own personal utopia on the top bunk in the girls’ room, after we’d just upgraded from our wet and windblown tent to a cabin: “Dad, I don’t really care. I just want a bunk bed, curtains and a window in Denmark. That’s all. So, you can go anywhere you want because I don’t need to go anywhere right now.”

SUNDAY DECEMBER 16

Driving home from Denmark

Just a joke, isn’t it?

HOLLY, pointing to a paddock filled with grazing horses: “Dad, I want to own a horse really badly.”

DAD: “Well, after the way you generally look after your room, Hols, I think you’d be very good at looking after a horse badly.”

HOLLY: “Oh, Dad. That’s just a joke, isn’t it?”

A welcome end

ISABELLA, as we pulled into our driveway at the end of our holiday: “Dad, is this the holiday over now?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy. It is.”

ISABELLA: “Oh good. *Finally.*”

C H A P T E R F O U R

2008

**DAD: “Do you think going through
a red light is a way of getting
somewhere faster?”**

**ISABELLA: “No, because they’d have
to do a lot more running over
and that would make them slower.”**

AUGUST 10, 2008

Holly, aged 9 • Isabella, aged 6 • Amelie, aged 3

TUESDAY JANUARY 1

She's here to play

ISABELLA, keen to avoid doing the dishes: “Dad, Annie [Holly’s best friend] isn’t over to watch us do dishes, you know. She’s here to play.”

Some present

ISABELLA to Aunty Jen, as she held up one of Aunty Jen’s Christmas presents: “Oh that’s not a very good present, Aunty Jen. It’s just a tea towel.”

The gift giver was in the room at the time.

Back bot bias

HOLLY: “Dad, why do they show the back bot on TV but not the front bot? Everyone’s got a back bot, but front bots are so much more interesting because they’re so different. Issy thinks so, too.”

DAD: “Are they, Hols? And why’s that?”

HOLLY: “Well . . . if you count in boobies, lots of them dangle and droop and stick out.”

ISABELLA: “Yeah. And a man’s front bot gets in the way when he wants to do a poo. It’s very funny, Dad.”

DAD: “Yeah, I’m sure it is.”

HOLLY: “Dad? What’s your favourite rude bit? I bet it’s boobies and tooshes [what the girls call female genitalia]. You know why?”

DAD: “No. I have no idea why.”

HOLLY: “Because you don’t have them.”

DAD: “Oh yes! Of course. Boobies and toosh envy. Now why didn’t I think of that?”

HOLLY: “Because you aren’t me, Dad.”

SUNDAY JANUARY 6



HOLLY, viewing a well-known homewares department store advertisement for the first time:
“Dad, I don’t really like all those ads that bang down prices like \$99. Why do they try and make you buy things you don’t even want? They speak so loudly and in such fast voices.”

Toys are real

ISABELLA, after I teasingly told her none of her toys were real: “Dad, toys are real, you know. It’s just they don’t want you to know they’re real. That’s why they’re so still and don’t do anything. They want people, especially grown-ups, to think they’re dead or something. (*Looks towards Holly and Amelie*) But we know they’re not, Dad. We know they’re really really real. Especially at night.”

Not off to a flying start

DAD: “Amelie, close the door, sweetheart, or the flies will come in.”

AMELIE: “They’ll get a banged brain and broken wing if they come through the door, won’t they, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, honey. Except they can’t get through the door.”

ISABELLA: “Dad, why doesn’t her brain know that?”

DAD: “Know what?”

ISABELLA: “That flies can’t go through doors.”

DAD: “It probably does, Issy. It’s just that her brain most likely doesn’t have the words yet that match up well with what she sees.”

ISABELLA: “Oh. Was I that way?”

DAD: “We all were.”

ISABELLA: “So, everyone started out really stupid, did they?”

Misnomer

ISABELLA, yelling out from her room: “How do you spell ‘yoghurt’, Dad?”

DAD, walking towards her room: “Y-O-G HURT. Do you think you can spell the rest of it, Issy? It’s pretty easy from there.”

ISABELLA: “H-U-R-T?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy. That’s it. Well done.”

ISABELLA, laughing to herself: “So, yoghurt hurts then, does it? *(Even more to herself)* Doesn’t really.”

TUESDAY JANUARY 15

Slaughter in the city

HOLLY: “Dad? I’d never own an abattoir.”

DAD: “Wouldn’t you?”

HOLLY: “No. But if I did, you know what I’d do?”

DAD: “No. What would you do, Holly?”

HOLLY: “I’d put it right in the middle of the city so everyone could visit it and see what happens to Babe . . . There should be excursions to abattoirs, Dad. Why aren’t there any?”

He’s not a person

DAD, in a pleasant voice: “That’s it, Amelie. Turn the tap off, sweetheart. He likes that.”

AMELIE: “He’s not a friend, Dad. He’s not a guy or anything. You can’t talk to him like a person.”

Cheating is stupid

HOLLY: “Hey, Dad, you know what? I’m actually really scared now to copy off other people. You know why?”

DAD: “No, Hols, I can’t think why.”

HOLLY: “Well, it’s because I’m frightened that if I do I won’t know as much about the world as other kids will. You don’t want to end up too stupid.”

Nothing can be tiring

DAD, arriving home from work: “How was your day, hun?”

KARIN: “Well, it hasn’t been that easy.”

DAD: “Hasn’t it?”

KARIN, seething: “No.”

ISABELLA interrupting: “But, Dad, you should ask us as well. It hasn’t been that easy of a day for us either, you know.”

HOLLY, in a rare moment of solidarity with her parents, “Yes it has, Issy. We haven’t done anything.”

ISABELLA: “So. That’s just you. It still hasn’t been that easy for me.”

AMELIE: “I don’t know what I’ve done, Dad.”

DAD: “I think what we have here, Issy, is a lot of doing by one person and a lot of not doing by three others. Or, perhaps, a lot of *undoing*. Would you say that was fair enough?”

ISABELLA: “No, I wouldn’t, Dad.”

DAD: “Well, how would you describe it then?”

ISABELLA: “It was tiring.”

DAD: “But Holly said you haven’t done anything all day.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, I know. But not doing anything can still make you tired.”

DAD: “Oh, I don’t know about that, Issy. I reckon you and Hols are the least tired and so tonight you two are washing and wiping up. Okay?”

ISABELLA: “What? Even though we’re too tired?”

DAD: “Yes. Even though you’re too tired.”

ISABELLA: “You are so strict, Dad.”

DAD: “No I’m not, Issy. I’m just like any other parent when it comes to chores.”

ISABELLA, obdurately: “Well, why are you trying to copy other parents for? You tell us not to do that.”

DAD: “It was for a rest, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “For a rest? What does that mean?”

DAD: “Well, right now, it means *you* work and the grown-ups in the house stop for a few minutes while you do.”

ISABELLA: “I knew it. You’re so strict.”

DAD: “Like I said, Issy, and this time our conversation will need to stop because we’ll all become dizzy if it doesn’t: I’m not strict. I’m just like any other parent when it comes to chores.”

ISABELLA: “Ohhh! You always get us to do chores, Dad.”

DAD: “No I don’t, Issy. But I’ll take it as a compliment anyway.”

ISABELLA: “A compliment? What’s a compliment?”

DAD: “It’s something you get when you finish washing and wiping up.”

ISABELLA: “Oh! Well, it better be something good.”

DAD, mischievously: “Don’t worry, sweetheart. It will be.”

ISABELLA: “Good!”

Grown-up times

ISABELLA: “Dad, when do I get to go out like a grown-up does?”

DAD: “When you’re much older, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “How much older?”

DAD: “Oh, I don’t know. In about ten years.”

ISABELLA: “Well, what about a purse then? When do I get a purse and things to put in it?”

DAD: “Like tissues you mean?”

ISABELLA: “No. Not tissues. I mean credit cards and stuff like that.”

DAD: “Oh, that will also be when you’re a lot older.”

ISABELLA: “Gee, there’s a lot for when I get older, isn’t there, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, I suppose there is.”

HOLLY, interrupting: “Hey, Dad. When I’m a teenager and a boy asks me if I’d like a go in his car, guess what I’m going to do?”

DAD: “I have no idea. What?”

HOLLY: “I’m going to get him to go around the block a couple of times first to see if he can resist showing off in front of me.”

DAD: “Oh good for you, Hols. Although it’s a long way from being foolproof, that’s not bad thinking.”

HOLLY: “Yes and if he does go really fast or drives like an idiot, Dad, I’m going to say to him, ‘No thanks! You’re too stupid for me.’ I’m never going to let an idiot drive me somewhere.”

Just in case

HOLLY, as we rode past a spot on our way home from school where a magpie swooped her about two years earlier: “Dad, I think he’s a Christian magpie because he always goes for me. I think he knows I’m not a Christian. That’s why when I go past him, I always say ‘Bless you God, Bless you God, Bless you God.’”

DAD: “Oh, Holly! It’s January. Magpies don’t swoop in January. You know that. And besides, God would know you were only being sycophantic when you said ‘Bless you God, Bless you God, Bless you God’. You know what ‘sycophantic’ means?”

HOLLY: “No.”

DAD: “It means grovelling.”

HOLLY: “Oh! Well, I’m still going to say it loudly anyway, Dad. Just in case he’s busy with a lion or something.”

Cartoon education

ISABELLA: “Dad, do poor people really have no food to eat?”

DAD: “Yes. That’s often the case, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “But they have coconuts, don’t they?”

DAD: “Coconuts?”

HOLLY: “She means in cartoons, Dad.”

Two big wishes

HOLLY: “Dad, if I had to choose between Miss Clee’s brain [Holly’s piano teacher] and all the dogs or animals I could own, guess what I’d choose?”

DAD: “All the dogs or animals you could own?”

HOLLY: “Nope. I’d definitely choose Miss Clee’s brain. You know why?”

DAD: “No.”

HOLLY: “Because you can’t get any money out of animals.”

DAD: “Hmmm. That’s probably right.”

HOLLY: “But you can out of a good brain. And then, with all the money a good brain can get me, I’d buy all the pets I wanted to. My two big wishes are Miss Clee’s brain and Lotto – the thirty million thing.”

SATURDAY JANUARY 19

Should have known better

For at least fifteen minutes, Isabella had persistently tried to order Karin and me from our bed to make her breakfast.

DAD, rather tetchily: “Go away, Isabella!”

ISABELLA: “Well, Dad, you shouldn’t’ve had kids if you knew they were going to be this much trouble.”

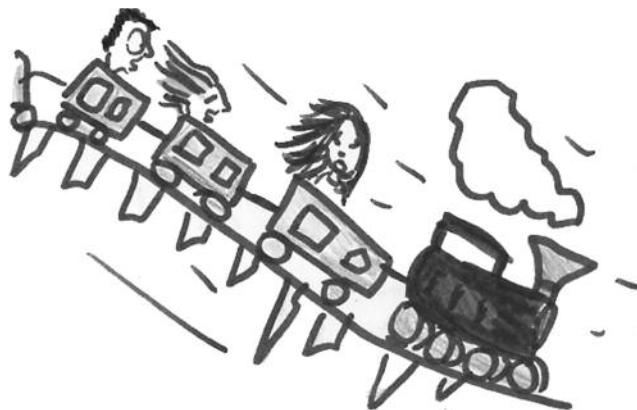
MONDAY JANUARY 21. Day 45 of the school holidays

Hopeless protection

HOLLY: “Dad, there’s one thing I don’t quite get. Why do so many teenage girls, and even some mums, care so much about covering up just their boobies and bots? The bikini has to be the stupidest thing ever to wear. A girl might as well wear nothing. I reckon rashies [sun-protecting shirt] and hats are best at protecting you from the sun, not a bikini. It’s hopeless. I wouldn’t just want to protect my bot and boobies, Dad; they’re always getting protected.”

Worth it for the rides

ISABELLA, at Adventure World: “Being alive is really worth it, Dad, because otherwise you couldn’t go on any rides.”



TUESDAY JANUARY 22

Unhelpful colour

ISABELLA, enquiring as to the meaning of a *Yellow Pages* advertisement that featured a square with a binder clip in the top left hand corner and the words ‘Yellow is always ready to help’ in the middle: “What does it mean, Dad?”

DAD, only half-listening: “Hmmm. Oh. Um. I don’t know, Issy. It means Yellow is always ready to help you. Something like that.”



ISABELLA, after returning from the kitchen with a yellow lid in her hand and after a moment or two’s consideration: “But that’s not right, Dad. See? It isn’t helping, is it?”

MONDAY JANUARY 28

Religious patriotism

HOLLY: “I used to sing the National Anthem in Year One, didn’t I, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Yeah. I was quite religious back then, wasn’t I?”

Lifelong ambition

HOLLY, quite blasé about the Skyshow: “Dad, I think the fireworks are pretty boring now.”

DAD: “Do you, Hols?”

HOLLY: “Yeah.”

HOLLY, whispering, five minutes later, after a TV camera swooped her and about a thousand others with its bright light: “Dad! Dad! I think I’m going to be on TV.”

DAD: “I know, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Do you think we can we go home now and tape it? I’ve wanted that all my life.”

Hidies, Issy-style

DAD: “Forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty . . . coming, ready or not. However, it won’t be a very good game if you’re still standing in the middle of the lounge room staring at me, Issy.”

A few moments later

DAD: “Oh, Issy! Why are you still standing in the middle of the lounge room staring at me? Why aren’t you hiding?”

ISABELLA: “Because I don’t know where to hide, Dad. Can’t you tell me a good place to hide?”

DAD: “No, I can’t . . . Well, I could. But there wouldn’t be any point because then I would know exactly where to look for you. Can you see what I mean? The whole idea of Hidies is to have at least one person hiding so the other person has to find them. You know that, Issy. We’ve been through this many times and you’ve done very well at finding a place to hide before.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, I know that, Dad. But this time I just can’t find anywhere to hide.”

DAD: “Why don’t you try the front room, then? There’s good things in there for you to either hide in or behind.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, no way, Dad. Not in there. I’m too scared of monsters and aliens to hide in the front room in the dark.”

DAD: “Well, put the light on.”

ISABELLA: “Can I?”

DAD: “Yes, you can. Although it won’t be much good for the game.”

ISABELLA: “I will if you come with me, Dad. I’ll hide in the front room if you’ll be next to me so I won’t get scared.”

DAD: “What? You want me to be next to you as you hide and then count to 50 and say ‘Coming, ready or not’, do you, Issy? Is that what you want me to do?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Well, that’s a very silly idea. But if that’s what you *really* want me to do, then I will.”

And so that's what we did. Holly found a hiding place in the laundry and next to me I had Isabella. She was crouching in an 'ideal' spot. I pretended, of course, that I couldn't see her and she thought that was highly exciting. However, after I went looking for Holly in the laundry, not unexpectedly, Isabella left her spot and made a run for home base.

ISABELLA: "Made it, Dad!"

DAD, feigning bewilderment: "Oh, you're just too good for me, Issy. Where on earth were you hiding?"

ISABELLA, endearingly: "Oh, Daddy, you know where I was hiding. I was always right next to you."

DAD: "Yes, I know that, Issy. But aren't I supposed to pretend I didn't know that?"

ISABELLA: "Yes."

DAD: "Well, that's what I was doing."

ISABELLA: "Oh, Dad. *(Pauses)* So, did you find Holly?"

DAD: "Oh yes, easily. She was in the laundry."

ISABELLA: "Was she? And what about Amelie? Did you get her, too?"

DAD: "Of course. As per usual, she was behind the glass door in the kitchen."

ISABELLA: "Oh yeah. She always hides there, doesn't she?"

DAD: "Yes. Alas, she does. And it's only slightly less obvious than your current hiding spot. So, do you think you're ready to hide in an actual hiding spot now?"

ISABELLA: "Mmmm. I might be. But only if we play Hides in the daytime, Dad. Then I'll be able to hide anywhere."

DAD: "Will you? But, Issy, monsters can still get you in the daytime, you know. Not that they actually exist."

ISABELLA: "Can they?"

DAD: "Oh yes. Why not? But look, they don't exist, remember?"

ISABELLA, rolling her eyes: “I *know* that, Dad. But that still doesn’t stop me being scared of them. So are Holly and Amelie.”

DAD: “I wish I had an answer for your fears, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Why, Dad? I’m just going to always be scared of them. That’s all.”

DAD: “No you won’t be. They’ll go away eventually.”

ISABELLA: “How?”

DAD: “Well, you’ll just grow up.”

ISABELLA: “And then they’ll go away?”

DAD: “Yeah. Eventually. You’ll just come to know they don’t exist.”

ISABELLA: “But how, Dad?”

But how? I don’t know, you just do.

DAD: “Well, you know how you *think* they don’t exist now, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Ye-es.”

DAD, knowing how inadequate it would sound: “Well, in the future you’ll just know it even more. In other words, you won’t just say it’s so, you’ll mean it. You’ll walk into a dark room one day and never once think a monster will jump out and eat or claw you.”

ISABELLA: “Really? It’s pretty incredible what happens to you when you grow up, isn’t it, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy, it is.”

ISABELLA, lifting her eyes to the ceiling for a moment: “I think I’ll be happy when I grow up, Dad. But not being a kid anymore won’t be too much fun . . . I know, I wish I could be both.”

DAD: “Yes, most people probably do, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Dad. You’re going to die, aren’t you?”

DAD, incredulously: “What? Oh, well, we all will.”

ISABELLA: “Mmmm. I know. That’s the worst thing about growing up, I think. You have to die.”

DAD: “That’s true, Issy. But in the meantime you get to live a little, don’t you?”

ISABELLA: “Yeah. I know . . . That’s why I’m glad I’m living, Dad.”

It’s all in the sleeves

HOLLY: “Dad, I don’t think I’ll ever have a boyfriend. I don’t even know how to judge handsome or ugly.”

ISABELLA, thinking of the prince in the movie *Enchanted*: “I don’t think I know how to judge handsome or ugly either, Holly. Although I think the handsome people can sometimes be ugly, too. They can have really big sleeves.”

A matter of luck

HOLLY: “Dad, on a lucky day, how much money would you get at work?”

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 12

Replays ad nauseam

HOLLY, relaying the game of cricket she was watching on TV: “Dad? I’ve just been watching the cricket.”

DAD: “Oh. Have you, Hols?”

HOLLY: “Yeah, you should have seen it. A batter was batting and he missed the ball completely. He did this big swish and the ball just went right to the catcher behind him who got it and accidentally put it on the wicket. The batter went out after that, Dad. Everyone shouted and that put the batter right out of the game. He had to go. The game was all over as quick as that. Except for the replays. They just kept on going until someone found some ads to put on.”

Too big a price

ISABELLA, describing a scene from *The Poseidon Adventure*: “The priest was a really good man, Dad. I really liked him. He turned all the steam and power off to save everyone but then got killed for it.”

DAD: “Oh! Did he? That’s sad, isn’t it? So, do you think you’d ever do that? Give your life like the priest did to save someone else?”

ISABELLA: “Oh no, Dad. No way.”

DAD: “What? Even if it was to save your dear old dad? You wouldn’t die to save me?”

ISABELLA: “No, Dad. I’d have to get someone else to die for you, I think.”

DAD: “Really? Well, I’m glad I got all that sorted out before we ever went on a boat together. Getting someone else to die for me isn’t exactly the same as dying for me, is it? Well, how about if no one else is around? Would you die for me then?”

ISABELLA, pausing: “Gosh! No, I still wouldn’t, Dad. You’d have to die, I think.”

DAD: “Is life that good, is it?”

ISABELLA: “Oh, Dad. You do so many happy things in life. It’s just too nice to not be alive. *(Pauses)* But if you have to be dead, the best thing is you don’t know you’re dead. That’s good.”

DAD, as if the thought had never occurred before: “Hey yeah! You’re right. Well, it’s good to know there’s at least one consolation in death.”

ISABELLA: “Yeah, but I still wouldn’t want to do it, Dad. Just not knowing you’re dead isn’t as much fun as knowing you’re alive.”

DAD: “I have no idea how to respond to that, Is . . . So, do you want to watch *The Poseidon Adventure* again?”

ISABELLA: “Oh, no way, Dad! It was too scary for me. Next time I want to watch *The Goodies*.”

DAD: “Oh, alright then. I’ll put *The Goodies* on again. When will you ever tire of them?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know, Dad. Probably never.”

DAD: “Hmmm. That’s just what I thought when I was a boy.”

ISABELLA: “Did you?”

DAD: “Yeah.”



THE GOODIES

ISABELLA: “You really were a kid, weren’t you, Dad?”

DAD: “Sure was.”

FRIDAY FEBRUARY 15

A blow

ISABELLA: “Dad, it took us three lunchtimes at school to build our bird nests. Build, build, build, build, build. But then the dusters [leaf blower operators] just came and dusted them all away. I wish they’d blow themselves away instead.”

The most oft-used excuse

DAD, as Holly was leaving the toilet: “Wait! Wait Hols! How many children does it take to change an empty roll of toilet paper? Just one I would have thought.”

HOLLY, slinking out the door: “I was just going to, Dad.”

Emergency friend

HOLLY: “Dad, you know, Annie? She couldn’t play with me today. She’s gone to another group. That’s why I had to play with an emergency friend.”

DAD: “An emergency friend? What on earth is an emergency friend?”

HOLLY: “Oh, it’s just someone I can play with when Annie isn’t around, Dad.”

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 20

The classic play-one-off-against-the-other

HOLLY: “Dad, can I go to Rebecca’s house for a sleepover tonight?”

DAD: “Oh, Holly, not a chance. We still have so much cleaning up to do and I need to get to bed straight after that because I have a full day of work ahead of me tomorrow.”

It had been Isabella’s seventh birthday party and the place was an even bigger mess than usual.

HOLLY: “Oh, well, can I ask Mum then?”

DAD, sighing: “Oh . . . er . . . yes, I guess you can. But I know she’ll agree with me.”

HOLLY: “Alright, Dad. I’ll just ask her then and let you know what she says.”

DAD, dismissively: “Yeah, you do that, Hols.”

Two minutes later.

HOLLY: “Dad, Mum said ‘Yes’.”

DAD: “*What?* She said ‘Yes’! Are you sure?”

HOLLY: “Yes, she thought it would be alright.”

DAD, not wishing to contradict Karin: “What? I just can’t believe that. Oh, alright then. You’d better pack a bag. And you’ll need to do all your music practice, too, because, as you know, none of it’s been done.”

HOLLY, agreeably: “Yes, alright, Dad.”

About five minutes later, spotting Karin in the hallway . . .

DAD: “Hun, why did you say she could go on the sleepover? I was sure you wouldn’t agree.”

KARIN: “But I didn’t. I was going to ask you the same thing. She said you said it was okay.”

DAD: “Oh, I can’t believe her . . . (*Yells*) Hol-ly!”

When you’re days aren’t numbered

ISABELLA, as she lay in bed ready to fall fast asleep after a big day that included turning seven: “Dad, did you know the kindy kids only think you go up to twenty because that’s all they can count to? They’re funny, aren’t they? Also, Dad, did you know, when you’re really old you end up going off numbers?”

DAD: “Do you?”

ISABELLA: “Yeah.”

DAD: “To where, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “I’m not sure. It doesn’t matter because then you’re too old. You just get buried, Dad.”

DAD: “Oh. Do you? Why?”

ISABELLA, rolling her eyes: “Because you’re so old. Once you’re off numbers, that’s just it, I think.”

DAD: “But numbers go on forever.”

ISABELLA, rolling her eyes again: “I know.”

DAD: “So, don’t we go on forever, too?”

ISABELLA: “No.”

DAD: “Why? What happens?”

ISABELLA: “They bury you. But don’t worry, Dad, you could die in your sleep and then it will be nice.”

DAD: “Will it?”

ISABELLA: “Well, not really. But it’s better than smashing up or going everywhere.”

DAD: “Yes. I suppose it is.”

ISABELLA: “Just go to sleep now, Dad. I’m getting tired.”

DAD: “But I might die, Issy. You just said so.”

ISABELLA: “Yeah, I know. But you probably won’t. You didn’t yesterday.”

DAD: “That’s true. I didn’t.”

ISABELLA: “And, anyway, I’ll bury you if you die, Dad. After I miss you, that is.”

DAD: “Oh, thanks, Issy. I’d like that. After you’ve done some missing of me first.”

ISABELLA: “Dad, I will definitely miss you. But, luckily, when you die I’ll have photos of you to look at. Won’t I? Lots of them.”

DAD: “Yes. Thank goodness for that, Is. Alright then. Good night, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Good night, Dad.”

HOLLY: “Good night, Dad.”

DAD: “Oh! Hello, Holly. I didn’t know you were still awake.”

HOLLY: “Yeah, I am. I was listening.”

DAD: “Were you? So, will you bury me as well if I die in my sleep tonight?”

HOLLY: “Hmmm. Probably. If you’re not too smelly or yucky I will.”

THURSDAY FEBRUARY 21

The mouth that was afraid

DAD, after Karin had dished up something new for Holly to try: “Go on, Holly, eat it.”

HOLLY: “But I’m trying to, Dad. It’s just that my mouth is too scared to open.”

Or you have sex with them

HOLLY: “Dad, there are girls in Issy’s class who think they have boyfriends. It’s crazy! They don’t even know what a boyfriend is or what you do with them. None of them would have ever gotten stuck into them with their heads*. Instead, all they do, Dad, is play Chasies with them and call them their boyfriends. That’s what Issy says. It’s so hilarious. You don’t do that, do you? You go to the movies or a restaurant.” (*a passionate kiss)

ISABELLA: “Or they have sex in bed with them, don’t they, Dad?”

MONDAY FEBRUARY 25

Can't see me at home

DAD, reading through Holly's school newsletter: "Oh look, Holly, Emily's received a Citizenship Award."

HOLLY, undemonstratively: "Hmmm. So?"

DAD: "Well, isn't that lovely? Her first award at her new school."

HOLLY: "Yeah, I know."

DAD, offhandedly: "Oh. Good, Hols . . . Hols, how come you don't get Citizenship Awards?"

HOLLY: "Oh, I don't know, Dad."

DAD: "Well, what do you have to do to get one?"

HOLLY, brusquely: "Be kind, I guess."

DAD: "Well, you're kind, aren't you?"

HOLLY: "Dad, stop it! I'm trying to watch this."

Holly and her sisters were watching a DVD about natural disasters. Friday night is their movie night, and over the last month it had also overlapped with nit-combing night. It seems the only way to get them to keep their heads still.

DAD: "Just answer that one question for me and I'll leave you alone."

HOLLY, a little frustrated: "Yes, I am. I'm kind all the time. I'm being as kind as I can, Dad. I don't think I can go much harder."

A minute later

HOLLY, shoving Amelie out of the way: "Amelie, go! Out of my way, will you? Get your big stupid curly head out of the way so I can see the screen."

AMELIE: "Da-ad?"

DAD: “Now, Hols, that’s not being kind, is it?”

HOLLY: “Yeah, well, I don’t do that at school, do I? It’s only what happens at school that counts. They can’t see me here.”

FRIDAY FEBRUARY 29

A party is a party!

DAD, yelling out to Isabella: “Issy? You’ve been invited to a party, honey. Do you want to—”

HOLLY: “No, Dad, she doesn’t. She already knows all about it and she doesn’t want to go.”

DAD, moving along the corridor to where Isabella was, with Holly keenly in tow: “Why not, Issy?”

HOLLY: “Because she doesn’t like her.”

ISABELLA: “Holly!”

HOLLY: “Well, you don’t.”

ISABELLA: “So. I still want to go.”

DAD: “Do you? Are you sure? I need to know because I have to tell the girl’s parents now.”

ISABELLA, adamantly: “Yes, I want to go, Dad.”

DAD: “Really? But, why? I thought you didn’t like her.”

ISABELLA: “I don’t. But other kids will be there and I want to play with them.”

DAD: “Oh, okay then. How interesting. So, tell me, do you think there’d ever be a birthday party you wouldn’t want to go to?”

ISABELLA: “No, parties are always fun, Dad. Everyone wants to go to birthday parties.”

DAD: “Yes, I suppose you’re right. So, what are you going to write on the card to the little girl you don’t even like?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know. I’ll just wish her a happy birthday. I can still do that.”

DAD: “And will you play with her?”

ISABELLA, rolling her eyes: “Ye-es!”

DAD: “But I guess you’ll mostly play with the other kids, won’t you?”

ISABELLA: “Probably. Don’t worry, Dad, everyone will be happy.”

DAD: “Oh, that’s good to know. That’s very reassuring, honey.”

ISABELLA: “Is it? What’s ‘reassuring’ mean?”

DAD: “It means giving comfort to someone during a difficult time.”

ISABELLA: “Comfort? Is that what I just gave you?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “Like a pillow or something?”

DAD: “Well, not a real one, of course. But in a way, yes.”

ISABELLA, with a perplexed look: “That was so easy to do, Dad.”

There’s a limit to this

DAD: “Close the door, Amelie.”

AMELIE, annoyed and defiant: “Close the door. Close the door. I close a door every day, Dad. I’m not closing it again!”

WEDNESDAY MARCH 5

I’ll get it in the wipe-up

DAD: “Holly, there’s still quite a lot of cereal left on that dish. I thought you said you’d finished washing up.”

HOLLY: “I have, Dad. When I wipe up it’ll come off then.”

Being specific

DAD: “Amelie, what have you made there?”

AMELIE, playing with Play-Doh: “A duck, Dad.”

DAD: “Oh that’s lovely, honey. What’s its name?”

AMELIE: “It’s not a name, Dad. It’s a duck, I said!”

I’m not paying

ISABELLA at a festival in Perth’s Hyde Park: “Mum, I’m really busting to go on the pony ride but I don’t want to spend my money. If I give you this \$20, will you pay for my pony ride instead?”

The pony ride cost \$6. Isabella thought that by giving her money to Karin and getting her to pay for the pony ride she wouldn’t be spending her money. Isabella then wanted her \$20 back.

Perfect solution

HOLLY: “Dad, if I ever have a child – which I won’t be doing because they’re too much work – I’m definitely going to adopt one. You know why?”

DAD: “No, Hols. Why?”

HOLLY: “Because then I’ll get exactly what I want.”

Spoke too soon

HOLLY, at a local park: “Dad, I wet my pants.”

DAD: “Yes, I know, Holly. You’ve been through sprinklers. What did you expect?”

HOLLY: “No, I mean I weed in them.”

DAD: “Oh, I see.”

HOLLY, giggling: “Yeah, it was great, Dad.”

DAD: “Yes, I’m sure it was. And what about you, Issy? Did you go in your pants as well?”

ISABELLA: “No.”

DAD: “Good! Good for you, Is. At least someone—”

ISABELLA: “That’s because I’m doing it now, Dad.”

WEDNESDAY MARCH 19

Self-hiding book

AMELIE, pointing to her favourite book and worrying she could suddenly lose it:
“Dad, can this hide itself?”

Survival kit

ISABELLA: “Holly, if you ever get locked in the storeroom at school there’s tomato sauce, juice, a bowl and some toys. I’m serious! If I ever get locked in there I’m not going to worry at all.”

Regret

HOLLY: “Dad, why do three-year-olds always think the police just wait for a robber to go ‘I’m a naughty robber, I’m a naughty robber’? They never do that. Robbers try to keep hidden for as long as they can, don’t they?”

DAD: “Yes, usually, Hols. Unless they suddenly have a guilty conscience.”

HOLLY: “Oh, you mean they might begin to wish they hadn’t done it.”

DAD: “Yes.”

HOLLY: “Has that ever happened?”

DAD: “Yes.”

HOLLY: “Has it?”

DAD: “Of course. It’s not normal for a robber to feel the effects of their actions as quickly as that, but it has happened before.”

HOLLY: “What about a politician? Has it ever happened to them?”

DAD, in jest: “No. Just like a child, they never feel sad straightaway about something they’ve done wrong.”

HOLLY: “What, never?”

DAD: “No.”

HOLLY: “Oh.”

DAD: “No, I am only joking, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Oh, I thought they were as bad as us [kids] for a moment.”

DAD: “Oh, did you? Tell me then, Hols, why do you think children aren’t able to know they’re doing something wrong when they’re in the middle of doing it?”

HOLLY: “Because then it isn’t wrong, Dad. It’s only what you want to do. You don’t know anything except the fun you want to have.”

DAD: “Yes, I suppose I can imagine how that would make you forget about whether something was wrong or not. I guess we’d better make sure then whatever fun we have is always good for everyone, hadn’t we?”

HOLLY: “Yes, Dad. But can that be done?”

DAD: “I don’t see why not.”

HOLLY, just as a sporty red car revved its way up a hill and screeched its tyres: “Good.”

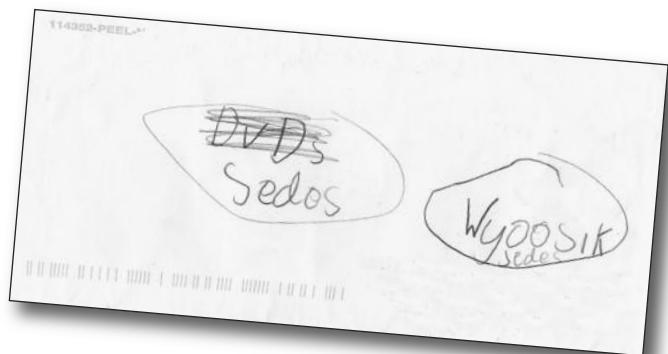
WEDNESDAY MARCH 19

Wyoosik Sedes

ISABELLA, after writing what she thought was ‘Music CDs’: “I wasn’t sure how to spell it, Dad.”

DAD: “Well, you went close.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, I know. But ‘music’ is a pretty easy word.”



Just a bit different

ISABELLA: “Dad, you know when an ant grows up, what does it turn into? Does it sometimes change into a grasshopper, or does it mostly just become another ant? The other day, I was using a leaf to help one cross a crack between two bricks in the backyard and he looked like he could be a grasshopper one day. You never know, Dad. He was carrying half a slater on his back and other ants were getting bits of it off him for snacks and that, and I think when one of them pulled a bit off the slater, he hopped a bit.”

DAD: “You mean the ant?”

ISABELLA: “Yeah. He went up in the air and then back down again.”

DAD: “Well, that sounds like a hop, Issy. You mean like he was on a sea-saw, right?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad.”

DAD: “Hmmm. Although I can’t be sure, I think that was probably caused by one of the nibbling ants being strong enough to fling the ant you were helping off the ground. Was the ant hanging on to the slater with its mouth?”

ISABELLA: “Hmmm, I think so.”

DAD: “Yes, I think we might have the proof we need there, Issy. Your ant didn’t hop; it just hung on to the Queen’s dinner and was flung skyward for just a little bit of time.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, so an ant will never be a grasshopper?”

DAD: “You mean in the way a caterpillar can become a butterfly?”

ISABELLA: “Can it?”

DAD: “Yes. It changes into a butterfly whether it wants to or not.”

ISABELLA: “So, it has to change?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “But an ant can’t? I mean, it can’t change into anything?”

DAD: “No. It’s like us.”

ISABELLA: “But we change, Dad.”

DAD: “Do we? How?”

ISABELLA: “Well, you know babies? They turn into big men and ladies.”

DAD: “Yes, but they’re still always human, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “I know that, Dad. But a baby is heaps more different to a man than a grasshopper is to an ant.”

DAD: “You think so?”

ISABELLA, derisively: “Yes, look at a baby and a grown-up, Dad. They’re really different.”

DAD: “Are they? How are they really different?”

ISABELLA: “Well, a man is absolutely huge (*On her tippee-toes, reaches with both arms for the ceiling*), but a baby’s only this little (*Brings both arms down to about a ruler length above the ground*). Grasshoppers and ants really aren’t *that* different. They’re just a *bit* different.”

MONDAY MARCH 24

Optimism

Isabella was at a friend’s birthday party and got a splinter in her right foot.

ISABELLA: “Dad, what do you think they’ll do with my splinter? It was wrapped up in tissue paper.”

DAD: “Why, do you want it?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Well, I’m not sure if we’ll be able to get it back, sweetheart.”

ISABELLA: “But the bus man said he would give it to me later. He had it in tissue paper, Dad. It was just before he forgot.”

DAD: “Yes, but bus operators are very busy people, Issy.”

ISABELLA, ignoring my answer: “Do you think he will be able to give it to Nicole, Dad? He could give it to Nicole’s mum and then she could get Nicole to give it to me at school.”

DAD: “Well, I guess that’s possible, Issy, however, according to Nicole’s mum, the bus man charges \$260 an hour to host a party, so even if he was just posting it, he’d probably charge me a ridiculous amount of money.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, so will you try, Dad?”

DAD, sarcastically: “Of course I will, sweetheart. Do you honestly think, in your wildest dreams, that your dad would ever let you down by not trying to get a splinter back to you that you desperately want? I can’t promise anything, but I’ll try.”

ISABELLA: “Oh goody. Thanks, Dad.”

DAD: “You’re very welcome, Issy. Right. Now let’s get you into bed so you can forget, I mean, before you forget all about it.”

TUESDAY APRIL 1

Too much, please

AMELIE, as I was pouring cereal into her bowl: “I want too much, Dad.”

The rarity of the reasonable person

ISABELLA, after I had said to her she couldn’t have a sleepover at Cloe S’s because we needed both of them to play with Amelie at our house: “You’re so stupid, Dad.”

DAD: “No, I’m not, Issy. I’m so reasonable. Just ask someone else who’s reasonable. They’ll tell you.”

ISABELLA: “Yeah, but when is ever that person going to be around to ask?”

FRIDAY APRIL 4

Spoilt for choice

ISABELLA: “Mum, what would you rather? Would you rather die, or do a bungee jump?”

KARIN: “Um. I think I’d rather do a bungee jump, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Yeah. I thought you’d say that.”

Ever-vigilant

ISABELLA: “Dad, what’s a chicken hawk?”

DAD: “I think it’s a bird that likes to catch and eat chickens, Is.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, do they still have them?”

DAD: “Who are they?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know. The world, I think.”

DAD: “Oh, you mean, are they still in nature?”

ISABELLA: “Yeah. They’re not extinct, are they?”

DAD: “No, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Well, chickens had better watch out for them then.”

DAD, roughly estimating how long chickens would have been craning their necks skyward in an attempt to keep safe from predators: “They have been, Issy. Not that well. But for probably quite a few million years, I think, chickens have been very wary of things that swoop them from above.”

ISABELLA: “Good, that’s very good, Dad. And I hope they keep looking up, too.”

DAD: “Except if it’s a land predator, Issy. They wouldn’t want to be looking up then.”

ISABELLA, sinking into thought: “No, they’d better be on a boat.”

MONDAY APRIL 7

In the know

ISABELLA: “Mum, how come kids don’t know where to go?”

KARIN: “What?”

ISABELLA: “Well, how come they don’t know how to get to the shops or how to get home on their own or to a friend’s house? Why is it only parents that know where things are?”

At least I could hide under the table

DAD, at a Fun Run and spotting a girl who had on a uniform that belonged to Holly’s school: “Hey, Hols, there’s a girl over there from your school. Do you know her?”

HOLLY: “No.”

DAD: “Oh! C’mon on then. I’ll introduce you to her.”

HOLLY: “Oh no, Dad. Please, please, please don’t. I don’t want you to.”

DAD: “Why?”

HOLLY: “It’s too embarrassing, that’s why.”

DAD: “Oh, Holly, no it’s not.”

HOLLY: “Yes it is, Dad. No one does that. If you don’t, I promise I’ll let you sing at restaurants.”

Holly was referring to Karin’s birthday a few nights ago when she hid under the table as I began to sing *Happy Birthday*.

Out of sight, out of life

If you’re elderly, and Isabella hasn’t seen you for a while, then don’t be too surprised if she starts to wonder whether you’re still alive. For instance, Isabella hadn’t seen an old man at her school for a few weeks, so she asked if he was dead or not.

ISABELLA: “Dad, do you think he’s dead?”

DAD: “I don’t know, Is. He might be just on holidays.”

ISABELLA: “Oh yeah. That’s what old people do, don’t they?”

DAD: “Well, many of them do.”

ISABELLA, staring aimlessly at the wall behind me: “Dad?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “But he could be dead, right?”

DAD: “What do you mean?”

ISABELLA: “Well, he’s old. And old people die.”

DAD: “Yes, but so do young people.”

ISABELLA: “Yeah, I know, but not as much. They don’t die all the time like old people do. They’re always dying . . . Dad, why do we die?”

DAD: “Well, the body gets old.”

ISABELLA: “But why?”

DAD: “Well, it’s complex. The body becomes less able to make new cells as good as they once were. Over time, it just makes body parts that don’t work as well as we’d like them to.”

ISABELLA: “But why would it want to do that for?”

DAD: “It doesn’t appear to have much of a choice, honey.”

ISABELLA: “Doesn’t it?”

DAD: “No, not really. You can help it stay younger by living healthily, however, that won’t make you live forever.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, that’s sad, Dad. I wish people could just live forever.”

DAD: “I know you do. That’s because kids like living probably more than anyone else. It’s fun to be alive, isn’t it?”

ISABELLA: “Oh yes, I like it a lot. It’s heaps better than being dead. When you’re dead you can’t do or think anything. It’s very boring, Dad. And worse than that, you don’t even know it’s boring. You just lie in the sand, it gets in your eyes, and then you get bones. I wouldn’t want that.”

DAD: “But you wouldn’t know, Is. Remember?”

ISABELLA: “Oh yeah, that’s right. Then that’s a good thing.”

MONDAY APRIL 14

Easy fixed

ISABELLA, after Holly had deliberately strolled recklessly through the toy room where Isabella and Amelie were playing Schools: “Dad, she can’t play. She steps on all the students all the time.”



HOLLY, trying to suppress a smirk: “But they’re just dolls, Issy.”

ISABELLA, distraught: “They’re not! And you know it. Dad, the whole class was stepped on.”

DAD: “Holly, out you go. You’ll just have to set them up again, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “But they’re all bent and hurt. And one’s got a squashed head.”

DAD: “Call an ambulance then.”

ISABELLA: “Oh yeah, Amelie. Ambulances. We’ll play Ambulances.”

WEDNESDAY APRIL 23

Our News is much more fun

ISABELLA, as we were watching a program on TV: “Dad, has it been an hour since The News?”

DAD: “Yes, I think so, Is. An hour and three minutes to be exact.”

ISABELLA: “Well, quick then. Switch back. She [the newsreader] said ‘More news in an hour’.”

DAD: “Yes, I know. But that doesn’t mean we have to obey her. She’s not the boss of the TV, you know.”

ISABELLA: “I know, Dad. I know she’s not. You’re the boss. But she’s in charge of News and you like The News, don’t you?”

DAD: “I like to watch it sometimes. That’s all. Just occasionally.”

ISABELLA: “I like it too, Dad, but only at school because our News is much more fun than the kind that’s on TV. In our class, we tell each other about our family and things like that. We also tell everyone about all the things we like to do. You never hear The News people on TV ever telling people about things like that. They just talk about bombs going off and cars going fast and all the people the police end up catching.”

DAD: “Yes, that’s true, Is. But don’t you ever talk about that for News in your class?”

ISABELLA: “Oh no, Dad! No way! We never talk about those things. Ever!”

DAD: “Oh, well in that case, I think I know why you like Year Two so much. It’s fun, isn’t it?”

ISABELLA: “It’s fun and funny.”

DAD: “Yes, I thought it was. Wouldn’t it be good if the grown-up world was like that as well?”

ISABELLA: “But it is, Dad. You’re fun and funny. Not every time, but lots of times you are.”

DAD: “Am I?”

ISABELLA: “Yes. You play with me and do games with me. You’re lots of fun. And you do piggyback rides. The News should have piggyback rides on it.”

DAD: “I’m seeing it right now, Issy. Yes, yes, I can see people piggybacking each other on the TV and . . . no I can’t see the person in charge of The News going for it, I’m afraid.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, why not?”

DAD: “Because it doesn’t have bombs going off and cars going fast and all the people the police end up catching in it.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, but that’s not that important, Dad.”

DAD: “To you maybe, however, to other people it appears to be very important.”

ISABELLA: “But why?”

DAD: “I’m not sure.”

ISABELLA: “It’s not fun.”

DAD: “No, well, I agree.”

ISABELLA: “Grown-ups are so stupid, Dad.”

DAD: “Sadly, it’s true. They can be very stupid.”

Isabella seemed somewhat surprised by that. However, in no time at all, she’d become inured to the thought.

ISABELLA: “Oh well, I guess one day I’ll be stupid too then, won’t I?”

DAD: “I hope not.”

ISABELLA: “I hope not either, but I probably will be by the looks of things.”

DAD: “Oh, chin up, Is.”

ISABELLA: “Chin up? What does that mean?”

DAD: “It means be happy regardless. When you or Holly or Amelie are being naughty I often say that to myself.”

ISABELLA: “Do you?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “Can you get happy regardless?”

DAD: “Sometimes.”

ISABELLA: “You’re very clever, Dad.”

SUNDAY MAY 4

English is stupid!

ISABELLA, pointing to the word ‘shed’ she’d written on a piece of paper: “Dad, does that spell ‘shed’?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy, it does.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, I thought it spelt ‘sheed’.”

DAD: “Oh no. You need two e’s to create the ‘ee’ sound.”

ISABELLA: “Oh. Do you? Well, what about ‘she’? That’s only one ‘e’ and it makes the ‘ee’ sound.”

DAD: “You’re right. Good point. But I don’t know why it does.”

ISABELLA: “Is that because English is stupid?”

TUESDAY JUNE 3

Classic blame shifting

HOLLY, after she arrived home from school camp: “I’m so glad I remembered your camera, Dad, because if I hadn’t I was going to have to come up with something like ‘Alison dropped it in the lake’.”

Live and let live

HOLLY: “Dad, the good thing about the world is that more people like you than don’t. And, even better than that, the ones that don’t like you pretend they do.”

DAD: “Do they?”

HOLLY: “Yes.”

DAD: “Oh! Well, do you think that’s a good thing or a bad thing?”

HOLLY: “Hmmm . . . a good thing, I think. I know of one girl in my class who definitely doesn’t like me. She thinks I’m clumsy and I think she’s clumsy but we never say that to each other.”

She couldn't be clearer

DAD: "It's a simple enough question, Isabella. The problem simply asks you: 'What's the difference between 18 and 13?'"

ISABELLA: "Oh, well that's really easy. They've both got ones, but one of them has a three and the other one has an eight."

DAD: "No, no, honey. It's not Spot the Difference; it's how many numbers are there between 18 and 13?"

ISABELLA: "Oh! But do I write that anyway? Y'know, that one's got a three and one's got an eight?"

DAD: "No, that has nothing to do with the answer, sweetheart. The question only wants you to minus one from the other."

ISABELLA: "Oh, like a takeaway?"

DAD: "Yes, exactly."

ISABELLA, after a bit of thought: "Well, then in that case, it's five."

DAD: "Yes, Issy. That's right, you're correct."

ISABELLA: "Am I?"

DAD: "Yes."

ISABELLA: "Good. But they shouldn't mix up their questions like that, Dad. You can never be sure what they're wanting when they do that."

No scary breathing, please

Bedtime stories are another regular part of getting the kids to sleep at night. Sometimes I'd read from books, sometimes I'd make them up as I went along, including scary stories, which they both loved and detested.

DAD, as Holly and Isabella began to cling to whomever or whatever they could that looked solid: ". . . but then the footsteps suddenly ceased and outside the tent all went quiet. Now you could no longer hear the sound of leaves rustling or twigs crackling underfoot. Instead, all you could make

out was the sound of someone, or something (*Voice lowers to a whisper*) breathing. It was getting closer. And the sound caused some inside the tent to scatter while those remaining noticed their teeth were chattering out of fear.”

ISABELLA: “Dad. Stop!”

HOLLY: “Yes, Dad. Don’t talk like that.”

DAD: “Like what?”

HOLLY: “Don’t do the scary breathing.”

DAD: “But that was the sound the monster’s voice made, Hols. You said you wanted a scary story that wasn’t too scary before you went to sleep and that was really how the voice sounded.”

HOLLY: “Yes, but Dad. Just say it was a hoarse voice or something when it comes to that bit. Don’t actually do the voice, because then Issy and I won’t be able to get to sleep.”

DAD: “Horse voice? What do you mean by horse voice? Like this?” (*Makes neighing sound*).

HOLLY: “No, no, Dad. Not like that. I mean a hoarse voice. You know, a raspy kind of sound. I don’t want to hear that.”

DAD: “Oh, I see. Alright then. I won’t make that sound anymore; I’ll just say hoarse every time.”

HOLLY: “Good, Dad. Because otherwise we’ll have to keep you here a lot longer so you can tell us a nice story that will make us forget all about the terrible voice. You wouldn’t want to have to do that, would you?”

DAD: “No. I guess I wouldn’t, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Good, Dad. Now you can keep going.”

A Did-You-Know at 6am in the midst of winter

HOLLY: “Dad? Did you know that—”

It took a moment or two to realise Holly was in our bedroom, that it was early and dark and I had been rudely awakened.

DAD, barely coherent: “What the . . . Oh, Holly . . . What on earth do you think you’re doing?”

HOLLY: “Nothing, Dad. I just want to read you something. Did you know—?”

Oh no, I thought. I couldn’t believe it. I was about to get a ‘did-you-know’ from Holly. And at six in the morning! I hadn’t been dreaming, I hadn’t been hallucinating.

DAD, utterly flabbergasted: “I can’t believe this?”

HOLLY: “—that the bow and stern sections of the wreck of the *Titanic* lie 1,970 feet apart?”

Holly had been pouring over the contents of page 31 of her book, *Inside the Titanic*.

DAD: “What?”

HOLLY: “I said, ‘Did you know that the bow and stern sections of the wreck of the *Titanic* lie 1,970 feet apart?’”

DAD: “No, I didn’t.”

HOLLY: “Well, they do. It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

DAD, suitably downbeat: “Yes, it is amazing.”

However, nowhere near as amazing as her standing there and telling me this at six in the morning.

DAD: “Holly, at this hour of the morning, it’s just not the kind of thing you should share with anyone, let alone your parents. If you’d told me at, say, eleven in the morning, I would’ve been all ears. I would’ve probably said ‘that’s incredible’ or ‘that’s amazing’. However, right now, it’s just too early for me to get enthusiastic about it. So *please go*.”

HOLLY, skipping out of the room: “Alright, Dad. I’ll tell you more about the *Titanic* when you’re more awake then.”

DAD: “Yes, good idea, honey. Oh, and Holly, let me say this one more time. Please don’t come into our room again at this hour with any fact you have. I don’t care what it’s about. Unless there’s a fire or some other sort of disaster, I don’t want to know about it. Okay? Do you understand?”

HOLLY, turning around: “Yes, Dad. I think so.”

DAD, frustrated: “I think so’? Let me repeat what I just said. Next time you have something you want to share at six in the morning, Holly, just consider: if it’s about a fire or similar emergency I want to hear about it. Anything else I don’t. Alright?”

HOLLY: “Yes, Dad. I promise.”

DAD: “Mega-promise?”

HOLLY: “Yes, mega-promise.”

SATURDAY JUNE 7

The power of the throne

HOLLY, on the toilet and talking in an imperious tone to Isabella and Amelie, who were standing next to her and desperately wanting to go: “Everyone who is busting to go just stand over there. I’ll pick who can go next in a minute.”

War: it’s all too difficult

ISABELLA, after having watched the last ten minutes of a TV documentary entitled *The Pacific War in Colour*: “Dad, who started the war?”

DAD: “Well, Japan did bomb America first, Issy, so in some sense it would be correct to say Japan was the one who started it. However, as with any war, that probably wasn’t the true beginning. War is always far more complex than just one action.”

I was trying to gently initiate Isabella into the intricacy of warfare. I wanted her to understand that conflict, as with many things in life, involves a lot more obscurantism than most textbooks would suggest. The last thing I wanted Isabella to ever think was that war was understandable in any simple way.

HOLLY, who was also watching the documentary and as she watched one plane after another of the Japanese Air Force dive into ships or plunge into the Pacific Ocean: “Well, whoever started it, Dad, I don’t think Japan made a good decision. Did our government back then think war was a good idea as well?”

DAD: “Yes, they did, Hols.”

ISABELLA: “So, everyone likes war then?”

DAD: “No, I wouldn’t use the words ‘likes war’, Issy. Most people just seem to get mixed up in wars they can’t get themselves out of.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, well how can you stop war, Dad?”

DAD, knowing this was probably too simplistic: “Well, I think it starts in the playground at school. I think it’s good for all children to be as kind as they can to each other.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad. So do I. Especially ugly people need kindness. And fat people. And you shouldn’t push people over either, Dad. Otherwise they might get up and push you over.”

What was I supposed to say to that? It’s true, the portly and ‘less attractive’ do need kindness. However, I just wish Isabella hadn’t felt the need to be specific about which groups she thought needed more kindness than others.

ISABELLA: “Dad, so with war then, who is the best at it? Who wins the most times?”

DAD: “What do you mean?”

ISABELLA: “I mean, well, who has killed the most people?”

DAD: “I don’t know, Issy. I sincerely don’t know how to answer that question. Except to say I don’t think there is ever a winner.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, why? There must be a country who has killed more people than all other countries.”

DAD: “Nope. Do you think war is about winners and losers?”

ISABELLA: “Hmmm. I can’t really tell. I don’t really know what’s going on.”

A few minutes later

ISABELLA: “Dad, who decided we’re not doing war anymore?”

DAD: “No one has decided that yet, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Haven’t they? Well, there doesn’t seem to be much war around now.”

DAD: “No, well at least not around here. However, unfortunately not every kid in the world would say what you just said.”

ISABELLA: “Wouldn’t they? Why?”

DAD: “Well, there are still wars going on in other parts of the world.”

ISABELLA: “Are there? So, what happens to the children in those wars? Do any of them get killed?”

DAD: “Yes, unfortunately.”

ISABELLA: “But that’s terrible, Dad. Really terrible. I’d hate to live in those countries.”

DAD: “Yes, and I bet the kids there would feel the same way.”

There was no reply. Isabella simply averted her attention to what was on the TV.

ISABELLA, a few moments later, as she watched a Japanese pilot nose-dive into a U.S. aircraft carrier: “Dad, who would have been driving that plane? A man or a boy?”

HOLLY: “A man, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Well, how did he live?”

HOLLY: “He didn’t.”

ISABELLA: “So, he just died?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “But he should have jumped out.”

DAD: “He didn’t want to.”

ISABELLA: “Didn’t he? Why?”

DAD: “I don’t really know. I guess he must have thought his emperor’s ideas were more important than his own life.”

ISABELLA: “Did he?”

DAD: “Yes, probably.”

ISABELLA: “But why?”

DAD: “I don’t know. The point is he just wanted to die.”

ISABELLA: “Did he really?”

DAD: “Yes, I’m afraid so.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, I think I’d choose another opportunity, Dad.”

DAD: “Yes, so would I, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Dad, you shouldn’t attack countries.”

DAD: “Shouldn’t you? But what if another country attacked us, Issy? What would you do then?”

ISABELLA: “Well, we’ve got guns at our country, but I don’t know who should shoot them. I don’t want to . . . But we’re a long way away from bad countries, aren’t we, Dad? I hope we are.”

A bit later

ISABELLA: “Dad, who can make bombs? Who’s allowed to?”

DAD: “People the government say can make them, Issy. In other words, people who they think would be good at making them.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, so can you, Dad? Would you be allowed to?”

DAD: “No, Issy. And I wouldn’t want to make them even if I was good at making bombs.”

ISABELLA: “No, nor would I. They might kill me instead. And besides, I’m not good at building things. I know I wouldn’t be able to make a bomb or something that’s got as big a bang as that even if I tried all day.”

DAD: “Oh, why not?”

ISABELLA: “Because it’s hard building things, Dad. I don’t want to build anything. Everything looks too difficult.”

Voters' fault

ISABELLA, three hours later: "Dad, we can't stop wars because people keep on voting for them."

SATURDAY JUNE 14

Worst day ever

ISABELLA, after going to a birthday party, building cubbies when she got home, playing all afternoon, *and* then being told to clean up all the mess she'd made: "This has been the worst day ever. I've hardly had any fun."

Does the cross come with wheels?

HOLLY: "Dad, did his [Jesus's] cross have wheels on it?"

DAD: "Wheels? Oh no, Hols."

HOLLY: "How come?"

DAD: "I don't really know. I suppose the people who made him carry it didn't want wheels on it. After all, as you know, the Romans weren't very pleased with Jesus."

HOLLY: "Yes, I know. But they still could've at least given him wheels for his cross. They didn't have to be *that* mean."

DAD: "You're right. They didn't. So, how many wheels do you think he should have had on his cross?"

HOLLY: "Um . . . Six, I think."

DAD: "Six?"

HOLLY: "Yes. All along the bottom of the cross so that it didn't have to be so bumpy for Jesus when he had to drag it along behind him. Or Dad, even better, they could have given him a shopping trolley to put the cross in. How big do you think his cross was?"

I stood on my tippee toes and extended my arms to the heavens.

HOLLY: “Oh, that big. But I think it would have still fitted. I mean, if they’d gotten one of the wider ones.”

DAD, in disbelief: “One of the wider ones? But where would they have gotten one of the wider ones from, Hols? Or any size shopping trolley?”

HOLLY: “From Coles.”

DAD: “From Coles? But Coles wasn’t around when Jesus was. There were no supermarkets anywhere in 33AD.”

HOLLY: “Weren’t there?”

DAD: “No.”

HOLLY: “Really? There were no places to get food?”

DAD: “No, there weren’t. Well, not as in a supermarket. There would have been markets in Galilee, but none of them back in Jesus’s time were supermarkets.”

HOLLY, after laughing at how odd that sounded: “I’m glad I’m alive today, Dad.”

DAD: “Yes, despite my occasional desire for simpler times, I have to agree with you. I wouldn’t truly want to go back in time. I’d miss too much all the things I now take for granted.”

HOLLY: “What does ‘take for granted’ mean, Dad?”

DAD: “You know, the things you’d only begin to miss after they’d been taken away from you.”

HOLLY: “Oh yeah. Now I get what you mean. I can even miss Issy like that.”

DAD: “Yes, precisely, Hols.”

HOLLY: “I do like her, you know, Dad. Even though she’s so annoying sometimes, I would miss her.”

DAD: “That happens a lot in life, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Yeah, but I’d never miss the Romans. They were horrible.”

THURSDAY JUNE 19

Speaks volumes

DAD, yelling: “Amelie? Keep your voice down, please.”

AMELIE: “But Dad, I can’t. I’m not a voice, you know. I’m just a little girl and that means I can’t stop my loud.”

SATURDAY JUNE 21

As if it’s deliberate

ISABELLA, as I lay groaning and clutching my head after giving her friend Cloe S a dizzy-whizzy: “Dad? When you’ve finished doing that with your head, can you give me a dizzy-whizzy, too?”

FRIDAY JUNE 27

Separation anxiety

ISABELLA, apprehensively: “What if someone comes and takes you away, Dad?”

DAD: “Takes me away? What do you mean, Issy? What are you talking about?”

ISABELLA: “I mean, what if a policeman comes and takes you away from us?”

DAD: “But why would he do that?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know. Maybe if you took a piece of bread out of a shop he might do it.”

DAD: “But I don’t take pieces of bread out of a shop. Or loaves.”

ISABELLA: “That’s good, Dad.”

MONDAY JUNE 30

You can say both

ISABELLA: “Mum, who do you like the most out of Angus [the dog] and Amelie? You can say both if you want to.”

KARIN: “Amelie, of course.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, poor Angus.”

Silver lining

HOLLY, on documentary-makers in war zones: “Dad? How do they [camera operators] shoot when they’re in a panic? How can they film something and keep away from all the bullets and bombs?”

DAD: “Well, sometimes they don’t keep away from all the bullets and bombs, Hols?”

HOLLY: “So, they get shot, too, sometimes?”

DAD: “Yes.”

HOLLY: “Well, what happens then? Does the movie just end?”

DAD: “Well, it could. It might just stay where it is and that’s the end of it. But I think what usually happens is someone picks up the camera and gives it to a news station who puts it on The News for us to see later on our TVs. A news team would probably edit the film and turn it into something they think we should see. So, in a way, it would be up to them how the film ended. Does that make sense to you?”

HOLLY: “Oh, so we still might see it, even if the cameraman dies?”

DAD: “Yes.”

HOLLY, as a look of delight quickly swept across her face: “That’s great, Dad. Not for the cameraman because he’d be dead, but for us it is.”

Only half the story

HOLLY: “Dad, we have a naughty girl in our class who probably would have gotten The Cuts* if she’d been alive when you were a little boy.” (*A form of punishment metered out to school students prior to the 1980s where the child’s fingers or palm were hit very hard with a cane.)

DAD: “Do you, Hols?”

HOLLY: “Yeah. She got called into the principal’s office the other day for turning off all the lights in the toilet.”

DAD: “Did she?”

HOLLY: “Yes. But I don’t think she should have. Not just for turning the toilet lights off. That’s a good thing. She was saving power and we have to do that, don’t we, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, we sure do.”

HOLLY: “Yes, that’s what I thought. So, she should have been given a certificate or something, shouldn’t she?”

DAD: “Hmm. You’re probably right.”

ISABELLA, interrupting: “But, Dad.”

DAD: “Yes, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Holly said she also locked the Year Ones in.”

DAD: “What? Did you, Holly?”

HOLLY, giggling at the thought of twenty little kids screaming hysterically in the dark: “Yes.”

DAD: “Hol-ly? You only told me half the story, didn’t you?”

HOLLY: “Yes, but Dad, you’re not allowed to do anything at our school. You’re not allowed to whistle; you’re not allowed to run on the bricks, only the grass; you’re not allowed to wear your hair out or put on the wrong clothes; you’re not allowed to walk in a funny way – you can’t walk straight-legged. Kirsten and I like to play a game where you have to keep your legs straight but we were told you could get injured so we had to stop walking that way.”

DAD: “Oh, well, if that’s true it’s ridiculous, Hols. I have no idea what sort of injury they think you might get by walking in that particular way, but I can assure you whatever it is, I think it’s an extraordinary overreaction.”

HOLLY: “Yeah, Dad, I know. The other day Rebecca was walking straight-legged with her face straight as well saying, ‘I’m Paris Hilton and I’ve had too much plastic surgery, I’m Paris Hilton and I’ve had too much plastic surgery, I’m Paris Hilton and I’ve had too much plastic surgery’ and she got told off for it.”

WEDNESDAY JULY 2

Not for hardly anything

ISABELLA: “Dad, do you think your sore knee will ever get better?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy. Of course I do.”

ISABELLA: “So, it won’t be cut off then?”

DAD: “What? No. Well, I hope it won’t be.”

HOLLY, butting in: “No, Issy, that’s only for smoking people. I’ve seen it. It has to be really, really bad before a leg gets chopped off. Not just a bit bad like a sprain or something.”

ISABELLA: “Is Holly right, Dad? Does a leg have to be really bad before it gets chopped off?”

DAD: “Well, surgeons don’t take off legs unless it’s really bad.”

ISABELLA: “Good, because I don’t want mine coming off for hardly anything.”

An attempt to read Isabella’s 2008 Half-Yearly Report

ISABELLA: “Dad, what does it say? Can you read it to me?”

DAD: “Sure, Issy. These are just some general comments your teacher has said about you.”

ISABELLA: “‘General comments’? What does ‘general comments’ mean?”

DAD: “It means non-specific . . . um . . . overall comments that are more about you as a person than how good you are in any particular subject. Does that make any sense to you?”

ISABELLA: “No. Not really, Dad.”

DAD: “No, I didn’t think it would. Shall we just push on?”

ISABELLA: “Push on? What’s that? Push on what?”

DAD: “I mean, shall we continue?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad.”

DAD: “Good. Alright. Let’s begin. ‘Isabella is a considerate and diligent student who—’”

ISABELLA: “What does ‘considerate’ and ‘diligent’ mean?”

DAD: “It means you care about things and that you’re hard-working.”

ISABELLA: “What things?”

DAD: “Well, how should I know, Is? I don’t follow you around the school playground all day, do I? These are just general . . . oh, it doesn’t matter . . . where was I? Oh, yes, I remember ‘. . . who has a positive attitude towards school.’ ”

ISABELLA: “‘Positive’? What does ‘positive’ mean?”

DAD: “It means you’re happy about being at school.”

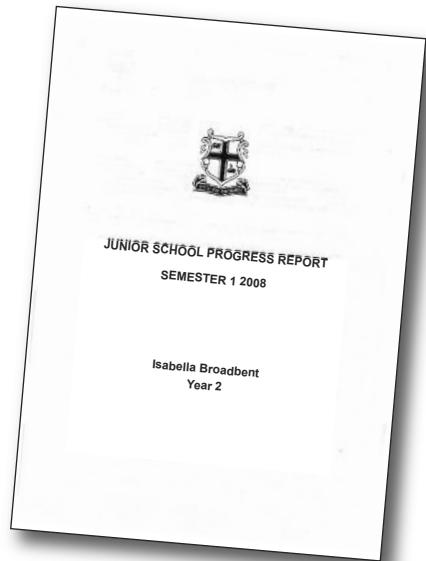
ISABELLA: “Yes, that’s right, Dad. I am happy when I’m at school. Well, most of the time I am. Except when I have arguments with other kids. Then I’m not. But that hardly ever happens . . .”

DAD, trying to move things along: “So, that’s why your teacher thinks you have a positive attitude. Can I keep going now?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad.”

DAD: “Good. ‘In English Isabella is making sound and steady progress—’”

ISABELLA: “What does that mean?”



DAD: “What?”

ISABELLA: “‘Sound and steady progress’.”

DAD: “It means you’re making good progress, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Oh. And what’s ‘progress’?”

DAD: “It means the exact opposite to what I’m doing right now.”

ISABELLA: “Hey?”

DAD: “Issy, at the pace we’re going, I think it’s going to take me a long time to get through your teacher’s comments. Progress in the way your teacher has used it simply means you’re not doing sums or reading the way you used to do sums or reading at the beginning of the year. It means you’ve got better at those two things. Does that make more sense to you?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad.”

DAD: “Good. Now we’re getting somewhere. Right. Back to what your teacher was saying about you. ‘She reads with understanding and is developing good fluency.’”

ISABELLA: “‘Fluency’?”

DAD: “That just means you’re reading well now without stopping and starting too much.”

ISABELLA: “Don’t I do that now?”

DAD: “No, you apparently don’t.” (*Presses on quickly*) “During writing activities she is now attempting to punctuate and edit her work . . .”

ISABELLA: “What does ‘punctuate’ mean? Is that like punching?”

DAD: “No, it means you’re putting full stops and commas in your writing.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, I thought it meant I was punching my work. That would have been a silly thing to say, wouldn’t it, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy, it would have been. That’s why it’s never good to guess words in English, is it? You mostly get them wrong when you do that. Right? Back to where I was ‘. . . often using her Useful Word Book. Her report writing skills have been—’”

ISABELLA: “Wh—”

DAD: “No. Let me go please, Issy. I want to do three sentences in a row if I can. ‘. . . pleasing. In Mathematics Isabella has shown she can recall number facts quickly.’”

ISABELLA: “What’s a ‘number fact’?”

DAD: “I’m not exactly sure. It probably means you know some of the rules of Maths now. Alright? I’m almost at the end now, Issy. ‘She works very well in the Hands-On Maths activities and benefits from using concrete material to solve mathematics problems.’”

ISABELLA: “What?”

DAD: “Look, Issy. I’m just reading it, that’s all. I didn’t write it, you know. ‘It is a pleasure to teach Isabella as she is cooperative and works well with her peers.’”

ISABELLA: “My ‘peers’?”

DAD: “That just means your friends.”

ISABELLA: “Does it? Well, why didn’t my teacher just say my friends then?”

DAD: “I’m not sure.”

ISABELLA: “Why did she have to use all those big words I’ve never heard of before? She hasn’t even taught us any of those words yet.”

DAD: “Issy, this report was written about you, not *for* you.”

ISABELLA: “Was it?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, so was it meant to be a bit of a secret?”

DAD: “No.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, well why was it written with such big words?”

DAD: “Well, to adults these aren’t big words.”

ISABELLA: “Aren’t they? But there are easier words to use, aren’t there, Dad? They all mean the same thing, so why don’t grown-ups use little words instead of big ones?”

DAD: “I’m not sure, Issy. Why don’t you ask one one day?”

ISABELLA: “But you’re a grown-up, Dad.”

DAD: “No I’m not.”

ISABELLA: “Yes you are.”

DAD: “No. I resigned from being a grown-up.”

ISABELLA: “Resigned? What does ‘resign’ mean?”

DAD: “It means I quit being a grown-up . . . oh no, what am I doing? I didn’t respond to you just then. In fact, I’m not even here anymore.”

ISABELLA: “What does ‘resp—’”

DAD: “Stop it, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “What?”

DAD: “Stop asking me questions.”

ISABELLA: “But Dad, you’re good at questions.”

DAD: “No I’m not. And I’m also not here anymore.”

ISABELLA, giggling: “But, Dad, you are here. How can you not be here anymore when I can see you?”

DAD: “Easy. I left just a few seconds before you began interrogating me. And don’t say ‘what’s “interrogating” mean?’”

ISABELLA: “Why? I don’t know what it means.”

DAD: “Oh Issy, can we just leave your Half-Yearly Report to another day?”

ISABELLA: “Oh, alright, Dad.”

TUESDAY JULY 8

Real-live picture

ISABELLA: “Holly, have you ever seen a real live giant squid before?”

HOLLY: “No.”

ISABELLA: “Oh well, I have. Laura brought in a picture of one for school.”

Any old goal will do

DAD: “Holly, it says here you and I have to come up with a shared goal. Your teacher says we do.”

HOLLY: “Oh, but Dad, I hate goals. I’ve been doing them for years and years and years. Why don’t you choose one for me? I won’t care what it is.”

Collecting breakfast cereal cards and other realisations

ISABELLA, peering into an empty Weet-Bix packet and seeing there was nothing inside except for three Test cricketers: “Dad, for goodest (sic) sake, there are no Weet-Bix left. All there is are these stupid cricketers.”

DAD: “What?”

ISABELLA: “I said there’s only these three stupid cricketers in the Weet-Bix packet.”

DAD: “Are there?”

ISABELLA, gloomily: “Yes. And a few crumbs. But that’s all, Dad. What am I supposed to do with them? I can’t eat them.”

DAD: “No, you can’t. But you can collect them.”

ISABELLA: “Can I? What for?”

DAD: “For all the happiness it will bring you.”

ISABELLA: “But that wouldn’t bring me any happiness, Dad. It’s stupid to collect bits of cardboard with cricketers on them. They’re not even food and food is all I ever want for breakfast.”

DAD: “Yes, well, the Weet-Bix people just want you to collect all 29 cricket cards. That’s all.”

ISABELLA: “Well, I’m not going to do it. And I don’t care what they say.”

DAD: “Good for you, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Would you have collected the cards when you were little, Dad?”



DAD: “Yes, I probably would’ve. That’s because up until the age of thirteen, I used to collect newspaper articles and photos of cricketers to stick into scrapbooks. When I was about your age, Issy, I used to put the name of every famous cricketer I knew of at the top of a page so I could stick pictures of them underneath with the date they appeared in the paper and any caption or headline that went with the picture. That’s how mad I was when I was a little boy. I probably did that for about six years. Every month or so I used to add up all the pictures I had of each cricketer. I’m not sure why, but that used to be very important to me when I was a boy. I liked to know how many pictures I had.”

ISABELLA, expectantly: “Did you, Dad? So, where are all the pictures now? Did you keep any of them?”

DAD: “No, I didn’t.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, well what did you do with them?”

DAD: “I burnt them. I gathered them all up – I think there were seven scrapbooks – and put a match to them in our barbecue.”

ISABELLA: “Did you? But why?”

DAD: “Well, when I turned fourteen, I suddenly realised collecting newspaper articles and photos of cricketers and sticking them into scrapbooks was a terrible waste of my time.”

ISABELLA: “Did you wish you hadn’t done it, Dad? I mean, a little bit afterwards.”

DAD: “What do you mean, Is?”

ISABELLA: “I mean, did you wish you hadn’t burnt them? You know, the scrapbooks.”

DAD: “Oh no, Issy. It didn’t hesitate once while I was burning them and I wasn’t sorry I’d done it either. I just lit the match and enjoyed watching them burn.”

ISABELLA: “Did you?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “That’s incredible, Dad! You burnt them all!”

DAD: “Yes, I suppose it was a bit incredible now I think about it – how all of a sudden I came to my senses. Not that you’ll probably ever go through a similar realisation, Is. You don’t seem to care about collecting anything, do you?”

ISABELLA: “What’s a realis-ayshon, Dad?”

DAD: “Oh, it’s when you discover something about yourself you didn’t know before.”

ISABELLA: “Oh. I think I know what you mean. I realis-ayshoned, I mean I realised the other day I had a tooth growing up the back of my mouth.”

DAD: “Did you?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Oh that’s lovely, honey. But it’s not exactly what I mean.”

ISABELLA: “Isn’t it?”

DAD: “No.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, well I think I might have to wait till I’m fourteen then, Dad. Realis-ayshons are probably a little bit grown up for me at my age.”

DAD: “Yes, Issy. At seven they probably are.”

ISABELLA: “But Holly might be getting one soon.”

DAD: “Do you think so?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad. She’s ten!”

DAD: “You’re right. She is. But I think between ten and fourteen most of Holly’s realisations will be Mum or Dad-driven, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “What does that mean?”

DAD: “I’ll show you. Just watch. Holly?”

HOLLY: “Yes, Dad.”

DAD: “You were told to clean up your room and do your music practice, weren’t you?”

HOLLY, dejectedly, in anticipation of a reprimand: “Yes, Dad.”

DAD: “Right. Well, as you did neither of those two things, there’ll be no sleepover this weekend.”

HOLLY, slumping to the ground: “Oh, Dad! Well, can I still have my sleepover if I do those two things quickly now?”

DAD: “Yes. But only if they’re done properly.”

HOLLY: “Alright, Dad, I promise.”

ISABELLA, whispering into my ear: “Was that a realis-ayshon, Dad?”

DAD: “Sort of. Although I’d probably call it more a reprieve than a realisation.”

ISABELLA: “Oh no! Is that another word I have to know, Dad?”

DAD: “No, Is. For the moment you can have a reprieve from knowing that one.”

ISABELLA: “Oh good.”

SATURDAY JULY 12

The perfect aw-shucks

What parent can't do with hearing a comment like this from one of their children every so often?

HOLLY, in the back seat of our car talking to her friend Ebony on the way home from a birthday party: "Some kids at school say they really hate their parents. I can't believe it when I hear them say that. I really love my parents. I think they're really generous for having me."

Will he still be your brother?

ISABELLA, referring to Karin's brother, Tony, who lives next door to us but will be moving shortly: "He'll still be your brother, won't he, Mum? I mean, even when he moves."

Toys and God, like peas in a pod

HOLLY: "Dad, did you know that toys are like Christianity?"

DAD, surprised, to say the least: "No, I didn't, Hols. I didn't know that at all. How so?"

HOLLY: "Well, you can believe in them and make them run and do anything you want. Just like with God, they're alive, you know."

DAD: "Can you?"

HOLLY: "Yes. Didn't you used to do that with your toys when you were a little boy?"

DAD: "Yes, I suppose I did. Although I'm not sure I believed they were as real as you think your toys are."

HOLLY: "Dad?"

DAD: "Yes, Hols."

HOLLY: "I hope I'll be able to find a man to marry one day who'll go to work so I can keep playing with my toys."

DAD: "Do you?"

HOLLY: "Yes."

DAD: “Do you really wish for that one day?”

HOLLY: “Yes, I do. If I have to marry someone then I want them to be good at giving me toys and letting me play with them.”

DAD: “Well, good luck, Hols. I always believe it’s important to have hope. But I think your chances of finding someone as foolish as that is quite small.”

HOLLY, truculently: “Then I won’t marry anyone then, Dad. Why would I? I can already play with my toys for hours so why would I want to marry a man if he won’t let me keep doing that?”

DAD: “Why, indeed. So, are there any other ways that toys and God are similar?”

HOLLY: “Well, you can believe in toys in the same way you can believe in God. I believe they’re real just like a Christian believes God is real. Actually, at night, I believe they come out and play together.”

DAD: “What? Your toys and God?”

HOLLY, indignantly: “No! I meant all my toys. I mean they come out and play together. That’s the same as Christians, isn’t it? They believe God can come out, too.”

DAD: “Yes, I suppose they do. So, is there anything else you can tell me about your toys?”

HOLLY, yawning: “No, Dad. I’m too tired now.”

DAD, whispering gently: “That’s alright, Holly. After all, it is quite late now. Why don’t you go to sleep so your toys can start playing?”

HOLLY: “They’re playing already, Dad.”

DAD: “Are they?”

HOLLY: “Yes. They start as soon as no one is watching them.”

Careful, it could mean another baby

Yesterday, Holly told Karin and me, quite forthrightly, we needed to be very careful around each other whenever we were in bed together. Otherwise, we could end up with something she was quite sure we didn’t want: another baby.

HOLLY: “Not after Amelie. You don’t want another Amelie.”

DAD: “Holly, we do actually love Amelie, you know. Even though she’s caused Karin and me a lot of stress at times, especially from all her screaming, she’s still an absolute delight to us. Not that that means we want to have another child. Not at all. We don’t. But I think I should just tell you that each of you, including Amelie, is very precious to us, regardless of how often we raise our voices at you.”

HOLLY, as if it were a burden: “Yes, I know that, Dad. You keep telling me that all the time. But I also know you wouldn’t be able to handle another Amelie. Not after all the trouble she’s been.”

DAD: “Holly, you’ve all been a bit of trouble for your mum and me. All of you. But we still adore you all. Every day you bring out every emotion there is and that’s not a bad thing. As for your worrying about mum and me being naked and close to each other, and, after hearing you talk about how you think babies are made, I think it might be time for you to learn more about what happens. What do you think? So far you haven’t wanted to know how babies are made. But is that still true, Holly?”

HOLLY: “Well, I think I would like to know how babies are made, Dad.”

And with that, I told Holly everything I thought she’d understand. It was nothing like how a talk about sex was supposed to be. All I had to go on were those horribly formal sex education films from the 1960s. I wasn’t, for instance, in the drawing room seated next to an open fire with a pipe in my mouth, about to deliver, with impeccable authority, the word from on high. And Holly wasn’t standing respectfully by either, ready to hear those words of wisdom. Instead, she was lying on the floor in our bedroom trying to pull the sheets off Karin and me because she thought it was funny. Neither of us had even dignified the occasion by wearing matching grey suits. On top of that, she also wasn’t even a boy. Holly should have been a boy because no father ever talks about sex with his daughter. Everything was wrong: the setting, the lack of an appointed time for this special chat, the fact that it was Holly and not Harry. Although, considering how little was handed down in the past by fathers to sons or mothers to daughters about sex, I’m happy to say I’m very pleased to be way out of step with the past.

HOLLY: “Really, Dad? Is that what really happens? I thought all you did was kiss. I didn’t know a willy did that. I just thought it was something that looked like an upside down mushroom with a rock sort of next to it.”

DAD: “Well, now you know, Holly. Now you know all you need to know. Well, at least for the time being. Do you have any more questions?”

HOLLY: “No, Dad. I don’t want to know any more, thanks.”

SATURDAY JULY 19

Sudden change of mind

ISABELLA, just before I was to get her to run around the block in the rain for some exercise:
“But Dad, my leg’s hurting.”

DAD: “Is it? Where?”

ISABELLA: “No, not really.”

Just one job

HOLLY, after being asked to clean up some dog wee, but hadn’t: “You always have to be so specific, don’t you, Dad?”

Neither me nor the dishcloth

HOLLY: “Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Holly.”

HOLLY: “I tried to wash up this dish but my dishcloth wouldn’t do it. I think it needs someone else to make it go clean.”

Trying

ISABELLA, as Karin and me walked in the door after seeing a movie together for the first time this year: “Hi, Dad! Did you like the movie?”

DAD: “No, I’m afraid I didn’t, Issy. I found the main character in the film to be rather irritating.”

ISABELLA: “Did you, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, what does ‘irritating’ mean?”

DAD: “It means annoying.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, then why did you see it for?”

DAD: “Well, I didn’t know it would end up being as bad as it was.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, did you like any bits?”

DAD: “No, not really. Overall, it was a particularly trying film.”

ISABELLA: “What does that mean?”

DAD: “You mean ‘trying’?”

ISABELLA: “Yeah, what does ‘trying’ mean?”

DAD: “It means annoying and irritating.”

ISABELLA: “Does it? But you’ve already told me that. I thought the film must have been trying to get better or something.”

Guile

DAD: “Look, why don’t I wash up for you tonight, girls? No, I mean it. Why don’t I give you the night off? Alright? And you can watch that documentary *Miracle on Everest*. Just as long as you promise to go to bed – as in sleep, Holly – straight after it. Is that a deal?”

HOLLY and **ISABELLA**, almost in unison, as they reached out to give their Dad a hug to express their delight: “Yes, alright, Dad.”

An hour later

HOLLY, after she’d quickly brushed her teeth and climbed into bed without complaint, and I’d just finished putting away the last dish: “Story!”

DAD: “What? What was that?”

HOLLY: “Can you read me a story? You said you would.”

DAD: “You’re incredible, Holly.”

HOLLY: “But you promised, Dad. Yesterday you said you would tonight.”

DAD: “Yes, that’s true. I did say that. But you promised something as well, Holly.”

HOLLY: “Yeah, I know I did. But your promise came first.”

TUESDAY JULY 22

Next question, please

ISABELLA: “Dad, what is court?”

DAD: “Court? Oh, court is usually where a judge, or people – they’re called a jury – decide whether someone is guilty or innocent. Remember? I was called up for jury duty at the start of the year but wasn’t, in the end, chosen.”

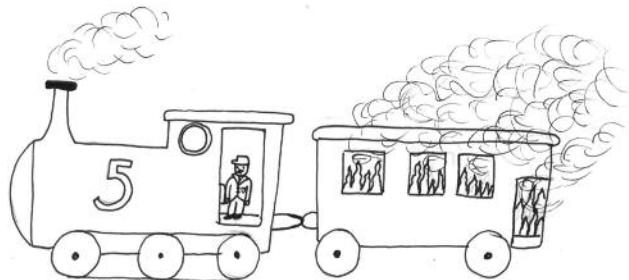
ISABELLA: “To be prime minister?”

DAD: “No, Issy. Prime ministers aren’t normally in court. Remember what I said happened in courts? It’s where a judge, or a jury, decide whether someone is guilty or innocent.”

ISABELLA: “Oh yeah. It’s where they decide if someone is good or bad, isn’t it?”

DAD: “Well, it’s not quite as simple as that, but as you are only seven that will have to do, I think. What do you think prime ministers do, though?”

ISABELLA: “I’m not sure, Dad. But they’re good people because they don’t kill or bash people and they don’t put fire on a train.”



DAD: “Don’t they? Well, what if they send people off to war? Are they still good people then?”

ISABELLA: “No, then they’re bad people.”

DAD: “Even if they send people off to war to protect you?”

ISABELLA: “Um, I don’t know. I think I need the next question, Dad.”

Literal

DAD, in the car, immediately after picking Holly up from her sleepover at Annie's: "So, Hols, did you miss me?"

HOLLY: "No, I didn't miss you at all. I never even thought about you once."

DAD, pretending to be hurt: "Oh, Hols, you have no idea how that makes me feel."

HOLLY, dispassionately: "I know, Dad. Of course I don't. How could I? I'm not you."

Wake-over

ANNIE to Holly, as Holly's eyes were beginning to blink heavily (*Holly's recollection*): "Please don't go to sleep yet. This is a wake-over, not a sleep-over."

Engrossed in being engrossed

HOLLY: "I was right into it . . . I was . . . uhm . . ."

ISABELLA: "What?"

HOLLY: "Hang on a minute, Issy. Wait on for a sec. I'm looking for the right word."

ISABELLA: "In your brain?"

HOLLY: "Yes! Of course I'm looking for it in my brain. Where else would I be looking for it? On the floor of the car or the side of the road?"

DAD: "You mean 'engrossed', don't you, Hols?"

HOLLY: "Yes. Yes, Dad. That's exactly the word I was looking for. I was engrossed."

ISABELLA: "Is that good, Dad?"

DAD: "Yes, Issy. It's fine to be engrossed in something."

ISABELLA, as though she'd suddenly been given approval to violate a sacred code: "Is it? Oooh! I can be engrossed."

DAD: "Indeed you can be. In fact, you sound like you might even be a bit engrossed now."

ISABELLA: “Do I?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, good.”

FRIDAY JULY 25

Solo accompaniment

HOLLY, due to ride solo to her friend Olivia’s house for the first time: “Dad? I’ll go by myself if I can say goodbye to one parent.”

DAD: “Alright. That’s okay. I’ll wave you off out the front now if you like.”

HOLLY: “No, Dad, I mean at Olivia’s house. I want you to say goodbye to me there.”

Except in tests

HOLLY: “Dad, guess what? Someone in my class did something really bad today.”

DAD, rather apathetically: “Did they, Hols? What? What did they do?”

HOLLY: “They wrote another girl’s name on the whiteboard.”

DAD, attention divided between Holly and what Amelie was trying to do to the cat: “Is that right? Really? And why is that so bad?”

HOLLY: “It just is, Dad.”

DAD: “Is it? . . . Oh come on, Holly! What on earth’s wrong with doing that?”

HOLLY: “You just can’t do it, Dad. You’re not allowed to.”

DAD, disbelievingly: “You aren’t allowed to write a person’s name on a whiteboard?”

HOLLY: “No, you don’t understand. Someone wrote such and such was here 2008 and that ended up getting the wrong girl in trouble. It even made her cry. And then they also wrote that she loved Mr Robertson.”

DAD: “Who’s he?”

HOLLY: “Oh, he’s a gym teacher.”

ISABELLA: “Imagine being a teacher and having someone love you, Dad.”

DAD, drolly: “Yes, imagine that.”

KARIN, trying to normalise the situation as best she could: “Oh teachers are very used to that sort of thing, Issy. They get that all the time.”

HOLLY: “Some kids say Mr Robertson is gay.”

DAD, naively: “Do they, Hols? So, what does ‘gay’ mean?”

HOLLY: “Oh, I think it means someone or something is really stupid. It used to mean something good, but now it means that. The cool group says ‘gay’ all the time.”

DAD: “Do they? So, do you think Mr Robertson is stupid?”

HOLLY: “Oh no. He’s not gay. He’s really good. He wants to stop global warming.”

DAD: “Good on you, Hols. Thinking for yourself. Well done. Always try to do that if you can.”

HOLLY: “I do, Dad. Even in tests I do. But it doesn’t always work. It’s not really the best way to get good marks, you know.”

TUESDAY JULY 29

Don’t join a team

HOLLY, during breakfast: “Dad, if Perth goes to war, will we have to move to Sydney? Oh, hang on. Then Sydney would be all filled up with too many Perth people, wouldn’t it?”

DAD: “What are you talking about, Holly? What war?”

HOLLY: “Oh, just a war, Dad. I don’t know what it would be about. I’m only wondering what would happen to us. That’s all. Just imagine they made up a war and got two teams to fight it.”

DAD: “They? Who’s they?”

HOLLY: “The people who start wars. You know, war people. Don’t join a team, Dad. I don’t care if they give you a white feather or something for not joining. Just don’t do it. No, that’s out of date now, isn’t it? Well, you know what I mean. Don’t worry if they think you’re a coward. Just live.”

DAD: “Oh, I’m sure I’d always be trying to do that. I wouldn’t want to miss out on a single day of living with you, Mum and your two sisters. It’s too much to live for.”

HOLLY: “Good! Because I don’t understand war. Why don’t people want to live? It’s a lot better than shooting people or being blown up.”

DAD: “I agree. And what about you, Isabella? What do you think about war?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t think about war, Dad.”

DAD, impertinently: “Oh, don’t you? Why?”

ISABELLA: “Because I don’t really know much about what it is. I know there are shooters (sic) and that, but I don’t know what makes it happen. It doesn’t happen in Australia, does it, Dad?”

DAD: “No.”

ISABELLA: “Good. That’s the best thing about Australia. There aren’t any bullets here.”

DAD: “We’re lucky, aren’t we?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, it makes us all happy.”

DAD: “You know what, Issy? I think I’d have you in charge of this world in a second if I could.”

ISABELLA: “Oh! That wouldn’t be good, Dad.”

DAD: “Wouldn’t it? Why?”

ISABELLA: “I can’t cook.”

DAD: “No, I guess you can’t.”

ISABELLA: “And I can’t drive or go to the post office.”

DAD: “No, but you can play and that’s more important than those other things you just mentioned.”

ISABELLA: “Is it?”

DAD: “Yes. In a way, it is. Except for cooking. Knowing how to make a meal for yourself would be just as important as playing, I think.”

ISABELLA: “Is that why you love Mum?”

While I think I can make a half-decent meal, my kids think otherwise, even to the point where they think I only love Karin because she can cook.

DAD, feigning umbrage: “I can make a meal for myself.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, but it’s very disgusting, Dad.”

DAD: “Oh thanks, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Well, it is, Dad.”

DAD: “Alright. So it might be. You don’t have to rub it—”

ISABELLA: “We all hate your food. Holly, Mum, Amie . . . we all do. It’s the worst food we’ve ever tasted.”

DAD: “Haven’t you got some playing to get on with, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “No . . . oh yeah! I do. Bye, Dad.”

SUNDAY AUGUST 3

The slightly silly and the really silly

HOLLY: “Dad, guess what?”

DAD, having been interrupted three times in as many minutes while reading the newspaper: “What, Hols? What is it this time?”

HOLLY: “A girl in my class got in trouble today for going ‘Oh sugar!’”

DAD: “What? ‘Oh sugar!’? Someone got in trouble for saying that?”

HOLLY: “Yes.”

DAD: “Oh, you have to be joking.”

HOLLY: “No, I’m not, Dad.”

DAD: “Oh, how ridiculous! Well, what about if she’d said ‘Oh salt!’? Would she have gotten in trouble for saying that?”

HOLLY, laughing: “No.”

DAD: “Well, it’s not such a silly question, Hols. If ‘Oh sugar!’ is out then ‘Oh salt!’ might be, too.”

HOLLY: “Yes, but if it was, Dad, then the grown-ups would be the kids and the kids would be the grown-ups because the world would then be full of more really silly people than just slightly silly people.”

Just mumble

DAD, after Isabella had practised *The Rainbow Connection* for the last time before she was due to perform it for real in front of more than a hundred people at her school’s Eisteddfod: “Yes, that was pretty good, Issy. Apart from that one line in the third verse, which you find hard to remember, that was really quite wonderful. What do you think you should do if you can’t remember the line? Do you remember what I told you?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, I just mumble.”

DAD: “Right, Issy. You just mumble the line and with any luck the judge, or judges, won’t be able to tell the difference. Okay?”

ISABELLA: “But, Dad, I still might remember the line.”

DAD: “You might, Issy. And that wouldn’t be a bad thing, would it? However, as you haven’t remembered the line yet in more than twenty attempts and the Eisteddfod is just forty minutes away, I think it’d be good to have a backup plan, don’t you? I think you need to be ready to mumble at a second’s notice. You know what I mean?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad, because mumbling might be a lot easier than trying to remember the line, mightn’t it?”

DAD: “Exactly.”

WEDNESDAY AUGUST 6

Still the same

ISABELLA, wondering about one of her teachers who'd just had a hip operation:
"I can't remember what she looked like."

HOLLY: "Issy, she'll look the same. The new hip won't change her."

ISABELLA: "Won't it? Won't it make her look different?"

DAD: "No, Is."

ISABELLA: "Oh, I thought it would. I bet she's happy about that!"

Last is still very good

HOLLY to Isabella, concerning the Beijing Olympics: "If you're ever at the Olympics and you come last, Issy, don't worry because last at the Olympics is still very, very good. Do you know what I mean? It might be still hopeless and all that, but it's never as hopeless as say if you were just racing your friends around the block and you came last. All that would happen at the Olympics is they'd keep all the medals away from you."

Olympic form

ISABELLA: "Dad, how do you get in the Olympics? Do you have to put a form in? Is that all you have to do?"

SUNDAY AUGUST 10

Why bother eating?

HOLLY: "Dad, Annie threw up everything she had the other day."

ISABELLA: "Did she?"

HOLLY: "Yes."

ISABELLA: "Well, then there's no point in her eating if she's going to do that, is there?"

No faster

DAD, after a car went through a red light that had startled Isabella: “See, you don’t just go when the Green Man says you can go, do you? Because that can be dangerous. Some people are in such a rush to get to work, they go through lights to get there quicker. Do you think going through a red light is a way of getting somewhere faster?”

ISABELLA: “No, because they’d have to do a lot more running over and that would make them slower.”

Nor should you want to

AMELIE, as she was sitting waiting to ‘help’ shift some things from our old house to our new house: “Issy, I haven’t had a go at working yet.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, but you shouldn’t want to have a go, Amelie. Working’s horrible.”

Not daft

“I still call Australia
I still call Australia
I still call Australia
Home . . .”

HOLLY, referring to the Peter Allen chorus in the Qantas ad that was shown repeatedly during the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony: “I still call it home, too. I’m not daft.”

SATURDAY AUGUST 16

The best part about warnings

Against her school rules, Holly had taken the shoelaces out of her shoes to make her feet more comfortable. To get out of trouble should she be caught, she had a spare pair in her pocket . . . and the impression she’d receive a number of warnings anyway. I had asked her to put her laces back in.

HOLLY, dispassionately: “But you get so many warnings, Dad!”

DAD: “But, Holly, you can’t rely on a steady flow of warnings.”

HOLLY, as though warnings were like Get out of Jail cards: “Can’t I? Why not, Dad? I always get lots of them so I might as well use them.”

Lost for words

ISABELLA: “Dad, did you know there’s a girl in my class who uses her underpants for toilet paper?”

DAD: “Did I know? Are you joking, Issy? Of course I wouldn’t know that.”

ISABELLA: “Well, she does. And she has a spare pair, too. But she lost them.”

The return of Harold, the Giraffe

HOLLY: “Dad, that Harold’s back.”

DAD: “Who?”

HOLLY: “Harold, the Giraffe. You know, that stupid giraffe that tries to teach us all about needles. He’s back at the school again. Not that anyone in my class believes in him anymore. Everyone in Year Five and Six already knows he’s just some man with his hand up a pretend giraffe. That’s why I can’t understand why they keep on making us go and see him.”



DAD: “Can’t you? Oh, well, I bet Issy likes Harold. Do you?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, I do, Dad. Everyone in my class thinks he’s great.”

HOLLY: “Yeah well they would, Issy. That’s because you’re only in Year Two. You wait until you’re older. Then you’ll see how stupid he is.”

ISABELLA: “Harold told us today that if you ever see a needle you should always get an adult. He also said if you smoke five times you’ll get addicted.”

DAD: “Is that right, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD, jesting: “Well, what about if you only smoke four times? Will you be alright if you do that? Hey, I’ve got an idea, Issy. C’mon, let’s have four smokes together.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, Dad! Why do you always have to do that for?”

DAD: “Do what?”

ISABELLA: “Make me think about different things to what my teachers or Harold say?”

DAD: “I don’t know. It just seemed like an obvious thing to ask you. That’s all. I didn’t mean to make your head hit the table and your hands go across your eyes so you couldn’t see me anymore.”

ISABELLA: “If you smoke four times then you’ll probably just get a *bit* addicted, Dad.”

DAD: “Oh, and what does that mean?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know, Dad. It probably means you won’t be coughing as much as someone who has smoked five times does. And you also won’t have as much brown in your lungs.”

DAD: “Oh! Well, that’s a good thing then, isn’t it?”

ISABELLA: “No, not really. You’ll still be very sick and awful looking. I wouldn’t have any cigarettes. And I also wouldn’t pick up needles, either. If you want to live, that is.”

DAD: “Good girl, Issy. You really listened well, didn’t you?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, I did. And at last now you’re being sensible.”

THURSDAY AUGUST 21

The red is strawberry

ISABELLA, about to leave for school: “Mum, if you see any little bits of red in my toothpaste spit that’s in the basin then it’s only tiny bits of strawberry. Alright? Don’t worry about it. I’m not sick or anything.”

Life sentence

DAD, in a tone earnest enough for Isabella to appreciate there'd be no backing down: “. . . and after you've put away your clothes and made your bed, Issy, you can help Holly with the washing and wiping up. Okay? This is what I want you to do from now on. I don't want to see Mum picking things up for you anymore. Do you understand?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Good. So, do you have any questions?”

ISABELLA, a horrified look creeping across her face: “No . . . I mean, yes.”

DAD: “Alright. What's up?”

ISABELLA: “Um . . . Dad . . . So, does this now mean I'll have to do all these things for the rest of my entire life?”

DAD, confirming her prison term: “Yes, it does.”

ISABELLA, jaw dropping slightly, head tilted forward: “Oh.”

Killer boys

HOLLY, commenting on two adolescent girls who were chatting to two boys of a similar age who were shirtless, tattooed and yelling belligerently at someone in the distance: “Well, I hope I never end up talking to boys like that, Dad. You can get yourself killed if you have ones like that around you.”

Just suds and boats

HOLLY: “Dad, it's incredible! Issy's only in Year Two and she already has a cool group in her class. She told me the other day some of the girls in her class have boyfriends. She said they even go in the bath with them. I just told her it would only be suds and boats at that age. There wouldn't be any kissing, would there?”

DAD, acting surprised: “Oh no! Not at that age, Hols.”

HOLLY: “No. I didn't think so.”

WEDNESDAY AUGUST 27

Do fish sleep?

ISABELLA: “Dad, do fish sleep?”

DAD: “Oh, I don’t know, Issy. My guess is they probably do because I can’t imagine how anything the size of a fish could keep swimming around a fishbowl – or an ocean – without a rest. But then again, if they did have a nap they could get eaten, couldn’t they? No, I have no idea, actually.”

HOLLY: “Dad, maybe they just go slow for a bit.”

DAD: “Yes, maybe, Hols.”

ISABELLA: “But what about a shark, Dad? If it slept it would float down.”

HOLLY: “You mean ‘sink’, don’t you?”

ISABELLA: “Yeah, sink.”

DAD: “I’ll have to look it up, girls.”

ISABELLA: “Can you also look up a giant squid and tell me if they sleep?”

DAD: “Sure, why not? I’ll look up as many things that go underwater as I can. How about that?”

ISABELLA: “That’s good, Dad.”

Different kinds of sick

ISABELLA: “Dad, I got stage sick today.”

DAD: “Did you? How, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Well, it was during Book Week parade. You know, fancy dress where we had to dress up as a character from a book we’d read? We had to go up on stage, every class did, in our costumes and do a parade. It was alright, but they told our class we should do a dance as we went around the stage. I wish they hadn’t done that because it made me very giddy.”

DAD: “Did it?”

ISABELLA: “Yes. That’s why I got stage sick, Dad.”

DAD: “Hmm. I can see why you would have felt like that. I’ve heard of kids being carsick or airsick or seasick, but I must admit I’ve never heard of kids being stage sick before.”

ISABELLA: “No, me either. But there are more sick than that.”

DAD: “Are there?”

ISABELLA: “Yes. What about just sick sick, Dad? You know, when a kid is just sick and doesn’t know why?”

DAD: “Oh yes, I’d forgotten about that one.”

ISABELLA: “And there’s also school sick when a kid doesn’t want to go to school.”

DAD: “You seem to know them all, don’t you?”

ISABELLA: “Not all of them. I don’t think I can come up with every kind of sick there is. But I probably know most ones.”

DAD: “You’re very good at knowing sicknesses, aren’t you? Perhaps you should be a doctor or a nurse when you grow up.”

ISABELLA: “No, they have to work too hard, Dad. There are too many people being sick all the time. I think I’ll just do something I can manage.”

DAD: “Like what?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know. I’m just a kid, so for a long time work won’t be important.”

SUNDAY AUGUST 31

Second thoughts

ISABELLA, just after I’d told her the time I did in Perth’s City-to-Surf race: “Forty-four?”

DAD: “Yeah, but it’s 51 minutes and 44 seconds, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Seconds?”

DAD: “Yeah, there were seconds in it.”

ISABELLA: “Yeah, but 44 seconds, Dad.”

DAD: “Yeah, what about it?”

ISABELLA: “That’s really fast.”

DAD: “Yeah, I know. But, there were 51 minutes as well, not just the 44 seconds—”

HOLLY, butting in: “Yeah, you’d be a world record man if you did that time, Dad.”

DAD: “Do you understand what I’m saying, Is?”

HOLLY, again: “Dad, 51 minutes is still pretty fast, you know.”

DAD: “Yes, I know, Holly. It’s alright. But Issy just thought I did it in 44 seconds, didn’t you, Is?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Right. So what do you think now, Is?”

Isabella was off to climb a tree.

HOLLY: “I don’t think she cares, Dad.”



THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 4

The penny drops

HOLLY: “Dad, we should try and find money on the ground because if we do we won’t have to spend our own money.”

DAD: “Yes, that’s right, Hols. But do you think we would find enough money that way? I mean, we’d have to really hope people were very careless with their money, wouldn’t we?”

HOLLY: “Yes, I suppose so. But we should still try, I think.”

DAD: “Many would say you’re wasting your time, Hols, but I’m just going to sit here and admire your optimism instead. I’ll be interested to see how you go.”

HOLLY: “Yes, alright, Dad. I’ll give it till Monday. People might drop more of their money on the weekend when they get drunk.”

Most Annoying Person To Have Nearby While Doing Your Tax Return

HOLLY, reading from *The Guinness Book of World Records*: “Dad, listen to this. ‘Fastest land snail. The fastest-moving species of land snail is the common garden snail (*Helix aspera*). On 20 February 1990, a specimen named Verne completed a 31-cm course at West Middle School in Plymouth, Michigan, USA, in two minutes thirteen seconds at 0.23cm slopy line—’”

DAD: “That means per, Hols.”

HOLLY: “What?”

DAD: “The slopy line means per. You know, 0.23cm every second.”

HOLLY: “Oh, per second then. (*Back to the book*) ‘To put this into perspective, the snail-racing equivalent of a four-minute mile would be roughly an eight-day mile.’”

DAD: “Oh, that’s interesting, Hols. But I need to concentrate now because if I don’t I might put the wrong number on my tax return. I’m doing it online for the first time, so I need to focus on what I’m typing. Alright?”

HOLLY, without lifting her eyes from the page she was on: “Yes, okay, Dad. Dad! Dad! You won’t believe this!”

DAD: “Holly! Remember? I need to concentrate.”

HOLLY: “Yes, I know you do, Dad, but I just have to tell you this.”

DAD, taking in a long, exaggerated breath and letting it out slowly: “Alright. What is it?”

HOLLY: “Did you know that the rarest seashell in the world is the white-toothed cowry? ‘It is known from just two specimens, the second of which turned up in 1960, and is thus the most coveted’ . . . what’s ‘coveted’ mean, Dad?”

DAD: “It means to really want something, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Oh . . . ‘the most coveted species among con-kol-ologists [conchologists]. Its only recorded locality is The Philippines’ Sulu Sea.’”

DAD: “The Philippines’ Sulu Sea?”

HOLLY: “Yes, that’s what it says in the book, Dad.”

DAD, knowing full well Switzerland was a land-locked country: “Oh, I thought a white-toothed cowry shell was also found off the coast of Switzerland.”

HOLLY: “No, just The Philippines’ Sulu Sea, Dad.”

DAD: “And I also remember, if memory serves me well, reading about one found in Sydney.”

HOLLY: “Da-ad, you’re just being silly.”

DAD: “Yes, I know, Hols. Now if you don’t mind, can I have some silence now?”

HOLLY: “Sure, Dad. In Sydney. How ridiculous. As if Sydney would have a rare white-toothed cowry shell. Hey, Dad! Listen to this. Ooooooo! ‘Ken Edwards (UK) ate 36 cockroaches in one minute on the set of *The Big Breakfast* (Channel 4, UK) on 5 March 2001. Ken’s technique is to pop the roach – which, according to *The Guinness Book of World Records*’ rules, must be the fully-grown Madagascar hissing variety – into his mouth and crush its head with his back teeth. “This stops them wriggling and scratching my gullet on the way down!” says the former rat-catcher.’ That’s amazing, Dad. I can’t believe he did that.”

DAD: “I’m not listening to you anymore, Holly. Can’t you see I’m now typing with one finger so I can block one ear with my free hand and the other one with my shoulder?”

HOLLY: “And, Dad, listen to this . . .”

She wasn’t listening. She couldn’t care less what I was saying. In fact, she was talking so quickly she could’ve earned herself a place in *The Guinness Book of World Records* as the Most Annoying Person To Have Nearby While Doing Your Tax Return.

Fame loses its appeal

HOLLY: “Dad, I don’t think I’d ever want to be famous.”

DAD: “No, it’s not something I’d ever want to be either, Hols. Why, though, wouldn’t you want to be famous?”

HOLLY: “Well, if you are, you have to be famous forever. People are always going: ‘There she is, Paris Hilton’. And then they go and pretend to be her. ‘I’m Paris Hilton and I’ve had plastic surgery, I’m Paris Hilton and I’ve had plastic surgery, I’m Paris Hilton and I’ve had plastic surgery’. They don’t even know why she’s famous. Just because her dad owns a lot of hotels, it shouldn’t mean she becomes famous as well. So what, your dad owns hotels. Big deal! That’s not so great. And besides, why would anyone want to smile forever? (*Refers to all the plastic surgery Paris Hilton is supposed to have had*) I’d want to have a movable face. (*Demonstrates facial flexibility*) See? Look how interesting your face becomes when you can move it about. The last thing I’d want to do is smile all the time. It would be horrible. Watch this.” (*Opens mouth as wide as possible to illustrate the unpleasantness of having to walk around all day with a beaming grin*)

DAD: “No, I agree, Holly. I think it would be rather irritating to say the least to see someone doing that all the time.”

HOLLY: “Yes, and did you know, Dad, in *The Guinness Book of World Records* . . .”

Oh no, here we go.

HOLLY: “. . . a man called JB Destiny got in it for the most self-inflicted kicks to the head?”

DAD, knowing such acts are common in *The Guinness Book of World Records*: “Oh, you have to be kidding. He couldn’t possibly have gotten in it for that. Surely!”

HOLLY: “No, I’m not joking, Dad. It’s true. See? He kicked himself in the forehead ‘a total of 57 times in one minute in Tucson, Arizona, USA, on 3 September 2005’. How stupid is that, Dad? Now he’s famous for doing something really dumb.”

DAD: “Yes, well, when I was little and used to read *The Guinness Book of World Records*, I once came across a person who’d eaten an entire aeroplane. It wasn’t a Jumbo or anything quite that large; I think it was some sort of light aircraft. Still, how’s that for stupidity? I have to say, though, knowing someone actually did that, I think it makes kicking yourself in the head look like blowing your nose, Hols. Wouldn’t you agree?”

HOLLY: “He ate a plane?”

DAD: “Yes, it took him a while, but after a few years he had, apparently, gotten through it all.”

HOLLY: “That’s so stupid, Dad. So, why isn’t he in *The Guinness Book of World Records* now?”

DAD: “Well, thankfully, I don’t think the people who own *The Guinness Book of World Records* want to encourage those sorts of records, Hols.”

HOLLY: “No, they’re stupid records, aren’t they, Dad? I’d only ever want to get in *The Guinness Book of World Records* for an accident, I think. Like for something that I didn’t mean to do. You know, for going to Beijing and jumping over the highest high jump or something. That’s the only way I’d want to be famous – where I couldn’t help it.”

WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 17

Trade secrets

HOLLY, reliving the moment when she took the lid off her lunchbox earlier today: “At first I thought it was a chocolate muffin, but then I looked closer and saw it was an old, cold potato from the night before. What was Mum thinking? Has she gone crazy? There was no way I was eating it, Dad. Jade said, ‘Errrr! Yuk! What’s that?’ I said, ‘an old, cold potato from the night before’. She said she’d never eat something as disgusting as that. I don’t even like chocolate muffins, Dad, but at least if it was that, I could have traded it for something else. Chocolate muffins are very easy to get rid of because everyone likes them.”

DAD: “Are they?”

HOLLY: “Yes. But what’s an old, cold potato from the night before good for? Nothing. That’s what. It just went in the bin.”

DAD: “Did it?”

HOLLY: “Yes. Everyone was still staring at it as it dropped out of my hand. I think only Olivia got a worse lunch than me today. Her mum was mad at her so she got an eggplant and mushroom sandwich that she hates. At least it made me feel better.”

What a steal!

ISABELLA, referring to one of her classmates: “She steals rubbers, Dad. Heaps of them. There are heaps of my rubbers in her locker and she thinks it’s a really big secret.”

DAD: “Does she?”

ISABELLA, indignantly: “Yes.”

DAD: “Oh! Well, do you know where her locker is?”

ISABELLA: “Her secret locker?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad. It’s next to mine.”

DAD: “Is it? Well, why don’t you just ask for your rubbers back?”

ISABELLA: “She wouldn’t like that, Dad.”

DAD: “Wouldn’t she?”

ISABELLA: “No.”

DAD: “Why?”

ISABELLA: “Well, they’re in her secret locker now.”

DAD: “Yes, but only because she went and took them off you and put them there. They’re yours. Remember? You should get them back off her.”

ISABELLA: “I know. That’s why I took them back when she wasn’t looking.”

DAD: “Oh, right. Now I see. So, what else does she like to steal? Is it only rubbers?”

ISABELLA: “No, she likes other things, too. She takes the things she really wants, Dad.”

DAD: “Does she? And what kinds of things does she really want?”

ISABELLA: “Oh, toy horses, hats, books, lunches—”

DAD: “Lunches?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, she really likes lunches.”

DAD: “But they’d be other kids’ lunches.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, I know, Dad. But she gets hungrier than the kids the sandwiches were made for.”

DAD: “Is that right?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Okay. But even so, do you think that’s a fair thing for her to do?”

ISABELLA: “No.”

DAD: “So, what should she do then?”

ISABELLA: “Probably steal her food from home instead of school, Dad. Then everyone can be full.”

FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 26

You’d *have* to talk

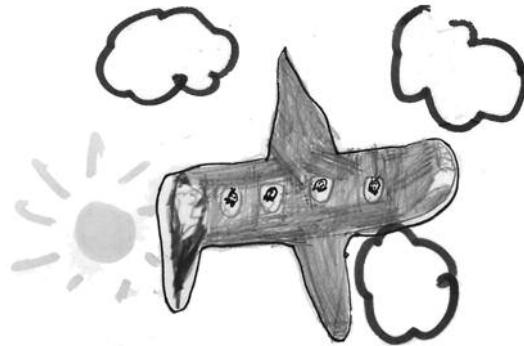
DAD: “Issy, do you think you’ll like work one day?”

ISABELLA: “No. You always have to talk to people even when you don’t want to.”

The trip to Europe

Just for once

ISABELLA, trying to draw our aircraft as we waited for our flight to Paris: “Oh, I keep on doing sharks, Dad. Every time I try and draw a plane it ends up looking like a big, angry shark.”



DAD: “Yes, well, that’s the beauty of art, Issy. A drawing can suddenly turn into something very unexpected.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, well I wish one of my sharks would turn back into a plane for once.”

MONDAY SEPTEMBER 29

Leap of logic

We’d arrived at the Palace of Versailles, just out of Paris, and I was keen for the kids to join Karin and me on a leisurely stroll through the palace’s fine art collection. Holly, Isabella and Amelie, however, had other ideas. They had spotted a pile of stones to play in, which, in the end, managed to occupy them for more than half an hour.

HOLLY, noting my look of mild disappointment: “What’s wrong with rolling down a pile of rocks, Dad?”

DAD: “Nothing, Hols. I didn’t say there was anything wrong with doing it.”

HOLLY: “Yes, you did. I saw it in your face. You looked unhappy.”

DAD: “Oh, did I? No, I was just a little surprised you’d want to play in a mound of stones when there was so much more to see in Versailles. That’s all.”

HOLLY: “C’mon, Dad, roll down the pile of stones with me.”

DAD: “No, I don’t want to.”

HOLLY: “Oh, c’mon.”

DAD: “No, as I said, I don’t feel like it, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Why? Why not, Dad?”

DAD: “Because I’m here to learn about The Palace of Versailles.”

HOLLY: “So? You can still roll down a pile of stones and learn stuff about Versailles at the same time, you know.”

DAD: “Is that so?”

HOLLY: “Yes. Rolling around is good for your brain.”

DAD: “/s it?”

HOLLY: “Well, I’m not sure. I think it might be. It makes you go all dizzy, so it could be good exercise for your brain.”

DAD: “Your logic never ceases to surprise me, Holly.”

HOLLY: “Good. That’s what I want it to do.”

SUNDAY OCTOBER 12. A day of sightseeing in Paris

Dose of reality

HOLLY, after watching *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* that evening: “Dad, I can’t work out why poor kids in movies always have to be so nice. They’re always doing things like selling toys or getting grand awards for ten thousand dollars so they can then give the money to their family or something. You know, they’re always being so good and caring.”

I suspect Holly may have mixed up the story about *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* because her retelling of it varies every time she describes it to me. Holly tends to do that. To make a point, she often joins together some of the characters she’s been reading about or has seen in movies so as to make her case more compelling.

HOLLY: “How can you care all the time? Kids don’t do that. Kids are normally selfish. They’re not always good to their families, they’re not always kind and thoughtful and stuff. Who’s ever heard of a kid being like that? They’d be like Jesus if they went on like that all the time. He was supposed to be always good and caring, wasn’t he? Well, I don’t believe he was like that. He would have

been more like me if he was ever a kid. You know, good and bad. A mixture. He would have definitely said mean things to his mum and dad if he was ever a kid. That's for sure. Just like me and Issy did the other day when we threw stones at you and called you a stupid idiot for not buying us ice creams at Luxembourg Gardens."

DAD: "Yes, and you and Issy got in a lot of trouble for doing that, didn't you?"

HOLLY, ignoring me completely: "And why also are the princesses in *Sleeping Beauty* so thin, Dad? Why do they have such really thin waists for? You know, why aren't some of them – actually a lot of them – fat like people are today? And they're always blonde. Except for Jasmin – she's got black hair – and Aerial who has red hair and Bell who has brown. And I also don't know why they need undies under their dresses for either. Those really big dresses they always wear should easily be enough, I think. And they also never ever fall over. You never see any of them trip over or stub a toe or break a leg. Everyone does those kinds of things eventually. And why are their stories always happily-ever-after stories? They could get taken away like Marie Antoinette did or get run over. But they don't. It's always happy, happy, happy. And you know what also, Dad?"

DAD: "No, tell me, Hols."

HOLLY: "It's a lot easier for a beautiful princess to be kind than it is for an ugly person."

DAD: "Is it?"

HOLLY: "Yes. Because they get lots of jewels and money for doing nothing at all. It's a lot like a biting competition I had with Isabella when she was really little, Dad. I got about fifteen bites on her and made her cry without her getting a single bite on me. That was because I was much bigger than she was."

DAD: "Is that so?"

HOLLY: "Yes."

DAD: "Right then. So, is there anything else about life you don't know yet, Hols?"

HOLLY: "Oh, yes. Heaps. That's why I ask you, Dad."

DAD: "Is that right?"

HOLLY: "Yes. Like I am now."

MONDAY OCTOBER 13. Another day at Disneyland, Paris.

Not on a Disneyland day

DAD, as we were about to leave for Disneyland: “Oh, Issy, can you do the washing up please? I want to leave as soon as possible so we can have a full day at Disneyland.”

ISABELLA: “What? Me? Wash up? On a Disneyland day? No, I could smash things because I’m too excited, Dad, and then what would you do? You’d have to waste a lot of time trying to clean it all up.”



Every beck and call

AMELIE, holding onto a piece of crust after she’d just finished her breakfast: “This is getting very annoying!”

She was expecting someone to take it out of her hand and free her from the inconvenience of having to hold it. That person, though, would not be her dad. Or anyone else if I could help it.

French food in French

ISABELLA: “Mum, I don’t want to go to a restaurant tonight.”

KARIN: “Don’t you, Issy? Why?”

ISABELLA: “Because I never know what to order. It’s always French food in French.”

TUESDAY OCTOBER 14

There must be another brain

ISABELLA, at Walt Disney Studios, after she’d just seen a stunt man fall from a building onto a large, and unmistakably soft, mattress. “Dad, did he die?”

DAD: “No, Issy. He’s waving to us.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, yeah!”

A little while later.

HOLLY, after leaving the Studios: “Dad, all the time you’re walking you don’t know your arms are doing this.” (*Swings arms*)

DAD: “What?”

HOLLY: “Swinging. We must have another brain.”

SATURDAY OCTOBER 18

The painful passage of . . . well, minutes

ISABELLA, after just farewelling Holly, Amelie and Karin at Gare de Nord train station: “I hope these four days go really fast, Dad, because I’m already really missing Mummy, Amie and Holly.”

DAD: “Well, they only will, Issy, if we do lots of fun things. That’s why we’re going to Giverny tomorrow and Rouen the next day. Are you looking forward to that?”

ISABELLA: “Only if it makes Mummy come quicker.”

DAD: “Well, I’m sure it will, Issy, however, that’s really only something you’ll know in two days’ time after you’ve been to those two places. Time, though, seems to go a lot quicker when your mind is busy thinking of other things. Okay?”

ISABELLA: “Does it? How do you know that?”

DAD, unsatisfactorily: “Well, it’s well-known fact.”

ISABELLA: “Is it? So, what happens then to someone who doesn’t do lots of things? Will they have to stay where they are for longer?”

DAD: “Well, not exactly. Time will just pass more slowly for them.”

ISABELLA: “Will it?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “Well, we should do lots of things then.”

DAD: “Yes. Exactly. We should.”

About ten seconds later

ISABELLA: “So, where would Mummy be now?”

DAD: “About ten kilometres nearer to London than she was the last time you asked me where she was.”

ISABELLA: “Ohhh! I miss Mummy, Dad.”

DAD: “Yes, I know you do. You’re one of the best missers I’ve ever come across.”

ISABELLA: “I’d miss you as well if you weren’t here, Dad.”

DAD: “Oh, that’s sweet, Issy. However, let’s think of Paris. After all, it is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, isn’t it?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, but it’s not as much fun as Amie or Holly is.”

DAD: “Isn’t it?”

ISABELLA: “No. Well, except for Disneyland.”

ISABELLA, about an hour later, as I was piggy-backing her along the banks of the Seine: “How much time went by then?”

DAD: “Only an hour, Is.”

ISABELLA: “An hour? Is that all? Three hours should have gone by in that time!”

DAD: “Yes, well you can’t hurry time, Issy. Anyway, can we get off this subject for a while?”

ISABELLA: “Um, alright. But only for a little while because I really miss Mummy, Dad.”

DAD, just slightly annoyed: “Yes, I know that, Issy. You’ve said it more than once, you know.”

Isabella was able to get off that topic for a while. In fact, true to her word, for the next ten to fifteen minutes we talked about anything but where Mum was, including whether leaves could be stuck back on a tree after they'd fallen off instead of 'going all crumple and curvy' to bottoms in the loo.

DAD: "What did you just say, Issy?"

ISABELLA: "I said I'd only miss Disneyland and the other fun park and not all those pictures of bottoms in the loo."

DAD: "Bottoms in the loo? What bottoms in the loo?"

ISABELLA: "Those pictures of bottoms in the museum you went to, Dad. You know, the photos you showed me."

DAD: "Oh, those. The paintings from the Louvre."

ISABELLA: "Yes . . . Dad?"

DAD: "Yes, Issy. But, before you begin, will this also be different to how much you miss Mummy?"

ISABELLA, reassuringly: "Yes, Dad."

DAD: "Good. Alright then. Go ahead."

ISABELLA: "Well, will I have to do the washing and wiping up now?"

DAD: "What do you mean, Is?"

ISABELLA: "Will I have to wash and wipe up now that Holly has gone home?"

DAD: "Oh, no. Don't worry about it. I'll do it."

ISABELLA: "Good. Because I don't think Mum will get Holly to do it at home now that you won't be there to make sure Holly does. That's why it wouldn't be fair if I still had to do it."

DAD: "Wouldn't it? No, I guess it wouldn't. Well, maybe I should send Mum an email to tell her to get Holly to do it."

ISABELLA: "No, that wouldn't work, Dad, because Mum might tell the wrong truth. We wouldn't know for sure."

DAD: “The wrong truth? What’s the wrong truth, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know, Dad. It’s just something that isn’t what happens.”

DAD: “Oh. I see. So, how then is that the truth?”

ISABELLA: “It’s the truth because Mum has said it.”

Karin is no pushover, however, Isabella knows how persistent Holly can be. There are the odd times when Holly has won out over Karin but Karin has told Isabella that Holly hadn’t. This is what Isabella calls the ‘wrong truth’.

Pardon my French

ISABELLA, at Giverny: “Dad, if a little French kid comes up to me and says ‘good morning’ or ‘nice teddy’ or something, I just say back to them ‘je parle anglais’ [I speak English]. That usually gets them away.”

WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 22. **On the long flight home from London**

Why not an ambulance?

DAD, waking Isabella: “Issy, we’re in India. A person is very sick and that’s why we needed to land here instead of going on to Singapore.”

ISABELLA, very drowsy and a bit annoyed: “They should already have ambulances on board, Dad.”

DAD: “What?”

ISABELLA: “They should already have ambulances on the plane.”

DAD: “But where would you put them?”

ISABELLA: “On a seat.”

DAD: “On a seat? But ambulances are huge; they can’t go on a seat. They’re like a big van. You know, like a car.”

ISABELLA: “No, just the people.”

DAD: “What?”

ISABELLA: “I only meant the people.”

DAD: “Oh! You only want the people from the ambulance to be onboard? Like a team of doctors?”

ISABELLA, groggily: “Yes.”

DAD: “Oh, now I see. Would they have to bring all their medical equipment with them?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “What about an operating theatre? Would they need one of those?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Oh, so they’d need all the different instruments to fix people. Is that right?”

Isabella nodded.

DAD: “Right. Well, we’d need quite a big room for them, wouldn’t we?”

ISABELLA: “Hmm-mm.”

DAD: “But who would pay for that?”

ISABELLA, shrugging her shoulders: “I’ll have water when they come around, Dad.”

DAD: “You’ve moved on, haven’t you?”

ISABELLA: “When the crew comes around I’ll just have water.”

DAD: “Yes, I’m sure you will, sweetheart. Sleep well now.”

ISABELLA: “Yes. You, too, Dad.”

Pins and Needles vs Pins and Stitches

ISABELLA, on the flight from New Delhi to Perth and after she'd just watched a video on deep vein thrombosis: "And, Dad, you can also get what I got as well if you're not careful."

DAD: "What's that, Issy? What can I get?"

ISABELLA: "Needles and Stitches. Don't you remember? When I was lying on my leg that time on the flight to Paris . . . No, that wasn't it . . . Oh yeah, Pins and Stitches. No, that's not it. Pins and Needles. Yeah. You'll get Pins and Needles."

DAD: "Yes, well, I suppose that's possible. But don't worry, I'll be careful."

ISABELLA: "Good, because your leg goes all tingly if you do what I did and then you can't walk for a while. Dad?"

DAD: "Yes, Issy."

ISABELLA: "What's the difference between Needles and Pins and Pins and Needles?"

DAD: "Nothing, Is."

ISABELLA: "Alright then, well what about between Needles and Pins and Pins and Stitches?"

DAD: "Very little if anything."

ISABELLA: "Oh, well I think Pins and Stitches would be much worse, Dad. That'd be like having a sewing machine go over you and that would really hurt."

DAD: "Yes, I'm beginning to see what you mean."

ISABELLA: "Good. That's good. Because tingliness is nothing compared to tatta-tatta-tatta on you."

THURSDAY OCTOBER 30

Dreams *and* nightmares

ISABELLA: “Dad, what are dreams made up of?”

DAD: “Um . . . thoughts, I think, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Thoughts?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, so what are thoughts made of, then?”

DAD: “You.”

ISABELLA: “Me?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “Oh. Well, I can’t be cranky much, then.”

DAD: “Can’t you? Why?”

ISABELLA: “Because hardly anyone in my dreams is ever cranky, so *I* can’t be cranky.”

DAD: “Yes, but, as you say, there could still be some people in your dreams that might be cranky and you might see them. See what I mean? Both you and the cranky people could be in there.”

ISABELLA: “Yeah, but they aren’t, Dad. My dreams are only ever happy dreams. It’s my nightmares that have mad people in them.”

SATURDAY NOVEMBER 1

It’s in the legs

DAD, after Isabella said she thought she had no chance of beating her friend, Beth, in an 800-metre Fun Run the next day: “You never know, Issy, you just might beat her.”

ISABELLA: “No. I bet she has big confidence in her, Dad. (*Thinks for a moment*) I might be able to

beat her one day, but that won't be unless she gets bad posture like a granny, I think. Then I might really beat her easily."

DAD: "Oh, Issy. Just try and have confidence in yourself now."

ISABELLA: "But I do, Dad. You just don't understand. Her legs go way up and then way down to the ground. It's impossible."

Too much talk-talk, not enough dong-dong

ISABELLA, referring to her friend Cloe S's piano practice:
"I saw her practice, Dad. It was just one note: dong. That's all she did. One dong and then there was this big, long chat with her teacher about everything she does wrong. (*Unhappily*) I never get to do only one note. I have to go dong, dong, dong, dong, dong for ages before my teacher ever says anything to me. My practice is always dong, dong, dong, dong, talk, talk, dong, dong, dong, dong, talk, talk, dong, dong, dong, dong, talk, talk. Hers is dong, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. She said she's going to quit, Dad."



TUESDAY-THURSDAY NOVEMBER 4-6

The Bluff Knoll trip

From off the dot . . .

Isabella, Amelie and me on our way to Bluff Knoll, about 400kms south-east of Perth.

ISABELLA: "Dad, so Bluff Knoll's not in Perth?"

DAD: "No, Issy."

ISABELLA: "Oh! I thought it was. I thought all this area we're in now was in Perth. You know, on the dot."

DAD: "What?"

ISABELLA: "I thought it was all on the dot."

DAD: “The dot? What dot?”

ISABELLA: “You know. That little black dot on the map for Perth. I thought all of Bluff Knoll was on that dot with Perth.”

DAD: “Oh, no, honey. We’re a long way away from Perth now.”

ISABELLA: “Oh! So, we’re off the dot?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “By much?”

DAD, trying to drive while making quick glances to the back to jab at the map Isabella was looking at: “By this much.”

ISABELLA: “Oh. So, we’re *way* off the dot?”

DAD: “Yes. That’s right, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Oh. Now I’m scared and really miss Mum.”

... to off the planet

We’d just finished a long road trip but still hadn’t found somewhere to stay the night and I was trying to get Isabella and Amelie to brush their teeth.

DAD: “You have to brush your teeth, Amelie.”

ISABELLA: “But, Dad, we’re too tired.”

DAD: “Nonsense, Issy. You are not. Now quickly go and brush them.”

ISABELLA: “But, Dad, what if we can’t find any toothpaste?”

DAD: “Well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Or, in our case, we’ll rummage through all the mess in the car. Right now though—”

ISABELLA: “But, Dad. You don’t understand. We’ve already looked and we can’t find it.”

DAD, convinced it must be there: “Oh, alright. I’ll have a look for it then. It must be in the car somewhere.”

About fifteen minutes later

DAD: “Look, I’ve searched everywhere, Issy, and I can’t find the toothpaste. Just brush your teeth with water. It’ll be okay for one night.”

AMELIE: “No, I want toothpaste.”

DAD: “But we don’t have any, Amelie. And besides, a little earlier on you didn’t even care if you brushed your teeth or not.”

ISABELLA: “Dad, I thought you cared about our teeth.”

DAD: “What? What on earth is all this sudden interest in brushing your teeth all about? As I just said, a little while ago neither you nor Amelie could have cared less about plaque.”

ISABELLA: “What’s plaque, Dad?”

DAD: “It doesn’t matter right now, Issy. I’ll tell you later.”

AMELIE, whimpering: “I need toothpaste, Dad.”

DAD, annoyed and unable to conceal it: “Yes. Alright. I know you do. I can hear you, Amelie. But as I’ve already told you, we don’t have any.”

AMELIE: “Yes we do.”

DAD, exasperatedly: “No we don’t. Well, we did when we started out because I know I packed it, but I’ve now looked everywhere in the car and can’t find it. So we don’t. Got it?”

AMELIE, persistently: “But, Dad, we do.”

DAD: “Where? Where’s the toothpaste, Amelie? Where did you see it?”

AMELIE: “In the bathroom.”

DAD: “In the bathroom? Right. Thanks, Amelie. I’ll check in the bathroom, shall I?”

AMELIE: “No, you can’t. The bathroom isn’t here anymore.”

DAD: “Isn’t it?”

AMELIE: “No.”

DAD, playing along with the madness but nonetheless close to losing it: “Oh, so where is it then?”

AMELIE: “We left it at home.”

DAD: “Someone please shoot me!”

Bluffy would be jealous

ISABELLA, the next day, as she and I stood together and looked up at Bluff Knoll, Western Australia’s second highest peak, just before beginning our ascent: “Dad, there’s one mountain in the world that’s way bigger than Bluff Knoll, you know.”

DAD, feigning ignorance: “Is there, Issy?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Oh, what’s it called?”

ISABELLA: “Mount Everest.”

DAD: “Oh, yes. I think I’ve heard of that mountain before. What does it look like?”

ISABELLA: “Something that’s very big.”

DAD: “Yes. I suppose it would, being big itself.”

ISABELLA: “But don’t worry, Dad. I’m never going to climb it. It’d make Bluffy jealous.”

Snakes and lizards

ISABELLA, on the way up Bluff Knoll: “Dad, I wish Amelie would shut up about her fears. They’re so stupid . . . Snakes that are really just tails; tails that are really just snakes, but aren’t really because they couldn’t be – well, not up here anyway; snakes that run so they’re really only lizards; all those fears are making the mountain take so long, Dad.”

What’s in a name?

ISABELLA, after she had reached the summit of Bluff Knoll and with a look of great apprehension: “Dad, is this rock we’re on solid? I mean, will it stay up while we’re up here?”

DAD, reassuringly: “Oh yes, Isabella. It’s a mountain. Mountains are very safe rocks. All the mountain is doing is wearing away. That’s all.”

ISABELLA: “It’s wearing away? The mountain is wearing away?”

DAD, dispassionately: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, well I hope it doesn’t wear out while we’re up here . . . Dad, does everyone call Bluff Knoll Bluff Knoll?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy. That’s its name.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, I just thought you called it whatever you wanted to. Like we call it Bluffy.”

The Sun and the Moon

ISABELLA, on our way back down Bluff Knoll: “Dad, is the Sun the Moon?”

DAD: “What? No, Issy. They’re separate bodies. Haven’t you ever seen the Moon and the Sun together in the sky before?”

ISABELLA: “No.”

DAD: “Really? Well, I guess that would be because the Moon is very faint when the Sun is out. When the Moon is in the sky during the day, you can only just see it. As it gets dark like it is now, though, the Moon gets brighter, doesn’t it?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Do you know why that is?”

ISABELLA: “No.”

AMELIE: “I do.”

DAD: “Do you, Amie?”

AMELIE, confidently: “Yes.”

DAD: “Alright then. Go ahead.”

AMELIE: “It’s because the sky is getting darker and the Moon wants to stand out.”

DAD: “Well done, Amelie! Well, apart from the Moon having ambition, that is. You got it right. As the Sun sets and loses its brightness the Moon takes over and shines the Sun’s light back to us more brightly than it did when the Sun was higher in the sky.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, so the Moon is not the Sun, but the Moon’s shine is?”

DAD: “Yes. Close enough, Issy. Very good. You listened well.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, I know. But you must have listened well when you were a little kid, too, Dad. You knew all about the Sun and the Moon being different, didn’t you?”

DAD: “Yes. I did.”

ISABELLA: “You’re smart, Dad.”

DAD: “You think so? Thanks. I’m glad you think I am.”

ISABELLA: “Well, other people might think you are, too, Dad. You need to have more confidence in yourself.”

DAD: “I do. Yes. You’re right, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Good. Now go and have it.”

The ocean is *alive*

AMELIE, on my shoulders as we made our way down a rocky track to a tempestuous ocean at Cape Naturaliste on the way home the next day: “Dad, what’s the ocean trying to do? Is it trying to get a whale out?”

DAD: “A whale out? Oh no, sweetheart. I don’t think so.”

AMELIE: “Oh, well is it trying to get itself out, then?”

DAD: “No, I don’t think it’s trying to do that either.”

After five seconds

AMELIE: “Well, what’s it trying to do? It’s being very mad.”

At that point I was busy trying to get a fly out of my eye that had become entangled in a few of my sweaty eyelashes.

DAD: “I’m not sure. I think it’s just being an ocean.”

AMELIE: “Is that what oceans do? Do they bang themselves on rocks all the time?”

DAD: “Yes. I guess they do, Amelie.”

AMELIE, bewildered: “Oh! We’d better not get too close to the ocean, then. Otherwise it might bang us on the rocks.”

Half a minute later

AMELIE, her only reference point being her bath: “Dad, has it got a plug?”

DAD: “What?”

AMELIE: “Has the ocean got a plug?”

DAD: “No.”

AMELIE: “Oh. Well, then, how does it stay up?”

FRIDAY NOVEMBER 7

Baffled

HOLLY, after I explained to her that some girls in her class might begin to show a lot more interest in boys soon, and that a boy might suddenly show interest in her one day: “So, what’s going to happen, Dad? Will they just sneak up on me from behind?”

DAD: “No, not usually, Holly. If he wants to be successful, a boy won’t normally approach a girl that way.”

HOLLY: “Dad, I already know which girls are interested in boys. I hear some of them talking. Actually, did you know all the girls in one of the Year Five classes think you’re hot?”

DAD: “Ye-es. You’ve mentioned that before, Holly, but I wish you hadn’t’ve because that’s quite embarrassing.”

HOLLY: “Yeah, I know. It’s really disgusting, Dad. You’re all old and wrinkly and forty-five. Why would anyone think you’re hot?”

DAD: “I have no idea, Hols.”

HOLLY: “I mean, I like you as my dad. You’re a great dad. But I don’t know how anyone could think you’re attractive.”

DAD: “One day, I promise I’ll learn to understand just how much of a compliment that is. I really mean that. However, right now, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll just remain somewhere between amusement and bemusement.”

HOLLY: “Yeah, that’s alright, Dad, because I’m amused, too, at how some kids can go on and on about my wrinkly old dad.”

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 11

Came in third, I think

DAD: “So, tell me, Issy, what did you learn today at school about Remembrance Day?”

ISABELLA: “Well, we were on the Big Oval and the Year Sixes – no it was Mrs Terry, I think – said to think about who was in the war and how they saved our country from being hurt and stuff or

taken over by Americans or something. Oh, and we also had to think about how they went and died for us. Then the music went on and then there was some silence and then the music came back on again.”

DAD: “What was the silence about?”

ISABELLA: “It was about thinking how the war happened and how it would feel to be there.”

DAD: “What did you think about?”

ISABELLA: “I just thought about how it would be to be in war.”

DAD: “And what did you imagine?”

ISABELLA: “I imagined bombs and ships coming over and bombs coming out of aeroplanes and aeroplanes all in the air and people being hurt everywhere and big ships with people shooting.”

DAD: “Oh, so whom did we fight against?”

ISABELLA: “All countries.”

DAD: “Did we? Did we fight against all countries?”

ISABELLA: “Yep.”

DAD: “Really? Do you remember any of them?”

ISABELLA: “America, Africa I think, um, Tasmania and I’m not sure what else.”

DAD: “Do you think we won the war?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know; I wasn’t there . . . I think we came third or something. Third or second.”

THURSDAY NOVEMBER 20

The hopeless brain

ISABELLA: “Mum, can we have Faye over?”

KARIN: “Sure, Issy. We can have her over in the holidays.”

ISABELLA: “No, we can’t.”

KARIN: “Can’t we? Why?”

ISABELLA: “Because she’s going away.”

KARIN: “Is she? When?”

ISABELLA: “On Tuesday and Wednesday, I think.”

KARIN: “Oh well, I think we can work around those two days. The holidays go for about seven weeks.”

ISABELLA: “Do they?”

KARIN: “Yes.”

ISABELLA, delightedly: “Oh! So, we can have her over and other kids over and anyone we want over, then.”

DAD, abruptly bringing to an end any expectation she had of forty-odd days of non-stop play with every kid she’s ever known: “No, not quite.”

ISABELLA: “No. We’d probably run out of days eventually, wouldn’t we?”

DAD: “Either that, or I’d lose my mind.”

ISABELLA: “Would you? Why would you want to do that for, Dad?”

DAD: “Well, I wouldn’t want that to happen, Issy. But I fear it would, after having every kid you know over in the holidays.”

ISABELLA: “No, it wouldn’t, Dad.”

DAD: “Yes, I’m afraid it would.”

ISABELLA: “Well, who, then, would you like me to leave out?”

DAD: “Most of them, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “But that would be too many. ‘Most’ is so much. How many does your brain want, Dad?”

DAD, letting my eyes point up momentarily to indicate that I’d checked with my brain first: “Oh, about three.”

ISABELLA: “Three?”

DAD: “Yes, three. My brain could handle three, I think.”

ISABELLA: “You have a really hopeless brain, Dad. Really hopeless!”

Sirens, and when to use them

Holly, Isabella and I were on a footpath at the intersection of South Terrace and the very busy Canning Highway, waiting for the Man to turn green. Next to us was a police car, siren blaring, about to speed through the intersection and, of all things, a red light.

ISABELLA: “Dad! Dad! A red light.”

DAD: “Yes, I know, Isabella. It’s a police car. They can go through them in an emergency.”

HOLLY, looking at the back of the police car as it sped off in the distance: “Dad, do you think it’ll crash?”

DAD: “I have no idea. I hope not.”

HOLLY, unconvincingly: “Yeah, me, too.”

ISABELLA: “Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Issy. What is it?”

ISABELLA: “Is there anything a puppy might do that would put a siren on a police car?”

DAD: “What? What are you talking about?”

ISABELLA: “Well, if a puppy was hurt, would a police car go to it? Would it rush through a red light with a siren on if it was bleeding somewhere?”

DAD: “You mean, would it go through a red light risking the lives of humans, don’t you?”

ISABELLA: “Yes, Dad.”

DAD: “No, not a chance.”

ISABELLA: “Are you sure?”

DAD: “I’m very sure. What about you, though? Is there anything you can imagine a police car rushing to that involved a puppy?”

ISABELLA, disappointedly: “No, not really.”

DAD: “Well, keep trying, Issy. I can’t think of anything that would be serious enough for a siren, but maybe you can.”

ISABELLA, as we took the first left available and got away from all the noise on Canning Highway: “I know, Dad. Maybe a dog could be caught in a fire and can’t find a way out. Or, it could have its two back legs broken. Or, all its legs broken.”

DAD: “Yes. All those things are terribly sad, Issy, but none of them make a police car speed through a traffic light. Well, except if there was a fire. A police car would probably go to that emergency but it wouldn’t be to rescue the dog.”

ISABELLA: “Well, what if a puppy bit someone? Would the police go to that with a siren on?”

DAD: “No. Probably not. Puppies aren’t generally very good at biting so a puppy bite probably wouldn’t do it.”

Isabella appeared to be quite let down by that.

DAD: “Don’t worry, Issy. I’d go to a puppy that was in need of rescuing.”

ISABELLA: “Would you, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, definitely. I hate anything suffering.”

ISABELLA: “Yes. Me, too. Animals hurt as much as people do, don’t they?”

DAD: “Yes, in most cases, they do. Well done, Is. You’d make a good Doctor Dolittle.”

ISABELLA: “Who’s he again? Oh yeah, that’s right. He’s the man from the book, isn’t he?”

DAD: “Yes, honey.”

ISABELLA: “I like him.”

DAD: “Yes. So did I when I was little.”

THURSDAY NOVEMBER 27

Favourite time

ISABELLA: “Dad, I love my teacher.”

DAD: “Do you?”

ISABELLA: “Yes. I’ve learnt more this year than I was ever even supposed to learn.”

DAD: “Have you?”

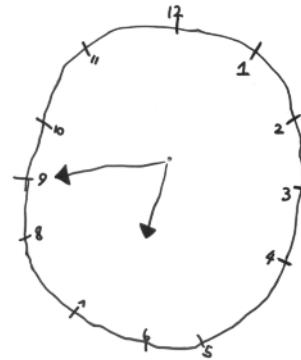
ISABELLA: “Yes. In Year Two you’re only supposed to learn o’clocks but I’ve learnt so much more. Every kid has.”

DAD: “Have you?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Like what?”

ISABELLA: “Well, I now know quarter-pasts and half-pasts and even three-quarters past six. That’s my favourite.”



TUESDAY DECEMBER 2

Even in the Olden Olden Days

ISABELLA, as she and I rode our bikes to school: “Dad, did you ever have buses when you were little?”

DAD: “Buses? You mean like school buses?”

ISABELLA: “Yes.”

DAD: “Of course we did, Issy.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, because Sophie said that in the Olden Days there weren’t any buses.”

DAD: “Did she? Well, she’s wrong, Issy. Very wrong. There were in my Olden Days.”

ISABELLA: “I knew it. I’ve been telling her that for ages, Dad, but she’s always said no and that’s made our Olden Days game so boring because we can never go anywhere. Did you have excursions when you were little, too, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes.”

ISABELLA: “I knew that, too. She thought kids didn’t used to have excursions.”

DAD: “Well, you can tell her from me that buses and excursions were as common as sandwiches and lunchboxes. And they were when Grandma and Pa and Nona and Popi were little, too.”

ISABELLA: “They weren’t!”

DAD: “Yes, they were.”

ISABELLA: “In the Olden Olden Days?”

DAD: “Yes, in the Olden Olden Days.”

ISABELLA: “Ohhh!”

SUNDAY DECEMBER 7

Finding her voice

For no fewer than ten days running, Isabella had been trying to give a little end-of-year card and gift to her teacher. On some days she even attempted to hand it to her more than once. She'd never done such a thing before and it made her very nervous.

DAD, catching Isabella after she had dumped her school bag and was walking away from the dining room table: "Isabella. It's still in your bag!"

ISABELLA: "Yes, I know that, Dad."

DAD: "Well, why don't you just give the card to your teacher, sweetheart?"

ISABELLA, a little cantankerously: "Because every time I go to do it something happens and I end up putting it back in my bag."

DAD: "Do you? Okay. Well, what happened today?"

ISABELLA: "Well, I said to Miss Keeley I had something for her but she told me to put it out the back in the Art Room. She just couldn't get it that I had a present for her. She just thought I had made something to do with Art."

DAD: "Oh, Issy. You should have said you had a card for her."

ISABELLA: "I tried to, Dad. But my voice was little because Fleur started to talk louder than my sound was."

Two days later

DAD, on the last day of the school year: "So, did you give your teacher her present this time, Issy? I hope so because today was your last chance."

ISABELLA, assertively: "Yes."

DAD: "Really, Issy?"

She took one look at me and then ran as fast as she could for the backyard so she could play on a swing. I'll never know for sure if she did finally find her voice on that last day of school. However,

one thing's for sure: once in the backyard, she certainly rediscovered the volume she had last summer holidays.

ISABELLA, yelling: "DAD! DAD! DAD! Holly just pushed me down the ladder again. Please Dad, you have to stop her."

THURSDAY DECEMBER 11

How to repel boys

HOLLY: "Dad, it's really weird."

DAD: "Is it, Hols? What's really weird?"

HOLLY: "Well, I don't have a boyfriend but there's a boy who likes me."

DAD: "Is there? Yes, well, that can happen, Hols. Quite a lot, in fact. Sometimes one person likes another person but the other person isn't that keen on them."

HOLLY: "Yeah, I know. It's just that Annie and I can't understand why he feels that way about us."

DAD: "Annie *and* you?"

HOLLY: "Yes."

DAD: "Oh, so are you trying to tell me he likes the both of you?"

HOLLY, rather matter-of-factly: "Yes, Dad. And twelve other girls, as well."

DAD: "Twelve other girls? He likes twelve other girls?"

HOLLY: "Yeah. Annie and I have seen his list. The bad part is we're unfortunately at the top of his stupid list."

DAD: "Oh, now I see. So, the boy has a cricket team of girls in reserve just in case it doesn't work out with you two."

HOLLY: "Yeah, I guess so. But he's a nut."

DAD, facetiously: "Oh, that's sweet, honey."

HOLLY: “‘Sweet, honey’. Hah! You just said ‘sweet honey’. That’s really funny, Dad, because honey is already sweet.”

DAD: “Yes, I know it is, Hols. You’re right. “But I was only trying—”

HOLLY: “Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Calling someone a nut isn’t really sweet, you know. ‘Nutty’ just means being silly.”

DAD: “Yes, I know that, Hols. I was only jok—”

HOLLY: “We don’t want him to think we think he’s sweet, you know.”

DAD: “Yes, I know that. But I was only—”

HOLLY: “And we don’t want to be sweet around him.”

DAD: “No, I know you don’t want that either.”

HOLLY: “That’s why I wear awful baggy clothes when he’s around.”

DAD: “Do you?”

HOLLY: “Yes. Annie said he thinks I’m pretty, so I don’t want to look even a little bit pretty. I can’t understand it, Dad. I put baggy clothes on; I don’t comb my hair and so it’s all really knotty; I hardly ever even have much of a bath. So, how can he possibly still like me? It’s really stupid. Annie and I try our hardest to be as smelly and awful as we can to get off his list, but I think all that does is make us more like a boy, which he probably likes.”

DAD: “I think you’ve done all you can, Hols.”

HOLLY: “Yes, so do I. I mean to really get rid of him we even end up talking about tea parties, nail polish and fairies when he’s around. You know, girl stuff.”

DAD: “And does it work? Does he end up going then?”

HOLLY: “Oh, yes. He’s into Pokémon, so he hates it. Boys are so easy to keep away if you really put your mind to it, Dad.”

Or else what?

ISABELLA: “. . . Or what? What will happen?”

DAD: “It doesn’t matter what will happen. Just be certain that something you won’t like will happen, Issy. That should be enough for you.”

ISABELLA: “But why won’t you say, Dad? I still want to know. I want to know if I still shouldn’t do it.”

DAD: “What?”

ISABELLA: “Well, if I don’t know what’s going to happen to me I won’t be able to decide if it’s a big problem or not.”

DAD: “As I was saying, Issy, it’ll be enough of a problem for you, alright? I promise.”

ISABELLA: “Yes, I know that’s what you keep on telling me, but why don’t you just say what it is?”

DAD, with a heavy sigh: “Oh, alright. I’ll put you in the toilet for ten minutes if you don’t return that plank you brought inside to use as a slippery dip.”

ISABELLA: “Which one?”

DAD: “What?”

ISABELLA: “Which toilet?”

DAD: “Which toilet? Why does it matter?”

ISABELLA: “Well, one of the toilets is darker than the other one, so I won’t be as scared in the lighter one.”

DAD: “It’ll be the dark one.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, alright then. I’ll do it just after this next slide.”

MONDAY DECEMBER 15

What hospitals are good for

Only a child who is well could say this.

HOLLY, after she'd just finished visiting her grandfather in hospital: "I love hospitals, Dad. There are so many passageways to run through."

TUESDAY DECEMBER 16

Waste of a good car

HOLLY, after she'd just passed a car yard full of cars for sale: "It's such a shame they have to waste good cars by putting those big numbers all over their windcreens, isn't it, Mum? Like that car over there with \$6,999 on its windscreen. Why would they go and do that for?"



WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 25

Lucky guess

ISABELLA, laughing uproariously: "Dad, you should have seen it. I put Holly's pretend snake she got for Christmas around Amelie's neck and she—"

DAD, through gritted teeth: "Let out a blood-curdling scream that even people trying to sleep off their Christmas dinner three blocks away could have heard?"

ISABELLA: "Yes, how did you know?"

DAD: "Lucky guess, Is. Lucky guess."

SUNDAY DECEMBER 28

Taller than myself

ISABELLA, measuring herself against an old mark she'd made on one of the supports beneath the archway to our kitchen: "Look, Dad! I'm tall. I'm taller than myself."

The ever-est of them all

ISABELLA: "Holly, why is Mount Everest called 'Everest'?"

HOLLY, self-assuredly: "Because, Issy, it goes on forever. It's obvious because it's in its name."

ISABELLA: "What is?"

HOLLY: "The word 'ever'. It's in 'Everest'."

ISABELLA, happily taken aback: "Oh yeah! You mean like as in the 'everest mountain'? It's everest high or something?"

HOLLY: "Yeah."

ISABELLA: "Oh. Then 'everest' means the most ever, doesn't it?"

HOLLY: "Yes. That's what '-est' on the end of 'ever' means, Is. The most ever."

ISABELLA: "Does it?"

HOLLY: "Yes."

ISABELLA: "Oh."



HOLLY, ISABELLA AND AMELIE

Over the past seven years, David Broadbent has recorded numerous conversations with his three daughters and chosen a few hundred to reflect a little of that sometimes elusive butterfly we call childhood. A time of wonder, simplicity and, above all, sheer unadulterated fun. If you've ever wanted a refreshing glimpse of a time free of spin, welcome to the tell-it-like-it-is world of Holly, Isabella and Amelie. Maybe, just maybe it'll rub off on you.

**It's not alright if it's a race,
but you can if it's a test, Dad.**

HOLLY ON WHEN YOU CAN AND CAN'T CHEAT

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