

extra fingers

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I blame the Wizard

The movies have a lot to answer for, don't they?

ISABELLA, as the rain and wind lashed and repeatedly shook her bedroom window: "What's the hardest wind that's ever been?"

DAD: "What's the what?"

ISABELLA: "The hardest wind that there's ever been in the world?"

DAD: "Oh, I don't know."

ISABELLA: "That you know of."

DAD: "Oh, um, well, it was probably a wind that I once heard about that blew at a force of between three and four hundred kilometres an hour."

ISABELLA: "Is that really, really hard?"

DAD: "Oh, yeah!"

ISABELLA: "What can it do?"

DAD: "Well, it can rip the roof off your house."

ISABELLA: "Oh! And then what would you do? What would be left of your house then?"

DAD: "A wind like that can completely destroy a house."

ISABELLA: "And can it hurt you?"

DAD: "Well, walls could crash on you."

ISABELLA: "Can it blow you away?"

DAD: "Um, yes."

ISABELLA: "What? Where would you go?"

DAD: "Well, you'd go wherever the wind blew you."

ISABELLA: "So, it could blow you into the sea with the sharks?"

DAD: "Well, yeah. It always has to be sharks being the most awful thing, hasn't it?"

ISABELLA, ignoring the impudence: "And killer whales?"

DAD: "Yeah, but, Is, why does it always have to be about sharks? It always has to finish with sharks being the worst thing ever."

ISABELLA: "Okay, doesn't matter."

DAD: "Because that sort of wind itself would probably whip you up and run you into a solid object like a wall and that would kill you — well before you'd get to a shark."

ISABELLA: "Phew!"

DAD: "What! You're happy? You've just been—"

ISABELLA: "As long as I don't go to a shark."

DAD: "Oh, look! You'd be so happy if you could just not be where the wind was. You know, you were able to avoid it. Once you're in that wind, it's all over. You'll die from either something falling on you or—"

ISABELLA: "But what if it just suddenly stopped? Just before you went onto a wall?"

DAD: "They don't suddenly stop like that, darl."

ISABELLA: "And then you were, like, 'oh yeah!' And then you run to your grandma's house in New York or whatever."

I have no idea why she chose New York, given that her grandmothers live in NSW and Western Australia.

ISABELLA, moving right along: "Dad, would there be sharks, or stingrays, in the waves that are coming towards you?"

DAD: "Well . . ."

ISABELLA: "Would you see a shark or a stingray going 'aaahhh!' down a wave and then crash on the shore?"

DAD: "Well, not likely, hun. They wouldn't be caught up in the wave."

ISABELLA: "So, they'd be safe in the water?"

DAD: "Yeah."

ISABELLA: "I guess sharks and stuff that live in the sea don't get much that happens to them. As in, like, natural disasters. You know, they don't get floods, they don't get fire, they don't get hurricanes, they don't get twisters, they don't get tsunamis, they don't get, like, bushfires or nothing like that. They just get nothing! Because they own the water. And they're safe. Well, could a hurricane pick up things in the sea?"

DAD: "Um . . . not really. No."

ISABELLA, a little frustrated: "Well, then they definitely don't get hurricanes. But, Dad? Can a hurricane pick you up?"

DAD: "The extremely powerful ones could do that. But they have to be huge."

ISABELLA: "So they pick you up and throw you back down?"

DAD: "Well—"

ISABELLA: "Can it fly you? It would be cool because then you'd be, like, sort of flying."

DAD: "Where?"

I was a little perplexed at this point because, in the space of just a minute, Isabella had left behind sharks that could eat her and the relative safety you'd expect to find in an ocean during a natural disaster so she could enjoy the experience of flight by catching a ride on a hurricane.

ISABELLA: "You'd be flying because it would be picking you up."

DAD: "Yeah, but not gently, darl. Really roughly."

ISABELLA: "No, but everyone would be getting videos of you going 'shwoo, shwoo'. And the hurricane's going 'shwoo, shwoo' too. And everyone's going 'click, click, click, click, click.'"

DAD: "What's the 'click, click, click, click, click'?"

ISABELLA: "The camera."

DAD: "Oh, right."

ISABELLA: "Because the hurricane would be going for that person [the person flying about, presumably], not the other people."

DAD: "What do you mean the hurricane would be going for?"

ISABELLA: "It would be going for that person."

DAD: "It hasn't got a brain, darl."

ISABELLA: "No, I know. But it only goes for one person."

DAD: "A hurricane?"

ISABELLA: "Hmm."

DAD: “No, it doesn’t. It can kill lots of people. It’s a big massive wind.”

ISABELLA: “Oh.”

I blame ‘The Wizard of Oz’ for that last part.

But I don’t even know them!

Every now and then – typically when a friend is either having a birthday, is convalescing after an illness, or has achieved something of note – I like to have one of the children contribute a drawing or some words to a card I’m sending because I think people often prefer the words of children over the platitudinous phrases you ordinarily find on greeting cards. This was a recent response from Isabella after I’d asked her to draw something for someone she didn’t know.

ISABELLA, dispiritedly: “Oh, Dad! You’re always getting me to do cards for people I don’t know. I’ll be doing one for Bruce and Bob next – whoever they might be!”

You should do this, Dad

AMELIE, as she climbed up my back and then slid down: “You should do this, Dad. On someone like you.”

All’s well that ends when Isabella says it does

AMELIE, about to make a ‘get well’ card for one of her friend’s mum: “Is it her birthday?”

DAD: “No, no. She’s had open heart surgery.”

AMELIE: “Is she dead?”

DAD: “No, because then we wouldn’t be sending her a card, would we? This is a card to make her feel better.”

ISABELLA, interrupting: “It won’t even make her feel better, Amie. She’s just going to chuck it in the bin.”

DAD: “No, she’s not going to chuck it in the bin. She’s going to treasure it.”

AMELIE, a little later on: “‘Well’s’ done, Dad. I’ve done ‘well’. What’s after that? ‘Done’?”

ISABELLA, interrupting again: “No, she’s sick, Amelie. As if it would be ‘done’. ‘Well done’ is for awards.”

When it suits, she’s all ears

We were only about five kilometres from home on our way to York in the school holidays, not time enough you would think to really get hungry. But above any number of competing sounds in the car, including three kids all trying desperately to speak over the top of each other, the drone of a car engine and the ten o’clock news, Isabella managed to pick out the faint crackling sound a surreptitious hand makes when it’s trying to sneak into a packet of something very edible.

ISABELLA: “Mum, can I have some too?”

KARIN: “What?”

ISABELLA: “Those chips you’re getting. Can I have some as well?”

KARIN, hoping she’d lose interest: “But they’re just cashews.”

ISABELLA: “Okay. They’ll do.”

However, it’s very selective, her hearing. To test it, I decided to rummage through a packet of green beans the following morning to see if she’d say anything. Nothing. Not a word. Natural selection, I’m assuming, has already equipped her, and perhaps all children, with the ability to tell apart the sound of two different types of plastic. Or perhaps she already knew it was unlikely I’d have something unhealthy such as chips or lollies. Most likely the latter.

Not again!

ISABELLA, cynically, upon us arriving in York and her noticing it was only a very small town: "Out in the middle of basically nowhere again, I presume."

That's just the sort of family we are, I suppose

ISABELLA, commenting on the state of our car as we were unpacking: "Everything in our car is always dusty and grubby. (*To Holly*) That's just the sort of family we are I suppose."

HOLLY: "Yeah, I know. I don't know why that is."

ISABELLA: "I do. It's Dad."

Discussing 'war' with Isabella

ISABELLA: "Why don't they [the people who want to go to war] have, like, two countries 'versing' another two countries? Why don't they have France and London, and Germany and Italy and stuff like that? And then they all fight. Like, Germany and Italy would be on a team, France and London would be on a team, and Australia and someone else would be on a team, right? And then they go, and these teams would (*makes the sound of a gun firing*) 'pitchoo' each other, which means 'kill', and then the other team would 'pitchoo' each other. And then Australia and the other people would kill them as well. Because what if you had a friend in another country?"

She lost me at this point, nevertheless I decided to play along in the best way I knew how.

DAD: "Yeah, well, that would be difficult, wouldn't it?"

ISABELLA: "Yes. To do that [go to war] against their country."

DAD: "Yes, but, you're talking about war as though it's just something that has to happen

and you might as well come up with some rules to make it work better. That's what it sounds like. Is that what you're trying to say? Is that what you think war is?"

ISABELLA: "Well, Dad, in the war [she was referring to World War One], did they vote whether they wanted to do it or not?"

DAD: "No. No, they didn't. The people who were in charge of each country, like the government or in some cases the monarchy, just said, well, like it or not people, we're at war now and, um, . . . in a lot of cases they didn't make you join up; they said, 'Look! Will you volunteer?' Sometimes they would make you join up and that's called conscription. But quite often they had a lot of people willing to fight because often the governments of each particular country would say how bad the enemy was; they'd say you must fight these people because they're really bad; those Germans kill their own babies and they're going to come in here and try and take our land off us. Let's defend our country against these vile people. And, a lot of the times, it was really exaggerated or completely made up. But the people, because that's all they got told, that's all they could listen to or see, believed it."

ISABELLA: "But, um, who came first in World War One?"

Isabella was unable to get past the idea that there had to be a country that took out first place.

DAD: "Well, it's not a case of people just coming up with an idea that, okay, we're due for a war so we'd better make up some rules about who's going to go against who. It's not like a sporting match. Is that what think? That it's like that?"

ISABELLA: "Well, I thought they just got into teams and they foughted (sic)."

DAD: "Right. No, they don't, darl. They don't do it like that."

ISABELLA: "So, they don't say you're on my team and you're on my team and—"

DAD: "Well, they sort of do do that. They're called alliances. But, it's not like that. You're thinking it's like, 'okay, it's time for a war'. You're thinking a bit like that, aren't you?"

ISABELLA: "Yeah. Of course I am!"

DAD: "So, you think that's what happens?"

ISABELLA: "Yeah. Because if they don't have a war for a long time then they get one and say that they need to have one."

DAD: "But why would they do that for?"

ISABELLA: "Because they hate each other?"

DAD: "So, you think all the hatred builds up after a while and they need to do something with all that hatred and so they have a good war?"

ISABELLA: "Yep."

DAD: "And that fixes it for a while?"

ISABELLA: "Yep."