

extra fingers

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Just listen to a story

ISABELLA, concerning our house insurance policy that was due for renewal soon: "So if there's a fire, they'll stop it, right?"

DAD: "No."

ISABELLA: "What? Well why are you paying them?"

DAD: "I'm paying them in case there is a fire. That's what insurance means: in case of."

ISABELLA: "But a fire hardly ever happens. You're paying for something that probably won't happen. How much do you have to pay?"

DAD: "\$391."

ISABELLA: "What! \$391?"

DAD: "Yes, it's for my peace of mind apparently."

ISABELLA: "But that's so much."

DAD: "Well, not really."

ISABELLA: "Yes it is. And you're paying all that for what? Peace of . . . what was that you were saying again?"

DAD: "Mind."

ISABELLA: "Mind? What does that mean?"

DAD: "It means I'll be able to sleep more easily at night knowing that someone will pay for a new house if our house gets burnt down or a raging river or an earthquake destroys it."

ISABELLA: "Dad, listen. Just listen to me for a sec. You need a story. Before you go to sleep at night, you need to listen to a story. That's what I do and I always sleep really well. Stories make you forget all about houses and things like that. You go to fun lands where houses are free and people can do anything. An old burnt down house is nothing when you're in the middle of a story."

Sound familial?

ISABELLA to Amelie, after Amelie had just scratched Isabella on the arm and it had left a long, red mark: "When I'm older I'm going to show my children this mark."

AMELIE: "Yeah, well, they won't be able to see it because it'll be all gone."

ISABELLA, persisting but with initial hesitation: "Yeah, well . . . that's what you think. And in any case, I'm still going to tell them the stories [of her childhood]."

AMELIE: "Yeah, well, I'll get my own stories. I'll tell my children other stories and then they can tell your children what my stories are and that will . . ."

ISABELLA: "Lead to a big fight."

DAD, stepping in: "Yes, precisely. So what should you do, girls, so that doesn't happen?"

ISABELLA, after a little while: "Not tell stories?"

DAD: "Well, you can tell stories. You just need to make them honest ones. You know, ones that take in Amelie's side of the story as well as your own."

ISABELLA: “Oh, Dad. She hasn’t got a side. Unless you count her side of the story to be a big fat lie.”

DAD, tapering off because he had to answer the telephone: “I’m just saying, that’s all. You need to think about your sister’s point of view as well.”

Two minutes later . . .

AMELIE: “Dad, Issy’s crying.”

DAD, curtly, as he was beginning to lose his patience: “Why?”

AMELIE: “Because she punched me.”

DAD: “What?”

AMELIE: “She punched me.”

DAD: “She punched you? Well, how did that make her cry? You should have been the one crying. (*Yelling out*) Isabella!”

AMELIE, innocently: “I know.”

ISABELLA, still whimpering: “She kicked me first, Dad. *Really* hard.”

DAD: “Did you? Is that true what Isabella is saying? Did you really kick her first? And really hard?”

Amelie: “Dad, you don’t understand. I had to kick her because . . . because . . . oh, why do I always have to explain? We kick and scratch. It’s what we always end up doing after a while. We’re sisters!”

How can I sleep when I can’t stop wriggling?

AMELIE, four days before going to Sydney and about to fall asleep: “But, Dad. How can I sleep when I can’t stop wriggling because it’s nearly Sydney?”

DAD: “You can’t stop wriggling?”

AMELIE: “Yeah. That always happens to me

[when excited about something]. My toes are the worst. They’re the worst wriggling bits of my body. They’re always going.”

Resting on one’s laurels

ISABELLA, concerning all the times she’s been made to run around the block or ride to school: “I’m going to have a huge rest when I’m older.”

A long snorkel might work

AMELIE, on the way to school on Wednesday: “Dad, how many cars are there in the world?”

DAD: “Oh, who knows, Amelie. But it would be millions.”

AMELIE: “Would it? What about buses? How many buses are there?”

DAD: “Less. But still lots. There’d be lots of them.”

AMELIE: “And what about people and exhaust pipes?”

DAD: “Six billion and, who knows.”

AMELIE, a few seconds later: “Dad, what do poor people catch if they don’t have buses or cars to ride in?”

DAD: “Well, in that case, they’d have to walk or run to places.”

AMELIE: “So, they’d just end up catching their feet because their feet would always be going? Is that what they’d do?”

DAD: “Yes.”

AMELIE: “But that’s so easy. Feet are so easy to catch. You wouldn’t even need petrol or a driver’s licence. You’d just fill up your feet with breakfast and blood and then you’re walking or running. I could go down the shops like that. But I wouldn’t go to another country that way.”

DAD: "Wouldn't you?"

AMELIE: "No. You'd drown. (*Thinking out loud*) Unless you got a long snorkel."

Unlimited interpretation

HOLLY, referring to one part of her teacher's assessment of her English paper: "Oh, I thought it said 'united'."

DAD: "You thought 'limited' understanding said 'united'?"

HOLLY: "Yeah. That's why I was rather happy with what he thought of my Part B."

Never over-promise

HOLLY: "Dad, I was remembering just then a day from when I was in Year Two."

DAD: "Were you?"

HOLLY: "Yeah. I was so excited that particular day that I actually skipped to school. You know why?"

DAD: "No."

HOLLY: "Well, the teacher, Miss Keeley, said that we were going to make rain. I was so excited because I actually thought we were going to do that. All it ended up being though was a kettle, a spoon and some water. What we had to do was pour water into the kettle and then boil it so that it made steam and when the steam hit the spoon, which was put over the steam, water would form on it and then drip off. That was when I knew things might not end up being exciting even if they sound like they might be. I think it was also the last day I skipped to school. I'm not sure, but I think so."

There goes the neighbourhood

HOLLY, referring to her friend, Olivia: "She likes her house, but there's a vagrant that lives nearby."

DAD: "Is there?"

HOLLY: "Yeah. He lives in a bush."

ISABELLA: "That's not very good. A little kid like Amelie could make friends with him."

HOLLY: "Yeah. Daniel [Olivia's six-year-old brother] tried to find him one day. He went with sticks to poke him. But he'd gone out for the day."

ISABELLA: "Hey! Maybe he's really rich and just wants to save money and get even richer by living in a bush. It's possible."

Skinny up time

ISABELLA, at Glenrock Lagoon in Newcastle, as we were about to go through a narrow section of rock: "Skinny up everyone."

Like father, like son

ISABELLA to Holly, in Newcastle: "I know where Dad gets his hands-in-his-pockets from. Look at Pa! He does it too."

Yawns plus

ISABELLA, at Merewether Beach: "Sometimes my yawns come with music. Sometimes when I breathe out when I'm yawning the song that's in my head comes out too."

All I ever do

I'd arranged to meet up with a friend in Sydney I hadn't seen in about five years who I first met in Vancouver around twenty years ago.

HOLLY, in a tone that left no doubt she was unenthusiastic to be coming along: "All you ever do, Dad, is meet people in Vancouver and then ring them up after nine years to see if you can come over. They're going to get really sick of you soon and who'd blame them. They're going to wish they never met you."

ISABELLA, adding to the lack of enthusiasm: "Yeah, well, all I know is I want to go as soon as we get there."