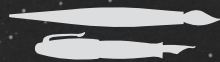


LISA THOMPSON

THE  
LIGHT  
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SCHOLASTIC PRESS • NEW YORK

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First published in the United Kingdom in 2018 by Scholastic UK Ltd., Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street, London NW1 1DB.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-21630-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, February 2019

*Book design by Chris Stengel*

## CHAPTER I

# THE NONHOLIDAY

I love Mum's tunnel-singing trick.

She always did it when she drove us to Grandma's for one of her Sunday lunches. In the car, Mum would put the radio on and we'd both sing along to whatever was playing, although I'd usually have to make up the words. We had to go through a long gray tunnel on the way there, and when we drove into it, the music would go all crackly and fizzy and then disappear altogether. I'd stop singing, but Mum would just keep going. I'd watch her from the back seat as she lifted her chin and shook her head to make the high notes go wobbly. The tunnel would go on and on and on, but Mum wouldn't stop and then . . . *whoosh*, we'd come out into the daylight, the radio would come back on, and Mum would be singing in *exactly* the right place. I'd clap and she'd laugh.

She hadn't done it on this journey yet, even though we'd already been through a long tunnel. The radio was on, but this time Mum wasn't singing. She was too busy looking into her rear-view mirror every few seconds at the dark road behind us.

"Why are we leaving now?" I said. "Couldn't we have waited until the morning?"

Mum switched the windshield wipers on, and they creaked slowly across the glass as if they'd just been woken up too.

“We want to beat the rush hour, don’t we?”

She looked at me in the rearview mirror and her eyes crinkled like she was giving me a big smile, but I wasn’t sure as I couldn’t see what the rest of her face was doing. She was acting like we were going on holiday, but it was pretty obvious we weren’t. First, we only had two small bags and my backpack with us, and you need far more than that for a holiday. And second, I’d only known we were going away when she shook me awake at one in the morning saying we had to leave right now. This definitely wasn’t like any holiday I’d ever been on. She’d stood by the window, watching the street while I quickly packed a few things, still half-asleep. I knew she was looking out for Gary even though he was away on a business trip and not due back until the next morning. We went downstairs in the dark, and Mum put our bags into the trunk of a car that was parked outside. I’d spotted it near our house when I’d come home from school. There was a sticker in the back window advertising a rental company, and I’d guessed it belonged to one of our neighbors. Mum didn’t have her car anymore. Gary told her they didn’t need two cars after he moved in.

I gave a big yawn as I looked out the window on to the wet road. The clock on the radio said 2:55 a.m. Nearly three in the morning. I don’t think I’ve ever been awake at three in the morning in my whole life. I was awake at two once, on a New Year’s Eve. We weren’t at a party or anything; someone let fireworks off in a field near our house. I’d been dreaming I was in World War II and I had

crawled into a metal trash can to escape the bombs, and when I woke I realized the bombs were actually fireworks.

The highway was deserted at 2.55 a.m. We hadn't seen another car in ages.

The rain began to drum really hard on the car roof like a billion fingertips all going *rat-a-tat-tat*. This went on for about ten minutes and then suddenly it stopped. It was just like someone had turned off the world's biggest hose. At first I thought it was some kind of weird weather like I've read about in the best book ever, *Freaky Things to Freak You Out*, but then I saw brick walls and orange lights and I knew we were just going through another tunnel. I looked at Mum and wondered if she was doing her tunnel-singing trick in her head.

I've read *Freaky Things to Freak You Out* three times now. Apparently, there is a ninety-six-year-old man in Brazil who has a pet maggot living in his eyelid. Mum says it's all made up and they've just written those stories to fool kids like me, but there's a photo of him holding the maggot, so it must be true. I brought the book with me and planned to start at the beginning and read the whole thing again. As well as *Freaky Things to Freak You Out*, I'd packed:

My soccer ball alarm clock (you can't actually kick it, it's just round)

A blue flashlight

A tennis ball

A puzzle book

Two pens

Mrs. Ellie-Fant (a stuffed toy that I've had since I was a baby)

My Ask Me a Question magic ball.

I got the magic ball out of the front pocket of my backpack and pressed the ON button. The little screen glowed green as the words scrolled across . . .

**Greetings from the Ask Me a Question Magic Ball!**

**Think of a thing and answer my questions . . .**

**. . . then be amazed as I read your mind!**

You can conjure up anything and, as long as you answer everything correctly, it reckons it can tell you what you are thinking. Sometimes it gets it right if you pick something easy like an apple or a train or a balloon, but most of the time it's pretty rubbish.

In my head I thought of a clown. I pressed the START button and it began:

**Is it a vegetable?**

*No.*

**Does it come in a box?**

*No.*

**Can you buy it in a supermarket?**

*No.*

I wasn't saying the answers out loud; I actually had to press a YES or NO button.

**Does it walk on two legs?**

*Yes.*

Can you see it?

Yes.

Is it used for entertainment?

(I thought about this one. I didn't find clowns particularly entertaining, but I guessed it was a yes.)

Yes.

It asked me loads more random questions, and then the little green words on the screen got faster:

You cannot fool the Ask Me a Question Magic Ball . . .

I've got it!

I am the smartest being in the whole land!

Be amazed when I tell you this . . .

. . . I can actually read your mind!

This goes on a bit too much if you ask me. It's just showing off about how clever it is, and it takes ages before it gives you an answer.

Are you thinking of . . .

. . . an imaginary friend?

Useless.

I huffed, switched it off, and put it back in my bag.

A lady on the radio was giving a weather forecast with warnings of icy conditions and sleet, with heavy snow to come later in the week.

I'd been putting off asking Mum too many questions. She'd looked so anxious and on edge before we left, but now I could see her shoulders relax.

"Where are we going, Mum?" I said.

“Oh, you’re going to love it!” she said, her voice sounding all weird and squeaky. “It’s a sweet cottage that belonged to one of Grandma’s old friends: a gardener named William. There are two bedrooms, an old wood stove that heats up the whole place, and a little garden with a door that goes through to a forest. William died a few months back. There’s no one around for miles, so it’s a real secret haven. We went there for a holiday once when you were small. Do you remember? He let us stay in the house while he was away visiting friends.”

I thought about the holidays we’d had with Dad when he still lived with us. We went to Spain once, and me and Dad went on a paddleboat five times. That was a brilliant holiday. I also remembered going camping—it rained a lot, but I remember it was funny because I couldn’t get out of my sleeping bag. The zipper had gotten stuck, so Mum had to pull me out of the top. I couldn’t remember visiting this cottage, however much I tried.

The inside of the car lit up. Someone behind us had their headlights on at full beam. It was the first car I’d seen for ages, and I looked around to see who was out in the middle of the night like we were.

“Keep your head down, Nate,” Mum said, squinting in the mirror. The other car was getting really close and the lights dazzled my eyes, so I scrunched them up to try to see.

“Nate, did you hear me? I said get down!”

I slid down in my seat. Mum kept looking in her mirrors, first the one on the side and then the one in the middle. She was looking in her mirrors more than she was looking at the road in front of us.



The car overtook us, and Mum slowed down as it passed and put her hand up to her forehead as if she was scratching it. The car drove in front of us for a while, and then its orange light blinked and it turned off to the left, and Mum's shoulders sank once more. Her hand appeared around the side of her seat, and she patted me on the knee.

"Sorry I shouted. I just couldn't see out of the mirror properly, that's all," she said.

We sat in silence for a bit, and I looked at the streetlights reflected in the puddles on the road. It reminded me of something from when I was little, but I couldn't quite place what it was. It was the color I remembered. A yellowish, glowing color. I suddenly felt like I wanted to cry.

"Mum?" I asked. "Are we really going on vacation?"

Mum rubbed the side of her face with her hand and took a deep breath before she answered quietly.

"Not exactly, Nate."