

# extra fingers

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## EXCELLENCE



## *in* UNDERACHIEVING Underachiever

**DAD**, about five minutes after Isabella had crossed the finish line at her school's cross country carnival: "How'd you go?"

**ISABELLA**: "I came seventeenth."

**DAD**: "Seventeenth? You've just missed out then on making the school team."

**ISABELLA**, overjoyed: "Yeah, I know. By two places. I'm so lucky."

**DAD**: "Although, if two people end up being sick or they aren't able to run on the day for some reason—"

**ISABELLA**: "Dad, don't even think about it."

## Is 2013 real?

**AMELIE:** "Dad, is there such a thing as '2013'?"

**DAD:** "Hmm-hmm. It's a year. Next year in fact. It'll be 2013 in only about four months' time."

**AMELIE:** "Oh. How far does it go?"

**DAD:** "How far does it go? It'll take the same length of time any year does. It'll go for a year."

**AMELIE:** "Oh. I was just wondering. I've been hearing people talking about it and I didn't know if it was real or not."

## They think they're going somewhere happy

**DAD:** "Amelie, can you tell me everything you know about war?"

**AMELIE:** "Well, you go to this big field . . ."

**DAD:** "Hmm-hmm."

**AMELIE:** "And, you stand on one line and the other team stands on another line . . ."

**DAD:** "Right."

**AMELIE:** "And, um, then when they say, when the gun shoots, everyone—"

**DAD:** "What gun is that? Which gun shoots?"

**AMELIE:** "Like, a gun. It just shoots. And then everyone runs into the centre and kills everyone. And then everyone goes and gets their bombs and bombs people and everyone dies."

**DAD:** "Oh. Whose job is it to start the war? Like, who fires that gun?"

**AMELIE:** "Well, Hitler."

**DAD:** "Okay."

**AMELIE:** "Hitler came up with the idea."

**DAD:** "Did he?"

**AMELIE:** "In World War Two."

**DAD:** "He came up with the idea of what?"

**AMELIE:** "World War Two."

**DAD:** "He came up with the idea of World War Two, did he?"

**AMELIE:** "Yeah."

**DAD:** "Okay. He invented that?"

**AMELIE:** "Yeah."

**DAD:** "Okay. Well, who was involved in wars before Hitler? Like, before Hitler was born?"

**AMELIE:** "Well, I think it was James Foley."

**DAD:** "James Foley? Who's he, darl?"

**AMELIE:** "Oh, no. He's an illustrator. Sorry. It's not James Foley. Um, it's . . . I don't know."

**DAD:** "Right."

**AMELIE:** "I think it was, um, a Viking."

**DAD:** "Oh."

**AMELIE:** "Yeah, I think it was Canar."

**DAD:** "Oh."

**AMELIE:** "Canut."

**DAD:** "Well, who fights in wars? Who's allowed to?"

**AMELIE:** "Well, not the ladies but the men."

**DAD:** "Right. Well, why do men have to fight? Would you want to fight in a war?"

**AMELIE:** "Well, no. Because I would die."

**DAD:** "So what about the poor men? That's not fair on them."

**AMELIE**, emphatically: "Well, they choose to go."

**DAD**: "Do they?"

**AMELIE**: "Yeah. Well, they don't really actually know where they're going. They think they're going, like, somewhere happy."

## Cartoons are more real

**DAD**: "Would you like to fly in the sky like a bird?"

**ISABELLA**: "Hmm."

**DAD**: "You would?"

**ISABELLA**: "That'd be fun."

**DAD**: "Would it?"

**ISABELLA**: "Yep."

**DAD**: "Why?"

**ISABELLA**: "Because it's fun. And I'd like to do it. There!"

**DAD**: "Well, what would be the most fun? To fly in the sky like a bird, or go zipping along and through the waves like a dolphin?"

**ISABELLA**: "I don't know. Probably flying."

**DAD**: "Would you like to be a seagull?"

**ISABELLA**: "Well, not really. Because . . . well, I don't know. For a day, yeah."

**DAD**: "What do you reckon you'd do?"

**ISABELLA**: "Um, I don't know. Peck at my enemies."

**DAD**: "Really?"

**ISABELLA**: "Yeah."

**DAD**: "You'd go and do that?"

**ISABELLA**: "Well, for some of the day."

**DAD**: "Yeah."

**ISABELLA**: "And for the rest of it I'd just fly."

**DAD**: "Yeah. And then you'd spend the other time pecking at your enemies?"

**ISABELLA**: "Yeah."

**DAD**: "Who would your enemies be?"

**ISABELLA**: "I don't know. Whoever they were when that happened [when she became a seagull]."

About a minute later, still discussing seagulls.

**DAD**, talking about a seagull's priorities: "If I was where the space rockets blasted off from to go into space, right?"

**ISABELLA**: "NASA."

**DAD**: "NASA. If I was there and some seagulls were as well, right? And I was eating a packet of chips. I don't think the seagulls would care less about a space rocket blasting off. They wouldn't care one bit! Even if NASA was in the middle of its countdown. Ten, nine, eight—"

**ISABELLA**: "Well, if—"

**DAD**: "The seagulls would be looking at me, a whole pack of them — there would be fifty of them easily — they'd be looking at me eating the chips and just hoping they'd get one. That's what I reckon."

**ISABELLA**: "Well, if the dude in the rocket had chips then they would be quite interested."

**DAD**: "They'd be quite interested in what?"

**ISABELLA**: "The dude. If the dude in the rocket had a packet of chips."

**DAD**: "Yeah, but they wouldn't be interested in the dude in the rocket ship going into outer space; they'd be just interested in the dude having the packet of chips. That's all."

**ISABELLA:** "I don't know. Probably."

**DAD:** "Not probably, darl. Definitely."

**ISABELLA:** "Well, some seagulls might have feelings towards space. They might think that space is really cool and they might want to go there one day."

**DAD:** "Yeah, but I don't think they do though. What makes you think—"

**ISABELLA:** "That's what you think, Dad."

**DAD:** "Yeah, but why do you think the way you do?"

**ISABELLA:** "Well, in those movies [animations] they always have, like, the ants and the flies having feelings."

**DAD:** "Yeah, I know. But they're movies. They're cartoons."

**ISABELLA:** "I know. But they just seem real to me. They're, like, real. They seem much more real than what you say."

## If I want

**HOLLY,** excitedly: "Dad, look what I found at my school the other day. An essay just lying on the ground."

**DAD:** "Oh, did you?"

**HOLLY:** "Yeah. And now I want you to read it to see if it would be good to scan in so I can use it as a good example of how to write an essay properly. That's if you think it's any good, of course."

**DAD,** struggling to leaf through the crumpled essay: "But it's only part of an essay, Holly. And what's all this muck on the back?"

**HOLLY,** referring to food stuck to the back page of the essay: "Oh, that's mine. I accidentally put the essay too close to my lunchbox and so some of my food got stuck to it. You can just brush it off if you want, Dad."

Oh thanks. If I want to!

## Don't breathe

**ISABELLA,** after Amelie had been coughing repeatedly in the car due to a cold: "Can you turn around, Amelie? Just face the other way, because I really don't want to get your cold. I've got a singing recital coming up."

**AMELIE:** "It can't [infect you]. It's [the cold's] happened now."

**ISABELLA:** "It can. If you breathe on me it will eventually happen. So please, do not [cough on me]. And can you stop breathing in the car?"

**HOLLY** to **AMELIE:** "Yeah. Don't breathe at all."

**ISABELLA** to **AMELIE:** "I have an idea. I'll count up to a million and you try and hold your breath."

## I would have just pushed him out of the way

*Holly, Isabella and Amelie during a tribute on YouTube to the late Neil Armstrong*

**ISABELLA,** referring to the Apollo 11 Moon landing: "So, only Neil [Armstrong] got out?"

**DAD:** "Neil and Buzz [Aldrin] both got out, darl."

**ISABELLA:** "But he [Neil Armstrong] was the first person to put his foot on the Moon?"

**DAD:** "That's right."

**HOLLY:** "That would be so cool."

**ISABELLA,** if she had been Buzz Aldrin: "I would have just pushed him over and gone, 'Get out of my way!'"

**DAD:** "Who would you have done that to?"

**ISABELLA:** "Neil."

**DAD:** "You would have pushed Neil out of the way, would you?"

**ISABELLA:** “Yeah. Why wouldn’t he want to do that?”

**DAD:** “Yeah, well, then you would have been known as the person who pushed Neil out of the way.”

**ISABELLA:** “Well, I would have just said . . . I would have gotten close to the door and gone, ‘Oops! Sorry!’ And then I would have put a foot out and gone, ‘Oops! I touched the Moon.’”

**DAD:** “Yeah, well—”

**ISABELLA:** “Because that could have been him. Buzz could have been first.”

**HOLLY:** “Poor Buzz. He went all the way to the Moon and no one remembers him as much as Neil.”

**DAD:** “Well, Michael Collins is remembered even less.”

**HOLLY:** “Yeah, I know.”

**ISABELLA:** “Yeah, who was he?”

**HOLLY:** “He was the third man.”

**ISABELLA:** “Oh yeah. He didn’t even get out of the spaceship. That’s so stupid. You go all the way there, and you just sit in the spaceship. And go, *(adopts an imperious tone to suggest the way she thought Collins would have spoken to Aldrin and Armstrong in getting them to leave the Moon)* ‘We’re ready to go!’”

**DAD:** “Yeah, well—”

**ISABELLA:** “That’s so daft!”

**DAD:** “Yeah, well, somebody had to drive it back.”

**HOLLY:** “Yeah.”

**ISABELLA:** “But they could have just left it, parked it.”

**DAD:** “Parked it where, darl?”

**ISABELLA:** “On the Moon.”

**HOLLY:** “It wasn’t going to go anywhere.”

**DAD:** “You can’t park a lunar spacecraft.”

**HOLLY:** “Yes you can. Where did it go then?”

**ISABELLA:** “Well, couldn’t they have just stopped?”

**DAD:** “And let him have a go? They didn’t have the time to do that.”

**ISABELLA:** “He could have just gone, ‘Okay, you can handle it. I’m just going to have a go now . . . Why would he [Michael Collins] want to take Neil back for?’ [A reference to how annoyed Isabella thought Michael would have been for not being allowed to have a go on the Moon.]”

## My favourite subjects

**ISABELLA:** “I don’t want to do school; I hate it. It’s so dumb. Literally, I hate every single subject. Except for Lunch. That’s fun. And Sport.”

**DAD:** “Lunch isn’t a subject, darl.”

**ISABELLA:** “Well, it sort of is.”

**DAD:** “How is Lunch a subject?”

**ISABELLA:** “Oh, it’s so cool. I just love it. And I’m always counting down the minutes until Recess and Lunch.”

## Silent letters

**ISABELLA,** as she was reading *The Hunger Games*: “Dad, what word is this? I’ll read out all the letters for you. It goes ‘p’, ‘n’, ‘e’, ‘u’, ‘m’, ‘o’, ‘n’, ‘i’ and ‘a’.”

**DAD:** “Oh, that spells ‘pneumonia’, darl.”

**ISABELLA:** “‘Pneumonia’?” How can that spell ‘pneumonia’? It’s got a ‘p’ at the start.”

**DAD:** "Yeah, I know. It's silent."

**ISABELLA:** "But there are only silent 's's', aren't there?"

**DAD:** "No, I'm afraid not, darl."

**ISABELLA**, her eyes closing and her shoulders slumping: "Oh no!"

## Doubly annoying

**AMELIE:** "I was so freezing last night, Dad. I couldn't find my doona cover or my warm jacket anywhere."

**DAD:** "Well, you should've turned your light on in your room so you could see."

**AMELIE:** "No. No way! I couldn't even put my hand out from under my sheet to feel around for them."

**DAD:** "What! How come? Why couldn't you?"

**AMELIE:** "Because I was too scared to."

**DAD:** "Of what? What were you so scared of?"

**AMELIE:** "Of an alien coming down and grabbing my hand to steal me away from everyone. I kept thinking that the alien I saw on the computer was going to get me. That's why I hid under my covers all night and didn't come out. In case the alien came."

**DAD**, trying to empathise: "Oh gosh! Oh gosh!"

**AMELIE:** "Don't repeat it."

**DAD**, consolingly: "Don't worry. I won't say anything to anybody. But you shouldn't worry about being afraid of aliens. Lots of kids get scared that a creature from outer space is going to grab them and take them away. It's quite common, you know."

**AMELIE:** "No, I don't mean that. Don't say, 'Oh gosh!' two times. It's really annoying!"

## LAST WORD

### That swooping feeling

**HOLLY**, at the bus stop waiting to catch the bus to school: "Dad, you know who my 'canary in a coal mine' is?"

**DAD:** "No, Hols. Who is it?"

**HOLLY:** "It's Amelie. Now that it's coming up to spring, I always let her go first on the bike so that magpies will swoop her and not me. She needs some swooping."

**DAD:** "Does she?"

**HOLLY:** "Yeah. Because I've had lots of swooping in my life and so she now needs to know what swooping feels like."