

A Place Where No One Knows Your Face

Your fingers are crossed because you've seen a white horse and until you see a black dog you have to keep them crossed.

White horse white horse give me good luck
onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnineten.

Sometimes you cross the fingers on both hands because this means double luck. Also it means one hand can keep crossed if the other one gets tired, or has to reach out and pinch your sister, who is sitting squashed against the car door as far away from you as she can because (she says) you stink.

This is not fair because last week at school you punched a boy who was mean to her. He wasn't mean on purpose but he threw a basketball across the quad and she was standing in the way and it hit her in the face. You saw her small and crying and you went up to him and you punched him. You also did it because he's Jeremy Lovegrove's younger brother and you like Jeremy Lovegrove but he doesn't like you. 'He doesn't even know I'm alive' is what you sometimes say to your reflection in the mirror. It is a phrase you read in a book. 'He doesn't even know I exist.' But the truth is he does know, he just doesn't care that much, and he has brown hair and sandy limbs and you are a bit weird. Punching his brother who is younger than you is not a good way to make Jeremy Lovegrove like you. But you don't understand this collision of aggression and love, and besides it makes you feel better. You hit Jeremy Lovegrove's younger brother because you are afraid of the power Jeremy Lovegrove has over you by not liking you when you like him, and this makes you angry. You are angry with yourself and with Jeremy Lovegrove and also with his younger brother, partly because he looks like him and partly because he threw a basketball at your sister's head.

Your sister who is sitting with hair curled around her thumb and her thumb shoved in her mouth, sucking it even though she's not a baby any more. She looks at you and pushes her nose up with her finger and then looks away. You hate her. You will torture her later. She's a scaredy-cat and when you get to the camping ground it will be no sweat to catch her off her guard and give her a fright. Be a nasty monster, Dracula or Werewolf-Man. Stalk her slowly, put a pillow up the back of your jersey like a hunchback, reach your hands out for her neck with their fingers all stretched and pointy. Wolfie's here. She will scream and scream. She is frightened of you. She doesn't know how to fight against these sorts of games. She doesn't even know that she could.

Your mother passes peaches back from the front seat. You uncross the fingers of your left hand so you can hold the peach. She tells you not to get juice everywhere. You don't see how you're going to be able not to. The peach is over-ripe and squashy and as soon as you bite into it juice dribbles down your chin. It will be sticky later. The squeaking of the furry peach skin gives you the shivers. You bite around a bruise. You unwind the window and throw the bruise bit out. It doesn't go out properly and slides down the door of the car. You hope your father didn't see.

You stick your face out the window to feel the air rushing over it. You stick your tongue out to be dried by the air and then put it to the peach flesh and feel the spit rushing back into your mouth. Saliva. You hate that word.

You are driving past pine trees. It is a forest. Wolves probably live there. The sun is bright on the road and the shadows of the pine trees sit blackly on top of the shiny tar. For a while you count the telegraph poles. Then you breathe in and out by them. In as you pass one, hold it, out as you pass the next one, then in again. It makes you breathe slower than normal and you don't like it so you stop. Your fingers are tacky and sore from being crossed. You swap the peach stone over to your right hand and cross the fingers of your left. You bring the stone up to your mouth to suck the last bit of fruit from it and it splits in your fingers and as it drops in your lap you see two earwigs crawl out. You scream. Your father slams on the brakes. You jerk forward. You squirm around in your seat, trying on the brakes. You jerk forward. You squirm around in your seat, trying to see where the earwigs have landed. Your father pulls the car over. He shouts at you. It isn't fair because you can't help it if there were insects inside your peach and now they're on the car floor somewhere and going to crawl up your leg. When he's finished telling you off he pulls back out onto the road. Your face is hot. You stick it out the window again. You're not going to look at your mother and you're specially not going to look at your sister. You don't have to anyway.

You're looking at the pine trees and your castle is in behind there somewhere and it's big and made of stone and you live there and do magic. You can talk without moving your lips. It's called telepathy. You and the knights at your castle can hear each other's thoughts. Only the ones you want them to. And you've got ESP and you can move objects just by looking at them. That's called telekinesis. You've got that, like right now you could make a telegraph pole fall over or make your sister's own hand fly up and slap her on the cheek. All you have to do is concentrate hard enough. The telegraph poles are no good at the moment because the car's moving past them too fast. Later when you get to the camping ground you'll do it. Make the tent fall over or something. Make the billy boil all by itself.

The pine forest ends and you're driving through a small town. You don't like this. You don't like the small town houses with their curtains pulled closed. They look like they're blind. You imagine people living behind those curtains as only being shadows moving. The flat footpaths scare you. The flat skies scare you. It's all so big and so small at the same time. You drive up to some shops. Your sister's saying Icecream, icecream, icecream. Your dad stops the car and gets out. Stopped in this small town. He gets out and walks up to the dairy. He pauses in the doorway to pull up his socks and then he disappears into the blackness of the shop. Two boys are leaning, squinting, against the wall outside. One of them has a bike. He holds onto it lightly with just one hand resting on the handle. It's a chopper with a flag on the back. Him and his friend have got jeans on. You're not allowed to wear jeans. The boys see you looking at them and they try to stare you down. You win the staring competition. You always do, even if it makes your eyes water. The boy without the bike has got freckles. They're big and blotchy on his face, like tea leaves. You can almost count them. Your dad comes out of the dairy holding Tip-tops. He gets in the car and hands them out. Your mum says Eat it before it melts. You peel

off the wrapper with your teeth and suck the cold hard chocolate coating. The boys are watching. You've got an icecream and they haven't. You bite into it, closing your eyes and going mmm like in the ads as the chocolate cracks in your mouth and you taste the creamy middle bit. You curl your lips up and smile your mean smile at them, waving the icecream back and forth and moving your head from side to side. Your dad starts the car. The boys give you the fingers. You can't do them back because you've got one hand full of icecream and stick and one hand with the fingers glued crossed together with peach juice. All you can do is poke out your tongue in the back windscreen while they wave their arms up and down, straight out in front of them, fingers held up in Vs. Fuck, shit, bugger, damn you say in your head. Then you say Sorry God, please God I'll never say it or think it again God never as long as I live sorry God sorry.

You twist back in your seat to face front again. And your bloody shit damn sister's eating her icecream slowly, tiny baby bites so she'll have heaps left when you're finished and she can gloat about it. You don't really care because you feel sick anyway, icecream and peaches and marmite and lettuce sandwich and a hard boiled egg all churning round inside. The heat outside. The road, starting to wind now over a hill. You think you might chuck. You tell your mum you have a headache. She goes Tch and sighs. Close your eyes she says. You do and it makes the swinging of the car worse. Rolling back and forward, swinging, going up and down over dips and little bumpy bits. Mum, you say, Mum. She turns and looks at you. She's green, says your sister. She's all green. Your mum reaches her hand back and squeezes your knee. You'll be alright, she says. Not long now. How long, how lo-ong says your sister. Shhh says your mum, looking in the glove box for something. She hands you a barley sugar. Suck this.

Dad, says your sister, Dad, do A for horses. He doesn't hear her. Your mother nudges him. She murmurs something. He glances quickly round at you and your sister. He smiles. A for'orses, he says slowly, B for mutton ... You join in. C for yourself, D for dumb. You know this game. Your dad knows it from when he was a little boy. Most of the things in it are from the olden days. From that time when your dad was running round in shorts and playing marbles and the war was on. The marbles are still at your Gran's place. G for police. I for Novello. L for leather. That's a good one, getting to hear your Dad say 'hell' even though he's not really saying it. O for the wings of a dove. You look up in the sky and see a hawk circling. They swoop down and eat the eyes out of baby lambs. At your castle you keep them tame and they carry messages for you. Z for breezes, your dad says, and your sister says Again again. But your mum starts singing her favourite car song, in her low and whispery voice. I know— a dark—secluded place—a place—where no one knows your face—a glass—of wine—a fast embrace—it's called—Hernando's hideaway. You image the room, lit with low yellow light and filled with Spanish music. Ladies like on the back of your playing cards, with big spotty dresses on, frills and flowers in their hair. Just knock—three times—and whisper low—that you—and I—were sent by Joe. You will be free—to gaze at me and talk—of—lo-ove. Your mum goes to that place. Well she did before you were born maybe. She spent nights in Hernando's Hideaway, smoking cigarettes with a man in a hat and dancing to castanets. Your mother sings, looking every now and then at her reflection in the window. There's a funny twist to her mouth when the song is over.

I want a barley sugar, says your sister, I want one too. Grow up, you say. Yours is gone and you don't feel sick any more. You glare at her. Your mum passes a barley sugar over to her. See, I got one, she says to you. Grow up, you say again. She pretends she can't hear you. The car goes over a really big bump. Your sister yelps. I swallowed mine Mum, I swallowed mine. Shhh, says your mother. You mimic your sister under your breath. You make your voice whiny and high. I thwallowed mine. Shut up, she says. Thut up, you say. Stop it, she says. Thtop it. Mum, she says. Mu-um. Make her stop. Make her thtop. Shut your face. Thut your fathe. You can see your mother in the front with her sunglasses on and her eyes shut, humming. Your dad is frowning at the road. Your sister pinches your leg. You slap her hand. Ow, she says. Ow, you echo. She tries to dead-arm you. You rap her knee with your knuckles. She scratches your hand. You grab her wrist and say Want a chinese burn? She tries to pull away but you are stronger than her. Do you? No. Say please. No. Say please most beautiful sister. You start to twist the skin a little bit. She looks as if she might start bawling. You don't like the way you feel. You feel like a big fat giant. You throw her wrist back into her lap. Crybaby, you say, turning to the window again. She sits and rubs her wrist for a minute. Then she leans over and pinches your arm really hard. You let her do it. If you two don't stop you can get out here, says your dad. You roll your eyes. Dick, you whisper. You glance at your sister. He's a dick, you whisper to her. She giggles. You rub your arm. He eats turds for breakfast, you say. Big fat smelly ones. She giggles again. You say, What's red and gets smaller and smaller and smaller? What? she says. A baby combing its hair with a potato peeler, you say. She laughs even though you can tell she doesn't really get it. Hey mum and dad, listen to this. What's red and gets smaller and smaller and smaller? What dear, says your mother. A baby combing its hair with a potato peeler. You and your sister force big laughs out, ha ha ha. Oh that's dreadful, says your mother. Really.

It's so hot in the car. Even with the window open it's boiling. You're driving past dry brown paddocks. Cows look at you when you go past. Sheep don't. You wonder if black sheep know they're different. Sheep look nice from far off but when you get close up they smell of dags and things. Their wool looks soft but it's not really. It's greasy and thick. You drive past a sign that says One Way Jesus. Dumb. That doesn't even make sense. You feel sleepy. There's nowhere comfortable to put your head. You curl up as little as you can and close your eyes, listen to the car engine, the wheels on the road.

When you wake up your legs have got pins and needles. You were dribbling, says your sister. Was not, you say, wiping the wet seat, grumpy from sleep. So thirsty. The countryside smells. Silage is what it's called. And there's bits of paddocks covered with black plastic that's held down by old tyres. You wish you could read your book in the car without feeling sick. In your book the countryside is full of robins and pussywillow and little stone cottages. Ramshackle. There's a twinkly old farmer, and winding lanes and streams and primroses. The car bounces again and your stomach lurches. The road's bumpy and dusty, loose shingle. You must be getting closer to the camping ground. There's that funny red clay you never see anywhere else. In your book the kids have boarding school and tuck boxes. They eat sandwiches with the crusts cut off them. Pony club and gymkhanas. At the camping ground last year, they had a horse race along the beach on New Year's Day. You imagine winning it this year, the kid's race, miles ahead of everyone on your beautiful white horse that lives at the castle. And at the end of the race

everyone just about falls over because you say the magic words to your horse and it starts to fly. It's got wings and you can fly as far as you like, high above the beach, over the bush and the hills and into another world where there are stone cottages and pussywillow and winding magic lanes.

You close your eyes again. Somewhere out of your dreams the car stops. Are we there? you say, stretching your neck. It's cooler now and the sun's not so bright. Soon, says your mum. Dad's getting fish and chips. Can I have L&P? you say. Go in and ask him. You open the door and almost fall out. Your feet feel strange on the ground. Put your jandals on, says your mother. You slip them on and stand swaying a bit outside the car. Your legs are all wobbly. You see your dad in the fish and chip shop. It's bright inside and you blink. You ask your dad if you can have L&P. He says yes. You lean against his leg. He puts his arm round your shoulder. The fish and chip shop smells of hot fat and sausages. You look out the glass door to the car. Your mother's leaning against it smoking a cigarette and looking down the road. Your sister's got her feet up on the seat and her knees up to her chin, sucking her thumb. You feel grown up. There's a purple electric light along the back wall. What's that dad? It's for killing flies, he says. They fly into it and get electrocuted. That's dreadful, you say. Really. The fish and chip shop man hands you a potato fritter in a white paper bag with see-through spots of grease on it. The fat fish and chip shop lady comes in through the plastic curtain strips that hang in the doorway to the other room. Long drive? she asks your father. We came from Wellington, he says, and she nods, waves fat fingers at you. The man shakes salt on everything and wraps it in newspaper and gives it to your dad.

The four of you sit in the car as it's getting dark, eating your fish and chips. There's flies in there, you tell your sister, pointing to her chips. Are not, she says. Your fingers are salty. The car smells of food. You let your sister have a drink of your L&P. We'll be pitching the tent in the dark again, your mum says to your dad. Don't worry, you say, I can put it up by myself. You'll do telepathy on it and it will all go in the right place. You look out the window at the dirty street and think of your big stone castle. Even though you're sitting in the car with your mum and your dad and your sister you feel as if you're all alone.

You take everyone's fish and chip paper to the rubbish bin across the road. A black dog runs past. You forgot.

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