

LBRIS

We know
books

Also by Lisa Thompson



THE
GOLDFISH
BOY

THE DAY I WAS
ERASED

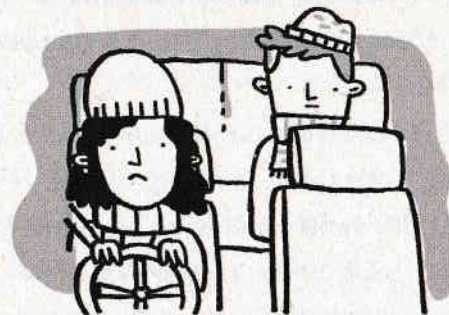
THE
LIGHT
JAR

LISA THOMPSON



SCHOLASTIC

CHAPTER 1



THE NON-HOLIDAY

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, grey 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 all 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 give her a 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 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 windscreen 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 rear-view 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. Firstly, we only had two small bags and my rucksack with us, and you need far more than that for a holiday. And secondly, I'd only known we were going away when she shook me awake at one a.m. 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 boot 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 hire company and I'd guessed it belonged to one of our neighbours. Mum didn't have her car any more. Gary told her they didn't need two cars after he moved in.

I did a big yawn as I looked out of the window on to the wet motorway. The clock on the radio said: 2:55 a.m. Nearly three a.m. I don't think I've ever been awake at three a.m. in my whole life. I was awake at two a.m. 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 Two and I had crawled into a tin dustbin to escape the bombs, and when I woke I realized the bombs were actually fireworks.

The motorway 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 hosepipe. 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 football alarm clock (you can't actually kick it, it's just round)

- A blue torch
- 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 zipper in the front 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?

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 called William. There are two bedrooms, an old log burner that heats up the whole place and a little garden with a door that goes through to a wood. 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 when 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 pedalo 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 zip had got 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 round 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. The car overtook us, and Mum slowed right 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.

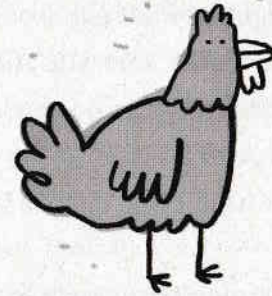
We sat in silence for a bit and I looked at the street lights reflected in the puddles on the road. It reminded me of something from when I was little but I couldn't quite place what it was. It was the colour I remembered. A yellowish glowing colour. I suddenly felt like I wanted to cry.

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

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

"Not exactly, Nate."

CHAPTER 2



THE COTTAGE

"Why can't we stay with Grandma?" I asked Mum.

We sat in the car as the rain hammered down and stared at the dirty grey cottage that was lit up by Mum's headlights. The image I'd pictured of a holiday we'd once had in a cosy, quaint cottage completely vanished. About thirty years ago this house was probably quite pretty, with its white walls and roses around the door. Now the walls were the colour of a muddy puddle and it looked like it was slowly being swallowed by blankets of thick, dark ivy. I didn't recognize this place at all. The dirt track that we turned down from the main road must have been at least two kilometres long. Mum was right: this was really off the radar.