

ISSY REMEMBERS

Issy sat in the doctor's office, flanked by both her parents. She was frowning at the doctor, because she knew he was no ordinary doctor. He was a doctor for 'mad people'. Her brother Ben said so.

"How old are you Lizzy", asked the doctor genially.

"My name's Issy", glowered Issy.

"It's short for Isabelle", said her mother, as she placed a pacifying hand on her daughter's knee. "She'll be four next month.

The doctor smiled at Issy.

"Four years old? So you're a big girl then".

Issy's frown deepened so that the furrow made a T-mark in the middle of her forehead. She didn't know the word "patronising" but she knew instinctively that the 'mad people' doctor was patronising her now, and she didn't like it.

"Yes, well", said doctor glancing down at his notes before turning to Issy's parents, "I see from my notes that Issy has been suspended from nursery. I must say this is the first time I've ever heard of a pre-schooler being suspended".

An uncomfortable look passed between Issy's parents.

"Her teacher said she was upsetting the other children, and there were complaints from some of the parents", said Issy's father.

"How so?"

"She keeps talking to them about death", said her mother.

"Oh", said the doctor turning to the little girl, "So you know about death, do you Liz- er, Issy?"

Issy nodded slowly, her eyes fixed on the doctor.

"Well, it's not unusual for a child Issy's age to become pre-occupied with death. I'm sure it's just a phase, perhaps if we ..."

"We're all going to die", interrupted Issy.

"Yes dear, but not for a long long time", said the doctor reassuringly.

Issy didn't have much concept of time yet, but she felt sure it couldn't be true that everyone was going to fall down dead at the same time. She eyed the doctor suspiciously and then brightened up when a thought struck her.

"Is ten years, six weeks and four days a long long time?" asked Issy hopefully.

Her parents shot each other a look of panic.

The doctor surveyed her for a moment and after taking in the age of his young patient said, "Yes, it is a long long time".

He winked at Issy's parents. The mother returned the gesture with a nervous smile, while the father shifted in his seat.

"Oh", said Issy in a disappointed tone, "I suppose, you're right. You won't die for a long long time then".

The doctor looked up from his notes. His expression was no longer genial.

"My gran's going to die next month", said Issy sadly. "I know *that's* not a long long time away", she added defiantly.

"You see doctor, this is exactly how she is at the moment", cried Issy's mother, "She tells everyone she meets that they're going to die".

"It's worse than that", said Issy's father.

"Yes", nodded her mother, "It's much worse than that, not only does she tell them they're going to die, I mean we all know we're going to die. But she also tells them *when* they're going to die". She whispered the word 'when' as if it were offensive.

"When she *thinks* they're going to die", added Issy's father.

"Yeah", said Issy's mother, but she didn't sound convinced.

"Extraordinary", said the doctor.

"It's getting so bad, that we daren't take her to visit her grandmother", said her mother.

"Yes, I can see how that would be upsetting".

"She's in a nursing home, so you can imagine the havoc Issy could cause".

All three turned towards Issy. They surveyed her as if she was a ticking time bomb. Issy swung her legs back and forth happily.

"When, er - did all this start?" asked the doctor after a few moments.

"I suppose, about three weeks ago", said Issy's father.

Her mother nodded.

"Yes, it was just after Issy's bedtime, one night about three weeks ago", she said. "I was passing Issy's bedroom when I heard her doing that choking thing she likes to do".

"Frogging", interrupted Issy.

The doctor's eyebrows shot up "Frogging?"

"I make noises like the frogs in the jungle, it helps me sleep when I'm scared".

"It sounds like she's choking", said her mother, "It's really unnerving".

"I don't think the frogging is the issue here", said Issy's father.

The doctor glanced at his watch. He didn't want this meeting to drag on longer than necessary, and he could see that a certain amount of tension between the parents could slow the process down.

"So what happened after you heard Issy, er - frogging?"

"Well, I left her to it and went downstairs. But as soon as I reached the bottom, I heard an unmerciful scream. Of course I rushed up to her room immediately.

She was sitting up in bed sobbing. She kept saying, 'We're all going to die, we're all going to die', over and over. I had to shake her to make her stop".

"I see", said the doctor quietly.

"What about her death predictions, when did they start?"

"The same night" said Issy's father. "Carol brought her downstairs for some milk, and we both tried to calm her down. When she eventually stopped crying, she looked at both of us and told us when we were both going to die".

The doctor could see that the couple were visibly shaken by this episode. He watched the child still kicking her legs. When she wasn't scowling, she was quite a sweet little thing.

"Tell me Issy how do you know when people are going to die?"

Issy thought for a moment, and said, "I remember it".

"Remember?"

"Yes, I forgot and then I remember".

"So you meet someone, and then you remember when they'll die?"

"Yes".

"Do you remember when *you'll* die Issy?"

Issy's father made a move to interrupt.

"No wait a moment, I want to hear what she says", said the doctor holding up his hand.

Issy screwed up her face, as if rehearsing a difficult poem.

"I'll die in fifty five years, two months and six days", she said quickly. Then swung her legs again happily.

"Lovely", said her father quietly, placing his head in his hands.

"Do you know how you'll die?" asked the doctor tentatively.

"Jesus", breathed her father.

"No, silly", cried Issy "I can't remember *that*". She looked around at her parents rolling her eyes as if the doctor was mad.

The doctor checked his notes again.

"Is Issy's grandmother terminally ill?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact, yes", said her father astonished.

The doctor smiled to himself, before going on.

"I thought so, and no doubt you discuss this unfortunate circumstance in front of Issy from time to time".

"I-I suppose so", said her mother. "My mother's illness has affected us badly".

"I don't mean to be insensitive, but how long is she expected to live?"

The little girl was about to answer, when her mother said hurriedly, "About six months".

Issy frowned shaking her head. Her father glared at her, until she stopped.

"You see, this is where it all stems from", cried the doctor. "Issy heard this prediction of your mother's death, and has adopted it as a sort of childish game. I assume you found out recently".

"About a month ago", said her mother.

"There you go then! Only a week before this behaviour began".

The doctor looked very pleased with himself.

"So she's not, well you know - disturbed then?" asked Issy's father hopefully.

"God no", laughed the doctor.

"But John, what about next door's cat?" whispered Issy's mother.

"Don't be silly Carol", hissed her father.

The doctor looked up inquiringly.

"Carol seems to think that Issy has some sort of gift".

"Indeed?"

"No I don't", said Issy's mother adopting a scowl that made her the image of her daughter.

"But she did predict the death of next door's cat down to the very day", she said shakily. "A lorry ran over him last week. Is it possible, I mean if Issy isn't disturbed, that she might actually be able to predict death? Could this be one of those paranormal things?"

The doctor laughed so loudly that Issy jumped in her seat.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Collins, I don't mean to offend you, but there is little chance that this is a 'paranormal thing,' what ever that is. The cat's death is merely coincidence".

The mother's faced reddened.

"I hope you're not encouraging Issy's behaviour by validating it?" he asked in a serious tone.

"No of course not, it's just that I can't help wondering ...no you're right, I'm sure it's just a coincidence.

"Good, well I'll write up a quick report and send it to Issy's nursery, and I'm sure..."

"Who's that?" asked Issy holding up a photograph she'd taken from the desk.

"It's my late wife", said the doctor his smile fading. He didn't like the way the girl had lifted the frame from his desk.

Issy looked confused. She was picturing a woman who never turned up on time.

"Late wife?" she asked.

"It means she died, Issy. Now stop asking questions and put that down."

"She died a long long time ago", said Issy sadly, looking down at the woman in the picture.

"No Issy, she died quite recently actually", said the doctor irritably, as he snatched the photograph from the child.

At that moment a middle-aged woman knocked briefly on the door before entering.

"Sorry to interrupt, but your son's here", said the woman.

"Thanks Sheila. Tell him I'll be with him shortly".

"We're having lunch today", he said to Issy's parents.

"Look, sorry for taking up so much of your time", said Issy's father "But the nursery suggested we seek professional help, before she returns next week".

"Well you can tell them that won't be necessary", said the doctor, adjusting the position of his wife's photograph.

"We live in a knee-jerk society Mr Collins, and Issy's suspension, at the age of four, is frankly ridiculous. The child has latched on to these death predictions because of her Grandmother's illness, that's all". He smiled down at Issy.

Both parents looked relieved.

The doctor stood up, and after shaking hands, he gestured the family towards the door. Just before the door closed, the doctor heard Issy say, "Isn't two years, six months and ten days a long long time Mummy?"

The door closed, and as it clicked into place, somewhere in the recesses of the doctor's mind, something else clicked into place. He grasped the edge of his desk before sitting down heavily. Staring at the picture of his wife, his face steadily turned ashen while he made the calculation.

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