

To Polly, Alice, William and Gregory, with thanks

A Red Fox Book

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Introducing Peter

When Peter Fortune was ten years old grown-up people sometimes used to tell him he was a 'difficult' child. He never understood what they meant. He didn't feel difficult at all. He didn't throw milk bottles at the garden wall, or tip tomato ketchup over his head and pretend it was blood, or slash at his granny's ankle with his sword, though he occasionally thought of these things. Apart from all vegetables except potatoes, and fish, eggs and cheese, there was nothing he would not eat. He wasn't noisier or dirtier or more stupid than anyone he knew. His name was easy to say and spell. His face, which was pale and freckled, was easy enough to remember. He went to school every day like all other children and never made that much fuss about it. He was only as horrid to his sister as she was to him. Policemen never came knocking at the front door wanting to arrest him. Doctors in white coats never offered to take him away to the madhouse. As far as Peter was concerned, he was really quite easy. What was difficult about him?

It was not until he had been a grown-up himself for many years that Peter finally understood. They thought he was difficult because he was so silent. That seemed to bother people. The other problem was he liked being by himself. Not all the time,

of course. Not even every day. But most days he liked to go off somewhere for an hour to his bedroom, or the park. He liked to be alone and think his thoughts.

Now, grown-ups like to think they know what's going on inside a ten-year-old's head. And it's impossible to know what someone is thinking if they keep quiet about it. People would see Peter lying on his back on a summer's afternoon, chewing a piece of grass and staring at the sky. 'Peter, Peter! What are you thinking about?' they would call to him. And Peter would sit up with a start. 'Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.' Grownups knew that something was going on inside that head, but they couldn't hear it or see it or feel it. They couldn't tell Peter to stop it, because they did not know what it was he was doing in there. He could have been setting his school on fire or feeding his sister to an alligator and escaping in a hot air balloon, but all they saw was a boy staring at the blue sky without blinking, a boy who did not hear you when you called his name.

As for being on his own, grown-ups didn't much like that either. They don't even like other grown-ups being on their own. When you join in, people can see what you're up to. You're up to what they're up to. You have to join in, or you'll spoil it for everyone else. Peter had different ideas. Joining in was all very fine, in its place. But far too much of it went on. In fact, he thought, if people spent less time joining in and making others join in, and spent a little time each day alone remembering who they were or who they might be, then the world would be a happier place and wars might never happen.

At school he often left his body sitting at its desk while his mind went off on its journeys. Even at home daydreaming could sometimes get him into trouble. One Christmas Peter's father, Thomas Fortune, was hanging the decorations in the living-room. It was a job he hated. It always put him in a bad mood. He had decided to tape some streamers high in one corner. Now, in that corner was an armchair, and sitting in that armchair doing nothing in particular, was Peter.

'Don't move, Pete,' said Thomas Fortune. 'I'm going to stand on the back of your chair to reach up here.'

'That's fine,' Peter said. 'You go ahead.'

Up on to the chair went Thomas Fortune, and away in his thoughts went Peter. He looked like he was doing nothing, but in fact he was very busy. He was inventing an exciting way of coming down a mountain quickly using a coat hanger and a length of wire stretched tight between the pine trees. He went on thinking about this problem while his father stood on the back of his chair, straining and gasping as he reached up to the ceiling. How, Peter wondered, would you go on sliding down without slamming into the trees that were holding up the wire?

Perhaps it was the mountain air that made Peter remember he was hungry. In the kitchen was an unopened packet of chocolate biscuits. It was a pity to go on neglecting them. As he stood up, there was a terrible crash behind him. He turned just in time to see his father fall head first into the gap between the chair and the corner. Then Thomas Fortune re-appeared, head first again, looking ready to chop Peter into tiny bits. On the other side of the room, Peter's mother



clamped her hand across her mouth to hide her laughter.

'Oh, sorry Dad,' Peter said. 'I forgot you were there.'

Not long after his tenth birthday he was entrusted with the mission of taking his seven-year-old sister, Kate, to school. Peter and Kate went to the same school. It was a fifteen-minute walk or a short bus ride away. Usually they walked there with their father who dropped them off on his way to work. But now the children were thought old enough to make it to school by themselves on the bus, and Peter was in charge.

It was only two stops down the road, but the way his parents kept going on about it, you might have thought Peter was taking Kate to the North Pole. He was given instructions the night before. When he woke up he had to listen to them over again. Then his parents repeated them all through breakfast. As the children were on their way out the door, their mother, Viola Fortune, ran through the rules one last time. Everyone must think I'm stupid, Peter thought. Perhaps I am. He was to keep hold of Kate's hand at all times. They were to sit downstairs, with Kate nearest the window. They were not to get into conversations with lunatics or wicked people. Peter was to tell the bus conductor the name of his stop in a loud voice, without forgetting to say 'please'. He was to keep his eyes on the route.

Peter repeated this back to his mother, and set off for the bus stop with his sister. They held hands all the way. Actually, he didn't mind this because the truth was he liked Kate. He simply hoped that none of his friends would see him holding a girl's hand. The bus came. They got on and sat downstairs. It was ridiculous sitting there holding hands, and there were

some boys from the school about, so they let go of each other. Peter was feeling proud. He could take care of his sister anywhere. She could count on him. Suppose they were alone together on a mountain pass and came face to face with a pack of hungry wolves, he would know exactly what to do. Taking care not to make any sudden movement, he would move away with Kate until they had their backs to a large rock. That way the wolves would not be able to surround them.

Then he takes from his pocket two important things he has remembered to bring with him – his hunting knife, and a box of matches. He takes the knife from its sheath and sets it down on the grass, ready in case the wolves attack. They are coming closer now. They are so hungry they are drooling and growling and baying. Kate is sobbing, but he cannot comfort her. He knows he has to concentrate on his plan. Right at his feet there are some dry leaves and twigs. Quickly and skilfully Peter gathers them up into a small pile. The wolves are edging closer. He has to get this right. There is only one match left in the box. They can smell the wolves' breath – a terrible rotten meat stench. He bends down, cups his hand and lights the match. There is a gust of wind, the flame flickers, but Peter holds it close in to the pile, and then first one leaf, then another, then the end of a twig catch fire, and soon the little pile is blazing. He piles on more leaves and twigs and larger sticks. Kate is getting the idea and helping him. The wolves are backing off. Wild animals are terrified of fire. The flames are leaping higher and the wind is carrying the smoke right into their slobbering jaws. Now Peter takes hold of the hunting knife and . . .

Ridiculous! It was daydreams like this could make him miss

his stop if he wasn't careful. The bus had come to a halt. The kids from his school were already getting off. Peter leaped to his feet and just managed to jump to the pavement as the bus was starting off again. It was more than fifty yards down the road when he realised he had forgotten something. Was it his satchel? No! It was his sister! He had saved her from the wolves, and left her sitting there. For a moment he couldn't move. He stood watching the bus pull away up the road. 'Come back,' he murmured. 'Come back.'

One of the boys from his school came over and thumped him on the back.

'Hey, what's up? Seen a ghost?'

Peter's voice seemed to come from far away. 'Oh, nothing, nothing. I left something on the bus.' And then he started to run. The bus was already a quarter of a mile away and beginning to slow down for its next stop. Peter sprinted. He was going so fast that if he spread his arms far apart, he would probably have been able to take off. Then he could skim along the top of the trees and . . . But no! He wasn't going to start daydreaming again. He was going to get his sister back. Even now, she would be screaming in terror.

Some passengers had got off, and the bus was moving away again. He was closer than before. The bus was crawling behind a lorry. If he could just keep running, and forget the terrible pain in his legs and chest, he would catch up. As he drew level with the bus stop, the bus was no more than a hundred yards away. 'Faster, faster,' he said to himself.

A kid standing by the bus shelter called out to Peter as he passed. 'Hey, Peter, Peter!'

Peter didn't have the strength to turn his head. 'Can't stop,' he panted, and ran on.

'Peter! Stop! It's me. Kate!'

Clutching at his chest, he collapsed on the grass at his sister's feet.

'Mind that dog mess,' she said calmly as she watched her brother fighting for his breath. 'Come on now. We'd better walk back or else we are going to be late. You'd better hold my hand if you're going to stay out of trouble.'

So they walked to school together, and Kate very decently promised – in return for Peter's Saturday pocket money – to say nothing about what had happened when they got home.

The trouble with being a daydreamer who doesn't say much is that the teachers at school, especially the ones who don't know you very well, are likely to think you are rather stupid. Or, if not stupid, then dull. No one can see the amazing things that are going on in your head. A teacher who saw Peter staring out the window or at a blank sheet of paper on his desk might think that he was bored, or stuck for an answer. But the truth was quite different.

For example, one morning the children in Peter's class were set a maths test. They had to add up some very large numbers, and they had twenty minutes to do it. Almost as soon as he had started on the first sum, which involved adding three million five hundred thousand, two hundred and ninety-five to another number almost as large, Peter found himself thinking about the largest number in the world. He had read the week before about a number with the wonderful name of

googol. A googol was ten multiplied by ten a hundred times. Ten with a hundred noughts on the end. And there was an even better word, a real beauty – a googolplex. A googolplex was ten multiplied by ten a googol number of times. What a number!

Peter let his mind wander off into the fantastic size of it. The noughts trailed into space like bubbles. His father had told him that astronomers had worked out that the total number of atoms in all the millions of stars they could see through their giant telescopes was ten with ninety-eight noughts on the end. All the atoms in the world did not even add up to one single googol. And a googol was the tiniest little scrap of a thing compared to a googolplex. If you asked someone for a googol of chocolate-covered toffees, there wouldn't be nearly enough atoms in the universe to make them.

Peter propped his head on his hand and sighed. At that very moment the teacher clapped her hands. Twenty minutes were up. All Peter had done was write out the first number of the first sum. Everyone else had finished. The teacher had been watching Peter staring at his page, writing nothing and sighing.

Not long after that he was put in with a group of children who had great difficulty adding up even small numbers like four and six. Soon, Peter became bored and found it even harder to pay attention. The teachers began to think he was too bad at maths even for this special group. What were they to do with him?

Of course, Peter's parents and his sister Kate knew that Peter wasn't stupid, or lazy or bored, and there were teachers at his

school who came to realise that all sorts of interesting things were happening in his mind. And Peter himself learned as he grew older that since people can't see what's going on in your head, the best thing to do, if you want them to understand you, is to tell them. So he began to write down some of the things that happened to him when he was staring out of the window or lying on his back looking up at the sky. When he grew up he became an inventor and a writer of stories and led a happy life. In this book you will find some of the weird adventures that happened in Peter's head, written down exactly as they happened.



Chapter One

The Dolls

Ever since he could remember, Peter had shared a bedroom with Kate. Most of the time, he did not mind. Kate was all right. She made him laugh. And there were nights when Peter woke from a nightmare and was glad to have someone else in the room, even if it was his seven-year-old sister who would be no use against the red-skinned, slime-covered creatures who chased him through his sleep. When he woke up, these monsters slid behind the curtains, or crept into the wardrobe. Because Kate was in the room, it was just that little bit easier to get out of bed and sprint across the landing to his parents' room.

But there were times when he did mind sharing a room. And Kate minded too. There were long afternoons when they got on each other's nerves. A squabble would lead to a row, and a row to a fight, a proper punching, scratching, hair-pulling fight. Since Peter was three years older he expected to win these all-out battles. And in a sense, he did. He could always count on making Kate cry first.

But was this really winning? Kate could hold her breath and push and make her face the colour of a ripe plum. All she needed to do then was run downstairs and show her mother 'what Peter did'. Or she might lie on the floor making a rattling sound in her throat so that Peter thought she was about to die. Then he