

# SCRUNCHING LIGHTS

**N**orthwick is a very special bear. He lives with a boy called Frank and his family. Both Northwick and Frank have nystagmus.

“You two look like you’re in pain. Your faces are all scrunched up. What’s the matter?” Frank’s father asked his son and Northwick who were sitting behind him in the car.

“It’s the flashing lights,” said Northwick, who had been looking forward to this day out for a picnic in the countryside, but wasn’t so sure now. “They hurt my eyes.”

“It’s the trees,” said Frank with an equally pained expression on his face. “They’re stinging my eyes.”

Frank’s father looked perplexed, dumbfounded and utterly befuddled. He wasn’t that comfortable himself, twisting around in the passenger seat to look at Frank and Northwick. But it was broad daylight. He couldn’t see any flashing lights. And how could trees sting Frank’s eyes? What trees anyway? They were driving along a motorway.

Even as Frank’s father watched them, Frank and Northwick started blinking, rubbing their eyes and unscrunching their faces. “You gave me a bit of a fright then. Are you both alright now?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Frank hesitantly, but almost immediately screwed up and scrunched up his face again. At exactly the same moment Northwick furrowed his furry brow and clamped his eyes shut too.

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“They’ve done it again,” said Frank’s father turning to his wife sitting alongside him in the driving seat. “I’m getting really worried. Maybe we should find somewhere to stop and check they’re OK?”

### **Sideways sunlight**

Without taking her eyes off the road ahead and the busy traffic, Frank’s mother said she thought she knew what the problem was. “Northwick?” she asked, “When you said the flashing lights are hurting your eyes, do you mean the sunlight through the trees at the side of the road?”

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“Of course!” replied the bear. “Doesn’t it hurt your eyes too? I don’t know how you can see to drive. I can hardly see at all when everything ripples and flickers from light to shade, light to shade non-stop.”

Before she could reply, Frank confirmed what the bear had said: “It’s like I told you. The trees sting my eyes. It’s flash, flash, flash! It’s almost like someone is slapping me in the face.”

Frank’s father looked relieved. “You had me worried there. I thought there was something seriously the matter with you both.”

Northwick sat up and snapped the seatbelt tightly across his tummy. “It is a very serious matter!” he said very seriously (and perhaps even a little pompously). “The sharp light through the trees hurts. Every time we go somewhere in the car, I wish it was raining or at least cloudy.”

“Me too,” said Frank. “Don’t the flashing trees sting and bite your eyes at all? I just see flicker, flicker, flicker when the sun dazzles through trees as we rush past in the car. If it goes on for long it gives me a headache, even if I close my eyes. The flashes still stab through my eyelids.”

### Upset eyes

Well that wiped the relieved look of Frank’s father’s face. He now looked very sad indeed. “I had no idea about the flashing and dazzling,” he said in his sorry voice. “It sounds to me like yet another nystagmus thing we didn’t know about.”

Frank agreed that it probably was a nystagmus thing. But he and Northwick were surprised his parents weren’t bothered by the stinging sunlight spiking through the trees. The four of them spent the rest of the journey thinking of ways to solve the Painful Tree Problem, as Northwick called it. But with no great success.

Frank’s mother explained that they couldn’t cover up the side windows of the car because the driver did need to see through them. Sun-glasses and baseball caps might help a bit, but wouldn’t block really low sharp sunlight sneaking through the trees into their eyes.

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However, even if they couldn't solve the Painful Tree Problem, said Frank's father in his most positive voice, at least knowing about it was a good thing. He wouldn't worry so much next time he saw Frank and Northwick scrunching up their eyes. And maybe they would think of a solution one day.

In the meantime, he said, "we're nearly there, so time to think about parking and picnic instead of the Painful Tree Problem. And, of course, we'll make sure we sit in the shade so there's no question of you and Frank being dazzled."

"That's a very good idea," said Northwick. "After all this nasty eye scrunching, it's definitely time for some nice food munching."

With thanks to Claire Entwistle whose book "What seems to be the trouble?" provided the seed for this story.