

AMANDA HICKIE

*Looting Lucy's*

Sean waved around a small square of newspaper. 'I said one, not two, not three, not a whole handful.' The kids stood in front of Sean, a silent audience. Oscar's eyes roamed anywhere but the kabuki mask of anger on Sean's face. Zac lounged against the doorframe looking shifty, planning a quick getaway. Ella stood her ground, gazing up wonderstruck at the display of emotional fireworks. 'This is the third time in two days I've had to unblock the toilet. And waste more water. It's disgusting. One square of paper. If you do what you're told, I won't have to unblock it. If you don't do what you're told, I'll make *you* unblock it.'

Zac nodded his head and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, easing himself through the door.

'Hang on one moment there.' Zac paused like a button had been pressed on a remote. 'We now have a day's, just one day's, worth of newspaper left. Do you want to tell me how you are going to wipe your bum then?'

Oscar shook his head the tiniest amount. Ella stared open mouthed. Zac pretended he was somewhere else.

'You're not. That's how. Because there is no more toilet paper, and no more newspaper. When it's gone, that's it.' Silence. 'Are you listening to me?'

Oscar and Zac murmured an indistinct chorus.

'And do I have to demonstrate, to you, Zac, who is supposed to be the grown-up one, how to flush again? Half a bucket, just half a bucket poured into the bowl. From a height. Dribble it in and you're just wasting water. Not you.' Sean pointed at the two littlies, Ella and Oscar. 'You ask me or Mum. But only if it needs it, yellow water in the toilet bowl doesn't kill you. But if we run out of water, you're going to be drinking it.'

Zac scowled and muttered something about stupid rules.

‘Oh really? Stupid? One sheet, remember. One sheet, that’s all you need, one, and the next one of you that goes to the loo, I’m coming in to watch.’

A look of outraged horror covered Zac’s face and Oscar looked down, embarrassed. But Ella was still mesmerised.

‘Go away, just go away, I don’t want to see any of you again today.’

Zac and Oscar scattered. Ella stared at Sean’s back as he marched away.

‘Unbelievable. Unbe-bloody-lievable.’ He fell into one of the kitchen chairs opposite Hannah. She wasn’t fooling him, he knew she was pretending to read, trying to look like she hadn’t been listening. ‘They can’t follow a simple instruction. What if their lives depended on it? And they do. It’s basic hygiene.’ Sean fiddled with the cutlery still on the table from breakfast. ‘Remember when we used to end up with a recycling bin of newspaper every week? We would have been ok for months then. You can’t wipe your bum with an iPad.’

‘Next time there’s an outbreak I’ll remember to stock up on tabloids. There’s still a stack of the local paper in the garage, but it’s shiny.’

‘We should have been prepared.’

‘I *was* prepared, the pantry is stocked. I just never thought it would go this many weeks.’ She gently took the butter knife out of his fist and rubbed the back of his hand. ‘I’m going to let the the kids stew on it for a half an hour — because you are right about the toilet paper — and then I’m going to tell them that Daddy wasn’t really mad at them.’

‘I meant every word I said.’

‘Oscar will be fine, it all rolls off him, but Zac. I can’t tell what goes on inside Zac’s head.’ She held Sean’s hand for a moment silently. ‘You are not going to go into the bathroom with them.’

‘Yes.’

‘You can’t.’

‘Watch me.’

‘Zac will burst before he goes to the loo.’

‘What would you have me do? Because something has to be done.’

‘I know what’s wrong with you.’ Sean wasn’t prepared to listen but she was going to try anyway. ‘It’s the lack of coffee. You think you’re hiding it but I know you have a headache. Take something for it.’

‘I’m not going to waste a pain killer.’

‘Then have a cup of tea.’

‘I don’t like tea. I don’t need tea. I need them,’ his hand took in the front of the house and the silent, absent children, ‘to take some responsibility.’

‘Have a Panadol for my sake and the kids. Or stay away from everyone until you’re bearable.’ Sean’s face was set, but she continued. ‘Unless, of course, you want a headache.’

‘What I want is to walk to the cafe at the corner, even though they don’t know the difference between a cafe latte and a cappuccino, and I want to sit on the footpath, watch people going by, have a chocolate chip cookie with my coffee and not share it with Oscar.’

She had sneaked a look at her phone in the privacy of the bedroom this morning, just to find out. Caffeine withdrawal lasted three days. As she watched, waited for the search to return, she thought she saw the level on the battery icon drop. Right now, the electrons in those batteries were the most precious things in the house. When the power had gone off, she was the one who had made a big deal about only using the phone for life and death. It was a crisis of sorts, and she had no one she could ask in a non-electronic way. Natalie would know, that was one of the advantages of having a doctor next door. But Hannah tried to call again this morning, even though there was little hope now. Hannah wanted to be able to tell Ella that Mummy was still busy at the hospital but she’d be home, even when she knew deep down she was wasting electrons. Natalie wasn’t coming home.

Ella hadn’t asked about Mummy and Daddy as often as Hannah expected. Her boys had been high energy drama queens at Ella’s age, every setback was

the death of all hope, every achievement needed a parade. Ella was more phlegmatic. Maybe in the early weeks of the epidemic, when Natalie was working crazy hours in her practice, she'd got used to Mummy being gone. And she was here because Daddy sent her, so her world made sense.

The words on the page, the ones she wasn't really reading, started to move around. She tried to focus on an individual letter. It shook like a miniature earthquake. She felt the shake coming through her elbow propped on the table. Sean uncrossed and recrossed his knees, jiggling the other one. Now the table took on a deeper tremor.

'Could you stop doing that?' He stood up, stretched. Hannah looked at him expectantly, as if she hoped he would go somewhere else. He sat down again. She put her finger on the word she was reading and waited for the spasm to pass.

He stood decisively. 'I'm going to get some coffee.'

'We're out of coffee.' Which was obvious, they had searched the cupboards, the pantry, the fridge, the freezers and the boxes in the garage. Together.

'I'll get some from Lucy's.'

Inexorably she took her part in this irrational conversation. 'Lucy's is shut, and if they weren't, she'd be out of coffee by now.'

Sean looked at her as if she had failed to grasp the magnitude of what had been going on for the last four weeks. As if she hadn't been there for first cases and second cases and declarations of public emergencies. As if she wasn't aware of exactly how many packets of rice and pasta were in their pantry and exactly how many meals they had left. As if she didn't know how germs were spread. 'She won't be there. There won't be anyone there.'

'So how will you get coffee?'

'I'll break the lock.' He was matter of fact.

'You can't loot Lucy's!' She didn't believe the words coming out of her mouth. 'You can't loot Lucy's.'

‘It’s not looting, it’s borrowing. If I leave money, then I’m buying the stuff, just without Lucy. For the lock too.’ He had worked it through in his mind.

It seemed incomprehensible that she was mustering reasons for not looting the corner store. ‘We have to shop there. If you loot Lucy’s I have to walk an extra three blocks for milk. Forever. I’m not walking three blocks uphill for milk for the rest of my life because you can’t wait one more day for your headache to go away.’ She had his attention, he might succumb to rational argument. ‘And how will you lock it up after? If you break her lock, other people will take stuff and they might not leave money.’

He took the objection on board, mulled it over.

‘Anyway, there’s probably nothing left, she’s been cleaned out by now.’ The minute the words were out of her mouth, Sean’s face told her she’d misstepped.

‘Then it won’t hurt for me to look.’

‘No.’ She flung herself dramatically over the hall doorway. He ran the other direction, there was no chance she could beat him to the back door. He had hold of the door handle, pushing down to open. She slipped her hand underneath just in time to push it up before it unlatched.

‘I’m going. You might as well let me out.’

He squeezed her hand hard, the metal dug into her palm but she held fast. She grabbed hold of his little finger and pulled back on it. He let go suddenly and sprinted to the hallway door, flinging it open. ‘Ha!’

‘You’d risk dying for some coffee?’

He strode through the living room. The three kids looked up for a moment then went back to the city they were constructing out of blocks.

He waited until they were in the front hall. ‘I’m not going to die.’

‘This is the stupidest reason to risk getting infected.’

‘I won’t touch anyone, I won’t let anyone breathe on me. I’ll take gloves and a mask. And I still won’t go near anyone.’

He was almost to the front door.

‘You go out, you’re not coming back. Someone has to think of the kids.’ She grabbed his sleeve with one hand and with the other prised the keys out of his hand.

But the door was already unlocked, he swung it open with his free hand. ‘I’ll bring you back toilet paper.’ He kissed her, like he was going to work.

‘Bring back chocolate.’ She called to his receding back.

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If he didn’t look carefully, the street was no different from the middle of any weekday. He corrected himself. There were some times on some weekdays when for a short time it would look like this, with nobody in sight.

The door of the house opposite was slightly ajar. Maybe, he told himself, someone was home and had just opened it a crack to catch the breeze. The sun was bright, the interior of the house was dark. He was almost relieved he couldn’t see in from over this side of the road and he certainly wasn’t going over to check it out. The curtains in the front window of their neighbouring semi were drawn. It looked blank and uncommunicative, like most of the houses. Although from time to time they still heard the footsteps of the elderly woman who lived there, carried by the communal joists, from the front he would have guessed it empty.

The moment he rounded the corner into the bigger street, it felt wrong. The shops were never this quiet. Even at night there was always someone at Lucy’s looking for milk, a tin of cat food or a late night tub of ice cream. And he could see the glass. Although the front of Lucy’s was half way down the block, light glittered on the edges of shards, contrasting with the dark bitumen underneath. The window spilled into the gutter, filling the same shape as the light from the shop at night.

The safety glass lay in four large pieces, in rough proximity to each other. His eye traced the spider's web of impact cracks across the gaps between the laminated fragments. He stepped gingerly between them. Someone had jemmied the expanding grill that was supposed to protect the door. The window had been smashed out from the inside. With force. All the shop windows had been smashed except the pharmacy. It was protected by a roller door, now covered in large dents. The metal bin from outside Lucy's was lying out front, mangled.

He rested his hand on the gloves in his pocket to remind himself to put them on before touching anything. Who was he kidding, he wasn't going to need them. With instant hindsight he knew that it was never going to be any other way. Lucy's was an easy target, food was survival or currency. It was self-delusion to think it would be otherwise.

The cheap white melamine shelves were empty. They looked small and badly made without their rows of tins and packets. The door to the fridge was open, an empty plastic jug lay in front of it in a pool of milk. Even from outside the rank, sour smell made him gag. Someone had played a game of cricket with the packets of flour. The floor was littered with their exploded paper shells, haloed by circular white flour spatter patterns. Underneath, a dark, dirty dusting of biscuit crumbs had congealed in starbursts of broken eggs.

There was no coffee, no chocolate. A pile of mars bar wrappers sat next to a clean person sized patch on the floor and an empty shelf. The only toilet paper festooned the fluoro lights.

He stood outside in the safety of his unearned virtue.

In the distance he heard a car. This was a stupid, stupid idea. There was no safety out here. There was nothing to see here but him. By himself. He waited for the sound to turn but it kept coming. Even if he sprinted for home now, he was running in the direction of the car. He was a flashing neon sign in the landscape. He stood spellbound for a moment by the thought, it blotted all else

from his mind. Before thought returned, he was pounding away from home, away from the car. At the first corner, he turned and put two houses between him and the road. He tried to keep still, to make himself part of the streetscape, gulping for air and breath rasping as the car whizzed across the intersection.

Silence flooded back into the street, its presence spooked him. He walked fast but not so fast as to draw attention to himself. All Hannah's concerns suddenly seemed much more reasonable. Just by being here, he drew attention to himself. There was no protective crowd.

He scanned the footpath ahead for even one other person. The silence was beyond quiet, an absence of people in the street, in the houses, in the yards. The street looked abandoned, but he had a feeling he was being watched from behind curtains. When he looked straight at a window he had the faint afterimage of movement and a small thin face.

A smell hit his nose, a smell with a physical presence, rotting, it repelled him. He could almost see it, coming off a pile of refuse in front of the next house. He skirted into the middle of the street, just beyond the wall of stench. He tried to keep his eyes away but in among the food scraps and tin cans he saw old clothes and a pair of shoes. He didn't look again, that was surely all it was, clothes and shoes.

The houses with broken in doors were punctuated by flat, impassive facades that were giving nothing away. If he had his bearings right, he was directly behind his own house. Another house with a broken door, smashed windows. As derelict as if it had been empty for years. A noise from inside made him jump. He sped up, trying not to break into a run, his shoes hit the ground with loud thuds.

'Hey.' Someone was coming through the broken door. He looked for a second, a young man, a teenager he didn't recognise. He had never known who lived here, the boy could be squatter or neighbour, he had no idea. Sean broke

into a fast walk, a very fast walk, with a hop in it, loping into the centre of the street.

‘Hey.’ He was past the house and the kid in the house too derelict to live in. The only visible person in an apparently empty street. Sean ran.

‘Come back.’ The voice was further behind. He rounded the corner, stopped for a second to listen for footsteps. He could hear nothing over his own breathing.

He walked briskly, staying in the centre of the road. More obvious to anyone watching, further from the reach of the houses seething with silent threat. Cars didn’t factor into it anymore, let them come head on, let them be a threat he could see. Now he couldn’t get out of his head the young man in the next street. The more he fixated on him, the more his mind invented the sounds of someone following. He forced himself to walk past home and the neighbouring semi. He stopped two doors up and looked back along the street. No one. He looked around to see if anyone was watching from the houses and moved with self-conscious embarrassment as he retraced his steps to his own front door. It scared him to think how desperate someone would have to be to risk talking to a stranger. How much he needed help, this dangerous stranger he ignored.

He checked the street one more time. The front door of the house opposite flapped again, ambushing him out of the corner of his eye. There was still nothing.

He knocked. Hannah’s voice came back instantly. ‘Who is it?’ The sound of her voice washed off his fear. She was waiting for him, right behind the door.

‘Some random person knocking on your front door when you were expecting your husband.’

‘You can’t come in.’

‘It’s me, come on.’

‘I mean it.’ Her voice sounded strained and tired through the door. ‘You can’t come in.’

‘I don’t have any chocolate. Or coffee. Or toilet paper.’ Nothing but silence.  
‘I didn’t go in, there was nothing left. I’m safe.’

‘You’re just saying that.’

‘Why would I say that? If I had coffee and chocolate and toilet paper, I’d tell you.’

She opened the door but not the grill. She looked him up and down, looked behind him. She was looking for food, she would have let the food in. ‘You’re not wearing the mask and gloves.’

‘There wasn’t anything left to touch and there wasn’t anyone to see. I’m virus free. Someone did a job on Lucy’s a while back.’

She was still standing back from the grill. ‘It doesn’t take that long to walk to Lucy’s.’

‘I needed to breathe so I went around the block.’ Still no movement from Hannah. ‘All I got was air, uncontaminated, unshared air.’

‘What the hell. What the absolute hell. You went for a walk?’

‘Please just open the grill.’

‘You want me to open the grill, to open the grill and let in a big fat idiot.’ She had a right to be angry. ‘I told you not to, I asked you not to. But you didn’t think, you didn’t think about anybody or anything.’

He stood and let her rage fall on him. He deserved it - for Lucy’s, for letting Ella into their house, for everything.

‘And what was I supposed to say to Oscar and Zac if you didn’t come back? That their Dad’s a moron? That he didn’t have the common decent sense to keep himself alive?’

‘And now you want me to let you back in. Tell me, when during your pleasant walk did you think about Oscar and Zac? When did you decide that the rest of us were happy to risk death so you could go for a stroll? Seven and a half thousand people died yesterday. In driving distance of this house and you think you’re bloody Superman.’

He was tired, he was wrong. He wanted to come back in. 'A number doesn't change what is happening in this street now.'

'Then what does? What on the face of the earth would it take for you to know exactly what is outside our door? Because going out and looking is the most short sighted, dumbest answer to that question.' She unlocked the grill and stomped into the bedroom. She threw herself down on the bed, the tension in her body spent.

'I'm sorry I wanted to loot Lucy's.'

'That means nothing. You didn't because you couldn't.'

'Yeah.' He noticed the bedclothes were crumpled. 'We're still going to need more food. How many more weeks can we live on beans and rice?'

'Beans and rice will keep you alive. Why isn't this clear to you? This isn't the time to go out shopping. That time is over, I did that when it was safe. This is the time when you stay inside and shut up about the beans and rice. And don't talk to me. I don't even know why I let you back in. Don't talk to me, don't look at me. Just go away.'