

FRAGILITY AND HOPE IN A WORLD OF UNCERTAINTY



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She called it 'Lucy'

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At the rise of the sun the clock struck one.

Kick, thump, roll. Kick, thump, roll. Tom's shoes camouflaged with the dust on which he stood, kicking the soccer ball against the wall. It wasn't really much of a soccer ball, it had been once — but now it was a tired piece of leather, the outer layer had been blasted off years ago by the next rising star. Now it sank; deflated, dusty and tattered and with much less enthusiasm held in its threads than in those days of youth. Nevertheless, it was the source of much fun; dribbling, passing, scoring, all very exciting games for some. Tom paused, ball under foot, 'Yes,' he thought, 'I'm sure of that.' Not at all the same as the moans and cries he'd heard through the afternoon, but a lighter cry, surely the noise of a displeased infant, upset by their removal from the comfort and safety of the womb.

The storm began to brew as the clock struck two.

Max smirked. His older brother was flicking peas across the table into a soccer goal between Max's spoon and glass. SCORE! His mother turned and glared. Eyes down, hide the smile. Kick your brother under the table. MUM! 'Dad,' Mum cries. A stern word, an ear cuff, spoon down, glass down, peas eaten.

They hid from 'Lucy' as the clock struck three

She ran wild. Dancing through the long grass with the net over one shoulder. There was a rainbow painted across the sky, the mist of rain that fell was just enough. The scene looked just

like Max's painting tacked upon the kitchen wall. The specimens today were extraordinary, every colour imaginable could be seen upon the wings of one of these butterflies; the trip was simply marvellous.

Blues, purples and oranges flashed by her eyes, and her eyes spun. The net whirled, she had to catch them all. Her hands waved, skipping around the kitchen table — then chasing Dad around the kitchen table. She really chased him now, oh how mad she was at him, gnashing at his hands and barking. Such obscene vocabulary. An apple, a jar of sauce, a can of soup, anything she could reach. Dad had come home half an hour ago, but the boys hadn't been back inside yet. Their throats were coarse and dry, their bellies empty. The afternoon sun burned down upon the bags of rubbish by the bins on the concrete. Beneath those bags, Max was getting hot.

He came to the door as the clock struck four

It was a rickety old thing, clearly trying its best to hold itself up on those four short legs. So much use had tired its bones. The bed was breaking. Not unlike any other possession of the household, it had been worn down to its full capacity, could hardly take another bit of use. Max lay beside Tom on the bed, heads at alternate ends, throwing and catching the rolled ball of socks. Amusement was thin, toys didn't exist, never had existed. They had a few crayons but rarely any paper to draw on. The 'soccer ball' had been thrown in the rubbish by a drunk Dad last week, it would be a long time before a replacement could be sourced. Friends were pretty thin too, but they had each other, it could be a lot worse. Max dropped the socks. They exhaled together, then smiled in agreeance, they were bored with that game anyway. The doorbell rang. Its echo filled the house, bouncing off the roof and filling up the bare rooms with its ring. On the second ring, Dad got off the couch, his thongs slapped the floorboards

as he headed to open the door. ‘What’s this then?’ The boys listened silently from their bed.

The bees left their hive as the clock struck five

Tom taught Max a new word that day: eviction — the action of being forced out of your home for not paying rent.

Tic toc, tic toc, pass the hours on the clock

He looked at the frail figure that lay on the hospital bed. To Max, she was an alien. Dozens of coloured cords stuck out from her body, keeping the life in her, but they could just as easily be sucking the life out of her, Max thought. Her eyelids were closed but her mouth was slightly open, lips dry, breath thin — there wasn’t much air left in her.

It was as though Max wasn’t there. He was, but he wasn’t. He glanced to the clock on the wall, watched it tick. Then Tom looked up, he saw Max standing in the doorway and walked over, embracing the non-responsive figure that lay there, frozen in time. Hah, they scoff, time doesn’t freeze. Time speeds ahead, makes you keep up, stay in front, or fall behind — track lost.

They stood there, the two of them, stood dumb and awkward after the embrace, (‘what do we do now’), lacking the emotional connection to this dying figure they thought they should be feeling. Sorrow, loss, grief, for heaven’s sake even a little sadness at the lowest level — nothing. Oh wait, something ... ah! Confusion. Where did it go wrong, when did good become bad, when did broke happen, homeless happen and ‘Lucy’? Where did that come into this picture, not the rainbow on the kitchen wall, the real picture. The picture where two boys hide under the rubbish bins from their Mum high on LSD, of a drunk Dad and of homeless children whose ages aren’t yet in double figures. That picture’s not coloured in crayon. Max exhaled. He looked at that figure, and he wondered how it had happened, how he hadn’t noticed or cared and why he hadn’t done more.