

The Thirst

ELENA LARKIN

It's Lucy's turn for show-and-tell. She's brought a can of baked beans to share with the class. "My Uncle Bernie has seventy-three cans of baked beans in his wardrobe. He's saving them for when the world gets poisoned and we've got nothing left to eat, because all the cows and pigs and lambs are dead and even the vegetarians can't survive because all the lettuces have died too."

Lucy looks pointedly at one of the girls in the front row before continuing.

"I asked Uncle Bernie if the vegetarians could eat the grass and Uncle Bernie said probably not because all the grass will be brown and dead too and it doesn't taste much good anyway. So the only way any of us can survive is if Uncle Bernie shares his baked beans. I guess Uncle Bernie's baked beans will be all right because they're protected in cans and by his wardrobe too. My

brother Dean reckons baked beans make you fart heaps but I said that doesn't matter because I'm a girl and girls don't fart."

The boys insist that they've heard girls fart before, "real stinky ones too". Lucy seems satisfied by the boys' indignant reactions and sits down smugly, clutching her can of baked beans. A quiet boy, Andrew, stands empty-handed for his turn at show and tell. Miss Appleby murmurs "Now,

← 'Mother' is by Cara Jordan-Miller (21), a full time fine arts student (RMIT) and part-time check out chick (Coles) living in the 'up and coming' suburbs of Melbourne.

now” in a half-hearted attempt to shush the boys. Eventually they quiet down, and resume picking their noses and challenging each other to flick boogers at the back of girls’ heads without being detected. Lucy is a prime target.

Miss Appleby registers the near-silence and reluctantly pulls her eyes away from her doodling.

“Did you forget your show and tell, Andrew?” she asks.

He shakes his head.

“Well, go on then. What have you brought to share?”

“A tongue.”

There is a ripple of giggles.

Miss Appleby sighs and puts down her pen. “Andrew, your task was to choose an object — something you can pick up and carry to school. Your tongue always comes along to school with you, in your mouth. So saying you brought your tongue for show and tell isn’t really completing the homework, is it?”

The children snigger.

“I didn’t mean my tongue. I brought a different tongue.”

Miss Appleby raises her eyebrows.

“Well? Where is it?”

“I don’t have it anymore.”

Miss Appleby exhales deeply. “Right. You mean you forgot it.”

“No. It slipped away at recess to swim with the fish in the river.”

Andrew’s voice is placid, his arms hang limply by his side and his gaze is soft, but certain.

“Andrew, I have no other option but to assume you haven’t brought an object in for show and tell—”

“But Miss! I saw the tongue! Andrew

showed me,” Lucy pipes up.

Miss Appleby looks at the two children, sighs, and glances at the clock. “Thank you for your show and tell, Andrew,” she says, finally.

Andrew wanders back to his spot on the floor. He hesitates and then says, “My mother has a whole box of them. I can bring you another, if you like.”

But Miss Appleby doesn’t hear him, it’s 3:15 and class has been dismissed.

Andrew pauses at the corner of a tree-lined street and glances behind him. That noisy girl Lucy is standing frozen on the path, staring at him. Her eyes dart around frantically. She looks like she’s searching for somewhere to hide, but all the good thick bushes are too far away and it’s useless now anyway, since he’s right in front of her and she’s obviously alone and nobody can play hide-and-seek by themselves.

“Hello,” she says, staring at her feet. Andrew notices that she’s not wearing any shoes.

“Are you following me?”

Lucy groans. “I... Yes.”

“What for?”

Andrew watches her contemplate possible excuses, before she blurts:

“I wanted to see your tongues.”

Her eyes are bright with interest. He’s confused by her eagerness, but he nods and continues walking. Lucy interprets his nod as permission to follow.

“What do you have for afternoon tea?” Lucy asks as they turn into Nigh St. The street is bare and thickly lined with brick units instead of trees. Andrew

hears her stomach rumble.

"Afternoon tea?"

"You know, like bickies and cheese after school. Or fruit salad. Or sometimes, Dad gives us Dunkaroos! Mum gets real cranky when Dad gives us Dunkaroos. She thinks the sugar makes us go all crazy and then we yell too much at dinnertime and then Dean says he can't go to bed because he's got dancing feet so Dad has to read to us till we're quiet, which works for a while but then Uncle Bernie comes home wearing his Speedos and goggles and we start yelling and laughing again because he looks like a beetle with a big dingdong."

"I don't have afternoon tea."

"Really? You wait the whole time 'til dinner?"

Andrew doesn't answer. He glances around cautiously before hurrying through the gate of a large block of units.

"Oh, is this your street?" Lucy asks, surprise evident in her tone.

Andrew pushes open the door to number 9/70 and gestures for Lucy to come inside.

It's so quiet and dark inside that Lucy doesn't dare to scream and run up and down the hallway like she does at home. The wallpaper is a flaking green, patterned with sad yellow daisies. Lucy feels the urge to peel the daisies from the wall and take them outside to blossom in the garden, but she doesn't, because she's not sure if Andrew's mum would like her plucking the paint from the walls — she might be like her friend Sam's mum. Sam's mum was funny

about walls. The house is so quiet and still that Lucy wonders if the sound of her voice might shatter the walls. So instead, she practises her 'calm self' like her mother taught her and follows Andrew into the kitchen. There isn't much to look at. It's a little lighter in here; a small window above the sink permits dapples of the afternoon sun to seep inside. Lucy conspicuously peers into kitchen cupboards.

"They're all empty!"

Andrew looks disinterested. He's drawing on a photograph of a woman from a crumpled up newspaper.

"What are you going to eat for dinner?" Lucy persists.

Andrew shrugs and continues to draw.

"Why are you wrapping that lady's wrists in tongues?" Lucy asks, now looking at Andrew's drawing.

Andrew stops drawing. "I don't know. I guess they're thirsty."

Lucy nods and ponders, "Should we go wake your mum up now?"

"She'll get up soon. I think I better show you the tongues another day. The box is in the bedroom and Mum doesn't like it when I touch it."

"Okay."

Lucy goes to leave but pauses by one of the kitchen cupboards. Andrew turns his attention back to the newspaper and begins to colour in the tongues. Lucy shuffles around a bit before Andrew hears the gentle click of the kitchen cupboard closing. He looks up to see Lucy padding down the hall, zipping up her backpack. She waves and gently shuts the front door behind her. Andrew

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perseveres with shading in the tongues for a time. Once he's happy with his shading, he approaches the kitchen cupboard, opens it and pulls out the can of baked beans sitting amongst the dust on the shelf.

Lucy loves Friday afternoons because it's art and craft time. Miss Appleby hands out big sheets of butcher's paper and the kids jostle one another, fighting to get to the box of crayons first. Someone squeals because another kid pulled their hair because they managed to grab the special rainbow crayon when the other kid saw it first.

Lucy marches past Miss Appleby, carrying her butcher's paper and her selection of crayons. She reaches a bare splash of carpet by the window, beside Andrew who is already busy working. He doesn't look up. Lucy plops herself down wordlessly and begins to draw. Her hand gouges orange crayon through the paper and onto the carpet. Lucy does very well at practising her 'calm self'. She concentrates on drawing her ballerina cat and tries to ignore that Andrew has a very nice bright blue crayon, which would be ideal for her cat's tutu. She draws patiently for a good ten minutes before breaking the silence.

"Can I come round after school? To see the tongues?"

Andrew shakes his head. "Maybe another day."

Lucy watches Andrew's face. He's impassive, focusing on blending the reds and blues on his butcher's paper. She continues to stare at him, and he continues to ignore her. Resigned, she

returns to her ballerina cat. Andrew passes her the bright blue crayon.

Lucy decides to follow Andrew home anyway. She sits by the swings and waits for him to leave the schoolyard, and then she runs up the stairs and slips down the slide ten times before following. She keeps her shoes on this time and looks to the pointing arms of the trees from the day before for directions to Nigh St.

It's a blaze of blinking blue and red lights. Lucy stands on the street watching as a harassed-looking woman gesticulates to the men in white. They start pushing something that looks like a very long trolley into Andrew's house. Lucy starts towards the house to see if Andrew is okay, but an arm juts out, blocking her path. The arm belongs to a stern-faced man in blue.

"Do you live in this block of units?"

"N-no," Lucy stammers.

"Go on then, go off home to your parents."

"But I came to see Andrew and his tongues—"

The policeman is not interested. He stands in stiff disapproval. "He's got a whole box of them," Lucy says. "One wriggled away to swim—"

"Look missy, I don't have time for your stories, you need to go home and share them with your mother."

Another policeman gets out of a car, "What have we got, Matthews?"

"A woman, single. Living alone in unit number nine," says the first policeman. He gives Lucy a prod in the back, "Go on girl. Get on home."

Lucy feels her eyes burn. She runs

away from Nigh Street and the angry men in blue, as the men in white emerge from the house, clattering down the front steps with the trolley.

Lucy is always sick on Monday mornings. Sometimes it's because her parents made her eat too much broccoli for dinner. Sometimes it's because her legs aren't working — she doesn't know how it happens but they turn all floppy in the night, like octopus arms, and the only way she can go to school is if her mum puts her in a bath, fills it up, and pushes it to the bus stop. Other times it's because she's lost her voice, because the Tooth Fairy went on vacation and the Voice Fairy came instead. Monday mornings also means maths and Lucy loathes maths. But this Monday, when her mum comes to wake her up, Lucy leaps out of bed so quickly that she nearly headbutts her. She tries to run out the door to the bus stop still wearing her pyjamas and without having her porridge.

"Calm your farm, Luce," her dad says, scooping her up around the middle and dropping her in a seat at the table. "I know your old man is smelly and Uncle Bernie's not so nice to look at but the bus won't be here for forty minutes so you may as well join us for brekkie." He passes her a bowl of steaming porridge, which she grudgingly accepts.

"What's biting your bum, Lucy?" Uncle Bernie asks.

"Nothing, Uncle Bernie."

"You got worms again?"

"No."

"Then how's about telling us what's going on today?"

"Dean! Breakfast!" her dad calls down the hallway.

Dean hurtles into the room and Uncle Bernie shoots out a hand, grabbing him around the ankle. Dean trips and falls in a heap, sprawled across the big tapestry rug. Normally Lucy would collapse in a fit of hysterical laughter at the sight of her brother gasping on the floor but she's had a squirming tummy since Friday afternoon and all she can think about is getting to school to see Andrew.

Eventually, she escapes from the table and Uncle Bernie's probing questions. She tries to dress as quickly as possible, but her mum stops her at the door and insists she put on a cardigan and matching socks. Finally, Lucy is on the bus. She counts the stops 'til school, squeezing her purple backpack between her knees.

It's 9:30 and Andrew's seat is still empty. At 9:45, Lucy sticks up her arm, ready to shout "Miss, where's Andrew?" when Andrew walks through the door and slips into his seat. Miss Appleby, still with her back to the class, continues to drone on about the rules of addition. Lucy stares fixedly at

Andrew, trying to catch his attention, but Andrew is staring at the blackboard and Miss Appleby's illegible scribbles.

Finally at recess, Lucy finds Andrew by the big tree peeling those funny pinecone things that go all furry once you remove the first layer.

"Whatcha doing?"

"Peeling."

"Why were you so late?"

"Our nosey neighbour was hanging around, so I had to wait for her to leave."

"Why?"

"My mother says it's better if she doesn't know things."

"What things?"

Andrew shrugs, "That I live there and stuff."

"Your mum wants you to play hide-and-seek? All the time?"

"I guess."

"Why?"

Andrew shrugs again, finishes peeling a pinecone and places it on the grass gently, next to another de-shelled pinecone.

"I followed you home on Friday."

Andrew picks up another pinecone and continues peeling.

"But the policemen wouldn't let me through. What were they doing there?"

Andrew holds his pinecone out for inspection and places it beside the other two. He picks up another, showing no intention of answering Lucy's question.

Lucy watches Andrew patiently shed the shell. She admires the soft flecks of fur. She chooses her own pinecone and begins picking at it. Soon, they have a neat little row of pinecone soldiers.

"I brought a tongue to show you today."

"Ooooh!" Lucy looks up from her de-shelling eagerly as Andrew pulls the tongue from his pocket. He holds it tightly in a fist, as if worried it'll escape. Lucy pries his fingers open.

"That's not a tongue."

Andrew stares down at it. "No... I guess not."

Lucy takes it from his hand gingerly and walks briskly towards the bin and drops it amongst the Cheezels packets and rejected multi-grain sandwiches. She walks back to Andrew and plops down beside him.

"Wanna come to my house for afternoon tea?"

V W

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