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NICK HOLDSTOCK

## The Ballad of Poor Lucy Miller

EVERY MORNING except Sunday, Lucy catches the eight o'clock bus. She dismounts at Paddington, walks down the cobbled street, revolves through the door of Galtons, moves through Perfumes, then through Linens, ascends to the mezzanine which principally sells gloves.

Sometimes she is tired, exhausted, and sometimes the customers are rude, but even when a woman puts a pin in Lucy's wrist, even as the red bead swells, even then the onlookers will see Lucy smile. And when the great clock chimes six times, when the clothed hands float their way out, Lucy puts on her coat and turns through the brass doors. She walks down the cobbled street and pulls her thin coat tight. The wind comes from an icy place where even vicious bears feel sorry for poor Lucy. She is small, and without fur. Her brain has a tumor. It is pressing on the nerves that make her sense of smell. The only thing she smells is violets, just after she wakes.

Lucy Miller waits at the bus stop. She knows something is wrong. The doctor made her breathe through a cardboard tube into a clocklike device whose hands moved not that much. He told her to take off her skirt and underwear and then said, "Lie down, please." Then he said, "Please lie still," and then he shone a small light into her open anus. When, after thirty seconds—during which neither spoke or breathed—Lucy twitched and tried to turn over, the good doctor said, quite sternly, "I told you, lie *still*."

The windows are the color of butter; it begins to rain. Several people glance at her because they think she is crying.

The bus is crowded; Lucy must stand and sway next to a woman with sharp elbows.

When Lucy gets off the bus it has at least stopped raining. She crosses the bridge, climbs up the hill, walks down her road, where the streetlights are out. She looks in the windows, whose curtains are closed, but there is still a yellow line that speaks of snug parlors, waiting meals, fires prepared to welcome. She walks, and gradually, house by house, she sees the father, the mother, the daughter, their faces flushed,

the love and kindness in their eyes, and something runs in front of her and almost makes her fall. She stops and gasps and the darkness shifts with an evil swish of a tail.

Poor, poor Lucy Miller tries to collect herself. She looks up, in hope of stars, but above, always clouds.

She makes her key bite through the lock. "Mother, I'm home," she says, and then a handbell rings. Lucy takes off her wet coat and the bell rings again. She sighs and climbs the leaning stairs that she fell down last month.

Her mother is propped up in bed. She is wearing a hat and gloves and even though she sees Lucy she rings the bell again.

"Where were you?"

"I'm sorry, the bus was late."

"Sorry never helped a horse." Her mother opens her mouth and points at her brown teeth. "They're hungry. Almost dead. *I'm* almost dead. Then you can have all the butcher's boys you want."

Poor, poor Lucy Miller has never even been *touched*. Not by a clerk from Smith & Hyde, not by a butcher's boy.

"Mother, I'm sorry. I'll get your tea."

"Don't want it."

"Please, Mother."

"Please yourself. That's what you do, my girl."

Lucy Miller goes downstairs. She sits at the kitchen table and gives her head to her hands. Her father was killed by a single brick that fell from their chimney. Her mother never speaks of him except when she's asleep.

The bell rings and rings and rings and her hands hold her head.

"Something with a bit of blood," her mother says, and laughs.

Lucy smells the ghost of violets in the near dawn. She wishes that her room were full of clean chrysanthemums. There is a flower stall on the way to the bus stop. One day she will stop and buy some. Even if she cannot smell them, she will see their heads, their stems, the petals they hold tight.

The charcoal light is smudged to gray when she slides from the bed. She puts on her worn dressing gown and goes into the bathroom. The water in the toilet is an intense yellow. It reminds her of the fields of rape she ran through as a child. Her dress and legs were stained with pollen but she did not fall.

Lucy flushes the toilet and turns on the tap. The basin fills. She thinks of Sunday. The day that she is free.

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On Saturday she sees at least a hundred hands. Long ones, small ones, pale ones, red ones, clean ones, ones with reddish brown stains under their chipped nails. It is as if the town has become ashamed of its hands. *Cover me*, the fingers say, as they rest on glass, linen, leather, wool, her flesh. These hands are like chicken's claws, old and slimy and grasping. They rest on hers while he looks in her eyes and talks about stitching. There used to be two rows on the fingers but now there is only one and did she know why, hmm? "Spaniards," he says as his wife comes over, and then he lifts his hands. He says, "I need a pair for the opera; my old ones are quite worn." Lucy flushes and feels like a bird in a cage that has been thrown out of a high, high window and it can fly, it knows it can, but it is in the cage and falling and here, oh dear, is the ground.

She stands and helps them hide their fingers. Her father never hid his hands. Whenever he fixed, or painted, or mended, his hands could always be seen.

She doesn't like her Sunday gloves. But it's the only way.

Is it autumn? Is it winter? No one seems to know. The leaves are mostly off the trees; the sun is doing its best. Flies bounce at windowpanes; women on their way to matins doubt their heavy coats. And Lucy, when she wakes on Sunday, finds a bright rectangle. In the clean shape of its goodness, she sees many things. She stares at it and smells the violets until she is summoned.

"You stink of meat," her mother says, but it does not matter. Lucy feeds her; Lucy wipes her; Lucy reads from Psalms to her till Mrs. Richards comes. Mrs. Richards, lean and gray, has always lived next door. Mrs. Richards sits with her from eleven to six.

Lucy scrapes a tin of pilchards into a small pot. She puts the pot in a bag, the bag in her pocket. Then she takes the gloves from the drawer and puts them in her coat. She says good-bye to Mrs. Richards, then goes out the back door. She walks to the back of the garden and opens the small gate. She steps into the dim alley that cuts between the houses. She walks down it, her footfalls loud, and it is like a long, dark gullet with a mind to swallow. It must smell of decay and urine, though Lucy cannot smell it, but then it widens like a cinema screen and there is the canal—silver, blue, a line that flows and stretches. The water contains the sky, and poor, poor Lucy Miller feels herself relax. Her neck and head still have a tightness; her ears still expect the bell; but as she wanders by the water she begins to smile. The sun is warm. She is free. There is enough time.

She walks until there are no houses. There are just the gasworks and the biscuit factory. Lucy sits on a metal bench from which the paint has flecked off. She takes the pot from her pocket and places it on the ground. Then she takes the gloves from her pocket and puts them next to her. She stares at the water. Waits.

The sun shines and shines and shines on Lucy's excellent skin. A woman with a green scarf pushes a pram past. She calls to Lucy: "Beautiful day!" "Yes it is!" Lucy replies.

Two boys pass on shiny bikes the red of fire engines. They streak by without a look and something in their ease and grace impresses Lucy deeply.

Two o'clock. Three o'clock. And then, although she hears nothing, she turns to the left. A small, black cat is looking at the pot. She looks at his tail, his paws, and her scalp begins to itch, but in a pleasant way. It is like the skin is sighing through small mouths. They are breathing out the week, not all of it, by any means, but Monday (when her mother hit her), and some of Tuesday, too.

She picks up the pot and takes a fish from it. She holds it by its oily tail and the cat comes nearer. Its tiny face is soft and eager; it is not much more than a kitten and if a passing painter saw this scene he'd find it so charming, so delightful, that he would have to stop and do the beauty of it justice. It would be touching; it would be heartfelt; it would sell a million boxes of chocolate.

Lucy watches the cat sniff closer. She drops the fish and the cat begins to eat. She looks at the water, the sun, the cat, and things seem so composed, so *ready*, that the itch spreads down her neck like a line of red ants.

As Lucy reaches for the gloves, the pain of Wednesday leaves. The gloves are thick and darkly stained and her fingers are small in them, as if these were adult gloves and she only a child.

The cat finishes the fish. It looks at her. It licks its lips. "All right," she says and drops a fish that the cat pounces on. She wonders if it has a name, if it lives nearby.

Lucy leans and grasps its neck and squeezes very hard. The cat makes a choking sound and scratches at the gloves. Lucy grabs one of its back legs and pulls it toward her. The cat screams like a scalded child; she puts her foot on it. She presses down on its small skull and Thursday, Friday shift.

Lucy raises her heel and the cat does not move. Although the animal is breathing, it has given up.

She lifts it gently from the ground; the cat has lost an eye. Its breath wheezes out, then in, and she is free of yesterday, that longest day of hands. She is glad; she is relieved; but there is still a weight. It feels large and like a stone, and it is in

her head, her stomach; it feels firmly lodged. Lucy holds the cat's head under the canal's water till the bubbles stop.

The golden hands on Galton's clock tell Lucy she is late. The pretty girls in Perfumes smirk; the girls in Linens laugh. "Lucy Miller is *late*," they say, and giggle at her blush.

She climbs to the mezzanine. "Twenty-four minutes," says Mr. Mackie. "Twenty-four minutes. Because you were sleeping. It must not happen again."

"Yes, Mr. Mackie."

He frowns. "I want you to clean the storeroom. Do not kill the spiders."

Lucy seldom goes to the park during her lunch break. There and back is half the time of which there's not enough. But Tuesday is clear and sharp; the colors all say *Yes*. She sits on a bench and eats. Dogs are playing in the leaves. A tramp is fast asleep.

She can barely taste her sandwich. If the cheese were yellow shit, she probably wouldn't know.

But the leaves are coming down: orange, yellow, red. They seem weightless as they fall, as if they could float back up whenever they so chose.

The tramp sleeps on; the dogs roll over; she breathes slowly out.

Next morning she wakes without hearing the bell. Lucy looks in on her mother; she is fast asleep. Lucy thinks about a Sunday when they had a picnic. Her father drove them to the Downs. Their sandwiches had tongue. Her mother stood on the hilltop while chaffinches flew round.

Her mother has not been outside for almost seven years.

Mr. Mackie has broken his leg. "Eight to ten weeks," says Mr. Walker, a dusty man whose left hand shakes because he's frightened of people.

Lucy looks at the gloves on the counter. Rows of white and rows of brown. A single row of green. The largest gloves are close to her, the child's ones far away.

Lucy watches the hands of the clock that shine and grudgingly move.

A mother and her girls come in. The girls are painted wooden dolls that can't stand on their own. Their hands are shaped from porcelain; they'll never have to work.

As Lucy clothes the girls' pale hands, they stare at her and whisper. She shrouds their gloves in tissue paper. They go in a box.

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The carpet in the park is thick; the hands above are bare. Lucy sits on the same bench and opens her bag. She removes a small, hard apple. She inspects it, then takes a bite. She enjoys the texture.

A blur of movement in the bushes: the tramp from before. He has a full, brown beard and string around his trousers. He stops and stares at her, then moves behind a tree.

Lucy finishes her apple. Then she eats the core. The pips are yielding in her mouth as she scans the leaves. Their colors do not form rows: they each chose their place. She thinks of woods, the tall, dense trees. Their leaves piled like rugs.

Her father used to catch her when she flew down the slope. Arms out but no plane noise because she was a girl. Down and down, her legs too fast, then crash into his arms.

By next weekend it will have rained. The carpet will be soiled.

She will go on Sunday. Leave her gloves at home. The tram to Epsom, then a bus, then the time between the trunks where bells can never ring.

“For you,” a hoarse voice says. The tramp looks like Karl Marx. He extends his palm, which holds a red oak leaf. “For you,” he says and then comes closer. There is something on the leaf. It is wet, but not like water; there are some white lumps.

He looks down and her eyes follow. His penis is small and brown and in his other hand. When Lucy tries to stand the tramp pushes her back. “For you,” he says and then she feels the leaf against her face.

She screams but when she tries to stand he hits her in the eye.

“For you,” he says and then she hears the police whistle blast.

On Thursday she goes to the doctor. He examines her.

When Lucy wakes on Friday morning she cannot smell violets. The tumor has grown so large it has killed the nerve.

She pulls the blanket over her head. Soon, the bell will ring. She wonders when this will end. Her mother, although insane, could live for many years. She could stand among the gloves till she is gray and small.

She does not want to get married. This means fetching, carrying, men putting things in her. Mary from Soft Furnishings can talk of nothing else. She says that it hurts too much unless they're in the bath.

Lucy raises the blanket and looks at the clock. Six thirty. She should get up.

The toilet contains large black pellets, like the droppings of sheep. She flushes the toilet and moves to the basin and then the bell begins to ring like it's the end of the world.

"Where were you? With the meat?"

"Mother, I came right away."

"Liar. Eating sausages. He will get you fat."

There are three black pellets on the bedside table. Her mother points to them. "Good meat." She takes one between thumb and finger. She opens her mouth.

Lucy moves and shouts, too late. She can feel the week in her, like fifty pounds of lead. It will slowly sink in her till it tears through her feet.

On Saturday Lucy buys a large tin of sardines.

On Sunday she cannot wait for good old Mrs. Richards. Her coat is already on. The gloves are in her pocket.

Her mother's bell is quiet because she's eating tripe. The only bells are those outside—but they can be ignored.

Lucy puts her hand to her cheek. She thinks about the leaves.

Finally, at ten past eleven, she hears a frail knock. Lucy admits Mrs. Richards, who must leave at two.

Through the back gate, down the alley, Lucy almost runs. The sky is a sheet of metal being lowered on ropes. If it rains, she has no chance: the week will stay in her.

As she reaches the canal she feels the first spot. Dumbly, she extends her palm. Another raindrop falls. When she tilts her face up, water strikes her chin. She stands there—palm out, face up—waiting, hoping, and although there is no mercy, no more raindrops fall.

She hurries on. She passes no one. When she rounds the bend, she stops. A small boy of five or six is sitting on her bench. His face is dirty; his hair is matted: he looks like a gypsy.

Get off my bench, she wants to say. But Lucy just walks on. She goes past the biscuit factory, then onto the lock. She stands where the water drops; she looks at her watch. In two hours she must relieve the patient Mrs. Richards. *Thank you very much*, she'll say, and then, as soon as the door shuts, the bell will start to ring. It will sound throughout her week while she dresses the hands.

The week has been too bad. If she cannot lift it slightly, she will not survive.

Lucy cries for several minutes. Then she bites her lip. She walks back toward her bench and wipes her stinging eyes. The skin is tender where he hit her, but there is no bruise.

As she rounds the corner the boy stares at her. This time she does not walk past. She stops and says, "Hello." The boy continues staring. "What's your name?" she asks, but he does not respond. Perhaps he does not understand. Perhaps the boy is shy, or simple, or does not know English.

"I'm Lucy," she says and smiles. "I'm supposed to meet someone here. We'd like to sit down." His eyes follow her hand as it moves to her pocket. They stare at the half crown she produces. "If you let me have the bench, I'll give this to you." The boy stares at her outstretched palm. Neither of them moves.

Then his hand snaps out to hers and he snatches the coin. "Thank you," she says and steps toward him. The boy opens his mouth and spits and even as it strikes her nose he begins to laugh. His laugh is high and broken, like a fox's cry. He gets up and moves away as Lucy wipes her face. "Get out of here," she shouts. The boy howls out a laugh.

The boy points at Lucy as he backs away. He starts to turn, perhaps to run. And then she sees him fall. As he tilts, as his arms flail, she sees the block of wood. The gypsy boy lands on his back and in an instant she is there.

Lucy puts her boot on his chest and presses till he screams. It is the sound of something feral, something that is free to roam, to do whatever it pleases.

She presses down, and something gives, and days begin to lift from her, to rise like fat and glad balloons toward the sky. She raises her boot then brings it down hard and when she hears the crack of his ribs, Thursday, Friday rise.

She brings her boot down again; there is another crack. Saturday bursts from her eyes. Her foot moves to his throat.

Lucy stamps and the gypsy boy spasms. He twitches and wets himself and then lies very still. The canal water hurries by. The branches call for help. As for poor, poor Lucy Miller, she has never been so happy.