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After Tomorrow

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1

THE FIRST RAID happened on an ordinary, boring evening. We were all sitting round the kitchen table and Mum was serving our tea. It was watery vegetable stew—as usual—and Taco was moaning about the swede.

As usual.

He scowled at the orange lumps on his plate and started singing under his breath. '*Horrible sick for tea today, sick for tea, sick for tea . . .*'

'Now, don't be silly,' Justin said. 'Grandpa grew that swede, Taco. And Mum's cooked it specially for us.'

'It's *sick*,' Taco muttered. He put his head down stubbornly, like a little bull.

'It's food,' Mum said shortly. She ladled some stew on to her own plate and sat down to eat. 'If you don't want yours, give it to Matt. And go to bed.'

I'd have eaten Taco's share like a shot. But I knew he'd spend the whole night moaning about being hungry if I did, so I whispered in his ear. 'Race you! If I finish first, I get to stomp on your shoebox.'

'NO!' roared Taco. (The shoebox trick always worked. No one knew what he kept in there, but it was his treasure.) He grabbed a spoon and started shovelling stew into his mouth.

So it was a normal, dull evening. And then suddenly, without any warning—

CRASH!!!

The back door burst open, splintering away from its hinges, and two men in balaclavas leapt into the kitchen. They were yelling at the tops of their voices.

'OK! Nobody move! Hands on the table!'

'Shut your mouths!'

They were both holding big, heavy wrenches, swinging them round like weapons. Justin began to stand up—and then sank slowly back into his chair. He looked stupid, but it made sense.

If a wrench like that smashed into your skull, it wouldn't just give you a bruise.

The men didn't hesitate. One of them grabbed Taco and yanked him backwards in his chair, holding the wrench over his face. The other one ripped open the cupboard doors, one after another—until he found the food cupboard.

He started emptying it straight away, scooping out pasta and beans and cereal—all the food Mum had stashed away so carefully. He loaded it all into trolley bags, cramming them full.

'Don't take *everything*,' Justin bleated, when he opened the freezer. 'We've got children to feed.'

'It's your kids or ours, mate,' said the other man.

He swung his wrench high in the air over Taco's head and looked sideways at Justin. Taco's spoon shook, spilling swede back on to the plate, and his eyes opened wide and white.

Justin opened his mouth to argue—and then shut it again, without saying anything.

'That's better,' the man said grimly. 'We don't want any trouble.'

All our frozen food went into the next couple of bags. Beans. Beetroot. Carrots. Apple. Our precious sausages and bacon and the bony bits of lamb for stewing. For a second there was no sound except the thump of frozen meat dropping into the bag. Then Mum put an arm round Taco's shoulders and started whispering in his ear.

The wrench swung towards her sharply. She glanced up at it and stopped talking, but she didn't move her arm.

In fifteen minutes, all the cupboards were bare. The fridge and the freezer were standing empty, with their

doors wide open and the ice slowly starting to melt. The man with the bags took them out into the hall and lined them up by the front door. Then he went out—leaving the other one to guard us.

That was our chance! We should have jumped him then. Justin could have knocked him sideways **CRUNCH! THUMP!** and I could have sat on his head while Mum grabbed the wrench. Then we'd have attacked the other man when he came back and **BANG! ZAP!! POW!!!** we would have been in charge. We'd have made them put all our food back and then tied them up and called the police.

My dad would have done that. He would have picked up those weedy little raiders and smashed their heads together. But Justin didn't move. Not an inch. He went on sitting meekly at the table, watching the wrench that was aimed at Mum's head.

The other raider started a van outside and reversed it up to the front door—driving straight across the lettuce patch. He jumped out, without bothering to turn off the engine, and loaded the bags into the back of the van. Then he slammed the rear doors and stuck his head back into the kitchen to nod to his mate.

The man with the wrench edged slowly towards the door, watching us all. Ready to race forward if one of us looked like moving. At the last moment, he reached out and swept his hand across all the light

switches, plunging us into darkness. Then he raced for the van, slamming the front door behind him.

For a moment we sat without moving, listening to the van drive out on to the road. Then Taco started to make a horrible gasping noise, as if he was suffocating. '*Uh—uh—uh—*'

'It's all right,' Justin said. He snatched Taco out of his chair and hugged him, hard. 'They've gone, Taco. It's all *right*.'

Mum leapt up and charged out of the house, yelling after the van. I think she was trying to see the number plate, but she was way too late for that. All she could do was shout rude words as it hurtled round the corner and disappeared. As the noise of the engine faded, her voice died away too and we heard her turn back towards the house.

Then there was a different kind of shout. More like a scream.

Justin put Taco down and raced for the door. I followed him, with Taco behind me, clutching at my sweatshirt. Mum was standing in the middle of the path, staring back at the house, and her mouth was twisted into a tight little knot. When she saw us, she pointed at the space over the front door.

We ran down the path, turned round to look—and saw huge black letters spray-painted right across the wall.

SCADGERS!

'What's that?' Taco said, in a small, scared voice.

Mum shook her head and pressed her lips together.

'It means *hoarders*.' Justin shuddered. 'Rich, greedy people who buy up all the food and hide it away so they don't have to share it with anyone else.'

'*We're* not rich,' I said. 'And we're not greedy either.'

'They don't care about that,' Mum said. Suddenly she sounded very tired. '*They* think we're scadgers—and they've tagged our house. Labelled us as fair game for any stinking raider who sees that. So this won't be the last time.'

Justin stroked her arm. 'Don't worry, Ali. I've got some paint in the garage. I'll paint over it in the morning. You'd better get on to the insurance people then. And you could phone the police now.'

'What can *they* do?' Mum said bitterly.

But she went inside straight away and rang them. And that made her even crosser. Justin and I were upstairs, putting Taco to bed, and we could hear her shouting.

'What do you *mean* you can't come out? . . . I don't care if it *does* happen fifty times a week . . . It's not our fault you're short-staffed . . . '

Taco sat up in bed, listening to it all. 'Why won't the police come?' he whispered. 'Why is Mum so angry?'

Justin sighed and tried to make him lie down. 'Lots of people are having their food stolen. And there aren't enough police to visit them all.'

'So why don't we get more police?' Taco said.

I knew the answer to that one. 'Because there's not enough money to pay them. The government can't afford it.'

'Why can't they go to the bank and get more money?' Taco said. 'And why did those men come and take our food? Why didn't they get their own? Why—'

Justin looked at me and rolled his eyes. How could we possibly explain all that? We'd need to go back to the beginning, before Taco was even born. Before my dad died and Mum met Justin.

Right back to the day when five banks crashed at once. The Monday they called Armageddon.

2

I'VE NEVER REALLY understood exactly what happened on that Monday, but I know it changed everything.

I didn't know at the time, of course. It was two days before my fourth birthday and the only bank I knew about was my little black and white piggy bank. But, as Mum says, even the grown-ups didn't guess how bad things were going to get.

'Lots of things had crashed before that,' she said, 'and everyone still managed OK. We thought we could carry on the same as before.'

So next morning—the day before my birthday—Dad tweaked my nose, ruffled my hair and said, 'See you tomorrow, Matty. Save me some birthday cake.' Then he went off to Manchester with a truckload of potatoes. The way he did every Tuesday.

Only this time he didn't come back.

His truck was hijacked by a gang with guns and knives. When Dad tried to fight them off, they shot him and threw his body into a ditch. A man found it next day, while he was walking his dog, and the police came round to break the news to Mum.

They knocked on the door just as she was lighting my candles.

I remember those candles. I sat at the table and watched them burn right down to nothing. They made puddles of blue wax on the icing.

Afterwards, Grandpa came to fetch me away. He put me on the back of his bike and wheeled me down the road, across the allotments and in through his back gate—the way he always did.

Grandma Grace must have been OK then, because she gave me a hug and a piece of cake. And Grandpa took me into his shed and let me hang all the tools on their hooks, even the dangerous ones, like the saw and the axe. There were black shapes painted on the wall, to show you where each tool went, and Grandpa gave me a toffee for getting them all right.

My dad was a big man, with a snake tattooed up one arm, across his back and down the other arm. When

he hugged me, he pretended to be a boa constrictor, squeezing me to death.

That was only a joke, of course.

Dad loved barbecues. Ribs and steaks. Fish wrapped in foil. Kebabs loaded with big, juicy lumps of meat. Mum made huge bowls of salad and afterwards we had chocolate cake with ice cream and strawberries.

When Dad took us shopping, the supermarket shelves were crammed with packets and tins and there were huge piles of fruit and vegetables. All the freezers were full and once there was a woman handing out samples of cheese for people to taste. *Free*.

Sometimes I dream we're back there, going up and down the aisles. Heaping the trolley with meat and crisps and bananas and sugary doughnuts. But in my dream we never reach the checkout. Before we can finish shopping, all the lights go out. There's a big crash and—

RAA-AA-AA-AAAAR!

A giant black monster, covered in slime, smashes its way in through the supermarket roof. Before we can move, it slithers along the aisles, swallowing everything on the shelves. And when I shout for Dad, he's not there any more.

It's Justin who's pushing the trolley. And all he can do is stare at the monster, with his stupid mouth wide open.

Mum says that's not fair. 'Armageddon Monday changed everything,' she says. 'That's why the hijackers wanted Dad's lorry. They knew food would start running out. Don't you remember what a hard time we had before I married Justin?'

No, I don't remember any of that. I don't remember anything about food being short—until the day Mum came home from the shops and *cried*.

She and Justin were married by then, but Taco was still in a high chair, so I must have been around six. Justin was giving us our tea (slimy pasta with a little bit of grated cheese) and when Mum came through the back door, Taco bounced up and down in his high chair and waved his arms around, shouting, 'Muh! Muh! Muh!'

Mum heaved her shopping bag on to the table, sat down in a chair—and burst into tears.

That was the first time I ever saw her cry. It was *so* not like her, that Justin went flying across the kitchen.

'What's the matter, Ali? What's happened?'

He crouched down and hugged her, but Mum shook her head and sat up straight, pushing him away.

'It was *horrible*,' she said fiercely, still sobbing and catching her breath. 'People were fighting over little pieces of cheese. And do you know what they're asking for chickens now? *Ninety pounds each*. Where's it all going to end?'

Justin looked at the shopping bag on the table. 'Did you manage to get *anything*?'

Mum shrugged. 'A bit more pasta and some apples. And a little loaf of bread. That's not going to last very long, is it?'

Justin peered into the bag, frowning in a useless, silly way. I think he wanted to say something good, so Mum would cheer up, but before he could think of anything Taco started banging his tray and shouting.

'Yes! Grampa! Yes! YES!'

And there was Grandpa outside the back door.

He propped his bicycle against the wall and opened the door. 'Anyone fancy some courgettes?' he said. 'And half a dozen eggs and some carrots?'

Mum laughed, a bit wildly, and stood up. 'Haven't seen you since Wednesday. Thought you'd forgotten us.'

'As if,' Grandpa said. He unstrapped the box from the back of his bike and carried it over to the kitchen table. 'There you are. There'll be pounds of blackcurrants too, in a couple of days. You can have all those if you like. Your mother's not really up to making jam any more.'

'But I *like* Grandma Grace's jam,' I said.

Mum frowned and shook her head at me. 'Can't make jam if there isn't any sugar,' she said to Grandpa.

'A pity you can't swap a few pounds of blackcurrants for a packet of sugar,' Justin said lightly.

He was only joking, of course, but Mum suddenly lit up like a light bulb. 'Hey,' she said. '*Hey!* That's a great idea. You're a genius, Justin!'

'I am?' Justin looked blank. 'What did I say?'

'You said we should swap the fruit we don't need. That's brilliant. There's always more than we can eat—isn't there, Dad? Fruit *and* vegetables.' She looked at Grandpa.

He nodded, cautiously. 'It could be good. But how are you going to find people who've got something to swap?'

Mum grinned. 'I know how to do that! I'll set it up tomorrow.'

The next day was Saturday. As soon as we'd finished breakfast (courgettes on toast) Mum took a load of Grandpa's fruit out of our freezer and went off to see Bob. He owned the haulage firm where Dad used to work and his trucks went all over the place.

When Mum came back, she was smiling.

'Well?' Justin said. 'Did the swapping work? What did you get?'

'Nothing!' Mum said. 'I gave all that to Bob.' And she grinned even more.

'You gave away food?' Justin said. '*For nothing*?'

Mum nodded again. 'Had to get Bob on our side, didn't I? And it's worked. The real swapping starts next week.'

She spent the whole of Sunday at Grandpa's, picking courgettes and blackcurrants. There were lettuces too, from his allotment, and new potatoes. When she came back, the car was loaded with boxes and carrier bags.

On Monday morning, she drove down to the yard again. This time, she went very early, while Taco and I were still in bed, and she handed out fruit and vegetables to all the drivers, before they set off for the day.

'See what you can get for these,' she said. 'And keep some for yourselves.'

It worked like magic. Fresh fruit and vegetables had almost disappeared from the shops, but lots of people had things in their store cupboards—and they were delighted to swap. It was never very much at a time, but the drivers brought back something every week and gradually it mounted up.

Packets of flour and rice. Tins of ham and pieces of cheese and cartons of long life milk. We hadn't seen things like that for months.

But Mum wouldn't let us eat them all. 'We have to *store* these,' she said. 'In case things get worse.'

So gradually—one packet and tin at a time—our food cupboard started filling up. And then one of the drivers found a farmer who was ready to swap meat for flour and sugar. So some of the packets came out of the cupboard and we had joints of meat in the freezer.

Mum and Justin started growing vegetables in our garden as well, so there was more to swap. For the next few years, we always had plenty to eat—even if it was mostly vegetable stew. There was food on our plates every day and enough stashed away in the kitchen to last six months or more.

I heard some of the kids at school talking about being hungry and I knew I was really lucky. It was a good, safe feeling. We could look after ourselves.

And that was what Mum said after the raid. 'The police won't come and the insurance won't pay out. So—we have to look after ourselves. No one else is going to do it.'

She made Justin fit new locks on the doors and they made a secret store cupboard under the stairs, hidden behind a false wall. Mum was determined the raiders weren't going to catch us out again. She knew things were getting worse all the time.

It was on the News every evening.

Two or three times a week, there were interviews with families who'd been raided. But they were much worse off than us. You could see that, by their desperate, frightened faces. *What are we going to do?* they said. *There's no food in the shops. How are we going to survive?*

On the days when there was nothing about raids on the News, there were usually pictures of riots. The riots started in London, but soon they were happening all over the country. Crowds of angry people marched through the cities with banners saying **SMASH THE SCADGERS** and **OUTLAW HOARDING!** They broke into shops and warehouses and grabbed whatever they could find.

Taco insisted on watching it all.

Mum tried to stop him, of course. But every time she turned the TV off, he screamed and screamed until she put it on again. He was obsessed with the News. And every time he saw pictures of people in masks, he thought it was the men who'd raided our house.

'Are they coming here?' he'd say. 'Where's Luton?' (Or Birmingham, or Edinburgh, or wherever the latest report was about.) 'Are they coming back?'

Justin always said no. 'They're hundreds of miles away, Taco. And I've painted over that nasty graffiti. We're absolutely safe now. They won't come here again.'

That was rubbish, of course. Yes, there was white paint on top of those ugly black letters, but they were already showing through again. I could see them, and so could Taco. No wonder he was afraid. When I went up to bed, he was never asleep now, like he used to be. He was always wide awake, staring into the dark. Listening for the next raid. And I listened too, planning what I would do next time the raiders came.

But things never happen the way you expect.