Quicksand

by Madeleine Heath 2026
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When I was a kid I thought I'd encounter quicksand a lot more in my adult life. All those survival books I read were for nothing.

But as I've gotten older I've come to see life as a jungle. Most people soaring through the air like Tarzan, but some of us, some of us get stuck.

Stuck in the quicksand. Stuck in pain, stuck in poverty, stuck in a shitty apartment. Stuck in a toxic sludge of a relationship you can't leave because they are your carer. Stuck in one place because you're a carer and can't leave anyone behind. Stuck in a body you hate. Stuck in a world that hates you.

"But Madeleine, just get on Centrelink, try harder, the government just gives out money for free! I got stuck in the mud once and I pulled myself out by my bootstraps and I was fine!"

Maybe you did. I'm glad you're on dry land again. But that was mud and this is quicksand. It pulls you down and crushes you slowly, suffocating you under more and more weight. Collapsing your lungs. If you try to reach your boots, your arms get stuck and you're in even more trouble. You can't dig your way out of quicksand. The more you dig, the faster you sink.

And sure. The government gives out handouts. If you fill in the forms and find all the documents and wait. And find more documents, and wait. And call. And wait...

If you reach up into the dark night with the last of your strength you can find the rope they threw down from the treetops and tie it 'round your waist. A piteous lifeline. It will stop you sinking, but it won't pull you out. That's a lot of effort after all. It takes a lot of money to get someone out of poverty. Too much when that money could be spent on their own uses. For things that matter. Cosy lives and seven figure retirement plans.

Useful things, that are too good for the likes of you. But all the while you are still stuck. You are still sinking.

And never forget the rope has a catch. It chafes and tears at the skin. The money is conditional. The help can be taken away at any moment and you could be made to give it back. The rope snatched away because you are doing it wrong! Don't sink so fast. You need too much help. Give the rope back! And all the flecks of rope that burned into your flesh, we want those too. It's too good for the likes of you.

The NDIS cut its funding not long ago. My friend looked me in the eyes and said, "This will kill people. And some of them will be people I know." She is right. Across the jungle people cry out as their lifeline is ripped away. Too good for the likes of you.

All those survival books taught me one basic principle. Stay alive long enough until help comes. But help isn't coming.

So we do what we can. Reaching out across the quicksand to each other. Trying to hold ourselves up. Learning quickly that we need to lean on each other or we will be crushed and choked to death in this swamp. Knowing, in a sick pit of our guts that this will not be enough. We will lose people. Those on the fringes who are too far away to be heard. They will go first, swallowed up. If a person dies alone, and in pain, and no one hears them, then you got away with murder, you cunt.

But I get it. Rope costs a lot of money after all. "If everyone who needed a lifeline got one, there wouldn't be enough rope for the rest of us!"

I don't believe that. I doubt many people do. Not really. We all know there's enough money, enough rope to pull everyone out of the muck, we just have to try. To care. To give a crap.

And I'm not heartless. I want everyone to have enough. Everyone should have a lifeline. Even the few that stole it for themselves. In fact, I hope everyone who took that money has just enough rope to hang themselves.