

STEVEN AMSTERDAM

**WHAT THE
FAMILY
NEEDED**

*"Wry, deeply
moving and
literally magical"*

Chloe Hooper

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Steven Amsterdam

Title Page

Giordana

Natalie

Ben

Ruth

Sasha

Peter

Alek

Acknowledgements

Copyright

About the Book

‘Okay, tell me which do you want: to be able to fly or to be invisible?’

So seven-year-old Alek asks his cousin Giordana, though neither can know where the answer will lead.

Family life is tough, and the lives in *What the Family Needed* are as full of trials, joys, loss and tribulation as any others. But at the moment of greatest need, each of these lives is touched by surprising strengths, by extraordinary gifts, by a strange sort of magic. From a sexually curious teenager to a septuagenarian widower to a middle-aged exile, we read about their secrets over thirty years.

At the centre of it all is Alek, the enabler and catalyst for the tale of a family finding itself, as they discover powers they never thought possible.

What the Family Needed is an uplifting and mesmerisingly original novel about how much each person needs in order to change their life, and what the family needs in order to survive.

About the Author

Steven Amsterdam was born in New York and has worked as a map editor, producer's assistant, and a pastry chef. He has lived in Melbourne, Australia since 2003, where he works as a writer and palliative care nurse. His debut novel, *Things We Didn't See Coming*, won The Age Book of the Year in Australia and was longlisted for the *Guardian* First Book Award.

Also by Steven Amsterdam
Things We Didn't See Coming

STEVEN AMSTERDAM

**WHAT THE
FAMILY
NEEDED**



Harvill Secker
LONDON

Giordana

AT LAST, THEY were arriving in the land of normalcy: streetlamps, parked cars, and hedges. And there was Alek, holding onto a full glass of milk and spinning circles in the middle of a moonlit lawn.

Giordana had to at least be thankful her mother wasn't checking them into a motel this time.

The blue hatchback swerved into the driveway, messing up the gravel and ending Alek's little dream. A pile of clothes and books that had divided the back seat between Giordana and her brother Ben finally fell across her lap.

She watched Alek run across the grass, up the front steps, call inside, then race to the head of the driveway. Gleeful in their headlights, he hopped up and down in a welcome dance, miraculously never spilling the milk. He waved the glass over his head, toasting their arrival.

Over the sound of her mother's last-minute instructions and her brother's resolute humming to his headphones, Giordana heard Alek call out, "Greetings, cousins!" He would make this bearable. His Superman underpants stuck out from his jeans. "They're here!" he shouted at the house.

Giordana unpacked herself from the clothing and sheets and kitchen crap that jammed the car to capacity, and climbed out into the still, chirping, suburban air. When he was good and ready, Ben got out too. They watched their mother paw through the junk to see what she wanted to bring inside first.

Giordana collected the facts. One: her parents had had an argument. A shocker. Two: once again, Dad was left in a cramped apartment on a street with trucks rolling by in the morning and rats creeping by at night. Three: the plan was that the family, minus Dad, was going to camp out at Aunt Natalie's till it all went away. Right. Giordana stayed close to the car.

Aunt Natalie's was the kind of house you would draw with a crayon if you had just learned squares and triangles. It would be home for the next week or two.

Ben was yawning as if nothing mattered. Since he'd turned seventeen and started staying out all night, she knew that if she didn't watch him every minute he could walk off and start living his life without them. A mere twenty months younger, she wasn't going to let herself be left behind. But anything was possible. After all, a woman had written a note to her husband and driven away with their kids. Tomorrow, Ben might decide it was his turn to make a sudden exit. Their mother might decide she didn't want to be a mother anymore. Anyone could leave anyone. Giordana couldn't think about it.

Aunt Natalie and Uncle Peter finally came out to the front step and beckoned them towards the front door.

Peter called, "You can unpack later. Come."

Giordana gave Ben's hair a tug to mobilise him. He said, "ow" loudly enough to draw attention to her, but she didn't care because she was the one being mature, trying to get him inside. Each of them was loaded up with a duffel bag and a pillow and pushed towards the house.

The better memories of her father, which seemed to be taking up space in exactly nobody's mind but hers, would have to be put on ice for a while. Going up and saying hello was what the situation demanded. Giordana dragged Ben along.

Giordana's mother had a successful double in life and it was Aunt Natalie. She was even more serene tonight than

ever, as if she fed off her sister's disasters. She was all mellowness, wearing tan pants and an unwrinkled olive shirt, like she had been at the piano practising Bach when they drove up. Beside her on the bench would have been chamomile tea in a flowered cup. Always just so. Natalie stood on the threshold and spread her arms wide for a hug.

"Oh Ruth," she said, pulling the three of them into the hall. "I am sorry. It's rotten."

"It is. It really is," Giordana's mother said, stroking her children with pity that she mainly had for herself.

Uncle Peter provided the male version of the same warm hug, patting everyone's back once or twice. He said, "You know you're free to stay as long as you need, if not longer."

For most of the three-hour runaway drive, Giordana had begged her mother to turn back. Now, she was glad they were all crushed together under the hallway light.

Alek squirmed in and asked his mother, "Can I take them on the tour?"

Natalie shushed. "This is a difficult time. They don't feel like playing."

Alek was still bouncing. "Why not? We're all together. That's what's important, right?"

"Please wait," said Natalie, not loosening her hold on the three of them. The embrace was a treatment and she hadn't finished applying it yet. Behind her, a corridor of framed family photos held out the promise of stability and happy memories in the future. Off in the front room, Giordana saw the whole TV corner. Picture it: a family sitting around, watching movies together. A quiet night with popcorn and no doors slamming. See what the right father and a little money in the bank could produce?

Uncle Peter said, "Your choices are the study next to the boys' room that has an old chaise longue, or there's the big pullout sofa downstairs. Who values privacy more than comfort?"

"Me," said Ben, with first-born authority. His decision was ratified without debate. So Giordana would cuddle up with her mother. To be expected.

Alek wrapped his fingers around his cousins' wrists to pry them away from the huddle, "Let me take you on the tour now?"

Ben told him, "We took the tour last time. Remember?"

"Then I'll change it!"

"Sweetheart," Natalie said.

Given the choice, Giordana would have preferred to stay with her mother and hear how she would tell the story of leaving. It would all be said differently if Giordana weren't in the room, though. How would Natalie and Peter react? Would her mother see their pity? The responsible thing to do was to go play with her cousins.

Giordana fluttered her hand at her face like it was a royal fan and told Alek, "A tour would be divine!"

Alek focused on her. "Okay, tell me which you want: to be able to fly or be invisible?"

"Is this part of the tour?"

"Which do you want? Whatever pops into your head first. Just say it."

"Can I walk through things or do I have to slip in and out of rooms when the door is open?"

Alek thought it over. "No. Okay, yes, you can go through walls. But you can't steal stuff, like from the bank."

"That's all right. I'll restrain myself. Invisible."

She gave Ben a glare to make him accompany them. Ben bent his elbows up and waved his hands sarcastically at his sides. "In that case, I'll fly."

Alek was satisfied. "Good. Follow me."

The tour led directly upstairs to the boys' bedroom, no surprise. Sasha was on the upper bunk, reading under a teal blanket.

"Sasha's going through a shy period," Alek announced.

Sasha threw the covers back to shout, "Am not!" and went back to his book.

Having the audience of real teenagers, it was easy for Alek to ignore his older brother. In the middle of the room, Alek stopped the tour to study Giordana's face.

Giordana opened her mouth to ask why, but he silenced her. "I'm pondering," he said.

Inspiration came. From a dozen plastic animals and monsters marching across a dresser, he retrieved a Godzilla and put it in her hand. "Here."

With that formality out of the way, he got down to the business of pulling games off a shelf and spilling them onto the carpet.

Giordana followed Ben's gaze out the window to the street below. A girl around Giordana's age was biking in bored infinites in the middle of the intersection. No cars around, so why not? At night here, a boy could spin on a front lawn and a girl could bike in the street. This place was that safe.

The rug had a rainforest design on it and Alek spread out over the treetop-and-monkey part. The game boards were aligned so that their corners touched in a triangle. Alek began spouting made-up rules for a whole new game that no one could follow.

"You're going to get the pieces all mixed up," Sasha said, from a crack in his covers.

Alek said, "You're not playing."

If anyone was going to rein Alek in, it would have been Giordana, but she was distracted by the sound of someone sliding a window open across the street. It was that quiet, too. People liked the leafy streets for a reason, she was sure, but this wasn't her. This was not the summer she had planned. Until she was back with her friends, she would be marked absent from life.

School had ended three days ago. She had lined up a part-time job scooping ice-cream at Sprinkles four times a

week. The job was totally lame, but it came with free ice-creams whenever the manager was out. Furthermore, Thea's parents had left her alone for a week and their apartment was going to be a base of operations for sleepovers where no one would sleep, where the blender would be full of rum and fruit juice, and where the mornings would be dominated by fashion extravaganzas, exclusively sponsored by Thea's mother. These things were facts that no longer mattered. Because now, at the same time that all of her friends were together, Giordana was standing there in Alek and Sasha's bedroom. Total weakness.

Invisibility would have been a relief. Not having to be seen by anyone as she limped through a dull week or two of suburban solitude. She could eavesdrop on her mother as she patched things up with her father and hear what new short-term fixes they were putting on their marriage. What was the bare minimum her father would have to say this time? She knew most of her parents' secrets because their conversations usually happened at top volume. But if she were out of sight, she could listen to other people too. What did a regular girl say to a regular boy?

As she was thinking about walking in a park and overhearing some dreamy-dippy lovebirds cooing, Ben called her name. He looked around the room – right at her, practically – then stuck his head into the hallway and called out, “Giordana, where the hell are you?” He looked back into the room, at Alek. “Where'd she go?”

Alek glanced up, but then went right on jumping pieces around the game boards. He didn't see her either.

She looked down at her hand and saw nothing, only the floor beneath her.

What Giordana didn't say was, “I'm right here.”

Instead, in two backwards steps, she withdrew from the centre of the room, staying quiet and close to the wall. There was a creak or two, but nobody looked in her

direction. Ben called her name again. Hanging on the far wall, there was a wooden boat with a triangle mirror in its sail. Giordana swivelled to look at herself and saw only the wall behind her. Her face flushed, but she couldn't see it. She was gone.

From his bed, Sasha was watching the chaos Alek was making with disapproval. Giordana waved her arm in front of him. He didn't see her either.

Ben shouted out into the hall, "Oh great, you drag me up here and then leave me here with this nut." When he didn't get a response, he kneeled down next to Alek, letting him know it was the biggest favour in the world. "All right kid, tell me how we play this game of yours."

Giordana took an alley cat step into the corner of the room, between the bunk bed and the wall. She put the Godzilla model down on the dresser. As she let go of it, it became visible. When she picked it up again, it disappeared. She let it go and it appeared.

All right then.

Steering clear of Ben and Alek and all the game pieces, Giordana left the bedroom. In the hallway, she padded softly along the corners of the floorboards to keep them still. Wait: if her feet were causing the creaks on the floor, then she must have body mass. She stopped and tried pressing her forehead against the wall. Her head didn't proceed through it. A barrier. Stuck in this deadlock with the plaster, she stared at the wallpaper. Rose bushes and gardening tools, a sweet shorthand for a happy household. The reds were like fire engines. Uncle Peter probably dusted the walls twice a month. Giordana kept her breathing steady, concentrating and pushing her head harder. No matter how she focused, she couldn't advance through. Her father's permanent sense of outrage surged inside, demanding she go back and make Alek tell her exactly how to walk through walls. *If he gave you this goddamn ability, it had better work two hundred per cent.*

But this wasn't a toaster you could throw at the woman at customer service.

Besides, it wasn't Alek's trick. She had simply never tried before. With some practice, she would figure it out.

Giordana went into the bathroom. There was enough light coming in from the moon. In the mirror over the sink, she saw the reflection of the shower curtain behind her. No Giordana. Invisible. What if this was forever? Life as she knew it, ended. She thought about her face, how her father had once told her she smiled with her eyes and should try doing it more often. She tried smiling consciously for the mirror. Her features, her body came into view. *Thank you, whoever you are*, she thought. As good as it would have been to disappear from surface life for a while, permanent invisibility would have created logistical problems. She imagined her own nothingness again and watched herself dissolve in the mirror. This was incredibly excellent.

Downstairs, she followed the sound of her mother's monologue to the airconditioned kitchen. Peter was pouring coffee. Natalie was putting away dishes.

Giordana stood in the doorway. They didn't see her.

Her mother said, "He knew we were going. He knew. He didn't come home tonight to a shock. The first time Ben got drunk was the clincher. I wasn't going to wait around to watch that develop. The boy lacks enough motivation as it is."

Giordana couldn't agree more.

Peter held out a packet of vanilla creams. "Ruth?"

She gave a no-thanks wave. After all, if her mouth were full she wouldn't be able to talk.

Giordana wanted one though, and started angling to see how far she could go into the room without being observed.

Her mother went on. "I can't believe it's finally real."

The best strategy was to let her mother tell and retell the story till it was all used up. Natalie must have sorted

that out a long time ago, because she didn't try to say anything.

Giordana stood an arm's-length away from a biscuit. All Peter had to do was stop eating them and put the packet down. As soon as she touched one, it would vanish and be hers. Would they hear her chewing?

Her mother's talking provided cover for the operation. "I kept waiting for him to screw up and, boy, he kept not letting me down."

Natalie squared the packet so that the edge lined up with the counter-top. Giordana took a step closer.

"When he quit that last job - some new pointless rage, everyone else's fault but his own - he came home and started fuelling up that anger. No way I was still going to care."

She had told Giordana he was fired.

"It was smart of you to wait for the end of the semester," Peter said.

"Oh no, I couldn't have torn them away any earlier. Besides, I had to plan."

Hold it: in the car, Giordana consoled herself that this was another of their marital 'hiccups', as her mother had renamed a previous drama. Was sharing a pullout sofa part of a plan?

"It's bad enough I'm uprooting them. But they'll make it. Ben could do with finding some different friends. And Lord knows Giordana will survive. You've seen her; she stays calm like I never could. She's the oldest of souls."

The oldest of souls.

Giordana was picturing each of those words when Peter reached for the biscuits and his hand brushed hers. He twitched when their skin touched, but Giordana let go quickly, leaving him in control of the pack again. All right, she definitely had mass. With two silent steps she retreated from the risky middle of the room.

The sound of the front door opening. Who left it unlocked?

It was the girl who'd been biking in circles, letting herself into the house.

Giordana struggled to wrap her mind around everything. One: the fact that all of this was planned. Why hadn't she been told? Two: her mother's mystical praise. Was thinking that Giordana possessed superhuman wisdom easier than giving her any serious consideration? Three: now this girl. Who was she? Definitely not an in-between fifteen. She was a little older, with actual breasts. She had hyper-conscious hair and skin. It was a defensive observation, but still: the serene pretty face and the shining brown wisps required time that could only be evidence of character flaws. If they were at the same school, she surely would have been at least one or two tiers above Giordana. They would never have a reason to speak.

"Hello-oo?" the girl called from the hall.

Uncle Peter lurched from the kitchen, "We're in here." Giordana missed her opportunity to snag a vanilla cream, only managing to scurry out of the way as the girl strode past her into the kitchen – so close that Giordana copped a blast of Calvin Klein's Obsession. Like she owned the place, the girl pulled the swinging door shut after her and lectured about conserving electricity.

Giordana couldn't pass through the door, but she could hear Natalie's introductions.

"Janelle, this is my sister Ruth. She's visiting with her kids for a while. Janelle usually babysits for the boys, but she's working at a children's camp this summer."

Her mother had been introduced as the sister. No mention of separation, divorce, abandonment.

Uncle Peter said, "You must be about Giordana's age."

"I'm sixteen," Janelle said.

Ruth helpfully pointed out, "Giordana's fifteen."

Camp leader, whatever that meant. A bit more interesting than scooping ice-cream. Probably more money, too. And though she was the babysitter, she had come over to visit Peter and Natalie as if they were friends.

"Coffee?" Peter asked her.

"Sure, Peter. Thanks."

Sure, Peter. Coffee. Giordana was outraged on so many different levels that she didn't know where to start. Were they going to jazz it up with a shot of whisky like her father did?

Her mother volunteered that since Janelle was busy with camp, Giordana would be free for babysitting while they were staying.

Peter said, "We'll pay the going rate."

"Don't be ridiculous," her mother said, as if money didn't matter at all. She pushed the kitchen door open, practically into Giordana's forehead, and shouted, "Giordana, come down!"

Right, she was still upstairs.

Giordana went to the hall bathroom so she could supervise her reappearance in the mirror. There she was again. Her face wasn't bad - nothing canine, but not exactly feline either. One long moment was allowed to pass so a smile could rise before she had to make her entrance - the way Thea had advised her to adjust herself before answering the phone. It made her voice friendlier, she said. Thea's mother had a subscription to *Cosmopolitan*.

Having seen and smelled Janelle already, Giordana entered the kitchen with something she didn't like to think of as an upper hand, but which was, at best, a minor upper hand.

Introductions were done. The girls gave each other warm hellos, but those were cheap.

No one offered Giordana coffee.

Janelle was holding court in the middle of the room, talking about the kids on her camp and turning her cup

around on the counter.

Peter leaned against the sink, and – Giordana was certain – paid close attention to Janelle’s movements. It was a little obvious, sleeping with the babysitter. Surely Natalie would have noticed. But maybe marriage numbs things. Giordana thought of her mother. Maybe it made you switch off a little so you could get on with your own life. Or maybe it made you switch off everything.

Janelle volunteered the use of a spare bike while Giordana was visiting. And, since Janelle had the next two days free, she could show her around the neighbourhood. Giordana, who had nothing to offer in return, said okay, and admitted to herself that she would be glad of the company. Besides, if Janelle was screwing Uncle Peter, this would be the way to obtain proof. Giordana wasn’t sure if she was more disgusted with Peter for being weak or Janelle for being evil. Or was it the other way around?

Ben came into the kitchen, with Alek and Sasha right behind him, all of them demanding biscuits. Ben gave Janelle a non-committal “hey”. Alek gave her a high-five, timed with a man-sized burp.

“Alek,” Peter said.

Alek replied with the same impatience. “Dad.”

Janelle didn’t distract easily, and continued talking to Giordana, “Is eight-thirty too early? I’m still stuck on my school wake-up time.”

Giordana, who had thought she would be spending the next few weeks alone on her aunt’s verandah reading, said “cool” before she could even remember how much she hated the word.

“There are definite, long-term details that you know about people, that you’ve always known about people in your life from very early on. You keep them in separate drawers from the daily-use details.” Her mother was trying to

explain away their departure while developing a system for the bags of clothing spread out on the floor. Giordana took her time to make up the sofa bed, so that she wouldn't be asked to do more than that.

Her mother continued, "You block them out because you can't even imagine that they're important or you don't think a time will ever come when you have to face them." She was working hard on this one. "You expect that the problems in the bottom drawer or in the back of the wardrobe or wherever you've hidden them will stay there forever. That they won't ever apply to you."

"Like our winter coats that we left with Dad?"

"Like Dad," her mother said.

"That's lame. Dad's not a detail."

"You're right," she said, and gave Giordana a pat on the head. She started to refold the contents of one bag so that it would at least prop up neatly on the floor. Giordana watched her, irritated. They hadn't packed, they had evacuated. None of this was necessary. If Giordana had been given some warning, she could have planned, could have said goodbye to her friends.

In school they had talked about displaced populations and she wondered if this was, on an infinitesimal scale, what that felt like – being washed out of one home and forced to find a new one. Misplaced was different. That was when you were lifted entirely out of the picture, lost. She was displaced. Dad was misplaced.

With a noisy sigh, her mother got to her knees to sort the boots and belts that didn't fit into sensible piles. "I know you're at a vulnerable age, darling, but I swear to you, as soon as we get settled some place, we'll get you therapy."

Giordana didn't want therapy. She wanted a home. This wasn't it; their last apartment (where her father was probably drinking himself to sleep) wasn't it. Giordana looked at her fingers as she shoved the pillows into their

cases. A sentence came to her that could have been in an old advertisement: *Knobby knuckles, not so nice*. She already knew she would never be a hand model, or any kind of model, really. If Natalie had been her mother, her hands would be beautiful and she and Janelle would have been friends for fifteen years.

Her mother wasn't looking at her. This would be a good time for a dry run. Giordana tried to space out on nothingness, clearing her body of visible particles. She looked around. She was still there, hands and all. Again, she tried. Again, nothing happened.

It had all been mental. A shock response to leaving so suddenly. People's hair turned white sometimes in times of crisis.

Extreme disappointment, not to mention the so-very-pathetic reality of sharing a bed with her mother, circled in. Her brain had given her a flashy hallucination and then taken it away. It disappeared – how ironic. Still, it was better that she found out the whole thing was a fantasy this way than if she had idiotically started bragging to Janelle, *Look what I can do!*

Practice and more concentration were needed. Dutifully, she went back to the bathroom to try one more time. She stood in front of the mirror and slowly considered herself entirely there but entirely gone. She was relieved to see she was still able to think herself away. Holding onto the thought like a too-full bowl of soup, she walked back to the living room. Her mother had pushed their belongings between the metal legs of the sofa bed. There they wouldn't disturb the clean lines of Aunt Natalie's happy home.

"Um?" Giordana said.

"Yes?" Ruth said, not turning around.

"I've got a question," waiting for her mother's gaze.

"And your question is...?"

Giordana stayed silent. As Ruth sat back on the floor to face her daughter with full attention, Giordana felt herself become visible. It was like inflating.

"What?" her mother asked.

That was the secret: it was the wish to be looked at that had undone her concentration. Next time she was sure she would know what to do differently.

"You had a question?"

"Yes." Giordana paused.

"Why am I not surprised? You always have a question."

"What's an old soul?"

Her mother had been a nurse for twelve years, and that meant not much caught her off-guard. She didn't look the least bit disturbed to hear her words come back at her. She talked so much that she didn't always know whom she said what to, anyway.

"You don't let the crappy bits of life sandbag you."

"The bottom drawer details?"

Her mother looked at her as if for the first time that day. "Bottom drawer, top drawer. All drawers. My hope is that when I grow up I'm as cool and beautiful as you are right now." Her mother had once defined cool as Aunt Natalie who, she said, could make perfect sandwiches in the middle of a battlefield. This was what was expected. No one had ever bothered to define beautiful.

"Thank you," Giordana said, though she wasn't sure what for.

"All right, at least you can choose which side of the bed you want."

The alarm went off. Her mother was already in the bathroom.

Giordana reached across the sad excuse for a mattress and over the edge of the metal bed frame to press buttons on the clock till it shut up.

A minute later, her mother was closing the front door, off to look for a job. They really were here to stay.

Another minute later and Alek and Sasha were bouncing on the bed, demanding attention. It was nearly eight o'clock. She burrowed her face into the ancient foam pillow. Alek fluffed her sheet up in the air, making a tent around him and her. He squatted close, bringing his face in front of hers. "I see you!"

She looked at him, his gap-toothed smile and his eyes off centre like a Picasso. A Picasso drawing of a lemur. He had given her the choice – flying or invisibility. Giordana had a vision of them decades in the future – their parents' age – still knowing each other, still connected in a vital way. What if she'd said she wanted to fly?

In a voice that could only be heard under the sheets, she asked him, "Did you know?"

"About what?" He looked confused, genuine. He wanted to play.

"Nothing," Giordana said.

This was entirely hers. She was sure she could have disappeared in front of them, but she didn't want anyone to freak out and tell.

"Boys, come," Peter called from the hall.

Alek asked her, "You'll be here when we get home from camp?"

"Yes."

"Good."

She scattered them by shaking the sheet and they ran for the door.

It would be her and Ben in the house. Natalie had already left for school. She taught primary. *A nurse or a teacher*, her mother had always said. *Those were the choices. These days you have a hundred different careers to explore.* What would Giordana be when she grew up? Invisible.