

The Snap Tin

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She lies in bed staring up into the darkness. Beside her, Arthur's snores sound like an engine labouring uphill, his out breaths wheezing and rattling, testament to years of inhaling coal dust. How can he sleep? It has been impossible for her. How can she rest knowing what the morning will bring?

Careful not to wake him, she slides to the edge of the bed and feels with her feet on the glacial linoleum until they find her slippers. At the window she scrapes away the ferns of ice then peers outside to see freezing fog hovering over fields ribbed by terraces of Coal Board houses. Shivering, she picks up her clothes from the chair and creeps down the stairs to dress in front of the remains of the fire. Arthur banks it up at night and it stays in until morning. There might not be much money but there is no shortage of coal.

When she opens the door to the kitchen the smell of yesterday's mutton stew meets her. The cat uncurls itself from its place by the fire and slinks forward, butts its head against her legs.

'Hello,' she murmurs, bending to stroke it, feeling the raised beads of its spine, the triangles of its shoulder blades.

She straightens and picks up a box of matches to light the lamp. It takes three attempts and she tuts. The wick smokes, the flame flutters but then, at last, it settles and throws out a soft, yellow light, reflects on the wedding photograph on the dresser. Arthur is wearing a badly-fitting, borrowed suit whereas her dress, handstitched by her mother is pretty with a pin-tucked bodice. Both of them are squinting into the sun. How many years ago, thirty two, thirty three? So filled with hope she had been for babies, three or four or even more, but it had never happened. The joy when she finally fell pregnant with William...the doctor said it was the change but she knew in her heart that she was carrying a child. Not usually a church-goer, she had attended the chapel weekly, falling on her knees to give thanks and to pray for the child's safe arrival.

'Time to get started,' she tells the cat who stares up at her with impassive, topaz eyes.

She shrugs off her nightdress, pulls on her clothes with her wraparound pinny on top then, clutching a shawl around her shoulders, opens the back door to the yard and goes outside to the lavatory.

The dark geometry of the pit winding gear is charcoaled against the sky. Spectral washing hangs frozen on the line and, down the street, lights begin to bloom in windows, punctuating the darkness. Smoke from chimneys rises vertically in the still air and the silence is absolute.

When she comes back out from the lavatory she draws the shawl more closely around her body, shuddering with cold. Her breath forms white plumes in the icy air as she hurries back inside to the warmth of the kitchen and sits for a moment beside the fire.

On the mantelpiece the minute hand of the clock shivers then bumps forward. It will be another hour yet before Arthur and William get up.

The cat mews and wreathes itself around her ankles.

'You're hungry.' She hauls herself to her feet and pours it a saucer of milk which shrinks away as the cat laps it. The fire cracks and sprinkles into stars as she stirs it and, once she has taken out the ashes, she feeds it with sticks and small pieces of coal until the flames sizzle with shooting sparks and roar up the chimney in a blast of colour.

Time to prepare their snap tins, one rusty and battered and - her stomach clenches - the other shiny and new. She cuts slices of cheese then takes out a loaf, cradles it in her arms and slices it towards herself. William's bed creaks in the room over her head and her hand falters. Has he slept? Is he afraid of the day ahead or excited on his first steps to manhood?

A sudden terror makes her gasp. It sucks her down like quicksand as her mind races through the litany of terrible things that might befall him. Memories of other accidents creep into her mind, like spiders, slowly out of corners: rock falls, pit props collapsing, flooding, explosions, fire-damp. So many ways to kill her son.

She sinks into a chair, wraps her arms around herself and rocks as fingers of dread creep up her spine. Only a few days ago he had been at school. He is clever, sharp as a Sheffield knife and could do so much more than be a miner. How can she let him go, her only child, her son, the lighthouse of pure joy beaming across her life?

Pictures roll through her mind like an old newsreel. Her memories of him are golden; as a baby, asleep, arms thrown above his head like the victor in a race; as a toddler with podgy, starfish hands; anointing him with calamine lotion after a day trip to Scarborough. The wave of nostalgia is so powerful she almost cries out.

By the time Arthur and William come down their bottles of cold tea are prepared and the bread and cheese is shrouded in greaseproof paper inside the snap tins.

'Morning, Arthur,' she says.

'Morning,' he grunts.

She lifts the kettle from the fire and pours boiling water, in a wavering stream, into the pot. By the time they've had a wash in the scullery and visited the lavatory the tea will be good and strong, throbbing with tannin the way they like it.

Arthur looks weary, threads of broken veins on his cheeks and tattoos, like blue cheese, on his forehead from crashing into coal seams. He rests a sympathetic hand on her shoulder for a brief moment then turns away, takes a half-smoked Woodbine from the mantle and lights it with a spill from the fire. He draws hard on the cigarette and the paper burns down quick and bright.

In the doorway to the stairs, she sees William as though he were a picture in a frame. His hair is sleep-flattened on one side and, no matter how she tries to fatten him up with dumplings and suet puddings he is still a gangling child, stork-like and pale. He smiles his crooked smile at her and she smiles back, puts on the character of cheerful mother the way she might put on a dress.

Edging the kettle to one side of the coals, she lays out rashers in the frying pan and soon the smell of frying bacon fills the kitchen.

She has never been a hugger or kisser, shows her love by feeding and caring for them, but when William takes his seat at the table she is unable to help herself and stretches out a hand to ruffle his hair. He ducks away, shooting a quick glance at his father. She maintains a determined smile, turns away to busy herself forking the rashers onto an enamel plate.

The small room tucks itself around them as they eat. Cutlery clatters, the shifting coals creak and the mantle clock ticks rhythmically. She watches William but he doesn't look up. Her child is pulling away from her, thread by thread. Soon he will be gone into a place, a life, where she can no longer protect him. She battles with terror. All at once, William looks up at her. When he smiles it is like the sun coming out. Holding her head up, she squares her shoulders and smiles back.

Arthur fumbles in his pocket, takes out his Woodbines and lights one. His head disappears in a cloud of smoke.

'It's time, lad,' he says, picking a fleck of tobacco from his lip. He stands. His trousers are bunched with a thick, leather belt and they smell of coal. He bends to the fire where his pit boots are warming in the hearth. There is a hole in his sock and his big toe pokes through.

Fear is scrawled across William's face as he picks up his snap tin and bottle of tea. A shard of glass lodges in her heart. She feels it every time she breathes but she smiles. Her mouth aches with smiling.

The scream of a siren splits the air. Her heart stops. Her hands fly to her face, form a shield. She looks at Arthur. His face is sewn up tight but a vein throbs in his neck. She looks at William. His face is white. He gnaws at fingers where nails are already bitten down to the quick.

Running boots crunch on the cinder path outside. Within seconds Arthur and William are haring after them. As she stands at the door to the yard, clammy mist coils around her ankles. Women, shawls over their heads, race towards the pit. They will stand there and keep vigil for however long it takes, waiting for their men to be brought to the surface. The last time the siren sounded there had been a grey, half-hearted dawn breaking, with spiteful sleet stinging the faces of those who waited. One stretcher came up followed by another then another. On and on, men with blackened faces, none of them moving. The time before, nearly three years ago, swifts swooped and swerved in a sky of improbable blue and the spiralling song of a skylark filled the air as it soared above them. There were no bodies to bring up that day. A part of the mine would forever remain sealed.

She clasps her hands together and hot tears splash onto knuckles swollen with arthritis. She shares every second of their agony. It is something all the women live with day to day, the terror of losing their men in unspeakable ways.

Back in the kitchen, the coals on the fire smoulder scarlet and spit as they shift in the shadows. As she drops heavily into Arthur's fireside chair she hears a rushing sound in her head, a roaring, like all the oceans of the world then a strange joy surges throughout her body. Happiness does a wild dance in her chest. The pit will not open again until the men's bodies are recovered. It might take days. Her son is safe for now.

Almost immediately a wave of grief engulfs her for all the poor women who are waiting. Guilt sits like a brick on her chest. How can she, for a single moment, not share their pain, their fear? What sort of a monster is she?

And yet, for the first time in days, she is able to take in a deep breath. For just a little longer no cold waves of fear will ripple through her. It will all start again, and very soon, but for now she thanks God and presses her hands over the burst of happiness in her chest, to keep it there.