

Our sister Lucy

“You can’t possibly send him, Mary, he’s a baby!”

“Don’t you think I know that? He’s my son!”

“Well then don’ send him!”

“You don’t UNDERSTAND! John, we work hours an’ hours – sixteen a day. Lucy an’ Benjamin work too and yet we can barely put a slice of bread on the table. For the love of God, I get paid seven shillings a week.”

“An’ you think that’s all gonna be fixed by sending ‘im there? To that living hell?” Pa spat at Ma’s foot.

“Do you think...”, Ma gasped for breath through tears, “do you think I want to see my children being beaten to the bone? Do you think I *want* to see their skeletons through their skin? DO YOU?”

Ma and Pa were fighting about Harry again. Shouts from the Evans household echoed through the slums of Victorian London.

All three of us children huddled close together, each equally as afraid as the other. Lucy was the eldest. I could hear her uttering under her breath “*It’s my duty to calm them*”. She suddenly grinned at me, an amiable glint in her eye.

*“Jack and Jill
Went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water
Jack fell down
And broke his crown
And Jill came tumbling after.”*

We listened silently, captivated, before Harry started to cry.

“I’m scared, Lucy.”

“Sh, sh. I ‘aven’t finished yet,” Lucy whispered, hugging us tightly. She gave us her most confident smile, but I could see her lips trembling. Our sister was being brave for us. She was our rock in a swarm of waves.

*“Up Jack got
And home did trot
As fast as he could caper
Went to bed
To mend his head
With vinegar and brown paper.”*

“Off to bed now boys”, I could hear her soft voice whisper in the distance as my eyes shut, encapsulating me in darkness.

It was four thirty on a biting December morning. Lines of cramped, terraced houses surrounded empty streets in the moonlit morning.

Among my serene surroundings, a sudden bright light appeared, piercing into my drowsy eyes. Lucy stood there, the garish glow of fire lighting up her scarred face. “Benjamin, Harry’s coming with us today,” she

muttered, each syllable dripping with remorse. "Ma thought it would be best". I noticed how she did not mention Pa.

"Harry... Harry's coming with us to the *mill*?" I asked stupidly, already knowing the answer. Starting work in the cotton mills was no decision to take lightly.

"Yes, now just get ready," was the stiff reply. I got ready for the tormenting fourteen hours ahead of me. The beatings, the sweat, and the agony were all something Lucy and I had to endure day to day. And now Harry too. I placed a grimy cap on my head and glanced at Lucy. She gently picked our younger brother up. Although he was only six, people considered him beyond ready to start work. "Harry, darlin', we're goin' somewhere...special today."

"Don' want to," Harry said indignantly before bursting into a fit of giggles. I sometimes envied him. His happiness, his ability to be carefree. I knew it would all end on that fateful day, and I was certain Lucy did too.

"Yes, that's right! It's a fun place," she said, urgency seeping through her words. I gaped at her. How could she so blatantly lie to her own brother? He deserved to know the terrors that lay before him. Of course, eight-year-old me didn't comprehend what our sister Lucy was doing. "Harry, you must promise me somthin', 'kay?" Harry raised his eyebrows. "Whenever this fun place b'comes too scary, not saying it will, you think of last night. When I sang to you and we all cuddled up together. Promise?" I could see the desperation through her forced smile and prayed for Harry to promise. I couldn't remember the last time I had seen Lucy with pure joy – being the ten-year-old she was meant to be. Harry nodded, a sudden silence taking over him. Almost as if he knew what was to come.

"Good!" Lucy comforted us with her familiar charred, toothy grin. "May you be blessed forever, dear Harry," she murmured, knowing very well that his six years of living would be over. Her happy baby brother would be gone, replaced simply with a moving body with scars and blood, and no soul.

We made our way to the mill and arrived shortly; it was just down the street. Taking a look at my siblings' expectant faces, I reluctantly opened the door to the stench of sweat, blood and tears. Children were crawling under death machines, women were working non-stop with every inch of their sallow faces covered in anguish, and helpless babies bellowed for their mothers while getting beaten with long sticks. This was the usual, of course, but Lucy and I still dreaded the day ahead. A tall, lean man – the overseer – approached, a permanent frown etched upon his dry face. I believe his name was Frank.

"LATE," he yelled before slapping Lucy and I with a strap. I could see his thin lips curl as Lucy reached a hand to her smarting face. He then glared at us children before noticing Harry. "New one, eh? Get over 'ere you little git!" The overseer dragged an agonised Harry away from us; his mouth opened wide in shock. Lucy gripped my hand.

"Please don' hurt him, oh please no," she whispered under her breath, making an advance. I pulled my exasperated sister back. It hurt to see my brother taken away but even more to see Lucy, the *eldest*, in this state. Tears pouring down her face, and the day had only just begun.

"Just get to work," I mumbled. As I went to my work area, I could not shake off the image of Harry's astonished face in my mind. He had been promised a 'fun place', but little did his pure mind know... I was never really that close to him, I sometimes even despised how *my* sister was always with him. But never, never, would I wish for him to start work at this abysmal place.

Being a scavenger, my job was to sweep under the mills. With a small figure and agile hands, I was perfect for the job, as abhorrent as it was. The air was humid and dust particles were everywhere. Taking a brush in one hand, I bent my head under the wheels.

Flying fragments of cotton were floating under the machine. I carefully outstretched my limbs and moved steadily across the floor with a small broom. As I approached the main, hissing part of the machine, my hands trembled, and not only because I was frightened by the nightmarish monster machine. A person in this time could not possibly care about looks, you say. But the truth was that I was terrified of my auburn locks getting torn off my head. It had happened before, like to any other scavenger, however I was determined for it not to happen again and slyly turned the other way. This was a mistake.

I was looking into a pair of black, shiny shoes. Cautiously, I raised my head to see a tall, lean man. Frank. "Flagging off, are we? I'll get you this time..." he growled. I knew I was in for a beating this time. Nevertheless, I didn't bother covering my face. All I *wanted* was to die and get out of this 'living hell', as Pa had called it. Surely, I had led a good enough life to go to heaven? The overseer lifted his whip, a horrible glint in his eye, before time froze – just for a split second. A second of pure calm.

And then the shriek.

The blood-curling shriek that pierced into the ears of everyone alive *and* dead in that moment of time. The sickening shriek that possessed our minds with the devil himself.

Frank forgot about me and sprinted to the scene. Glancing around at the chaos of running workers, I quickly followed. A gathering had occurred around a mill. "Get outa 'ere, you filthy mutts". The overseer shooed people off and proceeded towards the mill, not taking notice of me, the boy behind him. I could finally see the mill and stopped dead in my tracks. I stared at the scene in utter horror. The mill made a sickening crunching noise and was dripping in blood. A foot lay by its side, with a clean cut from the now abolished leg.

Someone, a girl, had been pulled into the machine; boys did not usually work here. I gulped, a feeling of dread creeping around my body. Lucy was terrified of these sorts of nightmares that happened at the factory. I craned my neck to try and glimpse her through the crowd. She wasn't there. *I can tell her later*, I thought.

"S-s-sir, who is it?" I whispered timidly, gazing up at the overseer. The man looked at me with a nauseous face.

"I – er – I believe it be..." he stopped to read the tag off a bloodied apron before staring at me with an absurd look on his dry face. "Lucy. Lucy Evans," he croaked. Silence. A stone dropped to the depths of my stomach. The overseer glanced at me. *He had been the one with the new boy, hadn't he?* I could hear him thinking. "Well, get back to work," he barked before adding, "the little skeleton deserved it." Frank walked away from me.

A silent tear fell down my cheek.

Then a sob came.

And then the wailing of agony.

Why? What had I done to lose my only hope? Harry's only hope. The only person who ever cared for us. I stepped forward and lay myself in her ruins. I held her skirt, saturated in blood. I kissed her apron, the stench of metal choking me. I gazed, in awe, at the monster which had devoured my sister, stealthily pulling her in, first by the apron, then eating its way up her body. I longed for it to eat me too.

Days went on as normal, in this teeming part of London. But the man-eating machine was yet to be satisfied; it had only eaten its first meal of many.