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I deserved it, didn't I?

by Eliza Mann

1st January 1834

I had never liked the colour grey. Grey meant the smoke pluming from the factories. Grey meant the sky on days the sun refused to shine, much like this one. Grey meant those awful machines. Grey meant misery. Some people like to pretend that a new year will really change things, even though all that really changes is a number, not how grey the world is. Today was the start of a new year, but be it what it would, today, like any other, all I saw as I approached the factory was grey. Grey smoke, grey sky, grey machines, grey mood. The factory was a grey place, even with my sister, Ann, at my side.

“Miss Williams!” Mr Clarke barked, all hammers and tongs, his voice low and deafening. Often, he referred to us as the same person, like we had no more worth than half of one. Most of the time, he did that to all the children working under his control- we were all one person to him. One thing he could use to get dough. A thing that Thomas had been a part of, once. *Don't think about Thomas.* “Here. Now. You've missed breakfast and work starts at 6, so you can't just wait out here. Unless you want a beating.”

Together, we shook our heads. We'd only just arrived, and it was some time before our work was due to begin. Biting my lip, I followed Ann in, with the smell of ash and rust flooding our lungs as soon as we crossed the threshold of the building, making us cough. I hated it here: everyone did.

“Right, get to work,” he snapped.

On the other side of the factory, through the hundreds of kids working on the machines, I could see Elizabeth glaring at us. At me. Honestly, I couldn't blame her. If that had happened to my brother, I'd be angry too. I *was* angry, too. About her brother and mine. Ann had told me that she would stop looking at me like that with time, that she had only had one year to deal with her grief. Although I didn't really believe that mattered all that much, the anguish and longing never went away, whether you'd had one year to cope, 2 years- like us- or 100 years. Gone was gone and time didn't make their absence less palpable. Maybe it was easier for me as no single person caused it: one morning Hugh left for the mines and that night he didn't arrive back home. Or the next night, or the next. It took us a week to believe he was really gone for good, and same with Father just a month later. For aught I know, her brother's death hurt her more than mine did me, and, if that was the case she had ought to look at me like that. I deserved it, didn't I? Completely and utterly. I deserved worse.

Our family was never the same after Hugh died, even less so after Father did. There were no funerals, nothing to celebrate the short lives they had lived: Hugh was only 14, Father 19 years his senior. As soon as we accepted the fact that Hugh wasn't going to come home, we knew we'd never be the same people again- Dad drunk so much in the weeks leading up to his death, I honestly wouldn't have been surprised if he'd been drunk when it happened, if he'd made a mistake because of it, one that cost him his life. Mum stopped talking as much, just woke us up so we got to the factory on time. Ann lost that light that had been behind her eyes, that hope she had still held on to in her heart and that smile I missed every day. It would be quite impossible to say exactly what I lost in that month- everything is the best way to describe it. After that, and even more after Thomas, I just felt like I was bad luck to anyone around me.

Briskly, as to not annoy Clarke, I strode over to the cotton machine for scavenger roll. I always did scavenger roll, likely as Clarke didn't seem to be at all fond of me, especially after what happened. Ann was a piecer, constantly repairing the threads of the spinning Jenny, which likely wouldn't have been any better a job had it not been for the memories I had.

The machine was spinning, just like it had been that day. Spinning and spinning and spinning, like it was taunting me. As always, I needed to time this exactly right. I knew better than most what this machine could do if I didn't. Carefully, I picked up the dusting brush from beside the machinery. 1.. 2.. 3.. Cawl. Sweep. Was I taking too long? I gulped. No, I was standing. I was safe. Well, as safe as one can be in a world like this, which wasn't very.

It seemed to take no less than an age for a stop to come to our work, and I knew that would only last a short half hour- only just enough to eat the meagre belly timber they fed us. I still got to Ann as soon as I could though, and we collected our food together- oatcake with boiled water- and sat ourselves down on the rock-hard bench. We ate this twice a day, every day, but, as we were reminded all too often, we were lucky to even get that.

"How was work this morning?" I questioned her, my voice hushed due to Clarke's acute dislike of 'nattering'. In answer, she simply looked at me, her own grey eyes bearing into mine, sharp as a knife, just like every other day. Grey, why did everything have to be grey? Anyone else may well have been gravelled by her lack of response; I understood it perfectly well. Of course, work had been boring, tiring and overall terrible, just like it always was.

Without any warning, Mr Clarke moved from his usual position, the corner furthest away from each and every one of us, to the centre of the dining hall. This did not bode well.

"Tomorrow, we've an inspector visiting," he ran a hand through his greying hair. More grey. "He might question any of you, if he does these are your answers, if you wish to avoid getting the sack. If he asks how long you work, your answer is 9 hours. He asks how much schooling you get; you say at least 2 hours a day. He asks your age, and you give him your age, by that point, he will have the documents. He asks if you are beaten and you say no, you say you have never been beaten. These are your answers, do you understand? And you'll be going home early tomorrow, at 3, not that any of you deserve it."

A chorus of nods and noises of assent followed before he carried on back to his corner, away from his tools. Such lies, all of them. Not a day in my life had I received 2 hours of education, the majority of them I received none at all. I could still feel a dull pain throbbing on my back from where he'd hit me with his belt yesterday. As well as that, we worked over 9 hours every day: most days we worked at least 12. Very well, though, I would lie if it meant leaving this retched place early.

The rest of the day past unbearably slowly, but it passed, nevertheless. Ann and I ate our supper of potato pie as fast as we could, our bellies still rumbling by the end, and got out of the factory at the first opportunity.

2nd January 1834

At 5am that morning, we found ourselves back there. Again. By now, I'd lost all hope that there would ever be a morning I didn't have to dread going to the factory, either that morning or the next day. This would be my life until the day I died, just like Thomas.

As we walked through those uninviting metal gates- grey gates- Clarke crossed us off on his little list, proving we'd shown up for yet another day of misery.

"Inspector's here from 6 so eat up," he spoke gruffly, putting his huge hand on my back and shoving me forward. I winced remembering all the times he'd beaten me in that exact spot. We did as we were told, eating our oatcake and getting started on our work.

Crouch, crawl, sweep, crouch, crawl, sweep. Over and over, the motions I did every day, with the added sense of impending doom every time. Except, after an hour or more of repeating these movements, something interrupted my rhythm when I stood back up. Standing behind me was a middle-aged man. He had jet black hair, cut short to his head, like mine was, like everyone's in the factory was since that's what Mr Clarke insisted, which he only did to take away our identity and punish us. To him, we really were just tools. Why had he chosen to cut his hair like that? Did he like it that way or was it some futile attempt to show us that he was *just like us, really?* Based on his spotless grey suit and the fact he couldn't have fit in less; I was guessing the latter.

"Hello, I'm Inspector Scott." His thick Irish accent caught me off guard: I'd pegged him as the sort of person who might clip his words and have a posh accent. "And you are?"

"Ellen Williams." I stood up straighter, I did not want this man looking down at me like he understood what I was going through.

"And how old are you, Miss Williams?" he asked me. *Miss Williams*, again. Why did everyone call me by my last name? It only reminded me of my family, or more precisely, those who were no longer in it.

"11," I replied, refusing to offer him any pleasantries.

"I'm just going to ask you a few questions," he said as if it was going to surprise me, or I'd be honoured. Hadn't he already started doing just that?

Most of the questions were easy to answer, with lies, of course. I couldn't lose this job; we needed the money badly. When he asked, I told him that I'd never been beaten, didn't work more than 9 hours a day and received adequate education. He'd also questioned whether the conditions we were working in were healthy and whether we were well fed, both of which I answered in the positive. It was the last question that made me stop and think, though.

"Now, Miss Williams, have you ever witnessed a death or serious accident during your time working at this factory?" My thoughts went straight to Thomas, how I'd seen every detail of how it happened, how I still saw it when I went to bed at night. Still, I gave the answer Clarke would have wanted me to and shook my head before he moved on to the next worker.

Up until we were due to go home, work continued fairly normally bar the fact Inspector Scott was working his way around the factory. After he'd spoken to Clarke and left the building, though, our superior called Elizabeth into the hall. I couldn't help thinking that I knew what had happened. I couldn't help thinking that she might have told Scott and I might have to

miss her daily glares at me, however much they hurt me, they showed me that she was still alive, and capable of feeling something.

I met up with Ann on the way out, as usual, but I didn't have the energy to ask my usual question – the one I asked every break and after every shift – and be met with that same knowing stare. So, I did not, and we walked, in silence to our cramped house in the narrow, terraced streets.

3rd January 1834

Another morning. That meant another day that I had to spend at that horrid, grey factory. When we'd complain to Mother, she wouldn't understand. That was not her fault, though, as we wouldn't let her understand what it was really like – she already had enough on her plate, metaphorically. The only reason she had anything on her physical plate was because we went to the factory; of course, it would be unfair to say she didn't work because that was all she did for us, working around the house. She cleaned and tidied until her pain was numbed and she could pretend she was preparing the house for Dad and Hugh. Our mother was broken, but she didn't let that stop her from being there for us.

So, when we had gotten dressed that morning – in our grey clothes – Mother had just stopped cleaning an already spotless front room, one of just 2 in our house which she also used as her bedroom. As we left through the door, she called after us:

“Have a good day, girls. I'll see you this evening!”

When we reached the factory, half an hour before our shift was due to start, Clarke began to shout at us, even louder than usual.

“Stupid kids, the lot of you,” he remarked. “Missed your first meal again. Just get going!” *Oh, no, God no*, I was so hungry, my stomach growled at me for food. Bills had gone up recently, so we couldn't afford to buy as much. And I was so tired, last night I hadn't been able to sleep very much, haunted by memories of Thomas.

Nevertheless, I did as I was asked and walked over to my station. As I had suspected, Elizabeth wasn't here to glare at me: I hoped she could find another job, soon. This world did not favour those without money. Breath, okay 1..2..3.. Crawl. Sweep. Stand. I was okay. I could do this. Alright, now I had to do it again. That was okay. Of course it was, I'd done it so, so many times before. How many times? Probably millions at this point. 1..2..3.. 3...

3.. I couldn't do it. For some reason, I just couldn't do it this time- likely as I was so tired and hungry and scared, and I wasn't thinking straight. What was that? Oh, Clarke. Shouting- who to? Me? Of course it was, I was just standing here not doing anything. I was being stupid. How long had I been standing here for when I should have been doing my job? I didn't know, it could have been minutes or hours, yet I didn't have any grasp on passing time. *Just do it, Ellen.*

3.. 2.. 1..Crawl. Sweep. It would be okay. I would be okay, I always was.

And then my world was shattered by pain from every angle, obscuring my vision. I'd seen this happen before. It was my fault now and it was my fault then, the memories came rushing back to me as the blood came rushing out of me, until all I could see was red, red, red. And grey.

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16th January 1833

Thomas made the factory less grey, managing to laugh every now and again despite how sad his life was. Thomas was always an optimist, some said he was too young to know what was happening, and that's why he could be happy- that wasn't true, though. I knew that because, when he came to my house the year before, since the rest of his family were out, he'd woken up crying from a nightmare. He had told me not to worry, that he was used to dreaming of the factory by now. And still, he came back to the factory managing to smile and laugh.

Like always, we were both working on the cotton machine doing our scavenger roll in turns. It was his 8th birthday. Technically, he shouldn't have been working, the law said no one under 9 could. That didn't really matter though, most factories still employed tiny little kids, taking away their childhoods. If the law had been better enforced, Thomas would still be here.

It was his turn to go. His turn. So why did I start to go instead, without telling him? I thought it would be a nice thing to do, on his birthday, to stop him doing as much of this treacherous job. He insisted he go, though- he had always been fair- and I let him. I had distracted him, though, so the timing wasn't right. And the machine came spinning. And there was a blood-curdling scream and red, red, red. And grey. I'd never forget that look on his sister, Elizabeth's face, so horrified and already flooded by tears. Twisted by anger and grief and pain so much that she was almost unrecognisable.

Thomas was gone. And it was my fault. I hadn't heard laughter since that day.

*

3rd January 1834

The pain was overwhelming, bringing me back into the moment.

I was going to die.

Was going to die.

Going to die.

To die.

Die.

And everything went black.

I deserved it, didn't I?