

## 3J The Tale of the Miner's Daughter

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It is so cold in this bedroom. When I went to bed I was in the middle, between my older sisters, but now I'm on the edge. I'd better get out of bed and pull the old army blanket and flannelette sheets in my direction. I step out of bed and fall flat on my face, my winceyette nightie is so long I keep tripping over in it. My sister Hilda is two years older than me and taller so everything that passes down to me is two years too big. Trying to hold up my nightie and pull the blanket is not easy but I do it. Back in bed I am cosy... for a while. Now I need a wee. It's too dark and cold to go outside to the lavvy, so out of bed again, carefully so as not to fall over my nightie. I am on my knees fumbling around looking and feeling under the bed for the chamber pot. "Why can't someone invent a switch on candle then I could see".

"Our Elsie is that you messing around". Oh no, now I've woken up Hilda. "It's alright I'm using the chamber pot, well I would if I could find it," I reply, "it's by Annie's side of the bed", Hilda says, "so hurry up then get back into bed". You would think that it was a simple task, but no. It's dark and cold and I can't see my hand in front my face and I've got to find the chamber or wet myself. You can bet our Annie has left the pot in the middle of the floor. On my hands and knees I carefully fumble for the pot, this damn long nightie doesn't help. Found it at last, I hope it's not too full, because now I'm finished I've got to put it back under the bed or else our Annie will step in it when she gets up. I'm cold and crawling on floor boards in the dark is scary, as I know there was a spider in here yesterday. More fumbling and I'm back in bed.

Now Annie and Hilda have the entire eiderdown. The eiderdown is heavy as it's stuffed with lots of feathers, but it keeps us really warm. After a bit of tugging and heaving I get my share of it. It feels like I have hardly been asleep for a minute when it's time to get up, I know this because our Annie is bouncing all over the bed. We try to get dressed under the bed covers to keep warm but it's impossible. I quickly (well as quick as you can when there is so much to put on) dress myself, starting with my knitted vest, pants, petticoat, skirt, blouse, cardigan and finally my knitted socks. I feel warmer already. I go over to the window to look out but Jack Frost has been and the window is covered in lovely icy patterns. Using my finer nails, I scratch a picture in the frost. "Elsie, breakfast", that's mum shouting me already and the day has only just started. Today is Saturday, so no school.

Saturday breakfast is porridge with a sprinkle of salt on top and a nice cup of tea. Dad has already gone to work at the mines, he went at 6.00am this morning. Mum makes him a bottle of tea wrapped in paper and placed in an old woolen sock to keep it warm for a while. Dad takes his lunch in a tin box and today mum gave him bread and dripping and the last bit of bacon from the pig we slaughtered a while ago. He has to walk to Huglith Mine, it's a long way to have to walk before you start to work. In summer we run to meet him after work, Fridays is the best day to meet him as it's pay day and he gives us a penny. We go straight to the shop in Snailbeach and spend it, sometimes the ice cream man would be there and we would have ice cream, a real treat.

"Elsie May there's jobs to be done", it's me mum again. That's the one thing about Saturday, there are jobs to do. Annie and Hilda are so organised, they have already bought up two buckets of water from the well. Mum said it's best if I don't get the water so I do the fire grates instead. All because the water just seems to jump out of the bucket when I fetch it and it might take me a bit longer cause I have to look at what's about, just in case I miss something. Mum passes me the old sack apron, as if I would forget to put me apron on. With my two years too big passed down shoes on, I dash to the outhouse to get the bucket for the ashes.

The fire has to stay in; it's our cooker and heats the house and water. The ashes at the bottom of the grate have to come out to let some air in. Shovel in hand I start, a few ashes at a time, I'm doing well today cause no one has shouted "Elsie May" for at least five minutes!

The ashes have to go down to the bottom of the garden, to make a path from the lavvy to the house. This bit is bad. I try to slowly tip the ashes but as always the breeze blows them in me face. Spitting out ash and rubbing me eyes I go back to the house. "Elsie May", there she goes again, me mum. "How many times do I have to tell you, see which way the wind is blowing before you tip the ashes, then stand with your back to the wind and the ash will not go in your face". All well and good but how can you see the wind. Mum spits on her apron and starts to rub ash of my face, ugh why do mums fuss so much. I finish brushing the hearth, now it's the fenders turn to get it. The fender is mums pride and joy, its brass from my nana and it goes in front of the fire and makes it look posh. I use this smelly and I mean really yucky smelly stuff in a tin. I put it on an old rag then wipe it all over the fender. It turns white when it's dry, so when mums not looking I make patterns in it with my finger. Then the hard work begins, you have to rub all the white stuff off until the fender shines. This all seems a waste of time to me, putting stuff on then wiping it off. I really would like to fetch the water but I'm not allowed. It was an accident when that bucket of water tipped itself over Annie and anyway water doesn't smell. Oh no talking about smells, I've got to empty the chamber pot. My sisters are feeding the pig and the hens, that's a good job as the boiled up peelings and pig meal smell lovely.

Here I go walking slowly, the last thing I want is to fall and have to clean up all Annie's wee. I have to go all the way down the garden to the lavvy to empty the pot, our lavvy is a posh one and we have two seats, one for us kids and one for grown ups. Which is just as well, cause our Annie once sat on the big one and almost fell into the bucket underneath. I'm supposed to check the paper while I'm here; there will not be enough newspaper squares so I will have to go get some. Dad brings a newspaper back from work every now and then, when everyone has read it; I rip it into squares and put it in the lavvy. So here I am sitting by the back door on the stool to rip up the newspaper. "Elsie...Elsie May" there goes that ringing in my ears again, "Just what do you think you are doing, the newspaper is blowing all over the garden". And it was, just as mum said. Oops I must have been day dreaming, "Get it all picked up now and finish what you started". All this wouldn't happen if mum would let me feed the pig. Anyway we have some proper toilet paper, but that's for visitors.

Jobs all done at last, we sit at the table for lunch. Today its rabbit stew, mum and has had the pot on the stove all morning. Dad is good at catching rabbits in the snare and we are good at eating them. Saturday afternoon passes quickly, me and my sisters play outside on a rope in the barn. Hilda has a rag doll; we all take turns at playing with it, I'm sure soon it will be my turn to have a toy of my own. Mum shouts to tell us its three o'clock. Great, my sisters and I go down towards Huglith to meet Dad. He finishes at 3.00pm and we walk back together. Dad is very dusty and we walk slowly as he's got a bad cough. Working down the mine makes a lot of the men ill. Most of my friends at school don't have a dad as one way or another the mines have taken them. Last year there was a big accident and men were killed, it was a very sad time for everyone. By the time we get home, mum has got the hot water in the bath ready for Dad in front of the fire. We girls have a quick bath first; three girls in a tin bath by the fire is great fun. After Dad finishes, we bucket the water out, I'm allowed to take water out, but not bring it in. Anyone would think I might spill it.

After a tea of bread and jam, we sit and talked about what would be planted in the garden as soon the morning frosts would be gone. We listened to the radio for a while and then it was bed time again. Me and my sisters ran to the lavvy together before dark, you never want to go in the dark as the candle goes out and

them two round holes look like eyes staring at you. And no one wants a wee with a boggle eyed monster watching. While we were in bed we could hear Mum downstairs putting out pots and pans to get Sunday dinner ready. Mum and Dad didn't work Sundays, so Mum peeled all the spuds and stuff on Saturday. "It's no wonder they didn't work as we spend all day walking to and fro from chapel".

No frost this morning but this nightie is still tripping me over. Today we can put on our best clothes, its chapel. Hilda and Annie look very ladylike but me, huh...in my two years too big skirt and blouse I look like me old gran... I can't wait until I grow into my sisters best clothes, then I'll really look something. Mum looks lovely because she makes all her best clothes. I watch her after tea, she sits by the oil lamp carefully sewing. Mum has a silver thimble on her finger, it was a gift from my gran and one day I might have a shiny thimble. Well here we go, breakfast over and we all walk over Lordshill to chapel, at least it's a dry day. Dad looks fine and handsome in his Sunday best, I look quite something myself. Hilda said there was quite a resemblance between me and a character in Little Red Riding Hood. Hilda knows I don't read and I don't know that story, I asked Mum about the story and she just told Hilda to shush and said "it's Sunday so think Christian thoughts". But I know I heard Hilda say something about an "old granny".

At chapel every one smiles and welcomes one another. We sing lots of hymns, then listen to a lecture (Mum says it's a sermon but it sure sounds like a lecture to me). I try very hard to listen, I really do! Just at that moment a blackbird hops onto the window sill, just asking to be watched so it's up to me to watch it. He looks wonderful with his yellow beak and black feathers. Before I know it I've sprouted wings and I'm flying. My silly two years too big clothes have become shiny feathers. Swooping over trees balancing on branches, this is great. I feel the wind blowing gently around me, flying is great. Ouch, my ear. "Elsie" mum says in a loud whisper while holding my ear in a vice like grip, "You and your silly day dreaming, what on earth you think you're doing, flapping and waving your arms when the minister is preaching". Without thought I quickly said "I wasn't on earth, I was flying". Mum's face went red and screwed up then she sat quiet, this meant trouble.

Chapel finished, children were dashing out to play and I sort of walked quickly and quietly so mum didn't see me. Mum and Dad stopped to talk after chapel as always. It was my turn with the skipping rope when we heard Dad call us, it was time to walk home. It hardly seemed worth going home as me and my sisters would be back at chapel in an hour's time for Sunday school. As we walked up Lordshill towards home Mum was quiet. Dad had to stop a few times to get his breath and Mum looked worried. Maybe she had forgotten about "all that flapping and waving" at chapel. As we arrived home I could smell the stew pot on the stove. Hilda as usual being the goody goody was about to start and lay the table. Then my ears were ringing "I could be a bell, the amount of ringing in my ears" I said to myself. "Today Elsie will do all the table chores and the washing up" mother said sternly. My mouth fell open but nothing came out. On this occasion I decided to keep quiet, I knew this was my punishment for flapping at chapel.

Lunch was over and the washing up done, so we headed back to chapel for afternoon Sunday school. Today was a good day for walking, we heard the cuckoo and then we tried to imitate it. What a sight we must have looked running over Lordshill cuckooing at the top of our voices. Back at home again I quietly did my chores, I had to butter the bread and jam and make a pot of tea. The silly tea cosy was having a mad moment and didn't fit at first. Then I realised that I had to put the spout and handle through big the holes in the tea cosy. Not that easy, Hilda had knitted it and holes were everywhere but mum said it was lovely. After tea was finished we went off again to chapel, I was about to point out to mum that all this walking was wearing out my shoes but I thought better of it.

Thank goodness for eight o'clock and bed time. There are only so many prayers and songs you can sing and today I'm all prayed and sung out. As usual, bed time shuffle takes place, I go in the middle, Mum says so, as I'm the youngest and I might fall out of bed. But no, our Annie will have none of it, she wants the middle tonight. With all the fuss the eiderdown falls off and the corner of it falls in the chamber pot, I just know this means trouble as I forgot to empty it. It's not my fault it's all that praying and singing I clean forgot. "It's okay Annie" I say quick as a flash so no one will notice the wet corner, "you can have the middle and I'll pull up the eiderdown", more pushing and shoving.....