

Que Sera, Sarah

They find me dad, three days after the fall-in. We rush to the coalfields, Mam and me. I want to see him, and to know Cecil is safe; to show him I've lost a tooth, but among the mounds of dirt and trail of lanterns, someone hollers up the line, "All souls gone," and the police turn us away from the pit. Mam marches me back to the car, just as specks of snow swirl about.

"No questions, please Sadie," she says.

At home, I wait at the window. Mam's crying, and Nanna is making another cup of tea. It seems forever for the miners to get here, but out of the dark, headlights come up the road. I rush to open the door. There's a couple of cars and a long black one.

No Cecil.

Four men carry me dad into the scullery and lay him on the table as Mam asks. They stand aside, covered from nose to boot in coal dust; their heads, dusty with snowflakes, bent low.

My body shakes, even my lip. I am frozen, stuck solid to the floor. He is gone, just like Granda.

Dad is longer than the table. His eyes are closed, and his face is grubby with black powder, like his hands and fingernails. Usually, he comes through the wash house first cos me mam plays war if he comes inside caked in soot.

One of the men holds his tin. The lid is a little dented. Always, me dad takes great slabs of bread and dripping for his dinner down the mine and a flask of tea. Sometimes he complains, "Cecil ate most me dinner. Even slurped me tea, cheeky beggar." Or, "Cecil pinched me crossword from the paper."

I want to ask the men about Cecil – the miniature pit pony who talks to Dad while he works underground. Every day I look forward to hearing tales about Cecil and the pie lady who lives in the mine. And I love how the pony asks so much about me, especially during those months I lay sick in bed with the fever, unable to walk. Cecil made up stories for Dad to tell me. It's like we are friends.

"Cecil was asking about school, Sadie. I told him you study hard, want to become a teacher."

"And what did he say, Dad?"

"He says you're a clever-clogs. Must have your mother's brains."

I take the tin from the man and open the lid. Me letter to Cecil is still folded inside. Dad didn't eat his sandwich. And neither did Cecil. Guess they weren't hungry.

Or maybe...

I want to cry, but Mam says not to upset me little brother. Already, I've kept tears inside these past three days waiting for the miners to bring me dad home. But we knew it would be the same thing as Granda. I think of Christmas coming, and the treats Santa will bring, like an orange and apple in me stocking. If I'm really good, I'll get a liquorice twist.

Will Santa know about Dad?

Mr. Trafford hands Mam a yellow envelope. "The Pit Four lads had a whip-round. There's a hundred pounds there, pet. It'll keep food on the table till his money comes through. We thought a lot of your Harry."

"Thank you, kindly, Jack. And he had a soft spot for you all." She slips the envelope into the pocket of her apron. Mam draws a big breath. "Right, you best be off. I've work to do. Bless you for bringing him home."

One of the men pats me head as he leaves. "By the way," he says, "the butcher is putting together a parcel for the family, including a roast for Christmas."

Mam dabs a handkerchief to her eyes and nods. I think she says "thank you" but her voice is soft. She sees them out then closes the curtains of both windows that look out to the street. We'd seen a few blackened windows this year after each fall-in at the pit. So many funerals.

Bairns aren't allowed to go, but we love the wake up. Always so much food. And lots of drinking and singing.

As soon as the men leave, Mam collects a towel from the linen cupboard. "Sadie, put the kettle on the hob, fetch me basin from the cupboard, please."

I turn on the wireless. Glen Miller's band plays Moonlight *Sarah-nade*. The soft trumpet and clarinet warm the air. "The song is about you, Sarah," me dad used to say as he twirled me about the room. But nobody calls me Sarah, just Sadie. And I know the song is *serenade*, I've seen the record cover, but I laugh at his joke. Just like when he says Cecil sings, *I've got a lovely bunch of carrots*, to all the miners. Silly Dad.

As Mam begins to undo Dad's shirt, Nanna comes downstairs. "The bairn is asleep. Sadie, peel the 'taties. We'll have a houseful tomorrow."

Nanna helps wash me dad. His face is pale, and his chest is white now. He looks cold. I want to get him a blanket and a cup of cocoa to make his cheeks rosy once more.

They take off his trousers and then underpants. I look away and scrub the dirt from the potatoes. The smell of rich earth reminds me of picking field mushrooms from the meadow with Dad.

Nanna dries him all over. "It's been over forty-years since I bathed and powdered me lad. Never liked his ears cleaned. I said he'd grow 'taties in them, one day."

"He's been a good provider." Mam's voice is shaky. She and Nanna struggle to put on his white shirt, tugging the sleeves up his arms then rolling him from side-to-side. She asks, "Should I fetch his cufflinks?"

Nanna says, "Aye, and his belt. Tie?"

"Haraway, man, he hates wearing one of those."

I wonder why he'd need a belt. It's not like he's going to walk around, is it? But then I suppose he'll need it for heaven.

Do ponies go to heaven? If Cecil is gone, too, will he find Dad up there? He's pretty smart; Dad said all the ponies know their way underground and can count how many carts the miners hitch behind them. Three carts, they'd set off, but four they wouldn't budge, knowing they couldn't pull that many. One day, Cecil went down the pub cos he'd had enough. That's when he got a pay rise.

I scrub the potatoes, soon they gleam white, like me dad's skin. He's now wearing his best trousers that Nanna ironed especially for today with a single line down the middle of each leg.

"I added extra starch to his shirt. Can't have the neighbours talking about wrinkles at the viewing," she says. Nanna threads the belt through the loops on his trousers while Mam combs his hair. She smooths a curl around his ears and sweeps his fringe to the side then kisses his forehead. "Never realised he's greying at the temples."

"Bairns'll do that to you. He was a canny lad but gave me more grey hairs than the five put together."

Mam lays a white sheet over me dad. With a sigh, she turns and rolls up her sleeves and washes her hands. "I'll make a fresh loaf."

Now early evening, bread baking in the oven wafts all through the house. I am sent to bed and take one slow step at a time up the stairs.

Mam unwraps the fruitcake she made for Christmas. "Might as well be used for the wake, now. Won't be much to celebrate, anyhow."

Nanna says, "But the brandy's not had time to soak in."

"No matter, the visitors will have a good dose in their stomachs. It'll soak a-plenty then."

They laugh together. Then Mam leans into Nanna's shoulder and I hear her cry. "It's just not going to be...the sa-"

"I know, flower."

Next morning, I check to see if the tooth fairy has been. But my tooth is still in the little snuff pot. She must have been busy last night.

Mam's seated at the table, chatting away, to me dad, I think. "As long as the money comes in, we'll be fine. You've been a good man, Harry; keeping food on the table." She's dressed in a black dress and wearing a hat with a veil, the same outfit from Granda's funeral. She dips the pastry brush into a cup of gravy powder then dusts her legs from knee to ankle. Mam owned a pair of stockings once, she said, but since the rations, money didn't stretch to such things. Next, she pours a little food colouring – cochineal – onto a cotton ball and dabs her cheekbones, then her lips. I want to tell her Dad said *cochineal* comes from a bug...and we put it in our food. Yuck. But she looks beautiful, so I hold that thought.

Mam lowers her veil and says look after me brother and help the church ladies with the food. A black car arrives. "Say goodbye to your father, Sadie."

I slip my hand in his, cold as a pack of butter, and kiss his pale skin. Tears slip down me face. I duck out the back door and let it all out.

When I come inside, he's gone. The kitchen is full of ladies I hardly know. They turn on the wireless and music fills the room. Immediately, one presses a spoon in me hand to stir the batter for the dumplings to go in the lamb broth. Another lays a white cloth on the table. Mam's bread is carved into thin slices, buttered then placed on the table along with Nanna's apple pies, pasties and sandwiches. And our Christmas cake with marzipan and icing is set in the centre, but no tiny plastic robins or mistletoe on top.

Mam will be pleased we're giving me dad a good send-off.

One lady pours small glasses of brandy and pats the seat next to her and says, "Tell me, Sadie, what will you miss most about your daddy?"

"That he'll not be at the wake-up."

With the big hand on eleven, visitors arrive. The men make their way straight to the drinks. I hand out tea plates. So many people. Everyone is talking at once. Some people are laughing. If Dad and Cecil were here, they'd be singing another favourite, *Que Sera, Sarah*, I'm sure.

I sit on the bottom of the stairs, but nearly everyone comes to tell me how wonderful me dad was. And how proud he was of me.

I know.

Mr. Trafford pushes through the crowd. "Hello, Sadie. I've seen Cecil. He says to tell you he'd taken a day off the day of the fall-in, and not to worry, pet, he's got a new job at the fair. He said to give you this." Mr. Trafford hands me a chocolate bar.

The foil is shiny. I smooth the tiny creases and smell the sweet scent. "Tell Cecil, thank you." I didn't ask how the pit pony came to have chocolate; I know he trades them for carrots.

"And Sadie, he said to give you a message. He's found someone else to share food with him, but he says to tell you, they can't make a cup of tea as good as your dad's."