

The Smog

In the midst of a vacuum of silence, the joyous ringing of the bell echoed around the gloomy, expansive room. The day's lengthy mundane shift was at last finished. The workers began proceeding towards the beaten down wooden door through the darkness of the factory, following the window to its immediate right which provided the only light for the room. Given that it was autumn and the days were becoming shorter with each week, the occurrences of men who had been partially blinded by the strenuous work of putting together the products of the factories, namely wooden cases and chairs, putting a rusty nail through their thumbs rose exponentially. One would expect elation from the workers upon the occasion of being freed back into their own lives (if one could reasonably call them that) but the workers were too drained of energy to revel, not to mention that nothing outside of that horrid door was worthy of celebration.

Such were the thoughts of George Anderson, a middle-aged man, with thirty three years of 'life' behind him. His grimy hair was beginning to thin, and while he was perchance slightly taller than average, making any sort of distinction would be a challenge. Little more than skin and bones, his figure was especially frail and visibly malnourished, and his voice surprising clear taking into account the conditions of the air he breathed in and out every day. He was a middle class man in hard times, but he spoke like a king. However, what was worse than the pain of breathing in the heavy air of the factory was the ache from holding his head. When he reached it, he pushed open the factory door to leave, only to face the streets of London.

It was somewhat of a troubling time for the city. While the growth of industry continued to skyrocket, bringing wealth to the elite, a population boom accompanied the growth of London often without a physical expanse of the city. The result was an increase of density, leading to an even higher prevalence of disease, crime at the most despicable levels, and smaller residences. Making life further dull for most commoners, days were increasingly spent more so inside of a dark factory, blinded by smog, than outside engaging in a form of specialized labour. George's father had been a well known maker

of furniture in the neighbourhood, amassing a reputation of respect from its inhabitants. Now, the lessons and teachings passed down to George from his father were essentially futile – all a man needed to create furniture was a contraption and a minute or two of instruction.

Through this city, George began his stroll. With his first step out, he took a heavy breath. Not quite fresh air, but most certainly fresher. He had no choice but to walk over the potholed cobblestone path at a snail's pace, as his legs had been worn out from standing all day; they were stiff to the point that any degree of movement caused a proportional degree of pain. He stayed reasonably close to several of his co-workers also on their way, passing familiar edifices such as the orphanage and the local pub. Stories of stick-ups and stabbing on ordinary street corners were too real to be forgotten. George shuddered at the mere thought.

At the passing of another minute, he arrived. The rickety wooden structure wedged between a vacant butcher's shop and the residence of a particularly rambunctious man whose frustrations with his mistress could be heard quite clearly through the deteriorating walls. It was visible to see upon close examination that the place he called his home had once been painted an auburn colour, and three windows seemed to fit in perfectly with the wall of insipidness that the front of the house presented. George grabbed the door knob, and pulled the door open, to see his wife, Adele, sitting on a rocking chair in front of the fire place, with their three year old daughter Jane in her arms.

"How's she getting on?" George asked quietly, as he grabbed a book lying on the kitchen table, and opened it up. Adele peered down to make sure the child was asleep.

"I can't say, George. I don't know. She's just been ill for so long now..." A tear slipped from Adele's eye unto the forehead of the child. George's eyes remained faithfully fixed on the pages in front of him.

"Earl said he'd be here while I was at work, did he come?"

"Yes, he left a note for you. He needs his money for next Tuesday."

George finally lifted up his head from the tattered pages and gazed Adele in her eyes. She was a very pale woman, but there was a strong incidence of vitality in her eyes, sentiments of hope seemed to seep out of her very pupils.

"What do we have to eat?"

“We had a loaf of bread and a few potatoes in the cellar, so that’s what I prepared. All that’s left now is scraps.” George sighed and let a pause ring, before finally speaking.

“How can we keep living like this?” Frustration could be sensed in his tone. “We can’t take care of our Jane’s health, we are half-starved, and I have to pay the landlord, and...”

“Relax. Forget about your problems now. Imagine they do not exist, and never have. Now read your poetry and I’ll get you your food.” The charisma with which she addressed him always gave George hope; she knew how to please him. George loved three things in life: sleeping, reading, and his wife, the three things that could bring him away from the dread of reality. However, it seemed these days the time he could allocate for these pleasures was plummeting. In the time he could, he opened the book and began reading. The page opened to Keats – his favourite. He began to find himself enveloped in the text to the point he lost track of time until heard screaming from across the wall, waking him up from his journey. He closed the page on *Ode to a Nightingale* and decided to get whatever sleep he could.

The next morning arrived and George awoke. He ritually marched to the factory over the rough cobble stone yet again, thrusting himself into the harsh air of London. He was accustomed to walking between the legs of sleeping beggars in the alleyways and keeping an eye open for muggers by this time, so much so that it became systematic practice. However, when he finally arrived, the on-goings around the front door were hardly typical. A short piece of parchment hung from the door, and at least two hundred workers were screaming, fighting passer-bys, and throwing sizable stones at the building in utter passion. George approached the mob and asked the nearest fellow to him a question.

“What’s the issue, friend? Why aren’t we working?”

“It’s over! It’s all over!” the man exclaimed in barely comprehensible groans. George, by this time quite frightened, approached another man, praying he would be more rational.

“Excuse me, good sir, what is the cause for this?”

“Did you not see the sign? Gah! They finally done it!” At least this man was clearer than the last. As George made his way to the door, though, another layer of the

situation unfolded as stallions made their selves menacingly clear marching up the road. The police had arrived.

The march became a rush as the proximity between the parties shrunk. Isolated members of the mob began jolting through surrounding alleyways with each second. In the midst of this chaos, a particularly raucous shout was made.

“Calm, calm!” A short, brawny officer with a waxed moustache rushed to the scene, giving loud orders. “Stop what you’re doing!” There was no holding back the sheer ardour of the body of workers. While the officer was speaking, a particularly disgruntled man standing beside George picked up a handful of pebbles off the ground, and formed a glare towards the oncoming body of policemen that embodied frustration and disobedience. The moustached officer prepared to speak, while his companions held the barrels of their weapons at the mob.

“We’ll read you the memorandum issued by the factory owner to clarify t’day’s happenin’s, and then you shall be on your way. If you’re ready, I’ll start.” He briefly coughed, and began reading the memo.

“Effective November 2nd, 1901, the McKinley Packaging, Casing and Furniture Production Facility has been sold to Ravensdale Enterprises for an undisclosed amount. The future of the property is currently being considered, and all present employees are, with the release of this document, released from their positions...”

George shifted his eyes to the man beside him again. His face was growing increasingly red with each passing instant, as he cradled the rocks between his hands.

“...and all concerns regarding payment for unpaid time or other cases of acknowledgement will not be addressed...”

That was enough. With what seemed like an absence of consideration and accompanied by an obscenity-riddled war cry, the man viciously hurled the small stones in his hand at the speaking officer, who quickly received the majority to his face. What happened next seemed to pass by in a second to George. One of the officers immediately shot the man standing next to George in the shoulder. The mob that had been building was amply frightened, and began running away while the police members bolted towards the scene. George, too, tried to get away, a process heavily slowed down by the pushing amidst the crowd. He pushed as hard as he could through the mass of people, catching a

glance of the man who had been shot being detained along with other members of the mob who had been caught. Before he knew it, George was running with his house in sight, panting, and confused. By the time he reached it, he didn't know if he could take telling Adele about what happened. He began to pace about the street, nearly crying, talking to himself.

“How am I supposed to go on without an occupation? I was already in a condition bad enough! And my child! My wife! Adele!” Tears struck the pavement as reality began to sink in from his shocked state. “I need to fix this... I need to take care of my family... how?” His voice was shrill at this time, and each word seemed to bleed. He continued whispering to himself until his composure was enough in check to walk into the house. As usual, Adele was in the rocking chair in front of the burning fire, with Jane lying on her lap; George faced her to tell her the news worriedly. However, the moment he gazed into her eyes, his sentiments began a sudden transformation– he felt hope and somehow knew that Adele would understand. They stared into each others eyes for what seemed like an eternity, before George decided to speak.

“I have some bad news...”

“Go on.” Adele's voice was as lucid as ever.

“The factory closed down. I...I have no job.” Emotion was overflowing his forthright words.

Adele stared down into Jane's small face. She blinked, and looked back up at George.

“What happened to it?”

“It was sold to another company who are apparently considering what to do with the property. They let off all of the workers.” A deafening silence engulfed the small living room. Adele again lifted her head up and stared at George as if she expected him to say more. Eventually, he spoke again.

“I'm sorry. I've tried everything to keep this family afloat. I've had to buy food, I've had to spend most of my money on keeping Jane alive, I've had to deal with the landlord, and I've had to deal with my job. This life has become too much!”

Adele abruptly began weeping. George had never seen her do so before, and was immediately staggered.

“What’s wrong?”

“The physician was here today. He looked at Jane.” She peered down to make sure Jane was slumbering. “He told me she might make it if we keep giving her those needles you bought. But I checked and... and... we ran out and have no money to buy more! Don’t let her die! Please!” She kept crying.

“This is too much. Everything... it has become too much. I’m only free when I’m arrested by a novel or your eyes, or dreaming of wondrous fantasies asleep in my bed. Why can’t I wake up from this, for it surely must be a nightmare!” The sole interruption to the aching silence was the crying of Adele. Staring at his grieving wife, he reflected on the state of his life. What he took for granted had fallen apart, and the situation was hardly desirable even beforehand. All feelings of self-esteem and confidence disappeared as he stood and stared into the distance.

“We have to leave. Our house, this city, everything.” The words haunted the room.

“What? How? Have you gone insane?” Adele finally spoke.

“You said we have to forget about the problems of the present and escape by the means we possess. It’s time to forget.” Adele laid Jane down and stood up; pacing towards George, she began to speak.

“I thought you were going to make everything better. You always work so hard; it’s unlike you to give up on everything. This world is filled with problems, what of your desire to fix them?”

“I’ve struggled for too long! It’s time to get away from this struggle!” George seemed to twitch as he spoke.

“Are you scared of work? Are you too lazy to provide? What of your daughter?” George paused. He had worked so hard for the lives of others; how could he stop? But his efforts were largely of no avail. He couldn’t bring life to others. He couldn’t even bring life to himself.

“No. I am not afraid to work. I am not lazy. I would never give up on my daughter. It would only be giving up if I kept her living only to die! I can’t give her life, Adele.”

“Attempting to solve these troubles is frivolous. Regardless of our actions, problems will exist. Aristocrats fret about becoming wealthier and the well-fed worry about becoming obese. There will be problems. What can be accomplished by any effort to obliterate them?” George felt as if he was in the midst of a surreal dizzy spell. His surroundings became less real, and the tip of his tongue took up a mind of its own.

“But at the cost of life? Do we not have a responsibility to care for this child that should seize precedence over all others?”

“There are no jobs in London; this city has grown faster than any development of industry could accommodate. A profession as a beggar could not yield the wealth needed to keep her alive, nor could it keep us alive. They’ve told me life is being able to feed one’s family, to have a respectable career and disposable income. But no, life is only found in escaping from it. I cannot live for myself, let alone my daughter. It may take a strong woman to cope with the death of her firstborn, but only a woman with the strength of the proud British Navy could tear a child away from her own bosom and leave it on the steps of an orphanage to be never seen again.”

“What are you suggesting? I give away my beloved child?” Somehow, Adele’s tone was more curious than fuming.

“Either that or watch her die. It’s time to let go of all of our preoccupations. This house, this child – illness and the landlord are coming after each. We can only run away.”

Adele lowered her head and a tear rolled from her cheek onto the floor. Sensing the sentiment, George floated towards his lover and carelessly placed his tepid hand under Adele’s shoulder, raising it until they intimately stood face to face, becoming lost in each others eyes. For that instant, they felt no pain, only the warmth of love overcoming their physical bodies. Staring into the deepness of each other, they knew what had to be done.

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“Happy birthday, sister!” An enthusiastic greeting rang through the narrow hallway.

“Much thanks, Father Edward. How kind of you to remember.” Father Edward chuckled.

“Such a thing would be a miracle with the state of my memory. Sister Priscilla had been here this fine morning and told me. May I ask what you’re going about at the parish this fine afternoon?”

“I have business to take care of in God’s name, Father. I must be on my way. Good day.” Her articulation was staccato. She began to walk away as she finished speaking.

“Good-day, Sister!” The man said, with a partially confused tone.

The woman continued striding through the parish hall towards the door at its end. The light through the small glass window permeated through the building. Eventually, she reached the door, extended her delicate arm towards its knob, and opened it. Under the brilliance of the sun, the bounty of nature expanded before her eyes. Beautiful willow trees towered over and around the regal stone boulevard, forming an undisturbed sanctuary. Amongst the contained grass, headstones jutted upwards, inching towards the sky in a uniform arrangement of rows and columns. The woman walked up through the rows, until she finally found what she was looking for. She got on one knee, and wiped the dirt off of two modest headstones tucked away in a patch of long grass. They read: “GEORGE ANDERSON, 1868-1901”, and “ADELE ANDERSON, BORN JONES, 1870-1901”.

“May they rest in peace”. These words escaped from her mouth without any degree of thought. “Lord, I pray that I never take for granted the life given to me by these dear souls.” A tear tenderly dropped onto the dirt over Adele’s headstone as she managed to continue. “You made everything possible for me... I owe my life to you. Amen.”

Jane pulled out a tattered book and a thorny rose. She laid the rose down, and opened the book to the page marked, which held the poetry of Keats. She began reading, on her knees, in that sanctuary under the grace of the mighty willows anterior to the two headstones:

“Ode to a Nightingale, by John Keats.



“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

“One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:  
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thine happiness, -  
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,  
In some melodious plot  
Of beechen green and shadows numberless,  
Singing of summer in full-throated ease...”