

The Day the Smog Came

As she slowly made her way home, Rosalind examined the callouses on her fingers, the rough skin on her palms and the dirt underneath her fingernails. She was thin, unkempt and drowning in her clothes. She lived with her parents and two younger brothers in a derelict slum situated on the outskirts of East London. Nikolas, a boy with permanently matted hair and soot blackened hands, lived with his mother in the flat above. Rosalind had known Nik since they were four, and at eleven, both were sent out to work. But this time they had a more important job...

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, tall chimneys had towered over the city spewing swathes of thick black smoke and coating the sky like a blanket. It was called 'smog', but truly it was a chemical soup. It hung in the air, shifting like ghosts in the breeze and brought with it illness and disease. Tomorrow marked the opening of a new textiles factory across the road from the slum. Engineers had developed bigger, faster and even more powerful machines that needed more fuel, and that meant more smog. At this rate their dwellings would soon become uninhabitable (more so than they already were). Their only hope was to reach a professor who was a pioneer in his field. He would surely have an invention that could help.

That evening, it was decided that the neighbours would travel to where the professor resided and return with something life changing. Ros began to pack two apples, an oil lamp, a tightly bundled blanket and a small loaf of bread wrapped in waxed paper.

Ambling along the cold cobbled streets, the friends followed the lamplighters on their rounds. "Nik, do you remember the last time you saw the stars?" Ros asked inquisitively.

"No," Nik replied shifting his gaze to the sky, "Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen them."

Up ahead, a tiny glimmer of light illuminated the building that was their destination. A man emerged from the opening flooding them in light. His spectacles were perched precariously on the tip of his protruding nose. Without hesitation, the pair began to run.

"Professor!" they bellowed. Startled, the professor looked up, a smile appeared across his face. "Ah, I've been expecting someone, but I didn't expect children! Nevertheless, welcome."

He outstretched his arm as if to beckon them in to a vast room resembling a laboratory. The room was scattered with tempting trinkets, copper cogs and intriguing inventions. At the far end of the room, a scarlet, weighted curtain hung from the ceiling. It was concealing something... something important. As the professor proudly unveiled the invention he declared, "I call it... the Breatheasy."

The next morning, Ros and Nik embarked on their return journey, the Breatheasy in tow. A feeling of hope enveloped them. They had done it.

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