

The Flood

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Extract

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When Mary Miller was ten years old and not yet a witch, and Carsden was still a thriving mining village, she would watch her brother Tom playing football in the park with his friends. She was attracted, young though she was, to their swagger, to the way they rolled their shirtsleeves up like their fathers and shouted for every ball. She would sit by the goalposts between which her brother danced and would console him when he let in a goal.

At that time she had a doll called Missie Lizzie, and she would clutch Missie Lizzie to her tiny chest as if sustaining her. The sun shone low over long summer evenings and the rumble of the pit-head lulled her into near sleep. Smoke drifted over the park while locomotives slipped away over distant rails. There was a rhythm to everything in those days, as if some tune were being played behind a veil beyond which the young girl could not see. The trees beside the hot burn snapped their fingers, and the lapping of the burn itself added the final cadence to the symphony.

One evening Mary was sitting against the iron fence behind Tom's goalposts, he having gone to the

centre of the pitch to share in the half-time refreshments, and was falling asleep as usual with Missie Lizzie lying across her lap. The air was so clear that bird-calls seemed to carry to her ears from way over past the Auld Kirk and even Blackwood's Farm, and these were the sounds to which she fell asleep. She was a small, skinny thing with long black hair tied back into a ponytail which fell tantalisingly down her back and which, consequently, her brother Tom in one of his moods would often pull. Every hair would cry out as if burning when he did this, and she would run crying to her mother who would tell her father who would scold the bully, perhaps even letting him taste his pit-belt. Then Tom would not speak to her for a day or two, and would give her killing looks. Not today, though; there could be nothing but innocence in the park on such an evening. She could almost feel the warmth of the hot burn behind her, bringing its murky deposits down from the pit-head to be washed into the River Ore and carried out to sea. In the winter, steam rose from the hot burn and people warmed themselves beside it, some even waggling their fingers or bared toes in the dark liquid to revive the feeling in them. Sometimes the burn was red in colour, sometimes black, and occasionally a clearer bluey-grey, but only when the pit was idle.

Mary had been sleeping for only a few minutes when she found herself edging towards wakefulness because of some sounds nearby. There was a rustling and a faint whistling behind her, then muffled sniggers and more rustling. She knew, as she opened

her eyes, that something was behind her, creeping through the field across which the hot burn threaded its course, nearing the railings against which she now sat petrified. From her still bleary eyes she could just make out Tom in the centre of the football pitch. He was laughing and biting into a half-orange. He would save a piece for her. The sounds were coming nearer, but she was too afraid to scream. Her mother had told her of the goblins who lived in the hot burn and would eat any young children who wandered close to their home without taking an adult for protection. Tom had laughed and told her that it was all a fairy story to stop her from going too close to the burn and maybe falling in. But perhaps, she now thought, she really had strayed too close to the goblins' home. Perhaps if she edged away now it would be all right.

Suddenly something growled immediately behind her and an arm, very human in design, snaked through the iron railings and snatched Missie Lizzie from Mary's lap. She screamed and stood up. The boys were whooping and careering across the field, tossing the doll between them. Mary was horrified. She screamed a high-pitched squeal and squeezed between the iron bars, almost getting stuck but eventually forcing herself through. Tom was shouting at her as she stumbled through the barley, which prickled her legs terribly. She made relentlessly towards the two boys, who seemed quite keen for her to follow. They were older boys, older even than Tom, and she recognised both of them. They grinned at her and waved Missie Lizzie towards her, and she

was bawling with the tears threatening to blind her. She held out her arms towards Missie Lizzie as she walked towards her tormentors. When she was too close, the boys darted around her and trotted a little distance away. They waved the doll and laughed and jeered at her, and all the time she could hear Tom's voice angrily behind her as he tried to climb over the fence.

'I want it back, I want it back!' she cried as she reached out her arms. The doll, with its smiling stupid face and its red dress, was hanging high in the air now, was pinned by an adolescent arm against the deepening blue sky below which the hot burn murmured. She stood on tiptoe, ignoring the boy and his outstretched arm, and just touched Missie Lizzie's foot with her fingertips. The doll was released, and a soft push in Mary's back was all that was needed to send her toppling into the hot burn, screaming as she hit the water, taking in a choking mouthful of silt and heat and darkness. Her eyes stung as if sand had been thrown into her face. She knew that she should not be here. She gasped, feeling her hand breaking the surface of the water and touching the floating body of her doll. There was a swirling and a rushing and a bubbling of liquid. She had no right to be in this place. This was a warm dying place and dark. Her knees touched the gritty, yielding bottom, her hands in light and air and her body submerged. It was quite pleasant, really, to be away from the teasing boys and their cruelty. She began to give herself to the thick water. Then her hair was screaming, rough things clawing at it. There

were goblins in the hot burn and she had disturbed their nest. She opened her eyes, but was blind. Then, hair screaming still, she felt herself rising from the liquid. Her hair was on fire, and suddenly she was in brightness and air and was being sick, spewing up all the silt and the darkness. She was dragged to the bank and her hair stopped screaming. Voices rushed into her ears as the water rushed out. 'By Christ, Tom, that was close.' 'Aye, pulled her out by the pigtail.' 'She was down there a while, though.' 'Are you all right, Mary?' 'I saw them. It was Matty Duncan and Jock McLeod's boy.' 'Is she all right there, Tom? Should we fetch your mum?'

Her dress clung to her like the dress of a rag-doll. Her stomach hurt and her eyes hurt and her head hurt, and she was shaking and crying and was afraid. She felt Tom touch her face, then she opened her eyes.

Her mother listened to the story and then told her to go upstairs and change; she would be up in a minute to help her. Mary left her mother with Tom and climbed the narrow staircase to the room where she slept with her brother. She had a small room of her own, but it was used more as a cupboard due to the dampness of its walls and its bitter cold in winter. The mumbled voices downstairs were too quiet to be truly calm. Mary began crying again as she pulled the ruined dress from her body and sat on her bed. She had disobeyed her mother. She had gone near the hot burn without an adult, and now she would never be forgiven. Perhaps her father would spank

her with the heavy leather belt. She had disobeyed her parents, whom she loved, and that was why she cried.

She seemed to sit in her bedroom for a very long time, and she heard the front door opening and closing several times. She was trapped there. It was as if she had been told in school that someone was going to beat her, and having to go through the rest of the day in fear of the bell for going home. She stared at her dirty dress and sat and waited. Finally, a heavy noise on the stairs told her that her father was coming up. He opened the door and looked in on her. She was shivering, naked. He had the coal-dust still on him and his piece-bag slung over his shoulder. His eyes burned, but he came over and rubbed his daughter's hair. He asked if she was all right, and she nodded and sniffed.

'Let me get washed then,' he said, 'and we'll clean you up and get you dressed.'

There seemed a conspiracy in the house for the rest of the day, with no one mentioning what had happened. Her father washed her and helped her into her good dress and she sat by the fireside while he read a book. They were alone in the house. Much later, after her father had made some toast and jam and she had said that she was not hungry and still had not been scolded, the front door opened and closed quietly and Tom came in. He sat at the table with them and drank tea. Then Mary's mother came in, taking off her coat as she entered the living room.

‘By God, I told them,’ she said. Her face was flushed and her hands fluttered about her as she made a fresh pot of tea. ‘I told them.’

When the family were seated around the table, they began to talk. It seemed that Mary’s mother had gone round to Mr Duncan’s house and Mr McLeod’s house and had had words with each of them. Tom smiled twice as his mother told her story, but his father was quick to admonish him on both occasions.

Mary was made much of that evening, being allowed to stay up well past her bedtime. Neighbours came to sympathise and to find out just what Mrs Miller had done. These women sat with their arms folded tightly and listened carefully to their neighbour’s narrative. They looked at the girl and smiled at her. By bedtime, Mary was aware that she was not to be scolded for her part in events. She went to bed with a lighter heart, but awoke twice during the night from a nightmare in which she was drowning again, but this time the faces above her were grim and unhelpful. An old man watched her and even seemed to be holding her below the surface, while a boy stood behind him and shouted. This boy looked quite like Tom, but was a bit older. She could not hear what he was shouting, but she saw him hammering on the old man’s back. Then the hands of the goblins were upon her and she screamed through the water, waking up with her sheets knotted around her and her body drenched with sweat.

The following morning, Mrs Miller stared at the girl in horror. Mary's hair had turned silver in the night.