

D. R. D. BRUTON

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## *The Day Coming Up Silver and Bright*

She hears her Da shifting in his bed, and coughing, and cursing the clock that says it is near time to be up. Her Mam she hears too, already creeping downstairs, soft in slippers, and she stirs small heat into the sleeping fire—you can hear the poker rattling in the grate, making a harsh music with its hard and thrusting rhythm. And Mam sets the kettle to boil, doesn't she, two eggs nested in the pot, and she cuts bread in thick slices, thick as doorsteps, and she lays the table for his coming down.

It's always so, 'cept Sundays. Been that way for as far back as memory and maybe further back than that. 'Cept Sundays it's different. Like it says in *The Book*, and on the seventh day He rested. And the men in the village hold God somewhere in their thoughts for God it is who brings them home safe each day; but 'tis the women that hold God nearer to their hearts. The seventh day is Sunday and the men keep later to their beds then. Doing what God says they should, Mam says in church-whispers so we none of us wake Da, not like he wakes us every other day. And Sundays, when he sleeps late, the air in Da's room when we dare to look—if we dare—smells sweet and sour both at the same time, smells of old beer and cigarettes, and Da, lying still as the dead almost, makes the sound of a cow on its back, blowing air, and we don't laugh because Da is resting like God.

But this is not yet Sunday, for all Da's wishing, and Mam wishing it too. Today is Wednesday and that's only half way through the working week and Sunday is as far off as horizons.

Black as cupboard dark, her Da's coughing, and jagged as glass when it is broken. She winces a little, understanding how it must hurt her Da. Then, through the wall, she hears the sound of him rising, his feet dull and heavy on the wooden floor, and the sighing of the bedsprings when he leaves them. And her Da dresses quick as dancing, at least in her imagination he does, dancing to no music, his arms all push and punch into his shirt sleeves and his legs kicking into his britches and his toes pointing into his boots, and he swears against buttons that do not fasten and laces that do not tie, and she does not think he looks in the mirror to brush his hair or to mark the tired that he is.

Then the stumbling thunder of his boots on the stairs and they seem without end to her, longer this day than yesterday, like he might be descending down into hell. And even at the thought she hears her Mam muttering a quick prayer against it is so and she sees her Mam crossing herself or touching the wood of the table for luck—because Da and all the men need luck on their side as much as God.

And she sees, in her head, her Da taking his seat in the kitchen, the scrape of the chair's wooden legs against the stone floor and the crack and groan of wood as it accepts his weight. Then quiet, for there are few words passed between her Da and her Mam over breakfast, few words to disturb the breaking of bread on days that are not Sunday. All across the town it is still too early for words. She hears the silver chink of a teaspoon stirring sugar and sweetness into his first cup—"let him have three teaspoons today, Mam," she says to herself and she clutches a rubbed rabbit's foot so that the wish might come true for Da, because when Da's sweet he's soft as pillows and his pockets not so deep that he can't reach the few pennies he has and a penny for her and a penny for her sister if they ask. She hears the scritch and scratch of a butter knife against well-fired toast and her Da coughs again.

If she holds her breath and stills her heart, she thinks she can hear song, the murmur of song, and it is Elsie in the next bed and though she sleeps there is the sound of music from her lips these days. Her sister is dreaming of Eddie, remembering a kissing-time, and Eddie laughing and being gentle with her. He picked her out of all the rest, that's what Elsie says with her head held as high as

towers or trees and her face all lit up like she's in the sun and her eyes wide and smiling. "Chose me when he could have had any girl in the town," and Eddie gave her a glint-gold ring, thin as a pinch, the gold clutching a winking diamond with rainbow sparks and flashes, so they will one Sunday soon be new man and new wife.

"Eddie is alright," her Da says. 'Course, it's a Saturday night when Da finds such words and he's a drink in him then and the words that were missing for all the days of the working week come back to him, like he's a magic pocketful of 'em, two pocketsful, and he gives them away as easy as giving pennies to two girls who know when to smile and say their Da's scrubbed up pretty as flowers and his face pink and smooth from the razor. "Eddie's alright," Da says again, like someone needs convincing.

Da knows Eddie. He's a worker in the same pit and Eddie's not daft with his money. Not like some as Da could name. So Da gives his approval to Eddie, though at the bottom of his empty glass—if it is his last Saturday glass and the day is ending and the man behind the bar of the Pithead Rest calls, "time now gentlemen, please"—well, then it's a different truth in Da's head, for once he wanted more for Elsie, more than he has hisself and what he has is all his days hard and black and choked. He nods to the barman and he draws breath and steadies hisself for the crooked walk home. "Elsie has made her choice," he whispers under his whisky-breath.

"It's your bed and once it's made then you got to lie in."

That's the blessing he gives her come Sunday and he's still in his pyjamas and downstairs sitting at the table. We are all watching him eat his eggs and his bacon and watching as he lifts his cup to his lips—his lips made into the shape of a kiss, one half of a kiss.

And so his attention turns to the younger sister, and maybe it can be better for her, at least. That's what he thinks, even though she never hears him say it in words. There's a smile he gifts her and a way of looking. 'God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good' and that is the look Da has when he looks at the daughter he has left.

But today is only Wednesday and not a day for smiling or kissing or looks soft as feathers or dandelion clocks, not when there's a dark day's work to be done. Work so hard it can break a man if he's not

careful, break him like a stick can be broken if it's dry and brittle.

Wednesday and she lies still in her bed, waiting for the sun to come up and listening to all the sounds of the not yet broken day. She hears her Mam gently scolding her Da for not being able to tie his bootlaces properly. Mam kneeling like at prayer before him, with her head bowed, and she ties his laces right for him. Fastening his shirt top buttons for him, too, if he'll just keep still and lift his chin—which he does, like he's looking fondly into her eyes, and he might be for all anyone else knows. 'Cept it's only Wednesday and Da's never so fond 'less it's Saturday night and his hands reaching through the dark for Mam in their bed, pulling her out of sleep and into his arms, and the breathless murmurings of his love for her then, words slippy and slurred and losing their shape.

It's Wednesday and Mam makes sure he has his piece and his flask of tea—one more spoonful of sugar, Mam, please—a rabbit's foot wish for her sweet Da. And his cigarettes and matches, Mam slips them into his jacket pocket, and a kiss she puts in there, too, for Da to take with him into the pit.

"You see and be safe," her Mam says to her Da, Mam's words like a song and a happy song, said light as nothing, though underneath there is something so easily broken if you listen.

Da coughs again, clears his throat like he might say something back to her Mam, but he don't say a word, just nods and pulls on his cap and turns to go.

And in her sleep, Elsie says the same to her dream of Eddie: "You see and be safe," the same sing-song and brittle brightness.

And this is the kind of place where there's no difference between what is and what was, and even what is dreamed is set hard in stone so it never can be changed but only can be broken.

She waits till he is gone, the sound and spark of her Da's hobnailed boots on the road outside shrunk small as no sound at all, or lost in the clump and clod of a hundred other boots, and a little after the skittery drumbeat of the boys that are new to this and they're running to catch up with the men, and everyone of 'em looking up at the lightening sky and making pronouncements on how the day will be, the day they will not see till it is near to ending.

Then the quiet of all of 'em gone, quiet like a slap when it's

## THE DAY COMING UP SILVER AND BRIGHT

hurting. The only sound is the pitwheel turning, but turning far off so you have to strain to hear. She gets up then, slow and silent as cats creeping or spiders, quiet so as not to wake Elsie. And downstairs she spends time with her Mam, the time before school, time in front of the fire, and everywhere the light coming up silver and bright as a new shilling, and the kitchen grown warm as an oven, and spoken words being born in that silence, all the good and the shiny words that ever was.