



Smoke/Shore by Keziah Whetham

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It was impossible to walk through the city without getting covered in smog. Mrs Beecham was particularly upset today, as her once richly dyed red cloak was stained an inky black. She had rinsed it out (wearing gloves, of course) to no avail, so she had no choice but to throw it out when she got back home.

She had seen plenty of people wearing stained clothes, but Mrs Beecham was not one to take her chances with anything, even if she would freeze in the harsh Manchester wind while doing so. It was difficult to throw clothes away, having friends in the mills, like, but Mrs Beecham knew firsthand how the smoke started whispering and caused people to do terrible, terrible things.

Her daughter Abigail hated how her clothes were scrubbed down as soon as she entered. Mrs Beecham did not miss the cold look that Abigail gave her whenever she played out, the look that said don't say anything or else. Mrs Beecham thought that sometimes Abigail could be worse than the smoke itself.

It was partly to do, she thought, with the fact that Abigail was born in the city, when the factories had already been pumping out blackness for years. She could almost hear her daughters scoff as she told tales of blue skies and green plants. Abigail had only ever known grey buildings, smoke, and rain. Mr Beecham was a traveling salesman, never home for long. From him, Mrs Beecham knew that the world was not completely covered in smoke. If she had the money, she would leave Manchester and live by the sea. She yearned for Abigail to see colours, to see more than what was here.

Nowadays Abigail hardly came home at all. Where on earth was she? Mrs Beecham hardly wanted to know, but she hadn't heard any gossip so far, which meant it couldn't be too bad.

Mrs Beecham looked around her. The people nowadays were so grey, despite the reds that were in fashion, and the frilly bonnets. She noticed Mrs Harris with her son. Once upon a time, Mrs Beecham had admired Mrs Harris, the shipshape way she ran her household. When Mr Beecham had first left, and Mrs Beecham was left alone with Abigail, Mrs Harris was the one that Mrs Beecham wanted to impress. She wasn't sure why, but there was just something in that lady's posture that annoyed her and made her determined not to fail.

Now, she couldn't help but notice how tired Mrs Harris looked, with her sagging silhouette

and right hand on her young Albert. Had she always had those deep purple eye bags? Mrs Beecham thought she must be dreaming to see anybody so out of their usual manner.

And there was Mr Jones. Mrs Beecham had once longed to be a Mrs Jones, but that title had gone to the once intriguing Rebecca Horne. There was a time where Rebecca used to run about with the boys with her hair down, but now she only followed Mr Jones, a blank expression on her face.

Mrs Beecham had never been exceedingly pretty, nor dazzlingly intelligent. She was not the perfect wife she saw in Mrs Harris, now the spangled New Woman of Rebecca Jones. She was just there. Lumpy, and in the middle, allowing the extremes to shine.

She began to feel the strangest pit of cold in her stomach. Absent-mindedly, she put her hand to her head. She must have spent too long in the rain the other day. Was it the other day? It felt like years and years and years ago.

Where was she going? The market. Her new cloak. Mrs Beecham smoothed it down. Had she once thought it dirty? It seemed perfectly red and rich to her now. She looked up, catching the eye of Mr Jones.

He seemed so ugly once you looked him in the eye, more like a man of fifty than thirty and six. And poor Rebecca looked like she was half-dead. Mrs Beecham curled her lip. Abigail would not be conversing with their little girl any longer.

The market smelt awfully of fish. Mrs Beecham had never liked fish, not even with her love of the sea. Plus, it was expensive. Manchester was not a coastal town, and the prices reflected this.

Today, there seemed to be a heavy gloom in the air. Granted, it was almost always gloomy, but today, Mrs Beecham could almost smell it, the soft, wet smell of oil. If she opened her mouth, she was certain it would taste like the slimy scales of fish, the parts she hated most.

Mrs Beecham blinked. The noise of the people had been drowned out by the smog, like they were far, far away. Mrs Beecham felt terribly alone. She felt a sudden chill of fear run down her spine, then shook it off. She was fine. She was fine.

She took a step and watched her foot sink into a puddle of oil. She stared at her hands, stained with charcoal. Her coat, black. The only thing of any colour was a single thread wrapped around her waist, like a stray dog hair. She picked it up, hardly noticing the buzzing feeling in her fingers.

Mrs Beecham looked up. She thought she could hear her name, somewhere, out in the distance. It didn't matter. She could see the smoke, and on the horizon, a strip of blue, just how she remembered it, thirty years ago. It was still so so unclouded by smoke, like a bright white lighthouse on the shore.

She ran towards it and almost tripped.

The smoke.

Mrs Beecham screamed.

The smoke.

Where on earth was Abigail?