

The Secret School of Dust and Dreams

Elsie approached the familiar soot-infested factory looming before her, wheezing out a black breath, its body frail and limp like a dying beast. Inside were rows of girls working under gas lamps that flickered like dying stars. England was coated milky white, the bitter weather stripping Elsie of her weak linen garments. Her lemon hair was cut short in a bob, to avoid the claws of the sewing machines. She advanced towards her timber stool, splinters like hands sticking out yearning for the taste of freedom, as she started her thirteen hour shift once again.

Every fleeting lunch break, Elsie would devour her ration crackers, the tasteless blocks scraping her twig-like throat. She slipped her hand into her numbing apron pocket, pulling out a vibrant red ribbon.

"What's that?" a convivial voice chipped in—a lively young girl, no older than eight.

Elsie screwed her mouth into a crooked smile. "It's my symbol of hope. My mother tied it around my wrist before she passed."

The foreign girl, unsatisfied with the answer, scrunched up her face. "It's a ribbon. What do you mean, 'a symbol of hope'?" She grunted, as if she knew everything.

"It's called a metaphor."

"Metal fork?" The little girl repeated, her confusion evident.

Elsie chuckled, shaking her head. "Anyways, my name's Elsie. What's yours?"

"My name is Clara A-."

But before she could finish her sentence, Gomer Rydewick, the owner of the factory, shot them a stern look across the floor. His presence alone was enough to silence them—an unspoken demand to stop talking and get back to work. She merged into her stool once again, hours chained together, until one day blurred into another in a single second.

The next day's weather was a delicious concoction of dusty grey and a few splotches of baby blue. On their break, Elsie and Clara sat next to each other.

"So tell me about the ribbon." Clara remarked inquisitively.

"Picture this. A world of fields, books, and blue skies with no ceilings. My mother told me that this really exists."

Clara watched Elsie's hand gestures sweep through the air like brushstrokes—each one revealing a glimpse into a dream neither of them had dared to name.

"That sounds amazing. Does it *really* exist?" she asked softly.

Elsie, bright-minded and brimming with ideas, didn't answer right away. But inside, a spark had caught fire.

"You know those scraps of charcoal and linen the cleaners toss behind the factory?" she whispered.

"And that staircase—right there—that leads to the abandoned basement?"

Clara nodded, her eyes wide.

"You wanted to know what a metaphor is, right? How to write one?" Elsie leaned in, voice low but filled with energy.

"We could make a community... a school, down there. A place where we can teach ourselves to read and write. If we ever want to reach that ceilingless blue world, our first step is to imagine it. To draw it. To write it into being."

And so began an affair of words and newspaper clippings, plastered like petals across the walls. Over time, they gathered more than twenty fellow workers. Words were carved into the concrete walls. Splintered crates became seats. By the dim glow of smuggled candles, they chanted the words they'd etched by hand:

Ceiling. Hope. Sky.

Their voices rose in unison—an orchestra of dreams, woven together.

This would only last eight more years.

In 1850, Rydewick's Garments Industry was shut down—exposed for its cruel, unethical labour practices. Laws were rewritten. Rights reshaped. And beneath the ruins, a journalist would stumble upon an abandoned basement. Words were stitched across the broken bricks. Handwriting so perfect, so full of hope, it softened even the roughest stone.

The journalist's name was Brymer Wright. His chocolate-colored hair was ruffled like a bird's nest. He chewed the wooden handle of his steel nib pen, lost in thought, as scraps of paper littered the ground like fallen leaves—each scrawled with half-sentences and discarded headlines.

He traced the carved words on the wall with soft fingertips. "Too dramatic," he muttered, crossing out his latest idea with a flourish. Directing his kerosene lamp to the far corner of the basement, he peered at the magnificent words etched into the stone.

What an excellent headline, he thought.

Later that ceilingless blue evening, the Thursday edition of the newspaper arrived. On the front page, a bold headline read:

"We were never just hands. We were voices."

~ *The Story of the Secret School of Dust and Dreams*