

he was important. Maybe she'd found a lodger at last.
We needed one to bring in extra money.

I licked my fingers and quickly smoothed down the hair around my ears that tended to frizz up and out.

"Where is the lad then?"

The man's low, rumbling tone reminded me of factory machinery.

George threw me a what-have-you-done-now glare. I shrugged – nothing that I could think of.

We boys had no occasion for visitors. The only folk who came out to Bradfield, away from the bustle of town, were customers dropping off or collecting the clothes Mother mended for them. We weren't the poorest, but we rarely had meat with dinner anymore. Life had been especially tough since the great flood three years ago. We lived with our grandparents but their house had half-washed away, so we'd needed to move into lodgings, and there were fewer shillings to go around.

As well as mending, Mother now also worked five nights a week over at the Bull and Yoke pub that Grandmother ran. Neither of them smiled much these days.

"Boys!" Mother ushered us in front of the gentleman. The small fire behind us crackled, warming the back of my legs.