

The Warm Coat

by Anna Rose Walter

Katy ran, not because she was in a hurry, but because she was cold. It was on this morning, around late February that Katy was on her way to her factory job in the center of New York city. It was not yet light, but already the city was bustling with workers and children, many whom Katy knew. In fact, she had lived in New York City all sixteen years of her life. She had lived in a small, damp row home while her parents had been alive, but they had died in a factory fire when she had been only eleven years old. Her memories of this time were vague and dark and whenever Katy thought of the time when she had gotten home late that night and found out that her parents had burned to death, she shuddered and tried to put her mind on something else. Besides there was plenty of work to do to keep her mind busy. Katy now lived with a family only a few blocks from her old home. They had eight children and the mother was happy enough to have Katy there to help with work at home and help out with her factory wages as the only other one in the family who was old enough to work was the oldest son, Harry. He was seventeen and worked at the same factory as Katy and they enjoyed each others friendship. They often walked home together and talked about cheerful things.

“Someday, I’ll be rich and live in the country.” Harry once said after one strenuous day of work. “I’ll have a big farm and maybe even a few cows!”

“Oh that would be such fun!” Katy laughed and imagined the scene in her head. “Please have a big pantry full of nice things like sugar and flour and jams.”

“Alright! I will. And I’ll even have a few sheep so that we can have good woolen clothing! We’ll never be cold!” Katy sighed and shivered when she was reminded how cold she was. Her shoes barely kept together, her blue toes stuck out and her coat barely came below her knees and elbows. The one thing she longed for more than anything else in the world was a warm coat. Every day from the time she got up and went down to sleep she was cold. However, she was no worse off than any other factory workers and poor Harry was even colder than her. Often when walking home he gave Katy his tattered coat to wear and pretended he was not one bit cold. Katy felt bad taking it, but she knew that it gave Harry joy in being able to give her something, even if it was not a new, fancy coat.

Katy arrived at the factory breathless, but still cold. The factory was many stories tall and had more windows than one could count. It was built of dark, grey stone and was almost always whirring with the sound of loud, clanking machinery. The outside of the building was a chaos of crowded carts, yelling drivers and honking horns. Katy was used to the noise. Even when she was far away from the factory, her ears rang with an annoying whirring.

Katy opened the factory door and climbed four long flights of dirty stairs. She found her room and went to her place at the sewing machine. Almost all the people working in that room were children younger than her and many coughed and looked terribly tired. They had to be on time, however or they would lose their jobs. When the five o'clock bell went off Katy started her work sewing coat sleeves. She spotted Harry in the next aisle fixing machinery intently and he didn't look up. Katy knew she could never say even hello to him in the factory or she would be fined. Everyone was fined in the factory if they talked, except the boss who continually came around with a stern look on his face and who yelled above the noise of the machinery some order. The day oozed by slowly in a whirl of sewing machines, the coughing of children and the musty smell of the dirty room. Katy diligently kept to her work and sewed seam after seam not daring to take even a few seconds break when her back ached horribly and she longed to stretch. She did look up in surprise, however, when she heard a scream of a child in the room. Everyone looked towards the sound which came from a little boy, not even eight years old. His whole hand was bloody and he could not stop screaming. Obviously he had caught his hand in the needle of the machine. The boss from across the room yelled. "Go home if ya want! Don't expect no job waitin' foe ye if ye come back though!" The boy, still sobbing, walked towards the door right near Katy. She reached in her pocket, "Here's something. Wrap it around your hand." She slipped her hanky to the child without looking.

That night Katy walked home with Harry in the bitter cold as usual and at home she had to help make some of the oatmeal for the little ones and put them to bed. By the time she got in her own bed her back hurt to much to sleep. When she finally did drift off her dreams were filled with the little boy and his bloody hand.

February rolled by in the same round of getting up, working at the factory, coming home, eating and going to bed. Summer soon drifted by and now Katy was far from cold, but burning hot all the time. Everything smelled sweaty and crowded and more then a few people fainted from heat in the factory. The burning heat soon mellowed then turned to cold and another winter lay ahead of Katy. She was now seventeen years old.

"You ever celebrate your birthday?" Harry once asked her as they were walking home from the factory in late October. "Never. My mother used to say that everyone was born so what was the use of celebrating it?" Katy said.

"How about celebrating your birthday? There's a first for everything!"

"Well, I suppose so, but what's the use of celebrating when there's nothing to celebrate with?" Katy laughed and looked at Harry. He had a wide grin on his face that he couldn't hide.

"Let's just see about that. See me tomorrow before work. Is it a deal?"

Katy went to bed smiling and full of hope. The world seemed so happy and full of fun things just waiting for her around the corner. "I may not even have to work in a factory much longer!" she dreamed and imagined her life away from the hustle and bustle of city life. She knew that Harry and his family had plans for them marrying and Harry had always wanted to live in the country. "I am sure he can do anything when he sets his mind to it." And with that comforting thought Katy slept peacefully. Poor Katy! She was right, but little did she know how all her hopes would be dashed into pieces in just a few hours!

Harry died that night. His mother found him stretched on his bed in the morning, cold. In his hands he held a woolen coat lined with soft fur and inside inside the collar was crudely written "Katy, you'll never be cold anymore!" His face had a smile on it. Harry was buried far above the city on a little hill. The undertaker said he had probably died from a long sickness caused by cold, strenuous work and lack of rest. Katy found out later that poor Harry had worked long nights to pay for her coat.

That very same day Katy was back in her room at the factory. She had been on time so as to not lose her job. She looked around her and everything was buzzing and whirring as before, but to her everything was changed forever. The machinery that used to look slightly hopeful to her with Harry at work fixing them, now she saw as just time whirring on and on and not stopping for her. She looked down at her coat and a tear dropped from her eye. She was not cold anymore.