

Mary Dilworth
The Factory

- 1 I have always hated the factory. It has a gaunt¹ steel frame² like a skeleton. I've often imagined it without its red bricks, just an etching³ of black against a red sky.
Of course, I've never said anything about this to anyone. Especially to Eric. You see, he loves the factory. He would like to put up his sign in those flashing neon lights that the city firms can afford.
- 5 He saw a rainbow once over a petrol station there. I think he would have sold almost anything to have one of those on his roof.
Every day he is up early. He sings in the shower and eats his breakfast quietly. He always reads the business section of the newspaper, then quarters it neatly. His days are like that. In four parts. The first is the morning, which I've mentioned. Then there's the day at the factory. That's in two: the morning and the afternoon. He uses the telephone to tell me when it's time for lunch. Just two rings. That's his code. Then five minutes later he's at the door, letting himself in. He reads at lunch, usually one of the classics. He didn't have much education. In fact, that's why I met him. We worked at the same factory, ten miles out of town. It manufactured shoes and boots. I was the boss's secretary, and Eric worked the floor⁴.
- 10 I'll always remember that first day. He was nervous, tired not to show it, but his hands shook. His hair was brown, his eyes were brown, and the factory overalls were brown. He almost faded⁵ into the background of brown leather shoes. Which was quite funny at the time.
But I was describing his day. And he's not brown any more. Streaks⁶ of grey and a balding⁷ patch which he rakes over⁸, spreading the hairs thinly across it. And he wears a suit. Usually grey, with a red handkerchief in the pocket. I suppose his eyes are still the same colour, but I can't tell you. If you asked me, I just couldn't tell you. I did notice they were red tonight, which was unusual, but then the whole day was different. As though the four quarters came together and just rolled away. I could draw the second half of his day with my eyes closed. In the afternoon, he has a cup of tea in his office, then he works until six o'clock. Two rings on the telephone mean he's coming home for dinner. He has a good appetite and enjoys his food. In the evening he likes quiet. He always says that after such a busy day at the factory, he needs to sit and think. Which he does, with his eyes closed, his elbow on the chair, and his thumb and one finger pressed against his forehead. Or sometimes he just sits and stares into space. Eric always goes to bed early. He feels fresh then for the next day.
- 20 But now the next day won't come. It won't be Eric's day, and his eyes are red. I've never seen him cry before. I said this day was different. It's night now, and soon the dawn will come. In the night, the sky was red. A brilliant red. That was beautiful. Black against red. Like a devil with horns or the final crashing chords of a great concerto. I loved it. Black skeleton of steel in a fiery night. Of course the fire brigade came. I didn't call them. It was beautiful just watching the sky burning. I don't think I will ever forget it. Eric was asleep. They came to tell us as soon as they arrived. Eric knew straight away it was all over.
- 25 I love the night. Sometimes I stay up for hours, savouring⁹ it. The stars and that great arc of sky. The immense pattern, the changing moods of wind. Tonight it was special. It was different. And I feel very tired. But happy. An exhilarated¹⁰ feeling, a prickling right down my spine¹¹. Nobody knows how the fire started. Accidental, they say. It happens all the time.
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(Tepe, Thomas: *Twenty-One New Short Shorts*. Ernst Klett Verlag, Stuttgart 1995, S. 27-29.)

¹ gaunt – very thin

² frame – Gerüst

³ etching – picture printed from a metal plate

⁴ to work the floor – to have a job as an ordinary worker

⁵ to fade – here: to disappear

⁶ streak – long stripe

⁷ balding – beginning to lose the hair on the head

⁸ to rake over – to cover

⁹ to savour – to enjoy

¹⁰ exhilarated – very happy and excited

¹¹ row of bones down s.o.'s back that supports the body