



Links in the Chain

When Tom Candlish was a baby he could see angels. His little eyes would watch them hover by his side or sometimes dart playfully to the corners of the room as if to make him smile and smile he did for Tom was of a happy disposition and as he grew it was this facet of his nature which saw him through the darkest of days. The latest addition of six children, he lay contentedly in his warm mess of a makeshift crib and smiled softly at the beings no one else could see.

Tom would lie happily for hours upon hours, stirring only when his brothers used him as a source of amusement, laughing gleefully when their rough hands provoked him to cry. The baby provided constant sport to his brothers Arthur and Silas who were never content until Tom's high pitched wails permeated the small grubby house, knowing as they did that when the cries eventually pierced the drunken ears of their father the baby would receive another slap.

"Leave him alone can't you?" Eliza Candlish entered the room silently, her dirt ingrained face red with the exertion of pummeling the washing she took in to help make ends meet and which she'd done all her married life since her husband was too fond of his tankard of ale and was therefore unable to keep a job for any sustainable length of time. When she was young and still in love she would cajole him to find work but over the years and many babies later, he became handy with his fists and Eliza learned to keep quiet.

Crafty Arthur stepped back at once. "I didn't touch him, ma."

"Silas! I might have known," she stretched out a hand and cuffed her unlucky son sharply across the head. She wiped her hands wearily on her well-worn apron. "How many times do I have to tell you to leave the poor mite alone? He's only a baby, barely born, and already black and blue from your wicked little hands."

Silas rubbed the back of his head where his mother's slap still lingered. "Not fair ma," he whined "Arthur was –"

But Arthur was long gone.

"Since you're here," his mother went on "you can run down and fetch your father."

This was the daily chore they all hated and strived to avoid for pulling Peter Candlish from the beer taps of the *Sailors Rest* public house was

more than their young lives were worth. "Ah ma, can't Martha go?" Silas was almost in tears.

"Martha has Tom to look after when she gets back from work," Eliza returned shortly. "Now get yourself down that road or you'll feel the back of my hand again." She lifted a heavy arm menacingly which had the effect of propelling eight-year-old Silas down the street to the docks and to his father's second home.

"Silas! Silas! Come back," his mother screeched.

Turning reluctantly the boy trudged back towards the house. She fumbled in the pocket of her apron and withdrew a filthy coin. "Bring a pot of ale for me son," she said almost coyly "for your ma needs some strength herself tonight."

Silas took the coin and signed heavily. His rumbling belly made him hope Martha had good pickings from the table of the big house for there would be scant portions on their own tonight.

Meanwhile the eldest Candlish child, thirteen-year-old Martha arrived home from her work as scullery maid at the house of Captain and Mrs Trent. Small for her age, Martha struggled with the heavy work inside the house and when she came home the last thing she wanted to do was baby-sit for baby Tom. Rubbing her tired eyes she entered the house quietly. Tom lay in his crib and by the look and smell of him, he'd lain there all day. The other children were probably out in the streets or down at the docks fetching and carrying for the sailors and spending any farthings thus earned quickly thereby avoiding their mother's searching hands when they went home. Eliza moved around the scullery pointlessly for they both knew she had nothing to cook and her greedy eyes raked over her daughter looking for the parcel wrapped in newspaper which would mean leftover rack of lamb or perhaps a good beef stew from la-di-da Mrs Trent's table but today Martha's thin arms were empty. "Sorry ma," she said.

"Oh ho! So the appetites at the big house have grown, have they?" Eliza advanced menacingly "or have you stuffed your greedy mouth on the way home? You've done it before, girl." Her hand crashed down hard on Martha's ears, already stinging from the ever-present sharp wind of the quays.

"Aw ma!" Martha covered her head with small chapped hands "that was only once, a tiny piece of ham and I was hungry -"

"Enough out of you, you thieving beggar." Eliza's blows rained down and Martha knew they wouldn't stop until her mother tired or Martha herself unconscious to the floor.

When Martha came to she was lying on the filthy flags in the kitchen where she fell and she heard Tom's screams from very far away. She struggled to pull herself to full consciousness and dragged herself to her feet. Cautiously she pushed the rough wooden door and passed into the family's living quarters. Da lay oblivious to all snoring soundly on the recess bed and Ma lolled beside him, one arm flung out to the side. Arthur and Silas huddled under a threadbare blanket together with their younger brother, two-year-old Joe, who lay with his eyes tightly shut as if willing sleep to come. The girls, Rose and

Bessie, lay together shivering in the chill autumn night. And Tom – oh, there was Tom lying where he'd no doubt lain all the long day in his filthy cot too tired and hungry now to scream. Martha picked her way through the sleepers and picked him up. The baby nestled into her warmth at once and the human contact gave him strength again to cry. Quickly she moved across to her drunken mother and with deftness – for she had done this many times before – she unleashed the mottled melon that was Eliza's breast and he latched on quickly. The sound of his frantic feeding split the silence and Martha held her breath lest he waken Da but Peter Candlish snored on and for this small mercy Martha gave silent thanks to God.

Sated, Tom's unfocused eyes roamed the room and Martha wondered – not for the first time – what he saw there. “What do you see, little man?” she whispered. The baby regarded her seriously and his stare was so intense Martha believed he was really trying to tell her. “I hope you see nice things,” she went on “for there will be time enough for you to know how life really is for people like us.” She held her brother close and felt the stronger for it. “Ah Tommy, you are a strange little one but I love you all the same.” Ignoring the pangs in her belly, Martha took Tom into a corner and covered them both as best she could with the remaining rags and they lay together with Martha softly stroking his downy head until the weak morning sunlight pervaded the grimy window, and all the while she wondered about the invisible things her brother could see.

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“Wait for me!” Seven-year-old Tom wailed, tailing his brothers doggedly along the narrow harbour streets.

“Faster Silas and we’ll lose him,” Arthur muttered.

Silas looked back. “He won’t know how to get home.”

“We’re not havin’ him,” Arthur declared. “Bugger off Tom,” he called.

“No!” the younger boy replied, his small legs pumping frantically to shorten the gap between his brothers and himself. “I’m coming with you.”

“You bloody well are not! Right Silas – run!” Arthur was away with Silas at his heels and soon they were swallowed by narrow lanes and alleys.

Alone, Tom stopped and rubbed his eyes. “Arthur!” he called uncertainly “Silas! Please come back! I don’t know the way home,” he realized sadly for although familiar with the harbour, the wicked boys had led him in a complicated dance and Tom had totally lost his bearings. Why did they hate him so? The child shook his head sadly and wandered on, trying not to notice the onset of darkness and the frightening shapes of the buildings looming over his head. A creaking noise stopped him in his tracks. He looked up and saw it was the sign of the *Sailors Rest* swinging gently in the evening breeze. The *Sailors Rest*! Perhaps Da would be in there and he could take him home. He thought again. He’d seen his brothers receive many a hefty cuff for trying to remove Da from his ale. No, he thought, better to wait outside until Da came out and if he looked in a black mood, well then Tom would simply follow him home and he’d be so quiet Da wouldn’t even know he was there. He nodded to himself, this seemed the best thing to do and he settled down to wait.

But it was winter and it was cold. Tom shivered in his thin breeches and wished that, like Arthur and Silas he too could have boots, but as Ma was always saying boots were for those who brought coin into the house and Tom, always small for his age, hadn’t yet been successful in his efforts to gain employment. He remembered the stout coalman’s face when Tom approached him for work. “I carry coal heavier than you boy,” the man said kindly and Tom moved away quickly, his face red with anger. He ran away fast as he could but the

taunts of Arthur still reached him. “Seven years old and still a runt! No good for anything, are you Tom?”

“You’re a baby!” Silas chimed “who’d give you work?” Screeching with glee the brothers sauntered away and Tom hid in the coalhouse for two days after that. Given that their coalhouse was almost always empty it seemed to Tom to be the best place to hide when he had to get away to think about things. And Tom thought about things a lot. Too much Ma said, too much thinking was bad for a boy and Da rarely noticed him and when he did it was to give him a cuff for being useless, Tom found it best to avoid his father whenever possible and now here he was, sitting outside waiting for him.

The child shivered badly. His belly, always empty, grumbled ferociously and he looked around quickly to see if anyone had heard but the streets were empty. It was the hour when decent folk were at home with their families and the others – like Da – were already settled in their taverns for the night. Tom knew it would be a long time before Da came out. In an effort to keep warm, he imagined he was in the coalhouse which he’d managed to make quite cosy with a few rags and a one-legged toy soldier he’d found on the quay. It was his secret hiding place and the only one who knew about it was Martha and that was only because she’d been out looking for him when he’d disappeared following his latest rejection by the coalman. “Come on inside Tommy,” she’d whispered “this place is filthy. Ma would have a fit if she knew.”

“No,” he replied firmly, crossing his arms over his thin chest “it’s nice here Martha, it’s quiet and peaceful and – well, I can see the angels here,” he finished seriously.

“Oh Tom,” Martha sighed “you are seven years old now and much too big to still believe in angels, and you know that talk upsets Ma.”

“Yes. That’s why I like it here,” he replied reasonably and Martha, shaking her head, promised to smuggle some food out to him.

“What do they angels say?” Martha asked some hours later as she crept to the coalhouse with a tin plate of cold steamed fish and bread. Tom fell upon the food, shovelling it into his mouth and speaking at the same time. Oh, how he loved to talk about the angels but usually when he tried to people either laughed at him or got angry or sometimes both. “They don’t always speak,” he said.

“Then what do they do?”

“They just – are.”

“They are what?”

“Just being angels, I suppose. But if I’m sad they make me feel happy.”

“How do they do that?” Martha loved Tom dearly and to see his little face so excited made her happy too.

“Well,” the child replied slowly “they sometimes sing songs, or dance or just fly about.”

“Inside this coalhouse angels fly about?”

Tom nodded. He licked the plate clean and handed it back to his sister.

“But isn’t it too small in here for flying?”

“Yes,” he agreed “but they still do it.”

Martha hugged him tightly and made her way back to the house still shaking her head, but life was hard she knew and if angels made Tom’s that little bit easier then she was of no mind to tear apart his dreams for life, she was sure, would do that for him soon enough.

Tom wondered if the angels would come to him now. He closed his eyes and thought of the very brightest angel and imagined he was standing with Tom on the street. Nothing happened. Perhaps angels don’t like this place he thought, perhaps they like coalhouses better. A raucous shout from inside the *Sailors Rest* made him start and he shrunk into the shadows as a man and a woman swayed out into the street. Tom held his breath until the lumbering figures slowly disappeared from view and taking their noise with them. Then he saw him. The angel. He appeared very close to Tom who suddenly wished very much that Martha was here to see him.

Hello Tom.

Hello angel.

What are you doing here?

I’m waitin’ for Da.

You have been waiting for a very long time. Are you cold?

Yes, but I know you don’t feel cold - or hot either.

That is true Tom. Angels are not affected by climate as humans are.

Would you like to go home? I can tell you are very hungry.

I’m lost. Arthur and Silas, they –

I know. Would you like me to take you home?

Oh yes please! But do you know the way?

I know the way, Tom. Just follow me.

When Tom arrived home he’d missed the evening meal. There was no food in the scullery although he looked in all Ma’s hiding places. Martha sat in a corner darning stocking that were now more darn than that stocking and her face lit up when she saw him. “Tom!” she cried “where have you been?”

“I was lost,” he explained “but then the angel came and brought me home. You should have seen him Martha, he knows all the streets an’ all the places –“

“Ssh,” his sister cautioned “you can tell me all about it later,” she gestured to Ma who lay on the bed in a stupor. “Are you hungry?”

“Always,” he leapt on her, all bony elbows and knees.

“Get off Tom!” she cried but he knew his sister could never be angry with him. Together they crept to the scullery where Martha deftly lifted one of the cracked flagstones to reveal some of the cold mutton she’d brought in earlier.

“This is a new secret place,” Tom enthused, his cheeks bulging with food “so good even Ma doesn’t know about it yet!”

“Now tell me about the angel, but you must do it quietly and we must be asleep when Da gets in,” Martha cautioned.

So they huddled together in the corner with a lice-ridden blanket across their chests and Tom told his sister all about the angels.

“That’s quite a story,” Martha whispered when Tom had finished.
“It’s not a story,” he insisted “it’s real Martha.”
She stroked his dark curls fondly. “Course it is Tom.”
“It is,” he insisted angrily “and the angel says it’s very bad to tell lies.”
“Well that’s true,” she had to agree.
“Martha?” he snuggled up to her sleepily.
“Do you think Da and Ma will let me go to school?”
Martha blinked. Tom came out with the strangest things sometimes.
“I don’t know,” she replied carefully “but you know they expect us to be earning, not learning Tom.”
“I know,” he said miserably “but I don’t seem to be any good at getting a job.”
She ruffled his hair kindly. “You will.”
“It’s because I’m small, I think.”
“You’ll grow Tom.”
“But you’re small too Martha,” Tom observed.
“Yes I am, and I got a job didn’t I?”
“But you get tired Martha.”
“Oh, don’t be such a worry-wart Tommy. I’m fine – and you will be too. And remember how lucky you are because you have the angels to look after you.”
“They look after you too, you know,” Tom replied before falling into an exhausted sleep.

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“I’ll hear no more about it!” Peter Candlish roared. “Goin’ to school indeed,” his fierce brown eyes fixed on his youngest son menacingly and Tom had the startled look of a rabbit caught in a shaft of bright light. He was terrified yet something compelled him to speak out despite his sister’s advice to the contrary. “Da, if I go to school I’ll get a good job –” He was silenced by a slap to the head.
“Are you so special you want to go to school when working is good enough for every other bugger in this family?” Another slap.
“No Da,” Tom whined “I just meant –”
“Oh shut up son, do. ” Unusually, the maternal feelings of Eliza came to the fore as she saw Peter work himself into a rage which would be the worse for the boy, but her selfish heart also knew that, once roused, her husband’s temper had a habit of backlashing on to herself. “He – he doesn’t know what he’s saying Peter,” she said quickly “get up Tom, stop snivelling there. Get out of your Da’s sight.” Tom needed telling only once and he scampered off. Eliza turned to Peter, sickly sweet. “Ah Peter,” she crooned “don’t let the boy upset you so.” She wound her lumpen body around his as enticingly as she could manage. “Come with me,” she went on, leading him towards the bed “I know how to take your black mood away.”
Like a large animal Peter, his mind befuddled by the years of abuse alcohol had inflicted, allowed himself to lie on the bed and accept her ministrations, all the while imagining his fat wife to be Nellie, the barmaid of the *Sailors Rest*.

