

## The Coat That Didn't Fit

Oh, how Thomas wished the black overcoat fit. Thomas wished for many things, but the coat was his number one. It was Papa's, so naturally it would pass to him when he was of age. Papa wore his black overcoat everyday that winter, and many a winter before. But it wasn't until the autumn of 1940 when everything changed.

Thomas had inherited the overcoat much sooner than he expected, but how he wished he hadn't. The strange business-like letter, Mama's tears and Papa's new coat only meant one thing—Papa was leaving.

Thomas remembered clearly as his father buttoned the oversized coat securely, the sleeves ran three inches past his wrists, the well-formed shoulders drooping as it was set on the young boy's narrow ones, and the hem reaching his calves. This coat was meant for a man, not a boy. But despite the laughable scene, Papa placed his hands firmly on Thomas's shoulders and smiled. "Take care of my coat while I'm gone, eh?"

"Yes, sir," Thomas replied.

"Watch out for your mama and Rose?"

"I will, sir," Thomas promised, saluting like he had often seen Papa do.

The train's whistle rang through the smoke polluted train station, and Papa turned his head sharply towards his transport and proceeded to climb aboard, glancing at his infant daughter Rose, his wife's tearstreaked face, and his son wearing the over-sized overcoat proudly.

"I'll be back, Tommy. I'll be home so I can see you grow into it one day," Papa winked.

Thomas nodded a small smile touching his lips. "Yes, Papa."

Thomas watched as Papa climbed aboard and waved one final time.

When the train's whistle and ruckus of the moving tracks subsided, they began to travel home to their small house in London. Thomas wore the coat every day since that chilly fall afternoon. He wore it to bed, he wore it to breakfast, he wore it to school, and he wore it to dinner. After a bath, he would

proceed to button it just the way Papa had. After a week or two, Mama had tried to coax him to wear his brown duffle coat that fit him superior, but Thomas was insistent. He would continue to wear it until Papa's return.

But Papa did not return—and the coat still didn't fit.

“Papa has to come back!” Thomas would yell. “He promised!”

But as November rolled by, and Christmas passed without Papa, Thomas began to doubt his own words. He knew in his heart the inevitable.

But if Papa promised to return to see Thomas grow up, then Thomas would keep his promise of watching over Rose and Mama.

Thomas still clutched a thread of hope that he would, but that thread became thinner by the gray bitter winds of winter and the swastika painted skies that became too familiar about London.

It was the bombs that originally fueled Papa's need to leave, but what Thomas wished he realized was that they needed him with them. All he left him was his black overcoat. It still didn't fit, but it was warm. Warm enough to keep Thomas and Rose alive. Warm enough to scamper about the streets of crippled London in hopes to find something edible.

Thomas ventured outside many times, often with a can of beans or a jar of preserves he had discovered in their demolished home. But it wasn't until that one fateful morning when he returned home.

He thrust the shelter door open just like any other day, but ceased when seeing his Mama's tearstreaked face, a bundle pressed closely to her chest.

Thomas peered over to catch a glimpse of Rose's face—white as snow.

He scampered down the stairs tearing off the oversize coat and draping it over the infant.

“You have to stay, Rose,” Thomas whispered. “Papa will want to see you when he comes back.”

But Rose didn't stay.

Thomas took comfort in knowing Papa was having a joyful reunion with her in heaven, because Thomas broke his promise, and Papa had broken his.

“Must God be so cruel?” Mama had wept, clutching her child’s corpse and throwing the coat across the floor as if the mere sight of it stirred her bitterness.

“We have to have hope, Mama,” Thomas whispered, tears of his own threatening to spill. But as Thomas spoke those words, he realized he didn’t know the meaning of them. Why have hope in something you know to be fruitless in the end?

He hoped all those months for Papa’s return, knowing he had likely been killed in battle. Hoping for something so unlikely was merely ridiculous from an outsider’s view. Hope was simply an illusion.

And why, thought Thomas, would I believe in something I know to be a lie?

In that moment he realized, as he lay wrapped in his coat with tears streaming down his face, that he wasn’t hoping for Papa’s return, only that he hoped that God knew what he was doing.

God knew Papa’s promise, yet He took him anyway. He knew they loved Rose, and he took her suddenly and so young.

“Mama,” Thomas cried, his tears finally spilling. “If God didn’t take Papa, I never would have learned how to fit in this coat, and I do now.”

Thomas wore his overcoat when he thrust his shovel into the ground, scarping against the harsh ice and bitter snow, and soon placing Rose’s little coffin inside the dark hole.

He wore his coat when Mama became sick. He wore it when he searched for a doctor. He wore it when Mr. Henderson next door helped him bury Mama next to her child.

He wore it when the snow melted, and when the flowers began to spring happily from the ground.

He wore it as nights of calm, and nights of bombs passed. He wore it, he held on, because that was what hoping and believing required, and eventually, slowly but surely, the coat began to fit.

When it became too warm, he always carried the overcoat over his shoulder to visit Mama and Rose and bring the newspaper and read them aloud, as if Mama and Rose could hear him. Sometimes he would carry a hashed edition of *The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn* under his arm and read a chapter or two to Rose. She would’ve liked it, Thomas thought.

A year or two passed, and though the black overcoat was still a bit large, Thomas carried it with him everywhere, resuming with his daily visits to Mama and Rose.

He only wished Papa was laid next to them, Thomas would've liked to visit and read to him as well.

"The war may be ending soon, Mama," Thomas said, unfolding a hammered newspaper.

He sat in his usual spot and began to read the first heading. So invested in his reading, he didn't notice the crunch of boots behind him, nor did he turn around to discover who it was.

It was only when a hand settled on his shoulder did he turn around, his eyes wide and full of tears at who it was.

Papa smiled. "I told you I would see you grow into that coat."