

Fanny

Cynthia Ehrenkrantz

“I’m going over to Betsy’s.” Mama says, stabbing a hatpin through the rusty black felt of her hat and placing it squarely on top of her head.

“Fanny, do the washing up and see that they don’t get into trouble.” She glances over to Rose and Goody, bent over homework at the kitchen table. Tilly is drawing circles on a piece of paper, imitating her brother and sister. She’s only five and not yet in school.

I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

Without looking back, Rivke leaves, her heavy tread thudding along the corridor.

Fanny sighs. The dishes haven’t been washed since yesterday afternoon for the Sabbath is a true day of rest for her mother. Rivke sleeps late every Saturday while Sol and Fanny’s brother Goody go to synagogue. She’s spent Thursday and Friday morning scrubbing, polishing, chopping and cooking and now it’s Saturday evening. Plates and greasy pans are piled high on the draining board and in the sink. The chicken soup pot stands on the stove next to the cholent pan, crusted with the remnants of dried beans.

Fanny puts water on to boil, readying two enamel bowls in the sink: one for washing, the other for rinsing, and she starts scraping dishes into the bin. A few bits of potato are stuck to the bottom of the roasting pan and there’s some stewed beef left over from lunch. Just a few crumbs really. She takes a slice of rye bread, spreads it with chicken fat from the crock next to the stove and puts the left overs on it, stuffing the sandwich into her mouth and gulping it down fast. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, hoping none of the others will come into the scullery and see her.

The three older children will be no bother. It’s baby Milly, toddling around the kitchen, who will need watching. She wishes Mama had taken her but it’ll soon be her bedtime, too late to take her visiting. At this very moment she’s pulling on the tablecloth and she can hear Rose saying, “Stop it Milly. Go play somewhere else.”

Rose has finished her homework. She takes a sheet of newspaper and folds it into a hat for Tilly. Tilly drags a chair towards the fireplace, climbs on it and admires herself

in the mirror above the mantel. Seeing the hat, Milly is distracted from her play and stretches her arms up towards it.

“Mine. Mine.” she whines.

“You can’t have it.” Tilly says and runs out to the corridor, climbs the stairs and sits on the topmost step chanting

“I’m the king of the castle. Get down you dirty rascal.”

Milly, unable to negotiate the stairs, plunks herself down on the floor and wails.

Fanny slogs through the pile of dishes. She’s fourteen and she left school two months before to work as an apprentice dressmaker in Debenham’s Department Store. At the end of the day, her back aches from leaning over her needlework, making sure that all the stitches are small and even. The other workroom girls are all around her age.

They’re friendly and they’d asked her to go out with them this evening; but Mama And Papa don’t want her to join these new friends. They’re afraid that the girls are “fast” and they made her stay home. That’s why she’s bending over the sink now, her hands getting chapped from the cold rinsing water, wishing she could be at the cinema And Milly is such a handful. Even now, she’s screeching at the foot of the stairs.

“C’mon Milly, let’s find something to play with.” she calls. Milly comes in from the corridor as Fanny wipes her hands on her apron. She gives Milly a couple of saucepans, a lid and a spoon. Milly bangs on them, shrieking with joy.

Milly soon tires of the game and starts to pull on her ear and suck her thumb so Fanny lays her in the cradle next to the fireplace and begins rocking her to sleep but she doesn’t seem to be tired any more and she insists on sitting up. Enjoying the rocking motion, she begs for “More. More.” Fanny opens a book and starts to read, pushing the cradle with her foot; but the motion is too gentle for Milly’s liking. “More. More.” she insists, rocking herself from side to side, making the cradle shake violently. Fanny is so tired. She rocks the cradle with her foot and her eyes start to close.

A loud crash makes her stomach lurch and she sits bolt upright. Milly lies on the floor, ominously quiet. She’s thrown herself out of the cradle and hit her head on the brass fender surrounding the hearth. Rose and Goody leap to their feet and Tilly runs in from the hallway. They all stand around the seemingly lifeless figure of the baby on the floor.

“Oh my God.” Fanny says as she gathers Milly into her arms and tries to shake her awake. “Rosie. Fetch some water, quick.” Rose brings a glass of water and Fanny sprinkles a few drops on Milly’s face. Time seems to stand still until Milly opens her eyes and begins to whimper. Fanny feels the side of her head where a lump is starting to form under her curly black hair. She finds a stick of barley sugar and shoves it into Milly’s mouth. Milly seems to be placated and then, all of a sudden, she falls asleep. Fanny lays her gently in the cradle.

The other three children look up at her.

“Promise not to tell Mama.” she says. The trio look doubtful.

“Promise not to tell and I’ll give you a penny.” she says. She digs into the new beaded purse, bought with her first week’s paycheck and hands out three pennies, one for each of them.

The next morning, Milly sleeps uncharacteristically late and Rivke has to shake her awake. She clings to her mother’s skirt and cries. Rivke offers her cereal but she pushes the spoon away, shakes her head from side to side and vomits. Rivke feels her forehead. It’s damp and clammy and she looks pale. She lies on the floor, banging her head with her fist and whimpering. Rivke sits in the rocking chair, holding her close but nothing comforts her. She cries herself to sleep and Rivke lays her in the cradle. For the next three days, Milly cries, hits her head with her fist and takes unusually long naps.

On Wednesday morning, Rivke takes money out of the biscuit barrel on the sideboard and carries Milly down to Dr. Rubens’ office on the High Street. He examines her carefully.

“Look at this lump on her head.” he says. “She’s sleeping more than usual, you say? Banging her head with her fists? Vomiting? This baby’s had quite a concussion.” Milly is Rivke’s wildest child. She’s always getting into things but Rivke can’t remember any occasion when she hit her head.

“Ask the other children. Do you ever go out and leave her with the older ones? Perhaps something happened while you were gone.”

Rivke waits till Fanny comes home from work and she stands the four children in a row.

“The doctor thinks that Milly banged her head on something. Did anything happen to her when I was out.”

Fan is quick to answer.” Why do you ask that? She’s always hurting herself. Remember when she scalded herself with hot tea? And the time she got stuck under the sideboard? Four of us had to lift it so that you could pull her out. She’s so wild.”

Goody looks up at the ceiling. He never has to watch the baby. That’s a job for his sisters. The conversation doesn’t concern him. Rose stares straight ahead, chewing her lip. Tilly looks down at the floor.

Rivke hugs Milly close and starts to cry. “Please, please, children. The doctor says she’s hurt her head. Look.” She pulls back Milly’s hair. “See the bump? She’s sleeping all the time and you’ve seen the way she hits her head.”

Tilly looks at the tears streaming down her mother’s face and she takes a deep breath.

“Milly fell out of the cradle when you were out.” she bursts out. “She banged her head on the fender.”

Suddenly, Rivke turns on Fanny. “Look what you’ve done to your sister. If I’d known before, I would’ve taken her to the doctor. He might have been able to do something. What kind of a sister are you? Always thinking of yourself. Get out of here! Get out!”

Fanny turns on her heel and runs upstairs to the room she shares with her sisters. She catches sight of herself in the mirror: her flushed freckled face, hazel eyes, bright with tears, and wisps of sandy hair escaping from the bun on top of her head. She throws herself face down down the bed and sobs.

After a few minutes, she feels a hand pulling on her pinafore. Tilly creeps on to the bed and nestles beside her big sister.

“Don’t cry Fan. Please don’t cry. I spent my penny already so I thought it would be all right to tell. I still have some of the sweeties I bought with it though. Would you like one?” She takes a sticky lemon drop out of the pocket of her pinafore and presses it into Fan’s hand.

Fan puts her arm around the little girl and looks at her tear-stained face. She hugs Tilly and they fall asleep, clinging to one another.