

Mo and the Mine

Mo stood with the rest of his group by the folding metal doors. A bell rang, the doors clattered apart and Mo followed the other children into the small lift that would take them down the shaft into the old mine. With a jolt, the lift started on its journey and the children chattered as they slowly descended. After a few minutes, the lift stopped, the doors opened and the children filed out into a narrow stone tunnel dimly lit by dusty bulbs.

‘Hi, I’m Guy. Come with me,’ ordered a man wearing blue overalls and a plastic helmet. He set off briskly along the tunnel and the five children followed him. Suddenly, the bulbs flickered and the tunnel was plunged into darkness. Someone screamed.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Guy. ‘The generator has stopped but it’ll come back on soon. Hold hands and we’ll move into the next tunnel. The lights will be on there.’

Mo stood very still and held out his hands. However, instead of feeling the outstretched hand of one of his classmates, his fingers touched cold, damp rock. His heart thudded. He could hear the other children breathing and ... surely that was the sound of footsteps fading into the distance?

As quickly as the lights had gone out, they burst back to life. Mo blinked and looked around him. He was alone in the silent tunnel. He remembered Guy saying something about moving into the next tunnel. Certain that he could see a brighter glow ahead, he started to walk towards it. Turning a corner, Mo found himself alongside a set of metal tracks. A cart trundled into view. Sitting in the front was a man in a grubby white shirt. He jerked his head at Mo.

‘Come on lad. No good standing there. Got to get on with us work.’

Mo clambered up and sat behind him. The cart set off, jerking and clattering along the track. He could see men hacking at the rock walls with enormous picks and shovels whilst others carried buckets of rock and stone to waiting barrows. Some of the miners turned to look as the cart jolted past. They were young, Mo realised. Maybe no older than him.

Suddenly, the cart started to shake, there was a thunderous roar and the air filled with dust. The man in the cart looked over his shoulder at Mo, his face full of fear.

‘That’s a rockfall!’ he yelled over the noise. ‘There’ll be men trapped. We need to get ’em out.’ The cart pulled up in front of a wall of tumbled rocks. The man jumped from the cart and thrust a shovel into Mo’s hands.

‘Get shifting them stones lad!’

Mo stared at him. Since when did visiting an exhibition mean clearing an enormous pile of rocks? Perhaps it was a ‘hands-on’ exhibition? However, the man had turned to the wall and was throwing great boulders to one side. Mo decided to follow the man’s lead and started shovelling much smaller stones out of the way. They worked together until Mo’s throat was full of dust and sweat ran into his eyes. Exhausted, he wiped his face with his sleeve.

‘Ow!’ he exclaimed. He touched his cheek and his fingers came away covered in blood. Looking at his sleeve, he could see a little shiny object stuck in the fabric. He pulled it out. It was a small silver shovel. He pushed it into his pocket.

‘There you are,’ said a voice behind him. He turned to find Guy standing next to the cart. ‘Somehow we lost you during the power cut. Are you OK? I think you’ve scratched your face.’

Mo started to explain about the rescue but, when he looked for the man he’d been working with, he had disappeared. Mo climbed into the cart, puzzling over what had happened. Where had the man gone? Had they rescued the miners behind the wall of rock? After a couple of minutes, the cart rounded a corner and Mo saw the rest of his group sitting on benches in front of a man who was showing them picks, shovels, buckets and barrows. His eye was caught by a sparkle on the man’s jacket. It was a small silver shovel – just like the one that he had shoved into his pocket earlier. The man finished speaking.

‘Now - any questions?’ he said. Mo put up his hand.

‘What’s that shovel on your jacket?’ he asked. The man looked at him.

‘It were my great-grandfather’s,’ he explained. ‘It were given to him because he rescued ten miners from a collapsed tunnel. It were just him and his young mate that got them out. They were both given these silver shovels. They were the only ones ever made.’

‘Where’s the other one?’ Mo asked.

‘Over there,’ the old miner said, pointing at a display cabinet. ‘Come and have a look.’

Mo stood on tip-toe to look through the glass at another silver shovel resting on a blue velvet cushion.

‘And there were just two shovels?’ he asked. The man nodded at him.

Mo’s hand closed around the little shovel in his pocket.

Many years later, Mo stood in front of a group of children, telling the story of the rescue and showing them the small silver shovel in the display cabinet.

‘Were you there?’ a girl asked. Mo smiled.

‘Well, yes – and no,’ he said. The children scampered over to the interactive display, forgetting the grey-haired man who had been talking to them. Mo put his hand in his pocket, brought out the small silver shovel and smiled quietly to himself. ‘

‘Was I there? Who knows,’ he murmured.

