

## THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS CAME ON

by Ann Feetham

*Every effort has been made to contact the copyright holders. If anyone feels their copyright has been inadvertently infringed, please get in touch with me via the contact form on the website.*

BILLY ROLLED over lazily in the big iron bed. He opened one eye just enough to see the face of the wind-up alarm clock on the bedside table. “Oh my gosh! It’s 5:30!” He snatched his blue jeans off the bedpost and wiggled into them.

His nose twitched as the aroma of sizzling bacon drifted up the stairs. Grandma was already at the wood stove making breakfast.

Billy hoped Grandpa hadn’t left for the barn. He had promised that Billy could watch the workmen hook up the electricity if he got his chores done early.

It was 1946, and electricity wasn’t new to Billy. He and his parents had always had it in the city. Many farm families, however, still used gas lanterns and oil lamps to light their homes.

“Are they here yet?” Billy shouted as he bounded down the steps, pulling yesterday’s rumpled T-shirt over his head.

“Billy Boy, you are going to a fire? Slow down,” his Polish grandmother scolded.

“Grandma, have you forgotten? This is the day the electricians are coming. Tonight we’ll have electric lights! Just think, no more kerosene lamps to clean and fill with oil! No more wicks to trim!”

“I tell you I live sixty years without electricity. I keep living without it. Your grandpa, he can get the electricity, but I won’t use it.” Grandmother’s voice shook. Billy knew she was afraid.

“Sit down and eat,” she said. “You got plenty time.”

“But Grandpa said if I got my work done, I could watch the electricity being hooked up.”

“He left an hour ago,” Grandma said. “The cows couldn’t wait, and *he* could not wait. You help him in the field this morning. Then you can see the electricity men when they come down the road.”

“Great!” Billy grinned and lathered a piece of Grandma’s homemade bread with butter. He took a bite, jumped up, and headed for the door.

“Stay where you are, Billy Boy.” Grandma whirled around, shaking her spatula at him. “You got to bring the wood so I can do the wash.”

“After today you won’t need wood,” Billy said. “You can have a washing machine and electric iron, and Grandpa can have a radio.”

Grandma had to heat water in large kettles and scrub the clothes on a washboard. To iron, she heated flatirons on the wood stove. Each iron weighed about six pounds, and she held them with potholders because they got so hot.

After breakfast, Billy hauled in wood. Then he carried milk and eggs left over from breakfast down to the dirt-walled cellar, the coolest place on the farm.

The electricians arrived midmorning. When Billy and Grandpa got to the house at lunchtime, the men were running wires from the poles by the road to the house.

Grandma wrung her hands and wailed, “Those men—they drill the holes and fill the walls with electricity. It is going to kill us all.”

“No, Grandma, it won’t hurt us,” Billy tried to explain, but Grandmother wouldn’t listen.

Finally, she calmed down enough to stir the stew that would be their lunch, together with green onions from the garden, homemade bread, and butter that Grandma had made in an old wooden churn.

“Grandma, I’m going to get you an electric fan,” Billy said. “Then the kitchen won’t be so hot.”

“Don’t need that electricity blowing on me,” Grandma muttered, wiping perspiration from her brow with the back of her hand.

“Come on, Ma,” Grandpa teased. “It’s time we had some electric horsepower around here. With an electric motor, we can get water pumped into the house. Might even put in a bathroom with a big tub. Then you could take bubble baths like them rich city ladies.”

“Humph,” Grandma snorted.

The electricians worked all afternoon. By evening, a drop cord holding a bare bulb was suspended from the ceiling in each room.

No one mentioned the events of the day during supper. Afterwards, Grandpa and Billy went outside to sit underneath the apple tree. “Grandma still says she’ll never use electricity,” Billy sighed as he stretched out on the cool grass.

“You know why she’s afraid, don’t you?”

“Yes, it’s because lightning struck her house when she was a kid in Poland. She thinks electricity is like lightning. That doesn’t make sense,” Billy said.

“It does to your grandmother.” Grandpa chuckled and then grew serious. “I think secretly she wants electric lights, but she’s too stubborn to admit it. She’ll never flip that switch.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to do it for her,” Billy said.

Slowly, dusk turned to dark. “Billy Boy, time to come inside,” Grandma called from the back door.

Billy scrambled to his feet. “In a minute, Grandma. But come out here first. There’s something I want to show you by the road” Hearing her grumble softly, he persisted. “It’s important!”

She stepped outside, fanning herself with her apron. “Make it pretty snappy. I don’t have all this time to play games,” she fumed. Billy had to skip to keep up with her as she trotted down the gravel driveway.

“Close your eyes,” he said when they reached the dirt road.

“Billy Boy, I don’t feel —”

“*Please*, Grandma,” Billy begged.

She sighed and obeyed.

After a few seconds Billy said, “Now, look!”

Grandma opened her eyes. “I don’t see anything,” she said crossly.

“Just wait.”

In a few seconds a light flickered in the living room window.

“Billy!” she gasped.

“Wait,” he repeated.

Soon another light appeared, then another, and another, until the farmhouse was aglow.

“Your grandpa turned on the electricity!” Grandma’s voice was shrill.

“Well, you wouldn’t, and we had to show you there was nothing to fear. Grandpa said you’d be mad, but I told him you always say not to waste anything. Well, we’ve got electricity, and I don’t figure we should waste it.” Billy paused, unsure of how much more he should say.

After what seemed like a long time, Grandma chuckled. “it is a pretty picture, isn’t it, Billy Boy?”

“Sure is,” Billy agreed.

“Those electrician fellows. They say it’s safe?”

“Sure do.”

“Well, I’ll think on it,” Grandma said. Then, without warning, she took off toward the house. “And don’t you forget what I say, Billy Boy. Waste *is* a bad thing. Your grandpa forgets. Look at those lights. The old fool is using them all.”

Billy was glad it was dark and she couldn’t see the grin on his face. He also was glad that at last there was electricity on the farm.