

Sandal Prints on the Hearth

They huddled inside the storm door – two children in ragged, outgrown coats. “Any old papers, lady?” the boy asked.

The woman of the house was busy. She wanted to say no – until she looked down at their feet. Thin little sandals, sopped with sleet.

“Come in, and I’ll make you a cup of hot cocoa,” she said.

There was no conversation. Their soggy sandals left marks upon the hearthstone.

The woman served them cocoa and toast with jam to fortify them against the chill outside. While they ate, she went back into the kitchen and started working again on her household budget. The silence in the front room struck her, so she looked in.

The girl held the empty cup in her hands, looking at it. The boy asked in a low voice, “Lady, are you rich?”

“Am I rich? Mercy, no!” she replied, glancing at her shabby slipcovers.

The girl put her cup back in its saucer carefully. “Your cups match your saucers,” she said. Her voice sounded old, with a hunger that was not of the stomach.

The children left then, holding their bundles of papers against the wind. They hadn’t said thank you. They didn’t need to. They had done more than that.

Plain blue pottery cups and saucers. But they matched. The housewife tested the potatoes and stirred the gravy.

“Potatoes and gravy,” she thought, “a roof over our heads, my husband with a good, steady job. These things matched, too.”

She moved the chairs back from the fire and tidied the living room. The muddy prints of small sandals were still wet upon the hearth.

She let them be. “I want them there in case I ever forget again how very rich I am,” she said to herself.

