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Food for the Journey

Cecile Cary

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Food for the Journey

On late month Saturdays throughout the year,
fair skies or foul, the indigent come here,
an English village church in the Midwest,
a mid-size city, waking to complex.
Two superhighways meet, five rivers too,
logistics, that's the word that draws the crew:
portentous businessmen in dark gray suits,
brass from the Base, techs from new institutes
for research, traffickers in sex and drugs –
trade lures them all, high rollers and low thugs.
Regular folk and artists struggle on,
plus leaders of most faiths including none.

The parish hall on an appointed day:
I serve the lost who've stumbled on the way,
their meager monthly funds don't meet expenses,
they're grateful for the goods the State dispenses
though some will rail at each intrusive query
on household size and if indeed they're needy,
but my spot mostly offers what's been given
by congregations seeking paths to heaven
by buying toiletries the Food Bank won't
or clearing homes of stuff that they don't want.
Two items for each family. Tribulation,
for "that's not fair" and defeats expectation.
"One toothbrush for six kids," screams outraged Mom,
but if I give her more, those getting none
will gripe. Repeaters know that larger rations
will go to larger groups at later stations.
This table makes it possible to choose,
and like all choices, you may win or lose.
Israeli couscous or Norwegian roe,
hotel soaps from Lucerne to Lake Tahoe,
or take the tried and true like Reese's cups
and local snack, Mikesell's potato chips.

Three old black women come up to me now:
one weak, one strong, one sick -- they're in a row.
The first one, wan and worn, quakes to inquire
if she may have these chocolates for her share.

Hard-faced, strong-limbed, dressed all in black, the next
scoops up five boxes. Weakly, I protest.
Our mentor said we're not the food police
but need to keep some order to keep peace.
The last of three, this one can barely stand,
and her four grandkids soon get out of hand;
they've all been given suckers at the door,
the toddler runs, trips, chokes, falls to the floor;
our sexton, Carlos, lifts the wailing child.

Computers down, more waiting for the crowd.
A light-skinned guy approaching with a swagger,
to pass the time asks if I'd like to wager
which Prez. is on a hundred-dollar bill.
"I'm not a betting woman." He gets shrill,
"Why not?" "Don't like to lose," "You a smart lady."
He winks, explains the scam, and joins his buddy.
(I never bring cash to the pantry door,
for fear I might give all unto the poor.)
A leader chants a line that catches on;
they sing, "I'm gonna lay my burdens down."

Computers up, Jean-Paul is signed in first,
a Rwandan family's oldest, he's the best
at English, so works here for household needs,
is crucifer on Sundays, earns good grades,
and notes the signpost for the route to take.
Polite, he asks, "What did you do this week?"
"My writing group," He questions, "Is that fun?"
"If you like poems." He nods, then moves along.
A teen-age couple with a babe in arms.
has come North seeking work and found hard times.
I hand them all the baby food that's in --
the pink-cheeked infant's plump, but they are thin.
This Appalachian woman with shrewd eyes
likes my display: there might be some surprise.
A mix for crème brûlée? she's game to try it;
some Cajun breeding? she'll get fish and fry it.

White woman in a wheelchair sits alone
while an old man gets slips and gives her one.
He makes his rounds. She stands up slow -- so frail,
young, and confused, I think she's going to fall.
Javan, who's calling numbers, takes her arm
and guides her steps before she comes to harm

Her friend returns and makes some random choices.
They leave behind a hum of troubled voices.

Whatever road leads people to this place
a bond exists no matter age nor race:
The search to find some way, need to be fed,
and hunger for far more than daily bread.