

Cabbage Stew

William Griffith

I pulled my left arm from beneath the warm pile of blankets and coverlets. With small forefinger I touched the crystal-line sheet of ice that covered the small window above my bed. The contact was strange: along my arm the minute, pale hairs rose with the goose pimples; a queer trembling passed through my body; my small bed trembled; and the hairs on my head seemed to want to pull from their roots. I quickly put my arm back under the comforting warmth of the blankets and pressed my nose into the pillow.

A metallic clang made me turn my head toward the room. Before the iron mouth of the laundry-stove, mother was stooping, thrusting great chunks of wood through the little door. Her round face, serious with her task, became red from the reflected glare of the fiery insides of the tiny stove. The soft curling hair glistened and sparkled around her ruddy face. Mother gathered the warmth from the stove into herself, then closed the door. The cheering redness was gone—there was my mother's face, pale and sad, beautiful and loveable. The door next to the stove opened and Betty hurried into the room dressed only in her pink cotton petticoat and long cotton stockings. Next to Mother she seemed very small. Her bobbed hair fell about her face in straight lines. Mother ran her hand over Betty's hair and straightened the little kinks that had formed in it. Slowly Mother shook her head; sadness shone in the pale morning light.

Soon, from the stove, came the pleasant savory smell of oatmeal and the rich teasing aroma of coffee. Mother frowned at me; it was time for me to get up.

An hour later, Betty and I stepped out onto the ice-hidden stoop. The air was cold and stung our faces until they were red and shining. Betty's red coat was buttoned close around her chin; a yellow knitted muffler peeped out around the edges of the collar. Her hair was almost hidden by the orange stocking cap. She stooped over and, with yellow mittened hand, clicked the buttons on her brown rubber galoshes. Over the bright brass buttons of my black coat, I drew my hand in its grey woolen mitten; I was proud of my buttons. Then I reached up and turned the red stocking-cap down over my ears. Mother opened the door a small crack and called through: "Betty, don't you let Billy fall into the crick. Be careful!" Betty took my hand and we safely made it across the treacherous stoop. Then she let go

of my hand and started skipping across the frozen ground. Ridges, footprints that had frozen into solid caricature, made her exhibition, for that is what it was, a little difficult; she stumbled and fell. But she was up and off again, over the path and down the hill. I followed, running and stumbling. We were happy; we were very happy.

At Nellie's garden we made an important discovery. In the fall Nellie had neglected to pick one of her cabbages and there it was. True it was small, the leaves were broken and white, and it was frozen quite hard; but it was a discovery. Betty pulled a stake from the ground and knocked at the cabbage until it fell from its stalk. By then it was in a very sorry condition, but Betty tucked it under her arm and we continued along the path.

The creek was frozen; I could not have fallen in, not even if I had wanted to. Near the bank the ice was thin and white; here there had been little water. We shattered this thin ice and listened to the crinkle it made in the still air. Over the thicker ice we boldly made our way and climbed the hill on the other side.

In the trash-pile at the top of the hill we found a stewpan with a broken handle. Into this Betty broke up the cabbage leaves; the leaves tinkled in the metal pan. With two bricks she made a stove and set the cabbage there to boil. Occasionally she would stir the leaves round and round. The leaves would then again set up their merry clinking. I removed a mitten and quickly my hand was wrapped round with cold. I picked up a tiny clod of earth and broke it into our cabbage stew. "Pepper!" I pronounced. I put on the mitten and held it fast against my body.

I stood up and looked. It was a sunless day, a day of grey cloud shapes that filled the sky. Against the greyness, distant trees raised their naked limbs up from the ground as if loathe to touch it, while small scrub trees around us hovered close as if to capture warmth from the earth. Tall grey weeds, skeletons of goldenrod and thistle, stuck into the grey atmosphere; brittle nothings they were. Tiny houses in the grey distance let thin spirals of grey smoke into the air. The wind that was creeping over the fields reached with icy grey fingers.

I looked down at my sister who was stooping over our cabbage stew. From underneath her orange stocking cap her bobbed hair was sticking out in brown confusion. In her yellow muffler there was a small, unraveling hole. I knelt beside her and, bending low, turned and smiled into her eyes.