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Austerity

by Garf Collins

“I can’t believe this weather,” moaned Edith as she huddled closer to the meagre fire, “Last summer we had so much rain it ruined the wheat and caused bread rationing. Now this endless winter and coal is hard to get so we are freezing all the time.”

“Never mind Mum,” said her daughter Mary, “I’ve just finished unpicking this old jumper and I won’t start knitting the new one until I’ve made us a nice omelette. At least Grandad’s chickens are laying and we’ve still got some of the bacon ration.”

Mary wrapped her cardigan more tightly around her as she turned on the radio.

“This is the BBC Home service and here is tonight’s news. The Government is urging the Dockworker’s Union not to strike as this would further damage food supplies. Our forces in the East have been progressively demobilised but the Government says that it will still be some months before men essential to transport can return home.” They stared at the faded cloth over the loudspeaker of the pre-war radio as if at a physical announcer. *“The Ministry of Food has announced that owing to the destruction of many stocks of potatoes by frost, rationing of potatoes will be introduced next week.....”*

Mary knew her mother would have heard enough bad news so she turned off the bulletin and busied herself with preparing their meal while half hearing her mother’s complaints.

“That daft father of yours is stuck out there. Just missed out on the last war so he volunteers in this one.....We’re lucky that sister of yours married an American. We at least get the odd food parcel. Not much chance of that with you though...”

“It’s not much of a meal is it,” she continued as Mary put the omelette in front of her.

It was a familiar refrain and Mary was used to her mother’s ingratitude. After they had eaten she encouraged her to go to bed to keep warm while she caught up with some housework.

Some washing she had done for her grandfather had been frozen on the line in the yard. She brought it in and stood it stiffly in the corner of the room as a ghostly figure which she pretended was her father.

“Dad, I wish you would come home. Mum is getting worn down by the terrible conditions this winter and Grandad is not too well. Doreen is doing all right though. She got married to a GI and is now living in Texas. She won't be freezing.”

After a night in bed still wearing most of her clothes' Mary got up. She added her blankets to her mother's bed and encouraged her to stay there to keep warm. Mary brought a zinc tub in from the garden and started laboriously scrubbing her grandfather's thick garments. As she did so she thought wryly about her status in the family. It was almost as if austerity pleased her – it gave her the comfort of sacrifice.