



Firewood and Christmas Potatoes

Written by - Robin Carole
Illustrated by - Sally Fantasia
Cover by - Aimee Croteau

Firewood and Christmas Potatoes
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Dedication



Firewood and Christmas Potatoes is dedicated to my mother (Delia) and my grandmother (Momma), who embraced life and all its challenges. You cherished family and taught us your three treasured precepts: hard



times means hard work, charity begins at home, and sometimes the only Bible people read is you.



This story is also dedicated to my brothers: Allen, Richard, Bing and Jules. The memories may fade with time, but the love and unity we share will always remain—a band of five that will not be broken . . . no matter where we are.



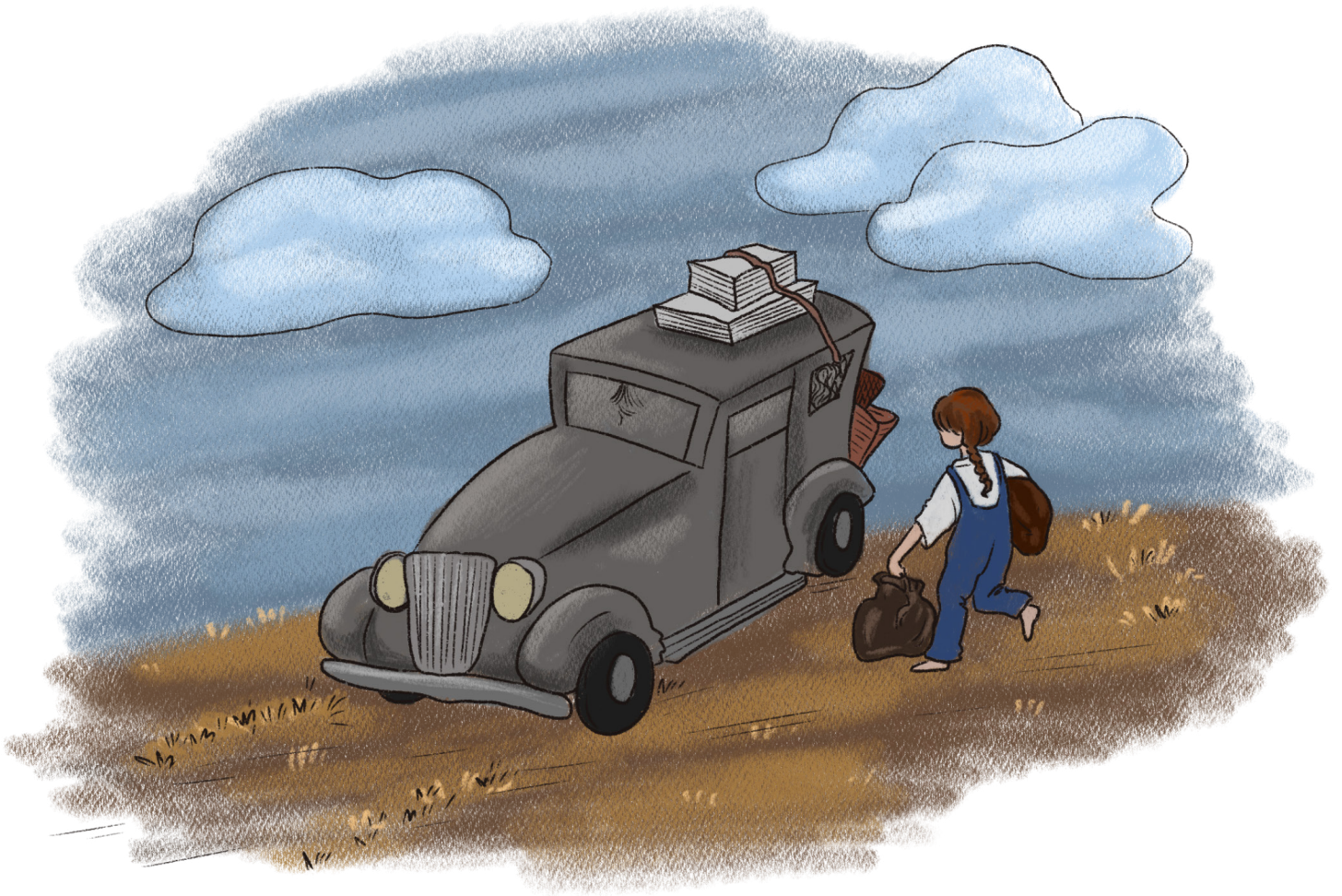
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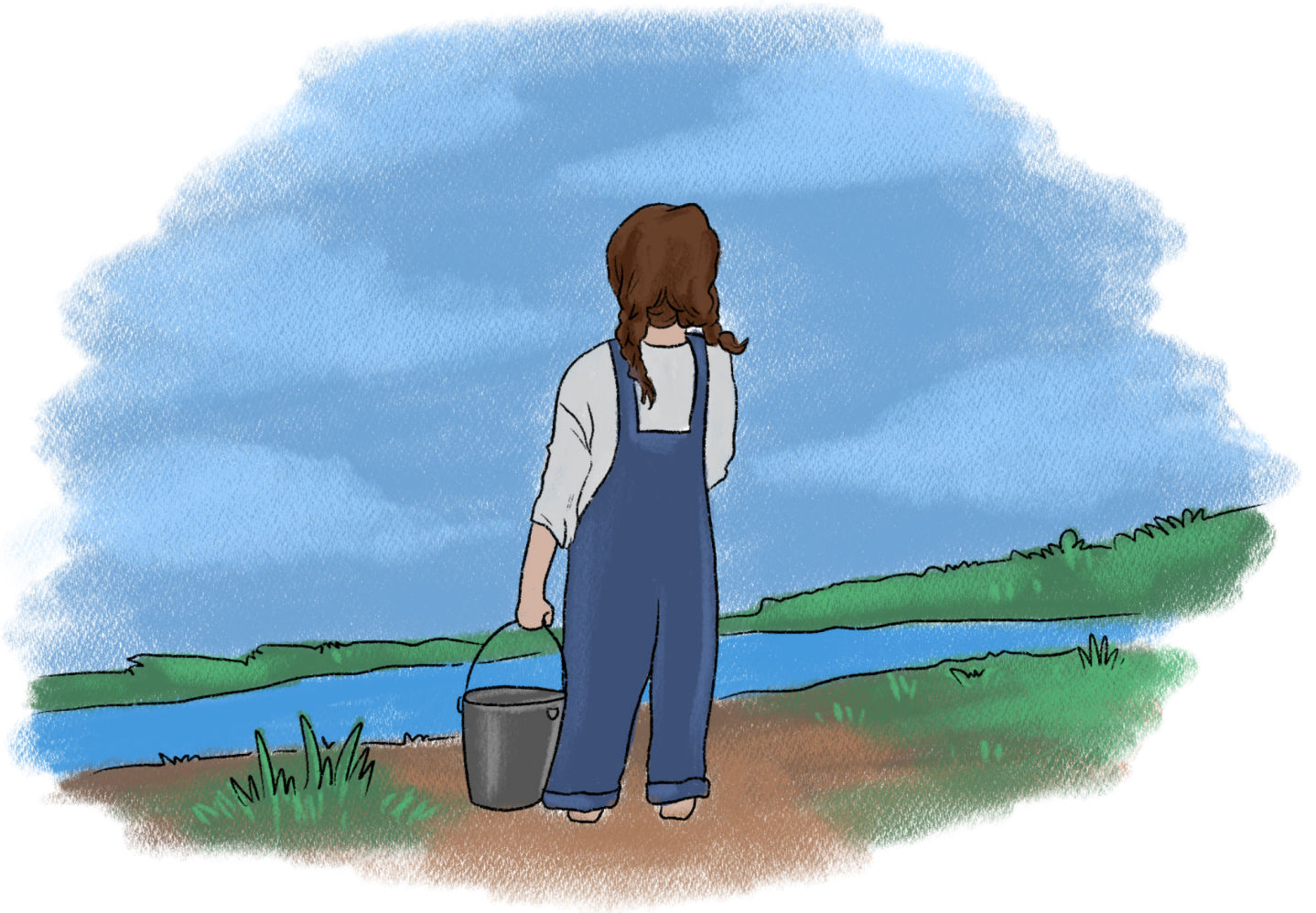
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To my wonderful family for your ongoing encouragement, story illustrator Sally Fantasia, cover design artist Aimee Croteau, my family & friends who read the story and shared their feedback, the Dewey “*Old Guard*,” and the publishing team at MindStir Media for making my dream into a book you can hold and read!

Momma was a simple woman who knew the meaning of hard times and hard work. During the years of the Great Depression, Momma packed our sparse belongings, along with all five of us children, and left the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma to find work in California.



We traveled to a farm labor camp near a town called Visalia in the Central Valley of California. Families with several children were assigned to the larger steel cabins, the largest measuring 12x16 feet. We were allowed to settle in two cabins. Momma used one cabin for cooking and the other for sleeping. There was no running water or electricity. When Momma started supper, she sent me outside with a worn metal bucket to collect water from the irrigation ditch that flowed behind us. I cautiously knelt and filled the bobbing pail with the murky water. I slowly backed away and firmly gripped the thin handle with both hands, trying not to spill it as I retraced my steps to the cabin. I watched as Momma boiled the water on the wood-burning stove, so it would be safe to use for cooking that evening's meal.



After we finished dinner, it was time for bathing. Momma stayed behind with Baby Ira while my sisters and I strolled to the center of camp to bathe. The water on a warm summer's night felt good against my skin. My sister, Opal, would always start a water fight, while Frances ensured our youngest sister, Gert was squeaky clean for Momma's inspection.

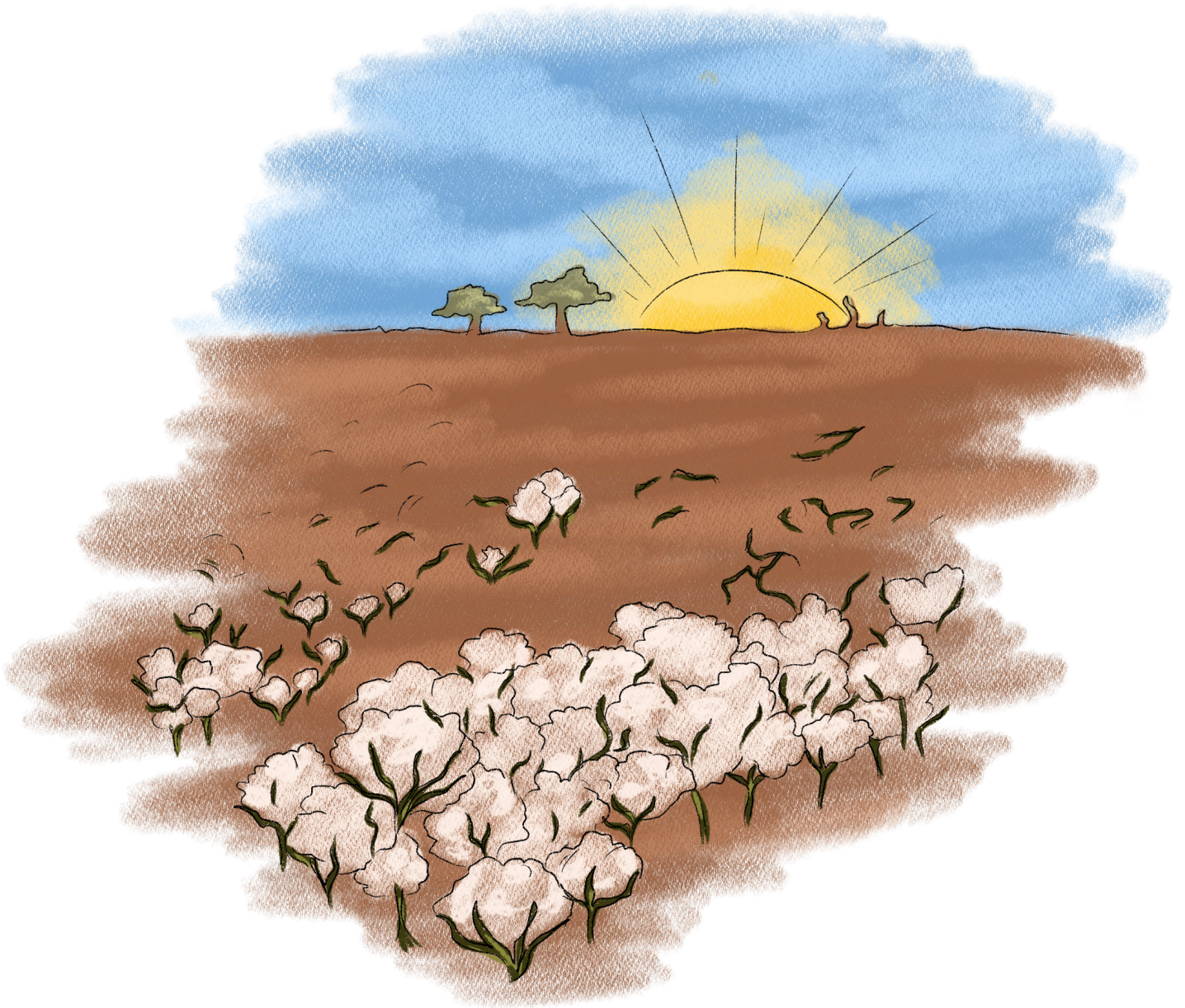


By the time we returned to the cabin, Momma had pulled back the covers on our cots. On hot days that continued into the night, it was impossible to sleep. Momma took the top sheet off our cots and soaked it in a rusty washtub full of cool water. I held one end of the dripping sheet and Momma clenched the other. We twisted it round and round, removing the excess water.

Momma tossed the dampened sheet over us; it felt like a spring shower. We soon drifted to sleep under its soothing caress.



Momma was a skilled farmhand. She found work in the cotton fields and labored alongside others, all trying to provide for their families. The pickers toiled under the sizzling California sun, harvesting the snowy puffs that had split open from inside the boll. Momma was one of the fastest pickers working in the fields. She could pick a hundred pounds of cotton in a single day, which paid a whole dollar. Once the cotton was picked and weighed, it was sent to be ginned and pressed into bales.



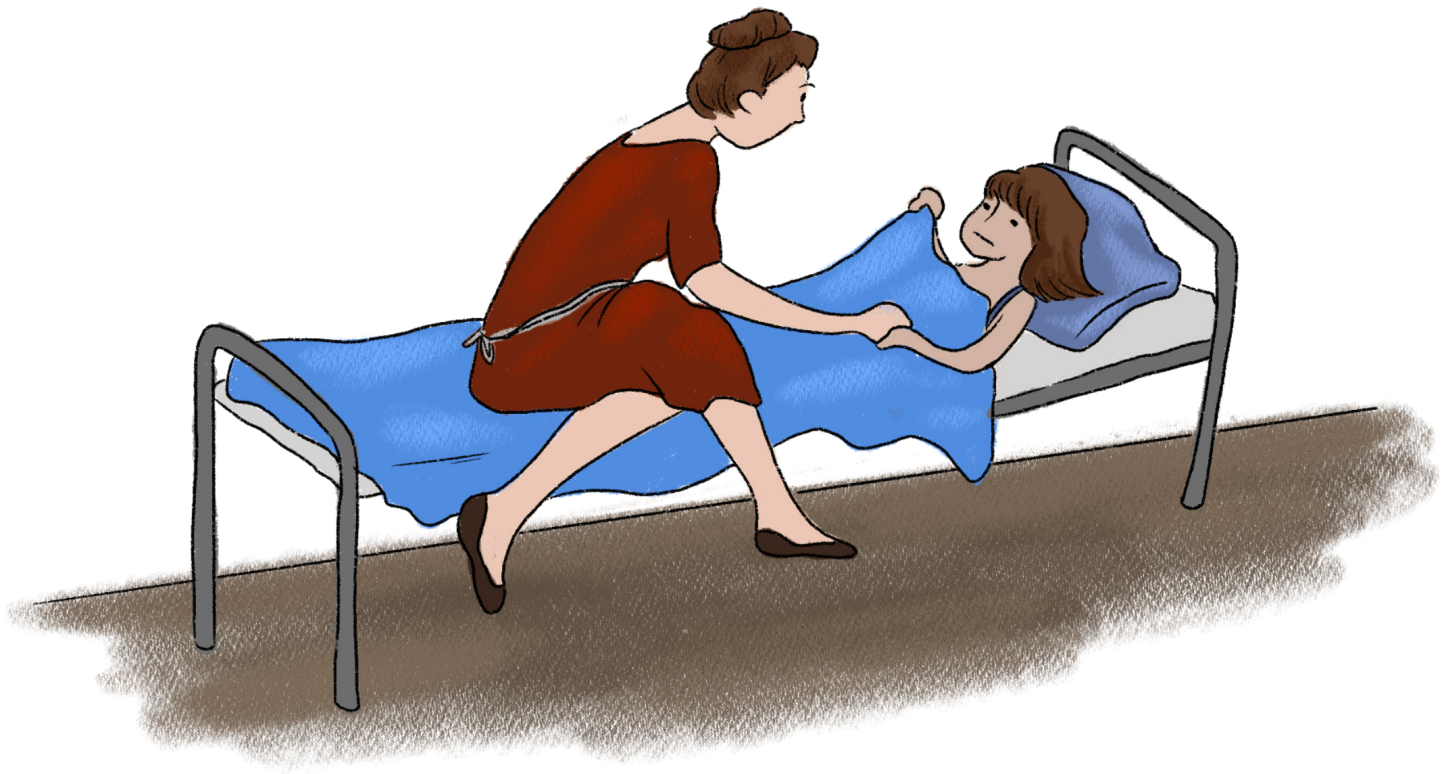
At the end of the long blistering workday, Momma trudged home to the camp. Her face and arms were caked with dirt that had hardened from sweat. She dipped her hands in water, trying to dull the sting from the cotton's thorn-like claws that scratched and tore her skin. I asked Momma if her hands hurt. She looked at me and calmly replied, "Delia, the good Lord tells us that whatever our hands find to do, we are to do it with all our might."



Summer was ending, and school was soon to start. Momma washed my only dress and hung it on a line to dry.



The night before the first day of school, Momma reminded me that even though we were poor, it did not mean we were different. “Delia, we are all the same in God’s eyes.” But it wasn’t God’s eyes that troubled me . . . it was the local town girls who had tongues that could slice your soul with a single word. Augusta Mae (Gussie for short) called me an Okie. Momma said to pay no mind to her. “We all put our pants on the same way, Delia, one leg at a time, and that includes Gussie Mae.” Momma was not an educated woman, but she had a Godly wisdom that could be stacked against any preacher.



Early the next morning, I stepped out of the cabin to leave for school. As my bare feet touched the dirt, Momma could see I was nervous. She anchored her callused hands upon my slouched shoulders and whispered, “Delia, everyone needs to know they are loved, and when you share your love with others, you will feel better about yourself.” While I journeyed to school that clear September morning, Momma’s words rang in my ears: Everyone needs to know they are loved.

“Okay, Momma,” I giggled to myself as I moseyed down the country road to the schoolhouse.



Before coming to California, Momma used the last of the money to buy a two-headed axe. This axe was precisely what I needed; I had *a plan*. The following day, I carried the axe to school . . . well, dragged it to school. My short, bony fingers could scarcely wrap around the thick, oak handle.

It was as tall as me and weighed just as much. Miss Stone, my third-grade teacher, was uncomfortable having an axe in her classroom. Momma assured Miss Stone that I was responsible and my intentions for its use were sincere. Once Momma set Miss Stone's mind at ease, she agreed that I could bring the axe to school on the condition that it be stored in the schoolyard shed during the day. My classmates teased me. They tried tricking me into telling them why I lugged that axe to school, but nothing could jar *the plan* from my mouth.



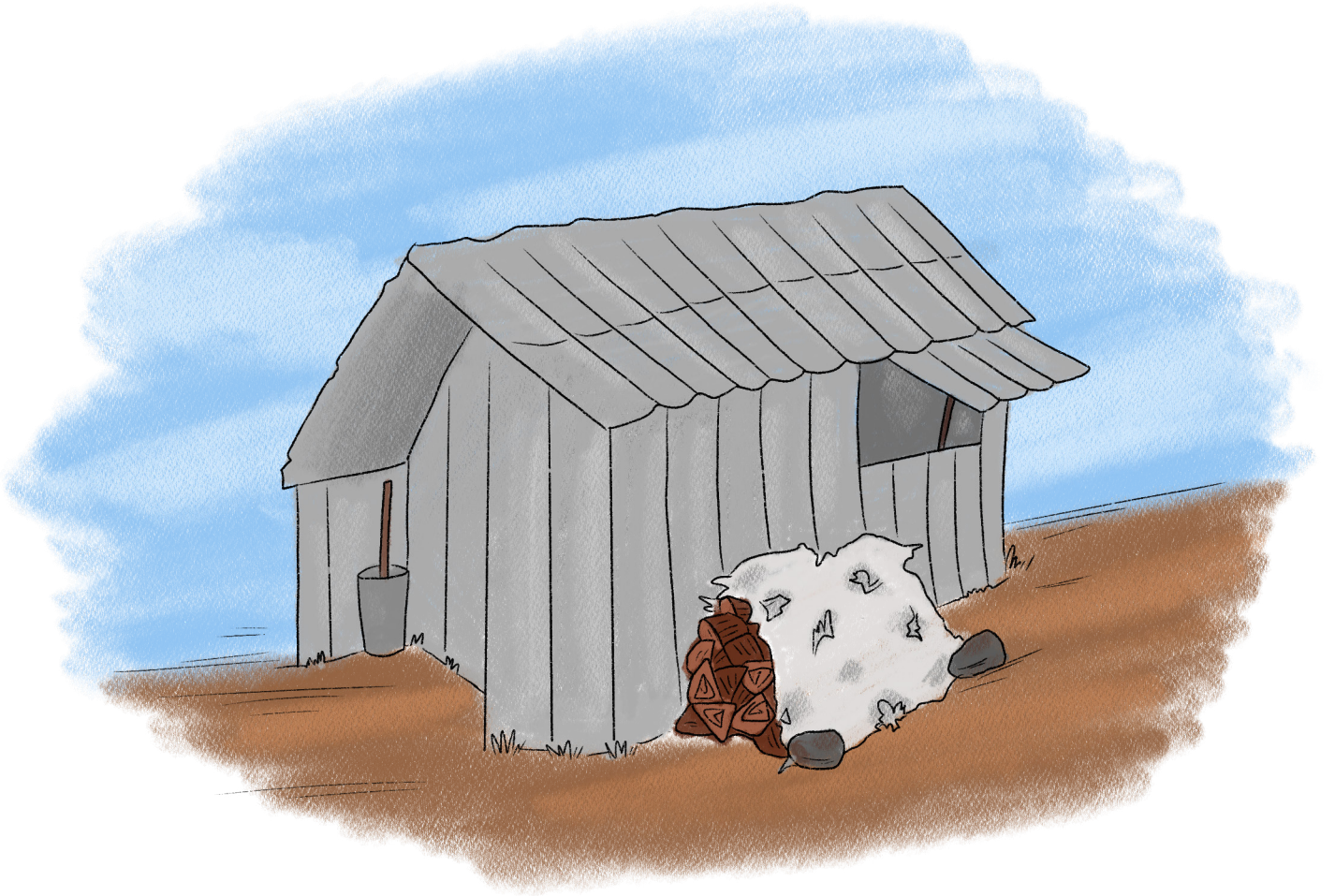
I waited with excitement for the end of the school day. As the bell thundered, I hurried to the back of the classroom and slung an empty potato sack over my shoulder. I flew over the steps into the schoolyard and sprinted to the shed. I threw open its doors, seized the axe, and veered toward the grove leading to the camp.



I stopped to chop wood from an aged sycamore tree. I placed the jagged timber into the sack. I couldn't carry much, only a piece or two.



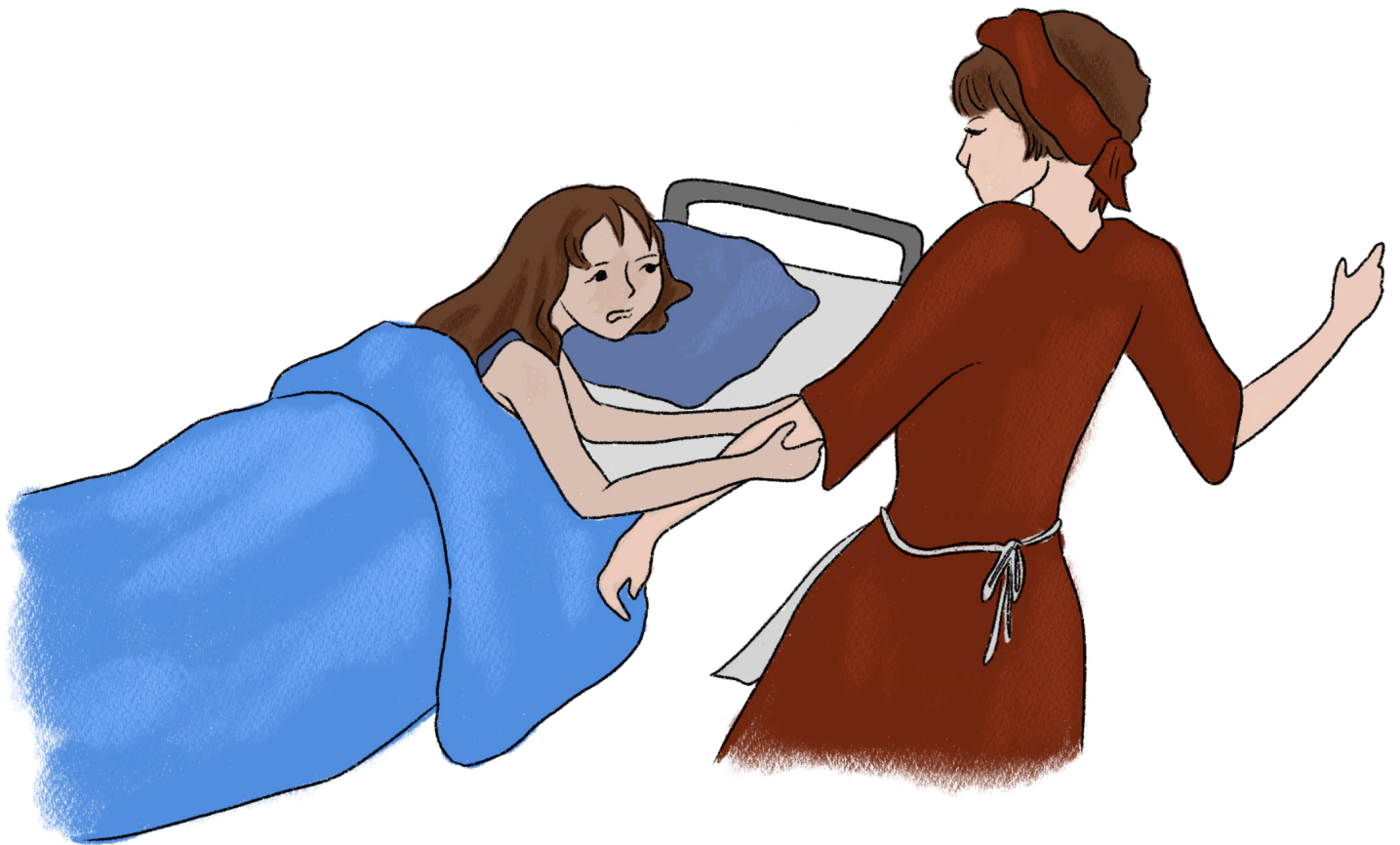
I scurried home and carefully arranged the logs at the side of our cabin. I covered the mound with a frayed sheet and secured it with a hefty rock at each end. Over the next two months, Momma noticed the pile of wood grow taller than a buffalo's back. "Delia, what are you planning to do, build an ark?" Momma hugged me, and we both laughed.



The first of December arrived, and I could barely stay in my seat to eat breakfast. Momma chuckled as she watched me squirm. She gave me a twinkling smile and said, “Delia, why don’t you go on ahead to school. You can no more sit still than a chicken with a fox pacing around its pen.” I leaped from my chair and ran all the way to school. As I rushed closer to the schoolhouse, the children stopped playing and stared at me with wide-open mouths that could catch a dozen flies. I wasn’t hauling the axe behind me, kicking up dirt that always announced my entrance. All day, my classmates pestered me with questions. Gussie planted her feet in front of me and cackled, “Hey, Delia, where’s your friend?” I looked her straight in the eye and with a bold voice declared, “Starting today, I let people know they are loved.” Gussie walked away mumbling and shaking her head. I could hear her mutter, “Dumb Okie.” It didn’t bother me none.



The sun was spilling its final rays through the opening of the cabin. Soon it would be time for bed. It was difficult for me to focus, but I completed all my homework and chores. As I climbed into my cot, Momma dimmed the wick on the oil lamp. Before she extinguished the dwindling flame, I grabbed her arm and pleaded, “You’ll remember to wake me, right, Momma?” “Yes, girl, now get what sleep you can,” Momma remarked with a reassuring wink.



I could not sleep. I crawled out of my bed, fastened my overalls, and tiptoed into the hazy night.

The ground was lathered with a bone-chilling fog, and the sky held the silhouette of a full moon. I could see Momma tying coarse twine around a brown paper package. “You have your note, Delia?” Momma asked. “Yes, Momma,” I answered softly. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a piece of crinkled paper. I placed it in Momma’s hand. She fastened the note to the parcel and positioned it in my arms for a firm embrace. Momma gave me a gentle push and with a faint voice uttered, “On your way then, girl. I will be here waiting for you.”



I quietly crept toward the cabin nearest ours. There, I delicately lay the bundle with its note at the door and swiftly returned to Momma. I shimmied out of my overalls and bounced back into bed. Momma tucked the blanket underneath me and kissed my icy cheeks. No sooner did she say, “Sleep tight, don’t let the...” I had already fallen asleep. Momma and I continued delivering a Christmas package to the neighboring cabins for the next twenty-three nights.



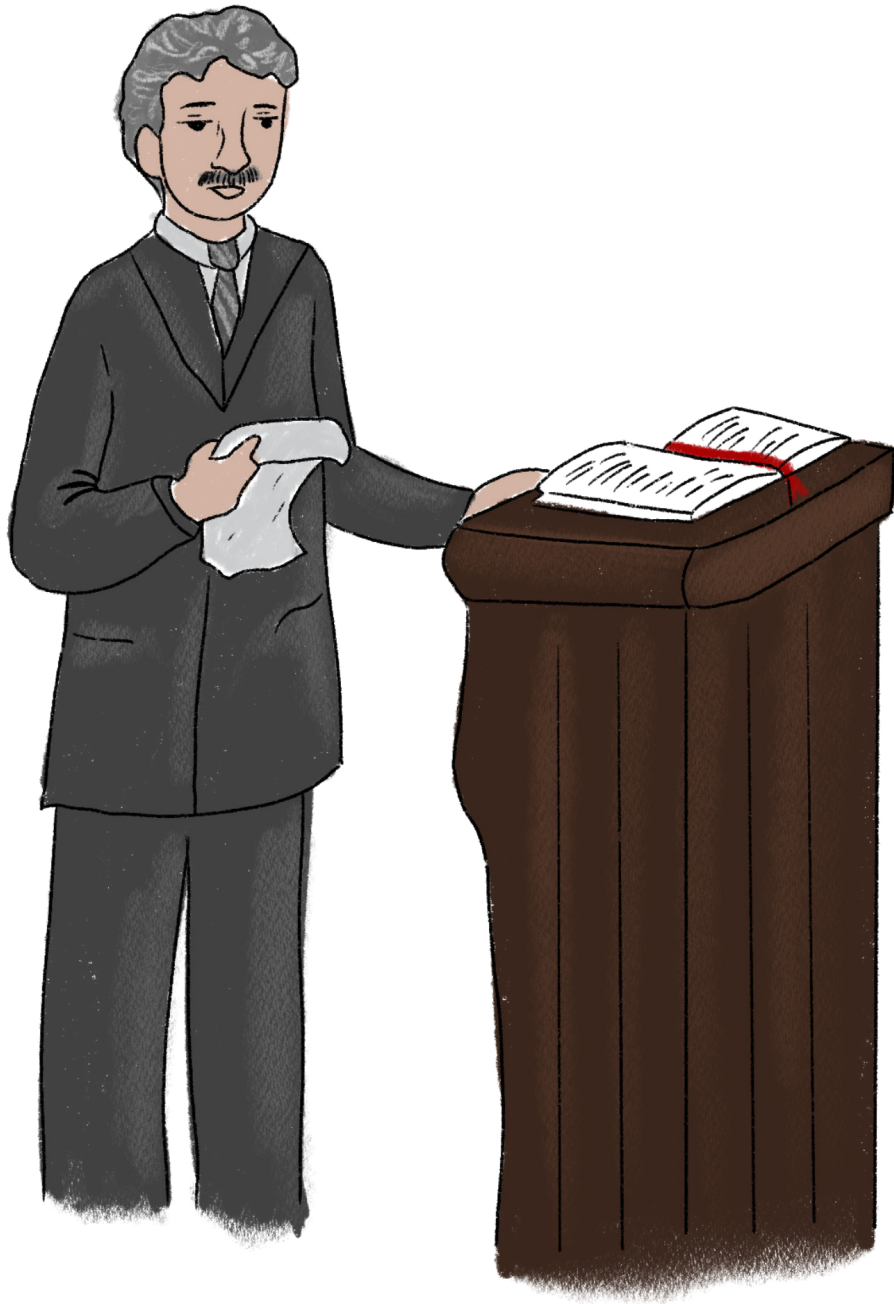
On Christmas morning, Momma and us children bustled in the bitter, winter air to church. My breath rose like steam billowing from the engine of a freight train. We scrambled up the steps leading into the church foyer. The scent from pine boughs that trimmed the railings tickled my nose. As we entered, Gussie saw me wearing a smile as wide as the valley. “What are you grinning about, Okie?” Gussie jeered. “I know you are too poor to have gotten any presents for Christmas.” Momma yanked me away and sat me down on a walnut stained pew with my sisters and baby brother.



Elder Meeks approached the pulpit and cleared his throat. “Before we begin the Christmas service today, I want to share with you a story I heard upon arriving this morning.

Someone has been leaving a brown parcel at the cabins in the nearby camp. I would like to read the note attached to these packages.” He held the crumpled paper and began to recite its message:

“I have not much that I can bring,
no turtledoves, no golden rings.
But what I give to you this day,
is heaven’s sweet love from far away.”



Elder Meeks was reading my note! Momma nudged me with her elbow as her eyes beamed with pride. She placed her strong arm around me and gave me a tight squeeze. Elder Meeks continued, “Enclosed in these bundles were two pieces of firewood and three potatoes—just enough wood to fire a stove and make a small meal of potato soup. You see, the best gifts in life do not always come from a fancy department store but from the heart.” As the pastor proceeded with his sermon, my mind echoed Gussie’s words. Yes, I was an Okie, and it was true that I was poor. I did not wake that Christmas to find any presents under a tree. Instead, I received something far more prized . . . that warm feeling you get inside when you simply love people. Momma was right.

- The End -



The Great Depression

From the years of 1929 to 1941, Americans combatted economic hardship. The stock market crashed, banks and businesses failed, and millions lost their jobs, homes, and farms. It affected over half of the USA's population. The Great Depression and its repercussions struck worldwide: its impact permeated regional, cultural, social, and economic lifestyles.



circa 1930: A migrant family saying grace before their noontday meal by the side of the road east of Oklahoma. (Three Lions/Hulton Archive via Getty Images)



The Dust Bowl



During the 1930s, the Midwestern plains of the United States contended with multiple droughts. With little rain and over-cultivation of once grassy terrain, the land became dry, and the soil became dust. Nineteen states suffered the effects of subsequent far-reaching dust storms. Dry dusty conditions, alongside fierce winds, caused storms known as *black blizzards*. These mountainous clouds of dust devastated farmland and homes, the health of people and animals weakened. A mass exodus followed; people left parched plains and migrated to different areas of the United States to find work. For ten years, the Dirty Thirties continued, its impact further complicated the years of the Great Depression.



South of Lamar, Colorado, a large dust cloud appears behind a truck traveling on highway 59, May 1936. (PhotoQuest/Archive Photos via Getty Images)

Okies

In the 1930s, thousands of farmers, families in tow, migrated from Dust Bowl regions to California. These impoverished people were desperate to find work to feed their families. The local townspeople called the migrants “Okies,” a name derived from the word *Oklahoma*. *Okie* was a label for all poor people moving from Dust Bowl states needing work. During the later part of the twentieth century, the derogatory connotations of the word *Okie* changed. *Okie* would become a term of courage—*one who harnessed inner strength, creativity, grit, and survival*. Generations have passed, their voices and experiences remain. This author is proud to keep their memory alive-R.C.



1930s: Pictured is Delia (left), Momma (center) and Delia's older sister (right) standing in front of their steel cabin in a farm labor camp near Visalia, California. (Family Photo)



Disclaimer



Firewood and Christmas Potatoes compares to my mother's potato soup—made with real and instant potatoes. This story is both fact (real potatoes) and fiction (instant potatoes). The Dust Bowl and the Great Depression were real. My grandmother, mother, aunts, and uncle, along with millions of people endured hardships during this American tragedy. My grandmother, with her children, left the desiccated plains of Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl; their travels led them to a farm labor camp in California. Grandma worked in the cotton fields of the Central Valley. She and my mother shared what little they had to help others, as others did with them. Names of characters were changed to protect all identities. Any resemblance to actual events, places, persons (living or dead), is entirely coincidental or fictional.

(Pictured is Delia in 1980s.)



My Mother's Quick and Easy Potato Soup Recipe



- * 3-4 Medium-Sized Potatoes (peeled and cut into small pieces)
- * 1 Small Yellow Onion (chopped)
- * Water (enough to just cover cut potatoes and chopped onion)
- * Salt and Pepper (to your liking)
- * Sprinkling of Garlic Powder (if desired)
- * ½ Tbsp. Butter
- * 2 Cups Milk (you may substitute with canned milk for a creamier consistency)

Peel and cut the potatoes into small pieces. Next, chop the onion. Cover potato pieces and chopped onion with water in medium-sized pot and cook the potatoes until tender (10-15 minutes). Mash the potatoes and onions in the water (do not drain the water). Add the remaining ingredients and let simmer for about 3-5 minutes. If your soup is thin, try adding instant potato flakes (sparingly) to thicken at any time while soup is cooking. Serve topped with grated cheese, green onions—whatever makes your taste buds sing.

(Pictured above is my mother, Delia, one month before her passing in 2018. I miss you, Mom!)



About the Author



Robin Carole was born in California and grew up in the wine country regions. Robin's fondest Christmas memory growing up is of her older brothers peering through the front window of their apartment as her date arrived to escort her to the Christmas banquet during her first year in high school. Unbeknownst to Robin, her brother, Allen, worked additional hours at the town's health food store to earn extra money, so, her date could present her with an orchid corsage (\$18.00 for a corsage was a considerable amount of money in the 1970s, especially since the average hourly wage was \$1.60). It would be years later that Robin learned of this precious gift from her brother. "My education, my work, my goals, and accomplishments are here for only a moment, but my family is a lifetime." —R.C.



About the Illustrator



Sally Fantasia was born and raised in Massachusetts. The middle of three girls, she spent endless hours exploring the two-acres around her childhood home and playing in the life-sized playhouse built by her dotting father, Sal. Her mother, Sylvia, was a renowned painter in New England and inspired Sally's creative side at a young age. As a hobby, Sally envisions images of playful expressions and sketches them out. Often inspired by the adventures along life's journey – military life, world-travel, raising her two daughters, and unforgettable moments that she wants to capture on paper. Sally delights in bringing laughter and joy and feelings of nostalgia to others through her art.



About the Cover Artist



Aimee Croteau is a colored pencil artist and graduate from the Studio Art program at Eastern Washington University. She derives much of her inspiration from nature and loves to draw her subjects in exquisite detail. She often uses an airbrush to paint out of focus backgrounds that give her drawings a softer presentation while preserving the smallest details within the main subject of each drawing.

