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Emi's Feet

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Kool-Aid

Beverly Sellers

“Young ‘uns can’t sit forever,” she told me. “Got to be done fairly.” We talked on while we worked, preparing for the children. All these years I never forgot her.

She was black, mother of three. I was white, girl of thirteen. We lived on the fringe of piney woods in rural East Texas, a place chock-full of common people—poor by all the charts. On summer evenings in mid-July, the youth at my church volunteered in Vacation Bible School at her church, a congregation separate from my own.

Things always separate for black families in the 50s, just trying to hold their heads above water. Signs on fast-food drive-ins—Colored Served in Rear, on courthouse water fountains—Whites Only, and schools—Colored Schools. Never equal to whites. Life being what it is, that’s how it was.

My fondest remembrance of that time in July? The two of us in the kitchen of that aging wooden structure—a school on most days, a church on others—preparing refreshments for the children. A schoolteacher, she had a smile that melted butter, a woman for whom heart, not color, mattered. I was shy, bashful around strangers. She was tall, self-assured. I was skinny and self-conscious.

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Girl-of-Thirteen opens packs of broken cookies from a day-old bakery, arranging as if they arrived from Neiman’s, poised on plates once polished with luster. Presentation covers a multitude of sins, my mama says.

Mother-of-Three opens packets of Kool-Aid, shaking purple contents into a five-gallon crock, the kind used to make sour pickles. She pours sugar—four pounds worth—into the crock, followed with pitcher after pitcher of water until the crock stands full. With no spoon long enough to stir sugar at the