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Warmed by the Generosity of Existence

If Laura and I had waited until we were in good financial condition, we never would have married. I was still healing after a drunk driver hit me, and I couldn't work eight hours in a row. I worked odd jobs in Willows, in the Sacramento Valley, and we married.

We found a large, old house on Road V, east of town. Trees grew along some of the ditches through farmland. Green grass began to sere toward winter. I called the owner and arranged to meet him at the house.

Laura and I waited in early morning sunshine by the big green house. The valley smelled of harvested hay, wild birds, vehicles moving on all the roads.

Geese and swans flew up from the wildlife refuge south of us, held tight formation as they flew north, up the wide valley, and settled to feed in rice paddies, fields of corn, fields of hay, in lush grasses along irrigation ditches. Red-winged blackbirds flew into bushes near the house.

Roger drove in, and the three of us walked through the empty, long-unused, dusty smelling house. Sun shone through windows upstairs, with glass broken out, shattered across the floor. Dust stirred by our activity drifted through slanting sunlight in the hollow-sounding inside of the house. Roger said, "You'd have to fix broken windows first and get some kind of heat. The chimney's good. You could put a woodstove in and put a stovepipe into the chimney downstairs."

We agreed Laura and I could live in the house for low rent. I would replace the stairs to the second floor, level the house that sagged in the middle, and sheet rock the upstairs rooms. A little at a time, I would do enough work to pay part or all of the rent each month. I was glad to make the commitment, move in, and start work on the place. I could probably drive tractor part time on some near farm for income.

Laura found part-time work in Willows. She stayed with her mother several days a week because we didn't have a car. Getting home from work and back to town the next day was difficult.

I cleaned up broken glass and put new glass in the windows upstairs by the light of setting sun. Winter approached. Nights were cold. Days stayed cool. The house we lived in had no heat. I found a sheet metal, airtight, wood burning heater in a store in Willows, at a very good price, but I had no money.

I had worked for Jack making wooden planters through the summer that had moved into autumn. I'd been willing to wait for pay for the last few days I worked, because Jack was using all the money he could get together to change from building planters to building houses.

Now, I tracked Jack through several building projects, found him on a new roof, and he happily climbed down a ladder and gave me the money he owed me. He said, "You can't live out there and freeze when you have money coming. I appreciate you waiting this long."

The year before, the temperature fell to 25 degrees in the northern Sacramento Valley, and the cold killed most of the eucalyptus trees, that grew to be large trees through many years of warmer weather.

The farmer who owned the place next to our developing home cut down frost-killed eucalyptus trees that lined his property along Road V. I tracked him to a field he was land-planing in preparation for planting winter wheat, and he stopped, climbed down from his red tractor, and gave me permission to cut firewood from the eucalyptus trees he'd cut down.

Laura's brother loaned me his pickup and a chain saw. I went to work cutting the downed trees into firewood. It was a good place to learn to use a chain saw, with the trees already down and no rush about cutting the wood.

Cold north wind blew chips and sawdust away from the chain ripping down through the wood I cut with the roaring saw. I cut firewood lengths, hauled them home in Joe's pickup, and split them in our yard. Everything smelled like fresh-cut wood and chain-saw oil and gas.

The large house, with big rooms, had begun to feel cavernous and forbidding as days and nights stayed colder and I made all the arrangements for a heater and cut wood to fuel the heater.

I drove into town, bought the stove, set it up in our house, and built a fire. Heat radiating from the stove slowly and gently filled the house. I took my jacket off. The house began to shed its forbidding air.

I went and got Laura in Joe's pickup when she finished

work that day. I brought her back to a warm house at dusk. We felt at home in the large green house at the intersection of two paved roads in farmland.

We soaked up heat from the stove as the night turned cold. We were warm from the stove and from the knowledge that small events, like acquiring our stove and appreciating the way it completed the house, warmed us with the generosity of existence and with appreciation for our participation in that generosity.