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All the Winter's Interruptions

Snow falls from a grey, twenty-degree sky onto our house in northern Colorado's Rocky Mountains and onto the forest, meadows, and granite ridges around us. I write at our kitchen table.

Juniper, who had been entirely home schooled, attended public school her junior year of high school, to see what it was like. She did well, but she returned to home schooling after her junior year. She enjoyed and appreciated some of the students in public school and some of the teachers and particularly classes she couldn't have at home, such as orchestra and team sports, but she decided she could achieve more directing her own education.

Now she applies for admission to college. Our family has been putting together transcripts, counselor's reports, and other forms school employees supply for public-school students. She brings me forms she needs help with.

Juniper has done her part. She provided most of her own motivation for home schooling. She made many of the decisions about what to study, especially as the years went by and her picture of the world filled in more and more. She researched colleges and filled out most of the application forms.

I leave my writing spread out on the table, and I help Juniper revise her home-built transcript, counselor's report, and a record of extracurricular activities.

I read her essay, required for an admissions application, and I make a few general recommendations. It is an excellent essay, but too long. I can't help much with solving how to meet the requirement for no more than three pages. I have an agreement with the three other writers in this family that I don't intrude much into their writing with specific suggestions. It would be easy to end up with four writers from one mold, and none of us wants that.

I return to my own writing.

The phone rings. Tami invites Amanda, our younger daughter, to her madrigal dinner in Fort Collins this evening. Amanda looks with some concern at the manuscripts spread in front of me on the table, and she asks, "Can I go?" Someone must drive her 47 miles if she goes, and I am the experienced

driver in snow storms.

Our daughters pursue their education at home. We live far from friends and activities, so we stay alert for cultural and social opportunities for them. Tami's parents will happily keep Amanda and feed her if this storm makes the roads unsafe for us to drive down the mountain tomorrow to retrieve her, so I say, "Yes. You can go. I'll take you. See if it's okay to get there early. I'd like to get back before the snow gets too deep."

Writing will simmer in the back of my mind without direct attention for a while.

Snow keeps falling. Dusk settles on the whitened mountain as we drive onto the highway, not because Amanda took a while to get ready to go, but because, as usual, I packed food, warm clothing, boots, sleeping bags, and paper and wood for a fire, in case the car breaks or the storm strands us.

In Fort Collins, Earl, Tami's dad, says, "You sure would be welcome to wait out this storm here. We have a bed for you and food. This snow is coming down pretty hard."

I say, "Thank you Earl. I'm going to see if I can get back up the mountain. I have things to do at home."

I don't exceed 25 miles an hour up the mountain, because falling snow limits my vision. Halfway up the mountain, six deer walk across the road, with snow on their backs. I slow down and let them cross. I climb the long, steep hill. In the light from my headlights, a large owl rises from beside the road into falling snow and flies into deeper darkness with some small prey grasped in its talons.

The slow drive up the mountain becomes a time for contemplation, much of it without words. As frequently happens, I'm not doing what I had planned to do, but I enjoy what I'm doing. Large snowflakes float down densely, illuminated in their softness by my headlights pointing up the mountain toward home.

One view of the world claims work toward material gain is all important. According to that view, this day has been full of interruptions, and I am far behind what I aimed for.

Another view, that fits my family better, says the interruptions of my writing and of my work taking care of the ranch make up the actual substance of the day. Without the interruptions, without my daughters' needs for assistance in living, without the drive in a snowstorm, the deer crossing the highway, the great horned owl flying into deeper darkness, with small prey held in powerful talons, I would have nothing to write about.

Darkness mingles with clean, white falling snow. The night is advanced when I return to writing. I pile my partial manuscripts together and write on a clean pad of paper. Seeing the owl stimulated many memories of experiences with owls. I want to write about the mysterious birds while memories move vividly through my mind.

Wind rises and blows snow against the house. Except for the sound of the storm and the sound of my pencil leaving words on the page, the night is quiet around me.