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Rototill for Breakfast
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We put Juniper's crib beneath a large white oak tree and our sleeping bag on the ground beside her, on the hill behind Jack's house. That served as our bedroom, forest around us, madrone, pine, aspen, fir, cedar, dozens of kinds of trees and brush of northern California, ceonothus, manzanita, whitethorn, wild roses, and profuse thickets of wickedly-thorned blackberry bushes for delicious harvest in the fall, when the berries ripened. Lush grass and flowers grew from California red clay in a small meadow rising up the hill to forest above our bedroom.

We used Jack's house freely during the day, home base while we rambled the town Jack's place edged into, and the town thirteen miles down the mountain. We looked for jobs and attempted to see what plans about how to approach our future might be fruitful for us. I worked toward healing after a severe encounter with a drunk driver. I could work, but not long enough to take on most jobs.

We'd lived in an old motel near the main road through the town on the west slope of the Sierras for a while, almost as cheap by the week as a good rental, if there were any good rentals. We agreed to trade landscaping work for rent on a big house the other side of town, and we moved from the motel, but our communication with the owners didn't work out, and our stay there was brief. Low money and Jack's gracious offer to share his place dictated our move to Jack's. We loved having the sky above our bedroom and the open, natural view all around us. We also knew we needed a roof before winter.

We owned an ancient pickup. I advertised in the local paper for gardening, landscaping, and yard work. I took work I knew I could do and priced the work by the job and not by the time it took me to do it. I bought a rototiller with my first earnings, did well for about three weeks, and the work ebbed, then ended. No one else called for any work.

I said, "Let's place another ad. Include repairs on houses, painting, stuff like that."

Laura said, "If we got a job painting a house, I could do part of it. Juniper could play right by us, and we could work together."

“Well, we could buy a small brush for her and start teaching her young.”

We drove in, placed an ad, and headed back out Clark Road. I said, “We have enough money for one breakfast at the café up there. We have some fruit and nuts at home. You and Juniper share a breakfast, and I’ll have fruit and nuts when we get home.”

Afterward, Laura said that was the lowest she’d ever seen me, and I did feel pretty low, sitting there in the restaurant watching the traffic go by on Clark Road. I watched Laura and Juniper eat and wondered where our next few bucks would come from, five days before the new ad would come out.

Chip and Roxanne came in and sat in the booth with us. Chip said, “I’ve been trying to find you, saw your pickup out there, see you got your rototiller with you, all shiny red. How come you’re not eating?”

“Laura has to eat for her and Juniper too. I got some stuff at home, but not enough for all of us.”

“You better eat breakfast. You hire out with that rototiller, don’t you?”

“I do. That’s why I bought it.”

“Order a good breakfast. You’re gonna need it. I’ll buy. Down payment, you come by our place, we’ll build a garden. I got two pickup loads of cow manure ready to turn in. We can spread that out and rototill and rake it smooth. We have everything we need for lunch, keep two garden builders, two women, couple little kids going. I want to get this garden started, but I couldn’t catch you till now.”

Four adults worked together in sunshine, and two little kids crawled around in the dirt. Two young mothers managed kids, fixed a beautiful lunch in the shade under trees, and helped rake newly rototilled, rough ground into garden by late afternoon. Chip said, “We’re going to plant a little bit of everything, enough for a start, about sundown. I’ll help you load that rototiller.”

Laura and Juniper and I spent part of our money at the grocery store on our way home to our habitation beneath the sky, with natural forest walls. The money left after groceries saw us through until the ad came out. More and more people called with work for me.

We ate many blackberries in autumn of the year and found walls and roof and home before winter. We started that winter with enough resources to see us through till spring and with my mood lifted far above what I

remember now as my low point of all time just before a turnaround in our circumstances rescued us.