

Lenora

A month before the drunk driver slammed his pickup into my carryall, Annalee and I went to a meeting of people forming a food co-op in the valley. Annalee introduced me to small, thin Lenora of intense hazel eyes I couldn't have told from my own, brown eyes with yellow and green, with spots of black through the varied colors.

Lenora kept her children, Kevin, five, and Julie, three, close. She emanated controlled energy and calmness. I wondered about the jagged scar from the outside corner of her left eye, like a stylized drawing of lightning, down to her chin.

Over a year later, a month after Annalee left me, two days before I had to leave my house because I couldn't pay the rent anymore, I saw a poster announcing a meeting at the co-op. I knew I could manage the distance on crutches, and I wanted to see people.

I stood inside, working up my determination to walk farther into the room, closer to people. Lenora walked in. Kevin and Julie held her hands. I said, "Hi, Lenora." She turned and looked at me. I said, "Annalee introduced me to you here last spring, when people were forming the co-op. I'm James."

"I know who you are, James. Someone said you got busted up. It looks like you did. What're you doing now?"

"Healing, running out of money and trying to live anyway, trying to find shelter for the winter. Arguing, maybe until eternity, with an insurance company about times of payment and amounts of money."

Lenora said, "I have a shed in my back yard you can live in. We use it for tools. It's more than the word 'shed' might make you think. It's tight. It has a wood stove and two windows and outlets, an overhead light. It's small, but it would give you shelter for the winter. You'd have to use the bathroom in our house, but the shed's close to the house."

I didn't need to think for long. Shelter in an unfamiliar situation beat no shelter. We could work out details as they came up. "Thank you. I'll accept."

"When do you want to move?"

"Now. I don't own much. I've trimmed to the essentials. It'd take five minutes to pick up my stuff."

Everything fit into the trunk of her car. I talked to Kevin and Julie as we headed up the mountain. Lenora watched the road as she drove. She listened to Kevin and Julie and me.

I settled into the shed on the ridge as winter came to the mountain. Rain poured into the foothills of the Sierras. Snow drifted down from the cold, grey sky. Snow blew off the ridge into the canyon or melted and left the winter ground bare. I caught rides with Lenora when I needed to go to town.

Pete, small, remaining hair gone white, pushed his cart around the end of the grocery-store aisle. His wooden leg creaked. My crutches stuck up out of the cart I leaned on as I put food into it. Pete said, "James, when are you going to get off those crutches?"

"When I find a decent cane. I don't like the metal canes I've seen, and the wooden ones all look thin and weak, like they might break if I put weight on them. For a while, I'm going to have to put a lot of weight on any cane I get."

"You come with me. I'll give you a cane."

I found Lenora in another aisle and said, "I'm going with Pete, so don't wait for me. I'll see you later this afternoon."

We paid for our groceries, put them in the back of Pete's old, faded-blue, rattling pickup, and drove out to his place, beyond the edge of town, down a long, curving, dirt driveway that ran past oak trees, pine and fir trees, manzanita brush, past a tiny cabin under oak trees.

Pete said, "That's where Unc lived. He was eighty-seven when he died, two years ago. Unc wasn't of this world. He kept a big garden and fruit trees. He grew all his vegetables and fruit and most of ours. He wouldn't talk to anybody except me. When he wasn't working in his garden, he walked in the woods. He looked for natural wood that would make a cane and brought them home for me."

Pete showed me nineteen canes of varied and often fantastic shapes, all of natural shapes, as they had grown. I chose the thick, light-red, slightly-crooked, manzanita cane, perfectly bent for a handle. I knew I would keep it all my life, long after I needed it.

More than a dozen years before the day of the cane at Pete's place, I attended high school and washed dishes weekends in The Pagoda restaurant in Paradise, California, on the ridge. Pete drove from a local service company and repaired the kitchen exhaust fan at the restaurant. In hot sunshine late in autumn, I climbed the ladder onto the roof and helped him. The air smelled of roofing tar, pine trees, and automobile exhaust.

While we unscrewed the mounting bolts of the blower motor, pulled the motor out of the exhaust housing onto the roof, and then sat on the roof, I heard the workers' movement placed in history by a man who had lived some of it and whose interest came because he was a working man, still struggling and still passionate for the rights of the people.

Pete was Carl's father. I thought he should be my father, but I didn't say anything about it. I didn't see him often after our time together on the roof, but when we ran into each other, we took up old conversations where we had left off, with intensity because we had to say a lot in a short time.

I left crutches behind and leaned heavily on the manzanita cane Pete gave me as I walked the edge of the ridge above the canyon behind Lenora's place. Cold wind blew into the canyon. I wore my long, heavy, black coat. I walked too far. My knee started to feel like fire burned inside the joint. Sharp pains shot down my shin, where bone had been crushed to a thousand pieces and only recently healed.

I sat down on soft pine duff beneath pine trees. Densely growing trees sheltered the edge of the ridge from cold wind. I shoved my hands deep into big pockets on my coat, lay down and watched small clouds move across winter sky.

I woke under clouds gathered dark again for a new rain. Afternoon had slipped away to grey light of winter dusk. I got up and walked the rest of the way back to the shed. My leg still hurt, but not as much as before I rested.

Some cold mornings, I built up my fire and decided to take the day off from building strength and endurance and stay inside by the stove. Often, after the fire warmed the place and I ate, I changed my mind about staying inside, put on insulated boots, coat, hat, scarf, and gloves and walked out the door and away from the edge of civilization.

Some days, I visited some of the people I knew on the ridge, but I felt isolated from most people, vulnerable, and alien. The people I visited were settled and, often, content in their lives, occupied with daily pursuits and different interests from my basic pursuits of healing and survival.

I returned to solitary walks.

I returned to the tool shed after a long walk. The day's light faded. I walked into the small cabin and saw a body hanging from the rafters in the dark corner of the room. My heart slammed into my breastbone. I snapped on the light, and nothing was there. I cast the vision away from me. It came back in my dreams and woke me again and again in the nights that

followed. Every day, I walked and worked toward recovery.

I wrote a poem about my vision of a body hanging in the shed. "... dreams suggest I should end my time of pain and discouragement./ Dreams hang like a strangled body./ Body open to suggestion/ turns slowly to rising darkness..."

I revised the poem and read it again and again. Then I put it into my stove and watched it burn above wood already burning. Smoke from the burning paper curved to the back of the stove, swirled up the pipe, and dissipated in cold winter sky.

Stan, Lenora's husband, left her in the summer, a few months before I moved into the tool shed. She said, "I don't think he has a girl friend. He said he doesn't want to have a family anymore. I think noisy kids and a wife who isn't as shapely as she was when she was twenty-one got to him.

"He dreams. Real life didn't go the direction he dreamed it would, so he dumped real life. He lives more and more in frustration at the failure of real life compared to his dreams." She didn't talk about details. I didn't ask her any questions.

Lenora invited me to dinner sometimes. I accepted some of her invitations. I usually talked to Kevin and Julie more than I talked to Lenora. After dinner, Lenora read a chapter from *Wind in the Willows* to Kevin and Julie. I sat in the big, ragged green chair and listened to the adventures of Mole, Rat, and Toad.

When she finished the chapter, Lenora put the book down and said, "Time for two sleepy, small animals to climb into bed." She and Julie and Kevin left the living room.

I picked up the book and started reading it from the beginning. When Lenora came back into the living room, I had gone deeply into the book. Lenora sat down on the couch and read from her Bible.

After a while, I looked at her over the book. "I never read this before. It's fascinating."

She said, "I didn't read it until I grew up. My parents never read to us. They didn't know parents did things like that."

"I don't remember much of my childhood. I don't think my parents read to us. Adult pursuits used up their time."

Lenora's book lay open on her lap. She said, "My father is a minister. That absorbed so much of his time, he never found time to read to his children. My mother doesn't know much about children."

I said, "My father wasn't there much for us. He used most of his time pursuing them. It took him away from home a lot of the time. When I was a kid, I didn't know that's why he was gone so much. I probably never thought about his being gone so

much. It was just the way things were.”

Lenora looked at me. The second hand on the clock beside Lenora jerked around its white face. I began to think Lenora had retreated so deeply into herself, I might not hear from her again, but she said, “My father didn’t pursue women. He knew he wouldn’t last as a minister if he did. He believed his daughter was for the fulfillment of his sexual desires. He used me sexually from when I was 12 and developed breasts until I left home.”

Lenora looked at me as she spoke. She breathed deeply and raggedly. She steadied her breathing. “That was why Stan left. He didn’t say so, but it was. When I told him about it, he said I should have told him before we married. Maybe I should have, but I couldn’t talk about it at all, then. I couldn’t even think about it without feeling messed up again. I knew what my father forced me to do was wrong, but I didn’t know how to stop him. I daydreamed many agonized hours about getting away from him. None of my daydreams worked until I was old enough to get a job and leave home.”

Wind blew hard across the ridge and whispered around the house, probing, seeking ways to break in and bring winter cold inside. Lenora sat quietly. She watched me. Her eyes pooled deeply liquid, filled with deep thoughts and memories.

She said, “The first time my father fucked me, I fought him. I was horribly afraid of him. I was afraid to fight him, but I did. I thought I would die from fear. I think I hoped I would die. My mother and my sister had gone to town. He hit me and knocked me down against the night stand and split my face open.”

She touched the scar on her face as she spoke. “He got bandages and closed the wound. Then he forced me down on the bed and forced his penis into me. After he came, he talked to me a lot. He couldn’t shut up until he explained and arranged everything. He said God would kill me if I told anyone what we did. He worked out a story for everything. He made me agree to tell his story. When my mother came home, we told her I tripped and fell against the night stand. He refused to take me to a doctor. He was afraid I would tell the doctor what happened. If I had had stitches, I might not have as big a scar as this.

“Once I agreed to lie to save my life and to protect him, we had begun a conspiracy. He could do anything he wanted and rely on me to keep up the lie. I believed he would kill me if I told, though he said God would kill me. I knew what he did and forced me to do did not come from God. I never knew how I knew that, but I did.

“He fucked me three times in the years after that. I’m sure he was afraid I’d get pregnant even when he used a rubber. That would bring everything into the open and have consequences he couldn’t handle. So the rest of the time, he kept it to mouth and hand stuff.

“It totally confused me about men and about religion, because he is a man, and he is a minister. I condemned all religion, because he justified what he did in religious terms. He said God gave me to him for his use.

“He hoped I would begin to enjoy what he did to me, as a woman can enjoy a man. He talked to me about passion. He tried to arouse me to passion. The only passion I ever felt was hatred for him and for what he did to me and forced me to do. His dreams of passion went sour. I knew by his eyes he would have killed me from frustration at my hatred of him, from fear I would tell what he had done. If he could have invented a story that explained my death, he would have killed me. He lacks imagination and creativity. He’s a dull, unimaginative man.

“I dreamed of ways I could kill him, useless dreams, because I couldn’t do it. I never found the moral vacuum that would have allowed me to kill him. I knew I could kill myself, but I wanted to live. I knew I had a future worth living for, if I could live through that time and get away from him to get to my future.

“I had more respect for his humanity than he had for mine. I had more respect for him as my father than he had for me as his daughter. I couldn’t kill him because he was my father and a human being.”

Lenora picked up the Bible from her lap and gripped it so tightly, her fingers were white. Her voice resonated clearly through clenched teeth. She hesitated, shivered through her entire being, and spoke again, “It took a long time after I got away from him just to begin to get my head straight. I didn’t resolve and live with what had happened. I buried it.

“After I was away from my father for several years, I started thinking about it again. I couldn’t leave it buried. I thought my way through it, and I tried to work it out.

“When Stan and I got to know each other and then married, I couldn’t talk about it. If I tried to talk about it, I froze up. I couldn’t say anything at all. Stan knew I wasn’t a virgin, but that’s all he knew, because it was all I was able to tell him. After we’d been married for years, I felt confident enough, I began to talk about it. I told Stan about it. I had to tell Stan about it. I couldn’t keep it all inside anymore. I didn’t have

anyone else to talk about it with, to test it out and see how it sounded, to see how someone else would react to it.

“Stan never touched me again. Not long after I told him, he left. I didn’t expect that. Finally, I was able to talk about it, to relieve some of the terrible burden thinking about it and keeping it to myself had become. I expected Stan to rejoice with me, because I was beginning to free myself from my own history.

“When he left, I lived through all the agonies again, all the bone-shriveling feelings of guilt and worthlessness. If I didn’t have children, I would have killed myself. I thought about killing myself anyway. I thought Stan could raise Kevin and Julie. But I didn’t kill myself, because, when he left, Stan showed me he lacked compassion. I didn’t trust him to raise Kevin and Julie if he didn’t have the compassion he needed to be human.

“I began to pray again. God still exists. He listened to me and spoke to me.

“God told me I am without guilt and blameless. He told me truth is true, no matter what anyone does in perversion and calls truth. He told me He is my father, and He told me I am healed of everything that happened. I don’t understand that, because I feel like I’m a long way from healed, but I trust that will become clear to me. Maybe, in a way, I am healing, because I think about it now and feel more relaxed about it than I ever have, more believing I am not completely destroyed by everything that hapened.”

Lenora sat quietly for several minutes. Most of her color returned, and the rigidity in her body left her. She seemed relaxed again.

She said, “I wonder sometimes if I became something beyond what I would have been if I hadn’t had that experience. I don’t mean the experience should have happened or was in any way good, but if we work to develop good from a bad experience, I think we can transcend what we would have been without that experience. Maybe God told me that. Maybe I just thought about what had happened long enough that I realized that possibility on my own. I really don’t know. I don’t even know if it’s true. It’s just something I think about. I have no way of knowing, because I can’t be both me with that in my past and me without it.

“My mother is total jello. She knew what was going on and did nothing about it, or she should have known, if she hadn’t avoided every clue. She has no moral courage. She’s terrified of

having to deal with the world on her own. She'll accept anything she thinks she has to accept to survive. Material survival is her god, but she's never had a job, and I think she can't imagine having a job.

"I'm at peace with myself now. It's nobody's business but mine, but you are becoming more important to me. Stan's reaction made me realize anyone who is important to me should know about this as early as possible, in case it changes the way they see me."

She watched me. We were both quiet for a long time. She said, "There are many possible reactions to what I've just said. I don't see any reaction from you, and that makes me wonder if you're concealing your reaction." Her voice was very quiet as she spoke.

I stood up, walked to her, bent over and hugged her, then walked back and sat down. I said, "I don't want to meet your parents."

She said, "James, you don't usually hug people. You've never hugged me before. Why now?"

"I can't think of anything to say about what you told me. You shouldn't have had to go through that, but it's past, so there's nothing I can do about it other than say I like you for who you are now. Knowing that part of your history increases my admiration for you. You lived through a very negative experience, and you became a strong, positive, beautiful person."

Lenora said, "It took me a long time to know I still believe in God. God is not what my father told me He was. He isn't what people think He is. I'm suspicious of what people say God is. People tell me God wants me to do something, and that means they want me to do something. They try to hide behind a perverted, cynical approach to what they call religion. Despite all the terrible, perverted misuse of religion around us, I believe. I've begun to understand what it means that God powers the universe now and God gives us love and grace."

Lenora didn't ask if I was religious. I wouldn't have known what to say if she had asked. Once, I would have argued against religious belief and for a scientific, rational view of the universe that excluded anything not material and available to our senses. I saw her beliefs worked for her, and I left her beliefs alone.

That wasn't the first time I had an uneasy feeling that what I thought I believed no longer fit my existence. Almost everything in my life had changed, but I hadn't changed the verbal structures of my mind to fit the changes in the way I felt,

thought, and lived. Living through severe injuries brought large changes. If I found a long time to think about it, I might figure out what changes had come to me, or I might never figure it out. That showed change, that I realized I might never be able to verbalize all the changes I had gone through, and it didn't matter.

Living near Lenora brought further change to my understanding of life, to my understanding of the universe, to my acceptance that I might never be able to verbalize what I had become, that some of what I was becoming didn't have residence in the rational, structured, verbal part of my mind.

Lenora, Kevin, Julie, and I settled more into enjoyment of knowing each other and into the realization that our existences began to mesh.

I asked Lenora, "Do you have a rifle?"

"A twenty-two."

"Could I borrow it?"

"What do you want it for, James?"

"I've been getting close to deer on the edge of the ridge. I'd like to shoot one and have some meat. I'll share the meat with you."

"James, if I loaned you my rifle and you shot yourself, I couldn't live through that. You can't do that to anyone. I have hard times enough without having to deal with something like that."

"I won't shoot myself, Lenora. I already decided to live. It's been a hard time to live through for a while, with a lot of pain, but it's a beautiful time, like being born again so I can be more aware of the world around me as I grow into it."

Three days, I saw deer but not close enough to kill with the small-caliber rifle.

The fourth day, cold morning fog gathered thickly in the deep canyon behind Lenora's house. White fog moved in morning restlessness. Five deer walked up out of the canyon, dim grey shapes in moving fog. They walked up onto the top of the ridge and took on solid, grey form as they emerged from trailing wisps of insubstantiality.

A doe stopped, stood with thick, white, moving fog behind her, and looked at me. I waited. The grey doe stepped closer, step after slow step, large, liquid brown eyes fixed on me, grey ears funneled toward me.

I slowly raised the rifle. When she walked close enough, I shot her in the forehead.

She dropped to the ground, quivered through her whole

body, and died.

I steadied my breathing and my heart. When I felt calm again, I walked forward. I lay the rifle on the ground, dropped to my knees, and touched her soft fur. The entire ridge was as quiet as moving fog.

Then an owl called from over the edge, down in the canyon, “hoo, hoo-oo, hoo, hoo.” A deeper-voiced owl answered from much closer, “hoo, hoo-hoo-hoo, hoo-oo, hoo-oo.”

Silence lay on the ridge.

A raven croaked. Its wings sounded against the air above me. A hawk screamed somewhere in the higher air. I drew my knife, cut the doe’s skin, separated muscles, and cut the large artery in her neck. Blood poured onto the ground and steamed in cold air. Rich blood smell rose around me, rose into clouds and small blue-sky openings above. I spilled her intestines onto the ground and separated out her heart and liver. Strong smells of partially-digested grass and intestines permeated cold air.

Once, I would have easily carried the white-tailed deer across my shoulders. I will carry that much weight again, in a few months, in a year, I don’t know how long, but now, I can’t carry her. I returned to the house and told Lenora, “I’m going to need some help.”

“Can I get to it with the garden cart?”

“I think so.”

“Okay. We’ll take a rope and the garden cart.”

We lifted the deer into the cart. Lenora tied rope to the cart handles. She lifted the handles and leaned her weight forward. I leaned into the rope, chest high, and walked ahead of her. We shared the load up the long incline to her place.

I hung the carcass from a rafter in the woodshed. I said, “Meat should hang several days, but we’re going to have to get this into the freezer before someone sees it.” I skinned the deer and separated the carcass into quarters and the rib cage and backbone while Lenora settled Julie and Kevin for the night. Then she came back outside.

She said, “I don’t want them to see anything but meat. Meat, you can buy in a store. It might be impossible to keep them quiet about this.”

We cut and wrapped meat on Lenora’s kitchen table. We put packages of meat into the freezer. I said, “Some cultures believed you took on qualities of the animal you killed and ate.”

“What do you think of as the qualities of this deer?” She taped a package and added it to the pile growing on the tray.

“Strength, endurance, grace, gentleness, beauty. She looked

at me, and then she walked directly toward me.”

Lenora looked up at me, across the table laden with bloody meat, bones, bits of fat, and tendons.

I had never really seen her before.

In light from the fixture in the ceiling above her, in light from the fixture above the sink, in light flowing through the doorway from the living room, her face formed a series of intricately blended planes, joined in beautiful, geometric patterns, living, rounded flesh that shone forth deep vitality. The scar on her left cheek met merging planes of her face and joined them together, as if it had been added to emphasize the beauty of her face for this moment of realization. Her green, brown, yellow, and black eyes radiated patterns of colors and light from her deep black pupils out through her irises. I thought I looked into a mirror and saw impossible images penetrating my existence.

I wondered if she knew a powerful shock of recognition drove from her face, from her eyes, into me.

I looked at the sharp edge of my knife. I could cut off one of my fingers or my ear and present it to her. “Please accept this small part of myself as a token of the powerful feeling that nearly overwhelms me as I look at you.”

I drew in a long, even breath and put away the thought of self-injury.

She said, “Some hunting cultures believed prey animals volunteered to become food for the hunters. Hunters agreed to honor the animals, and the animals volunteered to die so the people would have food, so they could continue to live.”

“I don’t know what they did to honor the animals.”

“I think if we thank her and respect what she was, what she still is, that must be part of it.”

Tears ran down my face. I made no effort to fight them, but I said, “I don’t think crying would have been part of it.”

“What was part of it for Indian hunters might not fit you. If tears fit you now, that should be part of your ceremony.”

I cut meat. We cut up one hindquarter and the back straps, packaged the meat, and put it in the freezer before we spoke again.

Then Lenora said, “Cannibals believed a person takes on qualities of the person they eat. That’s why they did it. If you eat part of an enemy who was strong and smart, a powerful warrior, you take on some of his best qualities. In the same way, you take on qualities of the animal you eat.”

She took the wrapped meat to the freezer, put the packages

in, came back, wrapped more meat, and started to fill the tray again. She said, "Do you think we'll take on qualities of this deer when we eat this meat?"

"If we work at it. I think we have to be conscious of it and work toward it."

"You need to regain strength and endurance. You don't think you lack grace and beauty because you were injured, do you?"

I put sliced meat on the paper she had just put down. I looked up at her. I thought of Annalee and the alienated look in her deep brown eyes after I was injured. Sometimes I missed Annalee with an intensity I couldn't allow to exist.

I said, "I don't know. Yes, I do know. Injury has nothing of beauty about it."

"Beauty and grace come from inside. Maybe going through difficult times gives you strength and beauty. I didn't know you well before, but I think, just in the time I've known you, you've gained beauty and inner strength. You grow. You're growing."

"Thank you, Lenora. That's kind of you to say."

"I didn't say it from kindness. That's what I see."

At ten o'clock, we finished cutting and wrapping meat.

I said, "We have to get rid of bones and the hide and the head."

"If you'll stay here with Kevin and Julie, I'll put it all in the garden cart and take it as far out the ridge as I can go. I think coyotes and ravens would appreciate the chance to scavenge what's left."

I washed our tools and our work area while she was gone. When she came back, she said, "We're both bloody. Let's wrap up the night with a hot shower."

"That'd be good. This stuff is dry now. I'll put it away while you take the first shower."

"Why don't we let putting everything away go until morning? We can take a shower together. That would save water."

I had started to clear the drainer and our work area, but I let the knives, cutting boards, tape dispensers and rolls of wrapping paper stay where they were. "Uh-- umm, that sounds like a good idea. I wonder if it actually saves water."

My hands shook. I concentrated until I held them steady again.

"I'm sure it does." She reached for my hand and led me toward the bathroom. "Come on. I'll show you."

When we stepped out of the shower and toweled dry, I said,

“I don’t think it did.”

“Did what?”

“Save water. It might have used more water than separate showers.”

“No. When I’m alone, I take long showers, until I run out of hot water.” She turned me around by the shoulders and rubbed my back with the towel. “I wanted to hurry and get clean and get dry, because while we were showering, I thought of something else we could do.”

She turned me back around. I reached around her and rubbed her back with my towel. We stood tightly against each other. I was so hard and throbbing with excitement, I thought I might come before I even entered her, but once we made it to her bed and I entered her, we fucked a long, slow time before we came together.

In the early hours of the morning, wind blew snow against the window above Lenora’s bed. I said, “I think the tool shed will be cold. I didn’t build a fire this evening, but I’d better head that way.”

“Stay with me.”

“What about Julie and Kevin? You worried about them talking if they saw the deer. They might talk if they get up in the morning and find me in your bed.”

“Killing a deer this time of year is illegal. We could be fined or go to jail for it. Having you in my bed isn’t illegal.”

“It could be dangerous.”

“I didn’t stop taking birth control pills when Stan left. For a while, I thought he might come back. Then I didn’t want him to come back. After you moved into the tool shed, I started thinking I might eventually get you into my bed, so I kept taking them. So, no negative consequences. Please relax and stay with me.”

“They might say something to their dad.”

“He’ll have to deal with it. He chose to leave. He voluntarily gave up any say he had in my life. He might be startled, but he wouldn’t be dangerous to either one of us. It took me a long time to get enough nerve to invite you. I hope you don’t leave now. With me wrapped around you, I don’t think you can get away. Have you gained that much strength?”

“I’m not interested in finding out. The shed will be really cold. You’re warm.”

“Then sleep. Unless you want to start again. This is even better exercise than walking, you know. It really builds strength and endurance. We have hours before daylight.”

I woke startled and afraid. Lenora murmured, "What's happening, James?"

"Bad dream. I dreamed cannibals were after me. Modern cannibals, in fast cars and business suits. Maybe the dream came from talking about cannibals earlier."

"I forgot to tell you. I'm a cannibal." She pulled the covers off and moved down in bed.

A long time later, I said, "That clears every bad dream I could ever have. But it isn't the kind of cannibalism I was thinking of."

"Best I could come up with on short notice." She moved back up and lay full length on me. I held her tightly until I had to say, "I have to move you so I can catch up on breathing."

I still used the shed that winter. Sometimes I wanted to be alone and concentrate on nothing but recovering, reading, writing, trying to find new sounds in the strings of my guitar. Lenora said, "You're welcome to sleep in my bed whenever you want to," and she left it at that.

Kevin and Julie walked out to the shed some days, knocked on the door and came in and spent part of the day. Sometimes they walked with me along the ridge. Sometimes I sent one of them into the house to ask Lenora if she wanted to go, and we all walked together.

Lenora and I exercised together many nights that winter, building strength and endurance. Love was a word neither of us used for the other, only for the children.

Green grasses sprouted from the warming earth. Deciduous trees opened new, green leaves. Smells of spring stirred in every air movement. Myriad birds returned to the ridge. I walked into the town spread along the center of the ridge and found work mowing lawns, repairing houses, pulling weeds, whatever I could find. I usually could work only two or three hours. I could walk a ways without my cane.

Lenora grew part of our food in the garden behind the house. Stan, becoming her ex-husband, sent support money, but not enough to take care of all her needs.

We had cast our lots together when I killed the deer. We continued to share our resources and our needs. We didn't have any extra, but, between us, we had enough.

Fall turned the leaves red and yellow, orange and brown, a hundred shades of colors against the colder sky of autumn above the mountain. I realized I hadn't seen bluebirds for several days. Meadowlarks had flown south. I looked for all the species and saw only those who wintered on the ridge.

Winter stripped the deciduous trees and brought a storm that left a foot of snow. The insurance company sent me a check.

I showed it to Lenora. "It took a long time. I'm buying into Doug's metal recycling and manufacturing business. He wants an ambitious partner. He's burned out on having to stay on top of the whole business by himself.

"We've known each other since high school. We both think our partnership will work. It's an opportunity to do well, if it's run right. I've had enough poverty to last the rest of my life. I want to make a good living. I haven't liked the idea of moving east, but that's where the business is, so it looks like it means moving east." I wasn't at ease about going into business either, but maybe that sense of ease would come.

Lenora looked at me for a long time. Then she extended her hand, as if to shake. "It's been nice, James. I'm going to miss you a lot."

I held her hand in both of mine. "I guess I'm slow to say what I'm thinking. I want you to go with me. I want Kevin and Julie to go with us. I want you to marry me, but if you aren't ready for that, I'll take you any way I can get you, as employee in the business, or as housekeeper, as mistress, as head gardener, as a friend I support from love, as a librarian who takes care of my books, whatever works for you."

"Are you sure about that James? I've wondered what would happen when you could afford to leave here. A long time ago, I realized you might say good bye and leave, and everything would be over. In my bravest moments, I accepted that possibility."

"I am sure. If you don't want to go, I'll pay off your house so you're not struggling to make payments, and I'll leave you enough money so you don't have to wonder where groceries are coming from."

"You're generous, but I'm also a good shot. The kids and I can live on venison and what we grow in the garden."

"You mean you want to stay here?"

"I don't want to go with you if you're inviting me out of a feeling of obligation."

"I've never said I love you, have I? Those words got knocked out of me by experience that showed me the words mean nothing without a lot of foundation under them. I think we've built that foundation piece by piece until it's more solid than I thought a foundation under love could be. I love you. I love Kevin and Julie. I want you to come with me, but I also

want you to do what you want to do.”

“I love this place. It has a lot of me in it.”

She stepped forward. We hugged and stood tight against each other as the clock on the bookcase ticked and ticked. Its second hand spun around its blind face.

Lenora said, “I can get what we absolutely need packed by morning if I start now, if you take care of Julie and Kevin while I work at it.”

It took us much longer than that to find a place to live and to get ready and to move. While Lenora and Kevin and Julie looked for a place and got ready to move, I worked my way into my new business. Running a business was something I hadn’t done before, but it felt like it would work. By then, I was nearly as strong as I had ever been.

Lenora planned a small wedding in her garden. She sent for her sister. Doug came from east and stood with us.

Early in the morning, the day of our wedding, Lenora shoveled a path through snow, cleared a large, round area in the garden, and spread dry, clean straw on the ground so our feet wouldn’t get muddy. The clean, summer smell of straw the color of sunshine spread above winter snow.

I went out to help, but Lenora stopped me before I entered the path. “I want to do this myself,” she said. “You stay out of the garden until we’re ready to start the ceremony.”

When we planned our wedding, I said, “Maybe we should get the living room ready, too, in case we have a storm.”

“That won’t be necessary. The sun will shine for our wedding.”

I thought Lenora harbored an edge of insanity, part of her thinking that stayed out of contact with the world as it really existed. I saw in her eyes the certainty of sunshine and a suggestion of alien existence, of madness that I might never fully understand. Misalignment with rational reality formed an essential part of her and an essential part of my love for her. Without understanding what I was doing, I joined in her absolute faith that the sun would shine.

Sun shone into our garden. A raven landed in the top of a pine tree, croaked loudly and then was quiet. It seemed to be waiting for the ceremony. Sunshine reflected from snow, brilliant in the sheltered area between the house and pine trees along the edge of the canyon. We wore sunglasses, five adults and Julie and Kevin. Soft, clear voices in ceremony spoke of our commitment into eternity and became the only sounds against the brilliant white silence of the mountain.