

MASTER OF THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

by Carol Emshwiller

Carol Emshwiller's 2006 story "World of No Return," which became the basis of her new novel *The Secret City* (Tachyon Publications), showed us an alien could attempt to pass himself off within the confines of our culture. Moving in even closer, she now reveals how another group of outsiders might find a way to survive at the very edges of our society.

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What we know so far: That we are few though we used to be many. That, through no fault of ours, we no longer have a land of our own.

It was the season to go from the fish and frog's legs, to the pine nuts, but the way was barred by new housing settlements, so we turned to the berries and the rabbits, and that way was barred, too.

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Our group asked the man guarding the crossroad if there was a hidden valley anywhere in these mountains, and how to get there if there is one.

He took our dollar and pointed out the way. We could see, at the end of the other road, a town, all its windows shiny in the morning sun as if telling us to go that way, but we went in the direction he said, away from the town, but it was hard and always up. We wonder if he just wanted to get rid of us. We've walked ... climbed mostly ... for two days but so far we haven't arrived anywhere. Now that we're in unknown territory, even Grandma doesn't know which way to go.

The road dwindled to little more than browse trails but we kept on. We went the way the wild things had gone. Up into nowhere until we said, stop. Not because we liked it here, but because we were tired.

We sat on stones and said, this is as far as we go. We said it even though everything here is stunted. Plants that usually are bushy and lush, here hug the ground and lean over. On some there are little berries that, lower down, are delicious, but here are dry and tasteless.

Maybe we can live off the people in that town. We're few now, maybe they wouldn't even notice. And we have somebody who's good at creeping around and stealing things.

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They mean me.

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Everything is down from here, and there's all these stones. We could pry them out and roll them down on people in case they find out it's us that's been stealing. And we have Our Big Man to do that.

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They mean me.

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So we make camp. Not easy in this wind. The ground is so hard we have to tie our tent ropes to stones.

At least there's no fear that anybody will pass by and bother us or steal our things—though we haven't much left to steal. Even so, Our Big Man will keep watch over us all night.

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They mean me.

But I'm as tired as they are.

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What we know so far is that the earth is in disarray, else why this empty, stony ridge? And why this wind? Why that man at the crossroads and not some other, kinder man?

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I lean against a rock, shut my eyes and doze. Everybody huddles under shawls and rugs. The children whimper themselves to sleep.

I have kept us safe all this time though my staff has never been used for anything but helping me climb. Sometimes I let a child hang on to it and I pull him along. They call me Uncle.

I'm sure, as we all are, that that man at the crossroads deliberately sent us up here where there's nothing, not even a tree. He saw our little ones, why didn't he have any sympathy—at least for them?

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What we know so far is that, if there is a heaven, trees will be there. Especially the dogwood. Especially in bloom. There will be strawberries. There will be poppies and quail and jackrabbits.

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We've run out of food. We'll send Our Big Man down to steal, though if anything happens to him we'll be in trouble.

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I'm not a big man. I was clever, that's how I got to be able to bring up the rear. Besides, that Former Big Man was old and wanted to leave the group to me. Everybody wanted me.

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We tell him, bring us apples and potatoes. We say an onion would be nice. We say, “And bring something for the children.”

I say, “I’ll try.”

I never take charge, it’s not my place, but when they tell me to take the boy with me, I say, “If you don’t mind, maybe next time.” I’m not supposed to contradict, but I feel I must. He wants to come, but if there’s danger up here, he’s the one they’ll need. I’ll leave him my staff.

Our Big Man shouldn’t disagree, but in this case we know he’s right. We let him go alone and keep Our Boy with us.

It only takes me one day trotting down, though it took all of us three days climbing up, what with our bundles and our little ones. When I get close to the crossroads I duck behind brush. The same man is there. As before, he sits where the road branches. He’s much bigger than I am and he has a rifle. But I can cut across beyond the man and wade their canal. I can be in town faster than the road would take me and I’ll not have to pay.

I hide behind sage and bitter brush and circle around him, crouching. I only move when he’s facing the other way. It’s not hard.

Right at the edge of town I notice an apple tree in a backyard. Some of those would be nice for the children. The laundry hanging there will hide the person stealing them. I gather a few, zip them into one of my bags, and leave them in the shade of a boulder. I sit and eat one. I want to wait till twilight before going into town.

There are lots of rusty pick-ups parked along Main Street. Not many people about. I walk from store window to store window. My mouth waters as I pass the bakery but I mustn't pause there too long. Bread isn't for the likes of us. Maybe a box of crackers for the children, they should know what those are like. I'd like to show them some chocolate, too. The littlest ones have never had it.

I let myself get locked in the grocery store. I fill my backpack. I take things that won't be noticed. Mostly from the bins of loose things like nuts. There's a bin of pretzels and a bin of beans.

I leave the store and start around to back doors.

I'm thinking another blanket would be nice, but too hard to get this trip.

Before I leave town, I check out an empty house. I wonder.... How would it be if some of us came down and camped here? We might not be found out for quite some time. They might put me in jail. That would be an odd end to my stint as Uncle.

I head back to the apples, but here's Our Boy, right in that very back yard, gobbling them up as fast as he can. He'll make himself sick. What was he thinking, sneaking out and following me on his own?

Well, I know what he's thinking, but isn't he a little young for it?

He'll be a much larger man than I am one of these days. MaryEllenson. I didn't think he'd be trouble for another couple of years.

There's always a coalition. He might consent to that for a while.

I don't want to have to hurt Our Boy. The way things are these days, he's more important than ever. Grandma depends on him.

I creep up and grab him from behind. I hold his mouth shut to keep him from crying out. He hasn't learned much yet. This'll be a good lesson.

I press his face into the grass.

Foolish boy.

I whisper. "Does anybody know you followed me?"

He shakes his head no as best he can.

If he has any sense at all he'll realize how stupid he's been. I could kill him right this minute and there'd be one less problem for some other Big Man later on.

I wait until he's choked enough. I whisper, "Silence!" then let him go.

But he's about to throw up his apples. Just as well. I hurry him away—farther from the edge of town. I hold his forehead. I wipe his face. Coalition? No problem.

I leave him collapsed there and go back for the batch of apples I'd gotten when I first came into town.

He's a skinny young one, our biggest boy. A redhead. Freckled. No son of mine. I remember his father. That was a man worthy of being called "Our Big Man."

I feel good. I've even got some chocolate for the little ones. I have cheeses. Grandma and Second Grandma do love cheese.

Now all we have to do is get past the man at the crossroads with our stolen goods. Turns out MaryEllenson paid a coin to get here. We won't go anywhere near the crossroads. I show him how to do it.

A lot of admiration in his eyes that wasn't there before.

Coalition firmly established.

There's a bright almost full moon. We get well away and up into the first steep hills, then lie on our backs looking up at it.

“Uncle?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you.”

He knows he owes his life to me. That will be important later on.

When it happens, I hope Rosalia will come with me.

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What we know so far is that there used to be moon watching platforms, one in each of our stopping spots. Those will be the first to rot away. Tent platforms and our hanging hooks will be next.

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Everybody's happy to see us—happy that we're not locked up down there and that we're still alive, and happy about all the good things we brought.

They've started setting up a permanent camp. I'm not pleased about that, but if Grandma says it must be so, then it has to be. I believe Grandma is being led by her sore knees rather than her head. There may have been objections, but I wasn't there to hear them. Everybody is working to make sleeping spots with drainage ditches. There isn't much usable brush. They've laid out a spot for me. They're going to enlarge it for MaryEllenson now that we've formed a coalition.

We have done as Grandma said to do. At first we argued about it but then realized it had to be or we'd lose Grandma. None of us wanted that. This is not a very good spot to lose a grandma. Second Grandma changed her mind right in the middle of arguing against it. We understood and voted for it along with her, wondering all the while what Our Big Man will think. This puts more of a burden on him than ever before. We fear that town will be our only resource. But we're glad he'll have MaryEllenson to help.

MaryEllenson swaggers around as if he's already bringing up the rear, elbows out, knees half bent.... Everybody smiles behind their hands. Even Our Big Man.

What we know so far is that some of us starved out of kindness to others. They gave away their food and died quietly in the night. Some slipped away, who knows where? Perhaps they threw themselves into the sea when we were near the sea, or into a rushing river to be taken back to the sea.

We think we're being followed by one of our men. We think it's Ruthson. We haven't seen him for six years. We'll be happy to greet him, but we're worried about what might happen to Uncle. But setting our village way up here may change things. We don't think Ruthson would like living here. None of us want to. Uncle will put up with it, though, and not complain. He's one of the sweetest ones we've ever had.

That night it storms. A real top-of-the-mountain storm. Water in all our tents, and the drains we shoveled overflowed. Grandma got wet. We can't stay here. Second Grandma thinks we should overrule her. This would be a big thing. (Second Grandma is Grandma's little sister.) But even if we overrule her, we don't have to leave her here, though it's often done. We can take her with us to a better place. Our Big Man can carry her.

They mean me.

Our Big Man says there's an empty house on the outskirts of town, with a fireplace and four rooms. Living in a house, we'll not be keeping to our way and towns scare us. All those people and not a single one living or even thinking as we do, but it's just till things warm up. And not all of us need go there, just the littlest ones and Grandma and a couple of us to look after things. Our Big Man can go back and forth and MaryEllenson can help.

We'll tell Grandma it's only until she's well again. Of course she'll know better than to believe us, but it'll save face.

I carry her. At least the way is mostly down.

I don't know why we don't have even one beast of burden. Have they all, long ago, made a decision about that? None of us Big Men would have had a say in it or it would have been decided differently. Even a donkey would be better than nothing. Or what about an elderly stallion that's been kicked out of his herd? I'd relate to that considering my situation. Or a young one still in his roaming years.

All of us men have had a few years on the fringes of the other life. Many of us have lapsed into that world, mated with one of them and been lost to us. Others, if they refuse to mate with any but their own kind, are condemned to a life of nothing *but* "the roaming years."

During my "roaming years" I rode a motorcycle. Now and then I drove a truck for a farmer in exchange for food and shelter. Sometimes I sneaked into classes with the farmer's sons. I've even had some college. Not that any of this is useful to us. Mostly we need to know how to protect and serve and service, and, when the time comes, how to fight.

What we know so far is that we will return to the sea no matter where we die. All our dead must be returned to water.

We ensconced Grandma in the empty house in the middle of the night. Less than half of us came down to do it. Thank goodness the house is well away from other houses and surrounded with a hedge in back and a fence in front. Our candle lights won't be seen. There's a nice outbuilding, too, only a few feet away from the main house ... a rickety garage. Just right for Our Big Man.

We left Our Boy up with the others. He was proud to be in charge of protecting the group all by himself.

Grandma got wet again when we had to cross the canal. Our Big Man was so tired from carrying her on his back for two days, he actually fell in. Thank goodness, at the spot where we crossed, the canal is only two feet deep, so no great harm done except for getting wet and cold. (That water comes straight down from the snow on the mountains.)

After we got Grandma dried off and in bed, we went out to the garage to see to Our Big Man, but he was already asleep. We covered him with a rug and left tea and crackers beside him. In case of ants or mice or rats, we left everything in a tin box. Rosalia went out later to add her shawl to the rug. We approved of that.

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What we know is that we used to be but one of more than seven groups. We know that babies died. We ask ourselves: Are we the last of those who live as we do?

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I wake up sore and just as tired as I was last night when I collapsed. I hope there's no new chore for me this morning. I'm still wet. I didn't have the energy to change into something dry—if there was something dry. What Grandma has been feeling in her knees, I'm feeling now myself.

I lie, not moving. Then I notice the shawl around my shoulders. I know whose it is. I feel better right away. I sit up and open the tin beside me, drink the cold tea. Then I begin to feel dread. It's a fearsome thing, to be right here in a town. Almost any circumstances would be better than the way we're set up, half of us here and the other half on a windy hill—a long steep hike between us. That man who follows might get discouraged and wait for some better year, so I may have a little more time. Actually, if Rosalia will come with me, I'll be glad to leave. Wouldn't it be nice, just the two of us? We'd pretend to be an old married couple. I'd have to change my name.

She and I have a boy out there somewhere. Rosaliaman. I should say, a man—by now. I wonder what became of him.

Rosalia was my first opportunity. I followed the group for several months. Rosalia got herself lost on purpose just to meet with me. She's the one, picked the spot, made it happen. It was dangerous. Especially for a not very big man. She knew that but she picked me, anyway. If not for her, I wonder if I'd have had the strength and know-how to become Uncle and take over the guardianship.

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What we know so far is that there will be a hidden valley where the earth is black and soft and there'll be plenty of berry bushes. The water will run down from three streams that join a rushing river. One can die in peace knowing the way to the sea is open.

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We're almost out of food again, but we let Our Big Man sleep. Grandma, also, sleeps on and on.

Our Big Man is getting older, too, but he's still clever. We've eaten better with him than with most of our others. But Grandma, dumped in the canal! That wouldn't have happened with a younger man. And now Our Big Man will have to keep those of us up on the hill fed and those of us down here, also. We can't let him sleep too long.

Second Grandma calls us all together in secret. We shut ourselves in one of the rooms and consult without Grandma. It's up to us. It always is.

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I pull the shawl close around me ... (Rosalia knitted it. I watched her. She didn't dare *really* give me such a nice thing, but she lends it to me every chance she gets, and she thinks of it as mine—as do I.) ... and go to the house to see if they have dry clothes for me and anything warm to drink.

I find that they're all in a back room with the door closed. I don't dare knock. If I want dry clothes I'll have to find them myself. Grandma is still asleep. What I put her through! Wouldn't it be nice if, when the time comes, Rosalia and I could run away some place and bring Grandma with us? Until two years ago,

she was a fun and funny leader.

One doesn't suggest such things. One doesn't even mention such a thing as, thanks for a shawl, knitted for a person's birthday but never given.

Since that man's been following us, I've kept a small paring knife in my pocket. I keep it wedged into the top of a fountain pen so it doesn't cut my pants or me. I'm not sure yet how fair I can expect him to fight.

When we come out of our meeting we tell Our Big Man what food we have left and send him off. There have been times when one of Our Men actually got a job in a grocery store. We suggest that. Money is not our way but we want him to know he's free to pick any way he thinks best.

After Our Man leaves, we wrap Grandma's legs in warm wet towels and feed her a special broth. She may guess what it is, but she drinks it willingly.

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It's not so easy to steal in the daytime. I pass the place with the apples. I ask if I can take a few. Sometimes that works. The lady there says, yes.

Then I do as they said, I ask for a job in the grocery store. I don't need an address. I say I'm just passing through and need a job for a week or two. They put me to work. I won't dare steal for the first few days except maybe a pocketful from the bins.

When I return to the house at lunch time with beans and nuts and the apples, there's no sign of Grandma.

So much for Rosalia and me ever bringing her with us when my time is over.

I don't ask. It's not my place to know.

Second Grandma says she saw a man hovering about in the meadow beyond the house. She says she could hear him whistling a love song.

This is happening much sooner than I expected.

Grandma ... *Grandma!* (It's going to be hard remembering to call Second Grandma, Grandma. It might have been better to do what they had to do up there, rather than have me carry Former Grandma all the way down here and dump her in the canal—that was icy water.)

Grandma says it again. "He was whistling a love song." She could be hinting that I have to make a show at defending my position.

I sneak out into the meadows. It's too soon for planting so there's nobody around.

I might be able to get it over with right here, now.

But there are two men out there, standing by a copse. A good place to hide, but they're not bothering to hide. Hard to tell from this distance, but they look large. I wouldn't have a chance even with Our Boy. I don't dare go up to get him, anyway. If I leave, those two might take over and our group might split. And Rosalia is down here. We never talked about going off together, and this is the only life she knows, she might not want to come with me.

Once I was privileged to bring up the rear, Rosalia and I lost the habit of talking as we had before. I had too much work to do. Sometimes she came out to my shelter when I was too tired to eat. Brought me soup. Rubbed my sore back. (Former Grandma said it was all right.)

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We know that one has to observe the formalities. That there can be no taking up more than your share of space, no eating more than your share of food, no harsh words, and especially no secret alliances, no favorites.

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I don't want Our Boy to get mixed up with two big men. Coalition or not, if anybody's going to get beat up it has to be me alone.

Their hair is long and tied back in ponytails. They're wearing black leather motorcycle jackets. No sign of motorcycles, though.

They don't look like good material for bringing up the rear. I'm not even sure they're our kind. Maybe they heard about our ways and are trying to take advantage of it. They could beat me up, mate with everybody, and then take off. It wouldn't be the first time outsiders have done such a thing.

If they're not us, one way or another, I'll *have* to win.

I make a big circle around the copse and come into it from the rear. I'm thinking that's where the motorcycles are.

And I find them. I take the spark plugs and some wires and hide them in a different part of the copse. I might have a little more bargaining power with that.

Of course they might really be us, brothers often form a coalition, and riding motorcycles is what many of us do in our roaming years, but it's safer to go with the idea that they're not us. And they're too chubby. With all our walking, we don't have a chance to get fat. And their hair is so long. We generally try to blend in with the conservative people. Also we'd have known better than to come in to us in our motorcycle jackets, though whistling a love song is exactly what we would do. I'm surprised these men knew to do that. Though maybe that was their warning to our women.

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We know that women have ways. They are full of ancient and intricate lore. Many of their recipes go back a thousand years. There are secrets no man knows.

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We're not supposed to have favorites. Former Grandma let things go too far. We may have to see to it that Rosalia keeps the proper distance, but, for now, we'll let her sneak around to find out what's happening. We asked others of us to go see, but no one else wanted to do it.

Rosalia came back and told us there are two men and neither of them is Ruthson. She said they don't look to be our kind.

I let the men see me as I leave the copse. “You’re just the one we’re looking for,” they say.

They’re not going to care that our group is split. All they want is me out of the way and one night with us. There’s no bargain to be struck here and they’re not going to be willing to wait.

Since they’re not of us, and won’t be staying, even if they beat me up, the group will still be my responsibility.

I say, “They’re all yours.”

They’re suspicious. They look at me—assessing. No doubt taking in how small I am, how thin and stringy. Taking in how large they are.

“Smart man,” they say.

Without a word, they head off towards the house we’re hiding in. They’ve already found out which it is.

They’re whistling that song: “Next to my yellow-haired girl, how good, how good it feels....” I follow. They don’t care. I’m as helpless as they know I am.

But surely they’re not going to rush in and just ... without even saying, Hello. I can just see it: tea first. If we have any left. Our best cups. Two big guys with tattoos.

They know none of us would dare call the police.

I look in the high little window in the front door. Just as I thought—though actually I *didn’t* really think it: Tea time! And with my apples. My walnuts. How did the women convince those men to do that?

But the women down here in town are not our youngest ones. The men may back down when they see just five middle-aged women and five children. They'll be angry and they could take their anger out on me.

We own nothing worth stealing. Our memories are our only treasures. There's only one reason men would come to us.

We invite them in. Sit them down. It has to be on the floor, we have no chairs. All of us come, each one holding a toddler. We serve things Our Big Man took a lot of trouble getting for us.

But here, coming up behind me, is Ruthson, the man the women talked of before.

We don't greet each other.

It doesn't usually happen like this. We always say the words of challenge and then shake our secret brother-to-brother handshake. (The women don't know it nor even of it.) The other will proclaim his worth as a father and I'll say, "If it can come to be." All this in a language so old and foreign, we hardly know what it means anymore.

He's a big red headed man. The kind of man Our Boy will become later on.

He says, "I'll come in with you, if you'll form a coalition."

"I accept, but when this is over, I want to leave. Beat me up, but not my legs and feet. I want to be able to walk away."

"Will do."

Even though I'm a small man, Ruthson and I prevail, no problem. All of us men are always in good shape. We know we're going to have to fight sooner or later if we ever want to be able to take up the rear of a group and keep it, so we spend a lot of time during our roaming years learning how to fight. You'd think, if they know about our way of life, they'd know that, but then they were only expecting one man.

We went to the edge of the copse to have our fight—out of sight of the townspeople and our women. We had to keep remembering this wasn't our kind of fight. We had to forget our rules: No killing, no maiming. They fought any way they wanted, kick to the groin, punch to the Adam's apple....

But when they start getting in trouble—almost right away—one of them says, "It isn't worth it. Those cunts are all too skinny and too old. Did you see the one with her hair in a bun? She had a nose on her. And she hardly had any knockers at all. You get a choice here, nose or knockers."

They're talking about Rosalia.

I leap towards them, but Ruthson grabs me. "Let them go."

They turn and jump on their motorcycles.

Ruthson, still holding me, says, "Calm down. It's over."

Of course the motorcycles won't start. I forgot about the spark plugs. They try several times, then get off and turn to us. This is different, not just a little free sex with a bunch of women who won't go to the police. Now they're going to really fight. They take out switchblades. I only have my paring knife. Ruthson picks up a stone.

But I yell, "Hold it! If you kill me you'll never find out where your spark plugs are."

Ruthson will stay while I go into the woods to get them. He's a good and willing man. I was hoping for someone just like him to take over the group. I like how he held me back after the men said those things about Rosalia. He was right.

But what to do? If I don't give them back those men will stay here and make more trouble, but even if I give them back they may attack us again. Why not?

And I'm still angry about what they said about Rosalia. Are *their* noses so perfect? Are *they* so handsome? Foolish thoughts, and over and over and over, as I scabble under the fallen tree for the plugs and wires. And when I bring back the plugs are they going to be happy? Thank me? I don't think so.

Of course it'll take them some time to install them. We should get out of the way or we'll get run over on purpose. I wonder if we can get away fast enough.

When I come back to the edge of the copse, one of the men is lying on his back, relaxed. The other sits smoking, leaning against his motorcycle. Both have their helmets on. It's a wonder they didn't have them on for our fight. Obviously they didn't take us seriously.

Three women are standing across the field. Rosalia, wearing my shawl, is one of them. (She's the shortest. We're two of a kind.) It's a thrill to see her. Especially wearing that shawl. It's always been a sign between us, though I couldn't say exactly what it means.

I wonder if those men will try to run down the women. They're angry enough to try it. It's my job to keep them safe. But nothing will happen until I get there with the plugs. I walk slowly. I motion for the women to leave. They don't.

Ruthson is ready. You can tell by the way he's standing. And he still holds the rock. I'm sure he's thinking the group is already his. I as much as said so. He'll do anything to defend it, as will I.

I hand over the spark plugs. I even help install them.

And they do just what I expected—though I was hoping they'd come after us—they rev up, spew out great gobs of dirt, and head for the women. Ruthson and I chase after, but there's no hope of catching them. Ruthson throws the stone, but misses.

Our women scatter.

One of the men drives right over Rosalia.

We know that tides will come in higher than ever, landslides will cover the roads and carry away houses, trees will crash down, stars will fall.

Thank goodness the ground is muddy and soft. Even so her leg is clearly broken. I turn and think to run after the men, but it's hopeless. I kneel beside Rosalia. She's making a little mewing sound with every breath. I touch her shoulder. I don't say, "Are you in pain?" or, "What can I do to help?" I say what I've been wanting to say all this time. "Come with me."

Of course she doesn't answer and I can see that she's in pain. Or maybe that look on her face isn't pain but shock.

I apologize right away for asking such a thing.

The other two women run up to us. Thank goodness they didn't hear what I said.

We are thought to be helpless without Our Big Man, but that's not so. The tea we served those motorcycle riders will have an effect, though not in time. Maybe an hour from now. A bad case of diarrhea. We were hoping to hold them off till then. We didn't realize Ruthson and Janeson would form a coalition and fight right then.

Janeson will have to set Rosalia's leg and we'll have to make the plaster cast. We don't go to doctors.

We bring him out some rags and pieces of wood for a splint. We give Rosalia some herbs to chew on.

Janeson covers his mouth with his hand. He's trying to hold back tears. We've always been worried about the way he and Rosalia are with each other, but of course that'll be over soon. We hope Ruthson won't play favorites, though we can't accuse Janeson of that. He tried his best to be fair. Even leaned over backwards so that sometimes Rosalia got less than the rest of us. We've all loved him. We hope Ruthson will be as sweet.

We help Janeson get Rosalia up on to his back. She's a skinny little thing, probably even lighter than poor Former Grandma. Rosalia rests her cheek next to his and hugs him. That's perfectly all right. Any of us would have done the same.

There's all this mud all over both of them and no water turned on in the house. We'll have to go out to the canal yet again today. Our little ones can help. They'll like that.

We have to be ready, also, for when Ruthson beats up Janeson. Perhaps we should make them have their fight up in the mountains with the rest of our group so Janeson can be healed and rest a bit while Ruthson takes over down here.

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Ruthson and I do as Grandma says, fight up in the hills, and he does as I asked, saves my legs.

MaryEllenson hid and watched our fight, though he's not supposed to. I didn't tell on him. I did the same when I was around his age and I got myself kicked out of my group for it.

MaryEllenson is worried about Ruthson, and rightly so, but I tell him to stay young for a while. I tell him I wish I'd stayed in my group longer. But he doesn't want to go backwards into being Our Boy. It's hard to do after forming a coalition with a Big Man as he did with me, and even harder after looking after our group all by himself up here in the mountains. He may go off for his roaming two or three years early just as I had to, though with me, it wasn't of my own choosing.

They give me a few days to recover, but now Rosalia is down in town and I'm stuck here and, after they send me away, I won't be allowed to communicate with any of them.

Normally they would give me a bundle of helpful things, but I'm leaving secretly, before they do. There would be nice things to show me how they've felt about me. Now that I'm not part of the group they can give me all sorts of things. There might even be that shawl Rosalia knit. But I'm going to break our rules and leave before they can give me anything. It's because of her I'm sneaking away.

But ... and it's so hard to believe ... I'm free! Actually free! I can do anything I want, go anywhere, or never roam again, never fight again, live as I please....

Except I don't want to live without Rosalia. I'm going down to see if I can sneak in and find out how she's getting along with her broken leg. If there's anything blooming on the way, I'll pick a bouquet. It's early, but lower there might be flowers. She loves daisies and lupine and wild sunflowers.

I make it as I did before—in one day. Thank goodness Ruthson saved my legs. He must now sleep in the garage where I slept. I hope he's tired enough not to mind the bugs and dust. It was cold there, too.

I wait till dark. Before she was hurt, Rosalia was in with three others, but they probably moved her to her own room because of her leg. I wish I could have been here helping. They wouldn't have let me near her, but I could have found some special treats. If I couldn't find wild flowers, I would have bought some—or begged or stolen. I'd have brought her butter, tomatoes, apricots.... I wonder if I can find a way to give her what she needs once we get off by ourselves.

That is, if she'll come.

That is, if we can get away.

Odd to think she wouldn't be calling me Uncle anymore. If we're pretending to be man and wife, she'd better not.

Soon the candles are lit and I look in the windows. Rosalia is in a room alone just as I was hoping. That's the one room that had a dusty old bed left in it. Her leg is in an old-fashioned plaster cast. It's bulky and looks heavy. That might be a problem.

I try to raise the window but it's locked. I tap. Rosalia sees me. At first she doesn't recognize me. I must look a fright. Ruthson knew I needed to look badly beaten so as to prove that I'd been through a real fight to try to keep my group. He concentrated on my face, but he knew how to hit so I didn't lose any teeth or break my jaw. All of us men are careful about not doing any real harm at our inaugural fight. Still, it's been hard to eat. I try to smile, but it hurts too much.

Then she sees it's me. She probably recognizes my rag of a blue shirt that she's often darned and sewn buttons back on.

To get to the window, she has to move her leg with her hands. It falls off the side of the bed, bringing her down with it. She drags it to the window and lets me in.

We stand there hugging for a long time. As if we might never get another chance.

“Will you come?”

“Of course.”

I would have to fight again if Ruthson catches us, and this time he wouldn't be so kind, nor would he need to follow our conventions.

—

We know that small things, one at a time, a little here, a little there, could end a life such as ours even though other herd creatures serve as good examples.

—

I lift Rosalia back onto the bed.

I don't think I can carry her very far with this cast but I'm going to try.

I look for something to put things in to start packing up what Rosalia wants to bring but before I find anything, Grandma comes in.

She's so shocked at seeing me she drops the tea she's bringing. Good it was one of our tin cups.

She gives a squeak and waves her arms as if to erase me, then whispers, “Go. Get out the window. Fast. This is not to be even thought about. If you leave right now, I'll not tell the others.”

I've obeyed her and Former Grandma all of my adult life, but now I won't. Before she can yell I hold her mouth shut. Rosalia's clothes are neatly piled on the floor next to the bed. I gag Grandma with one of Rosalia's stockings. I tie her hands behind her with the ribbon that had tied back Rosalia's hair. I tie her feet with the other stocking. Then I lift Rosalia off the bed and prop her and her leg against the wall. I lift Grandma up on the bed. With that cast, Rosalia is much heavier than Grandma.

And all the time Rosalia looks at me, wide-eyed. I hope it's not with horror, though it could be—or that I'm crazy, which I am.

I manage to get Rosalia and her leg out the window. I manage to carry her all the way to the copse in the field before I collapse. Even just that far is almost more than I can handle.

We hug again.

“Are you still with me? I'll take you back if you want me to.”

“I want to go with you, but how can we? You can't.”

“Stay here, I'll find some kind of wheels. I'll steal a car, a burro. Something.”

“Uncle, please. The others ... the town's people will be after you if you do and we'll be after you, too.”

“Don't call me Uncle, call me....” But I don't know what.

She says, “My love.”

Such a shocking thing to say.

We stare at each other, both of us appalled. But it's true, this is what we've come to. Exclusive love. The most outrageous thing our kind can do. Except our love has been there right from the beginning. It's for her that I wanted to become part of the group in the first place.

How can I leave my love here by herself under these trees, helpless, while I go for some sort of transportation? And then we have no food or water and, and I just realize it, Rosalia hasn't much on. She's in her nightgown. What have I gotten her into?

"I'm sorry."

"I don't want anyone but you."

I lift her and take her farther into bushes to hide her.

"Marry me."

She starts to laugh. Here, half naked, broken leg, cold, no doubt wishing for that cup of tea she never got, she laughs. It's what I always liked about her.

"I'll find us a mule. Or what about a wheelbarrow?"

That makes her laugh even more.

—

We find Rosalia gone out the window and Grandma in a shocking situation. We mustn't put up with any such behavior. Though we have loved Janeson, and he has been a perfect mate to all of us, self-centered love can't be tolerated. He knows we can't let this go. How can he put Rosalia in such a position? And she must have consented. They're both at fault. And such likeable people. It's a shame.

And when I come back with an old rusty gardening cart she laughs all the more. Says, "It's better than nothing."

"Or is it?"

I also stole some clothes off a line. Boys jeans and a shirt. I'll have to cut the pants leg to fit it over the cast. All I have is my paring knife for cutting it.

Our women never dress in anything but skirts. This will help to hide her.

Rosalia laughs at herself in these clothes. I say I like her in them. It's true, I do.

She says they came looking for her with flashlights, but she held as still as a fawn and they didn't find her. They called and warned and begged her, for her own sake, to come back, but she kept silent. They decided we had already left the woods.

We'd like to wait and find something to eat, but we start out on the little road that goes beside the canal. Thank goodness there's a pretty good moon. I worry the road may be too bumpy for somebody with a broken leg, and I don't have any of those secret-woman-herbs for pain, but if she's hurting, she doesn't mention it. Instead she says, "I'm so happy." I don't say how I feel, which is worried, but I'm happy that she's happy.

We don't rest till morning.

We have a meeting about them. We can't agree. We seem to no longer be "we," but a group of "I's. If we go after them, who to send? Who would carry the ritual sickle? Our group is so split it's impossible to consult with all of us at the same time.

We see doubt on our faces, as if, Let them go, they're old, what harm can they do?

Grandma is supposed to be the final word, but even she (and even after the way Janeson treated her), can't seem to decide what to do. Perhaps she will leave us and carry the ritual sickle herself. But how can she do what needs to be done to someone we've loved?

And now MaryEllenson has run away to begin his roaming years. With the group split, we needed him. Perhaps MaryEllenson feared Ruthson even though Ruthson told us he would accept the boy. His mother, Mary Ellen, won't be much good for a while. We'll let her take time off.

Later in the afternoon we start up again, and I dare to go out on the main road where it's smoother. Practically right away, a pickup stops for us when the driver sees me wheeling Rosalia along. You'd have thought he'd leave a couple of tramps alone (specially with one of them beat up and the other with a broken leg) but he and his truck look as raggedy as we do.

"I can take you and your cart, too. Far as Williamsville."

That's a couple of hours down the road. It'll get us well away from the group and we won't be leaving tracks. I'll feel a lot safer.

I ask if my wife can ride in the front with him. (How good to be able to say, My wife.) "She'll be more comfortable there."

He helps me get Rosalia and her leg into the front seat.

He says, "Got yourself in a barroom fight, didya?"

"Sort of."

I and the cart ride in the back with two big sacks of potatoes. I hate to steal from somebody who's helping us, but I make a little hole and take—just one—for Rosalia.

The man lets us off at the near side of town just beyond a nice grove of broken down cottonwoods. I wonder if he knew we might want to camp-out in there.

We're both pretty hungry by now. (Not that we aren't used to being hungry). I don't have my knapsack and my sacks, but it won't be hard to find plastic bags lying around.

I back up the cart and wheel Rosalia into the cottonwoods. I have to clear out some of the underbrush before I can do it. Then I pull the brush back to hide her. I leave her the potato. We both know building

a fire to cook it, what with all these fallen down dead cotton wood branches, would be a disaster.

I tell her I'm sorry to be putting her through all this, and she says it's what she's always, *always* wanted. And, anyway, she says, "It's not that different from our usual way of life except it's just the two of us."

—

One of us must think of herself as if "I" and leave, but which of us could bear to do it? We'll vote and someone will have to go.

But Grandma shuts herself away, back in that very room where she got tied up. When she comes out she says, no need to vote. She'll go. "But," we say, "you're our oldest one. Who best knows our secrets? Who will tell us what to do next? It was bad enough losing Former Grandma in a land where we don't even know where we are."

She says, "I'll return as soon as I can. And if I find MaryEllenson I'll try to convince him to come back for one more year at least. None of them can have gotten far, what with Rosalia's broken leg, and then MaryEllenson is so ignorant of the other life. He won't even know enough to change his name."

We pack a bag for her, make sure she has something warm for the nights, and she walks away. We have guessed they'll follow the canal. We have guessed Janeson will have found some sort of cart, perhaps a wheelbarrow, in which to push Rosalia along. Perhaps they'll get a ride in the back of a truck. They'll hide in wooded vacant lots. Later, out of habit, they'll go up into the mountains. They'll be looking, hardly meaning to, for the Hidden Valley, even though they know, as do we, that perhaps it doesn't exist.

—

Before I leave to get us something to eat, I use my paring knife and trim off some of Rosalia's cast. They made it thicker than it needs to be. They didn't expect her to be traveling. She'll be able to swing it around easier now and she won't be quite so hard to carry.

This is a big town. Main Street must go on for a mile. I walk it, end to end, and then start back. At the smallest grocery store I ask if there are any over-ripe bananas they can spare, and they can. Also ripe avocados. While they're being so kind I use my sleight of hand and steal a small steak—right before their eyes.

We eat some of the bananas and avocados and then I wheel Rosalia out to the road. We want to find a place where we can build a fire to cook our food. I take a back road that seems to go around the town. We find a little park with fireplaces as if all set up just for us. It's late, so there's nobody around. We take a picnic table under an oak way at the back. Some of the fireplaces still have coals in them or half burned wood. I look for more wood. There isn't much around, but I find enough. We have a wonderful meal, the best in a long time. Then we sit at our table and watch the day fade. We have no plans for the night, but we don't care.

Rosalia leans her head on my shoulder. She says, "My dear," three times as if practicing. It doesn't come easy after all these years of not saying it. I have a hard time with it, too.

"My dear ... my dear, you've been so good to us all these years. How can they begrudge you a life of your own any way you want to live it? How can they think this is wrong?"

"But they can. And they will. And it *is* wrong. Love of this sort is not for the likes of us."

"It doesn't feel wrong."

"Nor to me."

Then she says again, "I'm so happy."

—

We spend the night right there, Rosalia in the cart and I on the table. The police come and shine a spotlight around the park. We wake up and get ready to be thrown out, but they don't get out of their cars or shine their lights this far back.

In the morning we have a breakfast of leftovers—almost as good as before.

I carry Rosalia to the little bathroom shed. Her leg is much easier to manage since I cut some of the cast off.

We discuss what we never thought to discuss before: our future. Would we like a town like this or a little

place in the mountains? Perhaps we should keep on looking for the Hidden Valley?

Rosalia says, "We're not towns people."

And I agree. "Except won't the others know that and find us all the more easily?"

Then she gasps and stares beyond me, wide eyed, and I turn, thinking they've found us already.

But here comes MaryEllenson. He's limping and dirty, his face tear-streaked. He looks as if he'll start to cry again any minute.

He told me he was thirteen but I didn't believe him. Now I even wonder if he's twelve. He shouldn't have left the group so soon. And boys his age are a big help. We were always sorry we only had one big boy left. Now he'll be ashamed to go back. They always are.

He collapses beside us. I bring him water from the faucet in the park. Rosalia pushes herself off the cart, leg first, wets a cloth and wipes his face.

It takes a while before he can talk and then it all pours out. "I lost you. I saw the truck pick you up. I walked all day. But it got dark. I didn't see your tracks again until this morning. I slept in those trees just before the town. I thought that's where you'd be. I thought we had a coalition."

Doesn't he realize everything has changed? That we're outlaws to our kind? That I and Rosalia are beyond all rules now? He shouldn't have anything to do with us. There's a ritual sickle on its way to my neck.

And since he found us so easily, that means anybody can. I was afraid of those cart tracks. I'll cut more off Rosalia's cast and carry her from now on. We should find a place in town to rest and let her heal. As soon as I get Rosalia settled, I'm going to spend a couple of hours wheeling that cart off in a wrong direction, toward the mountains. That should slow them down.

—

One must always shoo away the adolescent males and not let them come back until they learn the ways

of fathers. That is: Strength, patience, affection, and labor.

MaryEllenson made Janeson's tracks even easier to follow. His shoes are so worn out I can see the print of his left big toe. He was sloppy while Janeson was careful.

I have the ritual sickle handy. I have the ritual cap. Under all my black, I'm dressed in red. I have loved Janeson, but if we let this kind of thing happen, it'll be the end of us all. I must do it and I must advertise it afterwards so all of our kind will know.

Before we start out we give MaryEllenson our last banana and a lesson. "You're...." But what? "Bobby Ellison. I'm...." What I used to be in my roaming years? "...John Johnson. And this is Mrs. Johnson. Or Aunt Rosalia if you'd like. I can still be Uncle, but Uncle Jack."

More lesson: "If they find us, *you're* safe. We're not."

With MaryEllenson helping, we move faster, first back to that grove of broken-down cottonwoods. But whoever is coming after us will know that's where we are. We'll spend the day here, at the edge of the road, not hiding. I'll go to town again and ... Bobby will stay here. I give him the job of hiding the tracks of the cart.

This time I stay off Main Street. I'm looking for a place to bring Rosalia. I don't find one, but I have to move her. In town with its paved roads and sidewalks, we'll be able to hide better than in any vacant lot or along dirt roads.

There's a house with nobody at home and a garage that faces an alleyway in back. There's a boat in there, but room for us, too. That will make a good temporary stop while we look for something better.

At the other, bigger grocery store I get some too-old fruit and day-old bread, some milk that's out of date but only by a day. I palm some butter. We won't need a fire for supper.

After we eat, I hide the cart in with the tumble-down cottonwoods. I'll take it into the hills later. It's well after midnight before we take off for the garage. Rosalia and MaryEllenson don't know enough about the other people to realize how odd we look to them. When I say we have to come into town in the middle of the night, they trust me.

I carry Rosalia. Her leg is much easier to manage than it was. Whenever a car comes we hide, but few cars come.

We bed down on the cement floor of the garage. We're so tired we can sleep anywhere. I think MaryEllenson ... Bobby ... is crying. I feel bad for him, but then I had to go through my roaming days all alone. I cried a lot, too. But he has us to help him—at least for a while.

If I reach out to him it would embarrass him, so I let him cry. Too bad he's big for his age. Everybody thinks he's older and expects him to act it. I never had that problem.

In the morning I climb up and look in the boat. I should have done that before. There are several flotation cushions in there. Tonight we'll sleep in luxury.

One of Bobby's jobs is going to be watching out for the people of that house coming home. And when they come, finding me and helping us get out of that garage. Though since it only holds their boat we may not have to hurry. Besides, we don't have anything to move but ourselves.

The people do come back, but they don't check on their boat and they don't use it. Only once does the owner come in to get some tools. He's so busy getting the tool that he doesn't notice Rosalia. She said she sat, again, as still as a fawn that's left alone.

In spite of my beat-up face and that I'm starting to grow a beard, I get a job in the little grocery store where they were so nice with bananas and avocados. With my first pay, I buy us underwear and shirts at the second hand store. Later I get blankets. I'm tired of living by stealing. I stole something for Rosalia, in case she's in pain and doesn't say so. I want that to be the last.

Bobby works in the grocery store part time and then goes around town asking for odd jobs. It's a good way for him to get to know the way the other people live. I tell him to keep an eye out for good places for us to move to. We want a place where we can stay put without fear of being found out.

We've been here under the boat a few weeks now. I've cut off even more of Rosalia's cast. Every evening I help her get used to walking. Best of all, she and I are beginning to appreciate being together

without the group. We allow ourselves to show affection in front of Bobby. Our group always did show affection with children, but he's not seen that with grownups. I should talk to him one of these days. Maybe first let him see more of the way the others live. He'll see there are other possible ways of being.

Now we hold hands, sleep in each other's arms. When she's cold I put her on top of me so as to keep her off the cement floor. We've found a few secret times to make love, though we don't hold back on kissing in front of Bobby. He watches as if he doesn't know whether to be horrified or not. Would he reveal us to Grandma out of indignation? Does he know what revealing us would lead to?

His roaming years are starting off a lot easier than our usual way. Most of us go off alone. I'm glad he's with us. He's too young to be on his own and he's a good help. He's earned almost as much as I have. People feel sorry for him because he's a skinny, ragged kid and always give him extra. We're not dirty, though, and our clothes are patched and darned. We have our ways to live up to. Rosalia has cut our hair.

When we want to cook we go up to that park with the fireplaces. It's one of our favorite spots. Now that it's warmer there are often people there. We don't always get our favorite table.

We find an unused shed not far from our park. It belonged to the park, for tools and such, but they have a new metal one right next to it and never bothered to take this old one down. It's smaller than the garage with the boat, but probably safer.

By now we have plastic bags with our extra clothes. Rosalia can hobble holding on to my arm. When we decide to move, she's walking well enough for us to take the long way round, along Main Street. We look in all the store windows. We sit on a bench and people-watch. My boss at the grocery store comes by and I introduce Rosalia. I say, "My wife."

He says, a man has been looking for me. Could they have sent Ruthson?

"Is it a big man with a scar on his forehead?"

"No, a thin little man. Hunched over."

Grandma! Perhaps it's just as well we're moving.

“I told him I didn’t know where you lived, but if I’da known I wouldn’ta told, anyway. Come by the store. I’ll have something for your wife.”

He’s a good boss. When we come by he has a little bag of fruit with flowers laid on top. I buy us hamburger and a can of beans. By now we have a pan.

We settle in. We find a way to bar the door. Bobby goes back and steals three of the boat cushions. He says he got too used to them. That family doesn’t seem to use the boat so we can probably return them when we leave, before they notice they’re gone. We don’t want to stay in this town forever.

We have our corner and Bobby has his, though he seems to think he and I should be together and the woman should be set apart as it always is in the group. When there’s a coalition the men are always together.

We set our bags in a row between us and Rosalia hangs up our towel to give us even more privacy though it’s still not much. Even so, we do dare to make love there, after we think Bobby is asleep.

—

Did Bobby betray us on purpose out of disgust for the way we’ve been showing our love? Or did he wake up and was shocked at us actually making love right when he was there? If Grandma came by the store she’d have recognized him right away, though maybe not me, what with my beard. And with this easy life, I’ve gotten fatter. We all have. Rosalia ... I suppose she’s not beautiful and probably never has been, but I liked her looks from the beginning. Or maybe it was the look in her eyes ... always interested. Maybe it was how she laughed. And now she looks healthier than ever, rested, calmer ... Beautiful! At least to me. Perhaps it’s the happiness I see on her face.

It was late and all the picnickers had gone home. We were at our favorite table looking up at the stars, our coals still glowing in the grill. We’d had steaks again, this time not stolen.

Rosalia sits on the bench and I’m sitting on the table. I pull her closer so she rests her head on my knee.

But someone all in black is standing at the far side of our oak tree—not moving, but I see the glint of what’s left of our fire in her glasses and there’s a flash of metal. I hiss a warning.

When she hears that she walks right up to us.

At first I don't recognize that it's Grandma even though I'd been warned she'd been dressed as a man.

She takes off a black hat and reveals the ritual red and gold cap of killing. She already holds the ceremonial sickle. Is it to be so soon?

She thanks MaryEllenson for doing his duty and predicts great things for him. She's sorry he had to see ... love. She can hardly say the word. "This ... behavior ... and at your age." She tells him to return to the group. She says he's too young for his roaming years. She says there's no shame in coming back. Besides, he'll be a hero since he's saving our way of life. Then she begins talking in the old language. It's as if she's praying.

I interrupt her. I say, "Rosalia has done nothing. I forced her."

Of course she doesn't believe that for a minute.

"I've seen you both from the start. I predicted there'd be trouble. I'm not like Former Grandma. I wouldn't have let it go on as far as it did. But you've been a good Big Man. If you leave right now and don't ever come near us again, and if Rosalia returns with me, I'll say I did what had to be done in the way it had to be, and finished it to my own satisfaction. I'll not tell them how.

Rosalia whispers a "No" that's little more than a breath. It's as if she doesn't dare say, No, in front of a Grandma.

—

Our ways are common to all herds. Common to horses, common to lions, and, in a different form, common to elephants. Even the beach master, lord of his beach, lives as we do. Even baboons. How did humans come to such unnatural ways?

It's important to preserve the sensible, the logical, and if not by us, who then?

—

Rosalia says, "If he dies, I'll die with him."

After she says that, I feel ready to take on everybody. We *will* be together, one way or another.

I say, "But what if we *both* leave and *both* never come back?"

"Happiness isn't for those who break the covenants."

Grandma is still spry. She's a lot younger than her big sister, Former Grandma. She can do whatever needs to be done. But if I harm Grandma what will become of the group? Besides, though I liked Former Grandma best ... (when there was no place to go, it was she who led us into the unknown with courage and wisdom) ... even so, I do appreciate Present Grandma for all she's trying to do for our ways. I even appreciate how she had to leave the group and come chasing after me. This can't be a very pleasant task. But covenant or not, if *I* had to do it, I wouldn't.

I take the ritual position of submission. I bare my neck. But I'm not on my knees. I'm braced and ready.

When Grandma swings the sickle back in order to get a stroke powerful enough, it's as if, until this very moment, the others didn't really understand that such a thing would happen, even Bobby who betrayed us.

Grandma pauses, says the ritual words. In that moment both MaryEllenson and Rosalia jump forward.

I jump, too.

—

Who would have thought that Rosalia and I would find the Hidden Valley all by ourselves, and that I, myself, would become the guardian of it?

We find a road that's hardly ever used, and there's the need for an old man to watch the turnoff. There's a tumbledown cottage and a garden in need of care. Farther on, a cluster of cottages of stones the same

color as the stone around them. Water runs down from three waterfalls just as described in our stories. A good place to die and be swept out to sea. We recognize it right away.

(First thing, even before cleaning up the garden and repairing the house, we put up a moon watching platform.)

To ourselves, we call our land The Place, all of us here do, but to others we call it Nowhere so no one will come by. As I watch our road I always say, "This other fork leads to Nowhere." Few people pass this way, I don't have to be on duty all the time. And the sign at the fork points left and says NOWHERE. Who would go there?

Rosalia doesn't call me Uncle anymore. She calls me Dear and Husband. It's good we're no longer wandering because Rosalia's leg never came quite right. She can hobble, but not far. I carry her when we go up into the hills to gather berries. I carry her to the river to wash the clothes.

Bobby lives with us, but he'll be moving on in a year or so. He wants to keep up the old ways. He wants his roaming years. But considering what happened he can't ever go near our old group. He was thinking of changing his name to Rosaliason, but Rosalia thought he would do better changing it to Janeson and be my nephew.

He's part of our secret. A big part. If not for him, I don't know what would have happened. And he knows where Grandma ended up.... At least she's headed towards the sea.

Rosalia wonders, should we go back and tell the others we found the Hidden Valley? But I don't think so. We'd get in trouble. I don't tell her, but, if they ever come to my crossroads, I'll pull my hat low, take my dollar, and send them in the wrong direction.

—

What we know so far is that, at death, a waterfall will do for sweeping us away, though an irrigation ditch might also serve for us to be swept out to some sea or other.

—

We never had a chance to give our Janeson his leaving gifts, among which was the shawl Rosalia knitted

for him long ago. We feel bad about that. We know how much he loved it. Though if they're together (and we shouldn't hope for it, but secretly we do), she'll be knitting him another.

—

What we know is that even in the middle of nowhere, there's beauty when you least expect it: top a hill and suddenly whole fields of poppies as far as the eye can see, or wake up early to the smell of sage after a rain....