



Somewhere in
an Oregon Valley

Jon Remmerde

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[I Include the table of contents in the sample to give a further idea of what the book is about.](#)

Whitney Valley

February 27. I kept two kerosene lamps turned up high on my work table and wrote into the early hours of the morning. About three a.m., I took my guitar from its case and played and sang several songs, softly, because my wife, Laura, slept in our bed six feet from me, and our daughters, Juniper and Amanda, nine and seven then, five years into our time in Whitney Valley, slept in the next room, twenty feet from me.

I built a song about spring coming to our mountain valley, and I wrote down the words and chords. I fed wood to the fire in the back room heater, walked through Juniper and Amanda's room, and fed the front room heater. I walked out onto the front porch and shone my flashlight on the thermometer. Ten degrees below zero.

A waning moon hung high in the clear sky. Snow two feet deep covered the wild mountain meadow around our old, ramshackle house. The meadow sloped a hundred and fifty yards from our house down to the north fork of the Burnt River. Across the river from the house, the meadow rose to the base of the ridge, about a quarter of a mile from the river, where the forest west of us began. Soft moonlight reflected bright from the snow. Densely growing willow bush along the river shadowed the iced-over stream black in moonlight.

A killdeer's insistent call carried across the snow-covered meadow and startled me. The bird had come north too soon. Surely it would freeze.

My breath condensed to ice in my beard and mustache. Cold drove toward my bones. I walked back into the house and checked my daughters. They stretched out straight in their beds. Had they been too cold, they would have curled up tightly, and I would have added more blankets.

The next night, the first Canada geese returned from south and flew above the meadow, calling loudly. Two days later, four killdeers circled above the snow, calling. These small, long-legged, grey, black, and white, gentle birds of the phalarope family, are misnamed. Their distinctive, high-pitched, two-syllable call doesn't say, "Kill deer. Kill deer. It says, "Shakespeare. Shakespeare," though at times, I'm just as sure it says, "John Donne. John Donne."

Migrating birds arriving in Whitney Valley when nights were still quite cold seemed to do well. A hundred yards below the house, a seep spread water over a wide, marshy area on its way to the river. The warmth of the water from that seep melted the snow. Grass sent up green shoots. Willows opened bright green leaves. More than a dozen marshy seeps and springs surround the meadow. Birds make their living in the melted-off areas below the springs and seeps until the meadow clears of snow.

More birds flew back from their winter homes as spring greened and softened Whitney Valley. A robin perched in willows in warm sunshine early one March morning. Two geese stood face to face on snow by the marsh below the house and honked at each other as if each thought the other hard of hearing.

Juniper, square shouldered, with short brown hair, our tomboy, and Amanda, feminine even then, thin and tall, with long, golden red hair, explored the sun-bright day.

Their personalities and interests often contrasted sharply. Amanda liked dolls and dresses, but Juniper wouldn't have anything to do with either. Juniper sought adventure, and Amanda tried to keep up, though she sometimes wished for a more conservative existence centered more in our home, concentrating more on quiet observation and a little less on active participation.

But Juniper and Amanda shared their lives with each other on the remote ranch in northeastern Oregon's Blue Mountains. Through the eight and a half years we took care of the ranch, they knew few other children. The children they did know, they seldom saw, so they worked through their contrasts in personalities and interests and stayed best friends and constant companions. They shared their education at home, their interest in acting out some of their wide reading, their interest in drawing, painting, and writing, and their interest in the natural world around them in Whitney Valley.

I watched them walk across snow to the edge of the marsh. I called them, and they stopped and waited for me as I crossed the garden on the crust on two feet of snow and stepped over the fence. "Did you get water in your boots?"

Juniper said, "No. On our boots, but not in our boots."

"Part of that marsh is deep, soft mud. You could sink way over your boots. You should stay out of there."

Amanda asked, "Is it quicksand?"

"Very like quicksand, for quite a ways down. I sank over my short waders once, to here. It was messy and cold, with my boots full of water and mud. I had a hard time getting out of there."

Amanda said, "If you get in quicksand, you should lie down and wiggle to the edge."

I broke through the crust on snow and sank to mid thigh. I lay down on the snow and rolled to the side to get my leg out. "You mean wiggle out of quicksand like this?"

Amanda looked into the hole in the snow I left when I pulled my leg out. "Look, there's grass down there." We all looked into the hole. An open space between the snow and the ground harbored grass as green as spring.

I said, "That's the vole's winter world. They stay active under the insulation of the snow." Wind rose and carried some of the warmth from sunshine away. "I'm not dressed for cold wind. I'm going to go back to the house and write. Are you two going to be warm enough?"

Amanda said, "Except my hands."

"You can use my gloves. They're too big, but they'll keep your hands warm. Will they work?" I handed her my gloves. She put them on and held her hands out in front of her. Her hands looked huge. We laughed.

"They'll work. As long as I don't try to pick anything up, they'll work."

"How about you, Juniper? Are you warm enough?"

"Yes."

"I'll depend on you to get more clothes or come in if you get too cold."

"Okay."

I walked around the edge of the marsh, back into the house, sat down, and wrote at the table in the back room. I wrote about the threads of meaning that knit together our daily existence. I wrote about wild animals we saw in Whitney Valley. I wrote about our existence without plumbing or electricity, about Juniper and Amanda learning at home rather than in public school, about our existence almost outside the consumer culture. We lived close to poverty in material terms, but we harvested rich rewards daily. Our family stayed closely knit in a culture where strong, positive values centered around families seemed to have some difficulty surviving.
