

## **Frozen Eucalyptus Warms Us through a Cold Winter**

If Laura and I had waited until we were in good financial condition, we never would have married. I was still healing after a drunk driver hit me, and I couldn't work eight hours in a row. I worked odd jobs, as many hours as I could work, in Willows, in the Sacramento Valley, and we married.

We found a large, old house on Road V, east of town. Trees grew along some of the ditches through farmland. Green grass began to sere toward winter. I called the owner and arranged to meet him at the house.

Laura and I waited in early morning sunshine by the big green house. Geese and swans flew up from the wildlife refuge south of us, held tight formation as they flew north, up the wide valley, and settled to feed in rice paddies, fields of corn, fields of hay, in lush grasses along irrigation ditches. Red-winged blackbirds flew into bushes near the house.

Roger drove in, and the three of us walked through the empty, long-unused, dusty-smelling house. Sun shone through windows upstairs, with glass broken out, shattered across the floor. Dust stirred by our activity drifted through slanting sunlight in the hollow-sounding inside of the house. Roger said, "You'd have to fix broken windows first and get some kind of heat. The chimney's good. You could put a woodstove in and put a stovepipe into the chimney downstairs."

We agreed Laura and I could live in the house for low rent. I would replace the stairs to the second floor, level the house that sagged in the middle, and sheet rock the upstairs rooms. A little at a time, I would do enough work to pay part or all of the rent each month. I was glad to make the commitment, move in, and start work on the place. I could probably drive tractor part time on some near farm for income.

Laura found part time work in Willows. She stayed with her mother several days a week because we didn't have a car. Getting home from work and back to town the next day was difficult.

I cleaned up broken glass and put new glass in the windows upstairs by the light of setting sun. Winter approached. Nights were cold. Days stayed cool. The house we lived in had no heat. I found a sheet metal, airtight, wood-burning heater in a store in Willows, at a very good price, but I had no money.

I had worked for Jack making wooden planters that summer. I'd been willing to wait for pay for the last few days I worked, because he was using all the money he could get together to change from building planters to building houses. Now, I tracked Jack through several building projects, found him on a new roof, and he happily climbed down a ladder and gave me the money he owed me. He said, "You can't live out there and freeze when you have money coming. I appreciate you waiting this long."

The year before, the temperature fell to 25 degrees in the northern Sacramento Valley, and the cold killed most of the eucalyptus trees, that grew to be large trees through many years of warmer weather.

Laura's brother loaned me his pickup and a chain saw. The farmer who owned the place next to ours cut down frost-killed eucalyptus trees that lined his property along Road V, and he gave me permission to cut firewood from the down trees. It was a good place to learn to use a chain saw, with the trees already down and no rush about cutting the wood.

Cold north wind blew chips and sawdust away from the chain ripping down through the wood I cut with the screaming saw. I cut firewood lengths, hauled them home in Joe's pickup, and split them in our yard.

The large house, with big rooms, had begun to feel cavernous and forbidding as days and nights stayed colder and I made all the arrangements for a heater and cut wood to fuel the heater. I drove into town, bought the stove, set it up in our house, and built a fire. Heat radiating from the stove slowly and gently filled the house. I took my jacket off. The house began to shed its forbidding air.

I welcomed Laura home from work at dusk into a warm house. We began to feel the potential for home in the large green house at the intersection of two paved roads in farmland. Together, we soaked up heat from the stove that cold night, warm with the knowledge that small events, like acquiring our stove and wood to feed it and feeling the way it and the work it took to meld the heater into the house and complete the house warmed us with affluence of existence and appreciation.