

The twins caught a little flu just after the caravan left Winnipeg for a long trek south to Bigmouth. In just over a year, Ruth Aniram had adjusted to the challenges of caring for her two little ones, and ~~was proudly to take~~ took the illness in stride. The other women traveling with the six-vehicle group of nomads ~~traveling~~ between walled cities were happy to help as well.

Ruth was the only member of the caravan who didn't ~~have~~ a large, rolling house. She ~~was~~ still ~~running~~ the smallish rig that had been some kind of sports car before the Fall, ~~the one that~~ she'd been given when Mim Reddy had tearfully exiled her from Astoria. With the fussy twins nestled in the rear seat that she'd converted into a protected crib, it was snug, but it was home ~~and~~ Ruth was finding that she loved being outside of the walled cities, flitting from town to town through the wild zones in between.

~~She'd~~ been a soldier and ~~a~~ guard in Astoria, and that had more than prepared her for any of the uncertainties—or nasty people—that the caravan met. She had branded the “A” of Astoria’s flag on the car’s dash, to remind her of where she’d come from, even though she had no intention of going back. She was a scavenger now; she could handle sick children.

~~But~~ coming down out of the Rockies several days after Winnipeg, ~~though~~, the twins took a turn for the worse—first Holly, and then Ivy within an hour. Their mildly feverish lethargy gave way to ~~terrible~~ awful, choking coughs. The sound was so terrible—invisible hands, strangling her children—that Ruth stopped the car abruptly, sliding to the side of the time-faded road.

The rest of the caravan stopped. She waved the adults back, and only Juno, the caravan’s leader and matriarch, approached. She shook her head as soon as she saw the kids. “Whooping cough,” she said. “That’s bad.”

“That’s very bad,” Ruth agreed. The caravan had been skirting the larger towns. “Who hasn’t got their vaccs?” She’d been vaccinated, but the twins hadn’t been born when she’d left Astoria.

“Only me and Joe got them in Winnipeg,” Juno said. They ~~had been~~ were the only ones who’d gone into town proper. “None of the children have had them.”

Ruth made her decision. “I’ll cut east, to Dallas. The rest of you head south without me.”

“That’s three days’ run,” Juno said.

Ruth was pretty sure she could do it in two, but didn’t boast. “We’re past the worst of the desert pirates. I’ll be fine, but I don’t want your little ones getting sick.” The twins had been keeping to themselves since falling ill, so there was a good chance they hadn’t passed on the contagious infection.

“Dangerous.”

“I’ll be fine,” Ruth said again. “There are fuel stops along the way, right?” She was already thinking ahead. It was how she’d gotten by, after being ~~(effectively)~~ abandoned by Deighton, the twin’s father, and then by Astoria itself. Traveling with the caravan had been pleasing but their time together was clearly coming to an end. She could make it to Dallas quickly enough, and get vaccs and medicine for her children.

Juno nodded. “I’ll sketch you a map.” She returned to her rig for paper and charcoal. When she returned, big Tracey was following her. He had a pack and his rifle over his shoulder, and Ruth could guess what was coming next. “Tracey will go with you,” Juno said. It wasn’t a request, and it wasn’t an offer made lightly. Though he wasn’t family, the caravan didn’t have that many able-bodied men to go around, Ruth knew.

~~The caravan~~ ~~It also didn't~~ ~~doesn't~~ have many unattached fertile women, ~~either~~. Ruth mused ~~observed~~ cynically. ~~Tracey~~ ~~No~~ doubt Tracey hoped to endear himself to her with assistance and a lack of competition. She wasn’t too jaded to accept the ~~help, but~~ help but had no pretensions that his offer was anything more than such a gambit. He was pleasant enough, if a bit taciturn,

Commented [LH1]: ‘Traveling is used twice in one sentence. Can you change one of them to something else?’

Commented [LH2]: ‘Have’ is bland. Occupy? Live in?’

Commented [LH3]: ‘that’ works technically, but felt clunky after the comma.

Commented [LH4]: Trying out ‘awful’ here, since ‘terrible’ is used again quite soon.

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Commented [LH5]: The men and women situation is being expressed as a fact Ruth knows. An internal thought on this feels appropriate.

but not much stood out about him. ~~H-and he~~ showed her the cursory interest that men showed all fertile women, but not much more.

She had no reason to refuse the offer, so she just nodded at Tracey and thanked Juno for the map. “No time for a long goodbye,” she said. “I need to make miles.”

“Safe travels,” Juno replied. “It’s been good sharing the dirt with you.”

“You as well.” The response was automatic; Ruth’s mind was already back in the car, closing the distance between her sick children and Dallas. They were back on the road and moving almost before Juno ~~returned-made it back~~ to her rig.

The coughing bothered Tracey. He tried not to let on that it did, but she could tell ~~as he~~ ~~was growing-grew~~ weary of the charade after a couple of hours. “Can’t you do something about it?” he asked ~~her~~.
ouble.”

Commented [LH6]: Changed from ‘returned’ to more clearly show she’d actively been walking back.