

THE  
**BRAIDED PATH**

**DONNA GLEE WILLIAMS**



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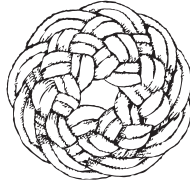
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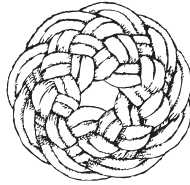
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# DEDICATION

For Dortha Dell Meade Williams.  
She held my hand and let me go.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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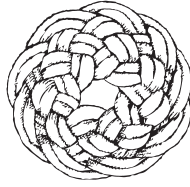
to see excellence in the arts, we should all support these creative hatcheries with our money, time, and energy.

To the thousands of menders who betook themselves to our beloved New Orleans after Katrina to help put the world back together.

And to the readers who venture out with me onto The Braided Path:

Thank you!

—Donna Glee Williams, 2013



# THE BRAIDED PATH

**A**LWAYS IN FRONT OF YOU AND ALWAYS BEHIND, sometimes trailing over the rich, giving soil of the village shelves, but mostly over stone. Some of the stone is the color of those roses that can't decide between red and yellow. Some is motley gray. Some is black, with bits of crystal that twinkle like something in a clear night's sky. Some is almost the color of cream. Some of it breaks into chips so sharp they can cut flesh. Some grinds underfoot into a powdery sand that can slide beneath your boot. Sometimes the path travels not over solid rock, but over an accretion of bits that have rolled downworld from somewhere high above.

Sometimes it is so broad, this path, that two can walk side by side, shielded from the great fall by a hedge of wind-wizened trees. Sometimes it is narrow steps, chipped out of the living stone. Sometimes it is just a rope, dangling across a wide rock face, where walking becomes a matter of trust: in your grip, in your boot-soles, and in the rope as your own weight presses you to the wall of the world. And there are some places where it can be nearly flat, startlingly so, making for easy walking for a time. Always changing but always itself, the path wanders across the rippling curtain of the world, stitching together the whole.

The villages are there, along the path. In the villages, walkers can find their rest at the end of a long day's travel. They can throw down their packs, take food and drink, tell their stories, then sleep and dream.



When did Len first see how far the path would take them on the great wall of the world? With all the switchbacks on the path, who can see ahead?

No Far-Walker had been born under the apple trees of Home Village for many years. But everyone knew Shreve Far-Walker, from Third Village Down, who often passed through as she carried loads between High and Low. When nightfall caught her near Len's Home Village, she would stay over, taking dinner and giving back news. She wasn't by nature a talkative person, but she understood the duties of a guest. Len would crowd in with the others to hear Shreve's account of the Far Villages and the strange stories they told there.

So Len had some notion of the life of a Far-Walker, though her own range was a modest seven villages. (Climbing up beyond her limits made her pant for breath like an old woman; going down past them left her sweaty and sticky.) When Cam began to show unusual aptitude for climbing high and descending very low along the path, she wondered. Like all parents, Len had observed Cam closely from his earliest tottering steps as he followed her to First Village Up. She had shared discreet smiles with the other parents as their young ones tried on the new costume of adulthood to see how it would fit them, daring each other to range ever farther from Home Village on spurious errands

There would be a jaunt proposed, a clamor of assent, and a rush like a group of startled goats when Cam and his friends hurried off. No packing or planning was needed as they carried no real loads and it was understood that they would stay in whichever village they were closest to when night fell. Families who housed a youth from another village tonight knew that their own children would find food and a pallet where they needed it tomorrow, and the balance would be kept.

Len was a maker of rope and twine. She prospered on the fiber of a certain nettle that grew all along the path near Home Village, thinning out above Second Village Up and abruptly disappearing in the shade of the trees around First Village Down. Her house was full of this little plant: baskets of stems, waiting to be broken; fringes of washed fiber draped everywhere, waiting to be plied; and coils of finished cords



and ropes of all sizes, waiting to be carried up or down the trail for trade.

Len was a fine crafter, with powerful, knowing hands that meted out the strength of the fiber smoothly and evenly. She did a good business from Fourth Village Down to Second Village Up, selling her rope and cordage and the intricate knots she created as ornaments and symbols.

Len knew her ropes were much valued in the lower villages because they resisted rot so well, but she did not care to take them there herself; she knew her limits. She would have been glad to find her son's range ran a little lower than her own. But it would be selfish for a mother to push or wish a thing on a child for her own convenience. So Len Rope-Maker held her heart open, and waited to see what would emerge from the clouds.

When little Cam let go of her hand and ran off to explore the world without her, she watched after him and waited. (It was a safe place, a place where a knee-high stone rim had been built between the path and the long fall.)

And Cam ran back to her with sparkling eyes, crying out, "As far as the big rock! I went that far, Len!" And she set aside the long, blond fibers she was plaiting and swept him up and made much of him ("As far as the rock!") and solemnly asked him for news.

It was bittersweet for Len when Cam and his friends got older and began to be away more. Len's little house was too silent at night without his breathing, so she got herself a cat. She named it Goose because she enjoyed standing at her door at dinner-time, calling "Goose! Goose! Oh, Goose!" and having the little gray cat run home to her.

Like other parents — maybe more than other parents — Len worried, as the jaunts got longer and Cam was away for days at a time. Days and nights with no word, only her trust in him to rely on. Sometimes there were dreams of a foot slipping on rolling gravel, and then a wailing fall. The world was steep and it happened sometimes.

But there was no need for her to say, "Be careful." Every child had been a part of the sad gift-giving when some son or daughter of Home Village did not return. Many youngsters wore shirts or coats or hats they had received on these occasions. Some had already shared the work of building the cairns that marked where someone had fallen off the path, of piling

up the stones: the black stones, the orange, the chalk-white, the gray. Around Len's Home Village, the stones were gray. Granite gray. The shoulders of the world were steep and a fall was almost always equal to a disappearance. The cairns were raised in memory and warning.

The young people of the villages planted their feet carefully and took the dangers of the world in stride.

As the months and years of youthful questing passed, limits began to emerge, a dim map of how far each person was willing to go. One of Cam's friends might decline to join an expedition to gather ice near a certain far Up village, because they could never stay warm that high, or because the thin air made them breathless.

And then someone might refuse to go along on a jaunt to a party far Below, saying that it got too hot down there at this time of year, and who could sleep properly with the heat and the racket of the frogs?

How to feel about these limits was a great riddle to Len. On the one hand, a person with many villages had more choices in every way. Such a person might gather feathers near a Low village, and white ore up High, and still enjoy the apples and the good potters' clay near Home Village. A person with many villages could choose his work based on what brought him delight, instead of on what was close at hand. That person could live where he wanted to, and travel up and down trading his wares without bleeding away the profits in carriers' fees. And, just as important, that person would have many villages to visit to look for a partner if he wanted one.

On the other hand, there was a lot to be said for finding that your son would have few villages, for then he would be much more likely to settle in Home Village or nearby. With family close at hand, there could be visiting and working together and sharing grandchildren— when it came to washing diapers and keeping babies fed, you needed all the help you could get. And, as the years went by and her legs would carry her to fewer villages, Cam and she wouldn't lose each other— or not so fast, anyway.

So what should a mother wish for? And did it matter? Children and wishes went their own ways.

So Len waited and watched her son avidly. He was her only; his father had fallen off the world when Cam was three and

the young widow had never found another partner, although she liked to dance with Fane Soap-Maker when dancing was afoot.

Of course, Cam still came home between journeys — it unraveled her heart to think of the day when soon he might go home to someone else's house — and his mother would set aside the knot she was weaving and he would wash at the spout and they would cook dinner together and she would ask him for news. This was no longer just a courtesy. Cam had grown tall and strong and he was walking to villages that she had never visited, even in the vigor of her first youth.

Sometimes now, Len met Cam coming or going on the path itself as she carried her ropes and twines and knots from village to village. It always startled and delighted her to see his form materialize out of the mists that ranged up and down the world, sometimes cloud overhead, sometimes cloud way down below, and sometimes fog right where she stood. The fogs could make the well-known path mysterious, strange, hard to predict, but Len could always recognize that one long stride, her son's stride, unmistakable among all others, coming towards her at the head of a dim line of walkers. She would greet him sedately, because he was with friends, and they might walk together for a while, if they were going in the same direction. But she would be slower, carrying a load, and soon she would step off the path to let him go ahead with his friends. He would kiss her cheek and she would dust the dew from his hair, and then the youths would file politely around and leave her behind to continue on her laden way.

It came to her that whenever she saw Cam on the path, he was always at the front of the group. She could not remember that it had been that way among her own age-mates, that one person was always in the lead. But Cam was.

As Cam's friends found their ranges, many of them settled on their livelihoods as well, and began to carry real loads up and down the world. There was some excitement at shouldering their first adult freight, especially when this involved something fragile. (Much teasing would be visited upon a carrier who slipped or tripped under a pack of crockery or eggs.)

When a young person began to carry real loads, the challenge of walking changed, becoming more a matter of weight than of distance. And with the question of distance settled,

they became less inclined to walk for the sake of walking. But Cam still took to the path, Cam and a handful of his friends still reaching for their limits. Sometimes the old group still walked together to the nearer villages, for friendship's sake. But Len Rope-Maker became aware that Cam's companions for the expeditions to the Far Villages dwindled over time to just a few: Karri and Fox and Hull and Gret. And if they were heading downworld, it might be only Fox and Hull.

As Rope-Maker, it was to Len that people came when they were ready to be partners. There were many reasons for binding lives together, but when the couple was young, it was usually about one thing only. Len had been young once (so *long* ago!)— she didn't blame them. But she would put on her stern face and talk to them about the knot called the Never-Ending Braid. "This isn't easy, you know. It's not *supposed* to be. And it has to be done right, so that it lays flat and neat on your partner's arm. You have to get it tight enough so that it won't slip off and get lost, but not so tight that it's going to constrict when it swells up in a rain." She told them that the Never-Ending Braid chafes sometimes, no matter how well-tied, especially when it is new. But, she admitted, "It does get softer as time goes by." She showed them the one on her own wrist, tied there by Cam's father. She ran two fingers over the smooth, interlocking cord, and remembered.

"Don't squander my time and twine on the Never-Ending Braid unless you are sure and certain," she would say severely. "Once tied, it's like two rat's nests to undo, unless you use a blade, which would be a wicked murder of fine cordage." But if the young people seemed sincere and their ranges overlapped enough for a fair chance at a happy life together, Len Rope-Maker taught them the secret of the Never-Ending Braid, and checked their work, and helped them until they got it right, finished with the ends tucked hidden in the weave. Len would stand at her door and watch as the young couple walked away. Holding hands, usually. And they would be seen to wear the knot, and it would be known that there was a new partnership on the world.

So Len Rope-Maker knew when some of Cam's age-mates began to partner and she wondered whom Cam might choose. She thought sometimes it might be Fox, because they still walked far together even after many of their friends settled

down. But then Fox would sit down to share a stew with them, and they would laugh hard, and Len would think, "No, it is friendship." And then the two would stride off together side by side, where the path was wide through Home Village, and one of them might take the other's hand, and Len would think, "Yes, it is love." And then they would be out of sight, and gone for many days, leaving her to wonder.

Love. Friendship. Friendship. Love.

In this way, work and walking and waiting braided together the life of Len Rope-Maker as her son came near to being eighteen years old. Hull found her limits, and Karri too, and now it was only Cam and Fox who pushed higher and lower on the path, always together, going further than they'd gone before.

One afternoon, Cam returned after being away for many days. Fox was not with him, which was unusual. The two had the habit of eating together at Len's house on their first night back in Home Village. But on this day, Cam came alone. Hmm...

He leaned his hickory walking stick against the side of the house and threw down his pack, and then himself, onto the steps of the little porch where Len was washing nettle-fibers. She rose and dried her hands, and sat down beside him, giving him a quick one-armed hug in greeting. The speckled hen pecked gently at the stones around their feet, searching for some overlooked thing.

"What's the news, my traveler?"

Cam looked at his feet. He looked at his hands. His fingernails were grimy from the trail. He didn't look at Len, but spoke to the wood of the bottom step.

"Fox turned back."

Len started to speak, to ask for more, but she saw her son slumped there on the steps. Something had happened. Be still. Wait.

He went on, low-voiced. "People told us there was a hot spring just up the path, three hours above Seventeenth Village Up..." Seventeenth Village Up. As high as that. Len felt a kick in her heart, like when Cam had been inside her belly. Even then, his legs kicked out, striding, reaching into the distance his mother had never dreamed of.

"...and I wanted to see it, but Fox wouldn't go on. It was snowing some, maybe a little ice on the path, and she said it

was too late in the day and..., oh, it doesn't matter. Fox *never* turns down a chance for a wallow. But she did this time, Len. Fox turned back. And I came with her, and didn't get to see the hot spring. Just think of it, Len, hot water that bubbles up in the snow. It's up there. Just a little way further."

Len studied her son's profile. His face was tense. Real adult misery crimped the skin around his eyes.

"Fox is dear to you," she observed.

"No," he snapped. "Or, yes. Maybe. But that's not the real point, is it?"

"Of course not," she agreed. "But, remind me again: The real point is...?"

He jumped up and began to pace, his head just clearing the lower limbs of the apple tree. The green fruit was just beginning to take on hints of yellow, the glimmer of the ripeness to come. "I told you: Fox turned back. She's beginning to find her limits, Len. I'm not. Steep pitches don't tire me. Scree doesn't trip me up. The long hauls between the Far Villages don't wear me out. Friends younger than me are finding their limits every day, youngsters not even in my age group. But not me. Never me. I walk and walk, but I can't find any end to it. The world is a string of villages, one after another, and I'll go to all of them, one after another. I can do the business of a Far Walker; of course I can. I can carry the news and arrange trail-tending chores between villages and broker trade and, and, and...." He stopped in front of her, his hands hanging slack and empty. "But where are my limits, Len? Why can't I find them?"

Len pulled him down onto the step beside her. "And what's made this all seem so terrible? What's changed? Just a little while ago, the prospect of visiting a new village would make you grab your pack, forget to shut the door behind you, and rush off with Fox."

"With Fox," Cam echoed softly, leaning into her. "When Fox finds her limits, who will I walk with, Len? Will I walk alone?"

Len was silent. She thought about the many miles she'd walked in her lifetime, and the long hours on the path. Seven hours to First Village Down, nine more to the next, the villages spaced like uneven beads along the path. (A flash of memory: Yarrow's back on the path in front of her under a heavy trade-pack. Yarrow's stick swinging with his long,

strong legs. Yarrow's voice, blown back over his shoulder, a question.) The path had unrolled like a spool when she had somebody to walk with, but how the hours could drag when she was alone. What would it have been like if those hours had been days, the long days of a Far Walker among the distant villages, where people spoke strangely and there would be no easy, relaxed conversation at the end of the day. Unless you walked with a companion...

"Shreve walks far, too, Cam. If you need someone to talk to... About that life, I mean. She must have—"

"Len, Shreve doesn't even *believe* there are villages beyond Seventeenth Up." His voice went a little shrill at this. "That's just silly; anyone with eyes can see that the path keeps going. And we could go on, too. But we turned back." He took a breath. "We call Shreve 'Far-Walker' because her range is longer than anyone we know, but the path goes on and on. How far, Len? How far does it go? Shreve has never even seen the ocean! What can she tell me — what can anyone tell me — about the life of a Far-Walker, if they've never even seen the ocean?"

"But I thought it was only a...."

"No, it's real and I've seen it. Fox and I, together; we saw it below us, a long way down, when we got off the path..." Len started to say something about this, but restrained the mother-impulse. "...and scrambled out onto a rock overhang to take a nap in the sun away from the ants. The clouds below us broke apart and there it was, very far down, flat, like the bottom of a pan. It's blue-green and shiny like that jade that Tel Jewelry-Maker got from Seventh Village Down. The ocean is real, Len. It's down there, below all the trees and mists and clouds, and it's as big as the sky. It made Fox cry, just from the bigness of it. You could see it, too, if you wanted to. It's easy. We could take you. We could show it to you."

"Not me, Cam!" she laughed. "I get heat rash if I go below Fourth Village Down. But I'm glad to know the old stories stay true. It pleases me that the world has a bottom. I wonder if you'll go there someday and walk on the jade ocean."

"And if I'll do it alone." Cam added somberly.

"Fox turned back one time, Cam. One time doesn't mean she's found her limit for life."

"But she will, Len. Everyone does. Everyone but me. I have to walk, Len. I have to keep going. The path goes somewhere;

I have to see it through to the end. But, Len— I don't want to walk alone."

They sat on the step together, mother and son, and the nettle fibers soaked in pots of cloudy water. A rising breeze stirred the apple tree.

"Maybe," Len said carefully, "that's your limit, Cam."

He was silent for a long moment, looking up the stony path that ran past his mother's doorstep and on towards the upworld villages. Len shivered.

"No," he said, "it's not."

And her son got up and went to wash himself at the spout where the bright chilly water broke out from the wall of the world.



That night, Len dreamed that she was saying goodbye to somebody, a man. She did not know him, didn't even know his name, but he was unspeakably precious to her. After everything was said, he turned away from her and took one step. Before he could take another, her hand flashed out with speed beyond human to save him from a fall, and fastened on his arm.

But her fingers sank through the heavy wool of his shirt, through the heavy muscle of his arm, through the sweet softness of the child's arm within, and closed on nothing at all.

She woke with her hands clenched in tight fists.



Cam stayed near Home Village for a while, helping Len gather nettle stems from the rock face beside the path. It was autumn and the plants had done their growing and were dry and gray. He walked with Fox to villages where they had been before, carrying news and rope. Len wondered if, in spite of what he'd said, Cam was finding his limits. Was he settling?

He was in Len's house a good bit during the wicked weather of winter, sleeping and eating a lot. He was taking on more substance, Len saw, filling out the frame of a man. He had no great talent for rope-making, she admitted to herself; his big hands were impatient and he was too restless for tasks



that took long sitting. But he was much help with breaking the fibers out of the stems, and teasing them free from bits of bark and old dry pulp.

Fox was often in the house too, the tightness between the two seemingly relaxed. Fox also took a hand at the work and seemed to enjoy the way the thin dense cords emerged from the soft hanks of fiber. Like blond hair, she said. Just like braiding a child's blond hair. It warmed Len to see that Fox, too, took pleasure in how the twisting and twining multiplied the strength of the fibers. Maybe there would be another rope-maker in the village? But it was hard to really tell what Fox loved.

When spring had settled on them and the sun grew stronger every day, Cam asked Fox if she would walk with him to Seventeenth Village Up and beyond, to see the hot spring they had missed in the fall because of the snow.

Fox looked down into the roots of the apple tree that shaded Len's porch, as if she were listening for something far away, some sound she could only hear if she didn't look at him.

"Let's not, Cam. Let's go down to that pool below Twelfth Village Down, where the water jumps out of the rock in that big waterfall. Let's walk hard and get all sweaty, and then jump into the cold water."

And Cam agreed.

They stuffed their packs with dried apples for eating and rope for trading, and started down the path, side by side, sticks in hand. Len watched them until they got to the bend, and wondered how far they would go.



They left their heavy woolen Home Village overshirts and trousers at the house where they guested in Seventh Village Down and walked on gaily in bright linen clothing that would be thought barely decent in Home Village. They offered rope and news at every village, and greeted old friends, congratulating new partners, exclaiming over the babies that had come since they had last passed through.

They got flatbread and new fruit at Twelfth Village Down, and carried it with them to the pool, which wasn't so far below as they remembered.