

The Wardos of Welkin

by Leah Jasmine Franklin

We were leaving the world in a flying silver Toyota. I threw a glance at my brother as we slid from side to side on the Toyota's backseat. Sammy just dozed. Straining my neck, my eyes were level with the bottom of the window and I could see that we were soaring over a vast valley of mountains. I had never been in a flying car before, but it did not worry me. I knew that cars could fly when necessary. Flight was the only way to get to the special places of the galaxy, like Disney Land. We visited there a few summers ago and had to take an airplane. This car ride was a lot like a Disney roller coaster, but we were not going to an amusement park. Sammy and I were going to our new home in the clouds.

Our parents had just divorced and our mom wanted to leave Boston; she wanted to move west to Colorado. On the day that we left Massachusetts, my best friend told me that her mother said we were going to live in a high and hazy town of hippies who lived with Lucy in the sky. I did not mind leaving Earth to live in the clouds, miles above all cities and life. *Carebares* was my favorite cartoon.

Sam's head loped to the side and I pinched him. He didn't wake. This was no time for napping. We were leaving Earth! Reluctantly, I also fell asleep and woke to my mom pointing out a rock that was called Chief Niwot. He granted wishes, she told us. We were in thick trees now – we must have landed on a secret atmospheric road – and our car whipped around a bend in the road called the Curve of Events. This was the true

threshold. As we passed the Curve of Events, I felt a shift. I could almost feel the air change. Things were going to be different up here.

The town slowly came into view as we rolled over the top of a steep hill. I was bewildered. We were not on a puffy white pillow of mist as I had been imagining. Instead, we were standing at the bottom of a hill in the middle of a small valley. This was Ward, Colorado, my new home. Old rusty cars that obviously could never be driven lined the street. No people were in sight. A group of scraggly dogs jogged by. I looked up at the tiny town displayed on an ascending mountainside. The morning sun was reflecting off of a white church that was surrounded by dusty dirt roads and lopsided abodes. Short mountain walls of green trees and gold rock circled the town and opened up to an overwhelming unobstructed sky. I could see everything; this was empowering. Sammy might be dreaming about heaven, but he had to see this. I pinched him hard on the arm and he awoke without urgency.

In a slight daze – his from sleep and mine from awe – we followed our mom across an aging footbridge the length of two busses. It stretched over a mini-valley of thick green grass and a narrow creek 30 feet below. I avoided the gaps in the wood that could easily capture an unobservant child's leg.

The house at the other end of the bridge was not what I expected. I thought all houses were like those in New England: quaint homes that looked the way houses should, the way I drew houses with a triangle roof, brick chimney, shuttered windows and front door. This house was a collage of plywood and sheet metal with a turquoise roof that glowed in the sun. Kids don't even draw things as ugly.

The shell was luckily deceiving. Antique telephone poles ran across the ceiling. Cupboards of stained glass windows depicted fairies and castles. A wall of moss-speckled stones met floors of smooth red rocks and pinewood. Skylights flooded the open two-story house with white sunshine. A wooden hot tub sat beneath a towering Hibiscus tree, adorned with vibrant purple blossoms. I felt like a princess standing in the middle of a Rocky Mountain palace. Almost everything seemed royal to me: the tree-branch chandeliers, the wall-sized windows looking over a field of Aspens, the marble bathtub, the oak balcony that circled the top floor. Only the toilet lacked the house's charm. "Don't fall in" suddenly held a sobering meaning and became life-saving advice. Under a dark maple toilet seat, instead of the familiar porcelain bowl holding unpolluted water, I found a grotesquely stained white shaft that stretched into a dark, rank abyss. It was wide enough to swallow a child my size and I knew what was at the bottom of the pit.

We'd only been in our new house for fifteen minutes when two boys and a girl came running into the living room – knocking on front doors is considered impolite in some towns.

- "Are the new kids here?" they asked eagerly.

How anyone knew about us, I didn't know. This was the first time I'd experienced the omniscient and often psychic powers of small town gossip.

- "Come on" they insisted and within moments we were touring Ward.

Ben and Andy were brothers. Ben was a year older than Sammy and Andy a year younger. Miranda was my age and we became instant pals. Sammy and I had already found our new best friends. Other kids met us outside and our tour group grew as we walked through the town.

- “This fucking dog is called Vulva,” Ben explained, seeming not to even notice that he’d used a bad word. “She just lies in the middle of the road all day and never moves for cars. That’s the Hotel Columbia, it’s haunted, and that’s the Odd Fellows Hall. It’s going to fall down some day, but it’s awesome to explore. That’s the Dosemadia. Anyone who needs a house gets to live there for free.” Each kid added similar tidbits, and I found them all baffling.

We went to the Ward General Store, which was run by Miranda’s dad. Adults and kids all smiled and stopped to talk to us. I wasn’t sure, but I couldn’t remember a time in Boston when I had met so many friendly strangers.

The town of 150 inhabitants (dogs included) confused me at first. There were many strange names and stories to remember. There was a man who lived in an old mining shack. He was too tall for the shack, which was smaller than most modern tool sheds, and when he lied down to sleep, his feet stuck out into the snow. But he kept a fire going all the time and wore several layers of wool socks. He seemed comfortable. There was Tall Bob, who made jewelry, and Fuzzy Bob, who had a thick beard and long hair. He was the town marshall. The kids said he carried a gun, but I never saw it. There was Little Randy, who was a tiny woman, and Big Randy, a sweet guy with a big-bear appeal. Dave Warren had about a dozen trucks from the ‘40s and ‘50s. Only one worked and the rest sat parked next to his house. He drove down to Boulder once a month. When there was a long line of twenty cars going below the speed limit, they were usually behind Dave Warren. His bumper stick read: *I may be slow, but I’m ahead of you.* He always had about ten cats living with him and he gave free cookies to anyone who asked. The Hotel Columbia was a deserted and haunted white hotel that we roamed through. We collected old bottles and

newspapers until a family moved in there. The Odd Fellows Hall was four stories of rusted metal and decaying wood. It swayed in the wind and, thankfully, collapsed one night without hurting anyone. Then the stone frame of the foundation became a hacky-sack arena. Derrick and Demo were brother blacksmiths who wore kilts and had sword fights. Some people lived in houses like ours in town, while others lived in tepees and cabins miles within the woods. Vulva, indeed, was a stubborn dog. Tourists honked and yelled at her, but she never budged and they soon learned to drive around her. The Ward General Store sold a sparse and eccentric assortment of goods: candy bars, motor oil and dream catchers. I understood in time that we were still on the planet, but I continued to feel that Ward was a singular place, removed from the rest of civilization.

The best part of living in Ward was that we were now members of an infamous and highly exclusive organization: we were Wardos. People from the nearby towns knew all about Wardos, or thought they did. Ward kids were notorious for cursing, dirty hair, offensive distaste for authority and crude behavior. We flipped people off, mooned them, told adults they were assholes when they were.

I don't think anyone hated Ward kids more than Dave the school bus driver. From the time when Ward kids were first bussed to Nederland schools, no bus driver lasted more than a year. But Dave was determined. He thought he was tougher than the Ward kids were. Cursing and yelling and rude comments were no match for a grown man. He hollered at the kids and often stopped the bus several times along the Peak-to-Peak Highway, demanding silence and threatening to drive us back to school. We would quiet down for a few minutes, but soon trash and profanity would be flying again. One afternoon, only two miles from Ward, he stopped the bus and turned it around. He said

we were going back to school and we would all have to call our parents. He screamed at the kids to shut up. He meant it all as a threat, but no one was scared of an emotional bus driver. He left after two years.

Winters in Ward were spent in the snow. There were often snowdrifts 10 feet deep outside our house. Miranda and I dug snow forts and built tunnels that connected to the boys' fort, built by Sammy, Ben and Andy. In the summers, we constructed forts in the woods. At night, we would dress all in black and sneak through town on top-secret missions, which were often to retrieve free envelopes or phonebooks from the post office.

Children in Ward are typically not afraid of adults and they develop core beliefs of trust and kindness that are less common in urban areas where suspicion is linked to survival. Ward was not just a small town where everyone knew our name. We felt treated as equals. While grown-ups had a certain level of jurisdiction, they awarded us the same rights to freedom as they enjoyed. To be a kid was not to be suppressed or restrained, and in some ways it was to be privileged. We had the liberty to live out the imagination that all children harbor. This license sometimes led to problematic behavior that has given the town a poor reputation.

Miranda and I began an impulsive, and later embarrassing, game of stopping cars driving through town. They were always filled with gawking tourists who stared at us like *we* were the weird ones.

- "Excuse me," We'd say innocently as they rolled down their windows. "Could you please help us? We live in Nederland and need to get home to our mommy and daddy. Can you please, please give us a ride?"

- "Oh...um... well, sure, of course we'll give you a ride."

- “Fuck you, we’re not getting in your car. You’re crazy. Get outta here.”

That car would drive on and we’d stop the next car. On a particularly busy summer afternoon, we had a line of fifteen cars waiting, clogging all the traffic on the only paved street that ran through the town. Those who were most appalled would complain to adults sitting in front of the Ward General Store, but it never did them any good. Tourists in Ward are like mice: annoying pests that scurry about and will infest your house if you don’t scare them away.

Miranda and I pretended that the Aspen trees were boys and made out with them. Sammy dreamt of entire societies that we created in the woods. The T-Society lasted the longest, more than a year. We made homes from logs, used old car parts from the junkyard for furniture, borrowed reading material from the town’s free library and found silverware in the Columbia Hotel. We built a bank, post office and grocery store; each structure was marked with a *T*, which we made by binding two sticks together. The T-Society eventually split between the boys – Sammy, Ben and Andy – and the girls – Miranda and I. We read detective books and investigated them, hoping to gather enough evidence to win a lawsuit in court and gain full rule over the T-Society.

I loved growing up in the clouds. The liberty I had to explore my world gave me an early sense of independence and I found myself in that freedom.

Sammy killed himself in January of this year. It is horrible. As I search my life for the reasons, trying to understand how he could have done this and why I couldn’t prevent it, I remember when we were kids in Ward. Sam and I both transferred to high schools in

Boulder. Ward was not a free place for us as adolescents. I saw it only as a town where I could get stuck forever. I couldn't accept a future without a college education, travel, and accomplishment – the experiences I saw possible only through urban-living. I simply had too much Boston in me and I knew I was not a Ward lifer. My mom and step-dad moved to Boulder a few years later and Ward became a fading history that I tried to cover up with cell phones, Gap clothing and academic success as I struggled to learn the social norms they don't teach above 9,000 feet in the Colorado Rockies.

We held a memorial service for Sammy at our suburban home and I sat thinking on our Italian leather couch about how I used to pinch him to wake up. He was always falling asleep when I wanted to talk. I couldn't pinch him back now. Ward was forgotten, physically and psychologically miles away. I felt that Sammy and my childhood were gone, morphed into irrelevant and illusive memories.

Then, unannounced, Wardo kids and adults flowed through my front door again. They looked like a mourning tribe of warriors who would have done anything to save the boy. They clashed with the black suits and perfume; their outdated clothes reeking of marijuana, dust and sunlight, the swordsmen in their kilts, the ex-hippies in their tye-dye.

Ben walked in and my mom embraced him. She broke down for the first time since finding my brother. The climbing rope, the green discoloration, the cold, the stare were gone. She cried. Not for the loss, but for the beauty of what had been. She cried for her brave and dreamy Ward son, who was loved, remembered and free. She cried for the reappearance of the Wardos and the return to the clouds; not a heaven of American ideals – white picket fences, new cars, status, winning – but a misty land of undefined liberty, opportunity and dreams.