

Terra Firma

In March of 2004, my younger sister Abbey and I loaded up her Toyota Celica with suitcases, every CD we owned and snacks to send our blood sugar into orbit. After locking the door to our apartment, we began driving, around 5 p.m., for South Bend, Indiana, where our maternal grandfather, Charles “Dusty” Duff, had just died the day before. We had three days off of work. The drive would be eighteen hours there, eighteen hours back.

Abbey called our younger sister MacKensey. “Just stall,” she said.

“You’re ridiculous,” MacKensey said. “Don’t come.”

“See you in eighteen hours,” Abbey said and hung up.

I’d been living with Abbey for four months. I was twenty-five and she was twenty-one. I worked at a hotel as a front desk clerk, and she toasted bagels for a living.

I told Abbey, for the tenth time, it was a bad idea to drive there for the funeral and turn around. I had my legs curled beneath me in the passenger seat. I was in charge of the stereo.

She turned the music down and said, “I’m sick of people dying.” She ticked off the eight people she’d known, intimately or remotely, who’d died in the last six months. “I want the opportunity to say goodbye to someone,” she said.

My husband was one of those eight. Six months earlier he had died after surgery on a brain tumor. Larry had been diagnosed on a Tuesday, and in ten days he was dead. We’d been living on the Big Island of Hawaii. He was twenty years older than me, and he was supposed to outlive his father, who’d died at fifty-four of a heart attack, an accomplishment we never had any doubt he’d achieve.

I moved to Boulder to recover with Abbey. She had the unspoken responsibility of monitoring my self-esteem, my loneliness, my ability to laugh, which movies I watched, how many pizzas I ate in a week and my wardrobe.

“I just wish everything would stop being about death,” I said, staring out the black window.

“That’ll never happen.”

I had perfect memories of my grandfather, and his death didn’t hurt the way Larry’s did. It was a different kind of hurt. Larry’s death hurt all over. My grandfather’s death just hurt in my legs and felt like a limp.

“Remember how grandpa used to let us whomp him in the gut?” I asked her. When we were little, my grandpa had a huge belly. It wasn’t a beer gut and it wasn’t even an obese gut. It was more of a pregnant gut, an abdomen hiding a fabulous universe inside.

My favorite thing to do with my grandpa when I was a kid was whack him, as hard as I could, in the stomach, sometimes so hard it would mangle my hand.

“Wait a second,” he’d say, looking me in the eye, planting his feet hip-width apart while I started pumping a fist and revving up like a leprechaun boxer, red hair bouncing up and down.

Then he’d flex every muscle in his torso and say, “Go!” and I’d punch him right at the bellybutton, one, two, three times.

“How do you do that?” I’d ask. He’d laugh, relax a moment and say, “Ready?” then petrify his abs again and I’d jut my pale fist into the inch of flab before meeting the impenetrable wall of his *rectus abdominus*.

In the late 1990's, my grandpa got colon cancer and received a colostomy. My grandma had a bladder catheter, and grandpa had a colostomy, and we used to call them "parts is parts," referring to the bags of chicken giblets and organs you could buy at the grocery store.

"Let me see it," I said to my grandpa one day after his surgery.

He never got embarrassed about anything, but he sat in his chair with his fingers folded into each other in front of his pelvis and said, "It ain't pretty. You don't want to see it.

"Come on," I said.

"It's just a bag of shit," he said, lifting his shirt so I could see his right side.

He grinned and said it was amazing that a bag of crap kept him alive. We were silent a moment as he tucked his shirt back around the bag and re-folded his hands in his lap.

"Hey..."

He looked at me and raised his enormous eyebrows – eyebrows so thick and haphazard that he had to trim them with shears.

"Think I can still hit you in the gut?"

He relaxed his hands and laughed. Then the smile vanished. "No."

Abbey informed me that the road we were driving on was the same road her ex-boyfriend drove to his new grownup job as a scientist.

"You can take your grownup job and your Friday lunch club and suck a nut!" she bellowed.

Peter thought I was co-dependent and that I usurped his nookie time with my sister because of my incessant depression.

I asked Abbey if she remembered when I bought her boneless BBQ wings for breaking up with him.

“Best break up gift ever.”

The first few hours of the ride were gorgeous and filled with the initial fumes of possibility a road trip always holds. We took a secret back road to the section of highway Abbey wanted to take to Indiana. The car seemed to melt into the black fields, and I imagined cows, erect and drowsy, sleeping in their perpetual upright position.

“I accidentally hung up on two customers today,” I said. “One called back and threatened to cancel her reservation, and the other one didn’t bother to call back.”

“I made \$2.50 in tips and spilled mustard on my jeans.”

I screwed up my face and grabbed a can of soda.

She told me she buried the jeans in a plastic bag in her hamper so they wouldn’t make the other clothes smell.

“Some day, I’m going to be a famous writer,” I said, flipping through the CDs.

“Some day, I’m going to work for the FBI and I’ll be like, ‘Hey, bitches, make *me* a bagel.’”

I told her she shouldn’t say “bitches;” it was degrading to women.

“BITCHES!” she said, pounding the steering wheel, and then she turned up the music.

Over the last four months, we’d devised a couple of losing ventures to get out of the bagel and hotel businesses. I was a belly dancer in Hawaii, and I’d made money at it.

I thought maybe Abbey and I could start a two-gal troupe that worked the birthday party scene in Boulder.

One night, after a couple of beers, I told Abbey it was time for her first lesson. We both put on skirts and bras and cinched the drapes shut so no leering eye from the tower across the courtyard could spy on us in our living room.

I did a couple of moves, explained the four planes of movement – head, torso, hips and feet – and put on the ching-ching-ka-ching music.

“OK, first thing you need to do is bend your knees a little. Pull your butt in and elongate your torso.”

I stood erect, like a peacock ready to unfurl my backside.

“Bend your knees,” I said.

She stood facing the couch in a poofy calf-length skirt and shuffled a little, toes digging into the carpet. She wouldn’t look at me, just concentrated on the drywall.

“Bend your knees and pull your butt in.”

She moved imperceptibly and giggled.

I told her she had a lot to learn if we wanted to start making money off this by April. Then I asked her if she wanted to smell like cream cheese for the rest of her life.

She shook her head, loosened her limbs and resumed the knees-bent stance.

I stalked up to her and put my right hand on her stomach and my left hand on her butt.

“Pull your butt in!”

“It is in.”

“No it’s not,” I said, glaring at her backside.

She squirmed. “It’s in. That’s just my butt. I can’t pull it in anymore.”

I stared at her butt, amplified in the poofy skirt.

“Really?”

She nodded and we exploded in giggles. “Damn, baby,” I said, turning the music off. “I guess what they say about you is right.”

She broke into a thoroughly un-graceful rump-shaking spasm and said, “If I could get paid to dance like this, I’d be fucking rich.”

“You suck,” I said. “This is probably a hopeless dream.”

She told me she wasn’t *feminine* enough to be a belly dancer and struck what was supposedly a feminine dancing pose but seemed more like an electrocuted pin-up girl contortion. “I’m more, like, you know, into…”

“Ass shaking,” I said.

After that we decided we were going to write a screenplay about – what else – sisters. Three sisters from the Midwest. All of them would be hot, and the movie would be funny, which meant none of them could be a widow, so I just settled on being the neurotic writer in the movie, which had plenty of comic strength.

We sat on our fifth floor balcony, covered in Astroturf that was ringed with pigeon shit, drinking beers, taking notes about our screenplay.

I’d slept with someone who worked in Hollywood so we naturally assumed our sisters screenplay would make it into capable hands when it was done.

“Have you ever written a play?” Abbey asked.

“It can’t be that hard,” I said. “I’ve started about six novels. You provide the funny, and I’d provide the writing expertise.”

“I wish MacKensey was here to help,” Abbey said. She was living in Michigan. Every month we tried to get her to move to Boulder, but she refused and said she liked her life in Lansing, which we always scoffed at because, seriously, who could like Lansing?

“We’ll give her a good part,” I said. “But she might have to be the least hot of the three sisters as recompense for staying in Michigan.”

Our final, and perhaps most practical entrepreneurial brainchild, was to clean houses for a living, lugging our crappy vacuum and boxes of solvents around in the Celica. This didn’t go anywhere. We hated cleaning and Abbey was afraid she’d break knick-knacks.

So the weeks dragged on, me working the 7-3 shift on the hotel, the epitome of customer service etiquette. (Thank you for staying with us, Ms. Nixon. I will have the maintenance supervisor check out the heater in that room. I’m sorry there are no low-carb items on the *complimentary breakfast buffet*, but really, it’s a fucking free breakfast. What do you want?) Abbey kept dragging herself to the bagel shop and came home smelling like lox and cinnamon rolls every afternoon.

“At least you don’t smell like your job,” she said. Then later she said, “I was wrong. I didn’t think you could smell like a hotel, but you do. You smell like a pool.”

We’d grown up in the Midwest – Michigan, Ohio and Indiana. Abbey and I escaped as soon as we could. I left at seventeen, she left at eighteen. I moved to Hawaii to live with Larry, and Abbey moved to Arizona to attend school.

We ended up in Boulder because of Peter. Abbey followed him to Colorado, hoping he'd change once he became a scientist. In a strange twist of fate, Larry passed away and Peter stayed a jerk, so Abbey and I decided it was time to reunite our forces as sisters and live together in a two-story monstrosity of an apartment while we tried to pick up our lives and find out how to be ourselves.

After three hours of driving, I took the wheel and Abbey shrank into the fetal position in the back seat of the Celica, which, contrary to what any SUV or Subaru-owning person may think, was actually comfortable enough to enable sleep.

The high plains road was black except for the tiny lights of cars and the circus lights of big rigs tooling like freight trains down the highway. I had an Indigo Girls CD on low, and the Midwest ahead of me.

Here's the thing: I didn't learn to drive until I was nineteen, and then it was on country roads that wound between bananas and palm trees. There were twelve semi trucks on the entire Big Island. I'd never driven next to a big rig.

For awhile, a half hour or so, I was fine because no semis passed me, and I was on a stretch of relatively naked highway. I was driving a smooth fifty-five miles an hour, quietly humming to the Indigo Girls while Abbey fell into the kind of hot coma that envelopes you when you sleep in a car. Because I had no concept of highway etiquette, I determined I was allowed to drive in the left lane because I was going the *speed limit*, and who could tell me to move, right? I'm going the speed limit, people.

The next thing I knew, an eighteen-wheeled mass of steel, filled with frozen chicken parts, came cruising beside my right door, trying to gain enough momentum in its heavy limbs to overtake me and claim his rightful place in the left lane.

I was sucked into a black tunnel between the semi, moving in agonizing slow motion, and the pathetic stretch of grass that separated me from the ditch in the median. My fists clutched the steering wheel in a violent grip, and my body instantly erupted in sweat. I was completely sure I would either pass out or veer the Celica onto the strip of gravel between the dead grass and the asphalt highway, resulting in a crash not dissimilar to the kind of embarrassing topple that occurred when I accidentally ran my bike, full force, into that chasm between the sidewalk and the grass as a kid and fell over, bruising my crotch on the bike seat and scraping my shins on the bike chain spikes.

“I’m going to die,” I told myself as my smooth fifty-five instantly dropped to a not-so-cool forty-five. As soon as the semi passed me, I signaled the little Celica into the right lane and began to cry, maintaining a not-so-cool fifty mph, turning the Indigo Girls off until I felt like I could stand any extraneous stimuli. I drove on without waking Abbey, until I met the butt of another semi, in my lane, going forty-five mph with no intention of speeding up.

I was paralyzed at forty-five mph and I gave myself two car lengths between the massive box of Con-Agra perishables and the Celica. This dance of highway tension lasted twenty minutes. Twenty minutes at forty-five mph, a day and a half from South Bend, Indiana, and a grandfather that would, at this rate, be cremated before I got there.

I pulled over and turned the car off.

“Abbey,” I said, looking in the rearview mirror.

“ABBEY!”

Abbey’s head shimmied out of the down sleeping bag.

“I need you to drive. I can’t pass this semi going forty-five in the right lane. I’ve been driving behind him for twenty minutes going forty-five miles an hour.”

She propped herself up on her right arm and looked out the window. “Where are we?”

I told her we were somewhere in Nebraska. “I just pulled over.”

“Jesus,” she said, extricating herself from the sleeping bag. She put her sweatshirt back on and dragged her legs from the down shroud, put her shoes on and said, “Let me out.”

I opened the car door, let her out of the stuffed back seat and walked around to the passenger side. I slumped into the right seat. She turned on the car and gunned it off the gravel shoulder onto the blank, blinking highway, at which time she took up a cool eighty mph in the left lane and passed semi after semi like a bullet.

“See,” I said, “I’m not really afraid if I’m just sitting in the car.”

“I get it,” she said, snapping the tab on a can of Coke. She ejected the Indigo Girls and replaced them with revolutionary rap.

After about an hour and a half, she pulled into one of those rest stops glowing with vending machines and stone-colored rest stalls saying she needed to sleep again.

We slept until dawn, aware that we could be murdered or raped at any moment.

Abbey poked my left arm. “Dude, fuck this. I can’t drive to Indiana myself.”

I stared at the periwinkle dawn rising above the fields of dead Nebraska.

I told her we didn’t have to go, that driving there was a moronic idea to begin with. She sat in the driver’s seat and stared out the wind shield.

“Where are we?” I said.

She squinted at a sign. “North Platte, Nebraska.”

She turned the key in the ignition and told me she was going to find us breakfast.

North Platte, Nebraska, the farthest east we made it, was three states away from the funeral and one state away from our disgusting apartment and bad-paying jobs. We pulled into a Perkins restaurant and stretched.

A homely waitress with badly dyed hair took our order. She smiled so beautifully and called us “honey” and filled our coffee so punctually that we concluded she was an angel disguised in a half-apron. Carla of North Platte, Nebraska, you are a minion of God on earth.

We went over the mileage while we ate enough food for three grown men.

“At eighty miles an hour, it would take us...” I said, pretending I could do this kind of advanced math.

“Too long,” she replied, sopping her eggs up with white bread toast. “It’s too bad they don’t have avocados here.”

“We’re in North Platte, Nebraska,” I said. Of course we had no idea if North Platte was really as much of a podunk place as we imagined, but we concocted a quick mythology of the town that included legions of tractors and Republicans and infused it with all of our fears of the Midwest.

After grabbing a few complimentary red and white mints, we stepped out to the Celica. It was cold, Midwest cold, where there aren’t any trees or mountains to protect you. We lit cigarettes and smoked while staring at the on and off ramps of I-80.

We called MacKensey and told her I was incapacitated.

“Where are you?” she asked.

Abbey told her all about North Platte and Carla.

“You can tell mom now because she’ll be relieved instead of panicked,” Abbey said.

“Ask MacKensey when she’s going to come out to Boulder,” I said, but she didn’t listen to me.

She hung up the phone and said, “Well?” blowing the smoke of her cigarette into the frigid air so that she was festooned with a cloud of tobacco and mist. “We have two more days off.”

“You know what I want to see?” I said. “Wyoming. I want to get a cowboy hat in Wyoming.” I figured hats would not make me look fat, my newest, and most pressing hang-up since Larry’s death.

She nodded and smiled.

“Do you know how to get there?” I said.

“It’s not that hard. You just drive west.”

She smiled, pulled her car keys out and said, “Good-bye Carla of North Platte. I love you.”

The road to Wyoming was desolate, a little more truck-less and brilliant yellow where the ground reached the cloudless blue sky.

The car was warm with the sun beating thru the windows so it felt like I’d curled up beside a campfire. My shoes were off, and I folded my legs to my chest and stared out the window at the robin-egg sky and the yellow land rolling gently against the horizon.

“He was dead before they unplugged him,” I said. I told her how the doctor called me at 4:30 in the morning and told me the whole thing was gone – brain stem,

everything. I wanted him to die in the night. When I left him the night before, I said goodbye like I'd never see him again. He was already a vegetable, and I wanted him to die of his own volition before dawn, before I came back.

Instead they called me. The phone shot me from a deep sleep and my dad came in to tell me the hospital was on the phone. I said hello? like I didn't know who it was. The doctor said I needed to come in. No more brain stem. I told him to hold on a second, like I needed to consult something. I put my hand over the mouthpiece and held it away from my face. I told my dad the brain stem was dead. They want me to come in, I said. Then I slumped over and put the phone in my lap and told my dad I didn't want to go in. He stared at me, a short silhouette in his boxers, and said, he'd want you there. OK, I said. OK, let's go. Let's just go.

The ICU was quiet. Larry was like I'd left him, hooked up to six machines, bags of fluids entering and exiting his skin like interstate ramps. He was still so tan. I remember thinking, how does this guy stay tan when he's in a coma?

I asked my dad, the nurse and the doctor to leave me alone with him for a minute. I put my hands on his left leg – one hand on the thigh, one hand on the knee – and I asked Larry if he was ready. He said yes, let's go. I'm ready. One, two, three – whoosh! I saw him jump up out of his flesh, clothed in a pair of grey shorts, a Special Olympics coach's t-shirt and his flip-flops. He walked out of the ICU stall, looked around and went through the doors to the hallway.

I found his nurse and told her I was done. I told my dad that Larry was already dead.

We sat in a waiting room until the nurse came back to get us to view the body. She told us it was one of the most peaceful deaths she'd ever seen. They usually buckled and seized, she said, that's why we don't let you stay in there. But not Larry. He didn't breathe a single breath.

Abbey didn't say anything. Tears ran down her face past the little brown mole on her right cheek and dripped to her jeans.

"And then I ended up here," I said, gesturing to the dry corn fields and the interior of the Celica. "I don't know exactly how I ended up here."

"You signed a lease."

I reached across the stick shift for her hand.

I felt the road move beneath us like a conveyor belt.

Our drive to Cheyenne was interrupted only by one unplanned stop: an exit into the town of Dix, Nebraska, because Abbey said we needed to see what Dix looked like.

Dix consisted of silos and farm houses. We pulled over next to a barn that had a hand-painted sign that read "Welcome to Dix, Nebraska" emblazoned against the luscious body of an unfurling American flag. She took a picture of me against the barn with the inflatable monkey we'd brought along, and I took a picture of her in the same embrace with the plastic monkey.

We got to Cheyenne, Wyoming, in the early afternoon. More than anything I'd seen in Boulder, Cheyenne oozed with the blood of all things Western: bucking broncos, buildings with lovely facades, hiding insurance offices and curio shops, boots, hats, belt buckles and fringe obscuring the eyes in an ocean of dead cows and extracted precious metals.

“This is the *real* West,” I told Abbey, fingering cowboy hats and putting them on my dirty hair.

I stared at myself in the mirror and prayed no one would come to help me try on cowboy hats. I had an obsessively private relationship with my reflection. No one but Abbey understood.

Since Larry’s death, I’d gained twenty pounds. I watched myself swell, at first imperceptibly, and then it became apparent when I could no longer fit in most of my pants. When I moved to Boulder, I had to buy an entire wardrobe to accommodate the winter and my new curves, curves that bourgeoned from my hips, thighs, belly, arms and butt, curves that moved out from my neck and chin every time I smiled.

I was almost incapable of eating well at that point, even though immediately before his death I was eating vegetables, brown rice and lean meat for every meal. After his death, I began, almost at once, to eat nothing but large amounts of junk food and beer.

Abbey was on the self-proclaimed bacon and beer diet. In other words, she ate a half-price breakfast bagel on her shift, a tankard of coffee, a few beers in the evening and whatever dinner we managed to either rustle up, order in, drive up to get or consume from a disposable container.

As Abbey maintained her slim figure, I grew and grew, drowning in my flesh. The search for clothes that would make this new me pretty was an excruciating process.

Every week, sometimes twice a week, we went shopping at Ross discount department store. Abbey saddled her left arm with mid-drift revealing tops and low-cut jeans, and I searched for anything that hid my stomach, my eternal nemesis.

We checked our garments with a sweet, slow Hispanic woman with fuchsia lipstick, took our dirty plastic numbers, with our clothes, into the same double-wide stall with a bench and a huge mirror. The lock didn't really latch so we were always a little leery of someone springing the door open.

Abbey undressed and slid her clothes on at the speed of light, posing in front of the mirror, making faces, laughing at herself.

"I look like shit in yellow. Why do I keep trying on yellow?"

I undressed slowly, watching each hidden piece of flesh emerge in the mirror, backdropped by the grey laminate stall. My fat hung over my underwear, my fat spilled over my bra. Everywhere I looked, my fat seemed to unfurl, a pale sea of cellulite.

"I hate the cut of juniors pants," I said. "I mean, really, I want them to go above the fat, *on* the fat, not below the fat."

I extracted myself from the pants that wouldn't zip and tried on another pair.

Abbey told me they were cute and bobbed her head up and down.

I made a sound like "phut," rolled my eyes and yanked them down to my ankles.

"Give me the pink shirt."

By this point Abbey was sitting on the bench, her clothes divided into two piles, the keeps and the tosses, and she was putting my rejected garments on their hangers.

"It's too tight around the middle," I said.

"If you get a larger one it will hang in your armpits."

I scrutinized myself from each angle, squinted, bit my lip, sucked it in.

"You should get that. You love pink."

I loosened my abdomen, allowing my belly to protrude to its natural fullness and pulled my arms out of the sleeves. I took the shirt off and dropped it on the bench next to her. I grabbed the sweater I was wearing that day and put it on without saying anything.

She pointed at the pink shirt.

I shook my head, looked at the floor.

She asked me why.

I shrugged. Then my face trembled, and I turned my back to the mirror and began sobbing, which became so commonplace in this dressing room that she knew the cues: the sudden silence, the glazed look, the droopy face, furiously discarded clothes.

Then she held me, while I sat in my bra and pants, toes curled under to make myself small, toes curled like fists, until I realized how ridiculous I was being and wiped my eyes with a crumpled thrice-used tissue from the recesses of my purse, and she said, "Let's do shoes."

I watched Abbey attract men at the bars and know, unequivocally, the reason no one wanted me (except for that guy who looked like Dana Carvey) was because I was fat. I was, at my heaviest, a size seven. One hundred thirty-two pounds. No amount of rationalizing could make me realize this was not fat. I saw myself as enormous, gargantuan, obscene.

After trying on ten hats, I determined that cowboy hats looked stupid on me and that they were about \$200 more than I expected. We stopped meandering through the Western shops and stepped into a music store filled with New Age trinkets.

On the way to Cheyenne we'd decided that we wanted to do a ritual memorial for our grandfather and Larry in the mountains. March was the six-month anniversary of

Larry's death, and had become this strange milestone month for me. I expected that by March I would be feeling better. Instead of remembering that I'd lost my life over night, all I could do was plow forward with a kind of disembodied schizophrenic zeal, praying that at some point, I would reach some Pure Land that took my depression, like a yoke, from my shoulders, leaving me to frolic forever-after in a state of redemption.

As of yet, the Pure Land has not appeared on the horizon, and in March 2004, a mere six month's after Larry's death, my troubles were really only mounting and cresting in a sea of confusion, where depression and anxiety pulled me beneath the water's surface like ravenous animals, all eyes and claws, and then I'd resurface to get air, a pair of new shoes, something to eat, the soft and ephemeral bliss of an afternoon yoga class, and then I'd sink, without any ability to stand, back into the black water of my grief, telling myself over and over, in manic yelps, that I must overcome this, at any cost, and get on my feet again because grief meant death, and I couldn't die yet. At any cost, I must not die.

I bought crystals and sandalwood incense at the head shop and two little coin purses to put the trinkets and notes I intended to write for the departed inside of. My grandfather's satchel was a woven South American bag. Larry's was a vinyl coin purse with a picture of Krishna and Radha on it, glowing in a milky rainbow of color. The cosmic couple, immortalized in pastels with their soft eyes and perfect limbs, was an absurd caricature of what Larry and I had become.

We left Cheyenne and meandered south to Colorado where we intended to drive into the mountains and stay overnight, completing our ritual some time the next morning. The sky was clear and beautiful as we wound down into Colorado with the mountains to

our right. I saw buffalo for the first time, their heavy, dangling coats making them look like pack animals with a thousand pounds of fleece tied to their shanks.

Abbey put on her gigantic red bug-eye sunglasses that gave her a headache after twenty minutes, and I strapped on the bat hat – a felt appendage with wings that extended a foot from either side of my head and that had two oogly plastic eyes glued to the forehead. We drove, music blaring, down past Fort Collins, or Fort Fun, or Fort Fuck, depending on how your last trip there had gone, until we reached I-70, our portal to Summit County.

We spent the night in Georgetown, the largest town on I-70 between Denver and the ski resorts and Abbey's most frequent stopping point for a brief nap on her way back to Boulder from Breckenridge and Keystone. We found a chain motel, where they still manually imprint your credit card, and crashed almost instantly in the black room that buzzed with an old radiator.

I woke up early and left Abbey a note saying I went hunting for coffee. I took my notebook to the continental breakfast, which was complimentary and sugary and a far cry from low-carb, and I wrote for awhile against the backdrop of mingling half-asleep motorists and the sound of a big screen TV blaring news about the Iraq War. Someone was extolling me to eat Freedom Fries.

Since moving to Boulder I'd abandoned television. The sound of this machine, locked into FOX News, coupled with too many danishes, began to make me feel sick. I took my notebook and the car keys and drove part-way up the mountain road that slithered behind Georgetown.

Clouds half-way covered the sky, draping the low peaks in swiftly moving fog. It was warm enough to sit in a sweater in the car with the window open and smell the dirt that peeked past the melting snow. Large patches of snow that hadn't dissolved yet stood like ice floes between rocks and the roots of pine trees.

I pulled out my notebook and began writing a letter to Larry. The letter began with many "I miss you"s. It had been months since I felt Larry's presence, and this bothered me, like I'd somehow become too obtuse to sense him. I was pissed about this and wrote that I felt abandoned and jacked. There he was, on some celestial journey, and I was hanging out here, picking up the debt he'd accrued in his last incarnation, worrying about my future and feeling, above all, so physically lonely that I would have given my soul away for someone to tell me I was beautiful and mean it.

I sat in the car and watched the clouds dance around the piney peaks of Georgetown and sobbed until I couldn't cry anymore. A man jogging with a dog passed me in the middle of my fit, and I wiped my eyes fast, hid my face in a pillow of tissues.

The last time I let myself cry like that, Abbey and I lay in the loft on the crunchy carpet and stared at the popcorn acoustic ceiling, a small section of which looked like it had been burned by a halogen lamp. I'd strung white Christmas lights around the perimeter of the room and pinned them in place with multi-colored thumbtacks. My desk sat, a monolith, the only piece of furniture in the room aside from the \$7 torch lamp and boxes of Larry's old documents that I used as end tables. I'd tacked pictures of my cats, dead writers, Degas and Van Gogh prints and hand-written poems to the wall in an attempt to bring light to the loft, which up until that week, had been a trash dump. Each box of old taxes, check registers, pictures and Larry's clothes had sat skewed and avoided

in the loft for two months. One weekend, when Abbey was in Breckenridge, I cleaned the room, strung lights, vacuumed and put my desk out there, thinking maybe I'd write a fabulous novel full of death and pathos in the dim light of the loft.

"It would be perfect in here if you could hack a window out of the wall," Abbey said.

We lay on our backs and listened to Norah Jones.

"I wanna make out with Norah Jones," she said.

"Me too."

The apartment was always quiet and seemed unnaturally well-insulated against noise. Maybe the walls were filled with desiccated animals and insects; maybe they were filled with trash the way some houses are filled with the leftover junk from construction, but no one knows until they decide to remodel, and faded Mountain Dew cans and cigarette butts become illuminated by the new hole in the drywall.

"I miss my house," I said.

"What, this isn't good enough for you?" Abbey said, rolling her eyes and pointing at the streak of soot on the ceiling.

"I miss my cats," I said. "Did you see the picture of Booty I put on the wall? He was gorgeous."

"And annoying," she said.

I sniffed.

Abbey turned and looked at me. "He was annoying *and* gorgeous, not just annoying."

Her dark blue eyes grew small and she put her arm around my chest.

“I miss Larry.” I turned on my side toward her and curled around my knees and began crying. Before this my cries were always brief, fearful, and spastic; I hid in my room or my shower and then I’d wipe my face until it was raw.

I couldn’t stop this time. I heaved and wept, clutching her sweatshirt. She wrapped both tiny arms around me and held me like a baby. I kept repeating I was sorry, sorry for crying and moving there, sorry for being such a mess.

She pushed me away from her torso and stared at me.

“I don’t ever want you to apologize for crying again. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

I buried my face in her chest and sobbed until I was exhausted, wiping my mascara on her sweatshirt.

“I hate my life,” I said, my mouth buried in the teal cotton.

“It will get better,” she said, stroking my hair.

“My room is so cold.”

That morning, in the wet sunlight above Georgetown, my face felt like it might crack open, my fingers were cold, my veins throbbled with caffeine. I sat behind the wheel of the car shaking, looking up at the peaks as clouds moved farther and farther down into the valleys. This is what it felt like to be sad.

I wrote my grandfather a note telling him I loved him and drove to the motel where Abbey was ready to eat breakfast.

We sat across from each other at a table in an old-timey restaurant with plastic tablecloths and crusted jam jars and drank coffee until we were inverted.

I told her I found a good road behind town that would take us up into the mountains. I also told her about the letter I'd written to Larry. I told her I needed to do something with my life.

"You mean not work at a hotel?" she asked.

"Or a bagel shop," I retorted.

We loaded into the Celica and took it up behind Georgetown where the gravel road was dotted with patches of melting ice and hard snow. We drove slowly, with the windows open, smelling the wet, sharp scent of pine needles peeking out of crystalline tombs. The rocks emitted their knife scents. We barely passed another car. We peered past either side of the road for the perfect location for our ritual.

The road snaked in and out of forest, past rock face cliffs that begged to fall off into the road, releasing their great backs of the tension of holding flint tumors up like breasts swelled with frozen liquid rock.

We passed a clearing just below the road on the right-hand side that had the remnants of a fire pit. Its flat sandy soil spread like a small shelf between the terraced road and the quick slope of the mountain descending to a cleft between this mountain and the next.

We turned around, got out of the car and stood gazing at the spot. We grabbed our jackets and our objects, letters, incense, cigarettes and a lighter.

The soil was soft and clammy. There were sitting logs and rocks, and we set up the altar so we could lean back against the felled logs.

Abbey dug a hole in the dirt. I placed the purses, with their eclectic contents, letters of anger and appreciation, and crystals in the wet hole. I took every stick of

sandalwood incense and stuck them in the soil, about four inches apart from each other, around the hole. We lit them and sat back against the logs.

The smoking sticks burned slow, emitting the most delicate scent of sandalwood.

The silence of the Rocky Mountain slope was unlike any silence I'd heard on the Mainland. An empty jar sound of silence, like every sound was absorbed in the body of rock. I do not remember birds. I looked out past the chasm of the valley at the steep rocky slope of the next mountain face and felt that I had never seen such silence.

The incense, rising like spirits from their wooden coffins, lilted simultaneously like waves on the breeze, tremulous and fragile, before disappearing into the invisible body of sky.

I once asked a Zen Buddhist monk what happens when you die. He paused, looked away and said that it was like incense when it burns: Even when you can't see it, you know it's there. "You smell it," he said.

Abbey and I leaned our heads against the logs and stared at the clouded-over sky. Occasionally a car would wind by overhead. We didn't talk much, but someone would interject a memory sporadically: remember how grandpa used to let us wallop him in the gut as hard as we could after he clenched his abs?

Remember how Larry wore a Hawaiian sarong to the grocery store in Ohio just to scare the Midwesterners out of their suburban reverie? Remember how Larry didn't give a shit and everyone loved him anyway? Remember how, even though he died after a measly forty-four years, he packed a thousand years of life into that span, almost shaming the rest of us with our paltry worries, our catatonic fears, our somber, ugly faces?

I looked out at the distant mountain with its inhospitable face trembling with the latent potential of rock slides and said, “I just want to be somewhere in the middle.”

Abbey curled up beside me. I didn’t want to cry anymore. For just a small piece of time, I wanted to be released from the perpetual grief where my entire identity was that of a widow. It was so quiet. The sky was so big and close. I had never known a place like this.

Abbey lit a cigarette like a post-modern Marlboro chic. “There is nothing in this country like the West,” she said.

We buried the objects. Abbey rolled a rock on top of the spot. We plucked the incense sticks from the ground and gathered our trash and jackets. We climbed back to the road and turned around to look at the site. It was desolate and perfect.

The road back to Boulder quickly became crowded with truckers and snowboarders and fast food. We were quiet for many miles, absorbing the road and clinging to the tone of the modest memorial.

Once we got to I-70, the silence became oppressive. Life multiplied in abundance around us – noise, color, people, horns, the unavoidable intimacy of traffic, the looming cities, Denver and Boulder, the myriad towns clustered like grapes around the highways. I felt myself opening up, waking from a long sleep.

The last flight Larry took between Oahu and the Big Island was in a Cessna plane with me in the co-pilot seat, a medic pilot and two medics in the back making sure he stayed lying down.

“I want to look out the window,” he said. “Howzit up there, honey?” he asked before we took off.

I fucking hate flying. “Awesome,” I said.

The plane revved up and sputtered along the airstrip next to Mauna Kea, a 13,000 foot volcano, and took off into the quickly-retreating dusk across the channel between Maui and Hawaii. The moon rose, gibbous and silver, in the clear sky above the islands, illuminating each mound emerging from the ocean’s flat face. Maui, Kahoolawe, Molokai, Lanai, and in the distance Oahu glowing like a firefly.

I gripped my airsick bag and heard Larry and the medics guffaw above the roar of the engine. Larry wanted to be the funniest guy with a brain tumor anyone had ever met, act like he was taking this emergency night flight to Honolulu because he had a broken arm or a hemorrhoid, not because that Chinese doctor had asked him to smile and only half of his face went up.

The plane gyrated and thumped in mid-air, and I told myself to forget everything – the tumor, the pitiful amount of cash I had in my purse, the way my husband laughed like an embarrassed hyena in the stomach of the Cessna - and stare out at the glittering ocean with the silent island chain rising from the water. I told myself I’d never see Hawaii this way again, from a box of Plexiglas, with the window open a little.

When we reached the airport, Larry told me he wanted to sit up front, but they wouldn’t let him.

“Was it amazing?” he asked.

I nodded and ran my hand across his cheek. “It was spectacular.”

He told me he was going to sit up front on the way home.