Million Dollar Highway---This 12-mile “cliff-hanger” plummets over Red Mountain Pass then zips down the sheer walls of the Uncompahgre River Gorge, offering a spectacular drive for the brave-hearted.

It probably did cost a million dollars to build this highway, most of the money going to manual laborers because there’s no room for large construction machinery. Clinging to the mountain, the road is only two-lanes wide, and the shoulder drops into the gorge where the skinniest of rivers rumbles. When Mother rolls down her window, I can hear the current echo off the rock walls. Amazing that such a wispy stream can rip through so much stone.

I’m writing a postcard to my fiancé, Mike. *Maybe we can honeymoon here. Wish you could share the view.* Course, it’s not the best time to bother with postcards. The switchbacks make me dizzy, and my pen fishtails. The message I’ve scrawled is so compact and sloppy it seems cold like that of a mere acquaintance. Hoping to add romance, I sign off: *Love to you.*

Mother removes one hand from the steering wheel and flourishes it in front of the windshield. “Look at the scenery,” she says.
Dad risks one eye then leans his head against the window and groans. The winding mountain road upsets his stomach, too. He’s kept his eyes closed since we topped Red Mountain Pass, and his face is ashen like it was when he and Mother deboarded the plane in Albuquerque. The heat wave there kindled some turbulence, the warm air pulsing off the nearby mountains. The pilot on my flight warned us, but theirs said nothing. Dad was looking out the window, trying to spot the famous Mercado for Mother, and the horizon suddenly jumping up and down must have jolted his equilibrium. He likes things stable.

Mother laughs about it now, teasing him for the way he lay his head in her lap and the way he glared at the stewardess when she told him she couldn’t find any barf bags. Could he use a soda can? After leaving the airport but before driving on to Colorado, we stopped at Wal-Mart so Dad could buy some Dramamine. He wasn’t waiting for the return trip. Mother talked him into some oriental wristbands for nausea, too. They’re hot pink like sweat bands, and there’s a paltry bead sewn into the terry cloth. I laughed and told Dad he’d look like Andre Agassi fresh from a game-set-and-match if he wore those on an airplane. Still, we were so intrigued with the possibility of their actually working that we spent thirty minutes at lunch, pinching one another, digging between the tendons on our wrists, trying to locate the point where the bead should grip.

Mother trusts miracle cures lately, the spiritual. We’ve come to Colorado to get in touch with her Native American heritage, because things like elixirs, aroma therapy, and hot pink bands which grip your Nei-quan point, clamp your balance, prevent you from vomiting, are starting to sound good to her. She can rattle for hours about herbs and spring waters, unlike Dad who staggered through the airport refusing to acknowledge he didn’t feel good, afraid that talking about it might bring up whatever was stewing in his stomach. Mother doesn’t mind sharing her disease with others: doing so might weaken its power, wear out those tiny cancerous cells. I’ve seen my father succumb to her incessant chatter.

And I swear his hair wasn’t gray the last time I saw him. He’s always been the nurse in our family, but now, watching him suffer from nausea, Mother insists she’s the strong one. Even though she’s notorious for entering the Dallas freeways doing twenty, truckers shooting her the bird, she
wanted to drive, swore I wasn’t old enough to manage the snaky mountain roads. Maybe she’s right. Who knows what a thirty-year-old can handle?

**Main Street, Ouray**—Cupped in the hands of the San Juan Mountains, Ouray offers quaint souvenir shops, fine cuisine, and a breath-taking view.

Ouray is like those classifieds Mike and I have been reading trying to find a house back in Lubbock. *Energy-efficient* means it’s the size of a shoe-box and doesn’t have heat. *Quaint* means it’s forty years old and leaning to the left. Locals will tell you this town is *handy, convenient*. You can walk to the only pay phone from anywhere in the city in ten minutes. You can walk to the grocery in five, if you need to buy toilet paper, soap, the necessities. But if you want something exotic, say a Del Monte product, you’ve got to drive to the next town—on the other side of the mountains.

Not that I won’t admit how *breath-taking* it is. Snow covers the surrounding peaks even in June, and a waterfall crackles down the rock wall to the north of the city. Ouray itself boasts several historical landmarks—the bank, the post office, the library—and a number of bars and restaurants, some with live entertainment. Very metropolitan. But despite all the grand scenery, the expanse of history, everything seems congested. The houses don’t have yards, probably because land costs about $40,000 per lot here. Stacked tight as cages at a pet store, the tourist shops on Main Street are stuffed with every imaginable souvenir: shot glasses, T-shirts, rocks, playing cards, jewelry, junk. Even the mountains hunch over the city as if to prevent this stunted town from spreading.

But maybe it’s the heat wave that’s cramping me. It followed us up from Albuquerque and won’t let go. The warmth smothers the city, pressing down like the push of heat when you open an oven door. It slows Mother’s breathing and makes walking uphill difficult for her. I can see her face dampen with exertion. She hangs onto Dad’s hand, sometimes mine, hoping we will pull her up or, at least, won’t let go.

Shopping soothes her a little. She giggles when Dad comes out of a leather store wearing new mountain boots, a new leather belt with silver studs, and a new fedora with leather trim. He’s ready to
go hiking now, his old self stuffed in a brown paper bag. Like a woman, he couldn’t wait to put on the new gear. Bashful at first, he finally models his new hat by cocking his head, tipping the brim up. “Quite handsome. Don’t you think?” Then he takes Mother back inside: he’s spotted some Indian moccasins he knows she’ll love. Finding her size, she wedges her feet in and swaggers to the floor mirror where she turns from side to side, tips her toes like a ballerina, and frowns. Her pudgy feet swell out of those shoes, and she knows it’s the medicine that makes her bloated. I grab her hand, tell her how pretty those moccasins are. She should treat herself. She agrees. She senses the energy of the Ute Indian whose hands stitched their soles. Maybe they will help her travel many miles safely.

Back at our motel, we worry. We’ve bought so many things already that we’re not sure we have enough luggage to carry it home. Our suitcases were burdened with bulky sweaters to begin with, sweaters we don’t need in such warm temperatures. Mother jams her souvenirs in one shopping bag, tests its weight, then pats her brow and throat with a Handi-Wipe. Spotting me at the desk writing another postcard to Mike, she asks how I plan to capture our day much less send love and kisses on such a puny square. She knows I prattle like her.

Too many souvenirs; not enough baggage, I scribble. Bring a U-Haul to the airport.

Dad fans Mother then himself with his new hat. The sun continues to fill the city, and the smell of heat seeps through our screened windows, crowding the room with an uncomfortable fever.

San Juan Jeep Tours—The San Juan Range can only be reached by four-wheelers, so many tourists take advantage of Ouray’s world-famous jeep tours and leave the driving to someone else.

We hear that, in the summer months, the temperature drops 4° for every thousand feet you climb, so we decide to take a jeep tour and drive Mother to cooler temperatures. Dad and I make reservations with the San Juan Company, and before the jeep comes to pick us up, Mother waddles out
of the bedroom, cocooned in full Arctic gear—a down ski coat, long underwear, corduroy pants, turtleneck, sweater, two pairs of socks, mountain boots, wool mittens, and a toboggan.

She holds out an angora scarf. “You think I’ll need this?”

Dad stares at her. “Hell, yes. It’s 95° outside.”

Mother’s face tightens with confusion. She doesn’t know what he means exactly—will she or will she not need the scarf?

“Mother,” I say, “you look puffy in those clothes.”

She gazes past me, a wandering look. I understand. She’s forgotten the heat outside, is remembering the trip she made here in October fifteen years ago, when the air was fresh and crisp like her and her giggling girlfriends, traveling without their husbands, without their children, without any burdens. On that trip, she learned even the Indians couldn’t predict blizzards. They took precautions, carrying all their clothes wherever they traveled. She wraps the scarf around her neck and stuffs it inside her jacket. It may be the one trifle that decides whether or not she survives a snowy blast.

I look at Dad, finally notice what he’s wearing. Although he’s put shorts on, he’s pulled his silver hair into a ponytail and is sporting his new boots, fedora, and belt. He hasn’t cut his hair since January when he turned sixty. He asks if I think he looks silly. Now I know why we bought rubber bands at Wal-Mart. I laugh, not because he looks ridiculous, but because I want him to be still young, and suddenly I’m forgetting the heat outside, forgetting his ashen face as he staggered off the plane in Albuquerque, can’t remember how old I am really.

The postcard I’m writing to Mike should remind me. It’s my harness to reality. *Mom and Dad are wearing costumes*, I’ve written. Dad sees and smirks. He points toward the mirror where I catch a glimpse of myself. With a camera strung around my neck and the Igloo full of goodies I’m toting, I, too, look overdone—like a tourist. Dad grabs Mother’s hand and walks her to the jeep—hip mountain man and wise Indian princess. *This is what we look forward to.*

**The Columbine**—Mimicking the design of a Swiss chalet, The Columbine is one of Ouray’s most extravagant inns. Call 1-800-338-9845.
I think Mike might enjoy a postcard of our palatial accommodations. All twenty-five units. If it weren’t for the chalet paint job, The Columbine would look a lot like the Bates Motel, a run-down inn straight from Hitchcock, the kind that never gets real tourists, only small-town adulterers, embezzlers, psychopaths. *Norman works the front desk*, I write. *I’m afraid to shower.*

But Mother insists this could be a romantic place for newlyweds. Though the room doesn’t have air conditioning, the tub in the bathroom turns into a whirlpool. Today, after Mother sends Dad to buy her some more trail mix in case we go on another jeep tour, she decides to start it. Unfortunately, she runs too much bath water, and when those jets shoot on, the water erupts, blows right over the edge of the tub, floods the whole bathroom. Panicked, Mother stands there screaming, and I can’t shut off the pump because water is pelting my face. The whole time I’m thinking, *Dad is going to be angry we didn’t wait.* The jeep tour wore him out, he didn’t want to walk to the grocery store for more trail mix, and our whirlpool gone mad might be the last little thing that makes him snap.

When I hear him unlock the door, I skitter out of the bathroom, stand there with my wet hair clamped to my head, my soaked clothes gripping my body, hoping I don’t look too guilty.

“Mother did it,” I say.

He rushes into the bathroom, and though I expect to hear him curse and yell Mother’s name over and over, I only hear the jets shut off. Then it’s eerily quiet. Until the laughter starts. It’s faint at first, a soft gurgling, and I think, *Oh, my God, he’s strangling her.* But just before I’m about to burst in and break up the violence, the noise swells, and I hear Dad’s distinct laugh. It sounds like a lawn mower revving up, spitting out the word *inevitable,* choking at first but finally running full tilt. I think they were getting romantic in there.

Later that night, even with the windows open and fresh air circulating, the stifling heat wakes Mother. I hear her moaning, and I know her skin is hot as a skillet. This is one of those nights we try to keep her calm, tell her the sun will come up soon and she’ll be there to see it. Dad has fallen asleep beside her. He still holds a damp washcloth in his hand, ready in case he needs to bathe her forehead again. Jerking back the covers, she jumps up, dashes for the windows and slams them shut, screaming,
“Dust storm, dust storm.” In the morning, she brags about her spell. It’s proof she’s connecting with her Native American forefathers: she’s starting to predict most weather at a short walking distance, can see dust storms coming as they round the corner.

**Hot Springs Pool**—Located at the north end of town, Ouray’s Hot Springs feature cooler lap lanes and a large bathing area good for getting steamed at 115°.

Despite the heat wave, Mother continues her faithful trips to the Hot Springs. As I said before, she’s abandoning doctors. They don’t have real cures, just experimental medicine. Here, the healing waters from deep within the earth rise in a mystical, hot vapor which may cleanse her system, sweat out diseased spirits.

On our fifth day in Ouray, she offers me one of her bathing caps and asks me to go with her. While I’m not a big supporter of public pools, I go because she’s finally confessed to being blind in one eye and I know she’s afraid of walking somewhere she shouldn’t, entering the men’s room, tripping, attracting attention. I don’t like the spotlight either, but I wear the swim cap despite the neon green and orange butterflies decorating it. Mother feels more comfortable without her wig but doesn’t want to be the only one sporting a cap.

“They’re not very fashionable,” she admits.

I hold her hand as we walk inside, pay our admittance fee, and find a place to lay our towels. Shyly, we shuffle past the healthy swimmers working in the lap lanes and head for the steps leading into the steamy bathing area. It’s still in the 90’s, and I can’t believe we’re going to enjoy sitting in hot water. Gripping both my hand and the rail, Mother enters the pool—one step at a time. When she sits, her face puffs up, flushed like a happy baby cupped in a bubble bath. The steam envelops her, and for one moment, I imagine her illness wearies and evaporates. But later in our room, when I leave her sleeping on the bed, bundled in warm towels, she curls her swollen body into the fetal position, and I can hear her murmuring.
I find Dad at the laundromat, washing clothes with a young woman and her two children. She’s letting the kids eat green grapes and nacho chips with hot sauce, and Dad’s made fast friends with the little girl. She’s rattling on about purses and puppies and how her mother’s boyfriend punched a guy at the Montrose drive-in last week. She offers to share her grapes with me but only if I can prove I’m married to my father. “Girlfriends don’t count,” she says.

Her mother smiles at me, admires my engagement ring, and asks how long Dad and I have been married. Eating this up, he smirks and struts over to our washer, all flirty. He’s about to go along with the charade. “I’m his daughter,” I say. “I’m marrying someone else.” She blushes and tells me I’m lucky to have such a smiling father. Her stiff silence afterward tells me she didn’t have a father wise enough to smile, make friends with strangers, or guard her against dating or marrying the wrong man. Anger and heat waves ripple through her life, a fixed routine, a series of boyfriends, too much like her father, getting steamed, igniting fights at the drive-in. She can’t even stop the endless build-up of laundry consisting of winter clothes. She can’t afford luxuries like summer wardrobes.

Her little boy saunters over and sits in the chair next to mine. His sweaty bangs stick to his forehead. “School is rotten,” he says. Then the mother begins chattering again, like her daughter, about how Tim is in trouble with the principal, she thinks her son is hyper, he can’t seem to grasp addition and subtraction, maybe he needs an i.q. test. I should tell her she seems to come from a line of good mothers, like mine, but the smell of heated dryer sheets and the lack of air conditioning in the laundromat, make the day too hot for heavy conversations.

And when Dad and I return to The Columbine, I don’t know what to say to Mike either. My pen hovers, poised over an empty postcard. There aren’t words large enough to tell the story of this day. Dad unwraps Mother’s legs and places a fresh, cool towel on her feet. Her breathing rushes like a tire punctured and going flat. I scribble Mike’s address, stick on the stamp, but leave the message blank, assuring myself that he and I have learned to feel comfortable with silence.

Cecilia’s—Located in the center mall on Main Street, Cecilia’s serves homemade rolls, breads, and pies baked fresh daily.
Feeling guilty about the last postcard, I pen this one with renewed enthusiasm. *Getting dolled up tonight. Mother and I have a date with Dad.*

Dad wants to escort us to uptown Ouray for dessert. He promises Mother he’s seen the menu for Cecilia’s while walking around town, shopping for more souvenirs. “They serve a lemon ice box pie,” he says. “It’ll cool you off.” I slick my hair into a wet ponytail that looks like Dad’s. Mother wears her fanciest wig and asks me to curl it for her. She borrows my nail polish and perfume, too.

But later, sitting in the booth, waiting for our pie, we’ve nothing to say. We’re hot and tired and have been together too long. Mother has spent the afternoon preaching about the abuse of Native Americans, how Chief Ouray was snookered into signing over the San Juan Mountains to the United States, and Dad and I can only think of the Historical Museum as a stuffy cupboard where people shelve the past. We’re grateful for the air-conditioned restaurant. It’s a reprieve from blistering weather, sermons, hot springs, and mystical cures.

After five minutes, the silence drives Dad to hum. It’s a song he sang to me when I was little—an Arlo Guthrie tune about Alice’s Restaurant. I ask if he still knows the verses about chocolate pie, potato cake, peach ice cream, whatever dessert you want. I’ve forgotten the lyrics.

He looks at me funny. “There isn’t any food in that song,” he says. “That’s a song about a whore house.”

I’m stunned. I recall a little ditty about a café, just a half-mile down the railroad tracks, where Alice served up southern, homemade sweets.

Mother slaps Dad on the shoulder. “You remember,” she says. “I made you change the lyrics. You can’t sing about hookers to little girls.” She turns to me and leans across the table, whispering, “Your father was wild when I met him. Always singing beer songs.” She waves her hand like she’s erasing a chalkboard. “Long time ago.”

I look at her. Then him. I guess all parents hide their true identities from their children.

Growing up, I never knew when my parents were mad at one another. They were always smiling, though they must have fought. I didn’t know Dad stayed home one year, doing laundry, cleaning house,
fixing dinner, while Mother worked in a dress shop, because he’d been laid off and couldn’t find another job. At seventeen, when my boyfriend and I parked in the drive, kissing, our hands nervous and fumbling in the dark, I could have never imagined Mother on a date with a boy, Mother on a date with Dad. I could have never pictured her patting the tousled strands of her hair back into place, straightening her blouse, then walking into her parents’ living room, pretending she and Dad had only been chatting. And last year, my parents waited seven months before they told my sister and I that Mother had cancer.

So tonight, I’m staring at my parents, a man with graying hair, a woman with no hair at all under that wig of hers. We’re sitting in a fancy restaurant in Ouray, Colorado, waiting for some lemon ice box pie, I don’t even like lemons, they’re too sour, and suddenly I’m not sure I know who my parents are. I’ve nursed Mother after her treatments, bathing her neck with a cool cloth, holding back her hair as she leaned over the toilet. I’ve made secret plans with my sister: after Mother’s funeral, Dad will spend every spring and summer with me in Lubbock, every fall and winter with her in Austin. Under these circumstances, I can’t even see my parents as parents any longer, though they can’t imagine being anyone else. They’re still not used to the idea of Mike or the idea of me as someone’s wife. Mother passes a tube of lipstick across the table. “You need some color,” she says. “You never know who you might meet.”

Yankee Boy Basin—Often featured in national beer commercials, Yankee Boy Basin is home of The Twin Waterfalls and a wide variety of native flora.

Today, we take another jeep tour. We select a calmer one though, for Mother doesn’t feel like jostling about in the higher, rugged altitudes. On this tour, we see some ghost towns, mining communities that shut down in the 1893 Silver Panic, signaling the mass exodus from this area that has never reversed. It’s sad to see such empty buildings, dark holes, dead and lonely. Dad takes my picture by an old well; then I snap his and Mother’s on the trestle of the mining car tracks. He holds Mother’s mitted hand, wraps his arm around her, and gives her a sturdy hug.
She doesn’t feel well today. For the rest of the tour, she stays in the jeep rather than climbing out and strolling around when it stops. Even the $30,000, federally-funded outhouse doesn’t pique her curiosity, although Dad teases her, assures her there are sparklies all over the faucets and it’s safe to go inside.

She’s bundled up again, pretending it’s that autumn ten years ago, wondering where yesterday went. She says when she looks at ghost towns she wonders if the people living there saw it coming or if it all collapsed in a boom, quick and sudden as when it started. The tour guide perks up. While Mother initially made him uncomfortable, like most sick people can sober up the healthy, this observation gives him a new respect for her. It proves she understands the country, senses the loneliness here without the roaming Indian tribes, the bustle of miners, and the rumble of mule carts traveling the toll road, taking four months to heave themselves over the pass.

The guide offers her some Mountain Bluebells, telling her a person can survive in the Colorado wilderness by eating them. I look at the tiny white flowers and think it would take a whole meadow of such fragile petals to fill one up. Dad and I try one though: they taste like clover. Mother wants one then because she needs all the luck she can get. I pick several and lay them in her palm. In return, she puts two rocks she gathered from the top of the Red Mountains in my hand. “The tour guide claims they’re red and yellow because of the iron and sulfur in the mountain,” she says. “I think they’re the color of flames, kindled by the sun and stoked by the wind.”

On the trip down, Mother asks the guide to stop at a field of Mountain Bluebells. She wants her picture taken. The breeze stirs, and taking off her ski jacket and scarf and mittens, Mother looks lighter, too. She walks alone into the basin of flowers, sinks among them, and Dad snaps the camera. The sun fingers Mother’s wig, making it glitter. The Bluebells bob their heads with reassurance.

Already I’m thinking what hopeful words I will send Mike tonight. *Tour guide fed Mother survival tips. I think, maybe, she is breathing better.*

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**The R&R Ranch**—Nestled in the Ridgeway valley, Ralph and Randie Lauren’s million dollar Ranch stretches for miles along the San Juan Skyway.
This morning Mother decides it’s time to go home. She wants to try acupuncture back in Dallas. Who knows? Maybe those lean needles can work a large miracle.

Though I can’t send word that we’re returning steamed crisp and good as new, I refuse to admit on paper the hot springs and mountain air didn’t help. The last postcard I send Mike will arrive after I’ve already returned to Lubbock, and when I spy it, mixed with his bills and other junk, its little message need not remind me of the truth. Instead, the words can recall the ghost of me, writing from a lovely journey, like my mother’s memories of her healthier self still haunting the streets of this town. *Home tomorrow,* I say. *It was a grand adventure.*

Driving back to the Albuquerque airport, we take a different road than when we drove in, one that doesn’t twist so much, shouldn’t make Dad dizzy. Besides, Mother wants to see Ralph Lauren’s ranch, and my sister told her it lies on The Skyway. We watch for it, expecting it to be hidden from the road, so we’re surprised when we see the big gates not two feet from our car with the iron R&R hanging on top. We stop to take our picture. A long wooden fence sweeps around the acreage then curves back. Dad says it must have cost a fortune to build that fence.

Mother reminds him to buy a lottery ticket as soon as they get back to Texas. If she and Dad win, they might buy this ranch out from under old Ralph. Dad says, no, he wants a condo at the beach. My parents have argued about this ever since the Texas lottery started, as if one day they really will draw the winning ticket, and afterward, things will continue, just as they are--only we’ll all quit our jobs and drive sports cars and own beach houses and be freed from cancer.

I thought Mother would be tired, would want me or Dad to finish the drive to Albuquerque while she slept, but when we walk back to the car, she takes the keys, rattling them like dainty bells, then gabs the whole trip about how we’ll go to New York City next summer and maybe California the one after that. Dad studies the instructions on his Dramamine bottle and practices tightening his anti-nausea wristbands. Thinking of Mike, I’m reading the latest issue of *Modern Bride.* Outside, the heat lingers, and the San Juan Skyway stretches on and on, like the thinnest ribbon of hope.