

Katie Pech

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## Cloudscapes

Two Wednesdays ago I was driving down Interstate twenty-five. Nova, my almost-three-year-old was fastened into his car seat in the back, happily swinging his legs and singing his “car song.” Nova’s car song is a sonorous string of impromptu declarations. To my adult ears it has no rhyme or rhythm but it has some sort of unpredictable flow between forte and mezzo forte. “Mommeee, daddeee, SPIDERMAN, mommy...it’s a car, it’s a bluuuue car, three cars! THREE!! CARS!!! Ooooh... Mommy! Wook at the mountains!” Nova had slipped into his talking voice without skipping a beat or losing any volume. This last exclamation grabbed my attention and a warm smile swept over my being as I was captured by the incandescent mountain scene which lay before me.

The bold array of sunset clouds which could make anything dull in comparison took away nothing from the hazy deep-cerulean mountains. Instead, in alternations ranging everywhere from royal purple to sunflower gold, the clouds formed their own peaks and valleys causing the mountain range to build and stretch upward. Its unseen end lay somewhere in the heavens. And how to describe those rosy sunlit hues?

“Peachish!” I heard myself exclaim in a voice which had not been mine in decades.

That term used to make my father laugh. “We’re leaving the city,” he would say. “We’re going to the mountains and we’re not coming back.” I sat, not in a car seat, but in the front of his Bronco. I had never seen such beauty. It was the day after my fourth birthday and one month after my parents’ divorce. I think the years following that day were some of the happiest of my childhood.

Neither of them had ever been abusive to us kids or each other, but the yelling matches at night, although frightening, seemed to be a normal course of events to me. One especially bad night I sat with my brother at the kitchen table. We tuned them out as we stuck macaroni and cheese noodles lengthwise onto each prong of our forks before taking a bite. It was a race and James, my elder by two years, was winning. Mahalie, the oldest, burst in from the direction of the yelling. "They're getting a divorce" she cried. Having no inkling what a divorce was, and not wanting to lose the macaroni race, I muttered "Naught-uh" and continued.

But that was that. Dad moved out and rented a room in someone's basement.

A month later, on the night that I turned four years old, my dad came and picked me up. I was to spend the weekend with him. When he arrived at the door I saw my father without a mustache for the first time in my life. And he brought presents! Wrapped only with the bags in which they had left the store where they were purchased were a teddy bear and a tee-shirt with a herd of horses dashing across a sunset stripe on the chest. I loved them. I imagined being one of those horses; having a tail and mane, feeling the wind in them as I ran fast, free and far. Dad swung me in his arms.

We went to bed early and woke up before the sunrise. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I noticed Dad throwing the last few items from his bare room into a big metal-frame backpack. "We're leaving the city" he said for the first of many times that day as he loaded me into his truck.

I had always thought that the mountains in the horizon marked the end of the world; that it simply ceased in existence abruptly on the other side. But we drove until those mountains became our surroundings. They enclosed us comfortably as the once-straight highway wound into a curving two-lane road, ascended to a bumpy dirt path and finally a gravel driveway in front of a small log cabin in the quaint mountain town of

Pine, Colorado. I stepped out of the truck and stretched the stiffness from my legs. The air, retaining the smell of a brief morning shower, was crisp, alive and new.

This was where I would spend the next few years in adventurous childhood bliss. It wasn't until I was older that I learned my mother had quickened in her downward spiral after the divorce. Luckily, Dad had not. In fact, he had his last drink in the days following the divorce. With a sober head, he put his children in front of all else. I'm not sure in what ways mother neglected us. I have only a few fuzzy memories of such, and no family member ever told me any stories. All they said is that father was especially concerned about me since I was the youngest. What they didn't say is that Dad had spent the two months between the morning he took me away and the day of the custody hearing preparing evidence to prove my mother unfit. She never even showed up to court.

So Dad had his babies safe under one roof. All things said, our perceptions can be much stronger than reality and my memories of my mother, who disappeared shortly after, are only the fondest.

The days that followed were an endless procession of homestead Americana. My dad let more than just the mustache grow back. His hair and beard became as wild as our boundary-less back yard. Mahalie and James attended West Jefferson County School while I went to the Whole Child preschool and Dad worked construction. We camped nearly every single weekend, winter or not. Dad had taken up photography again, so he was sure to show us all the beauty in this magnificent state and capture it as best he could.

Our little cabin, like most of our neighbors' had an outhouse instead of a bathroom. We kids took our baths on Saturdays in water which my father had transported from town in five-gallon jugs then heated on our pot-bellied woodstove. He began teaching me reading and writing before I started kindergarten. And art! He

bought us a chalkboard and nearly every morning we would wake up and run to it to view the magical depictions of elves and fairies which father said “just appeared there overnight.” Dad’s art could be quite conceptual as well. We did have a TV, but no reception. Dad abandoned this also. He dragged it out into the yard and shot it straight through the screen with his 30/30 Winchester. Not through anger; he displayed it on a tree stump as art.

Dad has always said I was a happy child; easy going and imaginative. I could play alone outside for hours on end, creating adventures and conversations with imaginary friends. But even the most fulfilled child, I am sure, feels that something is missing when they’ve got no mother. I know I did. Though the void seemed always to be there, my awareness of it was fleeting. Dad did the laundry, but let us dress ourselves, and for me there was no better match than my favorite pastel striped skirt with my favorite red wool sweater. And I remember noticing how the girls in school wore french braids and had their bangs curled. Now, my hair was clean and well kept, but Dad had no idea how to french braid and for at least the last week, we had been unable to find my hair-ties and he had been using bread bag twisty-ties to hold my hair back in a ponytail.

Looking back, these early childhood memories are bittersweet. No, *truly* sweet but lacking. Is it correct to say that a child like me could feel fulfilled yet half hollow at the same time?

I yearned for a whole family and this craving grew with age as Mom’s absence became more and more apparent to me. Mother had taught me about the first star in the twilight sky and about reciting “star-light star-bright,

first star I see tonight,

I wish I may, I wish I might,

have this wish I wish tonight.”

Years later (I guess I had given up on her) I used to find that star and wish for a new mother.

In my adolescent years I vowed not to have children until I was certain I could maintain for them the unity I had so desired. But, as with most of life's best laid plans, the universe had something else in store for me.

Motherhood came long before I expected it, and Nova's father and I, try as we may, simply could not work things out. Before age twenty-one I was a single mother. Life was hard.

But on that peachish day two Wednesdays ago, I finally realized something my sub-conscience must have been digging at for some time. Although my days of youth weren't quite ideal, and though sometimes they seemed like such a struggle, the love and beauty which were set before me were enough; more than enough. I pulled over on the side of the road and unbuckled Nova from his car seat. We stepped out of the car and onto the damp grass in the ditch. Nova ran through the green field toward the reverent mountain range. I opened my backpack and grabbed my camera. It was all I could do to refrain from running with him and not stopping until we were deep within some canyon. Of course, I would have to explain to Nova that the world does not end there.

*Katie Kristine Pech died one year and eight months after writing this for her college English course. It has been posted on her memorial site: <http://pechfamily.com/katie> for posterity. All rights reserved.*