

Continental Divide

by **Priscilla Mainardi**

Sasha, my daughter, sits next to me in the car, dressed all in black. Navy blue is the brightest color she ever wears, but beneath the dark clothes she's all sunniness. We're driving across New Mexico. The weather has finally warmed after the chill of Illinois and Missouri, and winter sun heats the car through the windows. The road is long and straight with nothing but empty fields of winter-brown grass on each side, dotted with dark shrubs. We have three more days together in the car before we reach Riverside, where Sasha is moving with her boyfriend Ty.

We pass faded billboards and abandoned ranches, climb some hills and descend the other side. A small sign tells us we just crossed the Continental Divide. "I always thought that would be a bigger deal," Sasha says when we stop for lunch an hour later.

"It is a big deal," I say. "It means that now all the rivers are running west."

Sasha rubs her eyes and stretches. She's been reading "Pet Milk" in the car, the Stuart Dybek story of time and memory that I'm thinking of having my upcoming freshman composition class read. Or at least she was reading it until she set it aside to search Yelp for a place to eat lunch. We've already driven forty minutes out of our way, following a sign promising "fry bread" that brought us to a store that looked like it closed twenty years ago. Each time we've gone in search of something that sounds exciting (caverns! trading post! petroglyphs!), it's been a long detour. Still, five days into the trip, here we sit in a cafe near the Arizona border, and the waitress, a teenage Navajo, has just set down a basket brimming with sopapillas, deep fried squares of bread, crispy in places, doughy in others. Sasha and I both reach for the same piece, let go, laugh, then each select a different one.

"What did you think of the story?" I ask.

"I love the line about how he's already missing his girlfriend while he's still with her."

I glance up at her. "Seems fitting for this trip," I say.

She sits up straighter, narrowing her eyes at the bottles of hot sauce and ketchup on the table. "I think it's about how hard it is to hold on to moments of your life while you're living them. You know in your mind that everything passes too quickly, but you can't really feel it."

A woman comes up to the table holding a tray of turquoise and silver earrings. Sasha glances at them and shakes her head. There's been a steady parade of these vendors. We're trying to resist buying things we know we won't wear anywhere else but here, any other time but now. I wait until the woman moves on to the next table, then ask, "What was your freshman composition class like? Did you have to read stories like this?"

"The theme was the ocean," Sasha says. "We had to read *Moby Dick*. That's all I remember."

All I remember about her freshman year is that she called in early October to say she'd spent the whole semester's allowance. All I remember about my own is that while sneaking home to visit my high school boyfriend, I fell down the steps in the train station and broke my ankle. I spent the rest of the semester on crutches.

Another vendor stops at the table, a man this time, holding a box of beaded bracelets. Maybe we should buy something, I think. That way he won't have to leave his home on the reservation and travel to Texas or Oklahoma for work, as I've heard many Navajos do to support their families. But Sasha says, "No, thank you," and he moves on.

There is a notice on the menu that says if you don't want the vendors to stop at your table, you can place a Do Not Disturb sign on the table, but we don't see these signs, handwritten on scraps of paper, until we're waiting at the cash register to pay, on our way out.

Sasha at the wheel, we weave back through the streets of Gallup. Interstate 40 unfurls in front of us. Behind us possibilities fall away, petrified forest, Indian casinos, painted desert. Soon after we cross the border into Arizona, Sasha points straight

ahead to a black mass, dark against the sky, with a wide level top and vertical sides that rise straight up out of the flat land. "What's that?" she says.

I reach into the back seat and draw up the road atlas, useful for providing the names of mesas and the heights of mountain peaks, marked on the maps with tiny x's. I open it to Arizona. "Black Mesa," I tell her. "Or maybe Second Mesa." Even with the atlas it's hard to tell.

We stop for gas in the middle of the afternoon. After filling the tank, I pull the car into a parking space to wait for Sasha to come out of the store. Suddenly I'm afraid she won't reappear, that she's gone forever. Then I think that when she does come out she won't see me sitting in the car, which is hidden between two white trucks. She'll think I'm the one who's disappeared. I get out and stand on the curb in front of the car. A minute later Sasha comes out, brown ponytail swinging, a bag of popcorn dangling from her fingertips.

I'm sitting in a chair in an empty room. Birds sing outside the open window: three notes and a trill. Inside the clocks no longer tick the silence away as they did on so many afternoons with everyone gone, my husband at work, Sasha and her brother Ned at school. Two men come into the room. I stand and they lift the chair and carry it outside. I go outside too, and take a last look at the house, which I somehow know, in the way of dreams, that I'll never see again.

A swerve of the car jolts me awake. Sasha's muttering to herself. "Jerk," she says. "Asshole. You have your own lane. Do you need mine too?" She pulls around a black pick-up, accelerating as we climb a pass, mountains all around us. The land levels off again, becoming so flat we can see the earth curving away at the edges. A train goes by in the opposite direction: matte-black tank cars, flat freight cars the dark red of dried blood. It's hard to tell how long the train is, or how far away. Such a long train is unimaginable in the East.

The day revisited in the dream was the last day we lived in that house, six years ago. When my husband and I were cleaning up before we moved, we found a stash of liquor, big bottles of cheap brands, most of them nearly empty, at the back of a

basement closet. We hoped they were Sasha's brother Ned's, but we had our suspicions.

Sasha was eight, in third grade, when we moved into that house. I picked her and fourteen-year-old Ned up at school and brought them to their new home. Their day had begun in one place and ended in another. When we arrived, Ned ran around the outside, then the inside, up and down the stairs, then out again through the back door and down the steps to the pool. He lay down beside the pool and dipped his hand in, but yanked it right out again. The water must have been colder than he expected.

The movers were still coming and going, lugging furniture up the stairs. I was emptying boxes into kitchen cabinets. Sasha sat down at the kitchen table, took her books from her backpack, opened her math book, and started her homework, as if it were the most ordinary day of her life, as if nothing had changed, not the house, not the neighborhood, not the table itself, which we had bought from the sellers. Maybe she believed that if she acted as if nothing had changed, nothing ever would. And how much had really changed for her? We'd moved to a bigger house in the same town, and she attended the same school. She soon adjusted to the new house and made friends in the neighborhood. I ask myself now what that moment meant, what that child has to do with the carefree grown-up person sitting next to me driving the car. They're like two sides of a foreign coin I don't recognize.

We arrive in Riverside in darkness and pull up in front of our hotel. Sasha shuts off the engine but makes no move to get out of the car. I don't move either. Getting out will mean it's over: the vast open spaces, the truck stops, the junk food, the otherworldly desert scenery. We sit in silence, other cars piling up around us, until the valet appears and opens my door. We reach into the back seat for all the things strewn there over a week of travel: books and postcards, "Pet Milk" and a half-eaten bag of popcorn.

Palm trees, wide streets, not too many cars and even fewer pedestrians. Small detached houses, a smattering of taller buildings, all of it surrounded by brown mountains and covered in a light layer of smog. I thought Riverside would be grittier, with more traffic and more people on the streets; not so hilly, nor quite so dry.

We spend two days looking at apartments and houses in the foothills that surround the downtown, Sasha seeking the familiar along the strange new streets. Do you think there's a Starbucks? she asks. I hope there's a local bar, Ty will want that. And movies. There has to be a theater around here somewhere. The hint of desperation in her voice tells me she has more doubts about the move than she's let on.

Sasha decides on the last place the realtor shows us, a compact brown house at the end of a cul-de-sac near the University, a small mountain like a pile of dry rocks rising beyond it in the distance. There's a patio out back, bordered by flowering shrubs we can't name and paved with square red-orange tiles, the color evoking Spanish-style roofs and tropical sunsets.

Nearby we find an organic market and buy coffee and sandwiches. They sell condensed milk and Sasha looks for Pet Milk but they don't carry it. I wonder if it still exists.

That night we eat in the hotel restaurant, where it's warm enough to sit outdoors under heat lamps. Sasha orders a steak; perhaps she feels it will be her last good meal for awhile, one that I'm paying for, anyway. We splurge on cupcakes for dessert, German chocolate cake topped with half an inch of fluffy coconut pecan icing. "When will I see you next?" I ask, peeling the paper from the rich dark cake. "Do you think you'll come for the shower?"

Ned is getting married in the fall, and his fiancée's mother is planning a shower six months from now, in July. Sasha had said she'd come back for it, but now she says, "I'm not sure. It depends on what I find for work."

"Teaching, do you think?" I ask her. She gave up a perfectly decent job teaching English as a Second Language to make this move.

Sasha shrugs. She begins to talk about her plans, to hike up the nearby mountains with Ty, to grow herbs on the patio, to learn to cook. I go back to eating cake, but soon put down my fork. It tastes too sweet, and I can't finish it. The efforts she's making on behalf of this venture, her vision of her and Ty's happiness, fill me with a familiar ache, the ache of watching your children make their way through life, knowing there are so many things you can't help them with.

Sasha too puts down her fork. "You know, Momma," she says, reverting to her childhood name for me, "the liquor you found in the basement when you moved? It wasn't Ned's. It was mine, from a party I had senior year when you and Daddy went to Italy for your anniversary. It was the night I met Ty."

She offers nothing further, and I don't press her. I never gave my parents an explanation of what I was doing home from college when I fell in the train station and broke my ankle, letting them believe I was making a surprise visit. I wasn't too concerned about what they thought. My ankle was giving off hot jolts of pain, and I was already worried about how I would get across campus to my favorite English literature class, where Sasha's father had sat down next to me on the first day.

I look up at the flowers hanging from the hotel balcony, thinking about the small space I take up in Sasha's head compared to the large space she takes up in mine. After a moment I start eating my cupcake again. Sasha says, "Where's the river? If this place is called Riverside, how come we haven't seen any river?"

Sasha drops me at the airport the next day. There's something unnerving, even unreal, about flying, about covering in six hours the distance we drove in eight days, as if time were a rubber band that had stretched and stretched then snapped back quickly when I left Riverside. I reread "Pet Milk" on the plane, thinking about how quickly our last hug, the feeling of being with Sasha, is fading from me, even as I try to hold onto it.



Priscilla and Sasha on the California Coast

Two days later, I stand in front of my new class, holding the writing assignment I'm about to hand out, on which I've reduced Sasha to a "reader," a speck on the other side of the map. "Discuss the following comment made by a reader. At the heart of 'Pet Milk' lies the question: How can we hold on to the things we love in life?"

I look out at the students, so young they don't yet know that they'll spend their whole lives trying to answer this question. Then I walk forward and hand out the assignment, beginning with the only student brave enough to sit in the front row.

Priscilla Mainardi's writing has appeared in numerous journals, including *Blue Moon Literary and Art Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, and *The Examined Life Journal*. She teaches writing at Rutgers University and serves on the editorial board at *The Intima*. She lives in Montclair, New Jersey.