

Veterans

by Pamela Cravez

We're on a working vacation over Memorial Day weekend in Denver. *Our* work is babysitting our granddaughter while her mother goes to a conference and her father has meetings. Our job description is vague, but we're told she likes playgrounds, she can walk (which we interpret to mean don't spend too much time pushing her in a stroller), and when she is transferred between our adjoining hotel rooms she comes with her favorite stuffed animals clutched to her chest, Sloth, Bear, and Goat.

She is nearly a year and a half old and hasn't seen us for a few months since we live in Alaska and she lives in Connecticut. She registers her annoyance at being left with us by sticking out her bottom lip, then standing on her toes and throwing her stuffed animals into the crib.

My husband picks them up and hands them back to her one at a time, until she has them all in her arms. She gives a defiant look and throws them back into the crib.

He retrieves them.

Her mouth curves up.

Game on.

Neither Glenn nor I have been to Denver. Last night, before our children and granddaughter arrived, we sat at an outdoor table eating sushi rice bowls watching couples holding hands, parents shepherding kids, people in cutoffs and t-shirts, jeans, khakis, skirts, and sandals spending the beginning of a three-day weekend strolling along Denver's 16th Street Mall. We relished the absence of snow, the warmth of the sun, and echoes of the west in old bank buildings and "Colorado red" brick designs. We also took note of the buses that ran up and down the pedestrian mall and their echo of "Wheels on the Bus," a song we've learned in the last year from our granddaughter.

We try to see her every few months. She is our first grandchild and we're still figuring out the logistics of getting to know her, falling into the rhythm of her family life, falling back into our own lives, and some mixture of the two. I mentally add riding the bus to the list of things that we can do with her.

Our first destination is City Park where there are playgrounds and the Denver Zoo. Knowing that the best way to see a city is to walk, we gather stuffed animals and put them in the stroller along with her diaper bag packed with snacks, a change of clothes and water. We take the elevator down to the lobby and go out the front door into the bright early morning light. It's a little over a mile to City Park. No stroller for our granddaughter, she would rather walk.

We cross multiple lanes of traffic, railroad tracks, more traffic, my granddaughter's hand in mine. We pass a grassy thoroughfare, brick apartment buildings, rows of bicycles for rent lined up on the corner, and small homes that look like they've been here a while. We stop at a bagel shop and get one for each of us. Cream cheese is all over her face and fingers and she is still hungry, so I give her half of mine. When she's done, I clean her with a thin paper napkin and offer her the stroller. She declines. She points to a playground across the street. The playground is for older children, its moving bridge too difficult for her, and she does not want to be pushed in a swing. She is looking tired. I look at my phone. We are just a few blocks from City Park. I offer her the stroller. No, she shakes her head.

The small houses have given way to a neighborhood of gentrified larger homes on bigger plots. Monstrous irises fill the gardens. Glenn and our granddaughter are playing a game of chase, reminding me of the "zoomies" that used to overtake our puppies before they finally curled up and fell asleep. Glenn steadies the stroller and she climbs in. We hand her Sloth and she holds him to her chest as we assure her that she can get out and walk whenever she wants.

She falls asleep and is still asleep when we get to the zoo at City Park. Glenn and I look at each other. We had no idea she could walk as far as she did or how long she will sleep. We get our tickets and stop at the first concession to eat a frozen fruit whip and rest. We're exhausted.

Big bossy geese, taller than our granddaughter, are herding fluffy goslings along the zoo's pedestrian path, pushing parents and children out of the way with their aggressive honking. I recognize the vigilance of these geese, their determination to protect their babies against all threats. I wonder how many small children have been nipped. Later, I will look online and find that springtime is especially dangerous. I'm glad our granddaughter is asleep. When she wakes, we show her the monkeys, elephants, giraffes and hippos. Glenn carries her and points. We know that this trip to the zoo is not about showing her animals, it is about being with her as she goes for a walk to the zoo and gets cream cheese all over herself.

"Don't worry. We lose things all the time," her mother says when we get back from the zoo and realize we've lost Bear, one of the three stuffed animals entrusted to us. I feel terrible but relieved to hear her mother's nonchalance at the loss.

The next day we're off to the Botanic Gardens. Sloth and Goat are wedged next to the diaper bag. Our route to the Botanic Garden is longer than to the zoo. Still, our granddaughter has chosen to walk. Along this route there are tents like those we've camped in, though these tents are people's homes. We stop in Cheesman Park, open and green with a white pavilion on top of a hill and manicured walkways. She climbs steps and puts her hand on one of the tall columns. We eat PB&J sandwiches on a park bench. I lay on my back on the soft grass and let her climb on me just as her father and his brother used to. She's been in and out of her stroller today and we are pushing her toward the Botanic Gardens when she breaks down into tears. When we try to console her, she gets more frustrated. We know this is like the zoomies, that there is little to do but ride it out. When we approach the ticket window at the Botanic Gardens, it doesn't surprise us that she is sleeping peacefully, Sloth and Goat still wedged securely below her.

"I love that you get me to do this," Glenn says, as we walk past old growth stumpy fir trees that are thousands of years old, cacti blooming in orange, peach, pink, and fuchsia, and columbines of all sizes and colors, so many more than the red and yellow ones that bloom on mountainsides around Anchorage in July and August. It surprises me that he likes that I have made this plan for us to visit a garden. We are more accustomed to hiking and backpacking together in wild places than spending time walking through a landscape intricately designed by humans. This is something I've loved doing with my

friends, not my husband. I point out the hostas and ferns to Glenn and tell him we have these in our garden, along with many others plants we see here. I feel a shift between us, that we are not just sharing this baby, but other things that are important to us as a couple. That this wander time is more than just babysitting.

We are in a corridor bordered on each side by a green wall of fir-like foliage when our granddaughter begins to stir. I do a mental count of her stuffed animals. I had specifically stuffed Sloth underneath. It's not there. I search the stroller. She wakes. She does not ask for Sloth, which is good because Sloth is gone.

The thought of retracing our steps is daunting. We've been here for two hours and have been through the entire garden. But that is what we will do. We are not losing another stuffed animal. One loss is enough, two just seems irresponsible.

We turn the stroller around and walk back to the main trail. There are tall planters all along this path. The sun is beating down on us. I am hot and sweaty but determined.

I look at the concrete planter that runs eye-height. Squint.

Sloth is sitting on the rim, its feet dangling.

"Someone left sloth for us," I say to the closest woman who looks like she might be a grandmother. "I cannot believe they were so kind, so thoughtful, I am so relieved."

"Yes, we had that toy too," the woman says to me. "It's a very expensive toy. So nice that it wasn't lost."

Another grandmother who understands this job that we've taken on, this work that we are doing pushing our granddaughter through the garden. Not really work. More like a responsibility, taking care of something that is not ours *and* ours at the same time. A small person who will not remember this time and her parents who will, all people important to us, people we love and don't want to disappoint.

That evening we tell stories from our day, playing in the park on the way to the Botanic Gardens, the lucky retrieval of Sloth. Like the zoo, our granddaughter has no memory of the specifics, but this morning there was little argument when her parents dropped her off and quite a bit of confidence as she walked down the street with us and played in the park.

The next morning, I wake up early to take a walk by myself on our last day in Denver. Most shops are still closed. City workers are spraying disinfectant on tables and chairs set out in the middle of the mall for visitors, which seems a useless task considering the misty rain. I am heading for the state Capitol. I've seen the gold-domed building etched in the sky at a distance on our way to the Denver Zoo and the Botanic Garden. I've been warned that the area around the Capitol is sketchy, but I'd like to see it before we leave.

"Is it Memorial Day?" a man in an oversize brown jacket asks me as I cross Colfax Avenue near the Capitol. He has an infectious smile that allows me to see the baby that he once was. But this man has no teeth. His clothes are frayed.

"Yes, it is," I say, trying to look at him only briefly, trying not to engage.

"What is Memorial Day?" he asks. And my heart breaks, a lump in my throat as I wonder if he is someone who has served his country. Did his father or brother or grandfather serve when there was a draft? What dreams did his mother have for him when he was born?

I shrug my shoulders and turn up my hands, using this expression to end our conversation. The Capitol is on a hill just across the street, fenced off. Two people are sitting at the bus stop in front of the Capitol picking through food left on the bench, a third is standing at the nearby garbage bin, foraging. Pigeons are eating French fries and scraps of bread amid yellow and white food wrappers. No one minds me.

I continue walking and pass a fancy old hotel where I imagine men drinking scotch and smoking cigars in years gone by or maybe later today. I pass expensive coffee shops and corporate headquarters. I follow the sound of a woman singing an aria, so beautiful, so unexpected on this early Memorial Day morning. I am drawn to her voice, the sound so clear, so perfect, so removed from the sadness of the early morning streets filled with hard luck and hard lives, with my own desire not to engage, to turn away.

I want to remember, instead, this music, the giant irises, people holding hands walking down 16th Street, the goslings being herded by their mothers at the zoo, playing with my granddaughter in the park, spending time with her parents.

The music is coming from a grate in a wall above the Seven Eleven. I open the glass door. The store clerk is arranging a plate of something fried under warming lights. I no longer hear music. "Where is the opera music coming from?"

“It’s company policy to play opera music to keep the homeless away. It’s been broken for months but just got fixed.” He nods at one of the men wandering an aisle. “It doesn’t really work.”



Pamela Cravez has worked as a journalist, magazine editor, and speechwriter in Anchorage, Alaska where she has lived for the last forty years. Her radio commentaries have been broadcast on Alaska Public Radio, and her personal essays have appeared in numerous publications including *The Manifest Station*, *Jewish Mothers Tell Their Stories: Acts of Love and Courage*, and they have received Honorable Mention in *Writer’s Digest* personal essay competitions. She received an MFA in creative nonfiction from the University of Alaska Anchorage and is the author of the book, *The Biggest Damned Hat: Tales from Alaska’s Territorial Lawyers and Judges* from the University of Alaska Press.