

DEX – Pueblo, Colorado, Summer/Fall 1979

My adopted mom Kara says I have an older sister. I'm writing stuff down, so she'll recognize me, for sure, in case I ever see her again. I wonder if she has I anxiety too?

I can't pinpoint anything though I try to tell my psychologist the truth. It feels like 'something' inside needs to get out. So, I run. After the 30th mile or so, that same 'something' begins to drip off me, like sweat. When I finish a 100 miler Ultra Race, after 20 hours, the something is gone for a while but sneaks back in in a day or so. All the goals and happenings in my life center around running and the 'something'. Even what I eat, and how much I sleep.

Someday, I'll run a thousand miles. Kara will be my pacer, running alongside me for a stretch here and there. For now, I do the Ultra Run scene around Pueblo, our hometown, or southwestern states. I can do longer races as soon as I turn 19 this summer.

It's mostly hot and dry here, a few flakes of snow in winter, if they come. I try to catch them on my tongue, in my hands, feel them melt into my face. Through the miles, when I run, I smell the crackling, dusty, old red rocks and sage brush that pushes up from my pounding feet. Rustling dry grasses keep me company. Higher up, the piney-ness hits my nose from Juniper and pinion. The rocks make bridges, fins, domes, hoodoos. I can live without people, but not without these old stones for company. I might have real friends someday.

Sometimes I run next to the Brown Snake. That's what I call the Colorado River. It slithers, fat and lazy through plains or roiling angry to cut rock like the Grand Canyon. I could lie down forever and never leave the bottom of the Canyon, near the Brown Snake. Nothing makes more sense to me than to lay there and look at clouds. Or to watch the moon move from one wall of rock to the other side in a night.

My first big trail race outside Colorado was in New Hampshire. Such a New England place. I was 16 and I'd never been that far east. Never seen rolling hill, green mountains. Never run around so many streams and water. The wet heavy leaves and ferny smell. I slipped on moss, old roots, and splintered rock.

I was ready to quit at 5 A.M. I dug down deep, but there was nothing left to pull up. I heard a tree branch squeak, or a leaf flapping. It made a sound that sounded like "keep going." I looked

over my shoulder. No one was there. A ghost, or time echo, or flashforward thing. It was meant to get me to stay on task, move ahead. A voice to help me. People see and hear things on distance runs: pterodactyls, giraffes, or their dead mothers. I don't have a dead mother, but I wish I did. I don't remember any mother until I was five and met my adopted mom.

I came to a rock outcrop, about 30 feet drop or so. I bent a tree sapling down over the edge and slid down the skinny trunk toward the ground.

Halfway down, I thought to myself, What the hell did I get myself into? My hands were raw from the slide over bark and little branches. As I swung close to the cliff, my shoulder bashed against the face. The tree trunk ran out and I had to fall six feet to the ground. When my feet landed in a pile of leaves and moss, I lost my breath on impact and fell to a squat. To my left and right were rocks that would have broken a foot. But I kept going. And beat the guy who went around the rock cliff.

Other far out moves I've done in Ultra-running are to jump from rock to rock and get down a stream when there's no passable trail. Or on hands and toes, monkey style, to do a boulder field. Usually, my races are over mountains or in forests, but I'd like to try the desert.

Once I was so cold, I couldn't feel my fingers, then my toes went numb, and my hamstrings and quads cramped. I was doubled over, barely could move. A runner who passed me told me to quit at the next station. Two hours later, I staggered in, sat down, and didn't get up to finish.

They gave me hot cocoa. No one in Ultra gives you a hard time. People throw up, pass out, get monster blisters. They Vaseline and powder their balls to keep from chafing. Failure is an option. It's escape from pressure, freedom – not like boring grades or friend problems or the best T-shirt contest. In Ultra, stuff like that doesn't matter, not where I come from or where I'm going; I don't know anything about either.

When she met me, my adopted mom Kara said I could barely talk. I couldn't act right and was small and skinny. I climbed onto the table at the Thanksgiving dinner at her friends' house.

When a new guest came in and the door opened, I made a run for it, out into the street. The crisis intervention dude who had had me for three days put a kid harness and leash on me. That Thanksgiving dinner sticks in my mind, but I don't remember anything before that.

The harness had a little backpack on it with a plush monkey peeking over my shoulder, which was supposed to be cute. I went nuts, tried to buck it off or rub it away against the wall. I couldn't tell them how bad this was. This monkey thing was trying to get me from behind. I had dumb fears in those days. I wasn't afraid of the dark or monsters in the closet. My monsters were real people, I think. Or things behind me that I couldn't figure out. I tried to get away from anything I didn't understand. The intervention dude took the monkey off the harness but kept me on the leash.

They gave me a big plate of food which I grabbed, ran in another room, and wolfed down as fast as I could, before anyone could take it away. They gave me more.

A television was on. I had never seen one before and ran from that too. But the moving color and pictures drew me back in. Everyone laughed, and I ran to hide under the sofa. Kara told me years later the news was about a dumb sitcom and forty-five live turkeys dropped from a helicopter onto a shopping mall parking lot. The turkeys couldn't fly; they smashed through windshields. They hit people.

Wild turkeys *can* fly, short distances. Domestic turkeys have been bred so that they can't get off the ground at all. Duh.

I stayed away from everyone that day 'cause they tried to talk to me or touch me. Kara was in the kitchen, doing dishes. She had ignored me. I ran up to her, wrapped my arms around her knees, wouldn't let go. They couldn't pry me loose.

She says now that she didn't want kids, never thought about it, wasn't married, and didn't want that either. We've talked about it, me and Kara. She says she never played with dolls, didn't like babies. I was perfect; already five years old.

And she says, why should I do the same thing that has been done for thousands of years? The marriage and family thing. It's not working.

She likes to be different. She likes that I'm different. She does social work administration as a manager. I keep her in tune with reality, in touch with the issues, so she tells me.

Kara says a switch flipped when I grabbed her that Thanksgiving Day. A kid like me needed a no-nonsense person like her, or at least, that's her explanation. Three weeks later, she'd done a bunch of paperwork and interviews and I was at her house, a foster kid in line for her adoption.

To her, it's logic. To me, it was magic. Even better than what happens on runs. Best far out time echo of my life. So far.

That first day at Kara's, she opened the door to let the cat out. Kara called her Black Cat. I pushed past Kara and ran, flying down the sidewalk, around the corner, onto a road, and up a rise, over a bridge on a river. It seemed like a long time that I ran. I was out of town with scrub brush all around and no houses. I stopped, looked behind me. Yowzer. Kara was right there. Had been running with me all along. She didn't grab me.

Are you done? She asked.

I didn't answer.

Do you want to run some more?

I shook my head 'no'.

Let's go home, she said, and get some food. These runs will take all your calories, so we need extra for you to grown on.

She won't tell me much about my being a kid, only that I came from Denver to live in Pueblo with her.

It took an hour to walk back home. I was looking around and Kara kept up some chat to tell me what I was seeing, which of course I got to know like the back of my hand over the next years. I had hightailed from our neighborhood, northeast to cross over a bridge on the Arkansas River, in wide shallow water with steppingstone boulders and lazy turns. Short trees and scrub brush were all around. The flat land to the east was the Plains, Kara said. And the Front Range of the Rockies was west. Kara took me, starting in a year or so, to run trails on those mountains - Greenhorn, Hogback, North Peak, Bears Head.

As we got closer to our house, Kara pointed out St. Therese Catholic School, where I'd go. I had no idea about school, so this didn't affect me much. We ended up in front of a football stadium and Kara said we could run the track the next day, if I wanted.

I asked her if we could run the same path along the river again, and she said yes.

Now, I know we passed the steel plant, a historic site where an orphanage used to be, and a mental hospital, but she didn't tell me about any of those.

At home, I ate a turkey sandwich with potato chips, three glasses of milk and six Oreos. Black Cat liked to sit on my lap when I ate.

Next morning, I dashed out the door ahead of Black Cat, not trusting what Kara said about the same path. I booked it on my own. Kara ran too but stayed behind me. When I stopped, we walked back home. This time Kara told me about the streets: Madison, Jefferson, Adams, Grant named for presidents, which I had no idea what those were. And other streets were Spruce, Pine, Cedar, Cypress, she told me, for trees. She pointed out when we passed one of those tree types. I liked trees so I learned them all, eventually, and many more on the trail. And eventually figured out the Presidents. too.

When we got home, I ate two bowls of cheerios, two bananas, two glasses of milk. She gave me a vitamin too. I tried to get Black Cat to eat the vitamin but no go. She did lick the cereal bowl. Because I needed the structure and discipline, Kara put me in that Catholic grade school. Holy shit, I was scared by then, as it was happening right in the moment and Kara had been telling me about it and taken me to visit. I grabbed her hand that day and called her “Mom.” I never did that, but it became my 'big moment' habit, to grab her hand and call her “Mom.”

It was a long hallway that smelled like weird cleaning stuff, not the Mop-n-Glo Kara used. We came to the classroom for both first and second grade. No kindergarten because of budget cuts in those days. I looked for a place to run but knew I wouldn't find my way in those hallways, past the big door that closed behind us. I'd get lost if I bolted.

So many problems came down on me all at once. Kara pried away from my fingers and left. I stood alone in the corner, and the nuns couldn't budge me until morning prayer. You call me Sister Mary, said one of them. She told us that Jesus was just like us. That he came to the world to save each child and parent. And he would help us with friends and family.

Something clicked, like a key to a locked space. It was Jesus who helped me find Kara and Black Cat! We started prayers. I watched sister's hands on rosary beads, touching one and moving on. I repeated the words. I felt warm liquid in my veins and pulsing started under my skin. I wasn't scared that day anymore. I felt armor around me but soft and hazy like a cloud. Even though I was still standing in the classroom. I smiled at the kids next to me, which was weird, because I never liked other kids.

I went home and told Kara about Jesus and asked for rosary beads. She said she didn't believe in Him, but that I could if I wanted to. Be careful of being in awe of something, she said. She did give me mala beads, a Hindu thing that she used when she taught her clients yoga to relax. Mala beads worked just fine for my prayers. To me, it was the most magical thing that I got a fast answer to my problems that day. More convenient than waiting to figure things out, I told Kara. Too convenient to be a real answer, she said.

One Saturday, Kara asked me to try some yoga with her. She said that since I liked moving, I would like the poses. Fine with me. I liked the beads she gave me. I trusted her at that point. She rolled out two mats that we stood on. She asked me to notice when I breathe in. Then notice breathe out. Then notice the next breath. And the next.

She told me to breathe in and raise my arms, breathe out and bend forward to fold and touch the floor. Then step back with my feet and make a tent shape of myself – or down dog. I couldn't straighten my knees in fold or down dog. She said my leg muscles were tight from running. We stepped and hopped around more; settled still at times, in shapes like triangle and warrior, Kara told me. I liked the pushup she called "planks." She showed me how to make a roaring sound in the back of my throat with the breath. After about fifteen minutes, we were both in down dog, side by side. She looked under her arm and asked, How 'r ya doin'?

I felt sunshine on my arms and legs even though it was cloudy outside and we were indoors. The breath over my throat pushed my chest and belly up and down in rhythm, like a song. I wasn't thinking about anything. Nothing. Even when I run, I think about food and trees, and stuff. I'm going to do this for the rest of my life, I said. Not like I know what the rest of my life looks like.

Another answer came to me in school. I've always felt I needed stuff. Food mostly. Even when Kara adopted me and I had food and clothes, I started wanting things. I took a kids math ruler in school. Perfect. I needed it and it was there, so I got it. I took pencils, a chocolate milk. Every day, I tried to take something I needed, that whole first year. When we played soccer outside in the spring, I took the ball. Just picked it up and ran. I didn't make friends. Kara says that's because I took stuff from other kids.

The nuns and Kara told me I couldn't have what wasn't mine. Kara's friends have their own things too, and they try to explain why I can't have them. They didn't understand. They weren't me to know what I need. If no one gave me what I needed, how else could I get it? I had to take it.

When I was in fifth grade, Kara's friend visited our house. I took this lady's purse, found the money and was on my way to hide the ten-dollar bill under my bed when Kara caught me. I tried to explain; just in case I'm ever in a scary place, like have no food or nothing. The ten dollars was the answer. My goal is to have answers. And money. Kara says her goal is to keep me out of jail. She says it's all well and good to believe in Jesus, but one of the commandments is "Thou Shalt not Steal." I'm not stealing, because I only take what I need. No one understands.

I asked Kara to go with me to Catholic Mass and communion. Four years ago, in high school, is when she first started taking me. She pulls up at the church, drops me off, and then at the end of Mass, she picks me up. Like with prayer at school, something happens to me in church. I feel like the baby Jesus in Mary's arms, like in the statue. I want to become Catholic, I say. Kara says I can when I'm an adult.

The priest in confession asked if I'm interested in girls yet. I told him I held hands at the mall with one girl, not very pretty to be honest. She and I also fooled around with our tops off and jeans unbuttoned, and I – ahem – when she sucked me off.

Maybe I'll edit that part out if I ever find my sister and give her this story. But maybe she would understand. It's important to know I score the chicks. Anyway, this
girl and me, we did that a bunch, until she moved onto the next guy. I told the priest we hadn't done more than that. He gave me a LOT of penance that day, so I don't talk about sex with him anymore.

I've seen the same psychologist since I was in third grade. Back then, she sat on the floor with me while and I talked some and played with puzzles, stuff like that. We sit in chairs, now. She talks like a regular person and doesn't try to change my mind, but she asks me questions.

Tell me why you take things?

And I talk, talk, talk.

Why do you think Jesus helps you?

Sometimes she asks me the same question over and over.

I say, I wouldn't help Kara with the dishes.

And what's that about? She asks.

Because I didn't want to?

What's that about?

We go on like that for a while. I have figured out with Psychologist lady (she laughs when I call her that) how to help around the house and ask permission when I know I'll get in trouble if I don't.

She doesn't ask me about what life was like before Tara and Black Cat, which is still a big who-knows to me. That's the Lost Years, under water and drowning by choice to go there. No se. No recordar, or however you conjugate that verb. I like Spanish in school. Or it could be "No neural pathways", my science teacher from the brain study unit would say. Besides, I get the fast answers from Jesus. I don't have to second guess.

Psychologist lady and me haven't come to an agreement on taking stuff, which she and Kara and school teachers all think needs to STOP. Psychologist lady leans into me on this.

Do you want to be free of stealing? She asks.

I don't get what she's saying. I could fake things or lie talking to her, but I don't. She's a nice lady and has been good to me for a long time. Like Kara and Black Cat.

Jimmy is a runner friend of Kara's. Kind of like a father to her. Grey hair, bent legs, he's old already and we are going to need him for a while. Starting when I was twelve, he'd show up after Kara and me did yoga, and take me out for ice cream. He said Kara needed time to herself and we needed "guy" time. We'd goof around like crazy, laugh and blow straw papers.

Once a week or maybe more often, I would have a really bad day, I mean multiple stuff gone wrong - caught stealing at school and kicked off the bus for hitting a kid with my textbook. I didn't mention he was bullying a six-year-old! Not a good excuse. Kara would call my

psychologist, deal with the teachers and other parents, talk to me, make dinner, sit, and listen to me while we ate. I talked a lot. Still do. Keeping quiet seems like a lie.

Then she'd drop on the sofa. She'd be white around the mouth, with tight lines on her forehead but flushed on her cheeks. She'd pull off her sweatshirt or sweater, down to her T-shirt, even when I thought it was cold. She looked like she got flooded with something. She'd mutter, 'not easy, ever'. Then she'd call Jimmy and he'd come pick me up. He taught me to play chess and we'd set out the board. He still had his mind then.

This was my chance to ask him stuff that I didn't dare ask anyone else, quiet, in front of kings, queens and knights. I had burning questions all lined up for Jimmy. I moved my white pawn two squares forward in front of his king. He responded with the same move in black.

Jimmy, what was the happiest moment of your life?

Right now, he said. He moved his piece.

Come on.

Wherever I am, that's where I want to be. Wherever I get a ride to, that's where I'm going. I've found that's the best way to be happy. It's the reverse of what you think. Rather than have to get something and then be happy, you are happy no matter what.

I moved a knight three rows in the 6th file, like he'd taught me.

I don't get it.

You will.

OK, next, I said, what's the dumbest thing Kara has done? I moved to control a square with the same pawn and didn't put another one in play.

He laughed, scratched his head, moved his Queen's pawn.

She wore a hot pink pantsuit, as matron of honor, to a friend's wedding. She didn't want to be at the front of the church for something she didn't believe in. So, she made a statement. It was cut low in the front too. Total anachronism for the situation.

He explained that word to me and I moved into the Queen Knight defense. He moved the King's Bishop. I was all stuck in the center of the board and he was going to smear me from the edges, I could see.

Why doesn't she believe in marriage?

You'll have to ask her that.

I wasn't paying attention to the game. I cared what the expression on his face was saying. I wanted his words. If I listened, I'd find out how men did things. Kara's friends were women, my teachers were women. I was surrounded by women.

I pushed on and asked, how old were you when you started your laundry business? And how did you do that?

Most of what people think they can control, they can't. They grasp for control because uncertainty is scary. And what people think is skill, is mostly luck, he said.

I don't get it.

You will. To get started in the laundry business, I was 19. I pretended I was an employment agency and called the laundry to ask if they needed staff. They said they needed a shirt launderer and pressor. I told them I'd send someone over. I walked in saying the agency had sent me. In two years, the place went up for sale. I got a loan and bought it. My wife and sons worked there, and my sons own it now. No way that could have been set up with a college degree or resume. Life is constantly throwing things up to stop you. You can't let yourself be stopped.

I picked up the board and dumped it on the table. I hadn't done that since he first started to teach me, years before.

He sat back.

My hands balled into fists. My guts felt like water.

He waited.

I don't know how to do that, how not to get stopped, I said, shaking all over.

I'll be your manager, he said, together we'll figure it out.

I looked into his eyes, rock solid, held fast on mine. I believed him.

I'm in a loop race, 100 kilometers, 6706 meters per loop, which is about 4 miles, 25 times around the course. A few weeks ago, I tripped down a bank on the trail. My PT said I could do this, but the knee would hurt. She told me to stop doing yoga for a week or so before the race. I'm at 70 km. She was right. My knee is killing me.

I stopped at the last checkpoint, and a crew guy gave me a slice of pizza and a Panadol, which helped awhile, maybe an hour. Or maybe more? I lost track of time. Kara asked me once if I want a wristwatch for running. No way. I'm better if I can listen for ghosts or time echoes; that voice that helps me. I fly along, or limp along. I feel good not knowing about time. I just keep going around this loop.

I ask myself, Have I seen these Larch trees before?

The gold needles drop in the wind. I don't recognize these trees, but I've been around here more than ten times. I'm laughing. They've lost more needles since I last past. That's why they aren't the same trees. Nothing is ever the same from moment to moment, or race loop to loop. My knee pain throbs on the right side now, instead of the left. This pizza slice is at a different place in my stomach than the last slice. I'm laughing hard now, so I stop running, bend over, throw up, so no big deal. That happens a lot to Ultra runners. I get going again.

I run along, laugh, and think about whether I've been on this trail before. I start thinking of other things I do again and again. Next week, I take my driver's license test for the fifth time. If it's a different Larch tree because needles have fallen, what if, seriously, I've never taken this driver's test. I'm not repeating; I FEEL different for this new test.

It will be entirely different than when I did the U-turn instead of a three-point turn. Or the curb I hit. Or the written test question to name the symbols. When I had no idea for the rectangle with diagonal yellow and black stripes, I named it "Bob." That was funny! I'm laughing. I throw up again.

I'm on a cot at the finish. They gave me Dramamine and a cereal bar. Thank you – it's not pizza. The guy next to me has a beer and he gives me a gulp when no one was looking. I can't have liquids as they say I've had enough. If the body cell salt content gets depleted, uh, something not-so-good happens.

These cot sheets are so smooth, white against the shiny steel railing, against my body. I'm a temporary imprint. I look down to my feet, ribs so high I barely see past them, hip points like mountains. Way down there, over my toes, my Salomons that Kara got me for Christmas, are mud-caked; my ankles and shins too. My knee is less swollen than when I started and doesn't

hurt. This is as good as church, with the warmth that spreads through me, and light all around. I'm smiling. Smiling.

I must get a job or go to Community College; Kara and my psychologist agree. I don't agree. I want to run Ultra and go to Church. I light a candle every week for Black Cat. She got really old and couldn't stand up anymore. When we took her to the Vet, the tech said it was time to go "over the rainbow bridge". Duh – I knew that meant – dead.

Kara says it's okay to die when you've had a long, happy life. I still felt like crap. I wouldn't let Black Cat out of my arms when she stopped breathing after the shot. Kara was desperate to get me to let go, so she promised me a gold cross for my 19th birthday and a Bible for High School graduation this month. Kara even said Jesus would take care of Black Cat. She must have been desperate to rely on Jesus as she just listens when I talk about it; never says her opinion, and sometimes rolls her eyes.

I slipped out to the rest room at the Vet place and found a \$20 bill in a jacket from the coat rack. I got some good stuff hidden beneath the floorboards under my bed. There's a Swiss Army Champ with all the tools; a blue ring my teacher in 10th grade left on the chemistry sink. I think it's a Safire. I found a \$100 bill in a man's wallet at the basketball game. I put the wallet back in his coat. Dollars here and there have added up and I have close to \$5,000, and other good stuff. Just in case I pay Ultra event entrance fees, or whatever. Kara paid for my first six-day race last month, and I did 390 miles. I made up a poem about that race:

It doesn't hurt, but feels like drowning,

My interest in life is waning

It might be nice to lie down.

Jesus says that's not the way out.

It is impossible to go any further

Maybe one more step.

I registered for a six-day race in California this July. I'll run over 500 miles I know I will.

My guidance counselor gave Kara a flyer from Volunteers in Service to America: VISTA. They recruit kids to do stuff for them, like grant writing, community education, volunteer for non-profits, and trail conservation. Kara said I'd be best at trail conservation, so I had an interview in Flagstaff to do maintenance in the Grand Canyon, my favorite! I started this fall. Even in November, it's 100 degrees some days. I love it. Kids bigger and stronger than me can't take the heat, but I could swing a pickaxe for eight hours – no problem. It's kinda like ultra; the hurt is good. We work mainly on the top two miles of Canyon trails because most folks can't hike further than that. Only five percent of people who visit even get on a trail. An only one percent make it to the bottom. I'm proud to be in that one percent, about ten times already since I've been here a month. I'll never finish loving the Canyon.

Kara found me a 1969 Ford Maverick, gold with a black stripe on hood and jacked-up back end. Cool! She paid \$400 for it because it had no brakes. I figured out how to repair the brakes. They squeak a bit but work, so far.

I don't worry about getting along with people or having friends, because I'm too tired to cause trouble. We work hard. But shit happens when a group of 12, holed up in a confined bunkhouse at night and all day, are laboring in heat.

One kid, Ted, was 23 years old but totally incompetent, didn't know how to move rock or wash a dirty soup bowl. A nice guy, but completely useless. He left the bunkhouse door open all the time, and mice would get in. Another girl, Haley, found the door open and asked him nicely, once again, to keep it closed. Then she went to the pantry and found a mouse in the rice. She exploded.

You must respect others! Even if you don't care about food for yourself! She was yelling, red in the face. Ted started crying. The supervisor put each of them in separate corners of the one room. The rest of the crew and me stood in the middle.

My head went back and forth, from corner to corner, as the supervisor asked them questions. The anger and confusion got out of each of them. I looked at my boots, up my legs, to my hands, as I stood in the center, with others. They seemed...like me. Even Ted and Haley were familiar. I liked that I wasn't the fuck-up here.

Most of the crew are college educated, mostly white. Some kids are from the Rez – Hopi, Willapa, Navajo, Havasupai. Kaya, a Hopi kid, still has a native name, while most of the other Rez kids are called Joe or Tina. He told me the National Park System was just an excuse to take land from his people. But he says he gets paid well and when a rock landslide destroyed corn fields on his Rez, he got a team over there to help clean it up.

I wouldn't steal land from people who needed it for life and culture. But what if I needed land for, for, for ...I don't know. Anything.

Do I have a culture?

I might try to take land, thinking twice about that. Not much opportunity for taking stuff on crew, though. We work eight days straight, twelve-hour days, and then get four days off. No one owns anything. Unless I literally rip a shirt from someone's back, there's nothing to take. I'm staying out of trouble and having fun. Kara is happy as I haven't been to jail yet. She got an apartment in Flagstaff and does Social Work for the State now.

Our crew cuts limestone, which is hard and holds up for large formations like steep steps and the bulky trail edges. Limestone is the upper most layer and contains cool fossils – shell-like imprints – that pop out here and there. The red sandstone, down from the surface, is soft and easy to shape. It cleaves naturally into brick shapes that we make into paths. Iron oxide that rusts in the wind and rain makes the most amazing colors. They say we'll remake or repair the trails every year 'cause the mules hooves and tourists' boots beat the sandstone bricks to powder. They say the Canyon was built by erosion, so erosion continues. We rebuild, rebuild.

Tourists are mostly gone for the October to May work season. Solitude fills the Canyon so it's ME and my rock and sky. I get the warm liquid church feeling in this place; I look out over the open Canyon and the view gets inside me. I could fly from the north to south rim, I swear. So far, I've only done belay down the limestone ridges. Flying is a fantasy that I might realize in the future. At least I feel that way on long runs.

Kara and I agree we need another cat, so we're at the Humane Society off Route 40. I told Kara I want a kitten and she said we'll see what they got. Kara is downstairs looking through the cages but that's too sad for me. I duck into the pet sitting room. There's a girl with a cat on her lap, but otherwise it's empty. I sit down in a beat-up old armchair covered with cat fur, all colors.

This girl looks up at me and smiles. I realize there's something about her, something different. She looks innocent, like a child. But she's my age, built nice in the chest department and slim. Blond, with blue eyes and petting the cat with the back of her hand, so the cat is purring almost louder than the girl's voice.

This is Tortie. She's twelve years old, and she needs a home. I'm Alice, she says to me.

I wasn't inviting any conversation. But her voice is so sweet, so I can't help saying, What's with the special colors?

A tortoiseshell cat, painted like the back of a turtle, she says, Tortie is very loving. Her owner got old and died, she runs on, What's your name?

Dex.

I'm feeling kinda bad for the old cat and dead person, but the cat looks so happy, and this girl wears kindness like a shirt. I feel that warm liquid in my veins and under my skin. A guy comes in, dumps his jacket, and hurries out. Alice asks me to watch Tortie and leaves to use the rest room. I walk over, pick up the coat, and feel the heavy wallet in the pocket. My fingers start searching the coat pocket. I pull out the wallet and lift the bills – a big handful. I'm stuffing the wallet back in the coat when Alice walks back in.

Why are you taking that man's money? She asks. Not like she's mad or would tell on me, but just like she wants to know. Is she dumb?

I jump. I'm the one who's dumb. Caught in the act.

In case, I need to buy food sometime, I say.

I'm always hungry. I have Prader Willi syndrome, Alice explains.

This is weird to me; she doesn't stick with the subject. And most people would NEVER let it go that I'm lifting a big wad of cash. But I go with this topic.

I'm always hungry too. Prada what? I ask.

Prader

Willi. I can't control my appetite, I have weak muscles and almost average intelligence, she says as if reading from a book. I do exercises to stay strong, she goes on, and my mom gives me enough food to keep me healthy. But doesn't feel like enough, but it's enough. I can have one small cookie and 6 potato chips a day, she says as if this explains anything.

I'm freaked out by this gush of talk. Does this syndrome affect her brain? Being different myself, I decide to appreciate her for that. Plus, I like her. I feel comfortable, open, and warm towards another person. Imagine that.

I sit back and look at her, hard, reading more than her appearance. Alice takes up her part of the room, like she was never meant to be anywhere else. There's none of the 'something' that wants to get out of her. I mean, that 'something' that makes me scared and I talk to Psychologist Lady about. Her body in the air meets no resistance. I'm sitting here wide eyed, wondering what it's like not to feel resistance. She would be the same in the Canyon in a snowstorm, or if she had to go to the hospital with a broken arm.

Don't you feel like you have enough of things? she asks sweetly.

It's never enough – food or anything, I say, to muster myself back to the room.

Is that

true? She asks.

I think hard

about this. I see myself running out of a trail rest station with a slice of pizza in one hand, a plateful of watermelon in the other and Oreos hanging out of my pockets. I think about the helicopter that flies in and drops huge nets of food for the crew. I go back in a picture flash show in my mind: all the races, my Canyon job, Spanish and Science in school. I hit all the years back to that first Thanksgiving when I got a second plate of food.

No, I

admit.

Friends, like Tortie,

help so I don't think about how hungry I am, she starts again. I also volunteer at the Nursing Home, hold people's hands, and talk to them. If they get upset, confused or lonely, sometimes they start to pace, or yell or cry. I put my arms around their shoulders and talk until they smile.

That makes me forget I'm hungry.

I'm getting used to her conversational outbursts and total lack of smarts. That warm feeling inside is getting intense.

Do you have friends, I mean, that aren't cats or old people? I ask. No,
she says. They don't like that I'm different. Kara,
my adopted mom, says I can be a jerk and someday I'll learn to get along and not take things
from everyone, I say. I don't have friends either, I admit to her, maybe for the first time in my
life. I didn't want to see this.

I'm different too, I say to her. I think
that's right, she says. Why don't you put those bills back? I stuff them
back in the wallet, and into the pocket. Kara comes
into the room. I found a 6-month-old, still very kitten-y, she says, looks at Alice, smiles. Then
nods to me and says, let's go. Can we take
Tortie home? I ask.

What?

This cat here, with only a few teeth, and.... I look over at Alice. ... tortoiseshell colors.

Alice gets up with Tortie in her arms. She gently puts Tortie up to Kara's chest, so Tara has no
choice but to take hold. Tortie has stopped purring. If you

pet her head with the back of your hand, softly, she purrs loudly, says Alice. Alice
takes Kara's hand, turns it over and sends it across Tortie's head. Kara picks up the stroke and
Tortie starts her buzzsaw Are

you sure, Dex? Kara asks. This cat is older, she explains, hesitant.

He won't be sad when Tortie dies because I'm his new friend. I can put my arm around his
shoulders until he feels better, says Alice. Kara

looks like she's got a question in her brain that she can't figure out how to ask. Mom, please, I
say. The rare "M-word" escapes me. I must be in bad shape. OK. Let's do the

paperwork, she says briskly, taking Tortie out to the front desk. It's an hour or so
more before me and Kara are walking to the car with Tortie in a cardboard box with holes in it.

You made a friend in there, she says.

I know from Ultra that failure is an option. I also know that I can run 500 miles. I weigh my chances. I recognize this is important. I jump on it, fast.

I'm not sure who is more surprised, me or Kara when I say, Mom, I'm going to marry that girl.

Kara's gets that look again; she needs an answer and it's nowhere around.