

Love, the Frontier

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14 Feb

Love, I am coming out to you in my wagon. I hear the call of dense forests, gold, jackrabbit plains. Rare wildflowers, now extinct. Glances that irrigate deserts. Cities of prairie dogs cute as Valentines. Skies like an open pocketbook, held upside down and shaken. 25° F.

16 Feb

Also: threats of buffalo runs, Indians, cyclones. Cholera. Wildfires. I know the risks: suffering, death. Suffering worse than death. 35°, sunny.

18 Feb

I studied maps and charts, overland routes and a few across the waters at the bottom of the world. I read accounts: a woman who slept with the windows open in January and feasted on brains and butterfat to make the swim through the bergs, the water's surface like broken safety glass. Pa Ingalls survived three days of blizzard in a snowbank, eating the girls' Christmas candy. My windows are open. There are Hershey's kisses in my coat pockets. 28°.

29 Feb

Leap Day. Something is different about time. I am getting fed up with loneliness caught like hair at the back of my tongue. I stuck a for-sale sign in the rear window of my Ford Escort. 36°. Cloudy.

5 March

I closed my account at Fleet Bank and stuffed five hundreds into the toes of my boots. I sold almost everything on ebay: my television, bed, books, and CDs. 44° and sunny!

6 March

38°. Rain.

Slept on the carpet. Woke up with blue fuzz in my nose. Traded a lock of my grandmother's hair, wrapped around an amethyst, for a Civil War musket, a bullet mold, and 2 cups of lead shavings.

8 March

39°. Rain.

Ordered a prairie schooner from the Studebaker Brothers.

Conestoga. Yankee bed. Jockey box. Iron brake. *Tongue*.

Looking forward to frontier sex.

15 March

Dragged all trash I couldn't sell—a broken box fan, blades black with dust, a leaning wire bathroom shelf, my parents' fifty-pound microwave—to my parking space and built a corral. Mudly and Studly, my new oxen, are huge and reportedly "docile," but they terrify me. Never even touched a cow, only chinchillas and Chihuahuas and cats. 50°. Fog.

16 March

60°!!!, sunny.

Today I made a trough out of the gutter. I clogged the storm sewer with dirt and rotten leaves and let the spigot run. Mudly and Studly were glad to drink. My neighbors howled on the horns of their Jettas, trying to parallel park around my team. I petted my oxen. I am starting to like them.

22 March

40°. Partly cloudy. Early start 6 a.m. Uphill out of Boston. Team's breath fogged in the morning; rainbows came thru. Pines up here break with snow weight. Made camp 5 mi. out of Worcester. Chickens SCREAMED at every bump in the road. 0 eggs among the straw.

23 March

40°. Clouds, wind. 10 mi. TIRED.

24 March

50°. Sunny. Trees like Alcott. Pond like Thoreau. Found a bent nail in Studly's feed bag!?! Rescued him.

1 April

Todd,

By now you've figured out I not only haven't been returning your calls, I am no longer a Sprint customer. This is because I have gone FAR AWAY. I'm looking for a Love you wouldn't be able to understand, let alone give. Facing dangers and hardships of all kinds for its glorious prospect. Something in the new grass gives my oxen bloat and foul humors. Barely made 15 mi. over 3 days. Wiped black strings from their mouths w/handkerchief. Learned to dangle a bullet from a stretch of twine and hypnotize them. When they blink and yawn, I place a pat of ginger on their big flat tongues. BIG sneezes! But ginger is v. good for the GI sys and I am getting to love them and if ginger doesn't work it means a big knitting needle, sharpened to a fine point, then sterilized by fire... will mail this at Cleveland if I make it there. Love from the Frontier,

Tori

5 April

60°. Rain. Coffee, molasses, flint and stone, I am out here all alone.

1 May

MAY DAY!!! 85°!!! Sunny!!! Sudden heat caused the wheels to shrink up—the iron tires rolled right off them—I chased those suckers downhill with arms spread out and skirts flapping.

19 May

Dear Mom and Dad,

Reached Independence safely. 85°, fair and sunny. Ate a dish of new peas. Green tastes so good! I miss the produce aisles of home, but more than produce I miss you. Wish you were here to give me advice—now I am choosing among wagon trains. The one I will probably join is all women: Ashley, Pam, and Jamie & Lisa (sisters). We had a slumber party last night in my room at the Inn, and I made Mom's Girls'-Night Mai Tais, but something bothers me about Ashley. (She kind of reminds me of your old boss Debra, but maybe it is just her weight and I don't want to think I'm judgmental like that.) Oh well. Got to grow up sometime. Love you both,

Tori

20 May

86°. T-storms. Lost some weight today—sold my heavy loom, 200 lbs., to a couple that met up on the way out here. They're arm in arm like a yoked team: decided to get married, stay here, move in above the dry goods. He's a computer programmer and she's a social worker. My oxen are braver than they are.

3 June

80°. Humid. Lisa has cholera. Pam and Ashley: big fight. Pam: let's wait a few days for Lisa to get better. Ashley: throw her in the back of the wagon and git. (Dying regardless.) Jamie, Lisa's sister, doesn't say anything. Me neither. (Ashley's 6'1" and 220 lbs.) Went on, made 17 mi.

5 June

83°. Sunny. To keep wolves away from her body (only 90 lbs. when she died) we buried Lisa between the furrows of the road. The next company to pass'll grind her smell out of the dirt. Pam wanted to bury her by a creek with a cross but Ashley said no and Pam didn't say anything, just snorted and blew her bangs up and staked her picket-pin in the ground, hard. Then Jamie got hysterics. We boiled her some roots. Had to be held down to take infusion. Mudly has a limp.

8 June

90°. Sweaty. Gnats. Dreamed last night of Love. Made Mudly a splint of ash bark. 16 miles!

18 June

Ran into Pony Express man! Boy, really—Paul Revere, no relation. He stopped a minute with us to wipe the lather from his mustang. Lonely. Told us jokes nonstop while his horse drank, then tipped his cap and left us with a pile of old Eastern newspapers to “curl our pretty hair with.”

June 19

Dear Mom & Dad,

I found out about Nana in an old Boston Herald I came across on the prairie. It is only a coincidence that I even know. I don't know what to say. By the time this reaches you, maybe your grief will be over. I read that the funeral was a month ago but right now I wish I was there, eating ham sandwiches and sweet pickles and hearing stories about Nana's vaudeville days, the time she fended off a baptism with a hat pin. I hope you are all taking good care of each other. Love, Tori

29 June

101°. Dry. No water but a stinking alkaline lake. Licked dew off the grass. A LITTLE water left in rain barrels, but no firewood to boil germs out.

30 June

101°. Same. Chickens dead of thirst. We lie in wagonshade. Mudly's and Studly's tongues ulcer with thirst. We drank our dirty water, all except Jamie, who prayed for Lisa to come and help.

1 July

102°. Dysentery. Got Jamie on best horse w/some hollow gourds. Go for help.

July 20

My two poor oxen who have never harmed anyone and do not deserve their awful fate. Dying alone on a treeless plain, I believed that Cupid had played a cruel joke. What scared me most was not dying, but if true love and a canteen had dropped from the sky, I wouldn't've shared even a drop with my beloved. For the first time I doubted my fitness for the Frontier.

Now that I am recovered, I know that diarrhea in a poisoned lake is not love. I know, too, my limits and am eager to overcome them. True love is only increased by obstacles.

At dawn on what could have been my last loveless day on earth, Jamie rode back with fifteen soldiers on fresh horses from Ft. Laramie. I thought the thunder of hooves was my heart's last hurrah, that the seventeen-year-old cadet who cradled my neck and pressed his cold canteen's mouth against my lips was an angel. He flung me up over his horse.

"But my team," I said.

"Hush now," said the cadet.

"My oxen," I said.

"Don't worry," he said.

I had no more strength to speak. My hair came undone and shook in the wind as we galloped over the plains. Only hours from death, our rescuers placed all five of us in the care of their "wives," who occupied a long log hut outside the stockade. This hut was called the Hog Ranch. And they called their wives clementines.

The Hog Ranch had no windows, but stripes of light came through the chinks between the logs. The clementines were kind at first. Maude, who wore the Colonel's epaulettes like flowers in her hair, helped me lie down on her own straw tick, bathed me with cool damp rags, and applied hot poultices to my abdomen.

At night the clementines sang us love ballads to help us sleep, then quietly opened the door for the men. The soldiers brought the clementines plugs of tobacco, cold flapjacks wrapped in handkerchiefs, handfuls of coffee beans. Through fever dreams I heard the men's noise and stirred. The clementines whispered, "Keep it down, boys; let's not wake the ladies."

With such good care, in ten days I went from a feeble 98 lbs. back to 110 on the commissary scale. The soldiers began to visit the Hog Ranch in the afternoons. They brought trinkets for us convalescents, bright buttons torn from their jackets, white sugar in paper packets.

My young cadet, Horace, gave me bunches of rough-stemmed wildflowers, their petals wilted and brown-edged by the sun. One evening he took my arm and walked me around the perimeter of the stockade, pointing out constellations in the big Wyoming sky. I was not yet strong and weary from walking, so I let him grope me up against the outhouse. He took me to dine with him in the mess. The scraps from the meal went first to the hounds, then to the clementines.

That night Maude dragged me out of bed and shoved me onto the dirt floor with a heap of greasy blankets that made me nervous about smallpox. We began to see the clementines for what they were: rough, sepia-skinned women, too worn by the stasis of their lives to smile. Their fishnets were torn and dirty, their mascara clumpy and full of germs.

I asked Horace one bright, hot morning if he would take me to the livery to see Mudly and Studly. "I would, but they are out to pasture, eating green grass and frolicking," he said.

It wasn't like Mudly and Studly to frolic. And I hadn't seen a blade of grass that wasn't brown. I insisted he take me to them.

"But you're too pretty to cry," said Horace.

"Where are they?" I said.

"Died of bloat yesterday," he said. "Sometimes the animals overfeed, after almost starving. I know a lot about livestock." He pulled me to him and pressed my face against his bony shoulder and began to rub my back, moving his hands over the ridges of my corset. "Hush now," he said, "hush." I pushed him so hard he staggered backward. Then I raced to the pump to wash the tears off my face.

Ashley was already there, sitting in the dust, weeping into her hands. Her huge shoulders shook under her calico. Her team, too, was dead. I put my arms around her and cried into her bun. Maude pushed past us toward the pump, knocking my collarbone with her empty bucket. "What are you crying about?" she said, violently jerking the pump handle.

“Our oxen died of bloat today,” I said.

“How are we supposed to leave?” wailed Ashley. “I want to go *west*.”

Maude laughed and heaved up her bucket. “DUH, ladies,” she said. “They never brought your livestock back. They wanted to keep you here. More snatch for them, less food for us.” She spat, right in Ashley’s face.

Ashley grabbed Maude by the collar of her halter top and lifted her, pail and all, into the air. Her little feet in button boots kicked into a blur. “Then help us get out of here,” Ashley said. She flung Maude to the dust.

That night, after the soldiers buttoned their flies and returned to the barracks, we gathered—clementines and pioneers—in the center of the hut and conspired. Pam, the prettiest and our lookout, stood outside the door and smoked a cigar.

Providence wasted no time. The very next day, a wagon train passed through. Word went around that one of their company had a crate of whiskey to sell for a dollar a pint. I took a hundred out of the toe of my boot. We carried the liquor back in our aprons.

The festivities started before dinner, so the men wouldn’t have the advantage of full stomachs. Jamie, who had studied violin at Juilliard, played a jig on her fiddle as we got our soldiers dangerous with drink. When Maude thrummed a march on her snare the men took off in a line with their pistols. There were some accidents. In the confusion, we hurried to the livery and took what we could find: sixteen mules and four mustangs.

We located our abandoned wagon train by the stench. Poor Studly and Mudly. Their carcasses, stripped by wolves and vultures, were bare save for flies and maggots. I took a deep drink from my canteen. It tasted like Horace. There was nothing to do but go on. We hitched up our fresh teams and headed west.

29 July

80°. Rain, wind. Stepped in gopher hole. Ankle swollen, purple. Barely walk. Have to ride and suffer the jolts.

1 Aug

Hey Sis,

70°—chilly in the mountains! You should see my buff arms—it takes a lot of strength to restrain the team on the downslopes. The reins tore the flesh off my palms, and Ashley rubbed my blisters with bear grease. Pam surprised me with a pair of leather gauntlets. Even though we’re all looking for love, there’s no petty jealousy. We’ll all find our soul-mates. There will be one for each of us, nontransferable. The air is so clear up here! You ought to come out. Love, Tori

5 Aug

70° and sunny. We stopped and camped by a clear creek with a huge company of Mormons. A moving city: hundreds of wagons, stench and noise. Stern men, dour women, flocks of children tearing off in all directions. We heard them for miles before we saw them. But after dinner, during their services, the whole company was quiet and we were too, out of respect. None of the women spoke to us Jezebels, but the kids stared. Some of the men approached us with a broken wagon wheel. Jamie had a spare, so she traded for a fabulous new musket.

One of the men was beautiful as the sea.

I can smell the salt. We must be getting close.

7 Aug

80°, light drizzle. Heard hoofbeats behind us today. Two riders galloped over the ridge, reined in and rode beside us. When they tipped their caps, I recognized one of them from the Mormon camp. Job. The whole day felt fast and anxious: the wind picked up at our backs and pushed us forward. We didn't speak, though Job whistled to his dogs, who retrieved jackrabbits from the tallgrass. He skinned and roasted them over the fire that evening. The smell of that fresh, sizzling meat! It had been a long time. As we ate, the men asked if they might join our company. Or one of them did—Job kept his peace, pulled the brim of his hat low over his face and whittled while Tyler made a speech about how he and Job had been moved to find God, but later realized it wasn't God they sought. Pam giggled. Job looked up at me and scraped a big chunk of wood off his carving. It flew into the fire and burned.

10 Aug

Job walked beside me all day. He smells so good despite hardship. 83°, 25 miles!!!

15 Aug

Job showed me what he has been carving: two small wooden hearts that fit inside a wooden box. When you shake the box, the hearts go beat-beat. 86°.

17 Aug

85°. Woke up to thunder. It was my turn to perk coffee and fry fatback, but I dropped the meat in the grass when I saw the dogs. Their throats were cut. Bright feathers floated in their blood.

Pam said she heard drums. Ashley said it was thunder. Tyler said if it were Indians, we'd best go back to the fort. Jamie said to get a move on. Job said we weren't going anywhere till we gave those dogs a proper burial.

He tried to hide his tears with his hat while he dug the graves for Haw and Gee. “You’re perspiring,” I said, and touched my last clean handkerchief to his cheek.

This is how we kissed. We forgot to cover up the graves. We even forgot the shovel.

18 Aug

89°. Dreamed I was being buried alive. Woke up with a mouthful of mono-grammed white cotton. “You dropped your handkerchief,” said Horace. I kicked, and he pinned me down. “Hanging’s too good for horse thieves.”

His mouth tasted like his canteen. “I’m taking you back to the fort.” He dragged me from my wagon. In my place he left a handful of feathers and arrowheads. 89°.

19 Aug

91°. My boyfriend is an expert tracker.

Job spotted us on the bank of a stream. He shot his rifle in the air. “You killed my dogs.” Horace fumbled with his revolver while Job splashed across the stream with his Winchester and his bowie knife.

20 Aug

Dear Mrs. Hardwick,

It is my sad duty to return to you your cadet’s copper buttons, the paper money we found on him at the time, your own letters, kept close to his heart, and the blue ribbons from your county’s fair: Horace told me he raised prize heifers. I knew Horace well. He saved my life. I once mistook him for an angel, which is, I’m sure, what he is now. I can say little that might console a mother about the cause of his demise, and feel certain there is no need to return to you the feathers and arrowheads found near him that must have belonged to his killers. Rest assured that an honorable, brave, and sensitive man—a dear member of our party—dug a grave, and you need worry about the dangers of the frontier no longer. Tori and Job.

1 Sept

75°. Sunny. Lush green hills. Can smell the ocean! Scent of home and newness at once! I will stay here with Job and wait for the invention of the telegraph.

15 Sept

Dear Mom and Dad,

Safe in Seattle! Back to 130 lbs. Not that it makes any difference to Love! Plus Job has a saying about a plump wife and full barn... I know he doesn't mean the plump part, he only means the wife part, but no date yet... We are building a log home. Job whittled over 200 pegs himself to spare expense of nails! (We are broke.) But so happy. Got letter from Ashley. Seems she's had privations in Spokane but sounds hopeful/aggressive. Pam's camped nearby; says she's happy trapping and trading with Tyler, but Job says Tyler's not half the man he ought to be. Jamie went to Japan to learn how to become a sushi chef. I'm West, with Love!

Love from the Frontier,

Tori

24 Nov

Sleet and 34°. But someone's getting his ass dragged out of a saloon anyway!

4 Dec

Rain. 34°. Found charred remains of 2 wooden hearts in the stove-ash.

20 Dec

Still raining. 32°. So much waterweight on the pine boughs the tree snapped and crashed through our roof. Woke up wet. Spent day stretching wagon bonnet over the hole. Couldn't get warm after.

23 Dec

30° F. Sleet. Grippe.

25 Dec

I told him I do not mind cold water up to the waist! I'd gladly pan for gold, spear salmon, or fell trees! I told him.

He won't get far. I smashed our one glass windowpane, sprinkled the shards into his boots.

26 Dec

33°. Big, fat snow.

30 Dec

31°. Through thunder and stormwail, a knock on the door. Surprise, surprise. He leaned on a crutch and held out peppermint sticks, wrapped in brown paper.

31 Dec

32°. Snowing. New Year's Eve! Popcorn and apple cider in our snug home. I heated water on the cookstove to dissolve the Epsom salts for Job's feet. Infection limned his toes with black. The fever gave him a firelit, summer complexion. We spoke of the Yukon.

3 Jan

It's a long, cold trip, and January's a bad season, but what are frozen fingers and failing matches compared to the Northern Lights of Love? Traded the wagon for a sledge, the mules for huskies.

10 Jan

Bought a hog. Butchered and trimmed it with Job's sharp knife.

13 Feb

Ready. Job's poor feet wither and dangle over the edge of the sledge. I stand in front in my sealskin cape, clutching my compass and crying, Mush! Mush!

—2008