# Letter from Utah

It is November. My boyfriend and I are flying to Utah for a week; to hike, to drive, see the earth. "Why there?" everyone says. This is the reaction I get the most—New Yorkers, pressed to find a reason to visit the Beehive State generally fail. I suspect they see it as an arid amalgam of bad food, prohibition and Mormonism, whatever that is. We had plans to go to Paris—in the way that you have plans to go everywhere at some point in your life, "Let's go there, someday," you say to each other. But, frankly, the idea was too much—fighting the language, navigating another city, another transit system, ordering food in restaurants. For some reason, the idea of wandering the halls of the Louvre gives me the creeps. I wanted a different kind of trip. I wanted something ambling, something with lots of sky and long stretches of road. I tell everyone who asks, "I need to see the horizon all around me."

My anxiety—and there is always anxiety—is focused on whether I have the correct equipment. In the weeks before the trip, I become obsessed with specialized gear, reading website reviews, and browsing hiker's message boards looking for answers, advice, perhaps for warnings. I go to buy shoes. "Light hiking, or just for regular wear?" asks the salesman. "As for clothes," he continues, "get some layers with good wicking properties." A list of items tumbles out of his mouth, and I listen, try things on, and come away with nothing. Should I get pants that zip off into shorts? Somehow clothing that transforms appeals to me—that I might be prepared for whatever we encounter. "Oh," someone says, "start thinking about getting a vehicle that can take the mountains."

A car runs into our livery cab on the way to the airport; the driver had fallen asleep. Fortunately, no one is hurt. The car is not damaged. We continue on, crisis averted.

Well, I think, there's *one* down.

"Group effort, guys," says the man sitting next to me on the plane. He pulls the Sky Magazine from the seat pocket and begins the crossword, passing the crinkled pages across the seats. "Group effort," he repeats. I want him to go away. "Hiking? For a week?" He takes in the information, then says to Kip: "You must not be married. Your wife certainly wouldn't let you go hiking for a week with your buddy." I wonder if this is the sort of reaction we'll get all over Utah. I

wonder if people will recognize us as lovers. I avoid all questions about what I do for a living. Kip, ever kind, ever even, has to talk briefly about his line of work—children's toys and television programming. "I build houses," the guy says, "I take houses that have been converted into multi-family two-bedrooms and convert them back into single family townhomes. You know, luxury living." New York City is facing a catastrophic affordable housing crisis, and here is this guy, who doesn't even live in New York—he lives with his family in California and commutes back and forth—housing rich people on the Upper East Side. He keeps talking, manages to say to Kip: "Wow, you must be old." It occurs to me that he is, in many ways, my exact opposite. I thumb through the seat pocket, to make sure there's a barf bag.

Our rental car is a hybrid, the Toyota Prius—it's quiet, eerily and beautifully quiet, and drives smooth, easy. The guy who fills out the paperwork goes through that seemingly-informal, but ultimately awkward walk around the vehicle with us to determine what flaws the previous renter might have added. The Prius has a video monitor in the dash, which acts as the audio/climate and battery interface. It shows you how much charge the battery has, whether you're using the engine, or the electric motor. As you drive, green and orange arrows flash in all directions over the tiny mock-up of the car on the screen. I become obsessed with the electric reserve, demanding that it be full at all times—like it's my cell phone—and I worry that, if it dies, the car will just stop. "Look it's going up," I say to Kip. Or "Look, it's running out."

"What if it runs out?" I say.

"Then it will just turn into a regular car," he says.

The rental car guy recommends a Mexican restaurant, The Red Iguana. "Not much on atmosphere, but the food is good. Try the shrimp enchiladas." I'm not sure if Mexican food is what I want to eat after five hours on an airplane enjoying a 'group effort' crossword, but we go anyway. Turns out, it's a lively, colorful little place (full of atmosphere if you ask me) on the west end of town, and has been named, by everyone you can think of who gives out food awards—Zagat, CitySearch, magazine after magazine—the best Mexican in the entire state. The food is fantastic, the salsa unearthly fresh and flavorful, zapping your mouth in all different directions. Kip has a fresh salmon burrito, and I have a plateful of what I can only describe as Mexican ravioli, tiny pressed dumplings filled with meat and cheese. We eat a mound of guacamole and baskets of housemade tortilla chips. We vow to return there on our way out of town.

We drive north about forty minutes, to Antelope Island, a national park famous for its herd of some 500 bison, introduced there in 1893. The island is surrounded by the Great Salt Lake, which is the leftovers of Lake Bonneville, a giant body of water that covered most of the state millions of years ago. There, we hike out to the edge of the water, take pictures to prove that it exists, and perhaps to prove that we exist, or at least that we existed there. I want taste the water, and I do. It is salty, like the sea, but it is flatter, the flavor is all concentrated in the front of your mouth, on the end of your tongue.

Back in Salt Lake City, the hotel's website promises "well-appointed guest rooms" and "spectacular views of the city and mountains." It is only half right, but that's okay. I don't care about hotels one way or another—though this trip will challenge that. We nap, thumb through the guidebook, and I trace my finger along the roads in the atlas, which stretch out into the open country, connecting one tiny town to the next—Spanish Fork, East Carbon, Green River, and Moab—our loose plan for the next day.

For dinner we fumble our way through the downtown grid and end up, quite haphazardly, at an Italian restaurant that specializes in family-style dishes. We order the house specialty: pork chops with blueberries, balsamic, red wine and hazelnuts, along with an excellent warm spinach and goat cheese salad. The ridiculous portions arrive—though we have ordered the 'small' versions of each—and immediately I become my mother, aghast at the amount of food on the plate. Something shifts inside you as you age—at some point all you can talk about is how absurdly large the portions are, at any restaurant, wherever you are. "Oh, that's just outrageous," I hear myself saying. Have I reached this point already?

I eat myself sick and groan all the way back to the hotel.

Monday morning. A thin column of light shines through the curtains. Kip breathes in, out, rustles against me, that strange twitching you perform during dreams. All around us are the rumblings of water sluicing through the walls—toilets and showers and sinks, everyone shifting toward the day.

The movement of water is the constant of our trip.

Also, of course, the road, the sky, each other.

After breakfast, we set off for Moab and Arches National Park. Elevations in Utah shift like weather. One minute you are switchbacking up a rocky face to the summit, and the next you are

descending into a craggy canyon, trees clinging to the surface, their roots gnarled by wind and erosion. Mountains next to valleys, stretches of nothing past junctures of roads. Wherever you look, there is the landscape and it's complement.

Four and a half hours later, we arrive in Moab—my back is twisted into odd shapes by the drive, buzzed on Coca-Cola and M&Ms, or whatever other crap we have eaten along the way. The city fans out on either side of Route 191 in low, square buildings. There is some argument about how the town got its name—either from William Pierce, a postmaster, or whether it has some Paiute origin. Uranium ore was discovered in the 1950s, and the town boomed. A little less than 5,000 people live here now, with thousands of others passing through as tourists and outdoor enthusiasts—primarily visiting Arches and biking the world famous Slickrock Trail. It has become a strange oasis of hippie kids and crunchy, earthy types; none of it looks much like the rest of Utah. Bike shops advertise hot showers by the minute. Restaurants offer sides of quinoa.

The drive into Arches itself is extraordinary—formations like buildings surround us, made almost religious by the light, the scale, the quiet. We hike to Turret Arch, Double Arch, to Balanced Rock. We take the rough trail, marked only by cairns around The Windows. The temperature changes quickly here, the sun and shade performing drastic feats of disparity. At the turnaround, we stare into the distance, at the horizon. I feel calm. Kip touches my arm.

For about an hour, all of it uphill, every step, we hike toward Delicate Arch, certainly the most famous of Arches' formations. Finally, at the top of the trail, after scrubby trees and veiny, red slickrock, sand and the heat—the chill of the wind—we make it to the last curved section cut into the side of the mountain. The arch appears at the very last instant, as you come around the last bit of the path. It is magnificent. There are a few other people around, European tourists and third-generation cattle ranchers from Wyoming—I'm good at eavesdropping. Everyone looks tired and satisfied. Everyone snaps pictures.

Delicate Arch is a peculiar entity, and there are thousands of other such formations across the globe. This one is 45 feet tall and 33 feet across, carved from Entrada sandstone by tons of water over millions of years. It is dazzlingly picturesque, so…finely balanced on the edge of the stone, as if some ancient monument to grace. It confounds the brain. Ultimately, it is here as proof of what? Of the power of nature? Of how randomness can be a promise of beauty? Of the constancy of time? I am tempted to mention God here, to mention some higher thing—this kind of wonder brings those words to your lips.

Our language is limited.

Questions only lead to more questions. The answers do not appear.

But a message does: Regard this moment. That you stood here.

That you were here together.

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On Tuesday we drive south. Kip spends most of the week sitting next to me with the atlas in his lap. I do all the driving, which is my preference, and he doesn't drive at all—or hasn't in about a decade. We pass through Monicello, Blanding, Bluff and Mexican Hat, moving on toward Monument Valley, which lies within the borders of the Navajo nation along the eastern part of Utah's border with Arizona. There, we stop at a grocery store, buy some lunch and other rations, stand along the side of the road and take a few pictures—none of them will capture it, I know. I rush us on through to the next town, disappointing my boyfriend, I fear.

This trip, these hours with nothing but Bjork and the Scala Choir and Dolly Parton on the stereo, the flat open highway, it all has me obsessed with surfaces, with the line—visible or invisible, actual or imagined—that separates one thing from another, one matter from the next. Miles of deep black ocean is separated from the endless blue sky by only the smallest molecular skin. Where the light falls onto the facade of the stone, what do the molecules do there? At the atomic level, do they become each other—the way our memories of two distinct moments can fuse to become a single experience. Can you mark the alchemical moment? Are surfaces beginnings or ends?

Perhaps they are their own breed entirely.

If I peel away this layer of rock, exposing it to the air, and the light falls on that fresh piece of stone, which, arguably, hasn't seen light in millions of years, does that change anything? I imagine our car as seen from above—shifting back exponentially, like changing lenses on a microscope, back, and back further still, until we are a speck traveling the edge of the planet, along the thin, unverifiable instant when earth becomes air.

Here we are again at surfaces.

Day Three.

My boots vanish, left in the parking lot in Moab, or somewhere, forgotten in Mt. Carmel Junction, found by hotel housekeeping who auctions them on eBay—who knows? Kip calls around,

asking if anyone has found them, like they are old dogs who wandered away from home. I hike the rest of the trip in my sneakers.

Bryce Canyon hides behind a thick line of trees until you walk to the edge of it. Then it falls away, crumbling into endless hues of orange, ochre, ivory—you will not know names for all the colors. The sky spreads out from the lip of the canyon, opening and widening, bathing the spires and fins and towers in a glorious clean light. Though you will see hikers below, some near, some far off, with packs and walking sticks and sunglasses, the only sound is of your breathing, and the wind.

Bryce is somewhat baffling; you can never quite take it in. It is not nearly as large as Arches National Park, or as Zion, but it has the advantage of concentration, being perhaps the most striking place in the known universe (known to us, that is) to see hoodoos, the tall, eroded formations that make up Bryce's grand amphitheater. The trails here are beaten white pathways that snake through the hoodoos, doubling back on themselves, disappearing through archways and around corners, wandering as if drawn by Dr. Suess. They hide inside curves, and float precariously on the highest edge of the cliffs.

We take the Navajo Loop trail down into the canyon with a dozen other hikers, voices carrying up through the gaps, and everywhere you look people are smiling. Eventually, maybe a half hour later, we've separated ourselves from the crowd, and the trail begins to flatten out. The sun is hot, purposeful, and we shed layers, cramming things into our backpack and slugging water from the bottle. We stop to eat, fitting ourselves into the concave ruts of a fallen tree. Immediately a bird lands nearby, hops directly up onto a close branch and begs for something to eat—inches away. Every sign in the park says "Do Not Feed the Animals." How can I resist? I feed him—I think it was a him—a tiny piece of our granola bar, and he gobbles it happily. In my memory of this moment, he chirps at us and flits away, but I'm sure that time has eroded that as well. All I can say surely is that we consulted the map, hiked on, and eventually made our way up and out of the canyon, back onto the rim and to our car.

Do you see how Bryce is baffling, how you are constantly pulled between regarding this majestic picture as a whole, and the bird that is no bigger than your palm? Perspective shifts too quickly, the small becomes the large, and you are astonished by the insane notion that all of this is…random? Nature is like this wherever you go—inexplicable, mysterious, impenetrable—be it Bryce Canyon or your backyard, but we forget this, and it feels good to be reminded.

At Rainbow Point, the highest lookout in the park at roughly 9000 feet, we eat apples we've carried in our backpack. Standing there, staring off into the distance, I think of again water. How it

creates, and takes away. How it falls from the sky in infinite variation, freezes, expands, pushes itself into the visible—and invisible—cracks of the stone it then dissolves. How it draws itself slowly, snaking through creeks, which lead to streams, which meet to form rivers. The rivers then guide it back to the sea. How, like the sky, it is indifferent.

I think of all the years, the millions of years that this canyon stood here with no one to gaze at it. Someday it will be that way again. I can get a bit morbid, flashing forward to the day when human beings cease to exist, having starved or bombed or infected each other into extinction. But the canyon will remain. The sunrise—some kind of sunrise—will still light those formations. The owls at night, if there are still owls, will nest in its trees just the same.

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The next day we ride horses through Red Canyon. If I regret anything in my life, it is that 1) I did not make out with Ron Bock when I had the chance, and 2) that we did not have our picture taken with Jim, our real-life Red Canyon cowboy guide. It is the last weekend they will send tours through the canyon—this is the end of the tourist season—and Kip and I are the only two people on this trip. Jim drives us away from the hotel parking lot—"We'll see y'all in a couple of days," the other guy jokes—and gives us a brief lesson on horse handling. We stand by the corral, awaiting his word that it's "safe to come toward the horses." Jim selects Rio, a huge brown stallion, for Kip, and Kip climbs onto Rio's back, fitting his toes into the stirrups and handling the reigns like a pro.

Jim turns to me. "We're going to put you on this mousy brown gal over here. Her name's Cinderella."

I'm not sure what to make of this—whether her name might as well have been Judy Garland, or if this is just coincidence, but she is a beautiful creature, with the smart, careful eyes that horses have, and a dark mane, nearly black, that feels rough and dry in my fingers. We set off onto the horse trail, which meanders along a dry creek bed, through red cliffs and stands of ponderosa pine. Jim feels the need to make conversation, it's his job to give us a good time, I suppose.

"New York, is it?" he asks. "Well, shoot. Y'all sure are quiet back there. Everything okay?" He is somewhat unsure about our silence.

I try to explain that in New York all we get is noise. Sirens and subway trains and crying babies and dumb conversations and advertising and ringtones and that ubiquitous city buzz—we came here for quiet. He tells us about his time guiding at basically every famous ranch you can think

of from Montana to Colorado and Texas and California, in his more than forty years of working with horses—"and people," he says.

"How many people live in New York," Jim asks.

"Almost nine million," I say.

"What's that like, nine million?"

"You're never alone," I say.

"I'm never alone," he says, "I got my horse."

He tells us how his sister lives in New York City, she's a bond trader or a banker or something, I can't exactly determine from his description. He's never been to visit, and he doesn't volunteer why.

"So how did you get into this business," I ask.

"I left home at 15 with my first horse, well, 'cuz I had to, and I never looked back." I almost ask him what chain of events led to his removal—on his own terms or someone else's, I don't know—but something stops me, and for a moment, I'm afraid of the answer. Jim is the kind of man who knows what he is capable of. This is not to say he's simple, or low on ambition—it' just me filling in the blanks, with my over-active imagination and bent toward character-driven fiction. Sometimes I wonder what's wrong with me.

Later, when Jim mentions a girlfriend who he "dragged over from California," I'm glad. On the ride back to the Ruby's Inn, he pushes us to visit the Paunsaugunt Wildlife Museum, of which he is the off-season caretaker, and a family-run diner where they'll give us 10% off if we tell them we rode with him that day. We skip both, anxious to get back to the Thunderbird Lodge, home of the too-casual waitresses, and as the neon outside promises, the "ho-made" pies.

The drive from the east into Zion National Park begins with a winding, precarious road that hugs the side of the mountain, dips through gullies, and then disappears into the 1.1-mile long Zion-Mt. Carmel tunnel—the longest tunnel in the world when it was constructed. We park at the visitor's center, stroll through the shop, read about the area's history, and then set off into the canyon itself, which extends for fifteen miles and is nearly a half-mile deep.

Zion feels like it's name: like home, safe, sacred and timeless. The canyon is spotted with lofty-named formations—The Three Patriarchs, Angel's Landing, The Great White Throne—who all live up to their glorious descriptions. Zion is also grayer than the rest of the state, and greener,

with leafy trees along the valley floor where the Virgin River passes quietly by. Trails extend on either side, climbing up the rock faces, to algae-rich pools of glowing green water, weeping ceilings of stone, and tiny streams that split, disappear, and meet again below you. Compared to Bryce Canyon, which is constantly shifting and changing shape, eating away at itself from the canyon rim, Zion feels like a testimonial, an elaborate shrine that suggests remembrance, vastness, and time.

We scurry up a short, steep trail of hard red dirt, past cactus and lizards. A few hours later, sweaty and wide-eyed, we emerge at the other end, and then walk another mile or so back to the parking lot, along a soft sandy path near the riverbank. I'm tired. Five days of this already.

Here's what I learn: I don't really care about hiking. I like to meander across the slickrock, climb up the trails, and gaze out across the valley. But a couple of hours are enough. I want the television, I want a warm bed—a good bed with my cloister of pillows—and a blazing hot shower with pummeling water pressure. What does this say about me? Does it say anything?

Our time spent in Zion feels rushed. The air there is heavy, almost holy; somehow, everything is meaningful, everything has a dense affecting weight. Do I sound crazy for saying this? The sun is setting on our way out of the canyon, but it isn't dark enough for the datura to bloom.

The days pass like brief mirages; the light drawing shadows out across canyons, bending objects like a Dali painting. At night, my dreams stretch into endless histrionic sagas, divided into the credible (misplaced hotel keys and broken shoelaces,) and the absurd (I come home to find my apartment filled with goose down.) It becomes impossible to determine if anything is real.

Wherever we are, I'm still scrutinizing the car's battery monitor. "Come on, come on, come on," I'm thinking. I even try telepathy, to no avail.

In a darkened hotel room just before sunrise, I stumble to the bathroom to pee, and when I pass by myself in the mirror, I catch a glimpse of my scruffy face. Something happens. I fast-forward through the years, the decades, mistaking myself for an old man, a stranger. Someone who sits in the same chair all day. Who calls his friends but doesn't see them much. Who buys toilet paper in ridiculous excess. Whose house is so covered in books and papers and old magazines that he feels almost strangled by them. The scary part is: How is that any different from who I am now?

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We meet my friend, the writer Rob Williams, in St. George, a town of nearly 70,000, where he is doing research for a novel. We check into the Super 8 Motel, and find a Thai restaurant down the road. Despite being so close to closing time, they seat us quickly and the food is warm and good—and the company is lovely. At some point during the meal, the restaurant staff begins to move all the chairs around into a circle, away from us, but still in earshot. Everyone sits, and someone—the manager? The owner?—starts to lecture the kitchen staff about sending entrées and appetizers out in the wrong order. Then he starts delivering a strange, rhetoric-rich speech on why working at this particular restaurant, with this particular crew, is important, character-building work. He asks everyone in the circle to talk about how this job has made them better people. "Well…" we hear one of the waitresses say, "I know I do not work here for the money, so it must be something bigger." Her tone indicates that she does not know what that something might be. They start vacuuming around our feet. Point taken.

The next morning, after a hearty breakfast at the Bear Paw Café, and compulsory photographs of all of us in front of the big Bear Paw sign, the three of us drive up to Snow Canyon, a National Park where much of the "The Conqueror" was shot, a 1956 Howard Hughes-produced flop starring John Wayne as Genghis Khan.

We climb up onto the red sand dunes where mothers are playing with their children. "Can you feel the radiation?" Rob says.

In the early 1950s, the United States Government began aboveground nuclear testing in the Nevada desert, only about 130 miles west of St. George. One of the tests, the detonation of a thirty-two-kiloton monster known as "Dirty Harry," would cause citizens in St. George to remark on the sudden appearance of an odd metallic taste in the air. (Residents of Three Mile Island would note the same mysterious tang on the wind.) Dick Powell, director of "The Conqueror," died of cancer in 1963. John Wayne died of cancer in 1979. The film's other stars, Agnes Moorhead and Pedro Armendåriz, also died of cancer. By the mid 1980s, 91 of the 220 cast and crew members had developed some kind of cancer, and roughly half of those 91 had died. Lots of things come into play with something as unpredictable as cancer—John Wayne smoked five packs a day—but these are significant numbers. In the nearby town of La Verkin, farmers reported that after fallout wafted through their grazing fields, their goats, literally, turned blue. William Sleight, a longtime resident of St. George, wrote about the blasts in his diary:

May 19, 1953:

Beautiful morning. We left St. George at 4 a.m. for Las Vegas, Nevada. We were watching for the A-Bomb explosion on the desert north of Las Vegas. At 5 a.m., just dawn, we saw the flash which lit up the skies, a beautiful red, visible for hundreds of miles away. It was a beautiful sight, a hundred miles or more away from it….I drove for ten minutes, then stopped the car on the roadside, got out and soon after we heard the report of the blast. It rumbled as thunder, not quite the same as other blasts we have heard. This is the 9th in a series of ten, another next week. It makes me shudder when I think of what misery we may face when men start dropping these terrific bombs on our cities. Some fanatics are now clamoring for their use in Korea.

After we came back on Highway 91, we were stopped and a young man examined our car with an instrument to see if we had picked up any radioactive dust while traveling on the Highway. Found none so we missed a free car wash (which would have been appreciated). . . .

Returned to St. George in a high wind, which seems to always follow these explosions.

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We're driving north on interstate 15, just past Pintura, when the tie lines on a pick-up truck come loose, trailing furniture, mattresses and cardboard boxes all over the freeway. A flood of brake lights, cars scattering in every direction, broken table legs, strips of printed fabric sprawling out over the tarmac. The tenuous nature of driving—the agreement that I'll stay on my side and you'll stay on yours—is on my mind constantly as we've been moving across Utah in our tiny tin box. You are at the mercy of the reaction time of everyone else on the road—and an infinite number of other variables. This seems like a simple observation, but a dozen times in the last five days I've wondered, flirted with it even, what it might be like to turn the car just barely into the other lane, into the path of the oncoming semi. It's not death I'm after, but the opposite—clearly, it's madness. But I am curious about the speed, about the flipping the car might do, about the silence you could find in the noise. I manage to avoid the exploding junk, and after brief moment of white-knuckled panic, we're out of it, it's behind us, no harm done.

"Good job, honey," Kip says.

My heart is racing. We are always one flashing instant from a new life.

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Back in Salt Lake City, I decide that I've had enough of cheap motels with bad restaurants, with beds that sag in the center. I beg Kip to look into the Peery Hotel, which opened in 1910 and retains much of its original charm. Surprisingly, they are affordable and have a room available—which is tiny, about as big as my bedroom back in New York, but with fabulous antique fixtures and the biggest, most lovely bed, which we sink into immediately. The concierge recommends a few restaurants, and I ask him to make a reservation at Metropolitan, a New American joint that has earned some of the best reviews in town. One of the more negative reviews of the place listed on CitySearch says it offers "expensive, small-portioned eye-candy." This sounds divine. Metropolitan is also, according to reviews on the site—granted not the most reputable resource—constantly being picketed for continuing to serve foie gras despite being "informed about" it. Admittedly, something remotely Marie Antoinette about me loves the idea of feasting on foie while the little people shriek with disgust out on the sidewalk—though there are no protestors when we arrive.

Our waiter there is gay—of course. (Of course?) He does a bit of that thing that some gay men do, flirting because you're gay and he's gay and somehow that's supposed to bring you closer together, even though you're just trying to order a martini—which is a bit gay in itself, I suppose. Alcohol in Utah is regulated, but you can have a drink if you fall within the rules. The rules have to do with the amount of liquor, the time of day, what you do or do not have to eat, and other peculiar limitations. (There are private clubs, however, for members who pay a nominal fee, or for tourists who buy a temporary membership, where one can drink all you like while sitting at the bar.)

This means that when my martini does arrive, it's half full—only one ounce of vodka measured exactly can go into a cocktail. (In New York, martinis are often filled to the lip of the glass, dripping liquor down across your fingers.) But this one is balanced well and tastes fantastic. They pamper us with cottage cheese rolls, and an amuse bouche that I don't even remember. We have a roasted pear soup with fig and walnuts; a grilled Caesar salad with tomato confit and parmesan crostini; then the entrées: scallops as big as your head served with braised endive and pomegranate, and a superb loin of elk with Lyonnaise potatoes, wild mushrooms and a port demi. For dessert, we have a pumpkin soufflé (so worth the 20 minute wait) and a cranberry cheesecake with orange clove sorbet, which was not at all like the cheesecake you're thinking of, more pudding/ice cream than cake. Everything has big, big flavors; everything is fantastic.

This, after having eaten in one lousy restaurant after another all throughout the state. Every hideous salad bar, every strange side dish, and every "camper's breakfast special;" it was all worth it to have a quiet, delicious dinner, with candles and peppermint tea and my boyfriend.

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Rain. The wind blows the water against the window.

We set out for Temple Square, the center of the Mormon religion, before our flight in the afternoon. The square is walled in on all sides, and is crawling—somewhat benevolently—with young Mormons, who each have a black plastic nametag that includes the flag of…their home country? Country of origin? Nationality?

A young lady hands me a palm-sized postcard, a photograph of the temple, with the most bizarre, surely Photoshop-enhanced, purple cast to the sky behind it. We wander through their museum, through the spiraling-heavenward gallery in the North Visitor's Center, where the enormous white statue of the Savior stands, surrounded by a gorgeous, if somewhat tacky, mural of the entire universe. Maybe there is some kind of piped-in narration, recounting the history of the heavens and the earth and we missed the beginning of it, or maybe there isn't any, and we're just supposed to sit here contemplating ourselves and basking in the wonderment. A few minutes pass, and we awkwardly get up, move through the aisles and back down the ramp.

The Mormons are all friendly and genuine. They are extremely happy to tell you about this building or that building, or to point out a piece of scripture that speaks of triumph through adversity or to the importance of family—one of them opens her Book of Mormon and points to a verse she's highlighted in pink.

Outside, with the water sprinkling down on us, we stand in front of the Handcart Pioneer Monument, which stands in tribute to the thousands of Mormons who walked to Salt Lake City from Iowa in the 1850s. In the sixth grade, my friends and I were obsessed with the computer game Oregon Trail. Your quest begins in Independence, Missouri, when you purchase extra sets of clothing for your family, as much food and spare parts as your wagon can carry, and a team of 6-10 oxen, who will pull you across the land. This is not, I suddenly realized, the way many of the pioneers did it. *Most* of them walked. How many of them could afford oxen? Even less could afford extra clothes. It's inspiring, this massive migration of people from one place to another. They made the difficult—the frightening, the only—choice, to set out for whatever challenges and hardships and frozen dirt awaited them. Because they had had enough.

We are too comfortable. We need more of that motion, that desperate, creative energy to make a new and better life each other.

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In the end, we drove more than 1600 miles—265 more and it would equal the one-way distance from New York to Salt Lake. But that's another trip, isn't it? As the plane begins its descent, curving across the sparkling surface of nighttime Brooklyn, I mistake the wing's navigation light for the moon.