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Writing 220

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Cars

The first was a navy blue Windstar. Her windows were the ones in which I was always pinching my fingers. Her door was the one I nearly squished my brother in (though it didn't really even get close). Her battery was the one that died on the side of the road in Cadillac on a hot summer night. Between the relentless mosquitoes outside and stifling heat inside, my siblings and I thought we were going to die there (even though we most definitely weren't).

That trip was her last, she was soon succeeded by a steel gray Explorer. Her radio was the one we used to tune to that silly kids channel. Her heated seats were a novelty. Her front right wheel was the one that ran over the dog (but miraculously, the dog was unscathed). When her battery adapter died, my dad replaced it - but immediately started looking for our next car.

Nowadays "she" is another Explorer, dark blue but not quite navy. Her backup camera is the one that died on the day of my driving test. Her steering wheel is the one I gripped, white-knuckled, as I drove up north for the first time. Her backseat is the one that I packed my life into before moving into my college dorm, and then packed myself into (a little more independent but also a little lonelier) four months later for winter break. I'm not a car person. But that doesn't mean I haven't loved a few cars.

Boats

The boats were a surprisingly reliable indicator of the seasons. Obviously the lake was frozen in the winter (and much of the spring), the ice dusted in powdery snow. But, as the weather warmed and the ice receded, boats would unfailingly return to their posts around the edge of the aquamarine sandbar. All summer, we could drive by and see a small cohort out on the water enjoying each mild evening.

Eventually, as the trees started to change colors across the lake, the number of boats would begin to dwindle. Driving home on those late summer weekends, I'd feel an intense solidarity with the last lonely boat. Like me, it was clinging desperately to the last shreds of summer bliss; like it, there was nothing I could do except watch the days slip away slowly through my fingers.

The Fish

As children, the fish was the most exciting part of the drive. Even late at night, we'd hold our sleepy eyes open just long enough to catch a glimpse of its towering, glossy body out the window as we passed. Everyone would call out the sighting, as if it were a rare wild animal instead of the same old statue we'd passed a hundred times before.

One day, passing through Kalkaska, I realized it had been several trips since anyone had mentioned the fish. Maybe as we'd gotten older and experienced more of the world, the statue's novelty had worn off. Or maybe, our lack of interest in the fish was a sign of our maturity: we no longer needed a shining landmark to convince us that we would, in time, reach our destination.

Responsibility

As a child, I could never stay awake for those four-hour drives. This was both frustrating - what was I missing those two and a half hours asleep? - and magical - I fell asleep on some random highway and woke up at my favorite place in the world!

When I became a preteen, my drives consisted of strategizing ways *not* to fall asleep - usually involving reading lights and iPad screens, keeping me too occupied to sleep even if I was tired.

As a teen, staying awake was easier: I stayed up late on a regular basis, so I could take advantage of the precious time to work on the weekend's homework and text friends .

But today? Put me in the driver's seat and you'd better have a concoction of caffeine, snacks and loud music to keep me awake. I'd give anything to not have to drive, to be able to nap for an hour or two (or even four) and wake up at the cottage - anything to be a carefree passenger again.

Beacons

There is a painting on the wall in the women's bathroom of the Beacon and Bridge gas station in Ithaca, MI. It depicts a quilt (patriotically themed of course), which drapes over the side of a wicker basket. There are red, white, and blue spools of thread scattered across the table where the basket sits.

Before I could even identify highways or city names or mile markers, I could recognize that picture in the gas station bathroom. Thinking about it now, it was one of the few markers I had to contextualize my trip - each time we stopped at the gas station, it was tiny confirmation that we were in fact on the correct route to the cottage. Even back then, I was independent enough to designate a mile-marker of my own.