

Kelsey Walworth
Honors 241
George Hoffman

Driving

The sun is shining and the bright blue sky is dotted with a few cheerful, puffy clouds. There's just a dusting of snow on the concrete driveway where a steel-blue Ford Explorer sits waiting, looking ready to live up to its name. It's a sight I know by heart: the rooftop cargo carrier is open just a crack, through which a rainbow mix of skis and snow boots is visible. The liftgate is raised to reveal a careful arrangement of two suitcases (a big black one and a small purple one), a gray work bag, a large canvas tote monogrammed with a blue "W", three duffle bags (two paisley and one dark navy), and a big, blue plastic cooler with black wheels and a white lid. Five backpacks, five water bottles, five ski coats, four phones, and an iPad are scattered through the main area of the car. Though I can't see them, I know that there's also a pack of gum, a bag of Werther's caramels, and a CD of carefully curated Disney songs in the front console. The CD hasn't been used in years, not since we started listening to satellite radio and Spotify, but nobody would ever dream of removing it from the car. *Hawaiian Rollercoaster Ride* has become as much a part of this 4-hour journey as the five passengers and their yellow dog.

A press of a button and the back door of the car starts to lower, chiming as it closes. I'm reminded how the exact shape and color of this vehicle have changed since I was little: once, it was a navy blue Ford Windstar, then a dark gray Ford Explorer. Besides the car, though, this trip has remained remarkably unchanged for eighteen years. Here's how it usually goes: first, the family makes plans to leave Ann Arbor around 4 pm on a Friday. We end up leaving around 7

pm. If mom's driving, we get on I-96 towards U.S. 127. Dad tends to choose the faster (but less scenic) route, driving up U.S. 23 to I-75. Either way, we end up in Grayling, MI, and then head west. In Kalkaska, the kids make sure to alert everyone when the car reaches the trout statue. In Rapid City, we watch wistfully as we pass the Cone Corral (whose ice cream is reserved as a morale booster for the sorrowful trip home). Turning left on Crystal Beach Rd, we squint through the darkness to see the south end of Torch Lake as we drive over the mouth of the Torch River. The bridge is lit up by red, white, and blue string lights arranged in the shape of an American flag. We drive on, passing a few cherry orchards, a sheep farm, and a quarry before turning right off of Indian Rd. A final left turn onto NW Torch Lake Drive, and my family arrives at a big gray house with forest green shutters, the Cottage.

The doors slam as my siblings jump into the car. I slide into the cool leather seat after them, and my parents take their places in the front seats. For as long as I can remember, my family has made the journey on the same schedule each year: Memorial Day weekend, the end of June, mid July, the beginning of August, Labor Day weekend, late October (if we're lucky), New Year's, late February, Spring Break. Those trips became a constant in our lives, as comforting and predictable as a favorite blanket. In a world where people and politics were changing all the time, we had only to go "up north" to remember who we were. I was the planner, the responsible one who packed everyone's shoes and snow gear. My sister, ever the compassionate one, made sure to get the dog's food and toys. My mom, the caregiver and ringleader, packed the cooler. My brother was the untroubled one, happy to simply follow instructions and fill everyone's water bottle. My dad, creative yet stoic, packed his tools and projects for the weekend but also made sure to do most of the driving. For the next four hours after we all piled in, it was as if nothing

else existed beyond the car. Why should it? Everything we could have possibly needed was already inside.

The gray garage door rolls down as we pull out of the driveway. My mom plugs her phone into the radio, and Peter Sagal's voice from last week's episode of the *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me* podcast fills the car. For as much as the car trips have stayed the same, one aspect is distinctly different today from when I was younger: time. In my earliest memories of up north trips, the drives took ages. I would bring stacks of books, coloring pages, and magazines, yet never enough to prevent me from getting bored. Now, I've been conditioned to bring books and magazines but I rarely use them. I usually let myself be lulled into daydreams by the buzzing of the road beneath me, or use the time to chat with my family. Maybe the fact that the time flies when I'm traveling up north means that I don't make enough time for relaxation in my everyday life. Or, maybe my shift in perspective is a sign of my maturity, evidence that I understand that good things require sacrifice and patience. Today, I'm tremendously different from that eight year old powering through four *American Girl* magazines an hour. I've realized, though, that I'm closer to her when I'm making the journey than I am at any other time in my daily life.

The drive up north ties me to a place and ties me to my family, but just as importantly, it ties me to myself. There's a clear dichotomy between my self that lives at school, where everything is changing and pressure to become someone new is everywhere, and the self that rides in the Cottage-bound car. Cottage-bound Kelsey never had to grow up, and maybe she never will. She doesn't have to work for respect or earn her place in the world because she already knows her role as the dependable older sister, the go-getter and adventurer, the golden child. The constancy of Cottage-bound Kelsey ties together every "version" of school Kelsey that's ever existed: she is the running thread through eighteen years of growth and change.

As a result, all I need to do is get into that car heading up north in order to remember who I am.

As the car rumbles out of the neighborhood, I roll down the window to escape the smell of coffee and slightly damp dog for a moment. In a few minutes or hours, I'll probably be arguing with my sister over my right to eat crunchy carrots or bargaining with my brother to let me use his computer charger. But for now, I smile. This car is nothing flashy, it can't match the exhilaration that comes from filling every waking moment with meaningful social and academic activities. But that doesn't matter. Right now, it gives me exactly what I need: the opportunity to remember what it means to be myself.