

**SHEER ABANDON**

**A Backstory**

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Last night I dreamt I went out in the pouring rain. In the car I turned the windshield wipers to the fastest setting but I could only glimpse the outside world in brief snippets, before everything blurred.

“Go,” said my mother from the passenger seat. “Go now.” She wiped the wetness from her face and stared straight ahead.

“Where?” I asked. I was trying to stay calm.

“To the Holiday Inn,” she said. “The one next to Fairview. Go left at the church, then left again. Just go now.”

“I don’t want to go,” said my sister, Becca. “I don’t want her to drive me. She doesn’t know how to drive.”

“Samantha can drive fine,” said my mother, “She’s been practicing.”

Becca sniffled in the backseat but she said nothing as we drove: past the yards of our neighbours; past the church where my Mom was the choir director; past my best friend Elizabeth’s house. I tried to concentrate, on turning the steering wheel smoothly, on braking not too soon. It was late and I was relieved to see that there were only one or two other cars to contend with.

Half an hour ago Becca and I had been watching TV in the basement room when our mother appeared, like a phantom, whispering at us to get in the car, quickly, don't argue and please, please be quiet. Dana was already in the backseat, in her pajamas and groggy from being woken up in the middle of the night.

The hotel was more welcoming in the dark, its blocky beige and glass lit up for the evening. I parked across from the entrance, a little crooked maybe but pretty good, I thought. I turned off the ignition and looked at my mother. She was staring out the window, straight ahead as though we were still driving; or maybe she was mesmerized by the rivulets that continued to form, and break, and then re-form on the windshield.

“I think they're asleep.” She meant my sisters but she didn't turn around to look in the back. I did. Dana was slumped against the door, breathing softly, but Becca was wide awake, mute, staring at me.

The car trembled as the night wind blew against it. I wondered if we would spend the night here in the car, where it was close and dry, a small sanctuary from the craziness outside. Who would stay at a hotel in the suburbs of Montreal anyway? I wondered. Bargain hunters traveling north from the States, wanting to shop at the Fairview Mall? Businessmen visiting the negligible office parks that dotted the main street? Perhaps they would come out to their cars in the morning and find us there. I felt uneasy at the thought of strangers watching us sleep.

Finally my mother turned toward me. In the dim light I could see no more trace of tears but she looked tired, like a clock that had wound down and would soon stop.

“We should go home.” Her voice was flat. The storm was easing off, the drumbeat of the rain had become slower and more irregular. The air now carried a chill, and I shivered a little bit.

“We should go home,” she said again, with more authority this time. She reached over and turned the key in the ignition. The headlights flared and picked out the wet leaves of the shrubbery that framed the parking lot.

It was late when I woke up the next morning. There were a few branches on the ground but otherwise the neighbourhood seemed refreshed - the sky washed clear of all clouds, the grass invigorated by the rain. I headed downstairs for breakfast. My mother was stacking dirty dishes at the sink. Dana was at the table, eating the last of her Shreddies, her spoon clattering against the bottom of the bowl.

“Where’s Becca?” I asked as I slid onto the banquette. My mother was filling the sink. I guess she didn’t hear me because she didn’t answer.

“At the pool,” said Dana. She slurped up some milk and then set her spoon down with some finality. “Can I go outside Mommy?”

“Yes, go ahead. Just stay in our yard for now, OK?” Dana had a habit of wandering away, and even though she was 9 years old my mother was still dubious that she could find her way back.

The screen door banged behind her.

My mother took her bowl from the table and slid it into the soapy water. The dishes chimed gently as she washed, washed and rinsed, then slid them into the plastic drainer. The drainer was faded yellow and starting to crack, its tray was gently warped. I wish we had a dishwasher, I thought, but I knew we weren't getting one anytime soon.

I ate my breakfast deliberately. I was always a slow eater but today I was conscious of chewing each mouthful, waiting for my mother to finish the dishes, wipe off the counter, put away the Shreddies in the cupboard, and the milk in the fridge.

“Are you going to the pool today?” my mother asked. She was staring out the window.

“Maybe,” I answered. I was not eager to get signed up for babysitting duty. On the other hand, I wasn't sure I could sit in the brightness and listen to my friends Elizabeth and Sophia talk about lifeguards all afternoon.

The silence stretched out in front of us and I realized that I was holding my breath. Suddenly I wanted to exhale in one big noisy blast. I wanted to run outside the house, slam the door really

hard, jump up and down on the pavement and scream. But if I did, I would step on a crack and break my mother - not just her back but her whole body. Her whole self would shatter into many tiny pieces right here in the kitchen. I could see it happening in slow motion in my head.

My mother broke her reverie. "Well I'm going to the store," she announced. She wiggled her grocery list from out under the magnet on the fridge. "Keep an eye on Dana. You can go to the pool when I get back."

We have a large backyard and Dana is at the far end, preoccupied with building a fort out of some branches that fell from our willow tree during the storm. I sit in a lawn chair on the patio so I can keep her in sight. I try to read a book, but when I turn the page I realize that none of the words have registered. I feel jangly, like bracelets clinking together when you move.

As soon as I hear the car in the driveway I grab my bathing suit and towel and take off around the side of the house. My mother is headed towards the front door, grocery bags in her arms. She frowns as I yell good-bye. She expects some help unloading the car. But I need to go now. I need to be free of the undertow of the conversation that we will not have.

The pool is crowded but Elizabeth and Sophia are nowhere to be found. I see Becca with a group of other 14-year olds and we pointedly ignore each other. The same unspoken rule is applied at our high school during the school year - don't talk to me when I'm with my friends. I change in

the locker room and reappear; still no one. I stretch out my towel and lie down, my head on my arms, the sun on my back.

I close my eyes and focus on the sounds. Water splashing. Little kids laughing and shrieking. A mother calling, Karen, get out of the pool, it's time to go now. Wet footsteps slapping as boys run past. Cannonballs into the water. And now other sounds push into my mind unbidden. Voices raised. The kitchen door slamming. Footsteps heavy on the stairs up to my parents' bedroom. Uncomfortable silences during the car ride home.

I wake up. The sun is fading and Becca is sitting beside me, waiting. We need to get home. It's getting late and pretty soon my father will be back from work and dinner will be ready.

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Last summer we drove back to Winnipeg, to visit the family and friends we'd left behind when we moved to Montreal. There's a certain rhythm to all road trips and this one was no exception. We traveled only during the day. In the backseat of our aging white Rambler, I read. Becca listened to her red transistor radio, pressed up against her ear, tuned in to whatever local station we were passing. Dana sat on the hump in the middle, a preventative barrier against the pinching and elbowing that happened when her older sisters sat together.

We rolled the windows all the way down so that the breeze would cool us. When that failed we stopped at a gas station for an icy cold bottle of Coke, pulled from a sweating fridge. We ate lunch in fast food restaurants and slept in motels just off the highway. Usually the motel had a pool and in our one burst of energy we kids would run from the car, pull on our bathings suits and jump into the water.

Our first real stop was our cousin's cottage in Duluth, Minnesota. The route threaded surprisingly straight across the backside of Northern Ontario and the scenery was not inspiring. On either side of the highway marched a barrier of spruce and pine, trees chosen not for their beauty but for their ability to withstand wind in the fall and spray from road salt in the winter. We looked forward to the third day, when we'd been promised a glimpse of the mighty Lake Superior.

But today we were traveling from North Bay, through Sudbury to Sault Ste Marie. In the 19th century these towns were bustling hubs in the fur-trading network that birthed our country. Early in the next century they had blossomed into prosperity with the gritty mines and railway lines that industrialized it. But in the backseat it was 1977 and we were oblivious to our nation's history. We saw only the concrete bleakness of small towns on the brink of economic defeat, and then more trees.

We had stalled in our efforts to amuse ourselves. Our version of the license plate game fell flat once we got past Pembroke and traffic disappeared. Dana had no books and no radio and she was

bored. For her sake we rallied for a game of I Spy. Then the humidity took its toll and we fell into a sullen stupor until the town of Sudbury came in to view.

My Dad had not slept well last night at the Comfort Inn North Bay. The air conditioner had been too loud and too cold. He didn't like driving long distances and he'd already done that all day yesterday. Now he had to drive all day today as well. And no, he did not want to stop in Sudbury to see the Big Nickel. We had to keep going if we wanted to do something other than sit in the car all day long. He only got three weeks of vacation a year and he didn't want to spend the whole time driving across the bloody country and then back.

I didn't care. At 15 I had reached the age where any suggestion from a family member was met with a shrug. But Becca, 2 years younger, was less jaded. The billboards that popped up at regular intervals since we'd left North Bay made it clear that this piece of money was big. It was famous. And you'd be crazy to pass by Sudbury without seeing it.

There was a gift shop too! Maybe we could get a snack because Becca was pretty sure one sign said there was a restaurant.

Dana was supportive, she wanted to see if the Big Nickel was as big as our house. But her enthusiasm did not transfer to my father. The prospect of going "off route" to see a replica of a coin was displeasing and the notion of eating bad food in an expensive tourist trap was even less

palatable. The Big Nickel was nixed and the atmosphere inside the car became gloomy as Sudbury receded from view.

Two hours later we pulled off the highway in front of a small strip of stores: on the right a desolate Kwik Mart, in the center a discount pet food vendor, and on the left our destination, a Dairy Queen. We ordered our burgers and shakes from a gum-popping blonde with chipped pink nail polish and a wisp of a French accent. Then we followed my Mom over to the lone picnic table on a piece of grass next to the parking lot. We nodded our heads as we tasted our food. This Dairy Queen was better than yesterday's. The fries were crispy and the milkshakes were cold and thick; they tasted chocolate-y and not watered down with ice.

My Mom had brought out the map from the car and as we ate she unfolded it on the picnic table. Our path along the Trans Canada highway was highlighted in yellow marker but even thus emboldened it looked small and defenseless against the huge expanse of green that stretched above it. Our true north strong and free. Land of moose and mosquitoes.

She pointed to our current location: Blind River, Ontario. A tiny dot still vexingly far away from where the yellow marker ended: Winnipeg. I'd missed it when we moved but now, only one year later, I just wanted to be back in Montreal with my friends.

Becca had brought her radio and was fiddling with the dial. We could hear the Jackson 5 ever so faintly but the music was laced with static. “Probably won’t get anything good till we’re in the Sault,” I told her.

“Just turn it off,” said my Dad. He threw the garbage from our lunch into a nearby trash can and headed back to the car.

We should all use the washroom while we had a chance, my Mom suggested, and by the time we were settling back in the car the heat of the sun was full upon us. Dana kicked my shoulder as I bent down to retrieve my book.

“Move over, Dana,” I grumbled. Dana slid over towards Becca.

“Not over here. You’re squishing me!” said Becca, barricading her turf with her elbow, the radio to her ear.

“You’re the one squishing me!” said Dana.

Suddenly my Dad turned around. “I said NOT to play the radio. I told you to turn it off.” He thrust his arm over the seat towards the opposite corner where Becca sat. “Give me that thing.”

She pulled away from him and he took a swipe at the radio. “Give it to me. I told you turn it off and you didn’t.”

Becca clutched the radio to her chest. “I’ll turn it down, I just want to listen to music. I’m tired of being in this car,” she said.

“Oh you’re tired of being in this car,” he mimicked. He lunged at the radio again. “I said GIVE. IT. TO. ME.”

“Michael, you don’t have to yell,” said my mother. “Becca, give your father the radio.”

Becca didn’t move. Then my Dad was out of the car, yanking open the back door next to her. He pulled the radio out of her hands and threw it. It winged across the parking lot and into the grass near the picnic table. We all watched as it bounced and then lay still.

Becca uttered a cry of dismay and levered out of the car, past my Dad and over to where the radio had fallen. My Dad got back into the driver’s seat and started the car, pushed the stalk deliberately into reverse. Becca had the radio in her hand now but she looked up, watching as our car pulled out of the parking lot and on to the highway at full speed.

I looked through the rear window in disbelief. “Dad, stop!” I said.

“Michael, what are you doing?” my mother said in a low voice.

“Go back,” I yelled.

“Go back, go back,” cried Dana.

“Michael,” my mother said, louder this time. We had gone around a curve and the strip mall was no longer visible behind us.

“You can’t leave her there!” I wanted to grab his arm but I was afraid to touch him, I could see his eyes in the rear view mirror.

There was a bridge coming towards us, with a lake widened out on both sides. I thought we might fly over that bridge and into some kind of perdition. My mother and Dana were both crying now, and one of them sounded hysterical.

The car lurched to the side of the road suddenly, did a U-turn and started speeding back towards the strip. When we arrived Becca was standing at the side of the parking lot with the radio in her hand, frozen like when we played Statues. My Dad pulled up beside her. She opened the door and got in.

It was quiet in the car for a long time. And after awhile we noticed that it was quiet outside too. The breeze was gone. Big fat drops began to fall, just one or two at first and then more, until they were beating down on the car. The windshield wipers were on the fastest setting but we could barely see the road.

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Two days later we arrived at the cottage of our American cousins, as we called them. My auntie Joyce was really Canadian, a nurse who'd grown up in Winnipeg, part of my mother's extended family. But she'd met and married her handsome Doctor Bill, moved across the border and had two sons, Glenn and Kev. This was the first time we had visited them here.

I sat alone on the dock with my book. Becca was out on the lake with our cousins, her water-skis stuttering over the wake of the boat. I knew she was determined to make it around the lake without falling. Kev was practically her age and he never fell, even when Uncle Bill made the boat whip him from side to side.

It was a beautiful day, clear and warm, "perfect cottage weather," Joyce had declared as we ate breakfast that morning. "It's a shame Mike still has that headache," she told my mother. My father had retired to a darkened bedroom when we arrived and had not emerged for dinner. It had been a raucous meal, with lots of cheerful food and family banter. Not something you'd enjoy with a "splitting head", as he called it.

But now I heard footsteps and there he was on the dock. “Afternoon,” he said, nodding my way. Despite the heat he was wearing his usual button-down shirt and pants. I had never seen my father in shorts or God forbid a bathing suit. He sometimes paddled in the water with his pant legs rolled up but his arms and legs were never bared. I attributed this to his British-ness, just like his slight frame and the strange way he pronounced “garage”.

And his fondness for puns. My father loved a good story, and a good pun even more.

He stood at the end of the dock, tracking the boat. It was at the furthest end of the lake now and Becca was still hanging by its thread. I was torn between wanting her to fall and wanting her to stay up.

“Sorry about what happened,” he said, still staring at the lake. I was dreading this moment.

“It’s OK,” I said.

“I know I’m not the best of fathers...” he trailed off.

I cleared the lump in my throat. “It’s OK,” I repeated. We’d played this game before. False apology, false absolution.

The silence stretched out. Then mercifully the waves started slapping at the dock; the boat was approaching. Bill called out, “You want to go out for a spin, Mike?”

My Dad laughed, “Still clearing my head! Maybe later.”

“You wanna ski now, Samantha? Your sister made it all the way around the lake, no problem!”

As though that would motivate me. But my Uncle Bill was very kind, and he so much wanted me to have a good time, it made me sad a little to refuse him.

“I’ll go for a ride in the boat. But I don’t want to ski,” I said. All those people watching me flounder, the very thought made me a little sick. I did love being on the water though, the frothy spray on my face.

“Glenn, Kev, you hop out. I’m going to take your cousins to the island,” Bill declared.

Dana was on the dock now, balancing on one foot. Excited by the prospect of visiting the tiny hump of land in the middle of the lake. Apparently there was a nest of loons out there and you could see the bird eggs.

“But not touch them,” Dana said. Joyce had told her this rule at the breakfast table and she had taken it to heart. “People can’t touch the eggs. Because then the mother bird won’t look after them.”

“That’s right,” said Bill. “You can look but don’t touch. We don’t want those baby birds to be left all alone.”

That night was our last at the cottage; we would be on the road to Winnipeg in the morning.

“Such a short visit,” clucked Joyce, looking at my mother.

The two women had spent most of the day up at the cottage, appearing briefly at the dock to bring us a plate of sandwiches and a pitcher of lemonade. I wondered what they could possibly do all day inside. Whatever it was, my mother seemed more relaxed now. She even pulled out a deck of cards after dinner. Sometimes we played poker at gatherings like this one but Dana was too young, she said. Tonight we would stick to Crazy Eights.

“You playing bridge in Montreal, Marilyn?” Bill asked my mother as she shuffled the deck.

“No, not yet,” she said.

“She just needs to find the right group,” said my Dad. It wouldn’t be easy. My mother was a very good bridge player.

“You taking it up now, Mike, to keep her company?”

My Dad shook his head. “I’m a bit of a dummy when it comes to cards,” he said. “Words are my game.” My father had been a newspaper reporter in Winnipeg. But when the paper he was working on folded, he’d headed to Montreal to work for a magazine: a promotion to editor, regular hours, better pay.

I won 3 rounds of Crazy Eights that night. But Glenn won 6, beating us all, even my mother. He destroyed all our stereotypes about Americans by being gracious in victory. “Wanna try the Ouija board?” he asked us.

Becca nodded, then Dana nodded, and now I had no choice but to go along. Publicly I scorned palm readers and fortune telling devices like the Ouija. But privately I suspected that for every 9 charlatans there was 1 true foreteller, someone all-seeing and all-knowing. I did not want to meet that person.

There seemed little chance of that tonight. Five of us crouched over the board; it jiggled up and down suspiciously. “Kev,” said Glenn, “stop moving your knees!”

“I’m not, it’s the ghoooooost!” whispered Kev. Dana screamed a little bit, and pulled her hands away. The little plastic tray almost slid off the board. Glenn hit Kev and they started to fight, like brothers. It was not a violence we were familiar with.

Later that night, camped out in the bunk beds of the guest room, Becca's voice came out of the darkness. "I think the Ouija is real. I felt it moving." I didn't know what to say so I pretended I was asleep.

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Winnipeg looked worn and dusty compared to Montreal. I felt a pang as we entered the city through our old neighbourhood, the spindly trees and the plain-faced houses. It had been a new subdivision when we moved in seven years ago, the sidewalks had been planks set on top of unsodded soil. My mother had fussed at us, "Take off your shoes! I don't want mud on a new carpet."

The sidewalks were concrete now but it still had a vaguely unfinished feel. Perhaps it was the omnipresence of the prairie; the high, whispery grassland started two blocks away and stretched west for thousands of kilometers, flat and unyielding.

My grandmother was waiting for us at her house. A little house on the corner of a tree-lined street, with a low stone fence that we used to balance-beam on. It still looked like something out of a fairytale. I ran out the car with Becca and Dana right behind me, and Grandma folded us all in a scented embrace.

“How much you’ve grown in just one year!” she exclaimed, touching Dana’s head lightly. We ignored our parents sweatily unloading the luggage and she ushered us into her kitchen. So familiar, I was taken aback by how much I missed it.

“How was your trip?” she asked, her eyes shining. She didn’t wait for our answer. “How about some pie?”

I craved another hug, so full of warmth and acceptance. Instead I asked, “Apple pie?”

“Of course,” she said. It was my all-time favourite, her apple pie. When I was little I asked for it instead of cake for my birthday.

She’d already eaten, my grandmother said, and so she pattered around the kitchen as we ate, humming a good-natured tune under her breath. Preparing dinner, no doubt. There was to be a big family gathering here tonight, to welcome us home.

The day we left Winnipeg we had driven by my grandparents’ house to say good-bye. My grandfather was there of course. But he was such a quiet man, I had very few specific memories of him; only the way he sat in his chair, slightly hunched over, his elbows on the armrest and his long elegant fingers dangling over his lap.

My grandmother had cried. I remember that well because it shocked me enormously. My grandma was the epitome of bustling cheerfulness, a nursery school teacher, a baker, a seamstress. I had never seen her cry before.

“I just wish I could be there. I wish I could be a fly on the wall,” she’d said as she hugged me good-bye. I wondered suddenly why she couldn’t come with us. But it was too late; all the arrangements had been made and before I could mention it we were on the train, racketing away from Winnipeg and leaving her behind.

Oh, that crust. And just the right amount of cinnamon, no pesky raisins, no soggy ice cream. Pure unadulterated apple pie. Still a little bit warm.

My cousin Jennifer arrived just before suppertime, with the rest of her family. Jennifer was slightly older than me and she had everything I did not: boobs, a boyfriend, and blond hair that feathered back like Farrah’s. “So hot,” she said, waving a hand in front of her. “We have air conditioning at home now. I guess Auntie Irene and Uncle Harold don’t want it.” She seemed unsurprised that my grandparents had not adopted this modern convenience.

“Let’s go downstairs,” I said. It was cooler in the basement, and further away from adult ears. I was sure Jennifer would have stories to tell me, about Grade 10, and about her boyfriend. I prayed that Becca would not see us otherwise she’d want to come too. But before we could escape dinner was called and the whole clan shuffled into place at the long dining room table.

My Dad always joked that my Mom's family spent more time passing the food around the table than eating it. And it's true that tonight, with more than a dozen people in attendance, there was a lot of "Can I have the potatoes, please?" and "There's plenty of gravy" before we got to dig in. But the wait was worth it: roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, the latter so light that it was like eating delicious puffs of air.

The conversation centered around the weather of course; every Canadian's obsession. "Hotter than usual for this time of year," said my uncle Fred. Everyone nodded. Fred Senior was my grandmother's older brother and the patriarch of her side of the family. His bushy white eyebrows were a constant source of anxiety for me. "Not going to get cooler for awhile."

"It's supposed to rain tomorrow," said my grandfather. He ate slowly, his roast beef cut into careful pieces.

"That won't help with the mosquitoes," said Fred Junior.

"They're going to have to spray again," said Donna, his wife, shaking her head. Winnipeg was famous for its mosquitoes. "How was it at Joyce's cottage?"

"Not so bad," said my Mom.

“Joyce told them to bug off,” said my Dad.

My cousin Chris snickered. He had bolted down his dinner and then sat squirming in the chair next to me, picking at a scab on his knee. Only now did he lift his head to grin at my Dad. “Bug off!” he repeated.

I noticed that no one asked us anything about Montreal. Westerners, I thought, remembering what my Dad had said. They won’t go east of Manitoba, something to do with the French - the language, the people, it was a little unclear. My Dad on the other hand loved being in French Canada. He had relatives from France, he’d learned some French from them when he lived over there and now he could practice with his friends from work.

My mother’s French was not good at all. But it didn’t matter because she was good at others things - bridge, but also and especially the piano. My Mom played the piano like an angel.

She played that evening, after the dishes had been cleared and everyone was gathered in the living room. She sat down, adjusted the bench, and spread her fingers over the keys. In that moment her back straightened and she was inhabited by some focus that could only be dispersed into the music. Pressing the keys firmly, first with speed, then suddenly delicate. A cascade of notes from very high to low. A punishing sequence of octaves. I knew the music so well, I heard it often at night when she practiced, as I was falling asleep. But it was more thrilling here, a performance in front of everyone.

We all murmured appreciatively when she was done. Then my grandmother appeared with more pie and suddenly she was just my Mom again, passing out dessert forks and serving tea.

Maybe not like an angel. No, she played like someone possessed. Like a bird, stuck in a trap as nightfall approaches. Flailing its wings even harder now that the injustice is clear.

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We stayed in Winnipeg for almost two weeks. The weather cooperated - there was one epic thunderstorm and then everything cleared and the prairie sky domed above us, pale blue and endless. The days stretched out too; there were more family dinners to attend and friends to visit. We went by my old piano teacher's house. I dreaded telling her that I'd quit playing, but she only smiled and said, "Maybe you'll go back to it, when you're older."

We spent several languid afternoons with my mother's best friend Helen; she had a Hungarian accent and a duck that she held on her lap like a baby. "My Sunshine," she would coo, kissing the top of its head. Her daughter rolled her eyes. We stayed for dinner there one night. Burgers dripped fat onto the coals of the BBQ, the grownups sipped on chilled white wine, and the kids jumped through the sprinkler to stay cool.

At least the younger kids did; I was an awkward 15, too old to put on my bathing suit and run screaming through a sweep of icy cold water. If there was no one my age I would sit outside and read a book. I had brought almost a dozen on vacation, cramming them into the trunk of our car. I sat on whatever lawnchair, or porch, or swing was offered me and picked up where I'd left off. I was quiet; conversations eddied around me.

I contended as best I could with the bugs. Mosquitoes that left welts; grasshoppers that threatened to jump on your legs; tent caterpillars that paratrooped out of the trees on their silken threads. The ones I feared most, gigantic June bugs that writhed like failing helicopters on the back door screen. These were things I did not miss about Winnipeg.

But all in all I was sad to leave. It was early morning when our suitcases were dragged out of my grandparents' house and loaded into the car. We all hugged good-bye, more formally than when we'd arrived perhaps. My grandmother didn't cry this time, at least not in front of us. But as we drove away, we kids turned around in the backseat and waved until she was very small.

On the road again. Our family seemed more fragile than ever with no one to distract us from each other. My mother kept absentmindedly fingering the map, spread out on her lap in the front seat. We planned to travel back through Niagara Falls, to see the monstrous curtain of water.

"And go on the rides," said Becca. Neither of our parents really liked amusement parks but she was hopeful that she and I were big enough to go on by ourselves.

We were on a more southerly route this time, said my mother, but who could tell. The towns in northern Wisconsin and Michigan, they looked no different than their Canadian counterparts on the other side of the Great Lakes. It was another tree-lined highway to nowhere.

We stopped our first night in a tiny town in Wisconsin and got in the car the next morning intending to make it to Michigan that evening. “Then Niagara Falls?” asked Becca.

“Yes,” said my Mom. “Saginaw tonight, then Niagara by lunch tomorrow. We can go on the boat in the afternoon.” She handed us a brochure for the Maid of the Mist. “Monumental Power!” the text blared. The photo featured a squat-looking boat about to be crushed by the immense volume of the waterfall above it.

Today was more humid than yesterday, and as we drove eastward we could see clouds on the horizon. We ate dinner at a roadside diner on the I-75. The service was slow and as we left the restaurant the first drops of rain started to fall. “Shit,” said my father, a little too loudly. He was tired, I could tell. It had been two long days of driving from Winnipeg and now the journey had just gotten a little more complicated.

The rain was persistent as we headed towards Saginaw. There was no way to read in the dark so I watched the wipers etch back and forth on the windshield. Dana had fallen asleep and was

resting her head on my arm. Her hair tickled my elbow but I didn't dare move. It was very quiet in the car.

Perhaps I feel asleep too. At some point I became conscious of my parents talking. "Maybe we passed it," said my mother.

"I don't need to drive around in circles in this rain," said my father.

"Wait, it's there! Slow down, Michael. I see the sign." The car careened to the right and then to a stop. It was raining very hard now, I could barely see the building in front of us.

"I'm going to check in." He opened the car door, cursed briefly, and then ran across the parking lot. My mother twisted around and looked in the backseat, but she said nothing. We waited, the rain pounding on the roof.

My father returned; the car door slammed shut. His hair was plastered to his head, his glasses spattered with drops. "Those.. they... they wanted to charge us extra. An extra 20 dollars," he stuttered. The tires skidded on the wet pavement as he pulled out onto the highway. "Because we have a third child. I'm not fucking paying extra for a third child."

I looked over at Becca. She was staring straight ahead. Dana was still leaning against me, I hoped she was still sleeping.

“That was NOT what we agreed to. They told me sixty on the phone,” my father continued, punching the accelerator.

“Michael,” said my mother in a low voice. “We need to stay somewhere. It’s late, and the girls are tired.”

There was no answer. Suddenly the car lurched again to the right; my father had pulled into a gas station, right up next to a pay phone booth.

“Find somewhere then,” he said. He shut off the engine and gripped the steering wheel with his hands.

I wasn’t sure what time it was but it felt like the middle of the night. There were no other cars around us. The gas station was deserted and so was the road. Only a single streetlight above the booth pierced the blackness around us. The wind blew the rain against the car in gusts.

No one moved for the longest time. “Should we call maybe?” I asked. Behind the accordion door of the booth I could see a phone book dangling from one of those silver cords that reminded of my bike lock.

I waited again. Perhaps I was the only one truly awake. I pushed Dana slightly, away from my shoulder. I fished around in my jacket pocket and felt a quarter. I opened the car door then closed it softly, despite the wind. There was a moment of panic when I opened the door to the booth; images of spiders made my heart beat faster. But I was mostly focused on the phone book. I prayed that no one had ripped out the yellow pages and for once, my prayers were answered.

Motels. The pages, flimsy and faded, stuck together but if I tilted the phone book up towards the light I could see the numbers fine. I chose the most promising name, Ace Motel; inserted the quarter; punched in the number on the square silver keys. "Please please please," I murmured under my breath, waiting for someone to pick up.

After that time sped up again. Yes, they had two rooms, 27 dollars each. Yes, three kids in one room with no extra charge. They weren't too far but the office was closing in 10 minutes, best get there as quick as possible. I repeated the directions to myself, and then to my father. And a couple of minutes later we were at the motel.

My father brought our bags in and then disappeared quickly into his room, slamming the door. Why did he always slam the door? My mother stayed long enough to tuck Dana in. "You sleep with Dana, Samantha. Becca can sleep in the other bed," she said. Then she was gone too.

The next day we stopped in Niagara Falls. The waterfall, of course: first we headed straight to its base on the boat, then we scurried along the passages behind it. Afterwards we drove down the

main strip on the Canadian side. The town presented an astoundingly ugly contrast, with its cheap storefronts and signage screaming at us to have fun. “5 Great Attractions, 1 Low Price!”

We ate a buffet dinner in a restaurant at the top of an observation tower. “Look!” said Becca, pointing to a mass of colorful pictures on the back of her menu. “There’s rides close to here. A carousel, even a ferris wheel!”

I couldn’t avoid the stupid waterfall but I didn’t go on any of the rides. “Those rides are for kids,” I told Becca.

I sat in the hotel room and read my book while they were at the rides. My mother had shown me tomorrow’s route, hooking around the shore of Lake Ontario, then just a couple of hours back to Montreal, to my friends. I already felt more relaxed. Because tonight was the last night of my last family vacation.