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## **Out Along The Highway**

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## Out Along The Highway

Jeff Dupuis<sup>1</sup>

Stacy said no to the road trip first thing. She was still angry at Mom and refused to come to the phone and speak with her. She tried convincing me that I should be angry with Mom too, and that her being older meant she understood things better. But after two years I missed Mom and forgot all about being angry.

“Mom's going to take you away and never bring you back,” Stacy said.

“No, she's not, we're only going away for a few days. You don't know anything.”

When Mom phoned, her calls were usually short, just before bedtime. She'd say she missed me and Stacy, I'd ask where she was and she'd always have a different answer. Staying with an old friend in Oshawa, maybe at a hotel in Hamilton or a bed and breakfast in Tecumseh. She liked dying her hair—“changing her look” she called it—and I always wondered what colour her hair was when I talked to her, holding the framed picture of us she put on my bedside table the night she left.

Halfway through the second week of summer vacation, Mom came to the house in a blue compact car. I just assumed she'd have a minivan like ours that we always took on road trips. She

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opened the door and stepped out of the car, the sun making her blonde hair golden. Stacy's door slammed shut, the sound echoed through the house.

“Are you ready?” she said, through the screen door.

Dad piled my bags behind me, straightening up slowly and looking at Mom through the door. She smiled, raising her hand of a half-wave. Dad nodded at her and looked down at me.

“Jamie, have fun, okay? I'll see you in a couple days. I love you, bud.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

Mom put both windows down once we got off the highway. Country air ripped through the car. Mom's hair flew backwards, snapping like a flag without the noise. She looked over at me, her eyes hidden behind sunglasses, smiling. Cows and cornfields surrounded us, nothing but green, farm land in the distance, divided into squares.

“Where are we going?”

“It's a surprise,” she said, looking at me, pulling her sunglasses down to give me a wink.

We were going north, and then we turned east. I know we'd been driving away from Lake Ontario and now the sun was above us, arcing behind us. I looked down at the compass on my watch covered by a plastic bubble. Mom slowed down as we entered a little village with a sign that said “Locust Hill.” There was a small stone church and a cemetery, then a long, sloping hill that dipped onto a bridge over a river and back up again. There were some old shops on the side of the road, and a post office, but it was mostly houses. Mom turned into a gravel driveway next to a pastel blue house with a garage at the back built to look like a barn.

“We're here!” she said, opening her door and stepping out quickly.

By the time I got out of the car, Mom already had my bags in her arms and nothing of her own.

“Isn't this great?”

She struggled to grab the small metal handle on the white screen door. She pulled it open and the spring at the top groaned. Mom gestured that I go in first, then walked in behind me, the door slapping wood as it shut. There was a fat man at the dining room table smoking a cigarette.

“Hey, this must be Jamie,” he said.

“Robert, I thought we agreed, no smoking in the house when Jamie's here.”

The man put out his cigarette and shook my hand.

“I'm taking Jamie upstairs to see his room. Dump that ash tray and come up and join us, will you?”

The man picked up the ashtray and walked into the kitchen.

We went from a tiled floor to a gray-carpeted living room, then around a corner and up a flight of stairs. The house looked much newer on the inside than on the outside.

“Here we are,” Mom said, pointing.

The room was sky blue with a single bed, night table, dresser and computer desk. Next to the keyboard was a stack of games and other software I'd told Mom I wanted for my birthday. I walked over and looked through the pile. Mom sat down on the corner of the bed.

On top of the pile was the full version of Doom, then the Deluxe Edition of Where In The World is Carmen Sandiego as well as a bunch of shareware versions of games.

“Jamie, look at me please.”

I turned around to see her, the packages held against my chest. Mom was holding her sunglasses in her hands, folding and unfolding them.

“Robert and I want you to stay here.”

“Don't worry, Mom, I am staying.”

“No, Jamie, what I mean is, we want you to come live here with us.”

“You mean until school starts?”

“Maybe longer than that.”

“But I don't even know Robert,” I said.

“You'll get to know him, Jamie, we'll be like a family.”

Her eyes, blue like mine, filled with tears. I clung to the boxes in my arms, confused. Robert walked through the door. He saw Mom crying then look at me, then back at Mom.

“I thought we agreed,” he said, mimicking her, “we wouldn't say anything to Jamie for at least a day or two.”

Mom looked up. Her eye makeup ran down her face, smearing over wrinkles so her skin looked like a navy blue version of the dried riverbeds you see in National Geographic. It hit me all at once that Mom got old over the last two years.

“I know,” she said to Robert, “I'm sorry.”

Robert knelt down on the gray carpet to face me. I was half-a-foot taller than him and he just looked stupid on his knees.

“Son, I know this is confusing, it is for all of us, just stay here a couple days and see if you like it.”

I nodded.

Robert took Mom by the arm and walked down the hallway to their bedroom at the other end of the house and closed the door.

There was no noise except cars racing along the highway. I decided to leave the room because of the weird feeling hanging in the air.

Outside the sun baked the grass, at least one out of every three blades was blonde, not green, and locusts leapt up at my feet. There was a big garden and a chicken coup behind the garage. Train tracks ran along the edge of the yard, whittling it to a point.

I climbed the rusted wire fence onto the tracks. They stretched south as far as I could see, with forest on either side. I looked at the sun, then at my compass, and started walking. On the key chain Dad gave me was a purple plastic triangle with a quarter stuck in it that I could pop out to make a phone call in case of an emergency.

The city couldn't have been more than two hours' walk, I'd call from a pay phone and have Dad pick me up. I walked slowly over a bridge with big gaps between the boards, I could see the Rouge River flowing under me. Dad could call Mom too and tell her I was okay. Halfway across the bridge I heard the train's horn blowing in the distance. She'd probably be worried, or mad. I could hear the ding ding ding of the railroad barriers at a road up ahead. If I hurried, maybe they wouldn't even notice that I was gone. The front of the train was now in sight, chugging away.