

Tales From The Backseat

by Victoria Watson

Bracing

My four-year-old self is wedged between my brother and sister along the backseat of some old jalopy trundling down the unmade track home. The car is draughty and incredibly loud, and what it lacks in insulation is nothing compared to its deficiency of suspension. My parents upfront ignore the whoops and squeals emanating from the backseat, and there is no rear-view mirror to witness their youngest child (me) catapulting up and down high like a bouncy ball kissing the roof of the car with my red-head before falling with a weighty thud between my guffawing siblings. My baby teeth involuntarily snap shut the next time my skull shoots upwards, the car ricocheting from pothole to pothole.

We finally come to a halt, and I hug myself in jubilation that I am alive, and contrary to the threat made my brother, I have not bounced out the window. My mother opens the door oblivious to all and my sister stifling a snigger, enthuses, “that was brilliant! Can we go to school in it?” while I push my way out to the safety of hard ground.

Boring

“Want to go shopping with me?” my mother enquires. Without much thought I climb into the car and settle down to the soothing calm of Terry Wogan on Radio 2. If I had thought about it, I would have remembered, as it happens so very regularly, that my mother has tricked me. There is no trickery over the destination or the journey, I will not suddenly find myself stuck high in the dentist’s chair, light shining in my eyes while I look up his hairy nostrils. The trick is all in the grammar. I will enjoy the journey, the “go” but sadly never the destination, “the shopping”. Once arrived at the supermarket car park, my mother will quickly say those infamous words, “won’t be

long”, and in one slick manoeuvre I will see her back marching through the sliding doors.

Every shopping trip was like this. I wondered what it was like in the over-lit mecca with so many arriving and leaving in such fast succession. I saw other children go in, but I had to wait it out, huffing up the windows and drawing smiley faces to keep me entertained. Cloud gazing, winding windows up and down, flicking through the curled pages of a vomit-stained road map or searching for opal fruits that would come out of their wrappers.

Weeping

I am studying my sister’s profile. She is sitting in the front passenger seat and fat tears are rolling down her face. I admire her even in tragedy; she still looks beautiful. She does not cry with snot bubbles or blotches like me, she sits there a tear resting on her chin, while her blonde hair is immaculately held back in hair combs; teenage things that defy me.

My mother is driving us to the doctors, but also explaining that my father packed his bags this morning, and won’t be home again tonight. Nor any night. My sister bows her head and wipes her nose with a handkerchief and I wonder why I cannot do the same. Why am I not crying? I have already tried a Chinese burn on my arm to have the same effect, but realise that the exercise is futile and I just stare hopelessly out of the window instead. When we arrive at the doctor’s surgery, my mother slams the car door shut with such deliberation that in the silence that follows, we know that’s the end of any conversation.