

Traffic Flow

Susan Hodara

I am in the back seat of my parents' dusky blue Chevy Bel Air. My father is driving, my mother next to him. In my memory she is dressed in white pedal-pushers and a blue-and-white striped sleeveless blouse, a crinkled map draped across her lap. I am behind my father; I can see the lines left by the comb he used on his straight dark brown hair. My two younger brothers are beside me; we're all in shorts and T-shirts. The windows are open; the air filling the car is warm. It is a clear day, but in the back seat the light feels dimmed.

It's 1966, and I am 12 years old. We're on our way to Cape Cod for our two-week summer vacation in a rented cottage in a little resort colony called Mashnee Village. It should be a 90-minute drive from our home, but we are stuck in traffic. We are inching across the Bourne Bridge, jammed amid hordes of other August vacationers, the water below us glistening.

Behind the wheel, my father is getting frustrated. He is speaking to my mother, or maybe to no one: "Jesus Christ," or, "Come on already!" I don't remember what he says, but his tone freezes me. There is already a taut line between him and me, and now it tightens.

My father probably has on a short-sleeved white button-down shirt and khaki pants. I don't recall the kind of shoes he wears when he isn't dressed in a suit for work or the synagogue. After Saturday morning services, he is a joke teller, a conversationalist; I watch him laughing with friends, comfortable and at ease. Sometimes he beckons me over to join him.

At home though, when it's just the family, his temper flares. Its onset is unpredictable and usually directed at my mother, but recently it's been coming at me, too. It's like the sudden snap of a rubber band when it's been pulled too far. When it snaps toward me, it can take days before I feel that he is treating me normally again. I am trying to figure out what sparks his outbursts, because I will do anything to prevent them.

Here, on the bridge, the traffic has set him off. My mother looks down at the map, even though we're not going anywhere. The sun beats down, and the air in the car is still. No one speaks. The bare part of my thigh sticks to the vinyl that covers the back seat.

At my feet there is a large canvas tote that my mother has packed with food, and I reach into it. I find the crinkly blue bag of Wise potato chips, take it out, tear it open. I grab a chip and bite it in half. The crispness and saltiness envelope me. I finish the chip and take another, and as I chew, I forget my brothers beside me and my mother up front. I don't hear my father's tense words. I blot out the sizzle of hostility that fills the car. Chip after chip, it is just me and the hot breeze and the waiting.

We will make it over the bridge and move into our cottage. We will unpack our suitcases and haul our Sunfish from the roof of the car onto the beach. I will meet a boy and make out with him every night on the rocks by the sea.



Lesa Cash. *Bicycle*