

## Real Things // Shooting Stars

By Ava Kunnath

Growing up, things were so different than they are for young kids today. My six-year-old cousin has a Nintendo Switch that he can't live without, and he has hundreds of dollars worth of games to go along with it. When I was his age, stuff like that wasn't even on my radar. I had books, colored pencils, card games, Legos, and an iPod Shuffle that I saved up for for what seemed like long, impatient *years*. That iPod was the size of a cracker, and about as functional too, but I took that thing everywhere. It had hundreds of songs on it, mostly my mom's favorites like Hall & Oates, Lionel Richie, Jack Johnson. She had the same music on her "road trippin'" playlist, and I remember that if I put my headphones on and closed my eyes it was like I was right back on the winding highways I knew so well--familiar Colorado mountain passes with taunting puffs of wildfire smoke, sandstone cliffs in Arizona. Dirty rest stops, gas station wobbly knees. Sunsets in the rearview mirror. Sunsets shining bright in our road-weary eyes. Nebraskan fields of corn as endless as the vast possibility of adventure. When I think of my childhood, I think of moments like these. My iPod Shuffle, a wonder of early 2010s technology, is like a soundtrack to my young life.

Those things I had--the books, the music, the art supplies--that's what I brought with me in my purple backpack on all our road trips. Most of it went unused because I was glued to the backseat window, but if I got bored of that, I would get out a spiral-bound notebook and my brother and I would play hangman or tic-tac-toe, the page open on the console between us, the

pencil flying between our small hands. We'd have heated games of Auto Bingo, and rock-paper-scissors and thumb wrestling matches across state line after state line.

I think I was eight or nine when we drove all the way from Michigan, where we had recently moved, to Colorado, where I grew up. That drive is no joke; it's seventeen hours straight, and when we made that drive, we left our house in the afternoon and pulled into a breakfast joint in Denver early the next morning. Driving right through the night was no easy task for my parents, but my brother, Max, and I had the best time. As usual, we brought games, notebooks, and pens with us, and during the daytime, the hours and miles flew by so fast. There were rest stops with dumb souvenirs and waxy tile floors, sore, cramped knees, laughs that felt like sunshine, bridges and silos and funny billboards and animals and then more rest stops, cramped knees, and laughter, and bridges and silos and billboards...

Then the sun set, and I can still picture the orange sun glinting off the hood of the car, and patches of golden light falling on seatbelts and pillows and our faces. The car got quiet as we felt the weight of hundreds of miles push us deeper into our seats. Road fatigue is ruthless.

We stopped at a rest stop sometime after dark to get gas, and my mom had the brilliant idea of putting down the seats in the back so my brother and I could lay down and sleep. Max and I were so giddy at the thought of that. We piled blankets and pillows in the back and it was like an amazing, cozy fort, and the car was driving so smoothly down this quiet two-lane highway that it felt like a dream. It was peaceful, yet we were rolling around the back laughing until tears ran down our faces, long into the night. We didn't sleep much. I mean, how could we? This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to ride in the back of a car *and* stay up late, and we were not passing that up.

When our energy bursts wore off, Max and I laid side by side, covered in Mom's big horse blanket, facing the back windshield and watching the black sky. It was beautiful; in the middle of Nebraska there's no light pollution, and there were so many stars out. It was like someone had spilled sugar across a table. And as we rested and watched the window, I saw one of those sweet sugar stars shoot right across the sky. My mouth dropped open in amazement. "Max!" I hissed.

"...What?" He said, his voice thick with fatigue.

"Did you see that? A shooting star. *A shooting star!*"

"Wait, really? No way." Max sat up and I described the earth-shattering flash of light I had just witnessed to him in great detail. I couldn't stop smiling.

I clutched onto that memory like a fistful of dollar bills. That was one of the best things I had ever seen. I smiled thinking about it the next morning, eating pancakes in Denver, and I smile thinking about it today. That small moment...it feels like it made me, in a way. I didn't grow up in a virtual world like my little cousin with his Nintendo Switch. I grew up on the road, with real things like my mom's favorite music, and paper and pens, and laughs that felt like sunshine, and two-lane highways, and shooting stars across the back windshield. Those thousands of miles showed me something a little bigger than myself. And now that I'm older, I have less time to spend on the road. Maybe those trips are a thing of the past, a sunset in the rearview mirror.

But it can't be a coincidence that my bedroom walls are lined with maps.