

## My Michigan Sky

Finally, it's time to go back. Every year is the same. From September to June, go to school at Highview Elementary, do chores, do homework, and take a bath every single night. I count down the months, then the weeks, then the days, then the hours, waiting. Then, at last, summer and real life starts. My family and I get to go to our place. A place that feels more like home than home. The cottage. The cottage sits on the top of a ravine and Lake Huron sits at the bottom. The cottage isn't an actual cottage, really an old farmhouse, but the way we use it is as a cottage so that's what we call it. If you look at Michigan like it's a mitten, which it does look like, the cottage is on the outside of the knuckle of the thumb. I just had to endure the long car ride out there from our home in New York. Mom never minds the drive, but nothing bothers her. She just gets in the car all happy and stays that way the whole time. For me? It's a nightmare of boredom I don't think I'll survive.

The cottage is red with white trim and has been ever since my grandparents bought it when I turned one. I saw pictures when it used to be all white but I don't remember that, of course. White was the wrong color. We have two real bedrooms on the second floor and an open loft in between. That's where my grandparents sleep. My sister, Sarah, and I have what everyone calls "the pink room" on the right and my parents sleep in "the blue room" on the left. Sarah, is a year older than I am and she has really pretty, long, brown hair and is always neat. My hair is brown too, but is always in knots and my clothes aren't so clean. At the cottage Sarah insists she gets the bed nearest the sunny window and the top dresser drawers. I get the bottom drawer that sticks and squeals when I move it, and I sleep next to the window under the dark trees that scratch at the glass at night. I think she'll keep all that until she gets old and dies and then I will get the sunny side and nice drawers but only live one year and then I'll die so it pretty much stinks. But I love the pink room anyway because I can see the pretty stones on the chimney from our window and I can leave the windows open even in the rain since each window has its own little roof that sticks way out. My parent's bedroom has two tiny doors along one wall that they tell everyone is where the pixies live. I always laugh along with everyone else, but I never like being alone in their room.

We all eat together in the dining room with its giant bay window overlooking the lake and the gigantically long table that can sit all our family and our cousins and anyone else who drops by. People come to the cottage all the time. When Uncle Dick visits from Ohio he makes me walk upside down on the ceiling and my footprints are still up there. My grandma sets the table where everything looks just so and puts out a crystal relish tray at every dinner with lots of kinds of sour and sweet pickles though we almost never eat any of them. Each time, she plucks the cold, frog-green, warty creatures out of their jar, puts them on the pretty glass tray, puts the tray on the table where the pickles sit untouched and unloved. Then she picks up the tray and puts the guys back in their jars. Even though I don't like the pickles, I love the relish trays and the dining table is never set right until I see one out there. Grandpa always sits at the head of the table because he is the head of the cottage and takes care of it like reattaching a shutter or getting rid of a squeak in the screen porch floor. The rest of us sit wherever else we want. Dinners are loud starting with the knives and forks clinking on the dishes and giant serving spoons scrapping the bottom of the big bowls of spaghetti sauce or whatever else we are eating. Mom talks when Grandma talks who talks when I talk who talks when Uncle Dick talks and on and on, but we understand each other just the same. After dinner we all help clean up in the kitchen whose sink faucets are reversed so the handle marked hot is cold and the handle marked cold is hot. Grandpa did that by mistake when he bought the cottage, but we never want him to fix it. It's the cottage and that is the way it is at the cottage and that is the way it must stay, forever.

During the day I play with my friend, Jenny, who lives two doors down. Her family has been there as long as my family has been here, but her family has eight kids and mine only has Sarah and me. Jenny and I may build trails in the woods next to the cottage, jump on the trampoline, walk the two miles along the beach into town and get penny candy at the General Store, or we search the lake for Whale Rock and then dive off of it. This rock is really hard to find and one of us has to be on top of the ravine to look for its giant shadow in the water and yell down to the other where to swim until she is on top of it. Jenny and I find each other right after breakfast and only leave each other for meals and for bedtime. If we don't want to do the same thing, we take turns picking what to do. We never get really mad at each other like with my friends in New York. Most nights everyone, Jenny's family and

mine, either go down to the beach for a bonfire or play spoons in our living room where all the grownups sit on the chairs and couch and all us kids sit together in a un-round circle on the floor. Sarah likes to sit with Kathy, Jenny's older sister, and I like to sit with Jenny, but I like everyone there so I don't have to sit next to her, I'd just rather. We do sing-alongs like "Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore" and "Leavin' on a Jet Plane" while Jenny's sister, Mary, plays guitar. We can't sing that last song too close to when my family has to leave for New York because we all cry and cry, and we can't get through the song. It never changes and never gets boring. I don't think about New York at all when I am at the cottage.

It's not that New York is so bad. It's fine enough, I guess. I like my friends, Karen and Kim especially. I liked Mrs. Oltman, my 2nd grade teacher and I like Mr. Ashley my 3rd grade teacher this year. I danced in a ballet recital as a blue fairy. I ride my bike down the steep hill on my street and climb the great tree outside our front door and read my comics on a fat, flat tree limb. Sarah gets the best reading limb, but mine's still a good one. But when the weekend after the last day of school comes, I'm ready to drop all of that, "like a hot potato" my mom would say. I run home from school and start getting all my things packed and ready to go. No one is faster than I am.

Dad has to stay in New York and work, but he comes out later for to visit, so it's just my mom, Sarah and me driving out. We pack all our things for the whole summer into our giant yellow suitcases and anything that doesn't fit in those goes into paper grocery bags. Then we squeeze and stuff it all into our station wagon. I never understand why we have to bring so much. It is just the three of us. I only bring a few shorts, a few shirts, underwear, one sweat suit for when it gets cold, one pair of shoes, a bathing suit, and a stack of comic books. It must be my mom and sister who bring too much. Sarah brings too many clothes for one thing. Does she really need three dresses, four pairs of pants, and a fancy sweater?

This year is the same. After everything gets loaded, there is just enough room for my mom to drive and for me and Sarah to sit side by side in the back seat. We are so close that our arms can touch and Sarah looks at me as if I had oozing germs all over my body and then she wipes her arm off. *This is going to be a long trip*, I think, but then I remember where we are going. She can give me all the dirty looks she wants and I don't care. I am going to the cottage.

Before my sister and I can even warm up the car seats, the car pops over the Tappan Zee Bridge taking us from our own back yard and out of New York. It's a good thing I love the cottage so much because the drive out there is deadly dull. I know we go from New York to Pennsylvania to Ohio before we get to Michigan because my mom has told me many times before, but all I know is that it is going to be a 12-hour drive of blah. Sarah and I settle into our seats and start to read. I barely brush Sarah's arm as I turn the pages of my Archie comic book, and she shoots me a look of impending death. I am already too close and now I invaded her space even more by, gasp, moving? It was just too much. *She's going to get me back for that*, I think. But Sarah starts reading her novel, The Secret Garden, and I get back to Archie. After this, I will read Richie Rich. At least it's calm for now.

Hours go by. Pennsylvania is too long. Why does any state need to be that long! It's stupid! I sigh, and Sarah shoots me another dirty look. Now my sigh was in her space as well as my arm. Well, she can only hate me so much and then I've just maxed her out. Besides, she hasn't killed me so far, and I just don't cry anymore from her death stares. I look out the window. So boring, so far to go, so much the same thing over and over. Trees, fields, balled up wheat, cows, trees, a house, fields, tall trees, short trees, trees with circle tops, trees with triangle tops, dark yellow fields, light yellow fields, wheat balls this way, wheat balls that way, black and white cows, white and black cows. I close my eyes for a long time then pop them open again. I still see trees, fields, balled up wheat, cows, maybe even the exact same cows. Do the cows know how boring they are? I doubt it. They probably think they are pretty cool because this is all they know; they never leave. I stop thinking about this and instead think of Jenny and the cottage. I know she will come over and see me as soon as we pull into the long driveway. I smile. "How many cartoons left, Mom?" I ask. We measure trips in how many Bugs Bunny cartoons we would watch before getting anywhere. "Only forty-two cartoons left," she says cheerfully. "Uggggggghhhhhh" I say and throw my head back. Nothing left to do but go back to my comic book for the thousand hours we have left.

"In Ohio!" mom chirps. She is always bubbly like this. This drive must be as boring for her, but she never acts like it. She never complains in general, except when we won't do her "adventures" like taking rubbings from grave stones in a creepy old cemetery or put on a parade with homemade instruments. One time I got stuck with the mostly empty Cheerio box that she wanted me to shake.

"It's a maraca!" Mom gushed. At least I didn't have to "drum" the Quaker Oats oatmeal container my sister got. Jeez, I thought Pennsylvania was boring? Ohio is worse. It has the same things but now it's flat too. Yep, tall trees, short trees, trees with circle tops, trees with triangle tops, dark yellow fields, light yellow fields, wheat balls this way, wheat balls that way, black and white cows, white and black cows, and now they are all lined up flat like on a checker board. And what is more boring than checkers? And it seems Ohio doesn't even have people in it! No people, no houses or anything. I finish reading another comic book from my stack, Casper the Friendly Ghost. I never know how I make it on this stupid drive each summer. It would be so much better if we could just fly there like Casper. But the cottage, of course, is worth it even if I can't fly like a ghost. Sitting in the car, we have dinner that we packed for the ride. I have bologna sandwich with mayonnaise. Mom buttered my bread again. I hate buttered bread on my sandwiches. But I know enough not to complain because she just tries to convince me it is better that way so instead I choke it down. Yuck – like eating a spoonful of fat. Suddenly there is a loud POP! The car makes a deep, drumming sound. I grab onto the door and Sarah's hand at the same time and Sarah grabs back.

The car hums loud and so low that we all jiggle in our seats. My comic book falls to the floor and wriggles up under the front seat. Sarah and I hold on to each other's hands so tightly that our hands get red and sweaty. Mom, still calm, puts on her blinker and grips the steering wheel with perfectly straight arms while the car seems determined to go its own way. She forces the steering wheel to the right and steps on the brakes until the cars on the highway began to whiz by us, the passing trees, wheat balls and cars slow down, and, finally, I hear our car crunching the gravel on the side of the road. By the time we stop Sarah pulls her hand away and shoots me a look as if it were all my fault.

We all quickly tumble out of the car and on wobbly legs walk to the back. One of the tires is not round anymore. Mom doesn't know how to change the tire, and neither do we. We stare at the betraying tire for a while. Stupid tire. It is Ohio and so I know there is nowhere to get help close to the highway. I don't even remember the last gas station exit we saw. We will have to find help by walking.

Across the field and a long way off we barely see a short, little light-colored house. It will be getting dark soon and we aren't sure how far away it is, and we aren't sure the people will be home, and even

if they are home, they may not be nice people who will help us, but we crawl over the guardrail and start walking through the yellow dry scratchy wheat field – Mom, Sarah then me. They are so much bigger than me that for every step they take I have to take two. “Wait up!” I say, like I always do, but they don’t seem to hear me because they keep going. I have to walk-jog if I want to keep up. We barely get anywhere before it isn’t light enough for me to see where we were going, but I can hear the crunching of our feet on what feels like drinking straws. I think I will get lost and left behind. I want to hold my sister’s hand, but I know that is never going to happen. We keep walking. “Almost there!” Mom announces when the house still looks like a dollhouse. There is no use looking at the house because it isn’t getting bigger or closer. The straws are cutting at my ankles, and they hurt. I think I see bats flying in the dark sky. I know we will just walk forever and die and then at least it would be over, and the bats won’t get me, and the straws won’t stab me. But then I wouldn’t get to the cottage. I would never see Jenny. We wouldn’t dive like dolphins in the cold Lake Huron water. I wouldn’t collect washed glass off the beach for my collection. I wouldn’t get to Bunny’s for the best frozen custard in the entire world. It is hopeless, but I have to keep trying. I walk on and on with a gallop here and there so I can still see them walking in front of me. “Can we just buy a new car?” I want to ask my mom. I look into the darkening sky and think I can almost see the Big Dipper, my favorite constellation of the Michigan sky above our cottage. Everything is so far away.

Finally, we get to a flat, plain, white house. Even in the dark, I can see the paint peeling all around the front, and there is grass coming up through big cracks in the front walk. It is nothing like home in New York or the cottage. I stop at the front of the porch steps while mom sweeps up the stairs without a moment’s hesitation. Sarah follows but plants herself right behind mom so that she can’t see the door and anyone at the door won’t be able to see her. “Maybe we should look for another house, Mom,” I say before she even reaches the front door. Mom gives me her look – “Don’t be so negative,” it says. The porch is cluttered with two rocking chairs with broken wicker in spots on the back and seat. “I don’t think these people will want to help us,” I add to make my point. I can just make out some clothes hanging from a line in the side yard. It looks like the clotheslines I saw in the poor and scary parts of New York City. My stomach hurts. “Mom, really...,” I start, but Mom already knocks on the door. I place one foot going the away from the door and am ready to get out of there,

and fast. We wait. My foot twitches. We are never going to get to Michigan, and on top of that we are going to be killed by crazy cow people who hang out their laundry to dry. We wait some more. My armpits itch – they always itch when I get scared. “In one more minute I am running,” I say in a whisper. Suddenly the door creaks open and I see an old man in beige pants and a plaid shirt. He has a scruffy beard and barely any hair left on his head. He is really, really old; he reminds me of the bitten apple from a Halloween party I forgot under my bed and found just yesterday while I was packing. Behind him is a gray lady. She has on a flowery dress that looked like our dress-up clothes at the cottage. It is ready to sprout holes. Their faces are frowny when they open the door. *Well, at least they will be slow, and I can outrun them,* I decide. Mom starts talking even before they can say a word, “Our car got a flat tire and I can’t change it by myself...” and the old man relaxes his face and puts his hands in his pockets, nodding his head as Mom tells him our story. I guess they aren’t going to do anything to hurt us. In fact, they didn’t look like they can *do* anything besides milk cows and make butter, including helping us. I sigh and I sit down on the top porch step and put my head in my hands. It doesn’t matter what happens anymore. I can’t walk all the way back to the car, anyway. We are stuck here forever. My head sinks lower and lower. They talk and talk and my head is so low it is between my legs and almost hitting the step below and I can’t even hear anything anymore. Why are they taking so long to talk anyway?! We are never going to get back on the road to the cottage.

Suddenly a pickup truck rumbles up. The old man’s head pops out of the driver’s window, and he waves to my mom. Mom pulls on my arm and grabs Sarah, dragging us over. She helps us get into the back of the truck where there are no seatbelts or seats even. She sits in the front next to the man, looks behind the seat through the window at me and smiles. It was her “See, this is just an adventure,” smile. Sarah and I sit on the dirty truck bed and hold on tightly to its sides as we start moving. Through the dark we can’t see anything and get bumped all around and the dust is flying everywhere and getting into my mouth and eyes. I seal my lips tight and shut my eyes so hard my nose squinches up. After a long time, we are back at the car. Sarah and I pat our clothes and dust puffs out like Indians sending smoke signals. We take everything out of the back of the station wagon, and he pulls out the spare tire and the jack. He doesn’t even stop to think about what to do. I am organizing all our luggage and paper bags on the side of the road and each time I look back at the old

man he is lifting something heavy or rolling a tire and it doesn't fall over or such. Before I am finished, we have a new tire on, and this one is round. My mom thanks the man over and over. We thank the man too. I can't believe we found any house in these fields. I can't believe we walked all the way there without dying from exhaustion. I can't believe that they were nice people who weren't going to hack off our heads with an axe and poke our bodies with a pitchfork. And I can't believe he could fix the tire. But then again, my grandpa could probably do it and he would help anyone who needed it. Grandpa can fix anything. Maybe this old man is a grandpa like mine. I smile at him and say thank you a few more times. The old man gets in his dusty truck and his tires spit out dirt and stones as he drives away.

I look at all the stuff on the roadside we have to get back into the car. It is a mountain. "We'll never get all this in and..." I start to say, and just as Mom turns to give me a look, I stop myself. Instead I haul my suitcase over and put it in the car's wayback. We have to get it all in before we can get back on our way and we have to get back on our way because we have to get to the cottage. We cram and crush the yellow suitcases into the rear. We pile and push the paper bags in any crack we can find. I don't care if we bend the Monopoly board, wrinkle Mom's maps from AAA or break the hard-boiled eggs we packed for snacks. It is all getting in there. Sarah and I lift the heavy cooler together and put it into the second seat floor. Finally, the roadside is empty, and our car is full, and we all push together on the car's rear gate to shut it. It is done. We get in the car, Sarah on her side and me on mine, and finally, finally, we are moving again. Finally, we will get out of Ohio. Finally, we will be back to our cottage soon, not soon enough, but we are getting there. I stare up out the window. Now I can see it is the Big Dipper looking just like it does on the beach down the ravine from my little red house on the hill. That Michigan sky I stare at each summer night when we make our bonfires, sing songs and make s'mores.

I sit in my little space trying to keep my body as far from Sarah as I can. She looks out the window too. Mom says, "Well, that was a pickle." She talks the same as if we pulled over to throw away peach pits. Sarah hands me my comic book from the floor. Then she punches at my pillow for invading her personal space. I glance at her and then back out the window at my Michigan sky. I don't have time to worry about her because tomorrow is my first day at the cottage, home, and nothing else matters.