

Car Journeys

Roseanne McCullough

A girl in my primary school once told me she lived life through the windows of her father's car. Her passport said she was from Argentina, but over cheese sandwiches at break she would tell me she didn't know where she was from. Staying in one place for longer than a year was something she thought crazy people did. We were 9 years old and when, one day, I told her I had lived in the same house all my life she stared at me with her big brown eyes, gobsmacked. She dropped her cheese sandwich if only for dramatic effect. Trying to redeem myself I told her I had been to Spain the previous summer. "There were people encouraging us to come into their restaurants, some were friendly and nodded when we said no but some laughed and stood in our way, waving plastic menus with fish and banana splits." The girl didn't seem impressed and handed me the school trip sign-up sheet with the same dismissiveness as a bored secretary. I was only required to write my name but I somehow felt as if the piece of paper bared a big red F-. I didn't know what culture was and I had lived in the same place for nine years. "Even when we have to cross the sea we stay beside our car on the ferry." She sat, played, talked, grew, and slept in her father's car across countries for hours at a time. It seemed to be a point of pride with her and I suddenly became embarrassed that my car journeys were short — walkable — and had been going to and from the same few locations for my whole life. I only ever sat, buckled in, thinking ordinary things — *Would I score in my football match? Would the new coach be at hockey training? Would my teacher give my homework a gold star?*

She told me that she and her dad were moving to Munich in two months' time and that he had bought new audiobooks for the occasion. The titles were supposed to be a surprise, but she suspected they were by Jacquelin Wilson. They had been her mother's favourite. I was jealous, I didn't know what my mother's favourite books growing up were, I didn't know where Munich was. As I bit into my cheese sandwich — every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday — I wondered what it was like to play, talk, sleep, and grow, among the windows of a moving car like the girl who didn't know where she was from and liked it.

At the age of 14, I began competing in track and cross-country competitions, and like everything in my running career, one day it was new and the next normal. It seemed I had been travelling long distances across the country for races in my mother's car for my whole life. It was the ironic part of the sport (travelling so far

to run when running was the one sport you could do anywhere) that took me by surprise. I was used to walking five minutes to football training or walking down the hill in school for hockey matches. I never imagined that something, a sport of all things, could make me feel connected to the girl I had met in primary school.

Flickering landscapes, deep conversations with my mother learning about a life before mine, sleeping with a seatbelt like a teddy bear, became part of who I was. I learnt about my mother's summer riding on the back of her Italian boyfriend's motorcycle, her years as a masseuse in a hospital, her favourite beer in college, how she snuck out of her boarding school windows, how my dad had scrawled her number on the nearest napkin, how kind the nurse was after my sister was born. Hours of anticipation, headlights in dawn, flicking through CD tracks, waiting for an unknown destination, became an intimate part of my life.

I did not understand the mechanisms of a car, how the wheels turned, what petrol sparked into action, how the battery was alive. Unlike engineers and mechanics, I did not search for the knowledge of how an engine did what it did; the insides, the wires, the pipes did not excite me. All I knew was that it was a space; a space that depending on what had just happened in a race or was about to, was exhilarating, nerve-wracking, happy or sad. Like the girl from primary school, it was this vehicle, loaded with emotion for hours on end, that taught me to talk, play, sleep, and grow, in a way I never could have if there was another way to go than the long road leading home.

Roseanne McCullough, a 25-year-old from Dublin, Ireland, graduated with degrees in psychology, English literature, and creative writing from Galway University, in the west of Ireland. In her adolescence, she was a competitive runner in both track and cross-country. Those experiences and lessons learned remain central to who she is and how she moves through the world. This essay, she says, "reflects the ordinary moments in sport that seem small at first but in fact are quite the opposite."