

File Name: N 11-12R All the Roads to Kansas

Narrative

Grade 11

Range of Writing

All The Roads to Kansas

I was six years old when my mother ran off with the pizza delivery boy. She sent a note in the mail to my grandmother that read, "Katie's at home. Needs food and clothing. Jane." Gramma drove the one-thousand-seven-hundred-twenty miles from Kansas to pick me up, pulling into the trailer lot in her blue, wood-paneled station wagon, slamming the car door behind her. I was sitting in a rusty hubcap on the front lawn, my chin cupped in my palm and my heart thundering wildly when she said, "Well, I'm here."

She wore a pink silk handkerchief around the beehive of her blue-tinted hair, a paisley mu-mu and orange scuffs on her feet. Red, plastic-rimmed glasses hung from the chain around her neck and a cigarette dangled from the corner of her pink-painted mouth. She was terrifying.

She was perfect.

She crossed the front lawn without saying a word, opening the door to the trailer as she looked back, once, for me to comply. I followed her, remaining stubbornly, apprehensively, at the front door. She hustled around the house, bundling up all my clothes and tying them with a piece of twine she found heaped in the back of her Buick. Before she decided it was time to leave, she trussed me up in my snow gear, explaining tersely, "It's cold in Kansas this time of year."

I had been sifting inside the trailer, alone, for three days. Leaving for Kansas was the most spectacular adventure I could imagine, so wondrous I could barely believe it was real. She hauled me into the Buick, grunting at the dead weight of my tense body, and we sat on the leather bench seat of her car as she let it idle in the lot. She was flicking cigarette ashes out the open window when I mustered up the nerve to pinch her, just to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

"What--?" she narrowed her gaze at me, dragging on the cigarette so the tip gleamed in a bright orange "O" between her lips.

"You're real," I whispered in wonder.

“As much as you are,” she huffed, tossing the cigarette from the car and cranking up the window. “Just don’t make a habit of pinching people to test out that theory, ‘kay, Sugar?” She rammed the car into reverse and sped away from the lot. The pieces of my childhood were fading as fast as the scenery, and yet I was filled with a sense of bone-deep elation. For the first time in three days, I smiled.

I saw Gramma cut a look at me out of the corner of her eye, and nod. She glanced back at the road when she pulled the slip of paper from her pocket, and said, “It’s all you’ve got of your momma, so I figured you’d want to keep it.”

I was six, and I couldn’t read the words my mother had hastily scrawled on a grocery receipt, but I kept that piece of paper fisted in my hand all along the roads to Kansas. “Gramma,” I whispered after a few hours, barely awake and suddenly terrified, “are you ever gonna bring me home.”

I could see her eyes in the passing lights of oncoming cars, watching them fill up with giant, watery tears, saw them go soft and achy. “Oh, Katydid,” she murmured gently, reaching out in the darkness to clutch the fist that held my mother’s letter. “We’re getting there.”