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Creative Writing
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Windmill Watching

Kings of Leon blared in our monstrous Toyota Sequoia as we made our way through rural Kansas. The windmills towered over us, creating intimidating shadows that guided us down the empty highway we'd been on for what felt like a lifetime. It was my turn to sit in the front seat, and I sat staring out the window, listening to the unfortunate music and pretending like I was a movie character embarking on an exciting adventure. Subconsciously separating myself from the reality of my situation. As kids do.

"Look at all the windmills guys," Dad says over "Sex on Fire," an unusual but at the same time extremely usual family road trip anthem. I would always complain about the constant queuing of my dad's Dad Music.

"I am closing my eyes!!!"

My little sister laid completely flat in the way back. One of the perks of being the youngest is not only getting the best car seat but also fitting perfectly in it. Her and my dad had been bickering the whole time. A cross country road trip will do that to any family.

"I can see yellow."

Sophia had been closing her eyes so tight she began to see colors. This is a perfect representation of her constant innocent rebellion. To this day, her stubborn nature continues to put her and my dad at odds.

"Aw man. Don't be like that. Seriously Sophia?"

"Yes, I am seeing yellow and it is prettier than windmills," she exclaimed with a twinge of guiltless confidence.

Mom could no longer contain her laughter. It rushed out of her in a gust as we whoosh by more windmills.

"I don't understand why we have to leave home for Christmas," my sister whined.

"I know, honey. It is just something we need to do."

At that point Sophia was about to gouge her little eyes out. I looked back to see her feet, in my face, crossed and covered in monkey socks. There was a period of time after my mom told her she was born in the year of the monkey that it was rare to see her without at least one monkey themed clothing item on. I guess it could have been worse. She could have been the year of the rat or ox, clothing item themes more difficult for my mom to find. Mom always aims to please, and she rarely fails. This trait obviously runs red in her family's blood.

"Why couldn't Aunt Debbie and her family come to us?"

"We need to be there for them. They can't leave their home right now."

My mom's laughter slowly subsided. The Kings of Leon song finally faded away. I watched the dead yellow grass outside blur together as I continued along my fantasy.

I remember that was the Christmas I found out Santa Claus wasn't real. Tragic, I know. I definitely had my doubts beforehand, but this trip confirmed my suspicions. The grey light from the hotel window crept past my roll out bed and exposed my mother, aka "Santa Clause." That, and the crinkle of wrapping paper at one in the morning. I always had a hard time falling asleep as a kid. Sometimes I would lie there for four or five hours until the sky was vaguely yellow and I realized I was screwed for the rest of the day. The next morning, I woke up and pretended like nothing happened. I felt as though it was my Duty as the Oldest Child.

Ellie and I had always bonded as the oldest children. Together we were the founders of the Oldest Cousins Club, and we were quite proud to be its most esteemed (and only) members. I remember one day at breakfast she was wearing a bright yellow Sesame Street t-shirt. Yellow was her favorite color. I always thought it was strange she liked Sesame Street so much. We were the same age, but she never liked the things that I did.

"You like French toast?" I asked, trying to find some common ground. *That was stupid. Obviously, she likes French toast. She's eating it,* I thought immediately. Thankfully, Aunt Debbie, sporting a bright pink blouse with a purple and green striped shirt underneath, chimed in by saying, "Yes, we looove French toast. Don't we Ellie? Did you say thank you to Aunt Susan for breakfast?"

Ellie continued to pour globs of thick syrup on her plate without even looking up to acknowledge my question or her mother's. She proceeded to take a bite of the French toast, dripping the molasses on her Sesame Street shirt while her mother simultaneously cut more pieces up for her. She would take a bite of her breakfast, reach for a crayon in the rainbow pile next to her, then take another bite of the toast. I hardly ever remember seeing Ellie without her crayons and a pile of the wrappers next to her. I used to be convinced she was going to be a professional crayon unwrapper someday. The first of her kind.

"So...um... does your head hurt?" I proceeded to ask. No one said anything. If you listened close enough, I swear you could hear the crayons screaming in terror as my cousin undressed them. Assuming nobody understood my question, I pressed harder. "I mean like, the cancer, does it hurt?"

Once again Aunt Debbie and her blindingly colorful outfit smoothly swooped in with, "Oh well, we don't really talk about that. We especially don't if we have this artisanal French toast to rave about! Susan, you have to tell me your secret."

Aunt Debbie fluttered out of the dining room to "rave" about breakfast in the kitchen, and I was left alone with Ellie. I suppose when your eight year old daughter has been diagnosed with a fatal disease, you need to simply rave about "artisanal French toast" once in a while.

Ellie had mastered a skill I obviously lacked, choosing her words carefully. I guess she had had a good amount of practice. Ellie looked up at me for the first time in between crayon and toast. She turned her head to make sure the coast was clear, and then she whispered very calmly, "Only sometimes," and shrugged a little. I nodded, satisfied with a response, and we both continued to eat.

One day during the visit it snowed. If you did not already know, snow is very important to Southern children. My sister and I rushed outside past our cousins' chicken coop into the frozen glitter. I remember someone threw a huge snowball right in my eye. I immediately started to cry. Ellie's dad heroically took me inside in his Captain America t-shirt and comforted me as if I had been hit by a bullet. That is why he is amazing. I slowly walked up the creaky old stairs, fully prepared to accept the vast amounts of pity I deserved from the rest of my family members.

My Aunt Debbie, my grandmother, and my mother sat around whispering, trying not to wake Ellie. I had been in her room before, but not many times. The walls were covered in drawings and Sesame Street posters and crayon wrappers. The three women sat around my cousins bed while she slept, her eyes only mostly closed. I sat down on the ground in front of my mother as she stroked my hair. My aunt did the same by Ellie's bed.

On the way back home when we passed the windmills, I looked at every windmill and every yellow strand of grass that whooshed by, doing my best to separate each individual moment from the blur.