

En route vers nowhere par Sophie Laurin

The Road to Nowhere by Sophie Laurin



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Marjorie bursts into my room with a bang. I scarcely have time to open my eyes and make sense of the early morning intrusion before my cellphone is being waved in my face. I'm so startled, I curse, then growl at my friend.

"Marjorie Morin! Are you trying to kill me?"

"Oh, come on, Sara. It's just a phone."

"Still. Not a great way to wake up."

"It wouldn't stop ringing. It was getting on my nerves."

Marjorie yawns with such force her jaw cracks. I fumble on the bedside table for my glasses. Now I can see her grumpy face in all its splendour.

"It's Seb. I told him you'd call him back."

"Where'd you find it?"

"Find what? Nice pillow marks on your face, by the way."

"My phone."

"In the centrepiece. Wedged between the one-eyed bird with the fake feathers and the big artificial flower."

It's all coming back to me. I hid it there yesterday in an attempt to forget that my ex had left me a flirtatious voicemail after confusing my number with that of his new flame who—ironically—is also named Sara. The kitschy centrepiece was all Marjorie. She'd found it in a pile of garbage on the curb a few weeks after we moved to Montreal and decided to bring it home because, in her opinion, our apartment was sorely lacking, décor-wise.

My roommate heads back to bed as quickly as she entered. I clear the morning phlegm from my throat with an inelegant noise, then flip open my hot-pink Razr and dial Sébastien Simard's number. He picks up right away, his voice way too peppy for 9 a.m., the time my clock is displaying. To my sleepy ears, the decibel level rivals that of a Club Med G.O. and, frankly, it's annoying.

"Hello, Sara!"

"How do you know it's me?"

"I just added Caller I.D. to my monthly plan."

"So tech savvy!"

I struggle to roll over in sheets drenched with my own sweat. We don't have air conditioning, and I've just spent the night in a hellishly hot apartment feeling like a chicken roasting on a spit. I groan slightly.

"Sorry. Heat wave."

"Come stay at my place next time!"

Sébastien is especially proud of the secondhand air-conditioning unit balancing perilously on the windowsill of his room. It's propped up on a crooked wooden board that makes passersby fear the worst as they walk beneath it. The device probably produces more noise than cool air, but for my friend it is the ultimate luxury.

"Yeah. Maybe... Hey, Seb, can you call me back? I'm almost out of minutes for the month."

"No need, I'm downstairs. I have a surprise for you, if you don't mind coming down for a sec."

"Can't you come up here instead?"

"No, you have to come down." I'm about to protest when he adds, "I even brought you a latte!"

His words are music to my broke college-student ears. I'm usually stuck drinking nasty French vanilla-flavoured filter coffee.

"The barista even drew a heart in the foam."

I kick off the covers.

"Okay, I'm coming!"

"I'd hurry if I were you. He sprinkled cinnamon on top, and it's starting to get lumpy."

I rush to pull on the first shirt and pair of shorts I can find in the pile of semi-clean clothes. Then I throw my brown hair, sticky with humidity, into a quick bun and hop down the twenty steps that separate my apartment from the building entrance. I'm wearing cheap flip-flops (the kind that give out after only one use), and I come close to falling flat on my ass. Hanging on to the wooden banister for dear life, I let out a string of four-letter words that would horrify my mother. In the process, I stub my baby toe against the wall.

When I finally get outside, I limp over to Sébastien, but the moment I grab the takeaway cup, I realize I've been shortchanged.

"I almost break my neck getting out of the house, and you give me your leftovers?"

"I only took one sip!"

I glare at him.

"Fine, more like two or three, but you should have gotten down here sooner."

Sébastien pulls a key from one of the pockets of his cargo shorts and tries to unlock the door of the car parked in front of us—a green station wagon that looks like its best years were back when disco was king.

From my neighbour's stairs, I watch him as I enjoy what's left of the latte.

After fiddling with the door for what seems like an eternity, he finally manages to crack it open with a terrible screech. He closes it with just as much difficulty as he slides behind the wheel. I watch him use an impressive amount of elbow grease to roll down the stubborn windows.

"Come on! Get in!"

Sceptical, I point to the rust that's eating away at the body of the clunker.

"My tetanus shot isn't up to date."

Sébastien ignores the bad joke. He's too busy dusting off the dashboard with his hand.

The car's interior is as hideous as its exterior. A beige headliner covers the ceiling and a little plastic figurine of the Virgin Mary sits on the dash. The car reeks of kitsch and air freshener. I use all my strength to yank on the passenger-side door, which probably hasn't been opened in forever. I sit down beside Seb, who flashes me his best jazz hands.

"Ta-da!"

"Ta-da?"

"Sara Langlois, welcome to my new old car!"

"You're joking."

"No, ma'am! I got the plates yesterday, and voilà!"

"I thought you said you were done with old cars after Big Lemon."

"Yeah, but this is different. Let's just hope the brakes on this one hold."

Big Lemon was Sébastien's first and—until now—last car. After getting his driver's license in grade 11, he'd bought a used car from a private seller so he wouldn't have to ask his parents for rides anymore. The purchase turned out to be of rather poor quality. Big Lemon's clutch was unforgiving, its brakes had failed on a hill, and its alternator had blown out on the highway.

When I lower the sun visor, it almost comes off in my hands.

"Does it drive as well as the doors open?"

"Stop it! You're going to hurt Lucette's feelings."

"Lucette? Solid name."

"Thanks! An homage to its previous owner."

I lean forward to touch the plastic beads of the rosary hanging from the rearview mirror.

"Solid style, too."

"Yeah, I know. I have to make a few changes."

I take another sip of coffee.

“So why’d you buy a car again?”

“Do you have time for breakfast? I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Sure, yeah.”

I fasten my seatbelt while Seb turns and reaches into the back seat to grab something.

“Check this out! It’s really cheesy, but it came with the car.”

He unfolds an accordion sunshade printed with palm trees and pink flamingos and settles it against the windshield. I look at Seb questioningly.

“I thought we were taking the car to go for breakfast?”

“Nah, we can walk. I managed to find a spot in front of your house that isn’t permit parking. No way I’m giving that up.”

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The two eggs, bacon, baked beans, and white toast sitting proudly on my plate are screaming my name. I spread artificially flavoured strawberry jam on the bread and douse the hash browns with ketchup from a plastic bottle that makes a farting noise.

I raise my mug of filter coffee, into which I’ve poured an unreasonable number of creamers.

“To your new old car!”

Seb clinks his mug against mine, and after taking a bite of his banana-chocolate crêpe, launches into an explanation.

My best friend speaks with such intensity that I can’t possibly tell him he’s just smeared chocolate on his right cheek—in the exact spot his beard is showing its rebellious streak. Although he’s over six feet tall, his enthusiasm makes him look like an adorable little kid.

I can’t help but think that it’s good to see him teasing and joking like this again. The Sébastien Simard of the past three years, the one who went out with Noémie Brière, was much more serious and not nearly as entertaining. But that’s all changed, now that he’s single again. Seb cuts himself off and is looking at me intently.

“You okay Sara?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Because you’re staring at me.”

“You’ve got a little chocolate on your cheek.” I point to the spot.

“Whoops!”

Awkwardly, he tries to wipe it off with his napkin, but he only manages to smudge it even more.

“Is it okay now?”

With a playful grin, I shake my head no.

“Eh, it’s no big deal,” he replies, amused. “I’ll go look in the bathroom in a little while. So, like I was telling you, a couple weeks ago, this old car showed up at my uncle’s garage. My uncle was going to scrap it, but I convinced him to give it to me.”

“So you could run it into the ground?”

“Exactly. My boss promised me two weeks off this summer, and it reminded me of something you told me recently. Any idea what I’m talking about?”

I tear into a slice of bacon.

“I say a lot of things, Seb.”

“Anyway, *chérie*...”

“Since when do you say *chérie*?”

Seb decides to get back at me by stealing a few hash browns from my plate. I don’t have time to defend myself because the server comes by to refill our coffees.

“Remember the time we had half-price chicken wings at that place on Ontario?”

I dip my crust into the bean gravy.

“The bar with the typos on the menu?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. We agreed that student life sucks, and you said that your New Year’s resolution was to have fun because you thought 2007 had been pretty boring so far. You wanted to buy plane tickets and go off and explore the world, but when I reminded you we were both broke, you started crying.”

“That’s usually what happens when we spend all night at a place with three-dollar beers.”

“Admit it, your choice of beer isn’t great for boosting morale.”

“I’m working within the budget of a girl who lives off student loans and a part-time job.”

Specifically, a part-time job that pays minimum wage and requires me to wear ridiculous costumes at kids’ birthday parties. I’d originally applied for the job because I lost a bet with Marjorie, but then I realized I actually like the work. The only downside is dealing with the sweaty costumes that always smell like body odour.

“I don’t know about you, but it would be nice to get away for a couple of days, kind of like a road trip to nowhere. Just driving with no plan. Sleeping wherever we want. Exploring the country. What do you think?”

Is it Sébastien's idea, or is it the jolt of caffeine hitting me? Suddenly, I can't sit still anymore.

"I've always wanted to go on a road trip!" I put down my coffee. "And I should probably take it easy on the caffeine."

Seb raises his eyebrows in approval.

"But aren't you afraid we'll get on each other's nerves? I mean, we've never spent more than twenty-four hours together," I point out.

"If things get too tense, you can always take the bus back."

"Or hitchhike, while we're at it. Then my mom will really freak out."

I stuff another delicious slice of bacon into my mouth and smile broadly at Seb, who teasingly points out that I have a large peppercorn stuck between my two front teeth.

My boss lets me take two weeks' vacation without asking too many questions, but my mother is a totally different story. She puts me through a full interrogation when I call her to announce my plans. While I can already picture myself driving down paved roads, with the wind in my hair and drunk on my freedom, my mother sees the trip in a much less romantic light.

"Where are you going to sleep?"

"I don't know, Mom. A road trip is spontaneous."

"It sounds dangerous to me."

"Nothing's going to happen. We'll be careful. And I'll have my cellphone with me.

"I wouldn't want anything to happen to my baby."

"Oh my God, Mom! I'm twenty-one!"

"You'll always be my baby. What car are you taking?"

"The one Sébastien just bought."

"Is it in good condition?"

"Of course, Mom."

If I'd told her we were taking off in a moving pile of rust, she would have had a heart attack.

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Luckily, my roommate Marjorie, a big fan of spur-of-the-moment decisions, is there to help celebrate my future road trip. The day before I'm supposed to leave, we crack open a bottle of corner-store wine and gorge ourselves on crudités, cheese, charcuterie, and bread, a habit we've developed since moving in together.

"The trip will be good for you and Seb. You've both had a tough year with all the breakups and everything."

I've barely taken two sips of wine and she's refilling my glass already. A brilliant, alcohol-fuelled idea pops into my head.

"You should come with us, Marj!"

"Uh, never in a million years."

She answers without even thinking about it.

“Oh come on, we’re not that bad! We have our quirks, I’ll give you that, but we’re funny, aren’t we?”

Marjorie gets up from her chair and comes over to wrap me in a tight embrace.

“S-S-Sara, dear,” she stammers, already a little tipsy, as I try to wriggle out of her grip. “If Sébastien wanted me to come, he would have invited me. It’s obvious he wants to spend some alone time with you.”

“Maybe he just figured that with the summer session and your job, you’d be too busy?”

Marjorie leans over to grab an olive from the buffet spread on the kitchen table.

“I admire your naïveté, lady, but I swear it’s OK. Really. By now, I’m used to being the third wheel.”

“You’re not a third wheel!”

“I’m not complaining, just stating a fact. It’s always been you and Seb. Anyone who makes it into your orbit is an afterthought.”

I try to think of a comeback, but I can’t. Marjorie is right. Seb and I can be pretty intense, especially when we break out the inside jokes.

“You’re my best friend, Marj!”

“And you’re mine. And I hope you have a lot of fun on your road trip!”

Marjorie raises her glass and toasts to our friendship, which has been going strong ever since we were assigned to share a locker in grade 7. It was love from the moment we discovered we each had a crush on a Habs player. That year, posters of Jocelyn Thibault and Stéphane Quintal proudly lined the door of our locker.

Before the glass makes it to my lips, I notice there is something floating in it. Proof that our wine is far from a top vintage.

“I think this party needs a little music,” Marj says as she runs into her room.

Soon I can hear “Everybody (Backstreet’s Back)” playing through her computer speakers. While Marjorie brings them as close as the wires will allow, I grab a chair for her to put them on so we don’t bother the woman who lives downstairs.

Once everything is all set up, I do my best zombie dance, belting out the lyrics at the top of my lungs so that Nick (Marj’s favourite), Brian (my favourite, since an unwritten rule says we can’t have the same crush), Howie, A. J., and Kevin can hear us, wherever they are.

After the song ends, I signal to Marj that I’m taking a break. The cheap wine is really starting to get to my head. I flop onto the couch for a few minutes while the playlist queues up a Spice Girls song. Marj continues dancing all by herself in the middle of the room.

“What’re you going to do while we’re away?”

I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want.

"I'll start by enjoying having the apartment all to myself. After that, I'll see."

"Good plan."

I wanna really, really, really wanna zigzag ah

"JP seemed like he wanted to hang out with you the other day."

JP, full name Jean-Philippe Leclerc, is Sébastien's roommate. The boys met in college and decided to move to Montreal together for university. He's super sweet, though he's really awkward when it comes to interacting with girls.

"Yeah, I dunno. I'm more into Olivier."

He's the strawberry blond barista at the coffee shop down the street. Marjorie's had a crush on him ever since we arrived in Montreal, even though she hasn't said more than two words to him in four years.

I close my eyes for a moment, and Marjorie plops down on the couch next to me. I lean my head against hers.

"I just want you to know that you're not a third wheel. I was being honest when I said I wanted you to come."

"I know."

The acid from the wine is making the inside of my cheeks shrivel up like prunes. Suddenly, a notification rings out from my computer speakers, letting me know I've received a new message on Windows Live Messenger.

"That must be Seb!"

Marjorie smiles at me, her teeth and lips stained red.

"Ooooooh!"

"Nice smile by the way, Marj."

"Right back at you."

I jump up from the couch and go into my room. Marj heads to the bathroom to survey the damage.

"I'm a vampire!" she shrieks from the other end of the apartment. "I'll suck your blood while you're sleeping!"

I let out a small alcohol-fuelled hiccup before I answer the message.

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Sébastien:

Ready for tomorrow? I borrowed a tent, if we end up having to camp somewhere.

Sara – I'm going on a road trip!!!! :

yeah !!1!!

Sara – I'm going on a road trip!!!! :

i'm turning the playlist right now

Sara – I'm going on a road trip!!!! :

burning, not turning. lolll i can't rite nemore

Sara – I’m going on a road trip!!!! :
write.
Sébastien:
Wine night with Marjorie?
Sara – I’m going on a road trip!!!! :
Yep
Sara – I’m going on a road trip!!!! :
;) ;) ;0
Sébastien:
Can I pick you up around 8 tomorrow?
Sara – I’m going on a road trip!!!! :
oof
Sébastien:
9?
Sara – I’m going on a road trip!!!! :
Ojk!
Sébastien:
Good night! See you tomorrow!
Sara – I’m going on a road trip!!!! :
goodniite!

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Marjorie walks over to me holding a brand-new bottle of wine.
“As long as we already look like vampires...”
“Seb’s picking me up early tomorrow, so I shouldn’t drink too much.”
She pours herself an overly generous glass.
“Come on! We’re about to spend, what, two weeks apart?”
I take the bottle from her and do the same.
“Ah, screw it!”

When the alarm goes off at 8 the next morning, it takes everything I have to haul myself out of bed. My saliva tastes acidic (I blame the wine), my hair is wet with sweat (I blame the heat), and I have a solid hangover (I blame the sulfites). Basically, I feel gross. It's already thirty degrees in my stuffy bedroom. The perfect time to get out of the city.

I jump into the shower to cool off, then hurry to finish up my packing. A half-asleep Marjorie meets me in the entryway to see me off.

"Bye, friend!"

"I gotta go or I'll be late."

I suspect that my roommate, who hates mornings as much as I do, dozes off on my shoulder during the few seconds we hug goodbye.

"You're always late. Seb's used to it."

"Shhhh, shhhh. You don't know what you're saying. You're tired."

Marj rouses herself long enough to tease me.

The worst part is that she's right. I give her a few pats on the back. Marjorie loosens her embrace, yawns loudly, and folds her arms across her chest.

"Enjoy all the making out," she adds, her eyes half closed.

"Oh, stop! Nothing's ever going to happen with Seb."

I let out a groan.

"Mmm hmm," she mumbles.

"And anyway, he and Noémie just broke up."

She opens one eye wide enough to scan my face.

"And it's just a road trip between friends to get our minds off things."

"Between friends, yeah right."

I take a step back, defensive.

"You and your dirty mind! I'm telling you, it's true!"

"That goofy smile says otherwise," she says before she heads back to bed, dragging her feet.

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Sébastien is leaning against Lucette and typing on the sliding keyboard of his phone. His focused expression gives way to a gigantic

smile as I come up to him. He hurries to put his phone in his pocket and leans awkwardly towards me (or rather, he twists around clumsily due to the difference in our height) to give me a peck on the cheek. Except that I was planning to greet him with a high five, and I realize his intentions a little too late. The result: My palm smacks him across the face.

Sébastien straightens up immediately, a little stunned by what I've just done.

"OH MY GOD, SEB! Are you okay? That's not what I meant to do at all! I was going for a high five, and then you leaned in and..."

"I'll try not to piss you off during the trip. I want to stay alive, you know," he says, touching his nose to make sure it's still there.

"We need to start over. There's no way we're kicking off our trip with my hand in your face."

I raise my hand up high.

"Road trip!" I say enthusiastically.

"Road trip!" Seb repeats, much less enthusiastically.

We miss each other's hands by a few centimetres. Refusing to give up so easily, we try again, but the result is just as disastrous: Our fingers barely touch.

"Okay, that's enough humiliation for one morning," Seb declares, popping the trunk of the car.

Two sleeping bags, a tent, and a gas burner (along with a bunch of other things that make the city girl in me panic) are all thrown in together.

"I thought this was supposed to be a spontaneous trip."

"It is! I don't know how the burner works and there aren't any instructions for setting up the tent!"

"I didn't know you had all this stuff."

"I bought it off a friend. She was looking to get rid of it." At the mention of another girl, I can feel my heart sink.

I decide to play the cool best friend card anyway. I start tittering like he's just said something totally taboo.

"Ooooh! A girl! Do I know her?" It's the first time in my life I've ever heard myself titter, and I sincerely hope it's the last.

"No. And I'm not gonna tell you her name, or you'll start stalking her."

"No way, I'd never do that."

"You do it all the time!"

"So I'm curious! It's not my fault!"

Sébastien moves a few things out of the way to make room in the trunk.

"So you really aren't going to tell me?"

"No."

“Not even if I make this face?”

I give him my biggest puppy-dog eyes, which I think are irresistible. Unfortunately for me, it’s not the first time Sébastien has seen them, so he’s built up immunity.

“One more question and I’m leaving you and your luggage right here on the curb.”

“Don’t be like that!”

I grab a few things out of my bag and throw the rest of my stuff in the back.

“Check this out.”

I swing a pine tree-shaped air freshener in front of his face.

“Instead of the rosary.”

He looks at the package.

“‘Urban therapy’?”

“In case we start missing the city!”

“And its chemicals.”

“Hardly! I also brought two rolls of toilet paper and my pee flops.”

“Your pee flops?”

“For peeing on the side of the road.”

“TMI.”

I wave the flip-flops a few inches from his face. He sidesteps them like a boxer trying to dodge a right hook.

“Yuck!”

“Oh please. I washed them.”

“Well, how would I know?” he says before slipping into the driver’s seat.

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I hang the urban-scented air freshener from the rearview mirror and pop two aspirins for my post cheap-wine headache. I stick my head out of the car, and while Seb finishes texting God knows who, I watch a squirrel picking through the contents of a ripped garbage bag. He puts his phone away and buckles his seat belt. I readjust mine because it’s starting to cut into my neck.

“Okay. Let’s roll!”

“I brought my road atlas for directions,” he says.

“I didn’t know you had one.”

“I bought it at work.”

Ever since arriving in Montreal a year ago, Sébastien has been working at a gas station not far from my apartment. Oddly enough, the number of girls who need help checking their oil and tire pressure has skyrocketed since he was hired. Seb claims it’s just a coincidence. He’s as naïve as he is handsome.

“There are about forty maps in there.”

“Wow!”

Seb ignores my sarcasm and turns the key in the ignition. Lucette doesn't make us wait long. Despite the rust, it's clear she's got a lot of life in her.

I propose flipping a coin to decide what to do next.

“Heads we go right, tails we go left?”

“Let's do it!”

A good idea that doesn't pan out. A few minutes later, we're only six blocks from my place and the coin is somewhere in the backseat after I flipped it a little too vigorously. We're stopped at an intersection when the driver behind us starts honking the horn impatiently, making it clear to everyone in the vicinity that he wants us to get a move on. Sébastien panics and turns right, then realizes he's going the wrong direction on a one-way street. The result is some frantic braking, another angry driver, and two friends on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

“Maybe we should get out of the city before we start the road trip?”

Seb nods in silence.

“So our options are the North Shore or the South Shore.”

I flip the coin again, and this time I have no trouble.

“North Shore, here we come!”

We've been driving for about an hour when my bladder starts issuing distress signals. We stop at a place where the coffee tastes like instant and they sell donut holes by the dozen.

"Well," I say, turning to Seb once he's parked Lucette in the lot.

"We need a bathroom strategy."

"A bathroom strategy?"

"So I can use the bathroom without having to buy something."

"OK."

"I thought you could come inside with me and look at the menu while I'm doing my business."

"But I'm not hungry."

"Just pretend."

"To be hungry?"

"No, to look at the menu. That way I'll feel better about using the bathroom without buying anything."

"Sounds complicated."

"No way!"

"Yes way."

I fidget a little in my seat—first, because my bladder is going crazy and then, because Seb doesn't seem to understand my brilliant scheme. Impatience wins out.

"Do you have a better idea, then?"

"I'll let the car idle, and when you get out of the bathroom you run without looking back. You hop in, and we take off like the car thieves in *Gone in 60 Seconds*."

"Never seen it. Is it good?"

"It's OK. You gotta love cars."

I can't hold it in any longer, so I dash into the bathroom and leave Seb to his cinematic musings. When I come out, I see him carefully studying the menu on the wall above the counter. It's so cute that he's doing this for me.

"So, sir," I say as I walk over to him, "what are you thinking of not ordering?"

"I'm thinking of not ordering the artificially flavoured raspberry jam donut."

"Excellent non-choice."

“Thank you!”

“I liked your idea too, by the way.”

“You mean driving away at top speed?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Seb asks.

Eyes sparkling with mischief, he starts to back up towards the exit. I follow him, knowing full well what he’s up to. As soon as we make it into the entryway, he shouts.

“First one to the car owes the other a coffee!”

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For as long as I’ve known Sébastien Simard, the two of us have always received disapproving looks. Because when we’re together, our IQ tends to drop dramatically. We become real delinquents. Two weirdos guided by the same sense of offbeat humour.

Seb is my control valve for the adult world. (He doesn’t like being compared to a device used to let off steam, but that’s the best image I can think of.) When I’m around him, I don’t take the world so seriously, which often leads to spur-of-the-moment shenanigans—like us racing through the parking lot under the critical gaze of everyone in the place.

While Seb is crowing about the victory he won by cheating (he took off running before the countdown ended), I get out the pop mix I’ve burned just for the trip. I slip the CD full of songs illegally downloaded from LimeWire into my portable player, plug it into the car’s cigarette lighter, and pop in the audiocassette adapter attached to it.

“Until I get the money to buy an MP3 player.”

Seb takes the next exit.

“Have you seen the Apple commercial where the silhouettes are dancing with an iPod Nano? It looks awesome!”

I nod eagerly. “I know, seriously!”

Trucks are everywhere on the highway, enveloping us in an unwelcome cloud of exhaust as they pass. The sun is really starting to heat up the car. Lucette has many qualities, but air conditioning is not one of them. Between the hum of the other cars and the noise from the wind, I can barely hear the music coming out of the speakers. Or Seb’s voice, for that matter.

“You can turn it up.”

“WHAT?”

“YOU CAN TURN IT UP!”

I raise the volume. When the road gets quieter, I turn it down. When it gets noisy again, I turn it back up. It’s a far cry from Britney Spears and her friends in *Crossroads* racing down the highway in their

convertible, hair blowing in the wind, and singing at the top of their lungs.

“What’re we listening to?”

“‘Promiscuous’. Nelly Furtado and Timbaland.”

“Nelly Furtado, that rings a bell.”

“It’s the girl who sings ‘I’m Like a Bird’.”

“Didn’t we just hear that one?”

“No, that was ‘Give It To Me’. Also by Timbaland, but with Nelly Furtado and Justin Timberlake.”

“Are there any other artists on your playlist?”

In answer to his question, I skip to the next track. Timbaland’s “Apologize” featuring One Republic comes on. I start singing a little too loudly, a little too off-key, just to annoy Sébastien. And it works.

“Can you drive for a bit?” he asks once the refrain comes on. “That way I can hold both hands over my ears.”

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Once we’ve left several small towns and villages behind, our stomachs start talking to us. We stop at a convenience store somewhere near Trois-Rivières to grab something to eat. On his shoestring budget, Seb opts for a days-old wrap that’s on special. I go for a cold plate of brown noodles with a disturbing consistency, along with some desiccated-looking raw vegetables. Choices we both instantly regret.

“This meal is about as exciting as that broken-down covered bridge we saw earlier.”

I bite into a celery stick that’s so dry it curls inwards.

After examining the contents of his wrap, Seb works up the courage to try it.

“Good thing it says ‘chicken’. Otherwise I wouldn’t know what I’m eating.”

“By comparison, the chunky orange Kraft Dinner I had the other day wasn’t so bad.”

Seb cringes in disgust. I don’t dare ask him if the face is for my Kraft Dinner or his slimy lettuce and soggy pita wrap.

“Gross! A piece just got stuck in my throat.”

“Want to try my noodles? They might dislodge it.”

“Nah, yours looks way worse than mine.”

After a few attempts, I settle back into my seat, which is covered with a beaded cushion, and stick my feet out the window so I can perfect my tan.

“Where do you want to go after this?” Seb asks.

I try to choke down a bite with a sip of water.

“My sister told me about a place that has dinosaurs on the other side of the Lavolette Bridge. We could go check that out.”

“Dinosaurs?”

“Plastic ones.”

“Ah. Real ones would have been amazing.”

He grins at me. I grin back.

“They’re right off the highway, on the lawn of some restaurant. I think it’s called The Madrid.”

“Sounds sick! Let’s go!”

Seb brings the wrap to his mouth to take another bite, then thinks better of it.

“I can’t. It’s just too gross.”

Without a hint of regret, he throws the sandwich into a plastic bag that now serves as a garbage can. I toss my lunch inside, too.

“I’m in the mood for an all-dressed hot dog, a nice, tall beer, and a whole lotta fries,” Seb says as we hit the road.

It sounds like poetry to my ravenous stomach.

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“Is it a man?”

“Yes.”

“Is he alive?”

“No.”

“And you’re sure I know who he is?”

“Pretty sure, yeah.”

We’d just passed Daveluyville, where we’d grabbed a Mr. Freeze and demanded (because we’d been fighting over it) to know the correct pronunciation of the town’s name. After stopping at The Madrid to take pictures with the dinosaurs, we decided to play Twenty Questions to pass the time.

But we encounter the same problem every time we play Twenty Questions, which is that we overestimate the other person’s knowledge. The game usually ends in total frustration for both of us. Seb always chooses historical figures that I don’t know, and I always pick celebrities that he doesn’t know—the only ones he’s heard of are Rihanna, Kate Winslet, and Sandra Bullock.

“Is it an actor?” I ask.

“No.”

“Give me a hint.”

“Are you sure? That kind of ruins it.”

I let out a huge sigh before answering.

“I’m sure.”

“It’s a philosopher.”

I look at Sébastien in disbelief. Is he kidding me?

“We studied him in college. You should know who he is!”

“You studied him in college. I never paid attention in philosophy class.”

“It’s Aristotle,” says Seb, a little miffed.

Neither of us insists on starting a new game. I put the playlist on again and watch the landscape go by. Suddenly, a billboard catches my attention.

“Seb! Did you see that?”

“That depends. What does ‘that’ mean?”

“It was an ad for a motel. The Chez Lucette motel!”

“Really? Did we already pass it?”

“I don’t think so.”

A few kilometres later, I see the billboard again. It’s advertising updated rooms and “Colour TV”.

“Right there. Here. Here! Pull off here!”

“*Here*, here—are you sure?” says Seb sarcastically, signalling for the next exit.

A few moments later, the Chez Lucette motel comes into view. It doesn’t take us long to realize that the place is as run-down as our old car. The pool’s cover is torn and the diving board has rusted. Instead of water, only dead leaves and trash. The rest of the place looks just as dilapidated, starting with the torn screen on the door of the main entrance.

“Are you sure you want to sleep here? It’s pretty creepy,” Seb says in a low voice as we head to the reception desk.

“Worst case, we can sleep in our clothes. It’ll be an adventure.”

The lobby is a replica of my grandparents’ basement: The walls are covered in floral wallpaper and the smell of mothballs hangs in the air. An oscillating fan swings from right to left with an infuriating metallic click. The bell on the counter is held in place under kilos of Scotch tape. You’d have to be really determined to steal it.

“Do you think we should leave?” whispers Seb, scanning the deserted area.

“Yeah, maybe—”

I don’t have time to finish my thought because just then a tall, skinny man appears at the other end of the hallway. And when I say tall, I mean it: He has to duck in order to avoid hitting his head on the doorframe. He walks over to us without saying a word, then picks up a dying cigarette from the ashtray on the counter and brings it to his mouth. Ash falls onto his stained shirt. He doesn’t seem to care.

“Uh, yeah. Uh, hello, sir. How much is a room for the night?”

Without a word, the man begins leafing through his register, which is practically blank under today's date. The glasses perched on his nose are so dirty that I doubt he can see much.

"That'll be thirty dollars," he says in a feeble voice, as if helping us is the most difficult thing in the world. His answer is followed by a long coughing fit.

I look over at Seb. He seems to be thinking what I'm thinking. The bedsheets may not be clean, but thirty dollars is a really good deal.

I hand my credit card to the man with the worst customer-service skills ever. He takes it after coughing into one hand. Charming. I throw a look of disgust at Seb, who is busy swatting the flies buzzing around him. Then, the man I've privately nicknamed Marcel (because he looks like a Marcel to me) hands us the room key, which is also wrapped in Scotch tape.

"Hey, Sara, do you smell that?" Seb asks me once we've left the lobby from hell.

Within seconds, the scent of cooking oil fills my nose. I look up and notice there is a snack bar across the road. Seb gives me a hopeful look, and I can see he is craving a poutine and a greasy hot dog. My arteries agree. It's impossible to say no to fries slathered in gravy and topped with squeaky cheese.