

## Second Place Fiction, Ages 14-18

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### **“The Sky’s the Limit (Unless You’re Speeding!)”**

1,704 miles to go. As I hop into the backseat of our minivan, my little brother smacks me on the head with his plastic toy car. Rubbing my forehead, I turn toward the window, my only view for the next several hours. I hear my dad slam the trunk, while my mom starts the car. The engine roars to life, and I catch one last glimpse of our home. I buckle up my seatbelt. Let the fun begin.

1,453 miles left on our family road trip. Parents always know best, right? But does driving from Maine to Florida in time for Great-Aunt Lizzy’s birthday *really* seem right? Maybe if you’re my mom and dad it does. But for a 16-year old girl, giving up her last week of summer to be stuck in the car with no one for company but her 4-year old brother and her parent’s entire 80’s music collection, it certainly doesn’t seem as if parent’s know “best”. Whatever happened to just sticking a birthday card in the mail?

1,278 miles remaining. I have just finished my book, when the characteristic chorus of a toddler stuck in a car seat for hours on end begins to arise.

“Mommy, I have to go pee.”

We are in the middle of nowhere. Somewhere past Connecticut, but not a bathroom in sight.

“Just try to hold it, honey, we are almost there.” My mother reassures him.

I sigh. That line never works on kids. I jam headphones in my ears, as an attempt to smother the sound of my brother’s wailing. Five minutes later, we pull over and my brother relieves himself right next to a large, shiny road sign. “Welcome to New York” it reads.

1,096 miles to go. It’s the middle of the night, and we are the only car on the road. My brother has finally fallen asleep, and I soak up the blissful silence. I glance out the window in a hope of seeing stars, when instead flashing red and blue lights flood my vision. They grow closer, and suddenly a burst of sirens shatter the air.

“New Jersey State Police. Pull over your vehicle immediately.”

943 miles are left. Sixty dollars cheaper from our speeding ticket, and with my Dad’s new hatred of New Jersey, we arrive in Washington D.C. Red, white, and blue adorns every building, but that hardly masks the agony of rush-hour traffic. My brother, at least, has found an exciting new form of entertainment, which involves repetitively kicking the back of my seat. Oh, the joys of being on the road.

791 miles, we are getting closer. I can smell the salt in the air and there is a strong ocean breeze. My mother, at the sight of the beach, sticks her hand out the window to point it out to us. In her hand, is our faithful road map. Or shall I say *was* our faithful road map.

582 miles. We are completely and utterly lost. My dad slows down the car, when he sees a man on the side of the road, in order to ask for directions. The man is scruffy and old, has a plethora of wrinkles, and an elaborate white beard. He gives us brief directions, and then asks us if he can hitch along for part of the ride.

“I have no money in which to pay you, but instead I can offer you another gift.”  
He says.

“A toy?” asks my little brother.

“No I cannot give you a toy. My gift is that of a story, which I find to be the most valuable present of all.” My parents glance at each other, and then open the door to let him in. He takes a seat, looking quite out of place in our powder blue minivan, and then he begins.

“Once upon a time, a small bird named Hope lived in a vast jungle. One hot summer day, a terrible wildfire erupted and the flames devoured many trees and animals living in the jungle. Other birds flew high into the sky and far away to safety, but Hope couldn't bear to leave her precious jungle home to burn. Day and night, she flew with all her might back and forth to the river, filling her tiny beak with water to drop on the raging fires. Hope's rare heart of courage and unshakable determination moved Mother Nature to shed tears, and a great rain poured down upon the jungle, extinguishing the flames. And so it is that even the smallest actions of a determined spirit can change the world.”

Silence. I ponder the story, and even more so this strange man. But just as I am about to ask him his name, he unbuckles his seatbelt, asks to be let out, and swiftly jumps from our car. He turns and quickly walks away, only glancing back once to wave goodbye.

“Was that Santa Claus?” My brother asks.

Only 334 miles are left. The mood has shifted in the car, as though the man’s story has left an unmistakable presence behind. As I flip through my SAT flashcards, I realize that even just the simple act of giving that man a ride has brought our family closer. The impact of his story has caused us to be kinder to one another, and we will share that memory forever.

152 miles. A mere couple of hours remain on our journey. My mother realizes she has left Great-Aunt Lizzy’s gift in our garage, back in Maine.

“Don’t even think about turning back now.” I instruct.

We decide to just pick her up something on the way. We are all throwing out suggestions; my brother’s being a giant candy-making machine. (“For heaven’s sake, she’s diabetic!” My mother hisses.) Finally, I think of the perfect thing.

We made it. 1,704 total miles over a period of three days. There is a mad haste to get out of the car, and stretch our legs.

“I’m never getting back in that *thing*.” My brother exclaims, as he points towards the van.

“Oh yes you are.” I say. “We are only halfway, don’t forget we have to drive all the way home.”

My brother’s face is equivalent to the pure terror of a child who just found out that Christmas is never coming again. I laugh, and then hand Great-Aunt Lizzy her birthday gift.

“My, my, is this a *bird*?” She clutches at her heart, while examining the small cage.

“It sure is!” I answer. “It’s pretty rare too. It’s usually only found in tropical jungles.”

Great-Aunt Lizzy's face grows paler as the tiny bird lets out a small squawk. "Good heavens!" she says. Eventually she grows a bit calmer, and then with a wave of apprehension she turns towards me. "Does it have a name?" she asks.

I smile as I think of the journey here, all the things we encountered and all the lasting memories we have made. Finally, I speak.

"Hope." I say.