

Waving at Cornfields

"There were a lot of stories about dead grandparents this year."

My ninth grade English teacher sized up that year's collection of prose essays. The winning three would be published in the yearbook and I was desperate for mine to be one of them. As a fourteen year old ninth grader, the desire to see my writing, forever on the pages of that yearbook- well, it was my version of making the bestseller list. But how could she reduce my story to that of a 'dead grandparent'? It sort of cheapened my whole experience. Maybe my story wasn't special enough, maybe I didn't give it the full on gravitas it deserved with my 'prose' whatever the hell that meant anyways. I had a little bit of a complex. But my story was special, I knew because it was bugging me in the best possible way. It still does.

It all started with a bath, in the kitchen sink, in a mustard-yellow rectangular plastic bin. I sometimes wonder if it's even possible I remember it. When I have described the scene to relatives who were there, they confirm that I did indeed get bathed in that plastic bin. So in the kitchen of my grandparents house in a tiny Iowa town, my first memories of life took shape. It's just a flash-frame, really, but it's there.

Things came into better focus not too many years later and those had more to do with being stuck in the backseat of a Dodge Dart. Living in the Twin Cities and driving to a town just outside Dubuque, Iowa - with the finish line being my grandparent's house- was always a major production. Since the concept of time is out of a three year old's grasp,

there was no way to really measure this torture. When I asked "how long until we get there"- I got no solid answer. I never really knew why we had to be in the car for this long. But Easter, Thanksgiving and summer vacations always called us there. My sister Mary, being two years older and much more creative than I, came up with these bizarre rituals and games. The first major milestone was Rochester. Now, as a three or four year old, did I know what Rochester was or even really what Minnesota or Iowa were? No, they were just funny sounding names, signs along the road. One more place to get to for us to get to where we needed to be to get out of this car! About two hours into the trip, which I calculated as going to church two times in a row, we would schlep into Rochester. The game my sister cleverly came up with had no strategy, she just called it 'Roger and Chester' and I thought it was the greatest thing I ever heard of. A blessed distraction at a point in the trip when books could only be stared at for so long. So one of us was 'Roger' and one of us was 'Chester'- that was it. I think the whole point of the game was to negotiate which name you would get and then you would get called that name until my sister decided the game was over.

That was the inevitable problem, if Mary got bored, game over. And there I was, left to squirm, wiggle, fuss, fidget, probably throw things and certainly whine. And in the front seat, my parents with pits in their stomachs either worrying about the weather or wondering if there was a yet to be discovered shortcut. My dad was famous for those. "If we cut across on 10 we can hook up with 52" - insert various number which could potentially connect us with the blessed 52. My mom always had a plastic baggie with some sort of wretched healthy snack like raisins. Just once

did we bring a giant thermos of water, which entertained me from Chatfield to Decorah, just pushing the button and catching the water! Some catastrophe ensued in the backseat that prevented us from bringing said thermos again. I have a feeling I was involved. Snacks, drinks of water, going to the bathroom...in the captivity of a moving car, these ho-hum matters were the best diversions. Just about the time I was ready to kick a hole in the seat, the car would veer to the right and the angels sang. At the end of a road that looked like a ribbon to me was a rusty merry go round, greenish colored swings and some dilapidated climbing device- all propped up on grains of sand. A park! The car came to a clunky stop- the first of about three in this merciless trip to the middle of the cornfields.