Laura Kenny

The 45th Parallel

We are on our way up north to see Santa at his summer home, and our station wagon, which is brown with fake wood on the sides, is fuller than I've ever seen it. I've made a nest for myself in the very back between the suitcases and pillows and toys. If I turn my head all the way around, like an owl, I can see everything from there—where we are going and where we have been, and all the places in-between.

My father is driving with one hand and smoking with the other. When the road straightens he steers with his knee and uses his driving hand to fiddle with the radio dial. Then he hits the dash with the heel of his hand the way I've seen him do to the cigarette machine at the Central Hotel when it doesn't give him what he wants.

'I think we're in a dead spot,' my mother says. She's massaging her temples with the middle fingers of both hands, which means she has a headache, but I know she won't say anything about it.

Whenever my mother used to say she had a headache, my father would say, 'You've always got a headache,' or, 'Nobody could possibly have a headache every day,' or, 'I'll give you a reason to have a headache'.

Before we left, my mother told me that it's really important not to make my father angry on this trip and, that because I'm the oldest, I have to help her with my brother and sisters. In the back seat, my youngest sister, Dottie, has fallen asleep with her thumb halfway in her mouth. Katie is pretending to be a statue. That's what I call it when she sits really still and stares at something nobody else can see. My father thinks there's something wrong with her, but my mother says she's just a daydreamer. Lizzie is brushing her doll's hair, and Jamie is counting the cars that pass us going in the other direction, but he keeps losing track and has to start over.

I'm reading *The Incredible Journey*. When I reach the part where Tao the cat gets carried away down the river I have to stop reading for a bit, even though I know he survives because I've read the book before.

The road we are on winds between two rocky walls, and I wonder where we are. On the map, Ontario looks like a deer bending its head down to drink from one of the lakes. We live on the deer's nose, and where we are going is a small black dot on its shoulder, like a flea. I think we might be crossing the deer's forehead, which means we must be about halfway there, but when I ask where we are my father just says, 'A bit west of nowhere and slightly north of nothing'.

My father has an uncle who lives somewhere up north. The last time I saw him I was two and a half, the same age as Dottie. My mother says it's impossible, but I can remember sitting on my father's lap listening to him playing the fiddle. I remember the throbbing beat of feet keeping time on wooden floorboards and the smell of wood smoke and the softness of my father's flannelette shirt.

My father pulls the station wagon to the side of the road. He wants to take a picture of us and the rocks. We all have to get out on the driver's side of the car because the other side is pressed up against the rocks. The car is not quite all the way off the road.

‘Is it safe?’ my mother asks.

‘You worry too much,’ my father says.

Jamie and I climb onto the rocks. I want to climb higher, but my mother says, ‘Stop.’ She lifts the others up and stands next to us.

My father waits for a break in the traffic, then stands in the middle of the road. ‘Try to look like you’re having fun,’ he says. I wonder what would happen if my father got hit by a car. I don’t know how we would get home, because my mother doesn’t know how to drive. My father tried to teach her how, but he says she’s hopeless.

We leave the rocks behind and drive past walls of tall pines. After what feels like forever we pass a red-and-white sign that announces:

Welcome to

Bracebridge

Home of

Santa’s Village

You are now at the 45th parallel of latitude

Halfway between the North Pole and the Equator.

I learned all about latitude and longitude at school. Our teacher showed us how the lines of latitude are like stripes on a ball and how lines of longitude are like the segments of an orange. Together, the lines make a cage for the world to live in.

We stop at the Moose Motel. It’s a long, low building with red doors opening onto the parking lot. On one side of the motel there’s a cemetery and on the other side there’s a log cabin with a sign saying, ‘Taxidermy and Cheese Shop’. My father laughs.

‘What’s tax-i-der-my?’ I break the unfamiliar word into syllables like I’ve been taught.

‘Stuffed animals,’ my father says.

‘Not toy ones,’ my mother says. ‘Real animals.’ Then she adds, ‘Dead ones.’

In front of the motel’s office there’s a moose. It’s taller than my father and has horns like a giant’s hands.

‘Is it stuffed?’ I ask.

My father taps its back three times like he’s knocking on a door. ‘Fibreglass,’ he says. He goes into the office and comes back with a key tied to a piece of wood.

Our room has two double beds and a TV that only gets static and two stations. ‘We’ll eat at that restaurant across the road,’ my father says, jingling his car keys in his pocket.

‘Do you think that’s a good idea?’ my mother asks.

‘What’s wrong with it?’

'Nothing.' She's making up the fold-out bed that Jamie and I will sleep on. 'It just looks a bit fancy.'

Back home we sometimes eat at the Chuckwagon. It has booths with red vinyl seats and tiny jukeboxes on each wooden table. My father lets me put the money in the jukebox, and he tells me which buttons to push. He likes Johnny Cash.

The restaurant across from the motel is nothing like the Chuckwagon. The lady standing near the door calls my father 'Sir', and leads us to a big round table covered with a bright white cloth. I rub the fabric between my fingers.

'It's linen,' my mother says.

'Would you like something to drink?' The waitress is wearing a white blouse and black skirt and a wide black shiny belt. She smiles at my father.

My mother orders milk for us kids and water for herself. My father orders a whiskey. 'Make it a double,' he says.

My mother squints at the menu like it's written in a foreign language. 'I don't know what they're going to eat.'

'I'm sure you'll figure something out.'

By the time the food arrives my father has ordered a fourth whiskey. Dottie is rubbing her eyes with her fists. It's past her bedtime. Katie is just sitting there, not eating. I pick up some mashed potato on her fork and she opens her mouth like a baby bird. 'I don't like this,' Lizzie says, pushing her food around on her plate. Jamie reaches for a bread roll and knocks over his glass of milk.

For a second it's so quiet I can hear milk dripping onto the carpet. Then my father says, 'For Christ's sake. Can't you control those kids?' I can see the veins in his temples swell and beat.

My mother twists the beads at her neck so tight that I'm afraid she's going to strangle herself.

'What do you have to say for yourself?' My father says this all the time. My mother either says, 'Nothing,' or else she says nothing.

This time she says nothing. She just stands up, picks up Dottie from her booster seat, and turns away from the table. 'Come on,' she says. Katie and Lizzie and Jamie follow her.

I look at my father. 'Can I have the key?'

The sky behind the motel is the colour of summer melons: watermelon and cantaloupe and a tiny bit of honeydew at the bottom.

Back in the room, we get changed into our pyjamas and climb into our beds.

I watch my mother's night-time ritual. She rubs Noxzema in circles on her face, leaning towards the mirror until her nose nearly touches it. She brushes her long dark hair exactly one hundred times. She lines up the triangles on the child-proof cap of her medicine bottle, and shakes out two pills. She starts to push the cap back on, then shakes out two more, and swallows all four without water. She takes out her teeth and puts them in their special container.

Her goodnight kisses smell like eucalyptus. She turns out the light and lies down on the bed. I can tell she's crying by the way she hiccoughs when she breathes.

I lay awake, listening for my father. I hope that sleeping all in one room will keep me safe. One of my sisters turns over. Another talks in her sleep. Jamie knees me and mumbles something. I wonder what he's dreaming about.

I hear breaking glass and swearing. My father fumbles with the doorknob, and I close my eyes.

'I know you're awake,' he slurs. He stands next to my bed and I concentrate on keeping my breathing slow and even. He puts his hand on my shoulder. I don't open my eyes, not even when he lifts my hair and runs his hand over the back of my neck. Katie's not the only one who can be a statue.

He drops my hair and goes into the bathroom. He pees with the door open. It sounds like a waterfall. When he's finished he walks past me and rolls into bed beside my mother. I let go of the breath I've been holding. He falls asleep and I count his snores like sheep.

Early the next morning I creep barefoot from the room. Everyone else is still asleep. The north smells different, cleaner and crisper.

I circle the broken glass and walk past the row of doors towards the cemetery fence. There's a picnic table in the middle of the cemetery. I don't think it's supposed to be there. People have carved names and initials and words I know are dirty even though I don't know exactly what they mean. I lie down on my back on top of the table, covering up 'carol sucks cock', and look up at the sky.

Last night I dreamt that the moose was real and not made of fibreglass like my father said. I climbed onto the moose's back and we left the motel parking lot. We followed the white lines on the road. 'Where are we going?' I asked the moose.

'Home,' he said.

'How do you know the way?'

The rhythm of the moose's hoof beats lulled me to sleep, and I didn't wake up until we stopped moving. 'Why did you stop?' I asked, tapping the moose's back three times like my father. It really was made of fibreglass, and when I looked around I saw that we were back in front of the motel office.

I close my eyes and try to read the carvings like Braille, with just my fingertips. I feel an H and an N inside a heart, and then I hear my father yell my name.

I climb over the cemetery fence and run back to the room, forgetting about the glass.

My mother pulls the shard from my heel and uses a wad of toilet paper to soak up the blood. She puts on two Band-Aids in the shape of an X, like on a treasure map. I change out of my pyjamas into shorts and a halter top.

Back in the car, we follow the signs to Santa's Village like Hansel and Gretel following breadcrumbs. It seems to be taking a lot time to get there and I worry about getting lost. I like to know where I am.

Santa's Village is in the middle of the Enchanted Forest. The buildings look like fairy-tale houses and there are all kinds of animals like goats and llamas and miniature cows, and a big enclosure full of deer.

'They don't look like reindeer,' I say.

'Santa can't bring reindeer to his summer home,' my mother explains. 'It's too hot here for them.' My mother has an explanation for almost everything.

At eleven o'clock we line up to watch the parade. From a distance Santa looks convincing, not like the Santa who rides a sleigh in our town's Christmas parade who has a fat tummy but skinny arms and legs and a beard that looks like it's falling off. I want to believe that this one is real.

After the parade we visit Santa and Mrs. Claus at their house. We take turns from youngest to oldest. As I lift Dottie onto Santa's lap I search for clues in his face. His cheeks are rosy and when he laughs his whole body shakes. His beard is real, and more grey than white. It looks soft and I want to touch it to see if I'm right. My father doesn't have a beard, but his night-time whiskers scratch between my legs.

When it's my turn, I don't sit on Santa's lap. I tell myself that I'm too old.

'You look like a good girl,' Santa hands me a badge that says, 'Santa's Helpers Club.' 'What would you like for Christmas?'

I just stand beside him and shake my head. The cut on my heel throbs in time with my heartbeat.

Biographical Note:

Laura Kenny is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Queensland University of Technology. She writes prose and poetry, and her research is concerned with the representation of childhood trauma and its effects on a character's sense of place. Her autobiographical fictions have been shortlisted for the Josephine Ulrick Literature Prize and published in the Review of Australian Fiction.

Research statement

Research background

As an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse and a sufferer of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the paradox of the trauma survivor as articulated by Jenny Edkins—'it is impossible to speak, and impossible not to speak' (2003: 1)—is evident throughout my writing practice. My fiction is replete with characters who resemble me and share my experiences, and yet I struggle to overtly write my life narrative. Although the reasons behind this struggle are complex, I find that PTSD—which is primarily a disorder of memory, where memories of traumatic events are profoundly disorganised, poorly elaborated, and lacking context in time, place, and other autobiographical memories (Schönenberg 2013: 76)—renders traditional life writing—which is seen as linear, progressive, and coherent (Hyvärinen et al. 2010: 1)—impossible. 'The 45th Parallel' is a work of autobiographical fiction, which attempts to bridge the gap between the two impossibilities.

Research contribution

I define autobiographical fiction as writing that is presented as fiction, but that merges autobiographical and fictive elements. Meg Jensen suggests that autobiographical fictions concern the interplay between what the author knows and remembers and what she does not and may never know, and proposes that they are produced in a liminal space 'between one's felt life and a once-potential life now lost to traumatic experience' (2014: 714). In this liminal space, the encounter between myself as the author—who struggles with memory and censors her writing—and myself as the character—who insists on telling her story—allows me to access ideas, insights, and emotions I might never have acknowledged or even known I had. Therefore I am more likely to reveal something I would not have otherwise revealed. I contend that autobiographical fiction allows for the breaking of 'rules' that usually constrain life writers. Consequently, autobiographical fiction allows more people to tell their stories.

Research significance

This piece is part of a portfolio of autobiographical fiction, poetry, and personal essays, which when read together locates my trauma in the accretion of details within and across these writings. 'The 45th Parallel' was shortlisted for the 2016 Josephine Ulrick Literature Prize, and was peer reviewed before publication.

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