

# Five Miles 'til Kentucky

Ryley Fallon

—Short Story Competition

Her knuckles strained white from gripping the steering wheel, and she kept her gaze steady as her Honda Civic wound down an empty road. The sound of a morning radio show trickled in through the stereo, but Demi hadn't processed a single word. With nothing but the glow of the dash and the headlights present, the noise was out of place. Demi drove and drove through what seemed like a repeating loop of cornfields. She had grown up with the crops, but never had she felt so alone while surrounded by them. Driving in complete darkness felt like the stalks of corn might cave in through the windows and sprout up from the bottom of the car, leaving the vehicle disguised until harvest. She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks in the same way that the land of Lincoln would start to scorch under the rays of the sun in the next few hours.

She had to make it there—for Addy.

To distract herself from the unwavering line of crops, Demi glanced in the rearview window to look at her daughter. She saw Addy slumped in her car seat, with one of her chubby cheeks pressed against her shoulder. Every few minutes, Demi would hit a pothole, sending Addy's tiny eyelashes fluttering, but for now, she was lost in peaceful slumber. Her hair was disheveled and needed to be brushed. She was wearing nothing but a thin t-shirt, so Demi turned on the heat, even though it was the middle of summer, willing to do anything to keep Addy asleep, anything to keep her at peace. Watching Addy made Demi loosen her grip on the wheel. Her daughter had always given her a sense of clarity. In moments when it felt like she was being consumed by this place, by the corn, Addy's tiny hand was there to pull her out. Because of Addy, Demi had to make it to her destination.

Although Demi tried her best to ignore it, she could see her tank of gas dwindling. She would have made sure to have a full tank had she known she would be

trekking across the state, but she hadn't. She let out a deep breath, an attempt to steady her breathing. There had to be at least one gas station on the way. Growing up as an Illinois native, she knew this wasn't true; she knew that there could be nothing but corn for the next fifty, one hundred, two hundred miles. She didn't need it. After thirty minutes of driving with the gas light on, Demi saw a red Texaco sign glaring in the distance.

From afar, it looked like an evil entity waiting to seal their fate, but in reality, the gas station was a saving grace. When she arrived, Demi locked Addy in the car and went inside to pay, not wanting to wake her. She walked into the small convenience store with her fingernails buried into her palm. The sound of bells clashing against the glass door was enough to make her

heart race. Demi paid with a few crumpled dollar bills. The cashier smiled at her.

"Where you headin' to?" he asked, while printing her receipt.

Demi kept glancing over her shoulder to look at Addy, missing his question. She left before he could hand Demi her receipt. While she

pumped gas, she stared at the sun peeking over the horizon. Her time was running out. She needed to leave. She needed to be on the road, for Addy.

Demi was thirty miles outside of Kentucky when the sun burst out and melted over the horizon like butter on corn. The rays filtered in through the backseat window and landed on the arch of Addy's nose, just below her eyes. As time passed, the light grew brighter, waking her. Demi saw her reach for her stuffed rabbit but did not find it. Longing for her crib, she wailed out; Demi shushed her while trying to get her attention.

"It's going to be alright, baby. Listen to Mama," she said, her voice calm but strained. Demi bit her lip and prayed her child would stop crying. Her daughter's high-pitched screams pierced her heart.

**"How could anyone  
take away her child...**

**the child that she loved**

**more than anything**

**else?"**

“I want Daddy,” Addy screamed out, her cry at a higher pitch.

“No, you don’t, baby. Mama’s here now. Mama’s got you.” Demi reeled at the mention of “Daddy,” the only man capable of ruining her life. She had made one mistake, one mistake. She was better now. He was pushing for full custody, though. Addy’s screaming grew. Full custody. How could anyone take away her child, the child she carried for nine months, the child she had named after her grandmother Adelaide, the child that had her eyes, the child that she loved more than anything else? How could he do it? She pressed down harder on the gas pedal, now approaching other vehicles, tears streaming down her face.

“Twenty more miles,” Demi sobbed, praying just to make it out. Flashbacks from the previous night came flooding. All she could think about were the Cinderella bed sheets on her daughter’s empty crib. She did it for Abby. It was the only option she had. If she could make it out of the state, the odds of finding her dropped. Demi turned up the radio to drown Addy’s crying. Country music blared, filling the car with its steady strumming of guitar. One hand of Demi’s was now off

the steering wheel and on her face. What had she done?

Demi saw red and blue lights flicker in the corner of her eyes; she had run a stop sign but had not heard sirens over the music. She sank into her seat. This was it. She pulled over and attempted to wipe the smudged mascara from under her eyes. When the officer walked up, she pulled down the window, her hands shaking.

“Ma’am, are you aware that you just ran through one of the busiest intersections in town? You’re lucky that you and your baby didn’t get hurt.” After saying that, he took another glance at the backseat. She knew he knew.

“Ma’am, wait right here while I write you a ticket.” Demi knew an Amber Alert had probably been sent out hours ago. It was only a matter of time. As soon as the officer was far enough from her car, Demi took off her seatbelt. While keeping her eye on the cop, she slowly lifted herself up and into the back seat. She unbuckled Addy and pressed her into her chest. Addy had stopped crying and seemed calm. Demi stroked her tousled curls and rocked back and forth.

“Mama’s here now,” Demi said, her voice calm. △

## The Chris Read Award for Fiction

The Chris Read Award for Fiction, instituted with the 1994 issue of *Southern Voices*, honors a member of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science’s Class of 1991. Christopher David Read was an active leader at MSMS as a member of Emissaries, the Debate Club, and the *Southern Voices* staff. Chris’s first love, however, was writing. Southern style.

Chris often wove his Southern tales late at night. Chris would compose either on the computer or on (his favorite) the old, brown Royal typewriter he had bought from the pawn shop down 13th Street South. Faking sleep, I would watch the grin on Chris’s face as he worked out the next great story. When he finished, Chris would always “wake me” and excitedly read his new story to me. He never knew that I had been hiding, watching his creative process with admiration. I was not the only one to admire Chris’s work. This award stands as testimony to the admiration that we all held for Chris and his work and as a memorial to the Southern writing tradition which Chris loved.

Chris had the potential to become a great writer. Unfortunately, Chris never reached this potential: he was killed in a car wreck on January 17, 1993. Though Chris will never attain his dream of writing a great novel, all of those who loved and respected Chris hope that the recipient of this Award, as well as all the other aspiring writers at MSMS, will achieve their dreams.

Michael D. Goggans  
Class of 1991