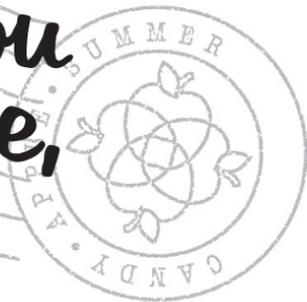


Wish You
Were Here,
Liza



by Robin Wasserman



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For Susie, who taught me how to make grilled cheese sandwiches over the campfire and didn't get mad that time I almost drove us off a cliff.

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Chapter One

Location: 35,000 feet above Ohio

Population: 347 passengers, 23 flight attendants, 2 pilots, 1 yapping Chihuahua in the carrier under the seat behind me

Miles Driven: 0

Days of Torment: 1

“In the event of an emergency landing, your seat cushion can be used as a flotation device,” the flight attendant announced as we took off.

I wanted to raise my hand. *I have an emergency,* I would have said.

I'm on the wrong plane.

On the wrong trip.

In the wrong family.

Stuck in the wrong summer.

*Just lend me a parachute, I would have said,
and I'll get out of your way.*

I used to like airplanes. The taking-off part was fun, like a lame amusement park ride. The food was gross, but there was always dessert — cookies or pretzels or candy bars — and, unlike at home, I was allowed to have as much as I wanted. There were people to eavesdrop on, bad movies to watch, and, if I was lucky, a pair of gold wings that I could pin to my backpack. It was pretty much the greatest thing ever.

At least, that's what I thought when I was a kid.

Turns out I was kind of a dumb kid.

Don't get me wrong. The plane wasn't the problem. Not the *whole* problem, at least. Yes, it smelled like BO. Yes, lunch was two pieces of stale bread with watery mustard smushed between them. (There was no way I was going to eat any of the other stuff they gave us.) Yes, the Chihuahua in the carrying case shoved under the seat behind me *Would. Not. Stop. Barking.* But I could have handled all that. *If* we'd been flying somewhere acceptable. Like Hawaii. Or Florida.

Or home.

I closed my eyes, trying to imagine that.

If I were home, I'd be at the local pool, stretching out in the sun, wondering whether Lucas McKidd would notice my new purple bathing suit. Or I'd be figuring out what to wear on the first day of camp. A counselor-in-training had to look the part. I would make my best friends, Sam and Mina, come over and —

That's where the fantasy cut off, like someone unplugged the power cord. Even if I *were* home, Sam and Mina wouldn't be there. Mina was at art camp and Sam was at the beach. They were both away for the whole summer — just like me.

“Liza, we have a surprise for you!” my mom had said, peeking her head into my room the day after my birthday. My father peered over her shoulder.

That should have been my first clue. If it had been a *good* surprise, they would have given it to me *on* my birthday, right? Instead of a new calculator and ten rolls of film for the decrepit, non-digital camera that I'd been begging them to replace.

My second clue? Surprises in my family are almost never a good thing.

Surprise . . . we're going to eat nothing but tofu and kale for dinner this month!

Surprise . . . Great-aunt Marge is coming to stay with us for two weeks, and you get to share your bedroom with her!

Surprise . . .

“We’re going on a family vacation — for the *whole* summer!” my mother announced, eyes glowing. My father beamed. I buried my head under my pillow, hoping I was still asleep.

I wasn’t.

When I came downstairs, my parents were in the living room, already planning the Great Gold Family Summer Vacation. All *two months* of it. We would fly to Chicago, rent a car, and spend the rest of the summer driving across “this amazing country of ours, seeing whatever there is to see.” (That was my father, digging through a mound of travel guides.) It would be a “once-in-a-lifetime adventure that none of us will ever forget.” (That was my mother, already making a list of “World’s Largest” tourist traps she wanted to hit: World’s Largest Bottle of Catsup. World’s Largest van Gogh Painting. The whole trip was sounding like the World’s Largest Disaster.) “And once we get to California, we’ll spend three days at the beach, just for *you*,” my father concluded. Like

three days at the beach would make up for *two months* of torment.

No amount of yelling, pouting, crying, or sulking changed their minds. It didn't matter that this was supposed to be my first summer as a CIT (not that I loved little kids or anything, but what did being a CIT have to do with liking little kids?). It didn't matter that all my friends would be here having fun without me (except Sam and Mina, but that wasn't the point). It didn't matter that I was starting seventh grade in the fall, which meant this was the perfect summer for a perfect first kiss (not that I told my parents *that*). It didn't matter that the absolute, very last thing in the entire world I would ever want to do was spend two months *trapped in a car with my parents*. All that mattered was that they wanted to go.

We went.

* * *

Location: Cheap-O Car Rental, Chicago, IL

Population: 2.8 million

Miles Driven: 0

Days of Torment: 1 (felt like 100)

There were a few small problems with the Great Gold Family Summer Vacation. For one thing, there was nothing great about it. For another, it

wasn't technically a Gold family vacation. At least, it wasn't *just* the Gold family.

Before I was born, my parents joined CRAWL, the Champions of Real America and its WonderLands. They had a fancy website and an official motto ("This land is your land"). But really it was just a bunch of people from all over the country who liked going on weird vacations to weird spots, like the National Presidential Wax Museum (Keystone, South Dakota) or the World's Largest Ball of Twine (Darwin, Minnesota).

When I was little, we went on a lot of trips with my parents' two favorite CRAWL families, the Kaplan-Novaks and the Schwebers. We went to Reptiland (Allenwood, Pennsylvania) where there was a machine that let you feed live crickets to a pet turtle. We made a pilgrimage to Mr. Muffles (Acushnet, Massachusetts), which was a roadside statue made out of old motorcycle parts. Three statues, actually: a man, his dog, and a fire hydrant. (You can guess what the dog was doing.) We saw the Whispering Statue in Barre, Vermont; the Snowmobile Museum in Allenstown, New Hampshire; and Frank Sinatra's used pink hand towel in Atlantic City, New Jersey, only an hour away from home. And then my mom switched

jobs, I went to camp, and for a few years we didn't go anywhere at all.

It was bliss.

But now that family vacation was back, the Kaplan-Novaks and the Schwebers were back, too. And so were their kids.

We met them at the car rental place by the airport. The office was as old and crumbly as the guy behind the counter. While my parents filled out forms for our rental car, I grabbed a paper cup of lukewarm water and ducked outside. The Kaplan-Novaks were waiting. I hadn't seen them in four years, but they were exactly like I remembered. Professor Novak had more hair on his face than on his head, and a permanently impatient expression, like he was bored with his whole life. His wife, Professor Kaplan, wore a red tracksuit and a black headband. It was the kind of thing you wore when you wanted to *look* like you were dressing casual. But there was nothing casual about Professor Kaplan. Even though they'd come all the way from North Carolina, her hair was perfectly smooth and glossy. Her makeup wasn't even smudged.

I wiped a sleeve across my sweaty forehead and tried to smooth down my frizz.

She gave me a thin smile. “Liza, I assume?”

I nodded.

“You’ve grown,” she said with faint surprise, like she couldn’t believe I’d done something right. Then she nodded at the two girls standing at her side. “You remember Dillie and Kirsten, of course?”

The Kirsten I remembered wore thick glasses and baggy overalls, kept her eyes on the ground and her voice to a whisper. But this Kirsten was just as pretty and polished as her mother, with wavy blond hair rippling over a glasses-free face. She was only four years older than me, but she looked like she was already in college. She gave me a fake smile, then rolled her eyes and went back to texting on her cell phone.

“Say hello to your friend, Dillie,” Professor Kaplan urged her other daughter. Dillie was my age, not that she looked it. She wore a neon-green sweatshirt with a hot pink planet plastered across the front. A moon-shaped pendant hung around her neck, and oversize green alien earrings dangled beneath her wild blond hair. I couldn’t imagine going out in public like that — not on purpose, at least. (I still had nightmares about the day I accidentally wore my teddy bear pajama shirt to school.)

Professor Kaplan nudged Dillie toward me. “You two kids catch up. Your father and I are going to go deal with this car situation.”

“Don’t forget, you said I could drive, too!” Kirsten said, without looking up from her phone.

Professor Kaplan and Professor Novak exchanged a glance, then sighed. They stepped into the car rental office, Kirsten hot on their heels. My “friend” and I were left alone.

“Isn’t this awesome?” Dillie said.

I looked around. There were junky cars, tired tourists, heat waves rising from the black cement — but definitely no awesomeness. “Um, what?”

“This!” Dillie rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. “I’ve been so psyched for this trip. I can’t believe we get to go away for the *whole* summer. It’ll be just like the old days.” She tapped her backpack. “I spent the whole flight reading about Route 66. Like, did you know it crosses eight states and three time zones? And we’re going to see them *all!* Awesome, right?”

“Right. Totally.” I was starting to get that feeling in my stomach. Like last summer at the amusement park when I’d eaten one too many bags of cotton candy.

“Of course, Roswell — that’s Roswell, New Mexico, UFO capital of the world — it’s not actually *on* Route 66, but Naomi and Peter — that’s my mom and dad; I call them Naomi and Peter, or sometimes Professor Kaplan and Professor Novak, which is kind of a joke, except they don’t think it’s funny. Anyway, they promised we could take a side trip to Roswell. Won’t that be cool?”

You never know, Mina had told me at our “See Ya Soon” party. (Because best friends never say “good-bye.”) *Maybe you’ll like them.*

Yeah, Sam had added. *You might decide to trade us in for new best friends.*

You’ve got nothing to worry about, I thought, missing them already. Sam, Mina, and I had promised to mail one another souvenirs, but I wouldn’t get mine until the end of the summer. (Since we were going to be moving from motel to motel almost every night, there was no way for me to get mail until we arrived in California.) No cell phones and no e-mail meant that I wouldn’t hear from them anytime before that. How was I supposed to get through a whole summer without my best friends?

“So, have you seen Caleb yet?” Dillie asked eagerly. (I was starting to remember that Dillie said everything eagerly.)

I shook my head, just as a silver SUV pulled up to the curb. The front doors opened, and Mr. and Mrs. Schweber climbed out, looking pretty much the same as they used to. Very thin, very quiet, very beige. I couldn't see Caleb through the tinted back window, which gave me a moment to hope.

Maybe he'll be cute! Sam had pointed out. *The two of you together, all summer long; you never know . . .*

Sam and Mina were convinced that Caleb would turn out to be my one true love. Sure, the Caleb I remembered was a short, shy, neat-freak, kind of lost inside his own head, but that was a long time ago. We hadn't seen each other since we were eight years old. Everything was different now, and maybe Caleb would turn out to be . . .

. . . exactly the same as when we were eight.

Same height, same clothes, same goofy smile. He climbed out of the SUV and pushed his glasses up on his face. He looked like Harry Potter. And *not* the cute movie version.

"Hey, Dillie," he mumbled. He gave us both a limp wave. "Hey, Lizard."

I leaned forward, hoping I'd heard him wrong. "Did you say —"

"Lizard!" Dillie squealed. "How'd I forget about that?"

“It’s *Liza*,” I said firmly. “*Not Lizard.*”

Dillie grinned. “Whatever you say, Lizard.”

When Caleb didn’t say anything, she gave him a friendly shove. “Yeah, *Lizard*,” he added. He smiled shyly at Dillie, like he was waiting for a gold star. “Whatever you say.”

Before I could explain to them that they were not, under any circumstances, to call me *Lizard* ever again, Dillie’s parents filed out of the rental place. Mine came out a moment later, followed by Kirsten. The adults were all chattering to one another about how exciting this was, how long it had been, how they couldn’t wait to hit the road, blah blah blah. . . . I stopped listening. I just stared out at the strip of highway that wound around the rental place, wondering how I was going to survive for fifty-four more days. I pulled out my camera and snapped a picture of the road. *The beginning of the torment*, I thought, assigning it an invisible caption.

And because I was peering through the camera lens, counting the cars driving by, I didn’t see the SUV door open again.

“Come on, Jake,” someone said. “You’ll have plenty of time to listen to the game once we get back on the road. Come out here and meet everybody.”

“Hey, everybody,” a low voice said. “I’m Jake. Guess you figured that.”

I turned around — and almost dropped my camera.

I felt like I was at the amusement park again. But this time, it wasn’t the too-much-cotton-candy feeling. It was that top-of-the-roller-coaster, stomach-clenching, scary-exciting, make-you-want-to-throw-your-hands-in-the-air-and-scream feeling.

“This is our nephew, Jake,” Mr. Schweber said. “His parents thought he might like to see a little of the country. Isn’t that right, Jake?”

Jake shrugged. “Whatever.”

Sam and Mina aren’t going to believe this, I thought.

He was *cute*. No, that’s not right. He wasn’t cute at all — he was handsome. Like, TV-star handsome. Bright blue eyes, shaggy brown hair, broad shoulders, and you could just tell he would have an incredible smile, even though he wasn’t smiling. That was the best part. . . . He looked just as bored as I felt. It was obvious he didn’t want to be here any more than I did.

It was starting to look like maybe, just maybe, this trip wouldn’t be so bad after all.