

“Get-Away”

I’m sitting here, folded up in the backseat of my mother’s silver Yugo, staring at my brother. Does he really think I don’t notice? His head is turned ever so slightly to the left so that his eyes just catch his reflection. He moves as if being instructed by a photographer, first tilting a little toward his right shoulder, then moving his chin down a bit. There, just right. He holds the pose, occasionally modifying his reflection with eyebrow raises and lip curls. I contemplate whether or not to break his intense concentration but opt for minding my own business. I’m not much in the mood for hearing yet another lecture about the importance of “the perfect look” so as to have the ability to “pick up the most righteous chick.” Please. There is absolutely not enough room back here for him, his hormones, and me.

“Sarah, hon, stop staring at your brother,” my mother says over her shoulder in her most condescending nasal voice. The confines of the small space amplify its annoyance and I reconfigure my “stare” into a glare. “Mother,” I begin, only to be cut off by Mr. Attention himself. “Yeah, Sarah, mind your own beeswax!” I roll my eyes and refrain from response, hoping to indicate my lack of interest in the matter. “Besides,” Andy continues, oblivious, as usual, to my apathy, “it is essential to develop the perfect look so that I can choose the most... *righteous*... chick... not that you would know anything about developing looks.” Pausing for dramatic effect, he then returns to his quest. I look to the empty seat in front of me and wonder which would be worse, staying crammed back here with Andy or taking shot-gun next to my mother. I notice her dimpled thighs seeping onto the passenger seat and decide I’m probably better off where I am.

“Sarah,” she says, flinging a map back at me, “look and see which exit we need next, will you?” We’re on our way to pick up my uncle Dirk. He lives in Springfield, Illinois. Land of Lincoln, wouldn’t you know. He even looks a little like Lincoln, I guess, tall and lanky, but no beard. Total opposite of my mother—makes you wonder which was adopted. Dirk, who I affectionately call Uncle Dorkus Maximus, really is a pretty quirky guy. Since we live about five hours away we usually only see him on holidays. Last Thanksgiving he thought it would be funny to “become one with the turkey.” And he did. Stuck his head up the bird’s ass and bopped around, trying to make it dance. I can still hear his muffled roars as the wings flopped up and down like a baby waving goodbye. “Dirk Theodore, take that bird off of your head!” Grandma yelled, trying to be stern but not able to suppress a smile. She reached her bony arms up in an attempt to rescue the turkey but could only reach his collar bone. Bringing her hands down with a huff she swatted his rear. “Better clean that thing out, boy!” she said.

I fell something slap my arm and realize it’s Andy hitting me with the map. “Hello, retard, mom said to look for the next exit.” Blanketing myself in a mass of lines and squiggles I find Route 97 and run my finger East until I get to the starred city of Springfield. “Exit 4,” I announce. “Oh, good!” she answered. “We should be there in no time!”

After we pick up Dirk we’re continuing on to the family’s beach house in Rhode Island. The whole family—all 11 of us—used to go there every summer until I was about five. I don’t remember a whole lot other than getting a lot of sand in my bikini bottoms and having lobster races before dinner. Uncle Tom would line them all up on

the kitchen floor and then stand by the huge silver pot of boiling water, waiting for the winner. It always amazed me how dark and ugly lobsters were until they got cooked. They then turned this bright Crayola shade of red-orange.

My mom veers onto the exit ramp and before long we're pulling into the rocky driveway of Dirk's ranch. He moseys out the front door with only a backpack and my mother throws off her seatbelt, rushing out to meet him. "EEEEEE! Honey! How are ya?!" she squeals. Her body surrounds him an embrace and his fingertips barely meet around her back. I can't make out his muffled salutations, but he offers a weak wave at Andy and me. "Oh, you look great!" she says. "Come on, throw that bag in the back and let's be on our way! Kids, you need to use the facilities?" Andy and I mumble a decline and I look at him with a worried glance. "This is gonna be a loooong car ride," he whispers with wide eyes. I nod.

Andy and I fought with her for an entire Monday about why she insisted on driving nearly a day when we could fly in a few short hours. But she just would not budge. Driving halfway across the U.S. to her was a "simply marvelous" idea that also enabled us to pick up Dirk on the way. At first our little get-away was just for the three of us, but Andy and I think Dirk's invite resulted in her perpetual desire for us to have a "male-figure" in our lives. Our dad left when Andy was three, but we've both managed just fine without him. And I'd rather be on my own anyway. But all mom's little magazines and self-help guides have convinced her we'll be emotionally unbalanced without both sides of the parental equation.

"Hey," I say as Dirk hunches over to climb in.

"Well hello there!" he says with a goofy smile, saluting as if I were a general or something. He plops down in my mom's relinquished driver's side, feeling around for the lever on the bottom of the seat. It flies at the way back, crushing Andy's knees. "Sorry, little buddy," he apologizes, scooting himself forward. A second later, "Mind if I tilt this back a bit?" Dirk leans into the back of the seat again with too much force and this time Andy's face greets it with an "ummphhh!" "Sorry, again, little dude," Dirk says with a chuckle. "No... problem," Andy mutters, turning to the window to smooth his hair. I smile and look out my own window to hid my amusement.

"Well, shall we be on our way?" my mother says with a hopeful grin.

"Yes, we're on our way... we're on our way today... let us not delay!" Dirk sings. He's always making up silly songs and rhymes and we've mostly grown to ignore them. He backs out of the driveway and we begin the 15-hour drive to Misquamicut.

She and Dirk commence in preliminary catching up and I lean back, relieved that his turn has come to occupy her for a while. My eyelids slowly fall and I am at peace... for approximately four and a half seconds. "Let's share stories!" I hear, jolting me from serenity. My mother turns to the back seat to get a better look at Andy and me. "Did we ever tell you the time when Tom and Michael tried to roll me up in the sofa bed?" Her eyes gaze out the window behind us, lost in memory. I can just imagine her helpless wails as her scrawny punk brothers wrap her in the sofa's flat mattress, pushing it mercilessly into the dark abyss of lost change and stale Cheetos. She continues, "Oh, they did that all the time, I guess, but Dirk here always came to my rescue!" She looks back at him and hits him playfully in the arm. "You've always been my favorite brother, you know!" Dirk sticks his nose up with a regal air and answers, "Well, I should think so!" Andy and I exchange eye rolls. I briefly flirt with thoughts of escape but I have no

idea where we are, and even if I did what would I do once I got out? Run a million miles home? I close my eyes and try to drown out the stories of Dirk helping her with this and Dirk showing her that. I've heard them all before.

Raindrops begin to freckle the tinted glass of the windshield and before long the sky becomes one big crybaby. It sounds like someone's dumping buckets of golf balls on the roof. The sounds of ABBA are drowned out and eventually die as Dirk switches off the radio, moving his hands to the ten-and-two position of the steering wheel. He sits perfectly erect, eyes straight ahead. "Water," he says, as if in the middle of some intense surgical procedure. "Preparing the water bottle," my mother responds, chuckling as she unscrews the cap to the Evian bottle. Dirk takes two precise sips and tentatively rolls them around in his mouth before committing them to his throat. Satisfied, he hands the bottle back and returns his right hand to "two." I watch, waiting for him to make some goofy face or crack a joke about the Towncar in front of us that is going five under. But he just continues to stare ahead. The skin on his knuckles begs for mercy as it loses all color. I scan my memory and decide that except for the one time he threatened to go find my dad and "give him what for," I've never seen him so... not *Dirk*.

The rain persists and the back tires struggle to follow the lead of the front and the cars ahead of us turn into fuzzy wetness. I say a prayer that I'll see my 19th birthday.

"Shit *shit* SHIT!" Dirk explodes, ending my prayer. I expect to hear horns blaring, tires squealing, and glass crunching as the car jerks to the right, slows for a second, then speeds up again. Andy looks at me and we share a moment of heart-palpitating anticipation before he breaks the tension. "What?" he asks, reaching for his seatbelt. It would wrinkle his shirt if he wore it all the time. "We missed the exit," Dirk says in disgust. *We missed the exit? That's* what caused him to get so worked up that I thought I was about to make an appearance at the Pearly Gates?

You might think someone believing they were about to die would feel relief at the mere missing of an exit, but instead I can sense the anger seep through my limbs, warming my blood and forcing it through my veins. I have to do something. Impulsively, I turn and slap Andy across his face. "What the hell are you doing?" he yells. "Kids, be quiet while Uncle Dirk is driving, we don't want to disturb his concentration," my mother says as if we are four. "And the weather's bad," she adds. Andy glares at me and this time I slide my fingers through his greasy 'do and shake them vigorously until his hair is one big mess. "Sarah!" he outrages, smoothing his hair with one hand and reaching over to pinch me on the arm with the other. "Seriously!" my mom says, throwing her hands up in disbelief. "What on earth has gotten into you two? Sarah, you—"

"Mother! Do you think I am four years old? I swear you treat us like—"

"Well if you wouldn't *act* like a child, I could—"

"Shut up! You don't understand—"

"Alright! Quiet!" Dirk finally yells. There is complete silence. The crescendo of my heartbeat rings in my ears until Dirk quietly interrupts. "Sara, don't talk to your mother like that." Excuse me? Am I being scolded by an uncle I barely ever see? I sit, dumbfounded, listening to the pounding of the rain, the swoosh of the tires navigating through wetness, and the click-clock of the turn signal as Dirk switches lanes. I am helpless.... Or am I? Recalling my original plan of attack, I spy Andy's right thigh and contemplate. Resenting submission to anyone, I extend my hand, fingers ready to inflict

pain. I give him one last hard pinch that results in a yelp, sending his leg right into the back of my uncle's seat. Dirk jerks forward and I watch his jaw clench as the car shoots from the left lane all the way to the shoulder. "Get out. Both of you. Get out!"

"But I didn't—" Andy begins to protest.

"I don't care! Get out of this car!" Dirk shouts. My mom takes a breath and looks like she's about to say something, like she might stick up for me for once, but as quick as her breath, the moment is lost. She looks at Dirk, who stares right back with eyebrows raised. This is horseshit. I open my door and step out into a blanket of rain. Andy does the same. Cars whoosh by and throw walls of wetness at us. Dirk tries to speed off however hydroplanes and the tires spit at us. Losing the effect of a grand exit I laugh and spread my arms out, twirling in the downpour.

"Great job, ass clown," Andy mutters as the foreign shelter slowly leaves us behind. I pretend not to hear. I am free. Andy grabs one of my wrists and forces me to look him in the face. "Stop that!" he screams through the sheet of rain between us. "Now what do we do?!"

I watch as the car moves further out into the dreary haze, but I'm not worried. It's *Dirk*, he couldn't possibly stay mad for long. Could he? We watch the Yugo shrink to the size of my smallest fingernail and doubt begins to form a rock in my stomach. We stare in silence until the brake lights turn a brighter shade of red. The lights then flash their hazard warning and Andy takes off running. I look around. There's nothing here that can keep me free forever. I follow. My Nikes squish with each leap, sending water bubbling up between my toes and threatening to drown my feet. I plop through puddles as cars and trucks race past me. Andy beats me to the finish line, and finally I, too, reach it, gasping for air.

He opens the car door and peers inside expectantly, saying nothing. His hair presses against his head like a soggy toupee and water drips off the end of his nose as he leans forward. I stay a step behind. "Get in," I hear. We do.

And I fold back into the confines of the silver smallness, breathing rapidly from out little jaunt down the highway. I have a strange satisfaction. Even if only for a moment, I got away. No one says a word as we listen to the soft return of ABBA from the speakers and the click-clock of the turn signal as Dirk merges back onto the highway.

-Shanna Bohdan