

## “Cows on My Side”

Julia looks out the window at the bruised sky hanging low over the endless cornfields and rolling hills. It's the kind of scene that's never fully appreciated for its self-evident beauty, but rather for the outpour of intractable memories it evokes. Every barn and farmhouse blends together into a rural metropolis defined by labor and practicality. The occasional tractor or combine meandering along the shoulder of the road with devil-may-care urgency always appears to be stuck in time, another still-life to be added to the gallery. It's all very interesting but not very interesting at all.

“Why do we have to drive halfway across the country for this?” Julia wines. “Can't I just stay home?”

The mother glares at her. “Julia, you have got to be kidding me if you think for a second that you are missing your brother's college graduation.”

“C'mon, it's not like he would even notice whether I was there or not.”

“We're already on the road. You're coming, and that's final.” The mother changes the subject. “Hey, can you help navigate? Why don't you reach into the glovebox and get the maps out.”

Julia rolls her eyes. “Ugh, do I have to? I didn't realize I was in geography class.”

“Unless you want to end up in the middle of some cornfield, then yes, you have to” her mother responds sharply. “Now, why don't you tell me where the next turn is.”

Julia wrinkles her face and finds the partially-torn map, squinting at it for a brief moment.

“Looks like we keep right on 94 E toward Billings? I don't know, does that sound right?”

Her mother frowns and scoops up the map with one hand while simultaneously gripping her coffee and the steering wheel with the other. “Honey, we’re heading west. Central College is west of us, you know that.”

Julia grins impishly. “Whoops, I guess I got my directions mixed up. Never eat soggy waffles.”

Her mother shakes her head. “Maybe you do need to go back to geography class.”

“Hey mom?”

“Yes dear?”

“How long have we been driving?”

“About an hour,” her mother answers, “still a long way to go.”

Julia crosses her arms and sighs. “Can we at least listen to something on the radio?”

Her mother nods and turns it on.

*101.9, feelin’ fine! I’m your host Chet Charleston, and I’m joined by my wonderful co-host, Serena Samberg. Serena, how are ya?*

*I’m doing well, Chet. On today’s segment, we’ve got an interesting question for all of our viewers: When did you first lose your virginity? We’ll be taking answers from the first ten callers, so call right now for a chance to be on air!*

Her mother hastily hits turns the dial. “What is this garbage? This would never have aired when I was your age.”

Julia giggles.

The next station is only marginally better.

*I'm Borris Crenshaw, and you're listening to 102.2 Discussion Hour. Today we'll be examining the history of atomic theory. We begin in the early 1800s when scientist John Dalton noticed that chemical substances seemed to break down into other substances proportionally, suggesting that each element is ultimately made up of tiny indivisible particles of--*

"This guy is so boring I could cry," Julia whines, "Next please!"

"It seems like there's nothing good on, why don't we pop in a CD?" Her mom replies.

Julia rummages around until she pulls out an old Bob Dylan CD, *Nashville Skyline*.

Her mom beams at her. "All right, nice! Put on *Girl from the North Country*."

They sit quietly as the song plays, fully absorbed in their thoughts. Outside, stalks of corn sway ominously in the wind like a set piece in a horror mise-en-scène. An old farmer sits on the porch of a farmhouse gazing off toward the naked horizon, checked out, inert.

The static scene brings out a combative caprice in Julia. "Mom, why can't I go on the Santo Domingo mission trip?"

The mother inhales deeply and looks at her. "We've already discussed this, you're not going."

Julia looks at her accusingly, "Why not? All my friends are going. Come on, this is the experience of a lifetime. Don't you want your daughter to grow up to be worldly and culturally-enriched?"

"I've already given you my reasons," the mother snaps back, "It's a horribly organized event with hardly any supervision, and every year there's at least one group that gets lost for hours. I don't want you to get kidnapped or assaulted or something."

“Come on, there’ll be chaperones with us at all times, what could possibly go wrong?” Julia whines, digging her sneakers into the dash in violent protest.

“A lot could go wrong, actually” her mother snaps curtly. “And most of the chaperones are practically children themselves. I don’t trust a bunch of eighteen and nineteen-year-olds to supervise you in a foreign city.”

Julia huffs loudly. “It’s just not fair mom.”

“A lot of things aren’t fair, *c’est la vie*” her mom replies, “maybe when you’re older you and I can go on a trip somewhere.”

Julia remains silent, staring at her mother in earnest with big blue eyes.

“And if you ask me one more time, you’re going to be in huge trouble young lady” the mother says, knowing full well she’ll try asking again on the way back.

The mother’s expression softens. “How about we play a game. It’s this game my sister and I used to play on long car rides; it’s called ‘cows on my side.’ The idea is as simple as the name suggests, you just count the number of cows you pass on your side of the car. But no guessing! You have to count each of them one by one. If you miss a cow, it’s your own fault.”

Julia laughs. “What, that sounds like the dumbest game in existence! How is that supposed to be fun?”

Her mother smirks at her. “Hey, it’s a way to pass the time. Take it or leave it. Oh, and one more thing. If we pass a graveyard, all of the cows on your side die and you go back to zero.”

“That’s so morbid!” Julia exclaims. “Okay, I’ll play. But only because there’s nothing else to do.”

She looks out the window again. A few minutes go by before they pass a massive industrial farm.

“Wow, looks like I hit the cow jackpot!” Julia cries, “One, two, three, four-”

“You better hurry it up and count them all before we pass,” her mother warns.

A little while later, and it is a close game. Julia has thirty four cows and her mother has twenty nine.

The stakes are high.

“Hey, let’s make a friendly wager,” her mother says shrewdly, “If you’re still winning by the time we turn off on 696, we’ll stop for a really quick bite to eat.”

Julia grins maniacally. “Deal. And I get to pick the spot.”

“Deal,” her mother answers.

Julia peers ahead down the endless stretch of highway. No farms, or cows for that matter are in sight. Victory is hers.

“Well mom, you better figure out what you want to eat at Poultry Palace, ‘cause that’s where we’re going” Julia crows haughtily.

Her mother gives her a slight wink, “Don’t celebrate just yet.” She gestures past Julia to the side of the road. Julia’s face turns white.

“A cemetery? Out here? But we were so close to the turn off.”

“You know what,” the mother says, “We’re making really good time and I’m hungry, so I’ll give you this one. Poultry Palace it is.

\*\*\*

“Hey mom, what was high school like for you?” Julia asks as she looks out the window intently at a pair of grazing cows as they merge back onto the interstate. “*There’s two more*” she thinks to herself.

Her mother pauses. “Pretty underwhelming if you ask me. I did well enough in school, but I can’t say that I had the best work-play balance. I think you’ll do better than me.”

Julia looks at her mother, intrigued. “Any advice?”

“Well, the best thing you can do is to enjoy the freedom from the responsibilities of adulthood. Time’s short, and it was only four years.”

She turns toward the passenger seat to look at Julia. “Are you nervous for your freshman year?”

“What, no way,” Julia says, still looking out the window. She turns to look at her mom with a sheepish grin. “I just wanted to know if you did anything really dumb.”

Her mother responds with a stern look. “Of course not. And I better not catch you experimenting with any ‘chemical substances’ like our friend John Dalton on the radio.”

Julia looks surprised. “What? No of course not, that stuff’s for hippies.”

They continue listening to the Bob Dylan CD; Julia’s eyelids are starting to get heavy.

The pungent odor of manure wafting in keeps her from fully drifting off, but it’s not entirely unpleasant. It’s just another scent in the arsenal of memories that every midwestern kid has. On this particular car ride, it brings to mind the dilapidated barn on Church road where she smoked her first cigarette a few months ago, a pack of Newports she had stolen from her brother. Thoroughly repulsed after a few drags, she tossed the rest of the pack in between two bales of hay and stamped out the lit cigarette. She finally understood why her mother constantly berates her brother about his smoking

habits - no good can possibly come from anything that squeezes the diaphragm like a juice press. Her mother was right about one thing at least.

“Mom, are we almost there?” She yawns, “I’m tired.”

“No honey, we still have a long way to go. Why don’t you take a nap?”

Julia sighs. “But I’m too bored to sleep. Did you pack my book?”

Her mother reaches behind her to the back seat and fishes Julia’s copy of *A Moveable Feast* out of her purse. She hands it to her.

“I’m not sure how I feel about you reading that,” her mother says, “I don’t like how Hemingway glorifies alcohol and gambling.”

“What, c’mon, it’s not even that bad!” Julia protests. “Plus, I just got to the most interesting part. It’s when Ernest and F. Scott Fitzgerald go to the Louvre to inspect the statues’ tiny genitalia after Fitzgerald admits he’s worried about not being able to satisfy his wife.”

“What?” Julia’s mom gasps, “I don’t remember that part. That is not appropriate for a fourteen-year-old; I don’t want you reading that filth!”

“Come on mother, don’t be so authoritarian” Julia responds sardonically, “Besides, it’s literary fiction, high art.”

“It’s horrid is what it is, give me that” her mom yells as she reaches over and tries to yank the book out of Julia’s hands. They struggle for a moment until Julia finally gives up.

“You’re damn right I’m authoritarian, I’m the sole dictator of this household” her mother says triumphantly.

“Mom, those aren’t even the same thing.”

“Don’t get smart with me young lady.”

“You’re the worst, I really hate you sometimes” Julia says, immediately regretting it after seeing her mother’s eyes ignite with fury.

“Don’t ever talk to me like that.”

Julia keeps pushing. “You know what, you never say yes to anything. Dad would have let me go on the trip, and he definitely would have let me read Hemingway.”

Evidently this strikes a nerve; the mother’s knuckles turn white as her grip on the steering wheel tightens. She slaps Julia across the jaw. Julia grinds her teeth and shuts her eyes hard, determined not to cry.

Neither of them speak for several minutes. Julia’s face is still smarting from the blow while the mother stares stony-faced into traffic.

“I’m sorry Julia, I overreacted there,” her mother confides, “I shouldn’t have hit you.”

Julia stays silent.

“We only have about two hours left,” the mother continues, “How are you doing?”

“I’m ok,” Julia answers, “I’m sorry too, I shouldn’t have started arguing.”

“It’s okay. Hey, I thought of something fun for you to do.”

Her mother digs through the driver’s side pocket and pulls out a transparent lock along with a handful of bobby pins and lockpicks. “Have you ever tried picking a lock?”

Julia looks dumbfounded. “So first you lecture me about reading Hemingway and now you’re encouraging me to be a criminal?”



Her mother laughs. “Of course not, that’s not what I’m suggesting at all. You asked me if I did anything bad in highschool. Well, a friend and I would always come to class with our bike locks and try to pick them. It annoyed the hell out of our teachers, but it was so much fun.”

“Wait, that’s all?” Julia guffas. “That’s nothing! I was expecting way worse.”

“I can’t demonstrate right now, but let me explain how it works” her mother says to her as Julia turns the lock over in her palm. “If you look inside, there are five pin stacks that are pushed down by springs, those are the pin-tumblers. The trick is to push each of the pins up so that you can actuate the locking bolt and turn it until it unlocks.”

“Cool,” Julia says, “but what are the bobby pins for?”

“Those are for putting torsion on the plug so that the pin-tumblers don’t slip,” her mother answers. “Here, let me see that.”

She takes one of the bobby pins from Julia and bends it into an L-shape. “Put the short end into the keyhole and fidget with it until you feel some resistance. Then you can go ahead and start working on the tumblers.”

Julia takes the bobby pin from her eagerly and fits it into the keyhole. She selects one of the lockpicks and begins tapping away at the tumblers.

Her mother looks over at her, “Nice job! Make sure you don’t push the pin-tumblers too far up or else they’ll get stuck.”

Julia is completely absorbed by her task, tap-tap-tapping each tumbler with surgical precision. She realizes her mother is still speaking to her and looks up.

“Oh, oops, yeah. I think this one’s stuck.”

“Yeah, that one’s pushed in too far,” her mother agrees, “here’s a trick: try letting up on the torsion wrench for just a second. Sometimes that drops the pin back in place.”

Julia nods and goes back to work. “Hey, that worked!” she says after a moment, smiling.

They keep driving along the packed interstate as Bob Dylan continues to loop faintly in the background. The sun has already reached its peak and is preparing for the inevitable descent. Julia remains engrossed in the challenge.

“It’s harder than the movies make it look, isn’t it?” her mother says sympathetically, “you’ll get it, just keep on trying.”

She looks over and realizes that Julia is asleep in a rather uncomfortable-looking position, head drooping to one side and arms akimbo. The mother smiles and runs her fingers through Julia’s soft brown hair. Julia starts mumbling in her sleep, something about cows. The mother takes the lock and tools from Julia’s lap. She turns the torsion wrench until she hears a satisfying click and the lock pops open.

“She forgot to rotate it when she was done,” the mother laughs to herself.

She turns off the radio, and they drive together in silence while Julia rests. A few hours pass before the mother gently nudges her daughter awake. Julia blinks away sleep and looks around.

“We’re almost there honey. I need my little navigator again.”

Julia nods and looks over at the drink holder where the open lock rests.

“Wait, mom, how’d you do that?” her eyes narrow, “Wait...did you use the key?”

Her mother laughs loudly. “No silly, you forgot to rotate the lock all the way when you were done. All I did was turn it.”

Julia looks at her excitedly, “Wait, I did it? I picked the lock all by myself?”

“Yes dear, it was all you. Now why don’t you take out the map and help me out.”

“Yeah, sure.” Julia squints at the map. “Looks like we get off on Exit 5 and take a left on--” she smiles maniacally “Cemetery Drive. Sorry mom, it’s on your side. Looks like you lose all your cows now.”

The mother opens her mouth in mock horror. “How dreadful! And here I was thinking I had won.”

They pull into a university parking spot at one-thirty, well before the ceremony is slated to begin. Julia and her mother get out of the car and stretch.

“Hey mom, that wasn’t too bad,” Julia says, yawning, “thanks for making it interesting.”

“Well thank you for coming along and being patient.” Her mother beams at her.

“As if I had a choice.”

“Nope, you didn’t. Now let’s go find your brother.”