

## **Brands of Escape**

In the Middle of the United States there is corn and, less ubiquitous, there are flowers, and the latter doesn't care whether or not you look upon them. I drive through Kansas, the middlest of the middle, and its middleness mocks and bites, as does all of the corn, which has husks that arch to steroidal heights too grand for a component of vegetable soup. But amongst the corn there are sunflowers, here there is a set of five, the fifth one bowed against the sky but all the rest friendly.

The drive through Kansas is so predictable that the throughway signage is moot decoration, since there are no exits in any of the cardinals, and no directions to go but onward. Kansas is encased in a metal of its own design, and the crop stalks are stolid bars between out there, and here - out here on the road.

The radio is worthless electron static, and its last utterance was back somewhere near the border where there were still semblances of planned communities, when a reporter that sounded both young and tired had lamented the recent anniversary of The Clutters.

Flowers and people tend not to look too much alike under ordinary circumstances. But under circumstances that are so terribly ordinary that they incarcerate the mind to deadness - extreme tedium so rare that it hits you like asthma - flowers and people start to look remarkably similar.

Which is what I think now, till I see that in fact this particular sunflower, the fourth of a set, has no petals but a human face, and that the face is attached to a human body, and that the sunflower is not itself but a girl. Who calls,

“Hey there!”

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And I have the sudden edification that she must be a farmgirl, she is probably freckled, this is her corn all around, or her father's. Mother's? It is unclear to me about the sexual dynamics of Middle American farming. But regardless she is in grayish dungarees, muddy round the ankles, has a hand up, and half her body is occupied by smile, which makes me slow the car.

I think about this Friday. I think about the girls at Tolley's Tavern, who might ask about this road trip, but who also might not. If they do ask, I will tell the story of an ephemeral relationship, an atavism from back when hitching was well and good. I will illustrate my overt friendliness and my adventurism herein, and this moment will suggest that I myself am well and good, and that the dreary purpose of this cross-country pursuit has not overtaken me entirely. I know that they believe that the deep dark nothing has entered and consumed me; but ladies, wait until you hear about this girl that I helped, and befriended, out in Kansas.

And so now I am pulled over, and the back door is unlocked. It probably has been, this whole time. I am barely stopped before she leaps in, crashes it closed. She says,

“Thank you! Thank you so much!”

And I look at her through my rearview. She is more teenager than girl, though she is freckled, and her smile looks like it's been granted an extended bedtime.

I ask where she is headed. She says,

“Anywhere! And you? Where are you going?”

And I almost tell her. But what sort of a new story would it be if the old one came round to haunt it and laugh and hog all the room? So I choose instead to tell her where I come from, which is a long way away, I say. The East Coast.

To which she seems astounded for many seconds, maybe nine seconds too long.

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So then there is a bit of silence. It waits for somebody to feed or water it. We both do: feed and water the silence. I remember that she's not told me where her home is, and since she looks keenly out the window now, like she's never seen such acreage before, I pay newly alert attention to the road signs. I look for an exit to a town, or a driveway to her family farm, and instead I see a green sign appear from the metal of the ants and the petals and the dew:

Kansas State Penitentiary, Do Not Pick Up Hitchhi-

The girl smiles again, it acquits half her body.

I wish now that she were a flower.