

EVA CIABATTONI

Aurora Borealis

In the parking lot of the Acme shopping center, your parents are loading bags into the trunk of your mother's dusty brown Dodge Dart Swinger. No one wants to sit behind your father, so you and your brother and your sister race to claim the least worst seats. Your brother reaches the door behind the driver's side first, clambers in, and sticks out his tongue at you and your sister as he pushes down the lock. You race to the passenger side, yank open the rear door graffitied with a slangy 'warsh me!', and gain the middle. The beige vinyl burns your skin through your flowered culottes, so you put your palms under your thighs. Your sister scowls and climbs in next to you. The parents take their seats: your mother behind the wheel so your father can comment on her driving technique. After lecturing your father about fastening his lap belt, your mother turns the key in the ignition and moves the lever behind the steering wheel into the R position. Your brother hums until your father asks if he is a girl. Your father fiddles with the radio knob until he finds the Cleveland Indians game. The Indians are losing, what else is new. The radio commentator could retire because your father does his own narration in German-accented English he doesn't realize is accented. As your mother cruises along a shipping lane on the ocean-sized blacktop, your father exclaims 'Cheese us, Christ!' several times.

At the stop sign on Tuscarawas, your mother waits. And waits. Your parents begin to argue about the proper amount of time to wait at a stop sign. Your mother says her driving teacher said to wait for one full minute at each stop sign. Your father asks if she is having an affair with the driving teacher. You stare at your knees where they are propped up on the hump over the drive shaft. You are very careful not to let any part of your body touch the brother on your left or the sister on your right not only because of cooties but because if you start to squabble, your face is the first one your father's sweeping hand will reach. He slaps like a bear swatting at bees. Your mother hits backhanded with a hard flat hand studded like a mace with rings and bony knuckles.

Your father is ordering your mother out of the car and insisting that she let him drive. He fancies himself an expert driver. When you are 17 years

old, he will try to teach you how to drive, but you are so focused on pleasing him that you cannot manage the various tasks of attention and mechanics necessary to both drive the car and win approval. When you take your driving test, you will get a perfect score on the written part, but barely pass the road test, then you will scrape a car in the parking lot of the DMV when you try to park the Swinger in a narrow perpendicular space. The photo on your first driver's license will show you wearing a hunted, terrified look, noticeable even under the afro of badly permed brown hair. When you buy your first car, a stick-shift, your roommate will offer to teach you how to work the clutch. You will back into her car because you are so worried about working the clutch that you forget about the brake. You will get several speeding tickets in your lifetime, but it's your sister who will end up in jail with a DUI. Twenty years after the bicycle accident that leaves your brother quadriplegic at age 22, a black SUV will run him over in a crosswalk, nearly killing him except that the heavy metal struts and tubes of his wheelchair absorb the initial impact. Since his bones have become as brittle as clay flowerpots, the doctors don't bother to set them. Even if a cure for spinal cord injuries is discovered, it will be too late for your brother who has shards instead of bones in his legs and hips.

Your parents are bickering about who got the better score on the driving test. The car behind you is honking in staccato blasts, unnerving your mother who jams the lever into Park and steps out of the car. Your father shoves his bulk across the front bench, moves the seat back as far as it will go while you and your siblings pull in your knees, and begins to roll forward. He likes to play games, your father. He spends a lot of time assuring others that his games are amusing. Your mother is trotting after the car and calling your father's name as he pulls away. You are yelling for him to stop too, but inside your head where nobody can hear except you. The car horn behind isn't honking anymore; it's blaring in an unceasing monotone. A glimpse in the rear view mirror shows the honking driver red-faced and yelling, the wife beside him looking shocked. They don't understand the game. Finally your father stops and lets your mother get in. He flips the honking driver the bird, steps on the gas, and peels out of the parking lot. The tires don't screech on blacktop oozy and bubbling from the heat.

Your mother fastens her seat belt, slowly, deliberately, with a 'Click' that sounds like the hammer on a pistol being cocked. Your father turns the ballgame up louder. Dennis Eckersley personally fails your father

when he lets a batter on first. Your father wonders if Eck is on his period. You touch your finger to a tarry stain on the side of your white sandals. Suddenly your mother says, 'You are just like your father.' Her repertoire of insults relies heavily on unfavorable comparisons. Your father does not want to be like his adventurous, tyrannical father, who had many women, but only one wife, and lived in Africa where he managed a banana plantation for the Fyffe Banana Company, and flew his own plane until it crashed into a mountain.

'Just like your father,' she repeats.

'Don't get emotional,' says your father. 'It was a joke.' It sounds like 'choke.'

Your mother is quiet, but only because she is selecting her next barb for maximum damage.

'You have no sense of humor,' your father adds.

'Hitler,' says your mother. 'Hitler liked to joke too.'

'You compare me to Hitler now,' says your father and twirls his right index finger while pointing at his temple. To make sure she understood, he tells her that she should have her head examined.

'You're the one who needs a psychiatrist,' retorts your mother. 'Crazy doesn't run on your side of the family. It asks for asylum.'

'Better than the witness protection program!'

Your father chuckles at this incomprehensible remark.

'I should have married the architect,' your mother mutters.

'He married your sister.'

'Not that architect.'

You can tell she got to him because he starts picking his scalp like he does when he's upset. Dandruff and scabby bits begin raining on your brother. Your sister gives a triumphant smile. She got the prime, flake-free seat after all. You stare at your knees, wishing that they weren't your grandmother's doughy knees, wishing that you had coltish legs with dainty kneecaps, wishing that you had stayed home to re-read old Nancy Drews instead of coming along to the Acme so you could read the latest issue of *Seventeen* cover to cover while your mother shopped according to the coupons she clipped and your father hid boxes of Ding Dongs and Ho Hos under the jumbo pack of toilet paper. At the checkout, your mother discovered the contraband and insisted that your father put the boxes back because she didn't have a coupon for Hostess brand products. From the magazine aisle, you could hear your father rumble a retort. You hoped none of your classmates were at the Acme. You walked out with

your head ducked, pretending to be engrossed in the speckled floor tiles but then it occurred to you that other teenagers would not come to the Acme with their parents on a Saturday morning. They have more interesting lives. They have friends.

On Saturday night, while other parents are at the movies, your father will pick a fight over how much money your mother spends on groceries. Your father will read each entry in your mother's checkbook like he is cross-examining witnesses. Your mother will defend them, reminding him about the Ho Hos and Ding Dongs for which she had to pay full price and which he has already demolished. She will remind your father how much more money other men make when they can get along with their bosses. She needs to distract him so he does not find out about the silver tea set she hid under her bed after she bought it on layaway. Your mother dreams of serving high tea on a crisp white tablecloth with lacy tatted edges to refined people who will sip, pinkies-extended, from porcelain cups thin as eggshells and compliment her on the pastries she baked for the occasion and admire how well the pretty dress she sewed herself suits her petite figure and how charming her children are—not you and your brother and sister, but the children she should have had that her sister got.

After he passes the IGA Foodliner mega-grocery, your father slows down to pull into the Sinclair gas station. Your mother tells him she filled the tank two days ago but he drives past the pump and around to the side of the white-washed cinderblock hut sheltering the cash register. Leaving the ballgame on and rolling down his window so he can keep track of the meatballs Eck is serving up to the batters, he gets out. You don't know what he is planning to do. Anything could happen. A Martian could land on the Dodge and begin dancing a jig. The Indians could start scoring. Your father could return to the car with ice-cold sweating bottles of Coke for everyone. You're betting on the Martian.

Your mother is more predictable. You know, for example, that your mother will creep into your room tonight, that you will pretend to be asleep while you hide the transistor radio under the covers, that you will pretend not to see the crack of light around your door widen into a wedge, that you will ignore the creaking of the bedsprings as your mother sits down, that you will try to shift your legs away from contact with her, that you will ignore her repeated throat-clearing, ignore her whispered 'Are you awake?,' but succumb once she starts to sob into her hands. You know that you will listen to her tell you how mean your father is and how she will file for divorce on Monday morning, first thing, because she

really means it this time, and that she will storm out of your room angrily when you fail to deliver the correct answer to her question of who you will choose to live with after the divorce, her or your father, because you alone of her three children are old enough to have to stand in front of the judge in the divorce court and announce which parent you will choose to live with for the rest of your life. No matter how many A's you get, this question stumps you. You think of the judge sitting high above you on his bench, asking you to choose a parent, and both of your parents waiting to hear you say their name, and you begin to cry. The next day your mother will lavish attention on your brother and sister and pretend not to notice you. You will offer to bring her tea, do her hair, wash the dishes, bathe the cat, dust the knick-knacks, ride your bike to the convenience food mart, shave your head, walk over hot coals, dangle from a cross in the front yard, anything to get her to look at you again. Finally she lets you iron your father's shirts, so you set up the ironing board in the basement next to the washer and dryer. Your father's shirts are enormous as you unfurl them over the ironing board, careful not to let a cuff drag on the basement floor. It takes a long time to press the cuffs and collars where they have bubbled away from the stiff iron-on interfacing, iron the sleeves so there is no crease, then smooth the acres of material across the back, and navigate the button-studded front – all without creasing what you've already ironed. Sometimes the iron snorts and spurts brown drops of rusty water onto the shirt; then you wash out the stains and begin again. As you finish pressing each shirt, you drape it on a hanger and fasten the top button. The walls are moist with the damp that seeps in from outside; the air smells moldy. Your father comes down, turns on the Indians double header, and begins grinding the mirror he is working on for a new telescope. In order to carve out the perfect parabolic concavity he moves around the upturned 55-gallon drum in slow circles with the glass disk under his palms. After you fold away the ironing board, you carry the freshly pressed shirts smelling of starch and penance upstairs and hang them on your father's side of the closet. Your brother and sister are watching television in the living room with your mother and no one says anything when you slide in at the very end of the sofa. When you laugh at the program, you will laugh loudly enough to feel like you are laughing with everyone, but not so loudly as to stand out. Your mother will not sit on your bed for a few nights. You will miss feeling special.

At the gas station, no one says anything for a while, not even your mother. It's hot in the car; the air drifting in your father's window is hot

too. Your hair sticks to the back of your neck and a bead of sweat rolls from your armpit down your side as though trying to tickle you. You don't wear sleeveless tops anymore since your mother pointed out the chubby rolls of flesh by the armholes. The Indians give up another run. You can almost picture the Martian. You hear the trunk open behind your head. Your mother turns and asks if you put the cat out. The cat has a habit of soiling rugs and furniture with foamy, grass-laden vomit. There is no place to hide from the twin spotlights of your mother's eyes that can illuminate all the dark places in your soul and ferret out the lies that hide there like cockroaches. She doesn't need to hear your answer because she already knows you forgot on purpose so you can see her on hands and knees scrubbing the vomit that no one else can clean properly. When you arrive home, you will find the cat sleeping peacefully on the bed where you left him, but no lack of vomity evidence can expunge your crime. The trunk bangs shut and your father re-enters the car holding a half-eaten Ho Ho, its foil wrapper pulled down like a banana peel.

'Plenty of air in the tires,' he says.

A quarter mile past the Sinclair, the car bounces over the train tracks. You have never laid a penny on the tracks, waited for a train, and then hunted for the flattened disc of copper flung between the tarry railroad ties but a boy in your class with hair and freckles the same color as the penny has. You held that thin piece of metal and thought how much you liked the boy who brought it to school, but he is interested in flattening pennies not kissing girls. And you kept your face as blank as that coppery surface, so the boy could not possibly guess that you liked him. You would rather die.

Your father turns left and begins driving along the county road that runs parallel to the train tracks. To the right is a cornfield. The corn is so high you can't see over it. In the winter, the smokestack looms over the fields of stubble shorn stiff like a crew-cut. The smokestack belongs to the paint and dye factory. It will come to light that this factory has contributed to the high rate of cancer in the area. The factory will deny it, then punish the town by laying off all the workers and moving to Mexico. Nine months before his retirement, your father will die of brain cancer, the tumor sending cancer cell shrapnel throughout his brain and starting baby cancers everywhere. The illness will come to light when the police call your mother because your father got lost on the way to the Acme. Your mother will enjoy being a widow far more than she enjoyed being a wife.

The sky is white, the glaring and hazy white of midsummer. The lazy

ochre plume from the smokestack looks like smoke rings before fading into a yellow smudge against the white sky.

It's another mile to the intersection where your father will have to cross back over the railroad tracks.

Your mother turns around and asks if you wrote a birthday card to your cousin Victoria.

'Mm,' you say, hoping that it's not a lie if it's unintelligible.

'My sister says she didn't get a card from you.'

'I sent her a card!' you say and cross your fingers because you mean last year. 'Besides, when's the last time she sent me a birthday card?'

'Do you know how busy Vicky is? Cheerleading, band, school plays, homework.' Your mother ticks off her fingers from pinkie to index finger. 'Friends,' she says tapping her thumb. 'Lots of friends.'

'I'll write her when I get home,' you promise, hoping she will turn her interrogation eyes elsewhere.

'She even has a boyfriend. One of the most popular boys in the school.'

When you squirm; the vinyl seat with your sweaty legs stuck to it makes a farty noise. You pretend your brother farted by saying his name loudly and with disgust, but you can feel the heat rising up your cheeks all the way to your scalp. From the look in your mother's eyes, you know why no one wants to be your friend, much less your boyfriend. You long to be like Victoria with her long blonde hair and tiny waist and real breasts in a silky bra like the ones featured this month in *Seventeen*. The fleshy pods on your chest look nothing like breasts and you wonder if something is wrong with you. You will hear all about Victoria's prom night and prom dress and prom date. You hope that something bad happens to your cousin Victoria, not really bad, but bad enough that she will turn to you and say that you are the only one who can help her with the bad thing that happens to her. And of course you will help and Victoria will notice how nice you are in real life and offer to do your hair and you will be best friends for the rest of your life and godmothers to each other's children. And then everyone will like you because if Victoria does, then it must be okay. What really happens is that you see Victoria at weddings and funerals with her handsome doting husband and she will ask about your sister and not you and never even mention getting together.

The first boy who kisses you is Jeff G.; he will want to kiss you one night the summer after you graduate from high school. He has a full beard that feels like scratchy wool against your face. You kiss chastely until he

slips his tongue between your lips. Relax, he says and goes back to kissing you while his hands brush over your breasts and up your legs. Around midnight you will end up swimming to the dock in your underwear and going all the way on the swaying wood planks. Jeff G. asks if you would like to go steady with him, but you are accepted at a college out of state and you are determined to go. You agree to go steady for the summer and it is nice. Better than nice. All summer long you lie to your parents about working extra hours at the fast food restaurant. But Jeff G. can't make you stay when September comes. You decide that it is better to leave and not look back. You still believe that you are destined for great things; otherwise why would you have had to endure the last 18 years? After the internet is invented and you are married to a man who never kisses you, you will look up Jeff G. on your high school's web site. You will find out that he died and you will be glad about the night at the lake with the light from houses and streetlamps broken into thousands of twinkles strewn across the dark surface of the water. You are lonely in a world that no longer includes Jeff G.

As your father turns left toward the tracks, the crossing bell begins to ring. Your mother is warning your father to stop and wait out the train; she cannot resist adding that he is as reckless as his father.

Your father eases the car toward the train tracks with your mother screaming what an idiot he is, just like his father. He has both hands on the wheel so the dandruff storm has subsided, the flakes disappearing into the synthetic carpeting like melting snow. The people in charge don't install a crossing gate here until the Jones boy gets himself killed.

To the right, still far away, you can see the bright headlamp of the locomotive. Trains are very long in the Midwest. You've counted up to 129 wagons, and debated with your brother if the caboose counts as a wagon. Your father does not want to be trapped waiting for 129 wagons with names like Southern & Pacific or Erie-Lackawanna to pass. He wanted to be an astronomer, but his father made him be an engineer. Your father understands the phase and movement of every constellation, moon, planet, comet, and star. As he trains the telescope mirror he ground and polished in the dank basement on the night skies, he says each star's name lovingly, like a father: Aldebaran, Betelgeuse, Rigel, Bellatrix, Arcturus, the Centauris: Alpha, Eta, and Epsilon. When you are sixteen, he will wake you up to show you the northern lights undulating across the back yard like a green phantom curtain stirred by a gentle breeze.

Aurora Borealis

‘Aurora borealis,’ he says and for a moment you imagine he is saying your name. You roll the words around in your mouth, savoring them. They are the most beautiful words you ever heard. This will be what you call yourself, the name you don’t tell anyone else. You want to go outside barefoot and run through the billowing green folds of the ephemeral curtain, but you don’t dare with your father so close behind you. So you continue to stand at the bathroom window wondering how much longer before he lets you go back to bed. It’s only after his death that it becomes your favorite memory of him.

Your father lets the car roll onto the tracks. All he has to do to get to the other side is step on the gas pedal, but instead he stops the car. *Aurora Borealis* runs through your mind like when the needle gets stuck in the groove of a record. *Aurora B. Orealis*. You suppress a laugh as jagged as a sob.

The train horn lows.

Your mother is shrieking at your father to get off the tracks. ‘Plenty of time,’ your father says, looking straight ahead.

Your brother has started to hum again. He rocks slightly, a faint imitation of the constant rocking he did in his crib. Your sister stares at the train like it bores her. You will find out that she knew where you hid the key to your diary and that she read all your mournful secrets out loud to her friends. She has not read anything you’ve written since the diary. When you tell her you are a writer, she will tell you to get real employment. She does not know the name of your novel. If she knew you were writing this, she would kill you.

One day you will wonder why you all sat suspended in the Dodge like insects in amber, why no one wrenched open a door and ran. Maybe the train will flatten you all like a giant penny that the copper-headed boy will find in the weeds growing beside the tracks. He might hear about your death, walk past your empty locker, and never know you are there, in the flattened metallic brown disc that used to be a Dodge Dart Swinger. Your mother turns around and says your name and catches you in her unblinking gaze. She looks like she is struggling to say something. She has never told you she loves you so perhaps that is what she is trying so hard to say before the train blasts the car and all of you to smithereens. You wonder if she will tell you that she loves you, that it was all a test like in a fairy tale and now it’s over and you have passed and you are really a princess and she loves you. Maybe she loves you best of all and was so worried about playing favorites that she was extra mean to you so nobody

would find out. Yes. You are sure of it. She is going to say she loves you. Nothing else would be this hard for her to say. What will you do then? She will expect you to answer in kind and you don't know if you can without more time to think about it. Then she will be angry, retract her 'I love you', and another crime will be chalked up on your record. You decide you can say 'me too' and have your crime reduced to a misdemeanor. The words are jostling behind your lips like parachute jumpers about to launch themselves into hostile territory. The train is close enough that you can see a tiny trainman sitting way up high. Your mother speaks above the clattering wheels and the mooing horn of the onrushing train.

'Aurora borealis,' you blurt out, unable to hold back the words, your secret words, at the same time your mother tells you the cat is going to starve, locked in the house like that, with everyone dead.