

Driving Blind

My father taught me how to drive a car with his eyes closed and I don't mean that in a metaphorical sense. His eyes were shut throughout most of the exercise. Not because he was scared. Or nervous. Or insane. He simply preferred to do most things he liked that way: listening to jazz music, talking on the phone with a friend, eating a newly ripened peach over the sink. *Don't you want to keep your eyes open just this one time*, I asked when he took me out for my first real parent-sanctioned drive. *For safety's sake?* He shook his head slowly, mouth turned up in a contented smile and answered the same way he always did when we asked him why his eyes were closed. *I am savouring the experience.*

Full disclosure: before our first real lesson, I had driven before. Twice, actually.

First time: It was summer and my friend and next-door neighbour, Marcy and I were waiting for her mom, Francine, to get off the phone so that we could go downtown and get a popsicle at the MiniMart. While we waited one hundred lifetimes, Marcy double-dog-dared me to get behind the wheel of her mother's car and drive the length of her driveway and back. It was 1980. I was eleven years old. My thighs squeaked as I slid them across the sun-heated Naugahyde bench seat and reached up with my hand to pull the stick down to shift into drive. I was tall for my age so my foot fit on the brake like Cinderella's slipper. I pressed it gently and it obeyed my command by moving forward slowly with an ease that surprised me. The car inched magically towards the front lawn and the shed at the end of the driveway. Lucky for me, when Marcy's mom got off the phone and I pumped the brakes, she was too distracted to notice that her car had moved ahead two feet. And with the exception of bruising my knee on the drop-down ashtray, the entire enterprise was surprisingly effortless. Plus, as an added bonus: we didn't get busted and got a popsicle at the end. Success!

Second time: Not as smooth. It was a few weeks after my sixteenth birthday and my father decided to take me to a dirt road by the dump outside of town, in order to "see what I could do" behind the wheel of his Pontiac Parisienne. My mom would have been my first choice for this task but she is away indefinitely in the city "finding herself." While she is looking, I am stuck with Mr. Savour-the-Experience. The driving I do on this road is more "lurching" and less "driving". Gas, thrust, stop. Breathe. Gas, thrust, stop. Dust rose up behind us like steam and all matter of insects- fly by in my peripherals like an invisible bully is pitching them violently at our car grille in order to thwart us. What are the correct things I should be paying attention to, I remember thinking? Where should my eyes be looking?

Am I doing this right? I ask finally aloud, my eyes glued to the road like a scene in a horror movie. *Is this even driving?* When I find the courage to peel my eyes away and glance over, my dad's eyes are closed but this time only because he is laughing so hard. *This is driving*, he says, matter-of-factly. *It's not remarkable driving but it's driving!* It's in that moment that I decide: I will only be taught to drive by someone who has not had a hand in making me.

But that plan goes up in smoke when my dad has a stroke the month before school starts and I miss the registration date for the driver's education course. When the bell rings after school, my friends rush in giggly packs towards the parking lot and their practice cars while I race home to make sure my dad hasn't burned down the house making a cup of tea. He nearly sets the kitchen on fire on his first week back from hospital when he fills the kettle and places it on high on the stove. The problem being that it is a plug-in. Marcy's dad, Tom, hears the fire alarm, races over to find my father slapping the flames with a dishcloth, throws water on it and goes straight home to have a shot of vodka to calm his nerves. The story spreads more quickly than the fire and before too-long, two stove-top kettles get mysteriously left out on our front porch. Francine, digs a third out of her camping stash and thrusts it in my hand after school one afternoon without looking me in the eyes. I am learning that my dad isn't the only one who does stuff with his eyes closed.

When people drop by to visit my dad, they are always pleasantly surprised - relieved, even - when they see that he looks exactly the same as he had before it all happened. Then he opens his mouth to speak and what comes out helps them understand why he needs to stay seated for a while. He forgets what time of day it is. Or that he used to smoke cigars. Frequently, he calls me by a name instead of my own. *Nancy. Cheryl. Cecelia.* When I correct him, he waves his hand like the error is a bad odour, like he meant to say the wrong thing. Once, he asks me to fetch his wallet and when I return with it, I find him in the middle of the kitchen with a carton of eggs in his hand. What he really meant to ask for is the frying pan. We are the blind leading the blind.

Instead of thinking about how horrible this is, I throw myself into house work. Cooking, cleaning, mowing lawns. There was a beautiful sense of peace in it. *Your house has never looked better*, Francine said when I returned her camp kettle. *Not since your Mom left*, is what I knew they wanted to say. Instead, I just nodded my head and said thanks.

When my mom first left, we used to hang out in Francine's car. Sunk down low in the seats, this is where we went when we wanted to get away from things. For Marcy it was chores and annoying siblings. For me, it was a phone call from my mother who called frequently to check in. The questions were awkward because they were the wrong ones.

What does your dad make you for dinner? Are you making your bed? These are the hot topics and not, *Want me to tell you why I left without telling anybody?* On her end, it was about how interesting her training course to become a flight attendant is and how she would soon be hired to work transatlantic flights. Hiding out in the car seemed like the better option.

One Sunday, the earth shifted on its axis when we fished out an eight-track tape from the floor of the passenger-side front seat from underneath a tsunami of crushed pop cans and ripped up napkins. Two women stared up at us through a gauzy haze on the cover -one blond, one brunette- their wild, raw beauty rendered us almost speechless. *Oh my God*, Marcy said in a whisper. *They aren't wearing any tops.* I grabbed it and stared, me eyes focused on the band's name written just above the women's hair in bold red teenager-y script: *Heart*.

We are gonna have to listen to this, Marcy said and I paused for a minute to consider. Francine's car didn't have an eight-track player but my mom's did. I didn't like to go in there because it smelled like her.

You wouldn't have known from looking at it that my mom's car hadn't been driven in more than three months. The ashtray was overflowing with butts, lipstick traces clung to the ends of filters like evidence of a crime. I fished the key out from under the mat on the driver's side, turned the key until the engine shook to life and stuck in the eight-track.

The gentle guitar sounds hit us first, followed by one voice as clear as a crystal stream. Soon another joined in, clearer still. The brunette, then the blond, maybe? What did it matter? It was perfect.

*Heading out this morning into the sun
Riding on the diamond waves, little darlin' one
Warm wind caress her
Her lover it seems
Oh, Annie
Dreamboat Annie my little ship of dreams*

Though still in the seats, we were traveling without moving, the voices a gentle breeze that we floated on for twenty straight, glorious minutes. When it was over, Marcy summed it up best. *I felt those girls' voices in my vagina.* I laughed but I knew what she meant. I was hearing girl power. I wanted it but my mom wasn't around to tell me where to find it.

The first “official” time: This is the one that takes. It happens two months after my dad comes home when I grow tired of getting groceries on my bicycle. I decide that we will drive two towns over to get our weekly groceries. It’s not too far and I have only driven two times before but I justify it by telling myself that we will go slowly and take back roads where there are fewer cars. Plus, not too many people know us there and I can avoid the looks of pity I get when I am buying milk.

It’s hot in the enclosed cab of our Pontiac Parisienne when we head out. I turn the key in the ignition and the car roars to life. Exhaling slowly, my breath comes out in a long, shaky stream. I place my hands at ten o’clock and two o’clock just like the manual tells me. I’ve been studying it at night and sleeping with it underneath my pillow in a gesture of hopeful magic. It must be working because the car moves like it did that day in Marcy’s driveway. We move past the mine entrance near our house and the refinery on the right that casts its early evening shadow over the pavement. We glide past the ski hill where my dad used to drop me off on the weekends to ski with my friends, lonely now and overrun with weeds. Maybe I will drive everyone there this year, I think. Or maybe my father will be driving by then. I look over at him with his eyes squeezed shut and know this is wishful thinking.

Watch your speed, my father says out of nowhere. I look down at the speedometer. I am slightly over the speed limit. How does he know? I am being careful. I slow my speed anyway, check the rear view mirror and thank my lucky stars that there are no cars on the road. *And leave your hands at ten and two*, he adds for good measure.

We arrived at the store without incident. And so it goes for the week after, and the week after and the week after that. Even after he makes a full recovery, we continue on our grocery rides. At school, I hear my friends’ Driver’s Ed stories - about their instructor’s bad breath or how they muff up parallel parking and may never get it - and they sound like children’s myths. Somewhere along the road to get groceries, I stopped being a teenager and became a grown-up. My dad’s eyes may have been closed but mine were wide open. I didn’t know it at the time but we were both doing the same thing: savouring the experience.