

Learning to Drive

“There!” My father wheezes heavily from the passenger seat. “Turn there!”

He pokes me hard in the rib with a brittle, broken fingernail. He tries to point towards an unmarked road on our left, but he can’t lift his crepe-skinned, purple-blotched arm high enough. His elbow quakes above the center console, then plunges back into his lap like a downed fighter plane. His twisted fingers twitch, then relax. He looks away from me, out the window. How easily he gives up! He is nothing like the booming-voiced, manicured, square-fingered man that has poked me in the rib so many times before. I glance at my eyes in the rear-view mirror, tuck a wiry strand of grey hair behind my ear, and notice that my crow’s feet don’t disappear when I drop my victory smile.

I do not take the turn.

We drive in silence with the air conditioner blasting and the windows rolled up against a muggy, Michigan July. I am still in my work dress, but I have switched from pumps to sneakers for the drive. We still have 19 miles to go along Fleming Lake Road, a two-lane thoroughfare that leads from my parents’ neighborhood to anywhere we might be going, which today is my father’s new apartment at the Woodford Hills Memory Care Center.

Fleming Lake Road is not the fastest route. There is the Evergreen Highway, a straight shot across the southernmost part of the county, that runs roughly parallel to Fleming Lake Road and would shave off 8 or 9 minutes of the drive. But locals never take the Evergreen Highway, because there are not enough exits. You have to go way past the dry cleaners or shopping mall or car dealership or movie theater and then backtrack along Fleming Lake Road to get wherever you are going. Even when traveling longer distances or to neighboring towns, locals prefer the

rubber-band give and take of Fleming Lake Road, taut in some spots with angry drivers, big box stores, strip malls and honking horns; loose and easy at others, a meandering tour of local lakefronts, open fields, family-owned diners, and single-story homes.

I take Fleming Lake Road out of habit. I have traveled along this road for 62 years. When I was in fifth grade, the whole road was repaved, a few miles at a time, and when it reopened it was not quite the same. At first, it was uneven and jarring. It jostled me around the back seat of my mother's car on the way to school, making me sleepy and irritable. But over the years it smoothed out and mellowed into a gentle vibration that numbed me and drowned out everything else.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

Fleming Lake Road is so familiar I barely notice it anymore. Not the kids on bikes or the steady buzz of the crickets or the backyard swimming pools or the yellow dandelions or the grassy green smell of fresh cut lawns or the damn mosquitos or the squirrels or the stifling absence of a breeze. All I ever really notice when my father is around is my father, including a nerve-prickling awareness of whatever he is or is not noticing about me.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

That day, for the first time in a while, I notice the rhythm of the road as my father and I head away from my parents' home for the last time. It is a rhythm of waiting, always waiting, for something. For a punchline. For the final act. For Godot. For the other shoe to drop.

About halfway through the drive, we approach the cemetery where we buried my mother last year. My father is unusually quiet, and I am surprised to find myself wishing for Richard

Payne's typical irritating chattiness, his name dropping, going on and on and on about the various idiots he has to deal with while doing all the important things he has to do.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

We reach the intersection of Fleming Lake Road and Hillside. On the southwest corner is the cemetery, a vast expanse of grass and stones behind a massive, wrought iron fence. My mother's grave is on a hill facing Hillside, overlooking the very spot where my father and I abruptly ended our first trip to the same cemetery 47 years earlier.

I was 15 years old, just a month away from getting my driver's license. My classmate, Claire Vinegrad, had committed suicide after a fight with her boyfriend. Claire and I weren't friends. I barely knew her. But I had never known anyone who died, and I felt sadder than I'd ever felt before. A lot of kids were going to the funeral, and I wanted to go too. Dad didn't want to take me, but he relented once I reminded him that I needed to get my driving hours in to get my license. He was tired of driving my ass around, he admitted. He agreed to let me drive to the funeral and back if I paid him \$2 for gas. He would wait in the car.

So, I drove. Dad rode in the passenger seat. I put my turn signal on as I approached Hillside from Fleming Lake Road. I stopped at the red light, relaxed my grip on the wheel, wiped my palms on my pants, and waited.

Dad poked me in the rib, then pointed to the right. "You can make a right turn on a red light here," he said.

I thought he meant right now, so I turned. Turns out, that's not what he meant.

As I pulled on to Hillside, there was a terrible screech. My father grabbed the dashboard and braced himself. He looked intently into the passenger side mirror at whatever was

happening behind us, locking his arm on the dashboard as if awaiting an impact. It never came. A Lincoln Town Car that was driving in the oncoming traffic lane seemed to brake hard as I continued past it. Then I heard a huge BOOM and the piercing sound of metal scraping on concrete. I didn't know what happened. I didn't turn around or look in the mirror. I heard the sounds but felt nothing. What I mean is, I felt the absence of anything that I could associate with the sounds. The sound of a crash but no crash. Dad is fine, I said in my head. You are fine. Dad's dark blue Ford Fairmont is fine. Everything is fine.

Dad poked me in the rib and pointed to the freeway on ramp on the right.

"Go," he said. "Go home."

I went straight to my room. My father headed for his.

"Why isn't she at the funeral?" I heard my mother ask.

"She changed her mind," my dad said. Then he closed the bedroom door.

That night, I laid in my bed and listened in the dark as my parents watched the news in the living room.

"A sad update on a story we brought you earlier this evening," a reporter said from the news desk. "Police have now confirmed that a second person has died as the result of a head-on collision on Hillside at Fleming Lake Road. The crash happened around 3:00 this afternoon. Police say a sedan, unknown make, model or color, was heading south on Fleming Lake Road when it made a right turn onto Hillside, directly into the path of a pickup truck with a male driver and two male passengers, all in their early 20's. The truck swerved into oncoming traffic and collided head-on with a Lincoln Town Car that was approaching from the opposite direction. A passenger in the truck was ejected and died at the scene. A 42-year-old female, the

driver and sole occupant of the Lincoln Town Car, was transported to the hospital with life-threatening injuries. Police now report that she too has died. The driver of the truck and the other passenger were treated for minor injuries. Police are withholding the involved parties' identities until they have notified next of kin. The investigation is ongoing. Anyone who witnessed the accident or has information about the sedan is asked to contact the Hillside Police Department."

Dad never said anything about it. For the first few days, every time we were with mom, he gave me a look that I thought meant to keep my mouth shut. But after a while, I wondered if maybe it didn't really happen. Maybe I made the whole thing up. Maybe it was just a coincidence that there was a double-fatal accident right around the same time I turned right on a red light.

One month later, I got my driver's license.

Then 46 years went by.

We drive past the cemetery. From the hilltop, my mother taunts me, haunts me, makes me wonder if she knows in death what we kept from her in life. This is my father's last chance to explain. It is my last chance to understand.

He leans his head against the window and closes his eyes.

His silence is intolerable. Maybe it's all just too much for him. What if he doesn't bring it up?

It must be killing him, the way it is killing me. He's got to be feeling the same growing tension I feel as we get closer to the Woodford Hills Memory Care Center, the pressure to say something, the need for closure, or something. Something. It builds in my chest, feels fiery

against my skin, like 46 years' worth of silence is about to erupt from inside of me. I look at him with his eyes closed and wonder if he's trying to think of what to say. My heart is pounding. Will he notice my sweaty fingers gripping the steering wheel so hard, the way I am sitting up so erect, my edginess?

He lifts his head and clears his throat. I feel his eyes on me. I try to focus on the road as I wait for him to speak. He angles his fingers along my back, beneath the ends of my overgrown hair, then lifts a handful of my grey split ends in his palm. He looks at me. I inhale sharply. Here we go.

"You're too old to wear sneakers," he says.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum. He drops my hair and his arm falls back into his lap. He winces as he looks at my waistline, or the spot above my waistline where a bubble of fat spills over the top of my high compression shapers and bulges out from under my dress. I step on the brake. In my peripheral vision I see his disapproving squint.

He says, "You really let yourself go, didn't you?"

He brushes some lint off his pants and looks back out the window.

Maybe he doesn't remember.

Six miles to go. Now dad is back to his usual self, looking straight out the window as he talks on and on, narrating every thought in his head, stream-of-consciousness style with no breaks. He loves the sound of his own voice and thinks that everyone around him finds his meandering prattle as fascinating as he does. Here he goes, talking away, caught up in his own story, talking to me but not really me, because I could be anyone with ears. He goes on and on about Beverly from Beverly Hills, a woman he met in line at the grocery store. She told him all

about her recent move to the Woodford Hills Independent Living Home (connected to the Memory Care Center where my dad is going but he doesn't understand the difference or care) and suddenly he wanted to move there too. For the entire year since my mom died, I'd been trying to get him to look at the place. Wouldn't listen to me. But then Beverly, who he mistakenly believes is from the California Beverly Hills and not the tiny Michigan town with the same name, chats him up at the grocery store, and, well, she is a classy lady. If Woodford is good enough for her, it must be pretty fabulous.

Beverly, Beverly, Beverly. Beautiful Beverly from Beverly Hills. That's all he is talking about now. A woman he has known for three weeks, spoken to six times on the phone. A woman who might live at Woodford Hills with her husband, for all my father knows. Beverly is all my father wants to talk about as 86 years of his life fade away in the rear-view mirror.

I say nothing out loud, but in my head, I say "WOW, DICK! WOW!! THAT'S SO GREAT DICK! I WISH YOU AND BEVERLY THE BEST! CAN'T WAIT TO MEET HER!" (No one calls my father Dick, not to his face anyway.)

Two miles to go. My rigidity is gone; I am now slouched towards the steering wheel from the weight of my lungs and my upper back. As dad chats away, my silence settles in my chest, a hollow ball.

One mile left. Who am I kidding. I know exactly what my father will say if I bring up the accident. He'll say he did it for me, that he told me to go home just to buy me some time to think about it, to make a plan. He'll say he didn't tell the police - or my mother - because he thought I would make the right choice. He'll say he was shocked and disappointed that I never turned myself in, that it speaks volumes about my character, that he does not know how I am

able to live with myself. He'll ask, "Didn't you wonder, every time the phone rang, every time someone knocked on the door, if they figured it out? If they were coming to get you?" Then he'll ask, "didn't you ever think about what you did to that young man's family? Or the teenage girls left behind by the woman you killed?" He'll tell me that it wasn't his secret to tell, but "do you have any idea what position you put me in? All these years I've had to live with the fear that your mother would find out. It tortured me, the mess you made. There was no way out. It would have broken your mother's heart to know that you killed two people, but keeping it a secret? That would have killed her." This is what he will say if I bring it up. If he remembers.

We pull into the circular driveway in front of the reception area for the Woodford complex. I stop the car. Dick pokes me in the rib. "Get my stuff," he says, then steps out of the car. A staff member approaches with a luggage cart and takes my father's things out of the trunk. It's just one suitcase.

"Is there a moving truck coming?" He asks me.

"No, this is it," I say.

I think about how little my father has left; how much he is leaving behind.

Beverly walks out the front door, no husband in sight. She smiles broadly, her big, straight teeth unusually bright for a woman her age. She wears red lipstick and a powder-blue cardigan, and she opens her arms to embrace my father. Truth be told, she does look pretty classy. My father smiles and hugs her back. They walk in, arm-in-arm, leaving me behind. The attendant follows with the luggage cart and waves me off.

"I've got him from here," he says. "I can get him settled in if you need to get back on the road."

I pull onto Fleming Lake Road and start the long drive home. I roll down my window and stick my arm out and notice a breeze. Bright green grass blankets the earth on both sides of the road, cut in park-like perfection. I love Michigan summers, Fourth-of-July nights when it stays light outside until 10:00 p.m. A few miles down the road, an entrance to the Evergreen Highway is set off by perfectly trimmed hedges, surrounded by a gorgeous carpet of marigolds.

At the last minute I decide to go in a different direction.

I take the highway.

I let myself go.

Ba-dum bum.