

Driving Lessons

My mother whispered so that my father, who was resting in the next room, could not hear. “Sue, I am afraid to ride with Dad anymore.”

“Why, Mom?” I already knew the answer to the question.

Mother’s lips quivered and her eyes were downcast. “He just isn’t as alert as he used to be, and he drives too fast. Today he went through an intersection after the light turned red.”

“It’s time to end his driving days, isn’t it, Mom?”

“He won’t like it,” she replied, her lips trembling.

“We’ll try to do it in a way that doesn’t destroy his sense of dignity.”

“How?” she asked.

I shrugged. I had no idea.

“And he would never let me drive,” she said.

She was right. In all the years I had known my father, he always took the wheel, unless he motioned one of his daughters into the driver’s seat for a driving lesson, or he designated a son-in-law to enjoy the thrill of operating his high-performance engine. On all other occasions, even now with an oxygen tank strapped to his side, he alone carried the car keys and he alone turned them in the ignition.

It soon became apparent that the solution was to turn to Dad’s personal care physician, Dr. John Smith. He was convinced that the doctor’s wisdom extended far beyond medical matters.

Dad was due for a regular check-up in a few days, and Mother asked me to come along. When we arrived for the appointment, the nurse called his name and ushered him and Mother

into the examination room. I waited outside the door for Dr. Smith to walk down the hall carrying his clipboard.

“I need to talk with you,” I said quietly.

The physician nodded.

“It’s my dad’s driving. Mom is afraid to ride with him. Neither of us can bring up the subject with him. We know he will respect whatever you tell him.”

“I will take care of it,” he assured me.

We walked into the examination room where Dad looked up at his doctor, happy to have the attention of his trusted physician.

When the doctor took out his stethoscope to check Dad’s heart, he directed the conversation to the topic my mother and I were waiting for him to discuss.

“Did you drive over here, Wilbur?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Well, the sound of your heart tells me that you shouldn’t be driving. You see, your heart rhythms are irregular, and the stress associated with operating a vehicle could cause another heart attack.”

Dad listened in silence. His weathered hands clutched the side of the exam table.

“If you were to be involved in an accident that injured another person, the victim could press charges. Your insurance company might not cover costs.”

Dad looked out the window. I wondered if he had even heard the doctor.

“Would it be possible for you to arrange for other transportation options?”

Dad breathed deeply and turned his eyes back to the doctor. “Yes, I can do that.”

Dad’s slow, shuffling footsteps sent hollow echoes through the waiting room and out into

the snow covered parking lot. Mother followed him, carrying his oxygen tank, and watching to see which side of the car he would approach. Keeping his head low under his NRA baseball cap, he reached for the keys in his pocket and handed them to me. He opened the car door on the passenger side of the vehicle and lowered himself unsteadily into the seat. Mother slid into the seat behind him.

I watched his stoic expression and could not read the emotions behind his eyes. He had too much respect for Dr. Smith to say that the doctor was wrong—something he would have quickly concluded about anyone else who had delivered such painful news. He faced forward in the car, no hint of anger or resentment in his demeanor. I wondered where his mind was taking him, a mind still sharp despite physical infirmity, a mind that had been so fiercely independent in days past.

“Dad,” I began, “what do you think?”

“About what?”

“About what Dr. Smith said. About driving.”

With a sigh and no change in expression, he softly responded, “It’s okay.”

“Will you miss driving, Dad?”

“No. No, I’ll be all right. It’s okay, Sue.”

As I drove us home, all of us were preoccupied with our own thoughts. Only the oldies station broke the hush of our journey. My mind traveled to earlier times when Dad’s driving had been so dependable. During the years of elementary school, Dad would abandon his farm work close to dismissal time to climb into his truck and motor the three miles to my country school. When the teacher dismissed us and I raced outside, Dad would be firmly situated in the driver’s seat, smiling broadly at me as the truck radio warned of an approaching storm.

In December of 1959, Dad had to steer our family through a frightening time. Having just buried her younger sister, whose untimely death was the result of uterine cancer, my mother had discovered that a tumor in her own womb might also be malignant. Through the long day of Mom's operation, my sisters, our grandmother and I paced the old wood floors in our farm house. When at last the winter twilight dropped into darkness, we pushed our faces up to the window panes, anxiously peering through the night for Dad's headlights to illumine the ruts of our gravel lane. When we finally saw the beams of the big Oldsmobile, an overwhelming mixture of fear and relief engulfed us. Dad was home. Soon we would discover Mom's prognosis.

His footsteps crossed the threshold and he dropped his felt hat and shrugged out of his wool overcoat. "She will be OK," he said. "There was no cancer."

My grandmother had to hear it again. "No cancer?" She longed for reassurance. Burying one daughter had been a tragedy of immense proportions. Thoughts of losing a second child to the same disease had left her with sleepless nights and constant worry.

"No," he said, "no cancer."

In the days that followed, as we arranged the silverware for dinner and filled the glasses with milk, as we swept the crumbs from the kitchen linoleum and hung the bed sheets out on the clothesline, we eagerly looked forward to Mom's homecoming. But on the anticipated morning, a whirling December snowstorm was pelting the windowpanes. Hustling down the creaky stairs, I searched Dad's impassive face for an answer to my question. "Will we still go to get Mom?"

With calm assurance, he replied, "Yes, we are still going."

Out on the road, the snow plows were pushing aside the newly forming drifts. The wipers swished in an arc across our windshield and on the radio, Bing Crosby crooned, "I'm

dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know.”

“Quit dreaming, Buster,” Dad said, “cause you’ve got it!” We erupted in peals of laughter, and suddenly the snow-packed roads to the big hospital two hours away were not as terrifying. Dad’s driving would be fearless, no matter what the weather. With his hands tight on the steering wheel, no treacherous roads could harm us. The warm interior of the car cocooned our family against the turbulence that raged outside.

On my sixteenth birthday, a whirling snowstorm shrouded our country roads at the end of the school day. Once more, the family car was idling outside when I slung my book bag over my shoulder and slogged through the snow of the school parking lot.

On our way to the driver’s license examining center, I concentrated on acquiring that coveted rite of passage, my own license. For the past several months, I had tentatively pushed on the accelerator while Dad instructed me to slow down for the curves, flip on my turn signal at least 50 yards ahead of a turn, and yield to oncoming traffic. Since I was the oldest child in the family, this was Dad’s first attempt at driver education, and his student was eager to take the final exam.

The driver’s license examiner looked up at us when we entered the cramped room and stomped the snow off our boots. “What a terrible day for a driving test! You just couldn’t wait, huh, kid?”

Of course I couldn’t wait. And after successfully passing both the written test and the driving test, I was on my way home with the new driver’s license tucked securely in my wallet. Dad smiled. He had taught me well. We had both triumphed.

When my high school sweetheart and I selected December 28th for our wedding nuptials,

we had no thought of threatening weather. So the three-day blizzard that began on December 27th took us a bit by surprise. It was an intense storm, beginning sheets of ice and then layer upon layer of heavy white snow. The wedding guests were calling. Were we going to postpone the nuptials? But marriage celebrations are so highly anticipated that cancellation was unthinkable, and all of the participants were in town, so we donned our festive apparel.

While we had been applying mascara and squeezing our toes into pointed high heeled shoes, Dad had been mounted on his old red tractor, sweeping ever higher piles of white to the sides of our lane. When Mom stepped out the door and called to him that every last hairdo was coiffed and every cheek was rouged, he hustled out of his coveralls and straightened his tie to chauffeur all of us to the little church in the village where I bravely clutched his arm and, taking a deep breath, let him guide me between the rows of pews to the altar in the front.

A year later, my new husband and I were living on his family farm, and I was teaching at what was then Central Grade School. On a morning in early November, my pupils and I looked in wonder out our classroom windows as lacy snowflakes covered the ground. Students were dismissed by 1:00 PM so that buses would be able to get them all home before the wintry blast made the roads impassable. Grabbing some ungraded spelling tests and my car keys, I slipped and slid to my car. The old bald tires were a stark reminder of just how unprepared I was for this new development. How would they ever gain traction on the uphill climb to my farm home? Just as fearful tears started welling in my eyes, I saw him. There in the parking lot, parked right by my little Corvair, was my dad's car, and Dad was in the driver's seat.

“Leave your car here,” he said, “and I will take you home.”

Weak with relief, I collapsed into the passenger seat of his sturdy Oldsmobile . Noting the gathering storm clouds, he had switched on the old Philco in the kitchen to find out whether school would be dismissed early. He had pulled on his boots and latched each buckle before beginning the winding drive to town from his farm twelve miles away. Wisps of smoke had drifted from his muffler as he watched the fully loaded school buses crunch away. He had waited for one other child, his own daughter, a new teacher vulnerable in the first blizzard of the season.

All the way home he instructed me in the intricate maneuvers that were essential when driving in fresh snow. Take a run at the hills. Keep a steady, reasonable speed on the curves. Stay in the wheel tracks of a previous traveler. And, Sue, get those snow tires on before the first of November. Bald tires in the winter are an invitation to trouble.

As winter followed winter, Dad guided me through the storms, always dependable, always just in the place where I needed him. But now, in this winter of his declining health, the drive was up to me. I had to take the wheel from my dad, the one whose stalwart, capable skills had sustained us on so many precarious journeys.

The winter after Dad passed, upper air disturbances dumped ice and snow upon us in one stormy weather system after another. One January day, as I walked out of the grocery store with my mother’s weekly provisions, another unpredicted clipper was unloading heavy wet snow on the parking lot and car roofs. I tugged open the trunk and loaded the bulging plastic bags from the shopping cart. Chunks of ice fell off the rear bumper as I slammed the trunk. The radio DJ warned

of another six inches of snow by midnight. I slipped and spun my way the five blocks to Mother's house and fish-tailed into her drive-way. I regained my composure by recalling my father's steady voice cautioning me, "Don't apply the brakes when you start slipping. You will be all right in snow as long as you stay calm and follow the front tires to their natural stopping place."

Many years have come and gone since those first driving lessons. I have buckled up beside my children and tenderly tucked grandchildren into their car seats. I have considered the unknown future and wondered whose hand will receive my car keys when I need to relinquish them. I think of my father. Until that moment when he handed me the car keys after his visit with Dr. Smith, he had been teaching me how to drive. When he put his car keys in my hand for the last time, he taught me how to live.