



Back Seat Driver

by Kerri Devine

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"You're drifting," I say.

My daughter is driving us across the bridge connecting downtown Charleston to Mt. Pleasant and the suburbs beyond. A learner's permit is tucked inside her wallet in the center console. Hands at 10 and 2 o'clock, she's navigating the right lane, veering slightly toward the railing that guards the pedestrian path 600 feet above the Cooper River.

"Easy!" I say.

The Ravenel Bridge is a striking feat of design engineering appearing like two massive sailboats against the southern sky. The "new bridge," as long timers call it, is a cable-stayed structure 13,000 feet long and eight-lanes across. Since it replaced the structurally obsolete and purportedly treacherous "old bridge" 20 years ago, it's been a boon to commuters, fitness enthusiasts, and Visitors Bureau bigwigs alike. Its majestic span over the Charleston Harbor marks the start of our commute from my daughter's school downtown to the quirky barrier island where we built our family's forever home. The bridge is beguiling for romantics and grievers alike. Today and every day, this compelling duality carries me through an uncertain passage between parenthood and the empty nest.

My daughter fingers the faux Tiger Maple steering wheel as we approach the convergence of lanes. Outside her window, cars speed past at 60 mph, positioning for advan-

tage. Outside mine, hundreds of cable spokes stretch from sky to pavement, where their enormous metal fastenings look like rockets ready for lift off. I want to launch myself off this bridge, back in time to when my daughter was a happy passenger in her car seat, kicking up her legs and singing "Coming 'Round the Mountain," to the soundtrack on our old CD player. A flash of brake lights disrupts the memory.

"Slow down," I admonish her, gripping my pleather armrest, my voice rising to match the urgency I feel.

"Mom, stop! I hear you. There is no need to shout."

Across the harbor, I spy the Carnival Ecstasy, one of a hundred cruise ships that drop anchor in our waters every year. I glance at my 15-year-old, turn up the A/C, and think how comforting a little drink on the Promenade Deck might feel right now.

Beyond the ship, a cargo liner is docked in the terminal. My daughter pulls close to a group of cars taking the curve. I flinch, grabbing the handle by the top of my door. She clicks her tongue. Though the sun is shining, I can feel the shade she's thrown my way. At the base of the off-ramp, the USS Yorktown stands watch. Nicknamed the Fighting Lady, the aircraft carrier is a source of pride for our community known as much for its genteel hospitality as for its place in military history. We shoot by in a war of words.

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Before we reach the end of the ramp, my daughter's reloading her cannons. "Stop sighing," she spits. "If you don't quit helicoptering, I will literally drive us off this ramp into the harbor."

Heat rises in my neck as we drive ahead in silence. My heart thumps in rhythmic percussion to the sound of the tires rolling over the surface of the road. Our argument is finished. But I'm instantly aware of all the ways lately I feel I am fighting myself. Nearly every day I resolve to relinquish control, to give my daughter the independence she wants. But then I become frightened, my natural inclination to protect her takes over and I do or say something I regret. I'm the backseat driver, the pest who sits on the comfortable cushions in the car ride of life and bosses everyone around.

"Stay in your lane," she tells me.

If only it were that easy.

Ten minutes later, we pull safely into our driveway. I'm struck by the beauty of our home, the stucco façade with its warm shutters and sentry palms. Suddenly I'm back in my old driveway in Florida. I'm 16, a new driver returning my father's green sedan from my job at Burger King to our driveway on 107th Avenue. Later, after a run to 7-11, my friends Mary Anne, Jana and I sit in the yard talking while my mother spies on us from behind the plantation shutters in our living room.

"What did I do now?" I whisper into the dewy evening.

My mother turns down the lights and adjusts the shutters so we cannot see her, but I know she is still watching, her dark lens that assumed the worst in people. I want to grab the keys from the damp grass beneath me, grab the car and my friends and drive away from the dark eyes hiding in that dark house.

The closing trunk jolts me to the present. I exit the car, help my daughter unload her backpack and dirty gym clothes, and begin to wonder whether a set of car keys was as disorienting to my mother as it is to me. In that same moment I realize I have inherited my mother's eyes, and her genetic predisposition for worry. *Why is this?* I speculate. Is it written in our DNA or just the inexorable tug of motherhood? Or is it the rush of time, the way a child's growth catches us off guard? One minute we're strapping them into their carriers. The next, we're buying car insurance.

I walk inside, down the long hallway, my daughter a full three strides ahead of me. Her pace is quickening—a step in the dance of separation we both have going. She retreats. I advance. She withdraws. I hover. The baby with whom I once shared my blood supply cannot get enough oxygen. And I cannot cut the cord. *My poor mother*, I think, as my child climbs the stairs to her room. *Did she feel as alone behind the living room shutters as I do now?*

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Later I'm on the phone—my weekly call with my friend Carrie back in New York. She's teaching her youngest, Jamie, to ride a bike. "Slow going," she reports.

"He'll get there," I say. "They all do." Then, my turn. In what seems like a single exhale, I tell her about the learner's permit, the driving school I'm about to enroll my daughter in, my long list of worries. "FIFTEEN," I shout into my cell phone. "What kind of lawless state is this that gives a *fifteen-year-old* permission to operate a two-ton vehicle?"

"Fifteen?" she repeats. "Crazy. Kids here don't drive 'til college. They Uber."

Despite my misgivings, I enroll my daughter in our local driving school, run by former cops, regrettably named "911." Following an eight-hour mandatory teen class and a few hours on the online quizlet, we make our appointment to visit the DMV for her permit. With it, she'll begin her supervised drives at 911. She'll also be licensed to drive alone during the day, back and forth to school, until she logs the 40 hours required to take her final road test. After digging up all the documents I had mislaid—birth certificate, social security card, proof of residency—we enter the low brick building and join the queue. She passes the vision and knowledge tests and gets a ticket for another line where we'll pick up Minor SCDMV Consent Form 447. I reach for a clipboard. A black pen dangles from a piece of string attached to its metal top-ring. I take out my glasses and read the first question:

Under penalty of perjury, I am signing for this minor as: (1) the father of the minor (2) the mother of the minor (3) the guardian of the minor, or (4) an individual who has custody, care, and control of the minor.

Who has control? I take a deep breath and look for number (5): I am signing for this minor as the apoplectic mother currently in a tailspin of uncontrolled panic who needs a large glass of Chardonnay. No such choice. I sign the form.

The following Saturday, we're back at 911, where a kindly gentleman named Lester introduces himself as her regular instructor. Lester is fit and tan, with salt and pepper hair, a pocket radio and an official looking binder. We meet in the parking lot to review what my daughter will learn. "She hasn't driven much on the highway," I tell him. "And not yet in the dark."

She shifts her feet and gives me the side eye.

"Moms worry," he tells her. In a move surely discouraged in the 911 employee handbook, Lester hugs me. With a jingle of keys, they head toward the company Prius. I'm on the hot pavement, alone.

After each weekly lesson, she greets me by our car with a spring in her step. One evening, my husband picks her up from her night drive. I'm reheating dinner when she meets me with red eyes and a swollen face. "I wrecked the car," she cries.

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Dad interjects. "Took a turn too close. Bent a hubcap is all."

A syrup of anger and relief spills from my chest and heats my shoulders. I push away the words "I told you to be careful." With feigned reassurance, I mumble: "Aww that doesn't sound too disastrous," and hand her a dinner plate.

Later that night, we're in her room, listening to the sound of rain on the galvanized metal roof. I sit on the edge of her bed while she repacks her backpack for school. On top of a pillowcase, a small pink puppy, a baby shower gift and a long-held favorite. The dog's pink coat is browned at the edges from years of wear, and its right ear curves like a soup ladle from too much rubbing. She's in the closet looking for black clogs.

"As soon as I get my license, I'm taking everyone to Uptown Cheapskate," she says. "They have ripped jeans and racks of shoes." "This rain," I reply. "Bring your boots tomorrow. High tide is early." The forecast summons an article I read about flooding downtown. "Did you know six inches of water will reach the bottom of most cars?" I say. "Remember that. Ask Lester for some tips—" Before the words are out, I recognize the stare from the bridge.

"You're helicoptering again, Mom."

It does rain here a lot, I mutter to myself as I close the bedroom door behind me. I am not a helicopter. I am a Tomahawk jet.

"What's driver assist?" I ask my husband. He's testing new cars in anticipation of passing his old Ford to our daughter. He's settled on a small crossover, green with tan seats and the technology package. We're standing on our gravel driveway admiring the vehicle when he motions for me to hop in. "Take it for a spin," he says. In a feat of automotive special effects, the car's computer projects information directly onto the windshield, so the driver doesn't need to look down to check her speed. It's a distracting visual, the boxed fluorescent numbers and green lane lines, pointing out like skis. After a few minutes, I warm to it. I'm navigating the narrow causeway when the skis on the windshield turn red and start to flash. Then, the steering wheel begins to shake. I shoot a look at my spouse who explains from the passenger seat that a small camera mounted on the windshield near the rearview mirror continuously watches the striped and solid lane markings on the road. As we drive ahead, I feel the invisible hand of the car's technology offering a gentle course correction. "I'm not sure I like this," I say.

My husband tells me to think of it as an exercise in faith. "You just have to be willing to let it take the wheel."

After we return home, my mother calls from Florida to inquire how her granddaughter's driving is going. "She's official," I say, filling her in on the learner's permit and lessons. "Soon she'll have her permanent license."

"Maybe I should give her my old car," she offers.

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"Hmmm. The Nissan," I say, transporting me to an incident a few years earlier.

Helping my mother unpack after a move, I go to her car to fetch some bottled water. Rustling around in the trunk, I see a few small boxes, the water, and a sleeve of wholesale tissue boxes wrapped in cellophane. Past a wad of tan plastic grocery bags, resting beside an umbrella in the rear of the compartment, I find a metal vessel, set inside a small cardboard box. The brass container rests on a pedestal engraved with a circle of leaves, its lid reinforced by tape. It takes me a moment to process. Then it hits me. I move the bags aside and lift the urn from the box. Nana's ashes. The narcissist whose absence haunted my mother her entire life, a weighty apparition now riding around in the trunk of her car. I put the vessel back in the box, take the water, and close the trunk. Looking back now, I appreciate the irony. Mother, daughter, mother, daughter—all part of a generation of women who tried driving away from their mothers but couldn't shake them.

How's the bike riding going? I type. Carrie and I are texting about our weekends.

It was perfect, she replies. **I just stopped holding on and off he went.** The bubble on the screen appears, signaling more typing. **That's the way it is with kids,** she continues. **They don't realize when you've let go.**

I pause and consider her words. Then I type my reply: **You don't realize when they have.**

I pull into the Driver's-Ed parking lot after my daughter's final lesson and watch her confidently guide the Prius to its designated spot. She disappears into the office with her instructor. After several minutes, they emerge. She's beaming, holding one of those paper certificates with a seal on the front. "For driving excellence," Lester says, giving her a pat.

"Lester says he feels safer driving with me than most of his students," my girl says proudly. She reaches for the driver's side door handle. "And, he says you worry too much. So do Ed and Elijah."

With a nudge of my chin I urge her into the car and onto the DMV for her official license.

The next day, she returns from school with end-of-year review packets and big plans for her squad's weekend trip to the thrift store. "I'm driving," she reports. She drops her bags on the kitchen table.

Our fridge is empty and there's nothing for dinner. Before I can suggest something, she grabs her wallet and walks toward the front door, calling to me from down the hallway. "I'm going to pick up a pizza," she says.

"It's dusk—" I begin to call back, but swallow the thought instead.

With a jingle of her keys, my daughter turns away from me, closes the door behind her, and steps alone into the warm evening.

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