

Driving Lessons From My Brother

1. Drive on the right side of the road. The right side, right side.
2. Just—just don't kill us all. Do it for Mom.
3. A car is like a gun.

Before I went in to take my permit test, I said, "God, if I only pass one test in my entire life, let it be this." I shouldn't have been so nervous: the questions were simple, and easy, like, "What does a bright red hexagon mean?" I got a perfect score. The testing room had glass walls and I could see my brother's reflection in the computer screen the whole time. When I got out, he high-fived me like I was his hero.

My dad taught my brother how to drive, and now my brother is teaching me how to drive, now my dad is a ghost, now my mom is too anxious to trust me. I always forget where I'm going and how to get there. The first time I drove with my brother, it was 1 AM and raining. The road glistened with stolen light and I couldn't focus on the street ahead. My brother told me to slow down, stay in the center of the lane. I gripped the wheel until my knuckles were white.

I am one year younger than him; he is one year wiser than me. I edited his college essays and he showed me how to ride a bike. We tell each other if we get bad grades. I get mad at him because sometimes he doesn't understand what I'm trying to say, because he tells the same stories over and over again, because he bothers me when I'm trying to work. Driving is our secret: we do it late at night, when the roads are empty, when my mom's asleep.

Maryam Ahmad

4. Avoid mailboxes, trashcans, small animals, small children.

My brother's bleeding hands grip the steering wheel. He has eczema, which means that his skin is dry and chafed, and his depression medicine gave him OCD. Now he washes his hands five, six, seven times an hour; now his knuckles bleed every time he tries to curl his hand up into a fist.

When we were younger, we would play cards, obsessively, and racing games on our twin GameBoys. Like most younger siblings, I wanted whatever he had. I wished, for a long time, that I could be as funny and popular and genuinely kind as him. (I still do, but now I recognize my own strengths.)

My brother, without complaint, drives me everywhere—to the grocery store, to my friends' houses, to the mall. Driving is the most meaningful time we spend together. I only see him for one-third of the year. I'm in boarding school, in New York, and he's back home in Tennessee.

5. Don't think about existentialism and drive. Listen, instead, to the traffic around you.

It happened both too fast and so slowly, like a car crash unfolding, like a man falling out of the sky. I am anchored by my memories, and I remember a dad. I remember long drives to Georgia, and winter walks to the ice cream store. I remember feeling weightless as he carried me, with my pupils dilated, my tongue

Maryam Ahmad

swollen, out of the house, into the car. I remember every time he was there for me, and every time he wasn't.

Some time in the past three years, my dad, a doctor, decided he was too good for medicine. He stopped taking his pills for bipolar disorder; he felt smarter and stronger without them. In a few months, he lost his job, his house, his calm and collected personality. My dad is no longer a doctor; he is now a paranoid schizophrenic. He lives in a psychiatric hospital; delusional, confused, a shell of the father I used to know.

I wish I could have it all back. My brother, my mother, my father, and I: we're all living cut-up lives. I wish we were whole again.

Still, I'm secretly glad that my dad isn't the one sitting next to me in the passenger seat. And sometimes I wish that my mom were brave enough to teach me, but then I remember the late nights, the close calls, and the trips to Walmart because there was nowhere else to go.

My brother is the only other person in the world with the same parents as me.

6. Don't hit Mom's car.

7. If you do hit Mom's car while backing out, don't tell her that it was you.

I was writing late one night, and I had to stop because I kept thinking about vanilla ice cream. I woke my brother up and begged him for his keys.

"I'll be back in five minutes," I said.

Maryam Ahmad

“I’ll go with you,” he said.

“I don’t want you to. You’re half asleep.”

“Is food really that important?” he asked.

I spent 15 minutes trying to get out of the parking space. I kept turning on the windshield wipers by mistake. It was narrow and my mom’s car was right next to mine. I considered giving up, but I didn’t want to come home empty-handed. Driving alone felt exhilarating.

I heard the car scrape against something, but I ignored it, instead accelerating out of the parking lot and turning sharply onto the street. It took me a good thirty seconds before I realized I was on the wrong side of the road. I slowed down, turned my indicator on every time I made a turn, came to full stops at stop signs, and made it back home in one piece.

My brother met me at the top of the stairs. “I’m the worst brother ever,” he said.

“I got some ice cream for you,” I said.

“I thought you were dead.”

“I hit Mom’s car when I was backing out. But you can barely even see the scratch.”

“I kept looking out the window, waiting for you to come back, wondering if you were going to make it.”

“I’m still alive,” I said. “I think I’m actually a pretty good driver. I don’t even need you anymore.”

Maryam Ahmad

8. Slow down, slow down. You don't need to drive so fast.

He drives; I write. When my brother graduated from high school, he asked my mom if he could drive anywhere in the country, alone. (She said yes; she changed her mind two days later.) The point wasn't where he chose to go; it was all the hours he'd spend on the road, existing in silence, with a purpose but without a destination. Driving, in that sense, is like writing. You have to trust yourself on the road, and with your words.

I miss who we used to be, when neither of us had depression or anxiety. I know my brother does, too. But he was never so patient then, not as patient and calm as he is now, when he is able to spend hours with me in his car, reminding me where to go.