

Maternallyours.

DRIVING LESSONS

Today I drove in the passenger seat. No, really. I drove with my feet, my fingernails, my turning stomach, my clenched teeth, my sputtering breath. My fifteen-year-old son, Jordan, was behind the wheel making the car go. I just whispered mini- prayers and curses under my breath and tried to keep my foot from making a hole through the metal floor where Toyota engineers should have built an additional brake pedal.

I know...I know, he is old enough, nearly sixteen. He is taller, bigger, stronger than I am. He is calmer than I am. He gets better grades than I did. I grudgingly admit: it is time.

Of course, I had to act like this new seat- swapping was routine—me in his seat, and he in mine. I didn't want him to think I didn't have any faith in him. Everyone knows what a pain it is to have to prove yourself to a cynic. I had to pretend that I believed in his driving skills, or at least in his capable nature, which I had a hand in cultivating, thank-you-very-much.

This was not his first day on the road, mind you. Jim had been driving with him for about a month. I was afraid to actually set foot on this “becoming-a-man training ground.” Maybe the early Native Americans had it right when they sent the men out into the wilderness to usher in a young boy's manhood. I figured since fathers-of-Indian-braves did this, Jim should be the one to usher Jordan into the newfound responsibilities of safe driving. I would be the squaw waiting at home to discover her young brave's new name. Would it be “Leadfoot?” How about “Tailgater?” Or “He-Who-Gets-The-Bird- From-Passing-Cars?”

Today would be my first trip with our green road-master and I had already pre-committed myself to behave like the kind of mother who would affirm instead of criticize, no matter what kind of wild driving he attempted.

“Any tricks and I'll never let you drive again,” I warned, hooking the belt, just in case he forgot to act like an adult while behind the wheel. Sure, he could kill me with one false move, but still, I had to exert whatever power I still had. “No music. No talking. Just driving.”

His face read “cool” as if nothing fazed him.

He backed down our driveway as well as my seventy-year-old mother-in-law manages to do—frantically wiggling all the way down, but somehow missing all eleven Italian cypress trees as if they were cones set up to guide him. I thought I should say, “good job,” but I didn't want him to think he could relax and rest on his laurels. I also knew if I nagged at him, he'd get irritated. That could be dangerous. So I tried to be quiet and watch the road. Let him drive. Let him do it. Breathe, Mom. Drive, Son.

The irony of the situation made me feel like a lamb on the altar. Everything I had ever sacrificed, given, offered to this boy... was now on the line. If I tried to control his every move he would never trust his own instincts and if I didn't coach at all he would soon be in danger. Both of us would be in grave danger. My balancing act was precarious at best and I had little control over

its outcome. I was caught between spectator and participator, audience and director. Neither position resembled the more familiar role of Mother, who is accustomed to giving instructions and then rewarding seven-year-olds with happy-face stickers.

Together we successfully changed lanes, made U-turns, mastered the complete stop, timed the yellow-light-dash while reciting, “Confucius say: He who hesitates is lost,” and managed to stay under the 45 mph speed limit or close to it. My mantra for the day was: “Start stopping ... Start stopping ... Start ... stopping ...Start—STOP!”

Aside from losing my cool during a few jerky moves, I remained encouraging, which made us both feel good.

His desire to please me was a reprise that I hadn’t heard since the preteens, but I didn’t even care that his motive was probably to ensure future car- piloting trips with Mom. This, too, felt good.