

*Tara L. Masih*  
**Sunday Drives**

**I**t was what we did every Sunday for many years, while our neighbors sat in church pews. My father insisted on piling our family into the car for a drive. Destination is unimportant, he said. What matters is that we are all together. In his own way, he was worshiping America's roadside stops and tree-lined vistas from the dashboard of his '63 Thunderbird—the 'Bird, as we came to call it.

Togetherness was my father's dream. It was something he worked for on those afternoons. Today I know more about his lonely childhood, but then his need only felt like a burden, to always be happy with each other. When my younger sister Gracie and I fought in the back seat, claiming our territory with a sacred line imagined down the center of the car's interior, my father grew upset. My mother, with two sisters of her own, would repeat that it was normal for siblings to fight. Not in my family they don't, he'd say. I could feel the anger in the way the car moved, sharp and abrupt, and I sensed it was time to quiet down.

I think it's accurate to say the '60s was the final decade when most middle-class families had just one car, mainly for the father's use. It was the same in our family—my mother, basically, was stranded during the week. She relied on the soaps and her neighbors for distraction, and had to be content to live a life of waiting—for her children to come home from school, for her husband to come home from work. I still see her rushing to open the door, see her standing and waiting for my father, weary from his job as a plumbing engineer for Grumman, shoulder bent with the heavy contents of his briefcase. She would take his felt hat and overcoat, so eager to show her love in this way. My father insisted on kissing each one of us hello, another ritual to show our togetherness.

I remember my father as being a great lover of hats. He wore one even while mowing and raking. When preparing for Sunday drives, he would pull from the hall closet a canvas hat, decorated with a checkered ribbon around the brim. It spoke of the breezy casualness with which he took these trips. My mother wore her gauzy scarves, triangular folds tied beneath her chin, looked bug-eyed in her large, round Jackie O. sunglasses.

Aside from these items, my father's idea was to leave the house with nothing—no purses, no toys, no food or umbrellas. He did bring his alligator wallet, with special money set aside for whatever might come up. Learn to be yourself, without props and supports, he preached. Learn to be free of it all. Learn you don't need things, but be grateful to go back to them.

My memories of the early drives are sweet and filling. Long Island's moving panorama of forests and harbors, strip malls and farmstands never grew tiring. But sometimes the 'Bird's blue, polished exterior, catching the sun, and the warmth building up within lulled me into a light sleep. The car rocked around bends, lifted over waves of unrepaired frost heaves and ruts, and sailed smoothly along the Long Island Expressway. My parents' voices grew small and distant, muffled as if from the far end of a tunnel, but soothing in the sound they created together.

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As the day darkened we returned with our plunder—homemade doughnuts and buckets of hand-picked strawberries; wooden boxes of Big Boy tomatoes; brown bags of butter and sugar corn; mulled cider and warty gourds; Coney Island prizes and cases of NeHi orange soda. Gracie and I still laugh over the dinner my mother once bought in the spirit of trying to match my father's adventurousness—a tin bucket of clams and mussels, layered between seaweed, along with another bucket of live crabs. Once home, the crabs made their escape into the back garden, and Gracie and I were commanded to retrieve them. We went about reluctantly, pulling the AWOL creatures from beds of daylilies and from beneath the chain-link fence that bordered our neighbors' yard. At dinner, they stared up at us from our plates with boiled eyes that still managed to recriminate.

These drives began in spring, fresh with expectancy, and ended in fall, as we prepared for the coming cold. I do remember my father's arm around my mother's shoulders, her playing with the short hair that escaped beneath his hat. But mostly I remember that summer when I watched, from the back seat, my parents' marriage slowly fall apart.

It began with a subtle shift in positions. After a summer of fried clams in paper cartons, Carvel cones, poor rain and heat storms, I noticed my mother now looked out her window, always to her right, never ahead or to her left, where my father now drove, gaze fixed forward, silent, both hands on the wheel.

And as Gracie and I instinctively quieted, children hoping somehow to repair the tense atmosphere, they began to fight. Little, nasty jabs at first. I'm tired of not knowing where we're going, I need to know. Can't you plan a day for once? Why do you have to control the money? Roll down the damn window so we can get some air in here, forget your damn hair. Then as the weather cooled and the sun lowered, bursts of hot-edged, unpredictable anger frightened us into pushing as far away as we could into the corners of the cold, leather upholstery.

When my father grabbed his hat one Sunday, I reluctantly followed, stomach queasy. It was a bright fall day, the leaves completely transformed. The yelling began immediately, the car jerked forcefully in our lane, and I banged on my mother's shoulder, yelling, I have to throw up! The 'Bird veered over to a halt with a screech of rubber, and I pushed down the handle, jumped into the high, sour-smelling weeds, and let everything go.

**M**y mother never went on another drive again. I sat in her place; Gracie hung dangerously between the bucket seats. My father didn't notice. A pall of silence fell over us—we no longer had to pretend we were happy.

It seemed my father was drawn to desolate stretches of shore, beach roses and wind-sculpted pines repeated over and over. Listen, he finally spoke, the only thing you can be sure of, certain of, is that you'll always love your children. Make sure you girls have children. It's what your mother and I are holding on to right now.

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The ocean, on my right, flashed through the trees.

And find something else, he continued, something that can't change—words, nature, God, music, anything. . . .

He slowed, put the turning light on, and pulled over to face the Atlantic, plainly visible, framed by dark, dry scrub. He watched the waves toil endlessly ashore. I watched his face, jawline working, brow shivering, the face of a man whose beliefs have fallen apart in his own hands. And I looked to them, his hands, one alternately caressing and gripping the bright blue plastic of the steering wheel, in the same way that he had held on to us, the other pushing at the dangling keys, as if restraining himself from the urge to continually turn them, to start the engine, or his life. And I knew that, for the first time on a Sunday, not knowing where he was going was a hard, painful thing.