

Ted Merwin
Crossroads

SHIFTING IMPATIENTLY FROM ONE FOOT TO ANOTHER in a strip-mall China King in Baltimore on Christmas Eve filled with my fellow DoorDash drivers, I found myself staring despondently at the pouring rain outside the window. I wondered how I had arrived at this place in my career. I had a doctorate in the humanities, a series of fairly high-paying jobs in the nonprofit world on my resume, a half-million-dollar ranch house in the suburbs, and a loving wife and three teenage daughters, one of whom had just started college. But, not knowing where my next paycheck would come from, I figured that I should take the most profitable time of the year for food orders and earn some money. So now I was waiting for glossy white cardboard containers of Pork Lo Mein and General Tso's Shrimp to rush to a customer in Ellicott City, a twenty-minute drive west toward Frederick.

Even as the puddles rippled and eddied on the black asphalt of Reisterstown Road, the memories came flooding back. I couldn't stop thinking about my dad, who was born in New York City on Christmas Eve in 1930; he would have turned ninety that day if he hadn't passed away a year and a half before the pandemic. Driving made me think of him and his uncanny ability to navigate around traffic jams in what were then the still somewhat leafy outer boroughs of Gotham, as if his brain had a kind of built-in GPS that was linked to a satellite. Like the taxi drivers in London, whose job depends on their memorizing a map of 25,000 streets and learning all the Shaftesbury Avenue theaters in order, I'm convinced that my dad grew extra nerve cells in his hippocampus.

Rather than waste any time at all honking at other drivers, Dad would pivot abruptly, transforming an ordinary trip from the city to our home in the suburb of Great Neck into an exhilarating adventure by zooming off in new directions and finding thrilling secret passageways. For a man who, born during the Great Depression, stayed depressed his entire life, driving was a zestful activity that made him feel manly and proud. It was painful for him when he was obliged to hang up his car keys for good after he suffered a stroke in his early eighties, his enfeebled brain no longer up to the task of even driving to the Seven Seas Diner on Northern Boulevard to meet a friend for lunch.

His skill at driving derived from a job as an electrician's assistant in the 1950s; he traveled around the five boroughs fixing flickering lamps and static-y radios. It was fitting that he was born on Christmas Eve, I realized, as, with the Chinese food on the passenger seat, I drove down streets of endless split-levels, split-foyers, and townhomes outlined in colorful twinkling lights. I turned up the volume on one of his favorite pieces, Handel's glorious *Messiah* ("Unto us a child is born/unto us a son is given...") on my hybrid Honda Accord's sound system.

Dad's ability to find new and unexpected routes was of a piece with his talent at rewiring electrical devices—he was always able to create an ingenious work-around or new connection. He and my mother spent innumerable hours scouring the community, scavenging things from other people's

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garbage. He would bring them home and combine them in his basement workshop into inventions like his “Leaf Me Alone,” a leaf-picker-upper constructed from discarded fireplace tongs.

As a result of his bizarre home “improvements,” you couldn’t take a shower in the dingy clawfoot bathtub on the second floor without manipulating all kinds of levers and nozzles, the attic stairs were crowned with an upside-down baby crib to guard us from falling into the stairwell, and, rather than repair the perpetually broken windshield wipers in his dark green Dodge Dart, my dad installed a little knob underneath the dashboard that he used to maneuver the wipers with his right hand while he adroitly steered with his left.

Nevertheless, despite his skill behind the wheel, Dad lacked a road map for his career. His long-time job in public relations for a major medical center failed to fulfill him, so he retired abruptly in his mid-fifties to pursue his dream of becoming a psychoanalyst. But, as he once admitted to me, he didn’t feel good enough about himself to help other people to feel better about themselves. Given that he had zero clients, he turned his psychoanalytic lens upon himself, sitting in the middle of the living room with his headphones on, furiously recording his dreams in his own peculiar scrawl in a notebook (in later years, typing on his laptop) before they slipped away and trying endlessly to decode them as if they were sacred texts. He seemed like a mix between a mad scientist and a rabbi, lost in a world of his own devising.

Indeed, his neurons must have streaked down some mighty odd but well-worn pathways, for he seemed to think about little else but psychoanalysis. He was even prone, at family gatherings, to delivering speeches about Freudian theory; at the last Thanksgiving Dinner before he died, he rhapsodized about a dream that he had had about cheese and how it related to our family dynamics. Then again, Freud’s name was invoked so frequently in our home that none of us would have been in the least surprised if the great Viennese neurologist himself had slipped into our house for dinner one night and taken a seat at our round wooden kitchen table, puffing meditatively on a short, fat Trabuco cigar.

One of our only true father-son projects came when I was a Cub Scout and we constructed a balsa wood car for the annual Pinewood Derby. We coated it with gleaming gold spray paint and sprinkled graphite on the wheels and axles. It hurtled down the track and, like a bolt of lightning, captured a first-place prize. I never felt closer to him than in the split second that that flimsy, indomitable car triumphantly crossed the finish line.

Dad also felt obliged to put his own particular stamp on the holidays, where our observance of Christmas Eve diverged sharply from that of the other Jewish families on Long Island. As a proud atheist with a more than a dollop of ambivalence about his Jewish identity, my father felt the need to reject all forms of Jewish ritual, whether religious or cultural in nature.

New York Jews traditionally eat takeout Chinese food on Christmas Eve. (Little wonder that, as a DoorDash driver, being in China King in Baltimore on Christmas Eve felt deliciously ironic.) Chinese restaurants used to be the only ones that were open then, before there were lots of other immigrant restaurateurs who didn’t celebrate Christmas either. However,

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since it was my father's birthday, he insisted that we dine on home-cooked beefsteak, baked potatoes and brussels sprouts. The fact that my younger sister, Amanda, and I despised brussels sprouts was irrelevant to him. We ingested them obediently, fantasizing about spicy, garlicky Moo Shu Pork (which, as non-practicing Jews, we had no qualms about eating in those days) from J.P. King's around the corner. It was his birthday; he was in the driver's seat.

His birthday also furnished a perfect occasion for Dad to impress upon us his own, idiosyncratic message to the world. Everyone needed to free themselves of their emotional conflicts by, as he repeated endlessly, "putting their feelings into words." He knew that few, including even among those who submitted to psychoanalysis, were receptive to this advice. And he wasn't particularly interested in sugar-coating it.

But he professed not to want to ram it down anyone's throat either. An aficionado of the late-Victorian British operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, which his own father had played constantly on the gramophone, Dad had a favorite line from "I've Jibe and Joke," a song performed by the crafty court jester in *Yeomen of the Guard*, that concludes, "He who'd make his fellow creatures wise/should always gild the philosophic pill." It was fruitless to tell Dad that that his entire psychoanalytic philosophy was a bit too much to swallow.

In my adolescent rebellion against my dad's hostility to organized religion, I forged my own connections to Judaism. Having missed celebrating a bar mitzvah at the traditional age of thirteen, I found a local Orthodox rabbi to teach me and I marked my Jewish coming of age just before my junior year of college. After continuing with my education and earning a doctorate in theatre, I spent the next twenty years teaching part-time on a college campus and working for a range of Jewish nonprofit organizations.

At the same time, I developed an expertise in Jewish food; my book on the history of the Jewish delicatessen sold well and was featured in the national media. While intoning the somber Yom Kippur prayers last Fall about what the new year would bring ("Who shall be exalted, and who shall be brought low/Who shall become rich and who shall be impoverished"), I had no inkling that just a week later I would no longer have a source of income.

Becoming a road warrior for the gig economy gave me something to do to avoid thinking about my future. The food delivery behemoth famously started when its founder, Tony Xu, a son of Chinese immigrants who was a student at Stanford University, delivered his first tub of hummus from his Honda to customers in Palo Alto. Now a New York Jew with a Ph.D. was delivering Chinese—and other—victuals from *his* Honda in Baltimore on Christmas Eve.

I drove down the winding roads of Ellicott City to the historic Main Street at the bottom of a ravine at the confluence of the Tiber and Patapsco Rivers. I passed the old fire station that was built into a hillside, the town's stone eighteenth century taverns and lodges, its brick nineteenth century banks and general stores, its twentieth century ice cream and knick-knack shops with painted lemon and plum siding. And then back up to the high-

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way, driving east into Baltimore City, passing Camden Yards with crimson and green stripes projected on its brick façade, past the Inner Harbor also illuminated for the holiday, and into urban neighborhoods I didn't know with names like Brooklyn, Govans, and Poppleton. I passed the boarded-up remains of the vintage Art Deco Ambassador Theatre on Liberty Heights Avenue in Howard Park and the 40-acre B&O Railroad Museum complex in Mount Clare.

In addition to making innumerable trips to China King and other Asian takeout places of its ilk, I was sent to fish and chicken places like Hip Hop and Sharks, (which serve fried chicken and that misnamed Baltimore delicacy, lake trout; it is actually Atlantic whiting), burger restaurants like Red Robin and Sonic, and even, occasionally, red sauce joints like Italiano's and Rosario's Italian Kitchen—eateries with their own parking lots that reminded me of my dad's favorite restaurant, Old Roma, in Flushing, Queens. My car smelled like a combination of Chipotle, Chick-fil-A, and Crusty Crab, with a top note of Taco Bell. I donned my mask to block out the odor and mopped up the inevitable spills on the passenger seat.

I was learning Baltimore much as my father had learned the outer boroughs of New York, but I felt no real claim to it—I hastened down other people's memory lanes, along streets of dilapidated wooden row houses, over rusty railroad tracks and past corner churches that came almost all the way to the curb. It was getting addictive—the app kept dinging twice to signal that another order had come in, and I was on the move, preparing to spread a kind of Christmas cheer that I wasn't really feeling, even as the tips kept adding up. I was making about twenty bucks an hour—by the end of the night, at the rate that I was going, I calculated that I might be able to cover a couple of sliding-scale sessions with my own therapist from my earnings.

At that time, DoorDash was still gaining a reputation for transporting orders from grocery chains, convenience stores and gas stations, so it wasn't only food—I delivered a clear plastic bag of goldfish from PetSmart, a pregnancy test from the local DashMart “dark” store (used exclusively for online orders), and a space heater from Walmart. (I wasn't sure what to say to the woman whose pregnancy test I delivered—“Good luck?” “I hope that you get the answer that you're looking for?”) I trafficked, in other words, in instant gratification, hoping to earn enough to surpass the cost of gas and car maintenance.

Shortly before midnight, I accepted my last order. I brought Italian subs from Rosario's to a customer in Middle River, a northeast suburb of downtown Baltimore where friends of ours have an elegant summer house on the water. But this was a grittier, more working-class section dominated by brick townhomes with little porches. The rain had subsided and been replaced by a gusty wind. As I got out of the car, the whole dark, empty street seemed to come alive to greet me, with wind chimes furiously ringing up and down the block. I knocked on the door, and it opened a crack; a hand mysteriously stuck out to take the food--the person to whom it presumably belonged did not utter a word. “Merry Christmas,” I shouted cheerily. Still no response. I turned and went back to my car.

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Had I really connected with anyone that rainy Christmas Eve? I wasn't sure. I didn't want to follow in my dad's footsteps, spending my life inside my own head, making interior connections but not ones with other people. But I had temporarily lost my bearings. I desperately needed to find a new direction for myself and for my career. But not tonight. I had delivered a couple dozen meals, made a couple hundred bucks, logged a couple hundred miles. I was totally wiped out. I went home, heated up a can of minestrone, ate it, and called it a night.

I thought I would need a break from driving and, in any case, it was high time to get to work on my resume. But Christmas Morning dawned sunny and bright, and the lure of the open road was irresistible. Before I knew it, I found myself heading contentedly for Dunkin' Donuts and IHOP, delivering breakfast to homes where, I knew, parents were taking pleasure giving gifts to their children, who were enjoying basking in the glow.