

In 1978 when I was fourteen, my parents decided to buy a car. First, they had to learn how to drive. Neither of them had ever driven a car. We always used the bus and the Montreal subway system known as the Metro. My mother was forty-four at the time and my father was fifty-five. I can't imagine learning how to drive now that I'm in my mid-fifties. I've been driving since age seventeen. My parents went to driving school. My mother passed the road test on her first try. My father failed three times. They bought a brandnew 1978 burgundy Ford Fairmont sedan. Having a car opened a whole new world for my family—a world of both adventure and terror. We went on day trips and weekend getaways. My mother didn't like driving. The only times I remember her driving were to go to the neighborhood shopping center. My father did the driving on these family road trips. My mother assumed the role of navigator. As this was decades before Google Maps, Waze and onboard GPS, she ordered paper maps from the Canadian Automobile Association and marked out the route before we departed on our trip. She worked most of her life as a travel agent and was good at geography, but she didn't have a sense of direction. Nor did my father. Nor do I. Maybe it's a genetic thing. My mother would be turning the map this way and that way, unfolding it and refolding it, trying to locate where we were. There was no "You are here" on the map. Meanwhile, my father—who always drove below the speed limit—would be gripping the steering wheel as if he were holding on for his life. Meanwhile, I was holding on for dear life in the back seat. My father would nervously ask my mother which exit to take; she'd tell him she was looking at the map. By the time she located the exit on the map, he was just passing the exit lane. She'd shout, "There's the exit!" and he'd swing the car over the solid line to make the exit, cutting off cars. There were more honking horns than on a Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass record. My father would yell, "Yoy! Yoy!" which I think is a variant of "Oy! Oy!" on steroids, and my mother would shuffle the map some more. I was in the back seat screaming, "You're going to kill us!" By the time we got to our destination, we were all stressed out. On these fun family trips, my brother and I weren't allowed to do anything that could distract my father while he was driving. No talking, no bickering, no Punch Buggy games, no radio, and we had to tilt our heads towards our respective door so as not to block the rear window. After a ninety-minute drive to Ausable Chasm, New York with my head to the side, my neck had a cramp. The car trip was more of a white-knuckle ride than the river raft ride through the chasm.

A couple of years later, I took driving lessons. It was 1980. I think everyone in my high school grade took lessons at the same place. I can't remember the name of the driving school; it should have been called You Drive, We Yell. My driving instructor yelled at me when I merged improperly into traffic and he yelled at me when I couldn't parallel park perfectly. He yelled at my classmate and driving partner when she held the steering wheel with her palms inside rather than on the outside of the wheel or when she turned on the radio. Today we call such instructional techniques verbal abuse. I followed in my father's footsteps and failed my first road test. Perhaps I'd been a bit nervous, but I knew the tester had a quota to fill and failed me on purpose. I had enough self-confidence to know that I deserved to pass. I hadn't killed anyone or hit anything. I learned a valuable lesson from a rerun of *The Brady Bunch* when Marcia had to retake her driving test. She imagined the examiner in his underwear so she wouldn't be nervous. In fact, I use that lesson to this day when I have to give a speech. I picture everyone in their undies. It's the great equalizer. A week after I failed my test, I went back and passed with a different examiner. In my mind, he wore tighty-whities. And a Playtex 18 Hour girdle. My parents let me use the car on the weekends as long as they didn't need it. I mostly used the car to go to the shopping center with my friends where we'd splurge on a pogo and french fries. The 1978 Ford Fairmont had a bench seat in the front. It was difficult to move the seat back and forth if I was in the car by myself. The adjustments were done manually with a lever. I'd pull the lever and swing my body forward

to get the bench to move closer. If there was a passenger and I wanted to be closer to the pedals, the two of us had to move in unison like synchronized swimmers. “One, two, three, go!” and we’d both swing our bodies simultaneously to get the bench to move forward. The car, which my parents had paid for in cash after saving up for many years, had to be kept clean. They put burgundy velour covers over the seats, which wasn’t surprising since I grew up with a living room that looked like a mausoleum. It was off-limits to the living with the exceptions of going in to dust or if we had guests. Why call it a living room if you can’t live in it? There was a gate to keep out the dog. The “chesterfield” was covered. My parents would yell, “Quick, pull off the cover, company’s coming over!” just as my uncle pulled up into our driveway. We didn’t have fitted plastic furniture covers that stuck to our legs. We didn’t even have proper fabric covers. My parents kept sheets over their prized paisley extra-long chesterfield and gold velour chairs. They also had fabric runners over the wall-to-wall green broadloom. They often kept the living room window roller blind down to keep the sun from fading the furniture—furniture that was already practically hermetically sealed. What were my parents saving the furniture for? Years later, they got new living room furniture. They also updated their vocabulary and called the new chesterfield a sofa. They put the old set in the basement, even though they already had an even older set down there. My dad never threw away old furniture that he no longer used. Our basement looked like a used-furniture store.

My mother passed away at age sixty. Daddy continued to live in the house almost twenty more years until he was eighty-nine. He refused to throw away the old furniture. I think it was his mentality because he lost everything and almost everyone in the Holocaust, and he worked until age sixty-nine for wages in a physically demanding job as a dress cutter in a schmatte factory. Every stick of furniture represented hard work. His generation wasn’t wasteful like my generation. I told him someday the junk in the basement would be given away or thrown away. After forty years in that house, he moved to the old folks’ home and that’s exactly what happened. I remember going down to the basement the last time I was in the house, after he’d already moved out. I took photos of the old furniture. So many memories, so much dust. I wished I could take all the junk with me as keepsakes of my late mother and all the happy times of my childhood. When I was a teenager, I promised myself that someday when I had a house of my own, I’d never cover my furniture and that I’d enjoy my living room. Life is too short to save the “good things” for special occasions or guests.

With a home and a family of my own, I don’t cover the furniture, but I do get upset when Allan or our sons sit in the living room with their feet up on the coffee table, eating snacks and making crumbs on the good sofa and chairs or putting a glass on the side table without a coaster. And I have a significant collection of odds ‘n ends gathering dust in my basement, including my 1960s Barbie dolls, my 1970s transistor radio, and my 1980s personal computer. I haven’t used any of these items in decades except for that one time twenty years ago when I let my then two-year-old son play with my childhood dolls because I didn’t want to impose gender role stereotypes on him. He thought it was fun to rip the head off of Barbie, so I immediately put my dolls back in storage. My rationale for hanging onto all these treasures (they say one man’s trash is another man’s treasure) is that someday when I’m famous, there’ll be a museum named after me and all of my stuff will be on display and appreciated. I suppose in some way we all turn into our parents, don’t we?