



# ROAD TRIP

*Cars. They're a microcosm of family life. A four-doored home on wheels. And, as the following essays reveal, a little magical. Cars provide a window to the past and the future. They can shift gears to make you feel 20 years younger or add a touch of gray. They can wipe away emotional scars, bring us closer together or transport us somewhere else. We asked 10 writers to take a look in their rearview mirror and recall a car ride that impacted the way they look at life, love and the pursuit of happiness. Come take a spin with them.*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LAUREN SIMKIN BERKE

## GROUNDING

By Katrina Kenison

There is a boy. (When you're 16, there is always a boy.) It's June 1975 and I have a small-town summer job at my mom's friend's clothing store. And I have a car, a huge 1970 red Plymouth Fury sedan, just handed down from my parents. Money and freedom.

It's five o'clock on a hot Friday afternoon. Time to balance the cash

register, close up for the day, make the bank deposit and head home to dress for the party I've told a different boy, one I could really care less about, that I'd meet him at later.

I lock the back door with a satisfying click, proud of my keys, my wheels, my independence, my newly grown-up life. The car makes anything possible. I love the very idea of stepping on the gas, of forward motion, of leaving my childish self behind.

In the parking lot behind the building the afternoon sun beats down. The air is hazy with heat, the acrid smell of tar. My enormous red car sits alone, floating like a low-slung ship on a sea of soft asphalt. And there, perched casually on the hood, is the boy of my dreams. He's shirtless, wearing a straw hat that would look ridiculous on anyone but him. One leg is crossed over the other. He's idly strumming his guitar. He's waiting. For me. He looks up, smiles.

"Hey," he says, and my astonished, rapturous heart starts banging around in my chest. "Hey."

Hours later—after the boy I'm supposed to meet has called my house again and again to ask where I am, after my parents have phoned all my friends' houses in search of me, after the boy and I have bought cigarettes and a six-pack, eaten pizza, cruised around town, gone to the drive-in, kissed and fallen asleep snuggled on the broad front seat of my car—my dad sets out in search of me.

There aren't that many places to look. The second movie is still playing as he walks up and down the shadowy aisles of the drive-in. He bangs his hand down, hard, on the Plymouth's roof to wake us up. And in that mortifying moment, as the boy and I fumble through dazed apologies and try to set stray pieces of clothing to rights, the thoughtless young woman I'm in danger of becoming finds herself face-to-face with a father who's not about to let his forthright daughter go without a fight.

I am grounded for the summer. I'm only allowed to drive to and from work. And although I weep and protest and promise and bargain, a part of me is relieved. I have no idea where I'm headed or who I really am. I'm not sure whether I want to follow the speed limit or drive too fast, obey the rules or drink and smoke and go skinny-dipping at the quarry and play "Stairway to Heaven" over and over and let some half-drunk football player unhook my bra. Nor am I sure I want to risk my tenuous social standing by remaining the dutiful girl I've always been, making my bed each day, carrying blouses to ladies in the dressing room, starting dinner for my family, writing poems and sewing throw pillows.

My parents, in their fear for me or in their wisdom or both, have saved me from having to answer that question. At least for now. And I don't dare to cross them.

The boy never calls. But my friends do, and I'm soon adept at handling them.

"I can't gooooo," I say, drawing the words out to convey both scorn at my parents' outrageous strictness and regret at missing out. "I'm grounded."

And then I hang up the phone, wander out to the chaise lounge on the back deck, and return to my novel. In the end, it isn't a red Plymouth Fury that takes me where I need to go this summer, but words, torrents of them. Each book offering its own escape and education, glimpses into other worlds, other lives, potential future selves. Experimentation without suffering the consequences. I can't admit it to my parents, or to anyone else for that matter, but I've never felt so free. ●

*Kenison co-edited (with John Updike) The Best American Short Stories of the Century and has authored books including The Gift of an Ordinary Day and Magical Journey: An Apprenticeship in Contentment.*

## UNMAPPED TERRITORY

By *Una LaMarche*

New York to Philadelphia is a pretty straight shot down I-95, but somehow somewhere in eastern New Jersey, on the way to drop my sister off at college, my family got deeply—possibly irrevocably—lost.

"Did you take the wrong exit?" my mother wondered aloud as the car, an old borrowed Jeep with a manual transmission and an enormous rainbow bumper sticker, idled in neutral in a deserted gas station.

"I was following your directions," my father answered in the sardonic sigh he used to express barely contained rage. My sister, Zoe, and I (19 and 25, respectively, but feeling a lot younger) sat helpless in the backseat, exchanging tense blinks through the splintered rattan chair between us.

"Why don't you ask someone else, then?" Mom said, staring pointedly into the middle distance.

"I would love to," Dad snapped, gesturing out at the barren landscape.

This was far from the poignant scene we'd envisioned when Zoe had first opened her fat acceptance envelope that spring. But then again, a lot had changed since then—including the fact that later that night, after we dropped Zoe off at her new dorm, Dad would be driving back to Brooklyn to move his stuff out too.

Our parents had announced their separation two months earlier. It was not a mutual decision: He was leaving, and she was devastated. That summer my mother and I had gone on what had traditionally been our annual family vacation. Not knowing what to say to her, I had said nothing, watching her weep on the beach while I pretended to be asleep beneath a paperback horror novel. But nothing was scarier than seeing a parent so broken.

"Fine. I'm calling the school," Mom said quietly, opening her door and stepping out into the blistering late-August sun.

"No! Please! Mom!" Zoe pleaded, searching desperately for her seatbelt buckle under the boxes on her lap.

"Relax," Mom said, already dialing. "I'm just letting them know we might miss orientation." My heart threatened to explode. It wasn't even my school, but the thought of admitting to anyone that we had drifted so far off course filled me with an inexplicable, all-consuming panic.

"Not knowing what to say to her, I had said nothing, watching her weep on the beach while I pretended to be asleep beneath a paperback horror novel. But nothing was scarier than seeing a parent so broken."



"Can you please just drive?" I begged my father.

"Believe me," he sighed, "this isn't how I wanted to spend my birthday, either." (Did I not mention it was his birthday? It was his birthday. This was clearly the best-planned road trip ever.)

Zoe finally freed herself from the seatbelt and leapt out to run interference, spilling toiletries in her wake. For the next few minutes she and Mom exchanged animated facial expressions. Then, red-faced, they returned to the car.

"Tell them," Mom said, her voice vibrating from what was either a giggle or a sob. Or a combination of both.

"I think I want to be a midwife," Zoe said. We were driving her to art school.

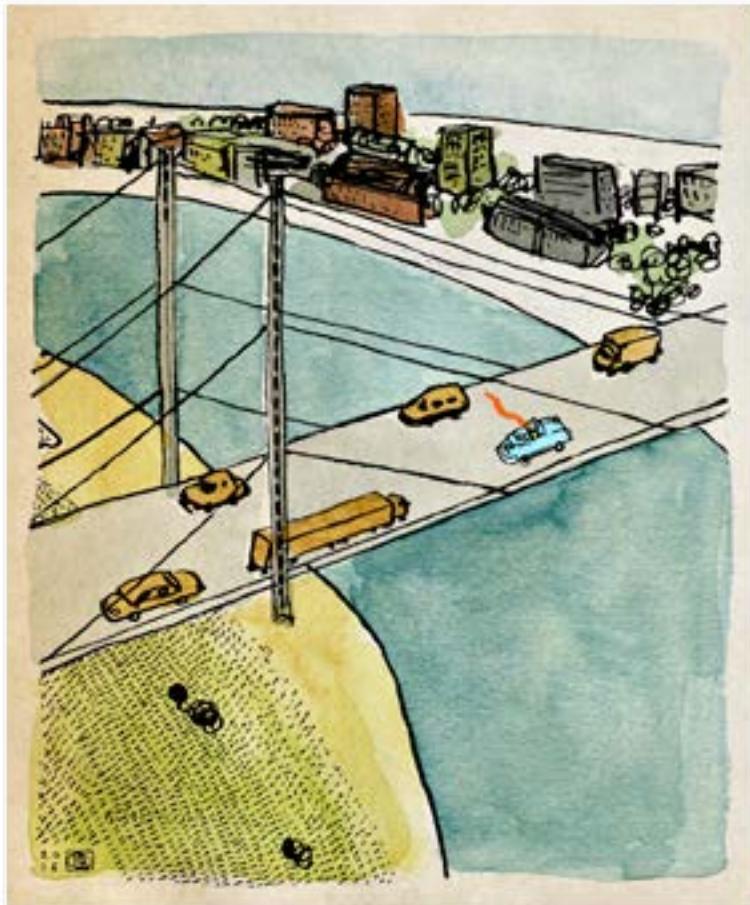
"And please tell them what I told you," Mom said.

Zoe swallowed hard. "That sometimes it's too late to change your mind."

Dad cleared his throat and shifted into gear. "That's true," he said.

Mom turned on the radio. We got back on the road. ●

*An award-winning blogger and a contributor to The Huffington Post, LaMarche has also written young adult novels and a memoir, Unabrow.*



## FAST CAR

By Karl Greenfeld

My future wife, Silka, and I met in Tokyo, a city with perhaps the best mass transit system in the world. Trains, buses, subways and taxis crisscrossed the vast, far-flung metropolis. We never drove those first winter months of our romance.

That summer, I flew with Silka back to her native Germany to meet her parents for the first time. She had told me stories of her mother, a fierce and beautiful woman named Gundi who was matriarch of her clan of four children, and already, in her late 40s, a grandmother.

Gundi picked us up in her baby-blue Porsche Carrera Cabriolet with the top down and exploded out of the Düsseldorf airport, maneuvering like a stuntwoman through dense traffic, cutting off other drivers, passing on the outside, generally making like Niki Lauda as she took us out of the airport and over the Rheinkniebrücke, the spectacular suspension bridge that spans the Rhine.

She was a dashing sight, this lovely, blond woman with red headscarf trailing as she drove her Porsche with a carefree confidence. She always seemed in control, weaving through this exotic (to me anyway) German city. I cowered, at one point closing my eyes as she swung around an impossibly tight turn and seemed to be heading straight for oncoming traffic before darting back into her lane. Despite the adrenaline rush, I never for a moment felt in real danger. This woman could handle a sports car.

It is one of those truisms, that when you meet the mother of your girlfriend or fiancée, you are meeting some possible future version of your lover. What I realized, as Gundi swerved out of the way of an oncoming truck and sped past a line of stalled traffic, was that this woman, this powerful, aggressive, confident woman, was a badass. And if that was what Silka would become, then that was not only fine with me, but an exciting prospect. Based on that drive—Gundi was in a hurry to get to an antiques auction on the Königsallee

before it began—I saw one possibility of what our life would be like. It might be dangerous, edgy, but also glamorous and undeniably exciting. I was hooked.

We now live in Pacific Palisades, California, the opposite of Tokyo in that now we need to drive to get anywhere. My wife is the same age Gundi was when I first met her, and she drives with a similar bravado, occasionally terrifying our daughters and me. While Silka has gotten a couple of speeding tickets, she's never been in an accident, and she swears her quick reflexes have probably gotten her out of a couple. And when we're running late, to a parents' night at our daughters' schools or a dinner reservation, there is no one I would rather have behind the wheel than the daughter of that dashing, Porsche-driving Gundi. ●

*Greenfeld has written eight books, including The Subprimes. His award-winning stories have appeared in The Atlantic, Harper's Magazine, The Paris Review, The Best American Short Stories and The O. Henry Prize Stories.*

# GETTING TO GRACELAND

By Veronica Chambers

I didn't learn how to drive until I was 21 years old. I grew up in a city where buses and trains made driving unnecessary. But I think, even more important, I grew up with a mom who had a terrible phobia about driving. She hated to drive, panicked when she was asked to take the wheel for even a short time, and it was a fear she shared with all her brothers and sisters. There was no inciting incident, just an old-world belief that this big hunk of metal on wheels was a death machine.

When I graduated from college, I lucked into a six-month job at a movie studio in Los Angeles. It took me nearly two hours to get back and forth every day by bus, so driving lessons were in order. My years in California were all full of happy car memories. I loved driving to work on rainy days, listening to Ella and Louis and singing along.

Then eight years ago, just months after my daughter was born, my youngest brother, HT, died suddenly in a terrible car accident. For the first time, it seemed like my mother's phobia had some truth to it. My brother's car exploded and his body was so badly burned in the accident that there was no element of him to bury, no cheek to kiss goodbye.

My family, like so many, was fractured and broken, but my youngest brother had always been the definition of wabi sabi. He was the beautiful thing that emerged when you put all the broken pieces together. He loved computers and numbers, and one of my proudest moments as a big sister was getting him into a tech camp at MIT and driving him up to campus. HT was like the boys you see in movies and TV shows: tall, honey brown, handsome but unaware of it, unabashedly goofy and a little shy. It had been a joy to watch him grow into himself and all I could think, when my husband walked in and said that at 27 my brother was dead, was that this could not possibly be how the story of us was going to end. I had been prepared to lose my parents, someday. I was prepared to die myself, hopefully someday in the faraway future. But I did not expect to lose my brilliant little brother, not one day, not ever.

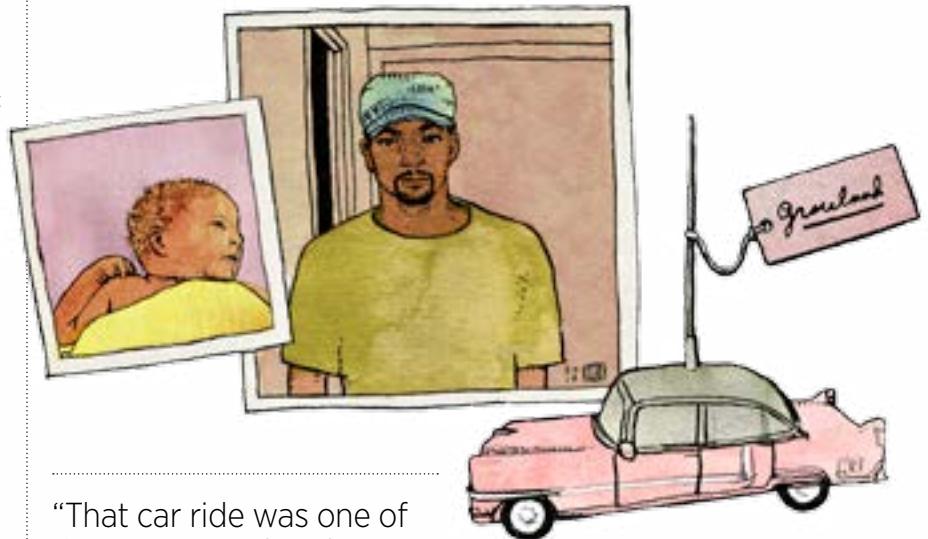
Everyone told me to take solace in my baby. But my daughter was just six months old. I kept thinking, "I barely know her. She's not a substitute for my brother." The exhaustion of caring for a newborn and the grief of losing my brother were overwhelming. I wept constantly, in public, in private, uncontrollable like someone who was in fear of losing her life, which I was. I couldn't sleep so I asked my doctor for and received my first prescription for sleeping pills. Each night I fell into a deep, long, dreamless sleep. My brother died just a few weeks before Christmas and I did not know how I was going to survive the holiday. I had been given 30 sleeping pills and I was afraid to ask for more.

The only thing that would calm me was Paul Simon's *Graceland*. Every afternoon I would listen to Paul Simon and, sometimes, I would hold my baby close and dance to songs like "Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes." I sang aloud to "You

Can Call Me Al" and reveled in the ways that they were funny and sad at the same time. Then a few days before Christmas, I said to my husband, "We have to go to Graceland. It's the only thing." In fact, I may have actually said, "I've reason to believe, we all will be received, in Graceland."

So we got in the car and drove from Philadelphia to Memphis. I wasn't afraid to drive. I knew that driving was safer than flying. And from the very first day, I felt a peace in the car that I had not been able to capture when I was home, sitting with my grief. The baby slept all day; it was winter but the sun was warm on our faces. We talked and listened to a lot of Paul Simon and by the time we showed up at Graceland, a few days after Christmas, I wasn't done grieving, but I no longer felt like I was dying.

That car ride was one of the greatest gifts of my life. It showed me how kind my husband was that when I made a crazy



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request, he said yes. It taught me that I could pack up my grief and literally drive it away. It taught me that songs are healing and so is sunshine and a baby who sleeps for hours in the warm rumble of the car.

Of course, the big irony was that when I arrived at Graceland, I was a little shocked to hear Elvis blaring over the loudspeakers. No Paul Simon. No Soweto choirs. I hadn't been thinking of Elvis at all as we drove for days to get to his house. But I did the tour and I ate barbecue and before we left I bought a Graceland ornament—of a pink Cadillac—that I hang on my tree every single year.

My daughter has, over these past few years, inherited our love of road trips. We drive everywhere—even when flying would be quicker and slightly cheaper. We listen to books on tape and play road trip games like going from person to person and naming a place or a food that begins with each letter of the alphabet. E. L. Doctorow once said writing a novel is “like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights illuminate but you can make the whole trip that way.” I believe that is as true for life as it is for writing. The dark moments in our life are like driving at night. But headlights, real and metaphorical, are there to guide our way. ● *Chambers is an award-winning and New York Times best-selling writer. She is co-author, with chef Eric Ripert, of 32 Yolks.*

## RADIO SILENCE

By Denene Millner

I promise you this: It's a miracle I didn't run my car into a ditch as I punched the buttons on the car radio, desperately trying to get pornographic lyrics off the speakers, out of my young daughters' ears and especially out of her mouth. Lila hadn't heard Lil Wayne's hit rap song “Mrs. Officer” before, but, like a kid who hears a curse and immediately repeats it loud and proud, she was singing along with the catchy chorus, much to my horror. Between car swerves, steely-eyed looks through the rearview mirror, fumbling for NPR on the dial and digging for my kid-safe D'Angelo CD in the car door, somewhere in there I heard myself rambling the words “Inappropriate” and “No, I'm not mad, really,” and “You're not grown, so”—proclamations that produced all kinds of confused, fearful looks on my baby's face. She was just singing a song. Her mother? Well, she was unraveling.

And rightfully so. Any mother would if she heard her then-unwitting 6-year-old singing along to the sexually charged ditty. With all the gusto she could muster, my baby girl was crooning this:

When I get all up in ya  
We can hear the angels calling us

“For me, radio was the canvas on which music artists painted extraordinary portraits—studies in longing, heartache, brash feminism, street politics, butterflies in the stomach. Love.”



We can see the sunrise before us  
And when I'm in that thang  
I'll make that body sang  
I make it say, “Wee ooh wee ooh wee...”

This is not the kind of music I want my kids to remember vibing to during our car rides; I want them to have reverence for the radio, and getting the right mix of music pumping through the speakers is paramount. See, I have vivid memories of discovering beautiful music while riding shotgun in my daddy's Eldorado. The first time I heard Stevie Wonder's “Ribbon in the Sky” was on the way from choir practice; Stevie's voice soared over the roaring piano, the heartfelt lyrics oozing through the speakers. We were so moved, Daddy pulled the car to the side of the road. I did the same years later when I first heard Will Downing's silky “Wishing on a Star” floating from car speakers in my own ride, a Nissan Sentra. For me, radio

was the canvas on which music artists painted extraordinary portraits—studies in longing, heartache, brash feminism, street politics, butterflies in the stomach. Love. And as cliché as it sounds, the melodies, and especially the lyrics, are the pictures that illustrate every moment of my life—the extra important and even the mundane.

Who was going to paint my babies their songs? The ones they'd remember and sing to their own children when they rocked them to sleep? What would they remember of their musical journey while riding in my car? Not Lil Wayne. Not on my radio dial. Not if I had anything to do with it.

Lila survived my car freak-out that fateful afternoon. She's also gone for years without hearing a Lil Wayne song in my ride—at least not without a conversation about the lyrics, the meaning behind them, the implications of letting something so mindless, so vile, seep into consciousness. I've switched the presets to tween-friendly and old-school R&B stations, and I've stocked the car with appropriate CDs. Mostly we crank up the tunes and rock out to songs that

don't make me want to smash the radio with a hammer. ●

*A New York Times best-selling author, Millner has written 25 books; penned articles for Essence, Parenting and more; and is the founder of MyBrownBaby.com.*

## PARK AND RIDE

By Ellen Seidman

My 13-year-old is sitting in the driver's seat in our gray minivan. We are en route to a new sushi restaurant. Max puts the right turn signal on and carefully shifts the wheel, his eyes glued to the road. Okay, actually, we're parked in our driveway and we aren't going anywhere. Pretend driving is one of his favorite activities.

Perhaps other parents would be bored out of their minds sitting in a car that's not going anywhere, but it's my idea of total relaxation.



“With our car ensconced by the tall, leafy oaks that line our driveway, I sink into my little passenger-seat sanctuary. I slip off my shoes, prop my feet up on the dashboard and sip from a tumbler of iced tea I stash in the cup holder.”

Typically Max likes to “drive” around our neighborhood or go on some fantasy trip to, say, Hawaii. This is the first time he’s wanted to head to a restaurant, and it reminds me of the amazing developmental leaps and bounds he’s made.

Max has cerebral palsy and cognitive impairment; when he was a toddler, he’d literally run screeching out of restaurants due to sensory overload because new places scared him. These days, my foodie adventurer is game to try different eateries in real life, and even pretend to take me to them too.

Yet the main reason I adore these drives is that they’re one of the only times when I can truly kick back. Enclosed in the car, away from the world, I’m cut off from life’s worrisome realities—particularly, my concern about Max’s progression with speech and the

fact that his left foot has been turning inward and making him stumble (cerebral palsy messes with your muscles). Riding to nowhere is my worry-free zone.

Besides, if I try to veg out at home on the living room couch or at the kitchen table, I will inevitably notice dust on the furniture, crumbs on the floor or a pile-up of papers and jump up to clean or de-clutter. Happily, I have no desire whatsoever to neaten up the car, although I sometimes marvel at the petrified chocolate ice cream that’s been stuck in a floor mat for years or the empty DVD cases scattered everywhere. (Where the DVDS are, who knows.)

With our car ensconced by the tall, leafy oaks that line our driveway, I sink into my little passenger-seat sanctuary. I slip off my shoes, prop my feet up on the dashboard and sip from a tumbler of iced tea I stash in the cup holder. Slowly but surely, the tension slips out of my body, usually ever-posed to tend to some task or emergency, typically from my 11-year-old. (“MOMMMMMY, I CAN’T FIND THE STAPLER!!!”)

“Beep! Beep! Beep!” Max says, pretending to honk the horn.

“Is there a truck in your way?” I guess.

“Yes!” Max says, and continues on his merry way.

Car “rides” usually last about a half hour. Between me and my husband, I’m often the one to volunteer because I am

so grateful for the downtime. Sometimes Max and I chat. Or we’ll call my mom; Max recently informed her that we were driving to Disney World. Or I sit and read a book as we cruise in silence, another rarity in parenthood. Peace when we’re actually out driving is unusual because either the kids are squabbling or I’m freaking out about my husband’s driving (“You’re going too fast! You’re going too slow!”). Once, in fact, when I got into the car with Max he looked at me and said, “No yelling!”

“Are we almost there yet?” I ask as Max bounces up and down, as if he’s on a bumpy road.

“No!” he says.

That’s fine with me. For just a few more minutes, I can escape stress in this four-wheeled haven. There are few places I’d rather be than in our driveway, chilling out and loving my joy non-ride. ●

*Award-winning Seidman is the voice behind the blog LoveThatMax.com. Her work has appeared in Health, Real Simple and other publications.*

## RAPPED UP

By Lonnae O’Neal

We had just pulled up to the light a few minutes from ballet when my daughter, Savannah, pointed to the car next to us, where an intense scene was playing out. The driver was looking at the teenage passenger, wagging her finger, and shooting out words in rapid-fire staccato. The passenger sat rigid in her seat, arms folded, head down and lips pursed tight.

“Oh, her mom is rapping her up,” Savvy, 17, said as the light changed and the car pulled off. “Mommy, that’s what you do to me sometimes.” I didn’t know what my daughter meant, but it couldn’t be good.

Savvy explained that the “rapping” usually happened in the mornings, during our 15-minute drive to school. To my mind, that’s where our best conversations take place these days. And often our most intense—boys, school girl drama, life aspirations, grades.

I cherish those morning rides.

To let Savannah tell it, that’s where I’ve been rapping her up for years.

“It means when you’re giving me a lecture,” Savannah said, “or just talking



“As I was trying to offer my wisest counsel, she was apparently feeling trapped in some kind of mobile lecturing unit. My daughter could easily take the school bus, but I chose to drive her.”

to talk.” Oh, nice, I thought sullenly. Here come the bad mom stories.

Savvy, of course, had examples—I rap her up when she uses the wrong word in a sentence, I rap her up when she calls someone Chinese but she doesn’t know for sure what country in Asia the person is from. I especially rap her up when her shorts are too short, or her big hoop earrings are too big, or the neckline of her tee falls a little too low. Those talks get especially testy as she’s trying to assert her independence, and I’m trying to hold on to my vision for her life, or even just her day. As I was trying to offer my wisest counsel,

she was apparently feeling trapped in some kind of mobile lecturing unit.

My daughter could easily take the school bus, but I chose to drive her. I split custody of her and her younger brother with my ex-husband, which means I only have her half the time. I want that time to count. I use those drives as intentional space; to get her off her cell phone long enough to talk about current events, her goals as a dancer, and to stress the importance of being kind, even to boys you don’t like.

And yes, absolutely, to rap her up if need be, because I have to squeeze 100% of my motherhood into only half the time.

No doubt I rap her up when she needs it. I take her to task when we’re running late because she’s been primping too long. Sometimes she’ll spend the drive trying to defend the hairstyle she got off YouTube, or explain how everyone talks in that class. Sometimes she’ll just sit next to me quiet or attitudinal and the air between us grows tense.

There are mornings when it may take the whole drive to reset enough for us to say “I love you” or “Have a good day.”

And sometimes we don’t quite get there. But we try again the next time.

We made it to ballet fine, but for days I was still smarting about Savvy’s take on our drive time. One day I joked that Savvy would have to take the bus to school and she protested loudly. She talked about how the morning rides had become our little ritual. “I like riding with you, Mom,” she said. “Even when you lecture me.” That felt like she had given me a gift. It’s so hard letting my children go at the end of every week, but those morning car rides help make up for lost time. ●  
*A Pulitzer Prize–nominated reporter, O’Neal is a senior writer for ESPN’s The Undeclared and author of I’m Every Woman: Remixed Stories of Marriage, Motherhood and Work.*

## CAR WASH

*By Lucy Frank*

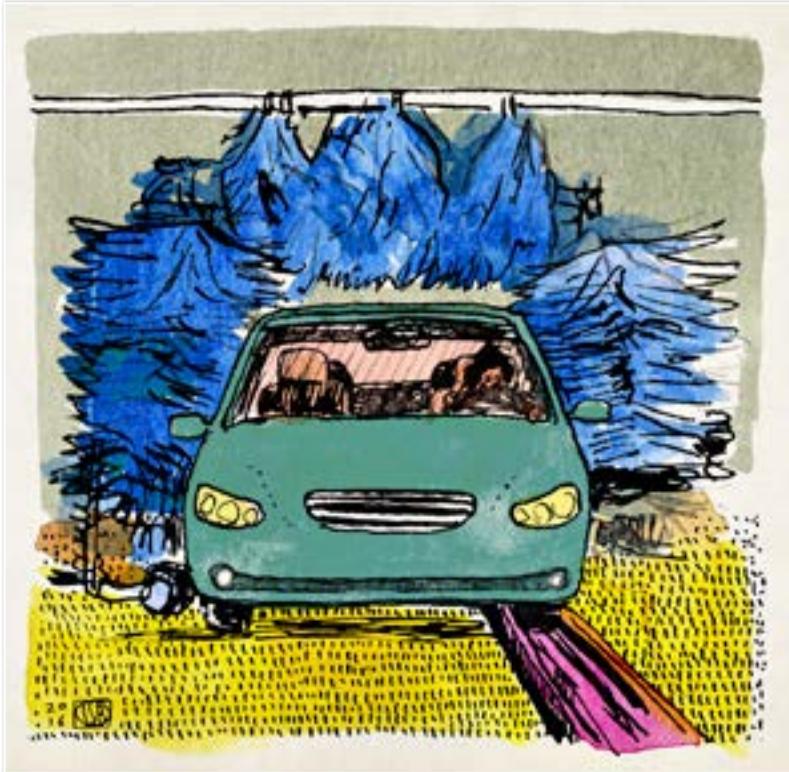
After my clothes are on  
 and the doctor, with a sober smile,  
 confirms the illness I’ve sworn to everyone  
 was over  
 has come roaring back,

After she’s reminded me that chronic  
 means it may come and go but  
 no matter what you do or don’t  
 it will always be with you,

After she’s asked, “Any questions?”  
 and written the script for the meds  
 I’d promised myself I’d never take again,

After, still tasting the chalky pink drink  
 that lit up my secrets, I call my mom  
 from the parking lot and hang up  
 before she answers,  
 because who needs a mom  
 when she can’t protect you and  
 there’s no way to shield her  
 from your pain,

After I can’t bear to tell my husband,  
 and turn off the ringer,  
 and crank up the car radio  
 to drown the questions  
 with no answers,  
 silence the words  
 I know I’ll have to say:  
 “I’m afraid  
 I won’t make it in to work;”  
 “I’m sorry, sweetie,  
 I can’t play with you;  
 Mama’s not feeling  
 good today,”



I roar past the pharmacy,  
 where the dreaded meds wait,  
 blow through the turnoff to my job,  
 the street where soon  
 I'll have to pick up my son,  
 Don't slow  
 until I let time stop  
 inside the car wash.

Untouchable inside my shell,  
 in neutral, I am rolled along  
 almost imperceptibly,  
 lulled by the rain  
 running down the windows,  
 drumming on the roof,  
 eased by the shushing hushing  
 smoothing soothing  
 foaming flapping  
 flopping mopping,  
 till my breathing slows,  
 the storm subsides,  
 slapping octopus arms slump,

And I am rolled out  
 maybe just for now,  
 but for now,  
 now will have to do,  
 buffed and gleaming. ●

*Frank is the author of eight young adult novels, including the award-winning Two Girls Staring at the Ceiling.*

## CROSSROADS

*By Steve Salerno*

**A**nother birthday had come, marking four decades complete. Hardly ancient, but evidence of decay was everywhere. A roll of flab obscured my belt. My jawline seemed less defined, dare I say, jowly. I had less hair on top, and more hair peeking from unwelcome places.

If the visible signs were unsettling, the hidden ones were downright ominous. A recent heart-rhythm disturbance had served notice of my mortality. My knees ached. My back periodically gave way.

Then, as I continued to study the dismal reflection, I had my epiphany.

Professionally, life was good. A TV version of one of my books had just been filmed; a second movie deal was being negotiated. Clearly it was time to announce my triumph over mediocrity and age. Clearly it was time to become a cliché.

Forty-eight hours later I peeled out of the Corvette dealer's lot in a gilded knife blade of a driving machine, in debt for a sum that would've bought my parents a house. (Yeah, but could a

house take corners at speeds approaching the escape velocity of a Mars orbiter?)

The wife was unimpressed. "You've got to be kidding," Kathy said as I made the introductions. "And what do we do with the kids?"

"We have the minivan. The Vette's for us."

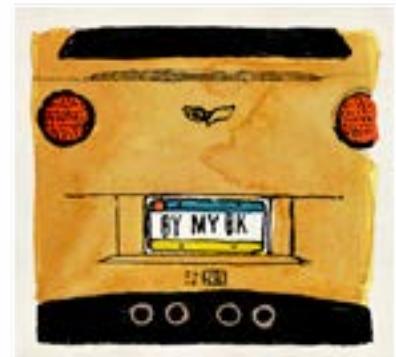
"Us, huh?" Kathy frowned.

In the ensuing weeks, I began to remake myself in the sleek image of my new wheels. Whereas once I'd venture out in an old sweatshirt and grungy Mets cap, I now dug into my dresser for the pricey sweaters I'd acquired as gifts. I started jogging, watched what I ate (with newly whitened teeth), got my heart rate down to a steady 52 bpm. I even had the remnants of my hair permed so I could remove the glass roof and let the air whoosh through my tresses.

Still, there was one necessary upgrade: the generic car plates. I needed a vanity plate befitting a man of such substance, and it needed to tell the world just how I'd attained such substance. C MY FLK seemed pretentious. Finally I settled on BY MY BK. It sounded glamorous and, I figured, might spark conversations that earned me added royalties.

The day the plate arrived I reverently removed it from the plain brown packaging. The kids smiled indulgently and applauded, as if I were a child opening my gifts on Christmas morn. Kathy smiled in a way that conveyed something like pity.

Soon after, my A-list fantasies disappeared faster than a gallon of gas in the Vette's formidable power train: That second movie deal never happened, and the follow-up book project got killed. By then my grungy Mets cap was back on



my (unpermed) head. And the Corvette had become more of a couple's car.

Once its seductive exhaust growl—the soundtrack of male menopause—stopped exciting, I found my clarity: The Vette was something bolted onto my life, much like the spoiler bolted onto the car itself. This beautiful woman sitting beside me, and the children we adored, they were my life. ● *Salerno has been a feature writer, essayist and investigative reporter for Esquire, Harper's Magazine, The New York Times Magazine and others. He is also the author of SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless.*

## THIS IS YOUR HOMETOWN

By Laura Amann

We drive slowly through the tree-lined neighborhood and I point out landmarks. "This is where grandpa grew up. He lived there with his 11 brothers and sisters," I explain, pausing the car. We take in the large, rambling house with its wide, wraparound porch from another era. I tell some of my favorite stories, often repeated over the years, about pranks and games they played and funny anecdotes, always including the one where they put comic pages in the chicken coop so the hens wouldn't get bored while laying eggs. My dad squints at the house, tilting his head as if trying to physically force the memory.

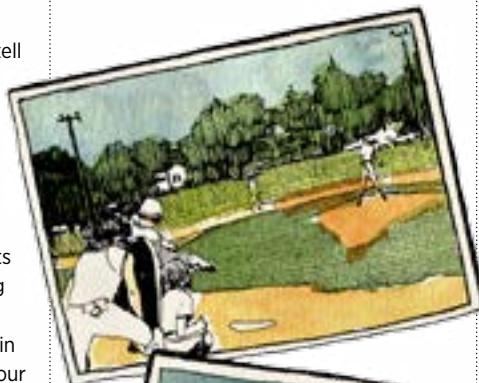
We drive down the street and stop in front of a smaller, tidy house. "This is your old house. The second window on the left was your room," I say. And again I narrate bits of my father's childhood back to him. We've been making these trips to his two hometowns for the past four years. Every year, he remembers less.

Always sentimental, he loved taking me on these outings when I was younger and proudly showing off his past. I rolled my eyes as a teenager when he knocked on the doors of his old houses. Now with Parkinson's dementia settling in, his school years have remained the most vivid, and so I started driving him through the old neighborhoods. Today these trips not only link us both to our past, but remind me of my dad as he used to be: charming, funny and a natural storyteller.

When I started taking him on these drives, I hoped to connect with my dad on my terms, to finally get his memories of my childhood and who he was back then. But he is rooted in his younger years now and I try to meet him there.

In the passenger seat, my dad clings to every word, as if he's hearing them for the first time. Which, of course, he is. That's

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the thing with his dementia, everything is new and exciting to him. He gazes in amazement at the house he lived in for 15 years and presses me for details. I make him into the hero who started a baseball league. I point out his best friend's house and talk about his grade-school girlfriend, whose books he used to carry home. And sometimes he surprises me. His memory of the time he fell in the ice after skipping church remains as vivid as if it were yesterday. Except that yesterday isn't vivid for him at all.

These trips have given me a peek into my grandparents' lives as well. Like most kids, I didn't ask enough about their past when they were alive. I have relics of my grandmother's life—fine linens for bridge parties, tiny salt urns with miniature spoons, a wide assortment of silver serving pieces—and I've often wondered what she was like when she was my age, living such a different life. I ask my dad how they celebrated Christmas or what he wore to school. On good days he'll tell me about spying on his mother's cocktail parties or hiding bags of dirt in his closet to even out his baseball fields. On bad days he gets frustrated with his rusty brain. Mostly he is just amazed. "How do you know all this?!" he exclaims when I point out the church where he went every week.

I've started taking advantage of his good days. If he mentions a name or a place, I'll jot it down for next time. "Dad, this is the football field, the very field, where Bob Coates threw three touchdowns in one day. The crowd stood over there and cheered."

He leans out the window, studying the field, and then, as if his brain were a camera trying to focus, he zooms in on the memory. "Man, what a day! I was standing right there," he says, pointing. "Nobody had ever seen anything like it."

He beams and chokes up at the thought of it, so long ago, and yet in his fragile memory, so fresh. I stare out the window as well, seeing my young dad cheer on his buddy while across town my grandmother sets the table for a bridge party. For a brief moment he is happy and healthy again—and I'm reluctant to put the car into drive. ●

*Amann is an award-winning writer who has written articles for The Chicago Sun-Times, Salon.com and Brain, Child.*