

## THE DRIVER'S SEAT

*What we learn when we learn to drive.*

By Adam Gopnik January 26, 2015

Mike loved the New Yorker. We shared conversation about it frequently. One day I sheepishly told him I'd read the current issue cover to cover in one sitting. He chuckled and said, "That's the only way to do it!" This is a typical classic found in Mike's saved documents. The single highlighted line is Mike's emphasis. EOG

I decided to learn to drive because I wanted to learn to drive. I wasn't, I told anyone who would listen, searching for a metaphor of middle age, or declaring my emancipation from my pedestrian past, or making up for time wasted in the passenger seat. There's a rich literature about learning to drive written by women, for whom it represents a larger emancipation from the feminine roles of enforced passivity, of sitting in place and accepting helplessness. That wasn't my "issue." I wanted to learn to drive because I wanted to make a vehicle move in an orderly direction forward and around corners and to necessary places.

I didn't know how to drive for reasons that seemed to me obvious and accidental and psychologically uncomplicated. My parents, who worked a few blocks from our apartment, didn't have a car for a few brief years that happened to coincide with my teen-age ones. Then, in my early twenties, I found myself in New York, where people don't have cars, and where, among a thousand enterprises in transportation, from learning to roller skate to mastering the transfer from the No. 6 train to the R to get to Times Square, taking the time to learn to drive seemed the least worthwhile. The years, and the decades, had flown past, and on that once-a-year summer occasion when we rented a car and set off for Cape Cod, my wife, Martha, who grew up in a semi-suburb of Montreal and had her license at eighteen, did the driving. She was a terrific, expert, careful driver, and the last thing we seemed to need in the family was another. I simply wanted to be her relief chauffeur—a middle-inning guy, able to go to the pond on an August morning or to the drive-in movie theatre on an August evening. I wanted to be able to get ice cream at night and cinnamon buns in the morning.

Of course, there were other, more ignoble motives pressing on the decision to learn. Even as a feminist in a feminist age, I sometimes felt that I was in the wrong seat. Instead of sitting where generations of fathers have sat, pressing down on pedals and cursing the competition on the road, I had spent decades in the traditional mother's seat, filling her role—shushing the children when the driver was tired or looking for the exit, or holding out the paper bag of cookies to unseen, waiting hands in the back. When the rental-car man or the gas-station attendant approached the driver's seat and saw me in the "wrong" one, I immediately glared and scowled in what I imagined to be a persuasive impersonation of a hugely overskilled driver, the kind whose license has finally been taken away by the cops, however reluctantly, after a lifetime of dangerous but entertaining high-speed, "Dukes of Hazzard"-like performance. (Though I accept that these gender roles are nine-tenths "constructed," invented, and cast, still, that does not make it less of a temptation to play another: that the clown wants to play Hamlet does not mean he thinks that the actor playing Hamlet is actually a prince.)

My immediate trigger, though, was simpler: my son, Luke, turning twenty, had to get *his* license—he was a sophomore at a liberal-arts college just out of town—and various Robert Bly–Iron John type scenarios of manhood achieved and passed on still existed somewhere in the Walter Mitty theatre of my mind. "Let's learn to drive together," I said. But where, in the typical contemporary memoir, the troubled youth and the alienated father would silently acknowledge their vexed journey toward expertise and adulthood, he merely gave me an opaque look and asked if I was really sure this was a good idea, and had I run it by Mom? "Your reflexes are a bit funny, Dad," he said. I made a joke about being guys together, he mumbled something about "gender fluidity," which he had been studying in college, and we agreed to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles together and take the test for learner's permits.

The D.M.V. has become such a byword for bureaucratic indifference and big-government horrors that it was nice to discover that the 125th Street branch, at least, was about as well-run a place as one could hope to find. As we waited, I insisted that the reason government bureaus could seem so bureaucratic was that, by their nature, they have to be inclusive, and they can't inflict the basic market rationale of price differences upon their customers. If the privileged could pay more for quicker service, they would, but this would undermine the premises of citizenship. That first-class passengers get a shorter line through security claws at our idea of citizenship, which ought to include the notion that the rich and the poor suffer the indignities and delays of common civic cause equally. That this has never happened—the rich could buy their way out of Civil War conscription—doesn't make it less of an ideal. I want David Koch waiting in line alongside his chauffeur to be checked for hidden bombs and razors.

I was talking too much, and too quickly, because I was nervous beyond words about the test. I hadn't taken a test in many years, and I was afraid that I hadn't studied the little booklet of road rules well enough. People do fail the written test, and in New York State more than half of those who take the road test fail that one. "Dad, it's easy—it's multiple choice," Luke said, as we waited to enter the test-taking room. "There will be two answers that are obviously wrong. Then there will be two sort of plausible ones. If you just choose the plausible ones at random you'll get fifty per cent. Since you do know *something*, you'll get more than half of that right for sure. You can't help passing." The American social truth—that what we spend years teaching our children is essentially to spot the two obviously wrong answers—was the essential truth of the D.M.V., too. The larger social truth Luke was touching on, that being good at passing tests has relatively little to do with being good at what those tests are supposed to be testing, in the end came to haunt my entire experience of learning to drive.

I passed the test and got my permit, with a suitably grim photograph, and the very next week I signed up with a driving school in Manhattan that was supposed to be particularly good with later-in-life students. At five-thirty on a Tuesday afternoon, I got into the driver's seat of a car parked outside my apartment building and advertised on the side as "Student Driver." I noticed that various catchphrases had been laboriously written out in block letters on adhesive tape and stuck to the dashboard: "NOODLES!!!" and "BUSY BEE!!!" and "GSSLG!"

"I love it, yuuuuss, I *love* it!" Arturo Leon, my driving instructor, said with more enthusiasm than I expected, as I adjusted my mirrors, trying to recall how my father had always aligned these things. And then, to my shock—I expected to be eased into the pool, inch by inch—he had me pull out into the street and make a left turn on the adjoining avenue, and there I was—at rush hour on the Upper East Side, heading north among impatient taxicabs, doing what I suppose was a steady, frightened fifteen miles an hour, while the world roared and bleated around me, speeding past our little car. Arturo, I noticed, kept his foot alarmingly well away from the extra brake on his side in the specially prepared student car.

---

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

How Pompeo Became Trump's Most Loyal Soldier

---

Panic enveloped me. Taxis were honking furiously—furious, I dimly realized, at me! "Let's give him the hand," Arturo said, showing me a gentle, palm-out wave. "Just give him the hand: 'Yes, thank you for sharing.'" He was addressing the car alongside us as its driver yelled soundlessly. He smiled. We moved forward up the avenue. Driving was like a nightmare, or, rather, like a dream I had had many times at the age of six or seven, of being behind the wheel of my father's car and moving forward, floating forward. I broke out in a sweat—up Madison into the South Bronx, incredibly doing this thing.

Though I kept my eyes mostly pointed rigidly ahead, in the moments when we stopped at a red light ("I want to see the floor under the car ahead of us," Arturo would instruct me, and it took me a while to understand that by "floor" he meant the asphalt street surface; that, a city boy like me, he thought that everything flat and low on the ground *was* a floor), I got to study my teacher. Cherub-faced and immense, he worked nights as a d.j. with his brother, loved to sing scraps of old Motown songs as we drove, and thought that rush-hour Manhattan and the crowded shopping streets of Arthur Avenue and Third Avenue in the South Bronx, where he lived, were the perfect arena for learning to drive. As I drove, struggling to keep the terror down, Arturo kept up a non-stop patter. He was a great teacher and a champion talker, somehow managing to be both elaborately formal—he couched any direction, even a last-minute, life-saving one, as a polite request—and cheerily intimate: I learned about his Ecuadorean parentage and his immigrant upbringing, his failed marriage, his two beloved children, and his future prospects, both erotic and professional.

“O.K., we’re going uptown, please continue straight ahead—excellent,” he would say casually, hissing the “xc.” And then: “I love it!” We would head north to approach the Madison Avenue Bridge, or the Willis Avenue Bridge, or the Third Avenue Bridge—all bridges of which I had previously been unaware. “Do I turn here?” I would say, my voice shaky, as livery drivers and cabbies raced around and ahead of me. “If you would just push the car slightly left just here?” he would reply. “Just slide over. Just *slide* into the left lane. Just look and signal and *sliiide*. Thank you! Thank you! Excellent. I’m so happy with the way you did that.” He started to sing: “Because I’m happy / Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof. / Because I’m happy / Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth.” And then: “Thank you for doing that so easily. And we’ll just continue here, and now I’m going to stop you *here*.” He nimbly slipped his foot sideways onto his own brake, as, coming off the bridge at my steady fifteen m.p.h., I narrowly missed a sixteen-wheeler coming the other way. The truck driver blasted his horn—his steam siren, really—and Arturo waved gently at him. “Let’s give him the hand, right here,” he said. “The hand means thank you, bless you, fuck you. The hand means everything we need it to mean. Oh, thank you so much for signalling to us! Sharing is caring!” He would smile serenely, while slipping in through his smile an obscenity directed at the truck driver for my benefit, and I would laugh and give the truck driver the hand, too. Then Arturo would lean back and let me drive while he told me about his kids—Bryan Armany and Hillary Alizé—and his struggles to keep them in a straight line at school, about his father’s bad health and his mother’s love.

“Become the noodle!” he kept insisting, and I soon learned that this meant to relax completely, go limp from head to toe. His constant talk, I decided, was intended to *make* you become the noodle by not allowing you to think too much. Dread is always the product of imagination. You see the bad consequence coming and the image paralyzes your judgment. Arturo had me on the F.D.R. Drive at rush hour before I had a chance to think about it.

Two or three times a week, we would spend a couple of hours driving, up to the South Bronx and back again. (Luke did five hours, and it was a wrap: he was ready for the road test.) Arturo would have me crawl along Arthur Avenue and Third Avenue, learning the complicated timing necessary to avoid pedestrians crossing against the light, and then go out into the empty, boarded-over areas of the borough, to practice parallel parking and three-point turns. Then he would reward me by taking me out onto one of the big highways, the Bruckner or the F.D.R., where I could, unbelievably, go forty miles an hour and negotiate lanes like a cabbie, until I found the exit home.

Unlike everything else I’ve learned to do in midlife, driving negated the usual path of learning: the incremental steps, the breaking down and building up of parts, the curve we go up as one small mastery follows another. **Driving, I realized, isn’t really difficult; it’s just extremely dangerous.** You hit the gas and turn the wheel, and there you are—in possession of a two-ton weapon capable of being pointed at anything you like, at any speed you can go at, just by pressing a pedal a little bit harder. The poor people in the crosswalk—the guy in the tank top striding indifferently forward; the mother yanking at her child’s hand—had no idea of the danger they were in with me behind the wheel! *I* had no idea of the danger I am in doing the same thing, day after day. Cars are terrifying, and cars are normality itself.

This discrepancy between difficulty and danger is our civilization’s signature, from machine guns to atomic bombs. You press a pedal and two tons of metal lurches down the city avenue; you pull a trigger and twenty enemies die; you waggle a button and cities burn. The point of living in a technologically advanced society is that minimal effort can produce maximal results. Making hard things easy is the path to convenience; it is also the lever of catastrophe. The realization of how close to disaster we were at every moment helped press my panic button, and, while Arturo’s singing and commentary reduced the panic some, I tried to find other ways to overcome it as well.

**O**ne way to calm myself was to become my calm father. Whenever I think of him, I am in the back seat and I see the back of his head, his mesh driving gloves, and his calm voice debating a topic with his children improbably crowded in behind him. (My first memories of life are in the Volkswagen “bug” my parents bought in the late fifties, into whose tiny back seat they introduced, like clowns into a clown car, one child after another, until there were six.) To see him so is to do a terrible disservice to his accomplishments—a chauffeur is the last thing he was—and yet in another way it is to see him whole, if one translates the act of driving into an act of understated service. He thought little of doing a kind of drive-around of his six children and twelve grandchildren, now dispersed around the continent like pieces on a game board. From rural Ontario to Boston to Ann Arbor to Berkeley to Washington to New York—the driving would last fifteen or sixteen hours, and he would emerge, bearded and smiling. “I’ve never had an accident,” he liked to say. We were very close when I was a teen-ager, and I loved him more for knowing that I was not remotely like him: he was sound, solid, in his role as a dean paterfamilias to a campus—all things I never hoped to be. My not driving was, in some sense, a response to his driving all the time. We make ourselves in our father’s sunshine but also in his shadow: what he beams down we bend away from.

He had been driving, he often recalled, since he was twelve, as a young boy on a farm in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, his family, unusually, Jews among the Pennsylvania Dutch. He first drove an Army-surplus jeep, used as a tractor, and at sixteen got his license. He often told me of how, as a teen-ager, having a car was the means not just to autonomy—though it was that: you could get behind the wheel and go to Atlantic City, to Provincetown, even to old Quebec—but to privacy. It enabled a lower-middle-class kid in a fractious, noisy extended family to be alone with his thoughts. He said to me once, when I was small, “You know, you can drive right across the country now without a stoplight.” The image stayed with me. (I suspect that the significant things we say to our children usually vanish, while incidental oddities linger.) I wanted to travel with him, but I left the driving to him.

Why, I wondered, had he never encouraged me to drive? Why had he not kept a car when I was a teen-ager? He gave me a driving lesson once—in Italy on a sabbatical leave, as it happened—and it had gone all right. But then he stopped, and he didn’t really have to; we didn’t have a car, that was true, but there were friends and rentals. If driving mattered so much to him, why would it not to me? Had he failed me in some way, or had I failed him in some way I was still not ready to recognize?

Learning to drive changed my perception of the city. Pre-modern peoples have to be persuaded that what they impute to sentient agency is actually the work of automatic forces: lightning, tides, the moon rising are not the result of gods or demons working their will but just things that happen from consciousness natural forces. I had to persuade myself that what I had grown to attribute to automatic forces was actually the work of agency. The crazy taxi-driver, weaving in and out of traffic, I had always viewed with what was, to my wife, undue calm—he was like a whirlpool in the river’s flow, just what was happening naturally. That he was *making* it happen, and should not have been, was not a thought entirely at home in my head. It had never occurred to me that the pulse and movement of traffic was not like the eddies and currents of rivers but a network of decisions made at frantic high speeds by coöperative and conflicting drivers. The deeper truth was that I accepted the action of cars as automatic forces because I thought, in effect, that my father was driving them all. I had always so trusted him up there in the front seat, as a benevolent natural force, that I extended that trust to anyone in that place.

This opacity of agency in car driving, and the ways we try to surmount it, turns out to be the subject of intense academic study. Distilling an argument from some reading, most of it work created under the general aegis of the studies of street traffic done by the sociologist Erving Goffman, I had the sense that it all seemed to intersect on the idea that we regard cars as shells, closed homes, more than as mobile weapons. Traffic is a way of avoiding looking at other people’s faces. We like being in cars because they give us my father’s teenage illusion of privacy, and as a consequence we are unduly surprised and even enraged when we are reminded that there are other people like us in them. Road rage is a function of mind blindness induced by the car’s enclosure: when we’re locked in our car’s little confession box, it’s easy to arrive at the illusion that we’re the only person out there. We consistently underrate the movements of cars as intentional objects, and then, in an instant, overrate them. A vehicle that obstructs our way is first a mute object in the maze to be avoided and then, suddenly, a menace. This is why the driver acting erratically, unexpectedly pulling ahead, or moseying down Madison at fifteen m.p.h., prompts “You idiot!” rather than “Are you O.K.?”

Arturo’s method, assuming that there was one, was, in part, to make driving a car more like walking on a sidewalk, full of recognitions and hand waving and early avoidance, tamping down the sudden shocks that the combustion engine is heir to. Driving so much with Arturo after reading the academics, I not only began to enjoy it but also began to like cars, and to see that driving is one of the last democratic things we do. I had long thought of cars as a weapon against civilization, and had said as much many times in print. They devoured cities, destroyed mass transit, assaulted walkers, greedily demanded parking lots where once there had been public space, and, worst of all, sent families out from dense cities into atomized suburbs. But now I saw that driving was in another way civilization itself: self-organizing, self-controlling, a pattern of agreement and coalition made at high speed and, on the whole, successfully. “Just signal and slide over,” Arturo would urge me on the highway, and, as I signalled, other cars—other drivers—actually let me slide over! No cop appeared at the edge of the road to enforce the rule. They just did! Swerving and sliding over is citizenship, and the startling thing is how commonplace and easy it is. It was the essential social contract at work at forty miles an hour. The promised approach of the self-driving car, though it might make the world easier for non-drivers like me—and, given how little I was improving, I thought it quite possible that I would remain a non-driver for life—would still mark a loss in courtesy. “Sharing is caring,” Arturo would sing out, again and again, and though he meant it somewhat sardonically, he also really meant it: we were sharing the public road and that alone was a way of caring for our fellow-drivers. Arturo’s all-purpose hand—the one that means “thank you,” “fuck you,” “who cares about you”—is the proper hand for a citizen. It broadcast civility, while keeping its private meanings to itself.

Along the way, Arturo tried to explain to me what he wanted me to do to prepare for the road test that Luke and I had scheduled together, for late October. Tactfully, he tried to get me to see that my job was not just to show that I could turn corners and do three-point turns and parallel park. More, it was to impress the license-giving tester with my readiness to do anything that was required

of me, and to do it in a suitably deferential spirit. “They make their decision in the first ten seconds,” he explained, over and over. “In the first *five* seconds, just by looking at you. They want to see you work the mirrors, they want to see you check your blind spot—they want to see you *work* your blind spot.” He showed me how I needed to behave: twisting my neck around in the car to look over my shoulder, my neck bobbing back and forth inside my collar, like Rodney Dangerfield doing standup for an audience in the back seat.

I complained that I saw what was behind me more clearly if I just faced front and looked in the rearview mirrors. “I know,” he said, sighing. “It doesn’t matter. You got to be the busy bee anyway! They make up their mind in the *first* second they look at you—it’s up to you to show them that you are a safe, skillful, and secure driver by the way you behave when you start up the car, even before you move an inch.” He gave me a brief, dispassionate breakdown of the character of the driving judges, who were joined together by pride of office. They liked skill, but they hated arrogance. They wanted *humble* drivers. As Luke had explained to me that the key to the written exam was that it was multiple choice, Arturo was telling me that the key to the road test was that it was *not* multiple choice, it was a game of Simon Says, call and response. The point was to figure out exactly what the tester wanted and then do it.

Over time, Arturo and I became friendly, exchanging confidences about our kids—we both had a boy and a girl, his daughter Hillary named admiringly after Mrs. Clinton, while his son, Bryan Armany, like mine, Luke Auden, had a first name he liked the sound of and the middle name of an artist he admired. We talked a lot about the difficulties of fathering: when to press hard, when to let up—when to be present and when to recede. He was in the middle of managing his father’s decline, in and out of hospitals, moments of lucidity rising in a mire of confusion.

One evening, as I dodged the pedestrians in the South Bronx, or they dodged me, Arturo turned toward me. “Adam, I have something I want to ask you.”

“Sure, Arturo, what?” He seemed so formal.

“How do you write a book?” he said. “There’s a book I have in mind. It’s called ‘Dream Driving,’ all about my way of teaching driving. How you have to think about driving when you’re not in the car. How you have to be the busy bee. How you have to shift gear, steer, signal, look, go.” That was what that “GSSLG” on his dashboard meant. “How you have to *dream* about driving to drive well. How do you write a book like that?”

Writing a book seemed as mysterious a process to him, one as much in need of elaborate advance and afterthought, as driving a car was to me. The secret to both—that, really, you sort of just do it—seemed as inadequate an answer to his question as it would have been to any of mine. I stumbled out something about making an outline, thinking through what you wanted to say, making sure that your sentences on the page sounded a little like your voice in life.

“You sort of get better at it the more you write,” I said. “You have to just keep writing and then, I promise, it will start to feel easier as you do it.”

He paused. “You become the noodle?” he said.

Yes, I agreed. You have to become the noodle to write a book. For the only moment in our time together, he didn’t say anything at all.

The day of the road test arrived at last, and I drove all the way to Bronxville, Arturo in the seat beside me, to collect Luke. The tests were being given in a residential neighborhood not far from there.

---

MORE FROM THIS ISSUE  
FEBRUARY 2, 2015

PROFILES

The Pursuit of Beauty

By Alec Wilkinson

SHOUTS & MURMURS

Taylor Swift and Your Taxes

By Paul Rudnick

SKETCHBOOK

The Seven-Second Workout

By Roz Chast

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Adventures in Rothland

By Anthony Lane

COMMENT

Here

By Nick Paumgarten



Any prospect for father-son bonding in road anxiety was quickly dispelled by Luke. "I'm just glad I'm not going to have to come back here after I get my license," he said. There was no doubt at all in his mind that he was going to get it.

I took the exam first. The examiner got into the car beside me. She was a tiny African-American woman, who sank down into the seat, barely coming up to the level of the windshield. She told me briefly to pull out and make a left turn. I did.

"Why are you so nervous?" she asked me impatiently. "What's making you nervous?"

My soul sank. Was it that obvious? This was getting off to a terrible start.

"The circumstance," I answered, dry-mouthed.

"*What* circumstance? Make a left turn at the light."

"The circumstance of taking a test," I said.

Oddly, that seemed to please her. "Well," she said. Then: "How can you not have a license? How can you *never* have had a license? Where did you grow up?"

I guided the car at what I hoped was the right pace along the streets, and gave her the whole story. She had me park, and do the three-point turn. Then she had me pull over.

"What are *you* going to do with a license?" she demanded.

I smiled weakly. "Take my kids to the ocean," I said at last.

"What ocean? You're going to the damned *Hamptons*?" Her tone was one of amused disdain: she could see right through me to the other side of the street.

"No," I said. "Cape Cod."

"Cape Cod! I like Martha's Vineyard."

"Why?" I came back. I sensed that she wanted me to.

"Why?" she answered. "It reminds me of down South."

"Yes, it does," I said sapiently. "There's a certain resemblance in the foliage . . ."

"When have you ever been down South?"

I smiled weakly again. She asked me what I did for a living. I told her I wrote.

"I could write a book," she said.

"What about?"

"This!" It was so obvious. "What people do on driving tests."

"Well, tell me one good story that would go in a book," I said. She wanted a little resistance, I felt, some nerve shown from the student.

"There's a million," she said, and she began to work her little handheld computer. After a while, she asked, again, "What are you going to do with this license?"

My heart leaped as I realized that she was going to give it to me. I was going to be a licensed driver! But her puzzlement was real. Her tone was that of a bureaucrat being asked to provide a marriage certificate to a hospice patient; she could supply the paper, but she could not really see the point.

"I'm going to drive home," I said at last.

She snorted. There was an odd mixture of hostility and good humor in her conversation—with enough class and race and sexual politics implicit in it to supply several seminar rooms at Luke’s liberal-arts college. She had taken my measure within the first ten seconds: no great shakes as a driver, but desperately eager to do well; responsible, if a little ridiculous; no danger on the road to the good people of New York State. It turned out that I had made two mistakes on the road test—taken too wide a left turn, and not signalled when I pulled out from my parallel-parking space. Still, if I was willing to be deferential, she was prepared to be decently tolerant of my absurdity. If I would be the noodle, she would be the sauce.

When I got out of the car, clutching my little piece of paper, Arturo embraced me, and we jumped up and down like a pitcher and catcher after the last out of the World Series. “I knew you could do it! I knew it! I knew it!” He seemed almost as excited as I was.

I called my dad, in Canada. (Luke, of course, got his license one-two-three, just like that.) He was pleased, but didn’t seem particularly impressed. “The important thing is that now you know how to drive,” he said. “I’m seventy-nine, and I got my license when I was sixteen and I’ve never had an accident.”

Now you know how to drive—the simple monosyllables hovered in the air. Knowing how to drive is part of knowing how to live. Everyone has a role: we yield, scoot, slide, wave, nod, sigh, deny each other space and give each other license. The amazing thing is that, while it sometimes ends up in a horrible pileup, it doesn’t *always* end up in a horrible pileup. That’s civilization.

I put the license away in my wallet and have not had a chance to use it since. We usually expand our capacities without changing our lives. People go off to meditation retreats and come back to their Manhattan existence; on the whole, they are not more serene, but they are much more knowing about where serenity might yet be found. People go to cooking school and don’t cook more; but they know how to cook. Dr. Johnson was once asked why he always rushed to look at the spines of books in the library when he arrived at a new house. “Sir, the reason is very plain,” he said. “Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it.” Almost all of our useful knowledge is potential knowledge.

The potentials may serve merely as vicarious experience, but almost all experience is vicarious: that’s why we have stories and movies and plays and pictures. It’s why we have drive-in movies in summer towns. We expand our worlds through acts of limited empathy more than through plunges into unexpected places. My father’s “Now you know how to drive” had wisdom buried in its simplicity. The highlights of life are first unbelievably intense and then absurdly commonplace. I am now a licensed driver. But almost everybody is a licensed driver. Having a child born is a religious experience. But everybody has kids. Everybody drives, and now I can, too. That’s all, and enough. Now I can drive straight across the country, without a stoplight. I don’t think I ever will. But at least I know I can.

**T**here is a postscript to the story. My father called in early January to say that, on the eve of his eightieth birthday, he had been forced to take a driving test.

“But it wasn’t a driving test—” my mother interrupted, not for the first time in their sixty-some years together.

“I’m getting there,” he said, sounding unusually testy with her. It had been a very Canadian test, he explained, a vision examination allied to a reading test, conducted in a friendly spirit—but its dagger end was present. One of the eighty-year-olds tested had had his license taken away, never to drive again. Social life involves being sorted by a few others who have, by the rest of us, been given the power to sort. Our illusion is that it ends on graduation, from one school or another, when one teacher passes us, and then passes us on. But it never really does. We go on being driven and sorted, until at last we’re sorted out, and driven home. ♦

*This article appears in the print edition of the February 2, 2015, issue.*



*Adam Gopnik, a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1986. He is the author of, most recently, “A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism.” [Read more »](#)*

CONDÉ NAST

© 2019 Condé Nast. All rights reserved. Use of and/or registration on any portion of this site constitutes acceptance of our User Agreement (updated 5/25/18) and Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement (updated 5/25/18). Your California Privacy Rights. The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Condé Nast. The New Yorker may earn a portion of sales from products and services that are purchased through links on our site as part of our affiliate partnerships with retailers. Ad Choices

