

Kyle Sager

The Driving Snow

I tied and untied my Converse¹ in the passenger seat, knees tucked close to my chest and sitting very still in the empty Southwest High School parking lot. One by one, snowflakes fell from a gray and motionless sky, only to land and melt instantly on the windshield, transforming into nothing but a dot of clear liquid, almost as if it were raining. It was New Year's Eve, my last year of school, and I was miserable.

Suddenly the driver's side door flew open and a burly² man holding a clipboard leaned down. The driving instructor.

"Cosette Evans, right?" he asked, plopping himself into the seat before I could answer. [...]

"That's me," I replied, letting my shoes slide to the floor. He glanced down at his clipboard and back up at me.

"So," he said, clearing his throat. "Your fourth try?"

"Yes." I pulled my glasses out of my pocket.

"Well, you probably know the drill then, don't you?"

We swapped places – I meandered³ around the front of the car and he around the back. It was a silver Honda Civic, the kind of car Dad had when I was growing up, but a few years newer. [...]

I climbed into the driver's seat and started the car, placing my hands at ten and two.

"Let's not waste time in the parking lot," he said. "We'll make our way out to 27th and head downtown before the snow gets any heavier. Big storm coming."

I put the car in drive and inched forward, too afraid of letting my foot leave the brake entirely. The snow was dizzying. Through it, I noticed the Shake Stop⁴ across the road with one of those colored "OPEN" signs all lit up and blinking, turning the snow that fell in front of it blue then red. [...]

Last year Jamie and I took Dad there for his birthday; it was the hottest day of the summer.

"One Peanut Protein Dream Shake please," he said confidently to the worker.

"Peanut Butter Dream Protein Cream Shake," I whispered to him, shaking my head and snickering with Jamie.

"How is anybody supposed to remember that," Dad joked as he handed over a twenty. "It's like the password to a secret club." The worker laughed. I recognized her from school, a year or two below me.

But I remember it so clearly because it was the day before his diagnosis. [...]

"You guys like high school?" Dad asked us.

Jamie grinned and rolled her eyes. "It's summer break, Dad. Don't do this."

"I'm just asking," he exclaimed, taking a sip of his shake. "I think you two will love senior year, especially you Cozy."

"Why's that?"

¹ gummisko

² kraftig

³ gik i en bue

⁴ Shake Stop: café med milkshakes

35 "Because," he replied, the sun illuminating his brown eyes, "you've always loved a good ending."

As I flicked on the left turn signal at the 27th intersection⁵, staring at the spot across the road where he'd said that to me, I was already fighting back tears. There wasn't going to be a good ending. Things had become so different so quickly. How was I ever supposed to keep up?

At the light, I was hoping for a left arrow, but all I got was a bright green circle. [...]

40 Driving never really clicked for me. It worked out just fine for Jamie. Dad had taught her, though. Once she'd learned how to do it, he'd become far too sick to stand, so I was left to fend for myself. I took a few lessons on Wednesdays after school and even some exams, but I always lacked the confidence to speed up or keep both hands on the wheel, all while watching out for other cars. It frightened me, like I was a risk to everyone else on the road. I'd get distracted, always picturing Mom
45 throwing up in the toilet at three in the morning and the unforgettable feeling of Dad's grip loosening on my hand in the hospital.

Somehow I turned safely and began driving north. [...] I stayed in the left lane, cruising a full ten under the speed limit. The instructor didn't seem to mind – he kept saying "nice and easy" like he could sense my nerves. It helped. [...]

50 The suburbs built in the 70s blew past in a flurry of white and brown. Some people still had their colored lights on, even though Christmas was finally over and the world felt worn out, like it'd just run a long race – the same one, year after year.

"Got New Year's plans?" the man asked me, tapping on his clipboard with a pencil.

"Not really, no."

55 "Mom and Dad let you go out with friends?"

In one quick breath I said, "My mom's in a psychiatric hospital and my dad died in August."

I shouldn't have let it slip out that way. [...] I came across so matter-of-fact, but there was no use in lying, especially when my parents were all I thought about.

"Jesus," he said. I could feel his eyes on me, his sympathy. "I'm really sorry."

60 I stared straight ahead as we passed under the glow of another green light, feeling my face turn sour and my eyes well up. The snow was thickening now into wide clumps. I turned on the wipers. [...]

"My dad died when I was seventeen," the man said softly, after a few minutes.

"Oh," I mumbled. "I'm really sorry too."

65 "It's alright," he said. A moment later, "I wish I could tell you it goes away, but losing a parent never really does. Not completely. Especially when it's sudden. It'll always feel like a piece of you is missing in some way or another."

I said nothing, feeling a tear slip down my left cheek.

"Sorry," he said, turning back to the road. "We don't have to talk about this. Really, I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

70 The two of us sat in silence until we crept up on South Boulevard, where the city began to get denser, the bungalows⁶ a little older but a little nicer. We were around the corner from the country club where Jamie and I worked last summer. I used to walk around the neighborhood with her on

⁵ veikryds

⁶ villaer

Fridays after we finished, waiting for Dad to pick us up and take us for Slurpees⁷ at the 7-Eleven down the road. He would wink and say, "Don't tell your mother".

75 Before she was even seventeen, Jamie had already picked out a house on the corner of Sycamore Avenue that she wanted to buy when she got married and bought a dog. [...] I could never think about my future like that because I never knew what I wanted.

80 "One day you will," Dad had told me when we were sitting together in the driveway last May. "One morning you'll wake up and open your windows and see the world in a different way and deep down you'll know exactly what you want. You're still so young, Cozy. And just because Jamie thinks she's got it all figured out doesn't mean she really does. You always think about things too much, but that's what I like about you. You're so much like I was. Like I still am."

85 I felt my voice tremble and say to the instructor, "Death was never something I thought about until he died. It wasn't real, it was never something that could actually happen to anyone I know. It was only something they talked about in books or at church or on TV, you know? Like car crashes or tornadoes or something. That sort of pain seemed so far away from me, so impossible to understand. But now I get it."

"I know exactly what you mean," he replied as we approached another intersection. "Take a right here."

90 Through the passenger window I saw the old Pizza Hut that got turned into a bank and next to it, the empty lots where there used to be a farmer's market⁸. Mom and Dad would take us when we were tiny almost every Sunday morning. [...]

"How did it happen?" I asked him. [...]

95 "Heart attack," said the man. "One minute he was grilling steaks for my brother and I, the next just... gone, that quick."

"Oh man."

"How about your dad?"

"Brain cancer." I was staring at the road, mesmerized⁹ by the snowflakes dancing up the curb and weaving through the blades of flat, dead grass on the median¹⁰. [...]

100 "Jesus. Awful disease." He sniffled and quietly wiped his eyes with a tissue from the glovebox, offering me one in the same gesture, but I wasn't quite crying anymore. After a minute he said, "You know, I remember hating it when people would tell me that eventually it would get better."

"Yeah. I'm not sure I want it to get better," I said, now coasting¹¹ at the speed limit. "I just want it to be the way it used to, like to turn back time or something and be a kid again."

105 "Oh man, we all wish that," he chuckled. Out of the corner of my eye, a kind, genuine smile. "Every damn one of us."

He had me turn into the entrance of Jameson Park. We'd practice parallel parking for a minute, then head back to Southwest High before the snow came down in sheets¹². The lot was completely

⁷ slushice

⁸ *farmer's market*: torvedag

⁹ hypnotiseret

¹⁰ midterrabatten

¹¹ (her) holdt farten ubesværet

¹² *came down in sheets*: væltede ned

empty except the shrunken snow pile in the corner, sharp with ice chunks and speckled with gravel
110 and dirt. [...]

“This is the hardest part though,” said the man.

“Parallel parking?”

He laughed. “Well yes, that. But I mean the first year without him.”

“Oh, I guess, yeah.”

115 “It won’t ever go away completely,” he said. “But you’ll learn to live with it, like they’re a part of
you. And then eventually you have your own kids and realize your parents loved you more than you
could ever understand. It’s different. But it heals you.”

The man set out four orange cones¹³ in a rectangle and told me I was supposed to park in between
120 them. With patience, he guided my maneuvers. [...] The windshield wipers squeaked as they brushed
wet flakes off the glass, and within no time I was parked squarely between the cones.

“Nicely done,” he exclaimed. “First try, too.”

“Thanks.” [...]

I turned and looked at the entrance, but once again without warning my memories were taking
125 over. I thought about the whole drive there and then the library. The warmth from the lights inside
and the kids I saw reading in the nooks through the windows. The long, steep sledding hill¹⁴, and how
tomorrow there might be a new little girl there with her father, how they might think it’s their own
secret hill too, just the two of them. [...] I thought of all the other kids who one day would have to go
through things they could never imagine, feel things they would never want to feel. [...]

130 For the first time, I really looked at the driving instructor’s face, the warmth from his eyes, the
white flecks of snow gathering in his thinned hair. He was almost smiling, his mind elsewhere, and I
imagined that soon he was going home to his wife and their kids. [...] There in front of me was
somebody else’s father, somebody they looked up to, somebody else’s everything. How lucky were
they? How lucky had I been?

135 I thought about how one day I was eight and the next day I was eighteen. How I would have days
where I felt even worse than I did today. And days where I felt better. [...] I’d miss this moment too,
when everything was vivid and painfully clear, when for the first time since August I felt my father’s
love again. [...]

“Do you want me to drive us back?” the instructor asked me. “Snow’s getting pretty bad.”

“That’s okay, I’ll drive,” I replied, finally breathing out. “I actually like the snow.”

(2023)

¹³ trafikkegler

¹⁴ sledding hill: kælkebakke