**BREAKING DOWN**

I find it hard to think when I can’t breathe. Some, most, can hold their breath for sixty, maybe eighty seconds. I can barely hold it for half that while driving with a navigator, who doesn’t believe in GPS, rotating a map counter-clockwise in my face like a diving plane’s altimeter. The smothering sensation is compounded by rants from my maternal passenger, tainted by self-appointed aristocracy and a drought of hormones, and a pondering of the benefits of a private school education.

My mother and I could not be characterized as friends. Somewhere between us the tide went out, and the earth stopped spinning permanently misaligning the planets.

My brother’s death came as a shock, but one could hardly call it a surprise. He had been killing himself for years. The only revelation was our mother’s wish to assist in packing his belongings from the one room efficiency he shared with a cat so old it could be mistaken for taxidermy. I intimated we meet at my brother’s place. Mother said she wanted to ride together, so I again suggested we converge at his apartment.

I spent a day washing and waxing my car, and shampooed the floor mats. I bought an aerosol can of air, a ridiculous concept to pay for, and blew the dust from my vents. It’s not that I desired to impress my mother. It’s that I did not wish to give her anything to criticize. A bottle of glass cleaner and sixteen ounces of leather revitalizer finished the job.

I drove into mother’s cobblestone driveway lined with flowers she did not plant, and a lawn manicured by staff she said were grateful to have a job. The varying colored mums were symmetrically arranged. Even in the flora, individuality was discouraged. As I pulled to the back of the property with the bays of garages, I found mother’s car in the turnaround with the tailgate open looking like a spoiler on the steroidal SUV.

“Hello dear,” a kiss on the cheek and a brief hug that didn’t violate her personal space, “I thought we would take my car. It’s much bigger than your thing.”

She waved her fingers in dismissal pointing where to park and discounting what had taken me seventy-two monthly payments to own. I pulled to the outer edge of the circle, put the car in park, and took a deep breath through my nose counting before exhaling.

“Hello mother.”

She wore a dress and low heels suitable for a luncheon. I donned blue jeans and a flannel shirt more acclimated for the local diner. She adorned herself with make-up and pearls while I skipped the morning shave. On her front passenger seat lay a new roll of paper towels, the end sheet still adhered in place, a pair of unused gardening gloves, and a map, unfolded and refolded to have a specific section on top. Mother’s deposit on the same seat of a canvas and leather day purse, acquired in Paris, conveyed that I was her driver.

“We won’t take the Turnpike,” she said. “Those trucks kick up stones looking to break my windshield. I planned our route through the back roads. We’ll do some sightseeing, maybe a little antiquing.”

Mother spoke with an expression her sons knew meant further debate was fruitless. One of the ironies of my life was that I was married with five children, and yet my mother still rendered me impotent.

I drove her car with gauges of techno greens and blues while Bach and Vivaldi blared. It provided relief from conversation more awkward than our embraces.

The Eisenhower administration developed the Turnpike, and it provided a dependable highway due west to my brother’s place. The back roads were the remnants of wagon trails, centuries old, which wound around earthen impediments with little regard for direction. Deviating from a proven route was unchartered waters for mother and me. We preferred to limit our risks to matters of weather, health, and the misfortune of others. The first time mother said to turn right when there was no such option, I knew we were in trouble. I didn’t contradict her. The lack of asphalt and two large oaks were ample obstacles.

“What are you doing?” she queried.

“Turning left. There is no right.”

“I can see that. You’re going the wrong way.”

“Which way would you have me go?”

“There should be a right turn. The map says so.”

Like my mother, the map was irrefutable. The tension hung between us as static charged air before a storm.

“I can’t turn right mother.”

A car honked an impatient horn behind us. I turned the only direction available.

“You must have done something wrong to get is into this mess,” she said.

“Why does it have to be my fault?”

“Because you must not have been listening earlier when I gave you directions.”

It was the same conversation we had been having for decades. The dialogue remained constant, only the precipitating subject changed.

The left turn yielded to a narrow two lane road with no shoulder. My eyes scanned the horizon for the silhouettes of signage. Mother muted Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 and hoisted her reading glasses from the lanyard around her neck, contemplating the map as if answers lay on the paper rather than the terrain before us. The subtle shift of gears and the thrum of a fine tuned European motor provided the only noise. The silence proved better than the juxtaposition of subjects and predicates between us.

“Do you even know where we are?”

“No mother. I do not. I wanted to take the Turnpike. You chose this route.”

“Don’t blame this on me. This isn’t my fault. I didn’t kill my-self.”

She broke the latter word into two distinct and separate syllables as if one was a shield and the other a sword. Her cheeks effused crimson, and her white knuckles crowned her taut hands.

I inhaled and held it as a buffer between my brain and the muted opinion begging to be unleashed from my lungs. I adjusted my grip on the steering wheel and straightened as I began a silent count, the beating of my heart resonating in my ears.

In times of duress, the medulla oblongata releases epinephrine to respond to the need for increased acuity. I was unaware of the initial surge of sound and pull on the wheel. My senses assaulted, the view through the windshield shifted hard and angled to the right as the steering wheel pulled a half revolution clockwise extricating itself from my grasp. The restraining belts held fast as inertia thrust us forward pressing into my torso and evacuating the air from my lungs as a rasp through clenched teeth. The car left the road and decelerated in the high grass. We came to a stop before I had time to brake. In a moot show of control, I put the car in park and turned off the ignition.

“Are you all right?” I asked my mother.

“I think so. What happened?”

I noticed one of her shoes was off, and a scratch on her elbow was beginning to bleed.

“It was a blow out.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Neither did I.” I pulled a clean handkerchief from my pocket. “Put this on your elbow. Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“No. I’m okay. How about you?”

“I’m fine.”

I answered quicker than I should, but it was reflexive after four decades. A hard rapping on the window broke the microcosm of the car’s interior.

“Hello! Hello! Are you hurt? Do you want me to call an ambulance?”

I opened the door straining as I pushed it away and up. When I unclipped my seat belt, I realized we were in a ditch listing forward and to the right.

“I’m okay. My mother’s okay,” I said to the woman. She looked to be in her mid-thirties and reminded me of the faces from the Ivory soap commercials of my youth. She did not wear a wedding ring. Two grade school age boys in blue and orange soccer uniforms watched from an open minivan door. It was apparent they had been told to stay in the car.

I stepped off the running board into knee high grass, and worked my way around the front to the passenger side. Several pieces of broken molding lay strewn about. I assumed them to be from the front undercarriage. My feet sunk in the soft and wet soil as I struggled to open my mother’s door. The cool water pooled in my shoes and soaked my socks.

“Mom, it might be easier if you climb over and get out on the driver’s side.”

She undid her restraint, and I witnessed a purple abrasion, the silhouette of her belt, across her shoulder. She reached over, grabbed the steering wheel, and pulled herself across the seat.

“Let me give you a hand,” said our responder climbing into the car.

By the time I negotiated myself out of the mire, mother stood on her own.

“There’s no changing the tire here. We need a tow.” I declared.

“Let’s get your mother to my car” suggested our responder glancing back up the hill.

I surveyed mother, a certain incongruity between the print on her dress and the chaffs of grass. We each took an arm and I helped her up the hill.

“You two are lucky you weren’t seriously hurt. My kids and I were right behind you when your tire exploded. I’m surprised you remained in control.”

I had no recollection of such, but saw no reason to refute the praise.

“He’s a good driver,” said my mother squeezing my stabilizing hand with her arm.

I excavated the auto club card from my wallet and shook my phone to garner signal. The woman opened a small first aid kit from her glove box and swabbed mother’s wound. I recited the sixteen digit number on my card and verified my identity with my mother’s maiden name. I was faced with the embarrassment of the obvious. “Excuse me ma’am. Where are we?”

Nonplussed, she answered, “You’re on Burnt Store Road about four miles south of Route 541.” As an afterthought, she added, “In the town of Pemberville.”

I regarded myself as fortunate to know the State.

“No. No one was hurt. It’s off the road about thirty to forty yards in tall grass and resting partly in a drainage ditch,” I said looking at my mother’s car, a trail of flattened grass and tire tracks marking its path. “Three hours. You’ve got to be kidding me. Isn’t there anything sooner?”

I hung up the phone in disgust. I observed mother primping using the mirror on the minivan’s passenger visor, and wondered how to occupy the next few hours. I felt a sensation erupt in my chest as when trapped in the middle seat on an airplane between two large people, arms held in submission at your sides.

Our first responder interrupted my flight plan. ‘Why don’t I take you into town? It’s only ten minutes and better than waiting by the side of the road. I’m sure the towing service will give you a ride back.”

I surveyed mother’s car. It rested at too much of an angle to sit in comfortably. The minimal road shoulder did not appear hospitable for loitering. Mother, failing to insert an opinion, finished applying her lip stick with an audible smack. She closed the clasp on her purse, and flipped up the visor with an air of finality. She didn’t move from the passenger seat which was the equivalent of rendering a decision.

I rode in the back with the two juvenile soccer stars occupied with YouTube videos on their phones. I envied their distraction.

A typical welcome sign affixed with four civic monikers ranging from Lion’s Club to Rotary announced the entrance to Pemberville. Clusters of two and three story fire-brick buildings with wood shutters, glass display windows were punctuated by the occasional Victorian gothic residence with high peaks and gingerbread cornices. Three blinking lights controlled traffic, and our driver pulled over after the second. A Veteran’s memorial obelisk with a stand of cannonballs on each corner fenced in by a run of rusting wrought iron posts composed the town’s center square.

“There are some good browsing stores on this side, and Maude’s Café has a great soup and sandwich deal for lunch,” said our responder pointing across the street to a mom and pop building; the kind with the business on the first floor, and the residential quarters in the two stories above.

Mother, who remained silent on the ride into town, managed a thank you. After conveying same, I reached for the sliding door handle, but it opened on its own. The driver’s eyes met mine in the rear view mirror. She pointed to a button on the dash.

The van pulled away exiling us to the presence of each other. Mother stepped off the curb in the direction of the restaurant. Two steps behind, I followed.

The wooden floor of Maude’s Café was dark with age and the walls adorned with aging photographs of local sports teams, firefighters, and police officers. It was a place where patrons were on a first name basis.

A woman mother’s age with an extra forty pounds and natural colored hair approached with menus and an inviting smile, “Pick the seats. You’re the first customers of the day. I’ll bring some fresh iced tea and an update on the specials.”

Mother selected a table by the front, and the morning sun warmed my hair and shoulders. We sat in folding Captain’s chairs, the canvas stretched from use. I wasn’t sure which was more uncomfortable; the tilt of my spine and forced rounding of my pelvis, or mother’s gaze out the window. I had no desire to initiate conversation and made myself busy counting rows of alternating red and white checks in the paper table cover.

“It wasn’t my fault,” she said still looking away.

“It was a blow-out mother. We could have run over something. Maybe a defective tire. Who knows?”

“Your brother. It wasn’t my fault.” She turned to face me, her eyes filled with pain, the lower lids quivering, the dam restraining a torrent. “I loved him so.”

Her tears came, and her gaze clouded to earlier memories I dared not tread. Thin lines of black mascara ran down her face. She did not move to dab the tears, her chin still high. I extended my hands across the table, first our fingertips touching, as if lost and now found. I ventured further still holding her hands in mine. They were small, frail, thin skin with veins on the surface. It was the first time I recognized her age.

“I love you too, son.”

I couldn’t remember the last time she said such. They were words restrained, and between us, as unfamiliar to her as they were to me.

We sat that way for several minutes, intimate, longer than I thought both of us could endure, longer than I could hold my breath. She broke contact when she reached for her purse and retrieved several tissues. Maude brought a pitcher of iced tea with several floating fruit wedges and a plastic tray of bread covered with a blue linen napkin.

“Would you like a roll Mom?”

She nodded, pressing her lips to form a smile. I chose the largest one, grain and seed encrusted, and tore it in half. Plumes of steam escaped from the fresh clefted bread. I placed half on her plate and passed the butter.

**THE END**