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[Eng 3130 Advanced Composition, ETSU](#)

Final Paper

April 24, 2017

## Learning to Drive: A Trip in Humor, Love, and Fear



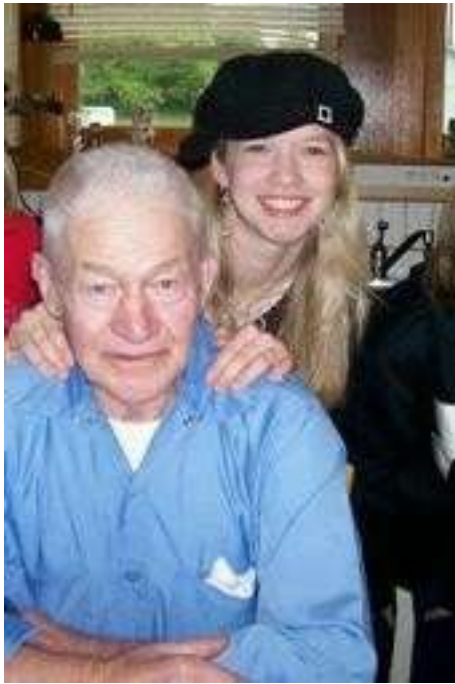
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*She got her learner's permit. He got a brand new truck. He taught her to drive in an afternoon of repetitive terror, challenges, mischief and love. She gained more than just the ability to drive during that day with her Poppaw. He gained a memory to make him smile for a lifetime.*

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“Beautiful!” I shouted as the brand new, shiny red, extended cab, Chevy Colorado pulled up to my house on a beautiful fall afternoon in October 2006. I was a fifteen-year-old kid with a shiny new learner’s permit and I was ecstatic. Poppaw was a reserved man with a weakness for me, his oldest granddaughter.

Around an hour earlier, as soon as I got home from the DMV, I had called the man who was always my favorite adult. “I got it, I passed!” I squealed into the phone. His quiet southern voice came back with, “I knew you would.” We talked a little bit longer and he asked if I wanted him to come pick me up. I immediately said “Yes!” Little did I know that he had a surprise in store for me as well.

My Poppaw got out of the truck both proud of his new toy and sheepish as he was a very humble man. He and Mommaw had always been the anchors of my life. When she was ripped out of our lives so unexpectedly right at two years before this, he and I became even closer. I was the favorite grandchild, being the first granddaughter after four grandsons and three sons, and he spoiled me rotten consistently. On this beautiful October day, he stepped inside the house, always the gentleman, and spoke to my mom before we left. We got in the truck and with the gleam of mischief in his eyes that matched the one I always had in my own, he said, “Let’s teach you how to drive.



**Fear. Jaw Dropping. Mind  
Numbing. Paralyzing.  
Terror.**

Jaw dropping, mind numbing fear left me paralyzed. *Surely he doesn't mean for me to drive his brand new truck. There are less than fifty miles on it. He paid for it with cash while I was passing the test for my learner's permit. I'm afraid to get it dirty; how am I supposed to drive it? My parents will have a fit. What if I wreck? What if I die? Worse, what if I total the truck??* A hundred similar replies flew through my brain while my jaw hung open. My quiet, introverted Poppaw, still with mischief seeping out of his every pore, just chuckled. He'd succeeded in leaving me tongue tied, a rare event, and was quite enjoying it.

Concerns, questions and fear began pouring out of me into the truck as I regained use of my tongue. I was on a roll, pouring out question after question in a confused blur without a breath. "I don't know how to drive, are you serious, Dad is gonna kill me, what if I wreck, are you sure, it's so new I'm scared to sit in it, where do you want me to drive, are you gonna make me go slow, is it ok, is there insurance on it, what if I scratch it...."

He began laughing from deep in his belly at me. "Slow down, slow down. It's going to be ok." He pulled onto a little, unnamed, private road I was intimately comfortable with. It was where I learned to ride my first bike, attempted a pitiful pass at skateboarding, and zoomed on roller blades. On one end of the road was the house that he and Mommaw had lived in until approximately a month before she died and on the other end was one of his oldest friend's, Nub, house. The road was located on the outskirts of Abingdon off of Repass Street. It was around three quarters of a mile long, private with only the two houses at the ends, with an easy curve

uphill across a cattle guard, straightening out to a short piece of flat ground before taking a sharp curve down a steep hill, past the acre garden that Poppaw had planted and harvested for all of my life and where he had taught me to shoot guns at, back up a steep hill and across another cattle guard, with a sharp curve to avoid Nub's garage and pull into his carport. My fear reached new heights. Poppaw's amusement just continued to grow at my expression.

Then he stopped the truck, facing the easy curve, and unbuckled. My eyebrows hit my hairline. He put the truck in park and began talking. I heard nothing but the blood racing through my ears. He patted my knees with rough hands that were accustomed to working with wood for years and waited.

**"Let's switch seats."**

After a few moments, which seemed like hours, I could hear again and told him that I hadn't heard a word that he said. He chuckled at me again. Then he very patiently explained to me where the brake pedal, gas pedal, and the gear shifter were. I dutifully listened and repeated what he said. Finally, both too soon and after what felt like ages, he said, "Let's switch seats."

The next three minutes brought a rush of emotions including terror because I had never driven and elation because I was about to drive a brand new truck on the day that I got my learner's permit. Poppaw and I switched seats, we both buckled up, and got ready to move. I pushed in the brake, put the truck in drive, then started to ease off the brake. What I was not prepared for was the fact that we were on an incline and consequently began to slowly move backwards.

Immediately, I jumped off the brake and on the gas, making the truck jump violently. Poppaw never said a word, although he did grab onto the grip handle firmly. I eased off the gas

slightly and succeeded in making the first easy curve without running off of the one lane road and not knocking out any of our teeth going over the cattle guard. Feeling both embarrassed and slightly less terrified, I eased further off the gas on the straight stretch and approached the next curve which was a hard left directly into a sharp hill. About halfway through that sharp curve, I realized I had not turned sharply enough and tried to correct it by pulling the wheel hard, my heart in my throat. The result was overcorrecting and almost running off the other side of the

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*The man had nerves of steel.*

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road while facing the steep downward slope.

I felt like throwing up. Poppaw, again, didn't say a word. I managed to straighten the truck out while going down the hill but applied the brake too quickly and made the truck jerk in protest. However, I did begin to breathe easier as I was then facing uphill. I let the truck's momentum carry me a little way up the hill before applying the gas. This I managed fairly smoothly, which brought down my urge to vomit. Then, there was the cattle guard and one last turn. I began muttering unintelligible prayers under my breath and eased off the gas to slow down to a crawl across the cattle guard, this time without making either of our teeth hit together at all. I barely applied the gas past the garage, as I knew there were four classic cars in it, and pulled very slowly into Nub's carport. I managed to put the truck in park, turn it off, and tried to breathe again.

If I had a little less ego and pride...

Poppaw got out of the truck in a much more dignified manner, as if he hadn't actually trusted his life and his brand new, paid for in cash truck to an inexperienced fifteen-year-old kid. I determined then that the man had nerves of steel. Nub was sitting on the carport and Poppaw went and sat down with him. I started for where I usually planted myself while they visited in the swing on Nub's carport when Poppaw stopped me and said words I have never forgotten: "I'm going to sit here a little while. Go drive back to the front and turn around and come back a few times."



If I had a little less ego and pride, I would have never taken those keys back and gotten into that truck again. Since I often had too much ego and pride, I proceeded to reverse the process and went through

more emotions than a counselor endures in a day. Every time I pulled up to the carport, Poppaw and Nub would both be smiling, and suppressing laughter at me I suspected, while Poppaw motioned for me to keep going. Thankfully, I was a quick learner and after the fifth or sixth time driving back and forth, Poppaw stood up and came to the truck window as I was pulling up. I was relieved, assuming it was time to go and hoping he would drive. Too late to simply drive

reverse and drive backwards here.” Then he walked back and sat down, leaving my jaw hanging open at his back.

Accordingly, I began the drive back and made sure the window was up before I began ranting out loud: “The man is insane. I can barely go forward and he wants me to drive backwards?!?” My stubbornness began to show up as I became determined to make it work. I stopped at the end of the drive, put the truck in reverse and started up the hill that way. Never before and never again have I been so sure I was going to wreck as I was driving backwards up that hill. I was having trouble watching over my shoulder and turning the wheel the correct amount, as I was 5’2” and could barely reach the pedals. I took over ten minutes to drive three quarters of a mile backwards, muttering and cussing enough to please a sailor the whole way.

I finally got back, and just when I thought I was safe, he motioned for me to keep going. So keep going I did; for over an hour, I drove forwards one way and backwards the other. Finally, I pulled in and put it in park and asked for a drink. Surely, I had done enough and I was actually decent going forward now. But no. I finished my drink and Poppaw looked at me and asked if I used my mirrors to drive in reverse. I hadn’t because they are tiny and weird and told him so. He smiled and said, “Do it again and this time only use your mirrors to go in reverse.” The glass bottle Coke in my hand popped and fizzled more loudly than anything else for a moment. My hands started trembling while my brain vehemently denied that he had just said this. After a few long seconds, I began arguing weakly that the mirrors were not set up for me. This, of course, he immediately squelched by helping me adjust the mirrors.

So, there I went down the road again; I stopped, took a huge gulp of air, and began learning to back up only using my mirrors. Another jerky, almost running off the road, terrifying trip backwards later, he motioned for me to keep going. I was starting to anticipate this and

frantically racked my brain while going forwards for an excuse to stop, however I couldn't come up with one that seemed plausible. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he motioned for me to stop only to get in the passenger seat and have me drive to a mom-and-pop pizza shop to pick up pizza then to his house at the upper end of Abingdon. That was truthfully the easiest part of the entire day. My dad came by after work to get me and take me home; I was never so happy to not be offered to drive.

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*He hated pizza...*

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I learned to drive that day with Poppaw. My parents were horrified when I told them what I had done and were just thankful that they didn't have to replace his truck. He hadn't told them that he was teaching me to drive because he didn't want them to worry. Nothing else

frightened me as much while driving after I made it through that first day.



Poppaw continued to pick me up and had me drive him around as his health slowly broke down. From 2005 until 2008, I became his chauffeur in that red pickup truck. We would visit his friends together, go to the store, or simply drive around. He got so sick that he could barely walk through his house and would have me drive up in my mom's car, help him carry his oxygen tank out to the truck and drive him so he could feel the fresh air. His children and

grandchildren kept vigil twenty-four hours a day for the last three months before he passed.



When it was my turn to stay with him, my alarm went off every hour of the night to remind me to go check that he was still breathing. I would creep up to his door and stand outside listening to his ragged breathing while it broke my heart knowing I was listening for his death. Many times after I confirmed he was still breathing, I would steal out into that truck to cry and beg God, the universe, or anyone listening to make him better.

The day came that he finally got relief on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008. I woke up with an utter sense of calmness in my heart. I drove my mom and sister up to his house, but I already knew what was happening. We walked in as he was breathing his last breath. Yet even knowing he was gone, I knelt beside his Lay-Z-Boy recliner, holding his hand and talking to him through my tears until personnel moved me out of their way to take his body.



During the days that followed, I discovered he hated pizza; he ate it twice a week for years simply because I loved it. He made women remove their high heels before walking on his hardwood floors; he let me rollerblade on them. He splurged on glass-bottle Cokes for himself and no one, from his kids to the grandkids, was allowed to have one. He and I shared two every night after dinner together. He hated riding in a vehicle with anyone; this selfless man let me drive anytime I wanted.

My parents bought the truck from the estate and it became mine. I literally could drive that truck forwards and backwards without a second thought. I kept that truck until I could no longer fit car seats for my children in the back of it and had to trade it in, although I still see it around Bristol. Often during the eight years I had it, I would sit in that truck for hours to read, nap, or simply unwind and, looking over, would remember the man with a mischievous glint in his eyes and an impish smile on his face, telling me, “Let’s teach you how to drive.”

