

## Magnetic Forces

I had forgotten how many little things there are to remember – the placement of the mirrors, the location of turn signals, the temperature controls – not to mention hazard lights, the gas tank release, the windshield wipers. I explained to my son that the details can seem overwhelming at first, but they become instinct after a while. As I drove us to a vacant lot to practice driving, a memory played in my head like a blurry home movie: I am twelve years old, working for a family from my neighborhood as an assistant to their full-time nanny. We are at a vacation house in the woods of Maine. Someone – probably the nanny who herself is only nineteen or twenty – wants to teach me to drive, so I find myself behind the wheel of their family station wagon, too self-conscious and accommodating to object. No one thinks to teach me which pedal is which, and within minutes I am spinning my wheels in a ditch off the dirt driveway. I was so mortified after this that I didn't drive again until I got my learner's permit three years later, at which point my desire for freedom was more powerful than my anxiety. What began as something awkward and difficult to keep straight eventually became automatic; I tried to remember this as I taught my son.

Before handing him the keys, I spent several minutes quizzing him on the pedals. After he settled into the driver's seat of my Subaru, I took him to a nearby lot that was empty on weekends. He played around with accelerating and braking, cruising in wide, easy loops. Part of me was excited for him to start driving; it would leave me with more time, plus I wanted him to experience that sense of autonomy I felt when I started driving. But another part of me was terrified. I would no longer be able to control where he went. I took some comfort in the fact that, unlike my own parents, I could at least track his movements on my phone, his blue dot moving in real time around the city. When I drove off in my dad's 1988 Camry, my parents just had to trust that I would make it home again.

As he made his way around and around the parking lot, I kept catching his sidelong glances at me, as if to say, "Am I doing okay?" I asked him if I could take a picture. My son is a tall kid – 6 feet 2 inches, and broad shouldered—a beautiful boy who presents more as a man. But to me he is still that nerdy nine-year old pontificating about Pokémon and excited to see the next Marvel movie with me; how can he be in the driver's seat already? Grudgingly and with the obligatory eye roll and, "Really, Mom?", he slowed to a stop and turned toward me, fighting to suppress a half-smile.

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It had been a challenging year. Diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder and Generalized Anxiety Disorder when I was nineteen, I was no stranger to dips in my mood and extended periods of feeling low, but this was more extreme; my medications were no longer helping, and I spent a significant amount of time incapacitated by my moods. I was volatile, unleashing rage that seemed to come out of the ether and escalated to near-violence; my whole body would be vibrating with anger even I did not understand. This kind of outburst would be followed by tears and then a shame that drove me to my bed. Other times, there was no anger at all – just a dull hopelessness that turned everything around me into a surreal dark cloud. I had been nervous about how I would handle my role as driving instructor, and I was relieved that I seemed to be doing just fine. We were even having fun.

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In spite of three months of practicing, my son failed the first time he took the driving test. He completed a left turn after the light changed to yellow, something I do all the time and seems to me necessary to keep traffic moving. Nonetheless, it was a violation that led the instructor to insist he pull over immediately and trade places with her, flatly stating, "The test is over." He was initially inconsolable, ranting about life's difficulty and pointlessness. I have since learned that lots of kids fail the first time and their reactions are just as dramatic as my son's. But in that moment, I was terrified. Did the severity of his response mean something deeper? Did it mean he was going to end up like me?

The day of the test, I was nearly halfway through a course of Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation. TMS, a fairly new technology for addressing treatment-resistant depression, uses magnets to wake up parts of the brain that tend to be under-activated in clinically depressed people. Patients receive 36 treatments, the first thirty of which occur every weekday for six weeks. The final treatments can be spaced out. While TMS isn't as extreme as the electro-convulsive therapy that my maternal grandmother endured to alleviate her own depression, it felt like a big deal to me.

On my first visit, a doctor and an assistant tested my reflexes to locate my prefrontal cortex. After that, each weekday I drove to an Owings Mills office park, took the elevator to the fourth floor, and entered a space run by sweet-faced twenty-somethings who gently showed me to a dentist-style chair and placed the apparatus on my head. At first the sensation was so forceful and surprising that I burst into tears, but soon enough I became accustomed to it, enduring 25 minutes of a powerful woodpecker boring into my skull.

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Halfway through my treatments, I wasn't optimistic. If anything, I seemed to be getting worse. Over the past few weeks, I had broken down multiple times in tears, insisting I would be better off dead, fantasizing about the relief I might find if only I could disappear myself from the world. My husband would hear me out patiently, ignoring the damp spots I made on his t-shirts with my tears and snot, until I calmed down enough to clarify that I was not actually suicidal – just sad and frustrated that I was once again stuck in this sadness.

I obsessed over questions of nature versus nurture, my son's own mental health always at the heart of these ruminations. I grew up with an intense and highly successful father who has made a name for himself in the field of geophysics and whose innovations have led to a whole new philosophy about minerology and the origins of life. Though I accepted long ago that I will never achieve at his level, my inner voice still berates me for not working hard enough, for never quite living up to my potential. I've published two poetry collections, but by the time my father was my age, he had published eight books, one of which was a New York Times bestseller. He also played trumpet professionally, performing regularly at The Kennedy Center. He was a Robinson Professor at George Mason, and he presented his research at conferences all around the globe. The career of a scientist may not really be comparable to that of a poet, but the importance of professional achievement was deeply ingrained in me early, and the voices in my head are loud.

Have I passed along this untenable striving, this sense of never-enough, to my son? Will he have the double whammy of genetics and environment to overcome? Throughout his childhood, I made it a point to tell him how special he is, hoping to spare him the insecurity that plagues me, but I now recognize that this, too, is a terrible burden, an impossible precedent that leads to disappointment when the rest of the world fails to show an interest. What, I asked myself, was the right thing to say to my son? I had no answers, but quoted Philip Larkin at every opportunity: “They fuck you up, your mum and dad. / They may not mean to, but they do . . .” as if this could somehow redeem me.

As I drove us home from the DMV, my son falling apart in the passenger seat beside me, I tried to keep calm and provide some perspective. I reminded him of the season five finale of *Buffy*, the TV show I credit with saving my life in college when I first experienced a depressive episode. In the closing scene, just before diving into a hell dimension to stop the apocalypse, Buffy tells her sister Dawn: “The hardest thing in this world is to live in it.”

“And we are doing that,” I said. “This will all work out.” I was talking to myself at least as much as to him. My eyes were on the road, so I couldn’t see whether or not he rolled his eyes.

By the time we got home, we had both calmed down. I scheduled another driving test for the following morning, strategically choosing the time slot just after rush hour traffic would have died down. I rescheduled my TMS for later in the day. I took an Ativan and tried not to worry about what would happen if he failed a second time. I needn’t have bothered. The next morning, he passed the test. He left the DMV happy, excited, proud; the drama of yesterday was just a blip for him. For me, he himself was the blip, a tiny blue dot swiftly moving away from me.

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I had been sinking for months. Over the previous year and a half, after the Prozac I’d been taking since college stopped working, I had tried four different antidepressants. Nothing seemed to have any effect except to crush my libido and cause me to gain weight, both side effects that invariably led me to feel even worse about myself. I woke up mired in self-disgust, hopelessness, and an undercurrent of rage, the source of which I could never quite identify and, therefore, was unable to address. Years of talk therapy had helped me work through early sexual trauma and identify attachment issues, but my brain chemistry remained stubborn. Worst of all, I was so incredibly bored by my own depression; my illness held none of the mystery and drama of the moody poetesses I’d cut my teeth on, and I was so overwrought I was barely writing anymore anyway. At my worst, my inner voice mocked my feelings, telling me I was just a fat, pathetic middle-aged white lady whining about nothing. My self-talk was sharp fingernails pulling off a scab. As my therapist reminded me week after week, this was not a helpful model for coping with depression. I did try to keep my self-deprecating comments to a minimum; even at my worst, I was aware of my son listening.

I did my best to maintain the routines of our household, to rally, to “fake it till I could make it.” I tried to be patient as I waited for the treatments and a new medication to start working. I got up, drank coffee, and compulsively made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for my son’s lunch, just as I had since he was small. I went to my part time job, tried to write poems, exercised, and cooked dinner. Often, anxiety crept in to jolt me out of my sadness, providing variation from the bleak low of depression; instead of wishing I could disappear, I would pace the halls of the house perseverating on some personal failing or perceived slight, some dreaded future possibility that loomed like hurricane-purple sky. I obsessed about how to react to

imaginary conflicts. I waged entire wars in my own mind. I was exhausted all the time. Sometimes my son would catch me stooped over, weeping; unfortunately, he had witnessed me falling apart like this throughout his life, but now it seemed to be happening more frequently and with greater intensity. I would gather myself, explain that I was trying a new medication or that my hormones were just in flux. Nonetheless, I fear these interactions have taught him only to expect, as I did when I saw my grandmother's vacant eyes after ECT, a legacy of despair.

Regardless of how badly I felt, every weekday I went to my appointment. On Thursdays, I filled out charts, rating my appetite and energy and mood on scales of one to ten, and gradually I seemed to be improving, the metrics shifting from feeling hopeless every day to half the time to just two or three days each week. As she strapped me in, the technician told me I was doing great.

Over the course of those eight weeks, I finished *Derry Girls*, *Beef*, *Obsession*, *The Watcher*, and several mediocre romantic comedies – anything to distract me during all that time in the chair – as the apparatus pecked at my frontal lobe. Now that my son was driving himself to school, I also watched his blue dot moving up 83 North. I was aware of the way teenagers disappear when they get their licenses; my stepdaughter was hardly home after she started driving. But I hadn't fully realized the extent to which the new freedom—his and my own—would be tempered by a sense of loss. Now that he can drive himself, our opportunities for conversation have dwindled. I regret, as I knew I would, my reluctance to drive him to friends' houses when he still needed me for rides, and I note the bittersweet irony: we spend our lives as parents teaching our kids how to leave us.

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Less than a week after getting his license, my son had to teach himself to parallel park. He texted me from Mount Washington where he was for his drum lesson at Peabody. He was furious. My phone dinged with a litany of complaints, the primary message being that I had failed him; I hadn't taught him this most essential skill. I was extremely anxious as I waited for his parking updates in real time, chopping onions for dinner with the phone beside me. I texted that he could just pay to park in a lot nearby, but he is stubborn. It took him 30 minutes to get into a spot, but he did it— and he made it to his lesson on time. “Now you know how,” I texted. “That's great! It will be easier next time.” I hoped this would be true.

My guilt over not teaching him how to parallel park lingered long after he returned home from the lesson, glowering and exhausted. It isn't just the parking that nagged at me; it was all the things I haven't told him, the things I haven't even thought to tell him, the things he doesn't yet know he doesn't know: ironing a shirt, roasting a chicken, formatting a resume, paying bills, paying respects, mending socks— a million things for which he may be unprepared, a million ways in which I have fallen short. I may have remembered to teach him which pedal is which in the car, but what about everything else?

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I had my final six treatments spread out over two weeks. By the thirty-third session, I was feeling pretty good. At my final session, I wrote on the evaluation that I thought the treatments had actually helped. Whether my improved state of mind really was the TMS or some combination of the sessions, the medication I had been adjusting to, the arrival of spring, and

other intangibles, I'll never know for sure, but I do know that I wasn't thinking about how much easier things would be if I didn't have to be alive. I wasn't waking up and promptly disintegrating into angry tears. I hadn't needed Ativan in a week.

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There are days now when I don't see my son at all. I leave for work before he is up, and sometimes he doesn't get home until after I've gone to bed. I calm my worries by checking his location on my phone, following his blue dot as he moves around the city on his own. Even when I can see where he is, I can't see what he is doing, nor can I know how he is feeling. Is he angry? Is he sad? Is he okay? I remind myself that some sadness is normal and healthy. I watch him growing into his independence, coming home frustrated by rush hour traffic or appalled by the price of gas. I agree with him about the insanity of the modern world, warmed by this new commiseration. I breathe through worry over how to manage the depression he may or may not develop, and I try not to obsess about the inevitable return of my own. Life is complicated, filled with so much that is beyond our control – both crushing disappointments and unexpected joys. The painful parts of life, just as the pleasurable ones, are reminders that we are alive. I pause at this, a tremendous relief rushing through me like cool water: I realize that I want, in spite of everything, to be here.

And so, I carry on. My son carries on. I try to give him space to experience his emotions without me managing him. I remind myself that he is capable and strong. I watch his dot move all around the city – to school or work or parties – even to places miles away where he's never been before. Sometimes his dot moves toward home, and I let myself feel glad.

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