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Afraid to Fly, Scared to Drive

Julie A. Jacob

I paced the aisle of the Amtrak train. It had been motionless for an hour, blocked by a frozen drawbridge, three blocks from the station in Milwaukee. The doughy-faced conductor had no idea how long we would be stuck there, nor did he care. That was not his job, he shrugged, as furious passengers whipped out their cell phones and began dialing someone, anyone, who might help. I had just spoken to my sister on my cell phone; she was nervously circling the station, waiting to pick me up and take me to the hospital. She could see the train stuck on the tracks. I told the conductor that my mother was in intensive care. He stared at me and said nothing.

My mother, who was named Marilyn and nicknamed Mimi, loved the Chicago North Shore and Milwaukee Road Railroad, which shuttled between Chicago and Milwaukee from 1919 until it shut down in 1964, the victim of expressways and Chevrolets. As a child my mother rode the North Shore to Milwaukee for shopping excursions with my grandmother. As a young woman, she hopped on the train for jaunts to Chicago with friends. My grandfather, who was an executive with a meat packing company on Chicago's South Side, took the North Shore train to work every Monday. He stayed at the Stockyard Inn and returned every Friday. My mother told me the weeks were lonely without her father.

When I was a child, my parents took my sister and me on several driving vacations—to Texas, Virginia, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and New York. My father loved road trips. Bliss for him was a full tank of gas, a map, his St. Christopher's medal clipped to the rearview mirror and four suitcases wedged in the trunk.

My father taught me to drive in the parking lot of my high school. I'd turn, park, back up and stop while he grabbed his chest and gasped in mock fear. I loved to drive as a teenager, zipping around Racine in my parents' blue Chevette. I was a nervous teenager, but driving didn't scare me. Fearlessly, I drove through fog, rain, and snow. My father drove carefully, but confidently, his hands resting lightly on the wheel, and he had taught me well.

When I was fourteen, I took the Metra train to Chicago with my mother, aunt, cousins, and sister to see a touring version of *A Chorus Line*. Although the North Shore had folded thirteen years earlier, the Metra Union Pacific North line still trundled between Kenosha and Chicago. The train was a double-decker with green vinyl seats and linoleum floors permeated with the faint chocolate odor of diesel fuel. A ticket cost only a few dollars, but the journey took nearly two hours. We sat on the upper deck and gazed out the windows as the train rolled past the North Shore towns with the romantic names—Lake Forest, Glencoe, and Winnetka. Those lovely villages, untouchable through the windows, did not look like real towns, rumpled and worn like Racine. Instead, they looked like the pictures on Christmas cards, all brick streets, wrought-iron lampposts, and colonial houses with red painted doors.

After the play ended, just minutes before our train departed, we piled in yet another cab outside the theater and tumbled out at the train station. We bolted up the stairs, our heels pounding on the stairs and our bulky winter coats swinging around our legs, while sailors on leave from Great Lakes Naval Station laughed and shouted "Go! Go! Go! Go!" as we raced past them. We scrambled

on the train, breathless and laughing, a moment before it pulled away from the station.

When I was 17, my friends Alyssa and Mari, and I took the Amtrak Hiawatha to Chicago to visit our friend Dee, who had moved the previous summer to the Chicago suburb of Orland Park. The train was packed, so we sat on our suitcases, bracing our feet against the floor to balance ourselves as the train rocked back and forth. We got off at Union Station, squinted at the monitor list of departing commuter trains and scurried to the track for the Metra line that would take us to Orland Park. The Metra train was filled with silent men in suits reading the *Chicago Tribune*, their leather briefcases tucked at their feet.

In college I attempted to learn to sail. I wanted to learn to fly across the lake in a boat with a rippling sail. I signed up for lessons with the university's sports club for students. During the first lesson, the sturdy little boats painted in crayon colors bobbed on the lake like bathtub toys. Soon the other students were gliding merrily in circles, jibing and tacking. Not me. My boat drifted forlornly as I tugged at the sheet and jiggled the tiller, willing the boat to move. The instructor, Mark, told me again and again to tighten the sheet and turn the tiller as I fumbled with the tiller.

Embarrassed at my failure, I didn't take another sailing class for years.

Sometime in my twenties I became a fearful driver. Lack of practice led to lack of confidence. I did not own a car in college, nor did I own one for thirteen years in Chicago. I drove only when I visited my parents and borrowed their car to run errands. Gradually, I turned from a fearless driver into a woman who gripped the steering wheel and peered anxiously through the windshield as she inched along the

When I was 25, I worked for six months as an assistant editor for a horticultural magazine in Chicago. I lived with my parents in Racine and commuted because I could not afford an apartment in the city. Every morning I got up at 5 a.m., gulped my breakfast, and drove ten miles to Kenosha to catch the 6:19 train. I arrived in Chicago at 8:20, dashed across the street to the office, worked in misery until 4:45 under the editor's baleful gaze, ran back across to the station to catch the 5:07 train, read or slept on the train, got off at 6:38, legs stiff from sitting one hundred minutes, pulled into my parents' driveway at 7 p.m., ate the dinner that my mother had kept warm for me, fell into bed at 9 p.m., and repeated the whole routine the next day. After six months of that schedule, I thought *I am 25 and I am too young to live my life like this*. I quit the next day and enrolled in graduate school.

Two years later, master's degree in hand, I landed a job in Chicago at twice my former salary. So it was a dental association and I was writing about teeth: my coworkers were friendly and I had my own office. I lived in Naperville in a loft in a rehabbed furniture factory. Every morning I'd leave my apartment at 7 a.m., dressed in one of my cute career girl dresses and my London Fog raincoat. I'd buy a cup of coffee and walk a block to the train station, where I'd wait for the 7:11 Burlington Northern. I fantasized that some day I would meet a nice man, someone tall and dark-haired with expressive eyes. We would exchange smiles and sit next to each other on the train and he would ask me out...but nothing like that ever happened. The only men I saw on that train platform were weary souls with graying hair and wedding bands. Thirty minutes later I'd arrive in Chicago and stand, shivering, in a line of glum commuters peering down Canal Street, waiting for the next No. 125 bus to whisk them to their offices.

In the evening I did it the whole thing in reverse. One evening, as I tossed my quarters down at a newsstand and grabbed a *Chicago Tribune* before sprinting to the train, I thought *no more*. When my lease ended, I moved to an apartment in the city. From then on, I took the bus to work. It took me 20 minutes.

Now I took the train only on the weekend to visit my parents. The station was hushed and deserted. The news stands and snack shops were closed; janitors mopped Union Station's vast marble floor. I'd buy an early edition of the Sunday *Chicago Tribune*, sit in the nearly empty car, and read all the way to Wisconsin. Sometimes I would gaze out the window at those same North Shore suburbs, still preternaturally clean and quaint, that I had seen as a girl 15 years earlier. I simultaneously felt safe and stifled, cocooned in that train, part of the passing landscape, but separate from it, too.

When I was 28, I took sailing lessons at Northwestern University. For four weeks, every Tuesday evening after work, I took the red line el from downtown Chicago to Howard Street, transferred to the purple line L, got off in downtown Evanston and walked to Northwestern's boathouse. Two hours later, I'd reverse the process, then catch the train from Chicago back to Naperville.

The teacher was a gentle woman, whose name I have forgotten, but not her kindness. I explained what had happened years ago in my other sailing class. She nodded and said *no problem, we'll go slowly*. She checked every step as I rigged the boat, then watched quietly as I tacked and jibed in my little Sunfish. Four weeks later, I passed my sailing class.

When I was 31, my friend Katie and I traveled to Switzerland for a ten-day vacation. She had a college friend who had married a Swiss man and settled in Zurich. We were going to visit her

for three days and then explore the rest of the country.

Her friend's life sounded like a fairy tale come true. She had been raised in a rough part of St. Louis, but now she lived in a white stucco house with lace curtains with her stockbroker husband and four rosy-cheeked little girls. But even women in fairy tales have to do household chores. Kristie, who had been an international studies major, wryly showed us her dryer. She had insisted on buying it, even though good housewives in Switzerland were expected to hang laundry to dry in the sun.

Her husband, Claude, told Katie and me that if we wanted to get married, we had to do it soon or else we would be too set in our ways to live happily with a husband. Katie laughed and said she didn't need a man, but I vowed silently that perpetual singlehood wasn't going to happen to me. I would *never* get too stuck in my ways to fall in love.

We hugged Kristie and Jean good-bye and ventured out on our own. We had Swissrail passes and took the train from Zurich to Lucerne, Lucerne to Zermatt, Zermatt to Interlochen, and back to Zurich. We'd wait for the trains in stations decorated with baskets of red geraniums, and eat Lindt chocolate bars (we assured each other that it was okay to eat a chocolate bar every day because we were burning so many calories) and read out loud from our travel guides. We nearly missed the train to Zurich on the morning of our return to the United States. Katie sprinted through the train station, while I trotted behind her, pulling my overstuffed wheeled bag, and huffing, "I'm not going to run for the train!"

My grandfather, Edward John Frederick Young, first saw my grandmother, Helen Bernice Breen, when she walked into the butcher shop in Danville, Illinois, where he worked. He was 20, lanky, blond, Lutheran, and German. She was

18, petite, Catholic, and Irish with waved onyx hair daringly bobbed. Edward said to his friend, apparently undaunted by the engagement ring on Helen's finger, "That's the woman I'm going to marry." According to family lore, the friend replied, "If you do, I'll pay for your marriage license." They did, and he did.

What I didn't know until I went to a family reunion, many years after my grandparents had passed away, is *how* my grandmother broke her engagement: she knocked on her fiancé's door and threw the ring in his face. My grandmother was always a lady, but a spirited one.

My grandfather gave my grandmother an anniversary diamond ring for their twenty-fifth anniversary. My grandmother wore both rings until the day she died, twenty-two years after his death. I have a hazy memory of those two rings, heavy and sparkling, encircling her finger.

In 1956, my father proposed to my mother. They had been dating a year. He was poor, scraping through college on the G.I. Bill, and wondered what the slim brunette with a closet full of angora sweaters saw in him. But, nonetheless, my father bought her a one-half carat diamond ring on a narrow platinum band, which he carried in his pocket one evening when they were taking a walk in the summer twilight. My father pulled the ring out of his pocket and said, "I want you to have this."

"What did Mom say?" I once asked my father.

He chuckled. "She stepped into the lamplight to see how big it was."

A few months before my grandmother died of cancer, she pulled off one of her diamond rings and said to my mother, "I want you to have this." My mother cried because she knew what this meant. After my grandmother died, my mother had a new ring made, with the two diamonds clustered together on one band.

My mother sometimes said, "When I die, you and your sister will each get one of my diamonds." We barely listened—it was silly to think of my mother *dying*. That wasn't going to happen until she was ninety, at least. She died when she was seventy-two. My father took her rings to the jewelry shop and had the diamonds removed. He brought my sister and me to the store and told us each to pick out a setting. I was drawn to a bold, modern setting, a thick gold band that narrowed to a "V" where the diamond was set, like the wings of a bird folded over my fingers.

My father joined the Army Air Corp, as it was known in 1948, when he was eighteen. He took the North Shore train from Racine to Chicago and then another train from Chicago to basic training in Texas. I have a mental image of my father at that moment: a lean young man of medium height with thick brown hair and blue eyes, standing in the train station, waiting for that train, excited and scared.

When my father was twenty, my grandfather had a heart attack. My father's parents had divorced years earlier; my grandfather now was an alcoholic, poor and alone. My father took a leave of absence from the Army Air Corp and boarded a train for Wisconsin. He cared for my father for months. The last time that my father saw my grandfather alive was when he glanced up as he left the house and saw his father standing at the bedroom window, waving good-bye to his only child.

I'm one of those people who believe that humans have no business hurtling 600 miles an hour 30,000 feet in the air encased in an aluminum tube. But there is one place I fly to with no fear: Hawaii. Or rather, the fear is overridden by this thought: *if I die, I die on my way to paradise.*

I was twenty-four the first time I visited Hawaii. I went with my parents; my sister, eight-months'

pregnant; and her husband. We stayed for ten days and visited three islands. The trip was a gift from my mother, paid for with her inheritance from my grandmother. We went to a luau in Kona on the Big Island. The band played a romantic song and invited the couples to dance on the beach. I stood on the side and smiled and waved to my parents and my sister and brother-in-law and thought *the next time I come to this beautiful place, I will come with my husband and we, too, will dance together on a starlit beach.*

The second time I went to Hawaii I was thirty-five and single. I hadn't dated in a year. I was a reporter for a newspaper for doctors and was sent to Honolulu to cover a meeting. In an elevator, I met a brainy, grey-eyed, divorced Navy man who was there for a conference. We spent the week walking on the beach each night until we had to say good-bye and fly back to our separate cities.

Three weeks after I returned, Chicago was hit with a massive snowstorm. I was running errands downtown right before the blizzard began. I ran into a bookstore as the sales clerk announced that the store was closing. I grabbed *Hawaii* by James Michener and hurried to the checkout counter. When I got back to my apartment, I dove onto my couch and opened the book. I barely noticed as twenty inches of snow piled up and the windows shook from the wind because I was far away, lost in Hawaii.

The third time I went to Hawaii I was still single. I went with two friends. It was a last-minute thing. I had but a few vacation days left and no spare money, but for Hawaii, I'd find the days and wring out the money. I left Chicago on a bleak December day. Nine hours later, the airplane descended beneath the clouds. The airplane flew into a rainbow and gracefully circled down to the airport.

One day we went snorkeling. The excursion boat took us tourists to the atoll of Molokini. On the way back, my friends went below deck to get out

of sun, but I stayed above, sitting cross-legged, staring in awe at the beauty of the cloud-wrapped mountains before me. *I am happy, I thought, utterly and completely happy at this moment.*

The Old Groundhog's Very Bad Year ran roughly from August 2003 to August 2004. The Old Groundhog is my father, born February 2. My private nickname for him, the Old Groundhog, honors both the date of his birth and his stubborn nature, as well as to distinguish him from my nephew, born exactly sixty years later. During his bad year my father had a triple-heart bypass, three leg bypasses, a staph infection, and an aneurysm. He was hospitalized five times in two hospitals. He had seven surgeries, culminating in the amputation of his left leg due to the infection that nearly killed him.

My memories of those months are a jumble: my father lying in a bed with his hands tied down because the morphine was making him hallucinate, my nephew solemnly slipping on a pair of latex gloves before entering my father's hospital room, my sister and I talking to many doctors and nurses, boxes of medical supplies stacked in the dining room, driving home from the hospital through a snowstorm, my mother and I struggling to open a bottle of wine with a corkscrew that only my father knew how to use; my sister and I tacking up photos of the family and the house in my father's hospital rooms so he would have something to remember, something to look forward to.

One thing I do remember clearly: the trains. At least once a week, sometimes twice or more, I rode the train back and forth between Chicago and Milwaukee to visit my father and support my mother. Once again I raced to the train station after work. I usually took the Amtrak train because it was faster. To this day there are certain sounds and smells of the train that I associate with sickness and worry: the hiss of the air vent; the chilly

pushing the refreshment car down the aisle, softly calling “Soft drinks, water, candy.”

When I got off the train, I would take one look at my mother’s face and immediately I would know if my father was having a good day or a bad one.

The holidays came during the middle of the Old Groundhog’s Very Bad Year. On Christmas Eve my sister and her husband and two children came to our parents’ house, as they did every year, and we toasted to dad’s recovery, to all of us being together, and to 2003 being a better year.

It was not.

My birthday was in February, two weeks after my father’s birthday. We sat in my father’s room that day, my mother and I, on plastic chairs, staring anxiously at my father. He was four days into his staph infection; his fever was 103, and the doctors warned us that if the infection went to his heart or brain there was little they could do. At one point my father opened his eyes and whispered, “Will you stop staring at me? You’re making me nervous.” That broke the tension; we laughed. That evening, after visiting hours were over, my mother, sister, brother-in-law, and nephew celebrated my birthday with a low-key dinner. The best birthday gift of all was that my father was alive.

We thought spring would never come that year, but it did. My father was released from the hospital a week after his leg was amputated. Through spring and summer he clawed his way through rehab, from a wheelchair to a walker to walking with a prosthetic leg and a cane to walking without a cane. It wasn’t a smooth transition. He was depressed and grouchy. My mother was exhausted and irritable. They squabbled. My mother cried. My father swore. He ignored the labels on his pain medication warning him not to drink; martinis were the only vice he had left,

he said. He drank a martini after taking a pain pill. Drunk, and frustrated that he couldn’t dial a number on the phone, he dunked the cordless phone in his martini glass. Months later, my mother would still say to him, holding out the phone, “Jake, this phone has never worked right since you dipped it in a martini.” But yet as the days grew longer and warmer, life slowly, imperceptibly, improved.

On New Year’s Eve 2003, my parents, aunt, and I went out for our traditional New Year’s Eve dinner. After dinner we had a drink in the bar. My parents ordered martinis; my aunt had a brandy old-fashioned. We toasted to the New Year. “May 2004 be a better year,” my mother said.

I felt honored, sitting there with my parents and aunt. Their lives combined totaled 224 years, and they had experienced so much. My mother had been a young girl during World War II. She had bought war bonds at school and wrote letters to her brother who was serving in the Pacific. My aunt, sitting next to her, had been engaged to a man who had died during World War II. Her husband lost his sight to diabetes, and she had raised two daughters alone. My father was seventy-four. He had lived through the Great Depression, served in the Air Force, and worked as an engineer on the team that designed the Apollo lunar module.

We argued on Jan. 2, 2005, my parents and I, that last day that I ever spent in the house with both of them alive. It was Sunday; my mother’s operation was on Wednesday. I wanted to take the train back to Chicago and leave my poodle, Asta, whom I’d gotten nine months earlier, in Racine. I could take the train back to Wisconsin on Tuesday night, I said, and accompany them to the hospital on Wednesday morning and stay with Dad that night. My father said no; he didn’t need me.

I sighed and wondered how much longer I'd be on the waiting list for a parking space at my condo building. With a car, I could come and go as I pleased.

When the phone rang I knew.

The telephone was not supposed to ring at 6 a.m. on a Sunday.

The day before, the Amtrak train had finally crawled into the station, two hours late. My sister had given up in frustration and gone back to the hospital. I looked for a cab; no cab was to be found. I jumped on a bus, instead, and arrived at the hospital twenty minutes later. My sister and father greeted me with smiles. Mom was doing better. Her doctor said she could be released from intensive care in the morning.

When I walked into her room, she was sitting up in bed and smiling, and even wearing a dab of pink lipstick. We talked about the social activities of my sister's teenaged children, the awful train ride, and my poodle's dislike of the snow. *Everything is going to be okay*, I thought, as I rode the train back to Chicago that night.

The telephone was not supposed to ring at 6 a.m. on a Sunday morning.

I knew.

My sister drove to my father's house to tell him. She said he was smiling when he opened the door.

"You're leaving bright and early for Chicago," he said.

He screamed when she told him.

Two weeks after my mother died, I took the Amtrak train home to visit my father, as I had every day since her death. The train stopped shortly after it left the station, delayed by some reason or another.

"I *hate* this," said the woman sitting next to me. "Amtrak is always delayed."

I nodded. "I know. Two weeks ago I was stuck for more than an hour three blocks from the station in Milwaukee, and my mother was in intensive care."

"How awful," my seatmate said.

She hesitated.

"And how is your mother?"

"She died."

The woman looked shocked.

"Oh," she said. "I'm sorry."

I nodded, turned away and closed my eyes, incapable of saying any more.

A month after my mother died, I bought a 2000 Pontiac Sunfire from a used auto dealer in Racine. The dealer was a kind man from whom my father had previously purchased cars; my father, and I stood around the car on a brittle February day discussing the price.

I needed a car to drive to Racine to visit my father. My father said he was getting too old to drive to Chicago, and, besides, he didn't want to drive without his wife next to him looking for the exits and watching for deer in the fields. For my part, I never, ever again wanted to be stuck anywhere without a way to return immediately. In true Chicago fashion, a parking space had mysteriously become available in my building after I told the manager that my mother had passed away and that I needed to get a car as soon as possible to visit my father on the weekends.

I was still afraid of the expressway, still fearful of driving, so I plotted a slow route along the back roads—up Sheridan to Hollywood, Hollywood to Ridge, Ridge to Green Bay, and then a straight shot home on Green Bay.

I drove up to Racine nearly every weekend those first few months. I'd get up, walk the dog, have breakfast, and then head for the parking lot. I'd deposit Asta in the back seat, get in the driver's seat, put on my seat belt, adjust my mirrors, turn on the engine, pick out a CD, take a deep breath, and pull out of the parking lot.

Driving was different than taking the train. I had to concentrate. I couldn't sleep or read or daydream like I could on the train. But yet, it was freeing, too. I left when I wanted. I could stop to buy a cup of coffee. My route paralleled the tracks of the Metra train to Kenosha, but the road curved and widened, unlike the unchanging train tracks. Sometimes I'd see the train whisk by, and I'd wonder if the people sitting in it were looking out of the window and daydreaming, like I once did, or if they were too immersed with their cell phones to notice.

While I drove, I often listened to a CD of contemporary Hawaiian music because it reminded me of Maui. I especially loved a song that was a remake of Bob Marley's "The Redemption Song." I had never heard the song before, but something about the vibrating chorus repeating *re-demp-tion, re-demp-tion* over and over haunted me. I thought about the meaning of redemption and grace. I thought about my mother. I wondered why she had not lived until ninety. I thought about her laugh. I wished I could talk to her. I thought about the roads that we get stuck on in life. I wondered if I was looking for redemption, and, if so, from what? Grief? Loneliness? I did not know.

"You don't have to come up every weekend," Dad would tell me every Friday on the phone.

"No, really, I want to."

"Well, all right then. Be careful driving."

He would be waiting for me in the living room, hat and jacket on, when I arrived around noon

on Saturday. We would have lunch at one of the restaurants he liked, and then we sometimes we would go to a matinee movie afterwards. He liked romantic comedies. Occasionally, I'd visit Katie, who lived nearby. We would watch a movie and drink margaritas while she corrected school papers. Later in the evening, I would return to my father's house. He would usually be in bed. I would sit in the dining room, checking my email at my father's laptop computer in the silent house. I would look at the dining table cluttered with DVDs and think of how dismayed my mother would be to see the state of her once pristine house. Sometime I would think of the life I used to have on the weekends—bike rides along the lake, lazy afternoons reading at coffeehouses, and evenings at dinner with friends. Then I would think about how much I missed my mother and how much I loved my father.

When I would leave on Sunday afternoon, my father would hobble out the driveway to see me off.

"You don't have to, Dad."

"No, I want to."

He would wave as I backed out of the driveway.

On Mother's Day 2005, my sister, father, and I met for breakfast, and then drove to the Southern Wisconsin Veteran's Cemetery, where my mother was buried. We placed flowers by her grave, cried a little, and then left. Back at what had been my parents' house, now my dad's house, I hugged my father good-bye and set out for Chicago. *So this is what every Mother's Day was going to be like from now*, I thought, a day to dread, a day to endure, a day to ignore. I was angry that day—mad at my mother for dying, though God knows she couldn't help it, and wanted to live, furious at her for leaving me, and upset at the doctors for failing her, although I truly believe that they did the best they could.

Somewhere around Highland Park, an hour in my journey, I stopped at a light. Then I looked, blinked, and looked again. The license plate in front of me said MIMI followed by three numbers. Mimi. My mother's nickname. *Mimi*. Random occurrence? A sign? Fate? I don't know. But the name on that plate made me feel better for a

moment. The light turned green; the car turned right. I started at the license plate, fixating on the word, *Mimi, Mimi, Mimi*, as the car headed down the side street, grew smaller and vanished into the traffic. Then I turned my eyes back to the road. I had another route to take. I pressed on the gas and moved forward.

