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## Daddy's Little Girl

*Paige Doepker*

“Learning to drive is something that takes persistence and patience,” my dad told me as I jumped into the driver’s seat of his 2003 navy blue PT Cruiser.

“Yeah Dad, I know,” I said, trying to hide the fact that I was already getting annoyed. The idea that my dad still saw me as his baby girl in the black and white polka dotted dress with the cute beret in my hair irked me. Growing up, I had always been responsible and independent. I always made the honor roll and was always invited to the academic awards banquet at the end of the year. I was also on our middle school basketball team. I was the starting shooting guard. We would always be in the championship game and it would be unusual if we didn’t come home champions. I always made it home in time for my 11:30 curfew, I never drank or did drugs, and I was very honest with my parents. This is why I could not understand why my dad continued to treat me as if I was still that little girl rather than the mature and responsible soon-to-be adult that I was.

I could tell that my dad had sprayed some air freshener before we got in because the “new car” scent stung my nostrils. I was teeming with excitement to finally learn how to drive a car. But not just any car, a stick shift. I would finally have the freedom to come and go as I pleased. No more, “Mom can you drop me off at the school for basketball practice? Dad can you pick me up at the bowling alley?” As I sat in the driver’s seat taking in this surreal moment, I began to realize my knees were digging into my chest. I reached down under the seat, a little apprehensive for what I might find: a couple of old, moldy, McDonald’s french fries, maybe some loose change, a Juicyfruit gum wrapper or two. God only knows what else could have been lurking under that seat. Eventually I had found what I was looking for: the switch to adjust my seat. I grabbed the gray cloth seat belt, pulled it across my body and clicked it into place. I imagined myself driving the car with all of my friends. The windows were down, the cool wind hitting my face as we jammed out to the Backstreet Boys. I smiled to myself as I slipped the cold, metal key into the ignition and slowly turned it over. The 2.4 liter, 4 cylinder engine spit and splattered for a second, but quickly rumbled to life.

I was ready. I punched the clutch down with my left foot and stomped down on the brake with my right foot. My hand shook nervously as I reached for the long, slender, metallic gear shifter which was located in between my seat and the right, front, passenger seat. Slowly, I pulled the shifter back into reverse, letting my left foot gradually slide off of the clutch and the brake while trying to remember to feather the gas pedal. So many thoughts raced through my mind: don’t speed or you might get pulled over, don’t stall the car in the middle of a busy intersection. But whatever you do, don’t wreck! I could just picture the flashing red and blue lights and the shrill of the siren, the faces of the people watching as my car was sitting in the middle of the intersection because I had stalled it, and the tow truck pulling away with a mangled piece of metal that used to be our blue PT Cruiser.

As I cautiously backed down our meandering, concrete driveway, I could feel my dad eyeing my every move, waiting for me to mess up. After what seemed like two hours, I had finally reached the end of the driveway and breathed a sigh of relief; so far, so good.

My dad and I both decided that it would be a better idea to learn how to drive a stick shift out in the country rather than downtown Ottawa, Ohio, so I could more easily practice shifting gears and stopping without having to worry about being in the way of steady flowing traffic. So I

turned out of the driveway and headed north out of town on State Route 65. I came to a stop sign and I tried to stop, but I forgot to put my foot on the clutch as I braked. The car started making a rattling, gear grinding noise and began to shake. Then it just suddenly shut off. I was so worried that I really messed something up.

“Oh gosh! Did I do that?”

“Yeah, it’s okay. You just stalled it. It happens all the time when people are learning how to drive a stick,” my dad replied.

Wow, I thought to myself, maybe this isn’t going to be so bad. This event had tripped my memory and I caught myself replaying the moment when my dad had taught me how to ride a bike. He let go of my pink banana seat and I pedaled by myself across the driveway. I remembered the look of pride on his face and I yearned for that look of approval as he was teaching me how to drive this car. I turned the key again, and the engine fired right back up. We were back in business.

I continued heading north out of town on State Route 65. I turned down random country roads until I found one that was so remote we were guaranteed not to be bothered by other intolerant motorists. I started down the road, trying to remember to hold down the clutch as I changed gears and picked up speed. CRUNCH, CREAK, BAM! I had stalled it again and I could tell by the look on my Dad’s face and the long sarcastic sighs that the little patience he had left was beginning to wear thin. What was wrong with him, I thought, normally he’s so supportive. I knew that car was important to him. Heck, I’m sure all of our neighbors could have told you how he was out in our driveway every Saturday morning hose in hand, washing and waxing that car. When my brothers and I were little and the car would accumulate dust and dirt in between Saturday washings, we would write messages in the dirt and he used to get so mad. We would have to sit there and listen to his half hour lectures about how that scratches the paint. But now he was acting like I was deliberately stalling the car just to pester him.

“You know that’s hard on the car when you stall it all the time,” he said dryly.

“Well, obviously, but it’s not like I’m doing it on purpose,” I said defensively.

It was beginning to be very clear that my dad wasn’t too keen on the idea of his little daughter getting her license. I was worried that he had begun to think that trying to teach me how to drive was a waste of his time when he could bring me places or pick me up just as he had done the past nine years. I began to sweat as I became uneasy at the fact that I could not drive this car. My legs began to stick the gray leather driver’s seat, causing another distraction, as if trying to remember to hold the clutch and the brake at the same time while stopping was not enough. I just wanted to prove to him that I was capable of driving this car. I wasn’t about to give up. I was going to learn how to drive this car. I tried once more, again with the same frustrating result. I was getting very irritated with my dad and with the car. I began yelling at my dad out of frustration.

“Can you stop sighing and rolling your eyes every time I mess up? I’m doing the best I can!”

“It’s not that hard to remember to hold the clutch down!” he snapped right back at me.

He made it seem so simple, but he didn’t understand that he had been driving a stick for over 25 years. The entire concept of the clutch was foreign to me and I was sick of him acting like I was incapable of driving it.

I got so pissed. “You know what, just forget it! *You* can drive it home!”

I knew that if I didn’t remove myself from the situation soon, our fight would escalate and we would both end up saying something we would later regret. I was so frustrated I just wanted to go home. We quietly switched places and the ride home was so silent it felt like I could have cut

the tension between us with an exacto knife.

The entire way home all I could think about was how I had just given up. This upset me even more because I try to live by the motto, "If at first you don't succeed, pick yourself up and try again." I also felt like I had just let my dad down. The fact that I had disappointed him ate away at my conscience. I just wanted him to stop seeing me as the little girl in the black and white polka dotted dress on the pink banana seat bike. I wanted him to see me as the 16 year old in her ripped American Eagle jeans and orange tank top sitting behind the wheel of that blue PT Cruiser. I envisioned him going to work the next day and telling his coworkers how he tried to teach me how to drive a stick shift, but I got irritated and aggravated and gave up.

Teary-eyed, aggravated, and exhausted we arrived back home. I walked into the door only to be greeted by my cheery, light-hearted mom.

"How did it go dear?"

"It was terrible," I replied. "He was not being very patient with me and every time I screwed up he acted like it was such a hassle to even attempt to teach me how to drive that stupid car! He acts like I'm still six years old and I'm too stupid to do anything." Seconds later my dad stomped through the door, and it was looking like round two of our shouting match was just about to begin. My Mom quickly intervened.

"Both of you need to work on your patience, especially with each other. Paige, not everyone is meant to be a teacher. Give your dad a break every now and then. Bruce, you need to learn that young people are sensitive, especially girls. Criticism won't get you anywhere, so try to be more positive and reassuring."

She had a way of smoothing things over and understanding both sides of the story. She was always more compassionate to me and my feelings at the age than my dad was because she knew how hard it is growing up at that age. I was trying to figure out who I was, where I belonged in my group of friends, dealing with the peer pressures of alcohol and drugs, becoming interested in boys and wearing makeup, all the while trying to juggle school and sports. Life is especially hard for girls at that age. She understood that learning how to drive and getting my license was such a big deal in my life. It was one of the first major steps in defining me as an emerging adult. At least I had someone I could relate to.

My dad and I both resolved the issues we had with each other and we apologized to one another.

"Paige, I'm sorry that I was impatient with you," my dad said.

"Yeah, I'm sorry I yelled at you," I said.

As I look back on that day now, I realize I blamed my dad for the fight for the simple fact that he wasn't sympathetic to my feelings of anxiety and nervousness. The irony of this is that I treated him the same way; I wasn't being sympathetic to his feelings of watching his little girl grow up.

An hour had passed since our fight and I was in the living room watching television. My dad walked in and sat down on the couch.

"Do you want to try driving the car again?"

"Yes! I would love to give it another shot," I replied excitedly.

We took the car out again and, even though I still made a few mistakes, I was happy that I did not give up on myself and neither did my dad.

Now that time has passed and we are getting older we find ourselves together at family events, especially around the holidays, sitting together around the table after our meal and

reminiscing about our old, cobwebbed, childhood memories. This story always seems to pop up and, as I retell it, the family erupts with laughter. It is nice to look back on it with the rest of the family, especially my dad, and laugh. As I have matured through the years, I find myself thinking about this memory and I have realized that this fight started not because my dad was mad at me for stalling the car, but because he loved me so much and it was hard for him to sit back and watch his little girl grow up.