

Marlowe Born Cohn

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FYS- Roadside America

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### Roadside Non-fiction Story

This was a trip my family had taken several times before, with several different iterations. As such, this trip was quickly fading into the monotonous road trip I was used to. We had already driven in from Leakey and through San Antonio to visit my grandmother- and make sure my uncle was still actually capable of taking care of her. My parents had been arguing about the whole situation with Nana for the last hour. I'd been trying to tune them out, as usual. This was a common theme of our family road trips. At least this time, they weren't pulling over to argue. Then, of course, I noticed the car was being pulled over and I pulled my headphones off, bracing myself for the arguing. Silence.

"... Did we get a flat?" I asked, even though the car was driving fine. Why else could we be pulling over at the edge of highway? It was the 99 now, so about an hour away from home, when we usually tried not to stop anymore to just through Houston traffic as quickly as possibly. Dad shook his head and put the car into park.

"You're driving the rest of the way home," He said and I jumped in my seat, fumbling with my phone and headphones. *What?*

“What?” I managed to ask aloud, looking up at him in the rearview mirror. For the record, this was about six months into me learning how to drive. I had never driven on the highway before, and Houston roads are terrifying, even on a Sunday afternoon.

“You brought your learner’s permit, right?” Dad asked, undoing his seatbelt with a loud click. I flinched and undid my own with leaden hands, muffling the sound as best as I could.

“Yeah, but-” I tried to protest, but Dad was already out of the car, slamming the door behind him *loudly*. I flinched again and looked over at Mom, who just shrugged tiredly. I swallowed and tried- unsuccessfully- to push down down the ball of nerves in my gut, even as the shaky-nervous feeling spread to my hands. But Dad had said I was driving, so... no choice there. I got out of the car and got into the driver’s side, readjusting the seat and review painfully slowly, to buy myself a few more moments. Thankfully, I’d remembered to bring my sunglasses on this trip. The sunlight was still painful. But it would not blind me on the road with the sunglasses. Small mercies. I took a deep breath in and out. I’d be fine. I had to do this. Worse things would happen if I refused to drive. So, before Dad could get impatient, I moved into drive and began to look in the rearview mirror and looking behind me to wait for an opening to pull out into the road.

“You could have gone then,” Dad said as a couple cars barreled pass. *When?* The cars were moving so fast!

“Sorry,” I muttered, hands slipping on the wheel with nervous sweat. The sunlight glinted off the car windshields as they rushed past, distracting me even more. The other cars wove between lanes, blocking off a way onto the freeway every time she thought she could pull into the road.

“It’s fine. Take your time, honey,” Mom said, engrossed in her phone. Finally, I saw a larger gap between the oncoming cars and- shit! I hit the gas pedal way, way too hard, jerking out roughly into the road, barely staying in the lane I was trying to merge into.

“Careful!” Dad chastised and I felt my ears burn as I began to accelerate a bit more smoothly. Slowly, the car came up to the speed limit and I managed not to waver across the lanes as people wove around me, giving me dirty looks. I was going the speed limit! But I managed to keep my head and not let it get to me. I used to get really upset about people doing that. The first time I drove on real roads, a person tail gaited me until I had to pull off and cry in a parking lot. But back to the highway, with the parental units hovering over my shoulder and judging my every move.

“You’re dropping below the speed limit a little,” Mom said as yet another car sped past us. I glanced towards the speedometer. 58. *Barely*. But I pressed the pedal a little harder and the car moved a little quicker. Finally, the initial adrenaline rush began to fade a little bit as car’s speed leveled out and the cars around me began to act a little less crazy. People scare me enough in normal circumstances, let alone behind the wheel of a car. Still, they do seem to have calmed down at this point and the road seems less dangerous now that the initial start is over.

“Take the exit to 290,” Dad said from the backseat and I nodded, turning on the blinker. As we reached the exit, the prairie lands near Bridgeland turned into the long lines of warehouses and the insanely large furniture store. This was familiar territory and I relaxed a little bit. I’d been in the car many times on this stretch of the road. Until we got to 290, I knew it’d been smooth sailing, so to speak. After a long day on the road, this was a relief. Even as my parents began to bicker in the back seat, I was able to tune them out, focusing on the road and the cars around me. This was the first time in learning to drive that I was really able to fall into a rhythm

of driving. Even with sudden moments of adrenaline, when drivers make foolish decisions and cut me off a couple of times. It was much better to be in the front of the car than the back of it, to be driving instead of being a passenger. This first time on the freeway, while stressful at times, was freeing, being the one driving instead of being in the back of the car, beholden to where my parents wanted to go. This experience, while stressful, gave me the experience of being in control of where the car was going, a new and freeing experience.

I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.