

First They Drive You, Then They Drive You

I'm noticing a lot more things in my street these days, such as kids in cars with their parents riding shotgun, learning to drive. Last week these kids were riding bicycles and leaving them in the driveway to be run over. Now they're running over their bikes themselves.

It's always nice when children assume responsibility.

Kids have a funny way of growing up. They go along for awhile, not seeming to change at all, then, one day, you notice something, and it's like a bolt unsticking. Like their coat hangers suddenly being large enough only for doll clothes. That they're now putting conditioner instead of spaghetti sauce in their hair, and have a KEEP OUT OR UR DEAD sign on their bedroom door. That their back-to-school shopping list, which used to contain items such as glue sticks, crayons, and notebook paper, now reads, 'bong, Bose, cooler.' (They saved the glue sticks over the years to sniff between classes.) Or that you have to tap your 401(k) to pay your car insurance bill, especially after sonny mistook the back of the garage for the brake pedal.

We won't be faced with the driving issue for several more years, which should give us plenty of time to get therapy to deal with it. It's not *Anna* we're concerned about, of course, it's the people already driving. Those blanched faces sitting in the passenger seat next to their kids.

Most people do not know how to drive; they merely steer, negotiating routine situations routinely. They cannot improvise. Compared with a jazz pianist's technique, most motorist's skills equate with 'chopsticks.' Faced with contingencies like a snow squall or downpour, they immediately lose all coordination and muscular control, reverting to primitive fight-or-flight mechanisms more suitable for navigating a deli. And these same folks are tutoring their offspring behind the wheel. Help.

But it's not only other motorists' squirrelness that has us already putting money into a chauffeuring trust fund for *Anna*. In recent years there have been some alarming logistical developments on America's streets. There are now twice as many vehicles out there as when *Marsha* and I learned to drive. Twice as many wheeled molecules barely moving around each other. By the time *Anna*'s ready to drive, traffic will be gridlocked so badly she won't be able to get out of the neighborhood. Which may not be a bad thing. By then there'll probably be a mall at the top of the hill,

anyway, which she'll be able to walk to--- within range of our binoculars.

Along with congestion, vehicle size also has increased. Thirty years ago there were no SUVs blocking out the sun and threatening to squash you. Even jacked-up muscle cars were lower in profile. You could actually get into and out of a parking space without a periscope. Or pass someone without sending up a flare.

Fortunately, we parents, ever resourceful, continue to dream up ways to circumvent such worrisome changes. My neighbor Rebecca, for example, who normally sweats blood over her family's welfare, has opted not to with her son's driving. She credits this to: (1) belief in a higher power, especially actuarial tables; (2) teaching him in a Ford crew cab dually pickup, the sort of vehicle that could tow Rhode Island out into the Atlantic if it ever decides to secede.

This would be fine if Rebecca's son were a rootin' tootin' bronco bustin' type, instead of the kind who could donate his brain to science and still pass the bar exam. At school, he gives presentations that make Pink Floyd concerts look like your fuse box blowing. He also walks slumped over, as if hunting for change, and asks waitresses' permission to order seconds. You get the picture. And this young man is learning to drive in a truck with a beam wider than the Queen Mary 2.

I'd hate to be in Rebecca's shoes when it's time to go into a nursing home. 'You'll like this place, Mom; all your windows open onto the waste treatment plant next door.' The clincher is, he's not exactly keen on driving himself. 'What for?' he said. 'I can research particle theory from home on the Internet!'

Personally, I wouldn't be sad if Anna wanted to skip the whole thing, either. Moved to a city with good public transportation and forewent America's fascination with the car. Or met a swell at college and got carted around the rest of her life. Which reminds me: it's demo derby time at the county fair. Let the anti-driving ed begin.