FEAR OF DRIVING

From my balcony, I see Vered pull up in the white Peugeot. My stomach clenches as I grab my shoulder bag, pull on my oversized Jackie O-style sunglasses, and reluctantly go to her. The platinum blond sun beats down with the intensity of a naked 100-watt bulb. My throat feels dry and temples throb. There's a *sharav*, a desert wind that brings dust and sand from the Sahara across the southern Mediterranean all the way here. To Tel Aviv, Israel.

Vered sits in the passenger seat, talking on her cell phone. She's about my daughter's age with skin the color of weak tea and dark unruly curls that in my day would have prompted straightening. A pronounced overbite makes it seem as if she's always smiling. She holds up a hand with the fingers pressed together into a tent, a Hebrew hand gesture meaning "One moment."

"*Beseder, madhim, yala*," Vered says and hangs up. Then she switches to English. "Sorry for the delay, some rich girl bang daddy's BMW on Namir backing traffic."

"A rich girl banged up daddy's BMW on Namir and traffic is backed up," I correct her.

It's an agreement we made when we first met. I agreed to talk with her in English, which she wants to improve. But only on the condition that I can correct her mistakes. As a retired English teacher, I cannot bear to listen to my native language being mangled. Still, not having to speak in Hebrew, which I never managed to learn fluently, gives me one less thing to worry about now.

I get into the driver's seat, still warm from someone's else bottom, and reach for the lever underneath to pull myself forward. I feel most secure when I'm sitting smack against the steering wheel, not back like I'm lounging in a recliner watching television. Then I take a

sweater out of my bag. The air conditioning is pumped so high that my arms are already peppered with goosebumps. But I know better than to ask Vered to lower it. It's good to be a little cold while driving, she said. Keeps you alive. You mean alert? I asked. Exactly, she said.

“Where to?” I ask.

We may be going to pick up other students with whom I sometimes share my lessons or doing another dry run of the road test. Vered straps herself into the passenger seat.

“Today we do the Ayalon. Ok?”

She says it like she’s asking my permission. But she’s not. She knows how I feel about the Ayalon. I am probably the only person in this country who wishes there was still a four-lane highway rather than the eight-lane behemoth. It’s bad enough being a bus or taxi passenger on the Ayalon. Being the driver is a special kind of torture.

“I’m not up for it today,” I say. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

It’s not a lie. I haven’t slept well for months.

"It will be fine," says Vered. "Go."

I start the car, look to my left and let a cyclist and taxi pass, before easing out of my street named for a Warsaw Ghetto resistance fighter. I drive past scruffy white Bauhaus buildings with wraparound balconies and peeling paint. A black cat meanders across the street, forcing me to slow down as it leaps onto an open trash can brimming with garbage. I make a right and then a left through streets so narrow that I’m always amazed when I don’t hit the side mirrors of parked cars.

I shift my sitting position several times, smooth down my hair and clear my throat. I make the turn opposite Habima and past Café Nehama ve Hetzi where David and I ate Friday breakfast so often the waiter remembered that he liked a double espresso shot and I wanted skim milk in my cappuccino.

Then it's past a storefront with a genealogy I can trace back 40 years: a children's clothing store where I buy gifts for my grandchildren preceded by a pet store where I had an account for supplies for our new deceased cat preceded by a hair salon where I used to color my hair preceded by a grocery store where I only bought emergency items because David complained it was overpriced preceded by another hair salon where a hairdresser once colored my hair red, even though I asked him to keep my original brown color, preceded by a restaurant which served excellent homemade pasta where we had a party after Ariella was born.

Now we're on Rothschild Boulevard with the wide pedestrian and bike walkway shaded by Ficus trees. I signal left and as the light turns to green a bare-chested male jogger continues running forcing me to slam down on the brakes.

"*Maniac*," says Vered, using one of her favorite words which means jerk. "You did good, Jenny."

I'm so unnerved by the encounter that I don't correct Vered's grammar to "You did well." As I'm stuck behind a red light catching my breath. I see a familiar face in the car stopped alongside me. It's Molly Kaplan with whom I attended college decades ago. She's made it as a political commentator who's often on television speaking her elegant Hebrew. I don't want her seeing me drive a car with a blue and white sign on top marked "*Lamed*" for learners. As the light fades out of red, I hit the accelerator hard.

“Whoa horsey,” Vered says. “Slow down.”

It’s the first time she’s ever told me to slow down. But she frequently tells other students to do so. Once a boy with a wisp of a mustache started driving so quickly that Vered hit her brakes and calmly told him to pull over to the side. "If you ever pull a stunt like that again in my car, I will make sure you never get your license," she said. But she’s always urging me to drive faster.

As we cross over Ibn Givorol, we get stuck behind an idling garbage truck. Men languidly pull overflowing garbage cans from the many restaurants lining the street and dump them into the back of the truck so hastily that food scraps and plastic wrapping fall to the ground.

“Sometimes we are third world country," Vered complains. "Do you know how much these guys make?”

We drive on Shaul HaMelekh Street past the old government press building where David’s brother, Eran, used to work evenings and then show up late at our apartment expecting dinner. The press building’s long been obsolete and Eran, who moved to Australia, didn't come for the funeral or even send me condolences.

“I receive date for your test,” Vered says. “Two weeks from tomorrow. Ten in the morning.”

“Already?”

“What? You want to pay me more?”

“I don’t feel ready for the test.”

“You are ready.”

"I don't think so."

"You are ready."

In my mirror, I see a dark luxury car smack against my rear. One short stop and I'll get hit. Finally, the car moves left around me as the driver opens the window and spits out a curse, which is met with another curse from Vered. As a former teacher, I'm at my most fluent in Hebrew when it comes to curse words.

"*Maniac*," Vered hisses.

She is my second driving teacher. Igor, the first, was recommended by my friend as "a patient sweetheart" who taught her 16-year-old ADHD daughter to drive. Igor was a balding middle aged former solid waste engineer from Kiev with a perpetual sunburn on his pale face. He never smiled or laughed and criticized my every move, even the way I turned on the engine. "Lady, you will destroy motor that way." But when a teenage girl almost hit a parked police car, he said "everyone makes mistakes." I wondered if it was age discrimination or punishment for having had a great-grandfather who left Russia for New York after World War I.

I returned home after each lesson feeling like a battered wife. Finally, I told Ariella that I would just continue to take a combination of train, bus, and taxis to her house in the Galilee.

"Mom, you're not trying to get into the space program," Ariella sighed. "Get another teacher."

There was no sense arguing with someone who rock climbs for a hobby. But she was pleased when I told her to take the new Passat parked in my building's garage. The car was a sign of our new improved financial status and David's belief that Germany had paid its Holocaust

dues. We had planned to use that car often to spend time with our grandchildren. But three months after driving home in the new car, David suffered a fatal heart attack.

Soon after the Igor fiasco, Ariella twisted her ankle rock climbing while Uzi, her husband, was out of the country on business. I arrived at her home in a taxi that cost 800 shekels. Over the following week, I had to hire taxis to get my two grandchildren to school, afterschool activities, and to buy groceries. It hit me then. If I was going to stay in Israel and Ariella was going to stay in her home, I'd have to learn how to drive.

I chose Vered as my second teacher because she seemed the opposite of Igor. Within a few minutes of our first lesson, she assured me that I would be driving in 28 lessons, the minimum required.

"Your husband will then have to share the car with you," she said. "Maybe he won't like that."

“My husband is dead.”

She covered her mouth with her hand, although with the overbite she still looked as if she was smiling. “Sorry.”

“It's the reason I'm here. He used to do all the driving.”

“So, you will drive for his honor.”

I thought about that phrase which grammatically should be "in his honor." It was true that David would have been pleased. He never liked having to do all the driving, although it had been many years since he complained about it. That was because I told him that I couldn't learn how

to drive along with everything else I had to get used to as a new immigrant. If we lived in the U.S., I said, I'd take driving lessons.

On our second lesson, Vered wanted to know why an American woman of "your age and intelligence" never had a driver's license.

"Many people from New York City never learned to drive," I explained.

I could have told her about my grandmother who drove through a storefront window on Third Avenue during her first and only driving lesson. Or how my father renewed his license for 60 years but refused to drive. Once, during a family road trip down South, my mother hurt her neck and my father was forced to take the wheel the next day. I'd never seen him look so terrified. That night, over the thin hotel walls in Charleston, I heard him tearfully inform my mother that she'd just have to bear the neck pain.

My fear of driving – also known as amaxophobia, ochophobia, motorphobia and hamaxophobia, -- is apparently genetic.

Ahead of me looms the large blue signs for the Ayalon. My heart is pounding and I feel both lightheaded and ultra-alert. I'm a teenager skiing, for the first and last time, down a hill in New Hampshire. I'm a 20-year-old on the Ferris wheel at Six Flags with my boyfriend who laughs hysterically at my screams. I'm a 40-something mother unwillingly biking with my family outside Amsterdam and getting hit by a car that knocks me to the ground and breaks my engagement ring. I'm begging Ariella to slow down and "watch that bus, that taxi, that motorcycle," as we drive to Ikea soon after she receives her license.

"North or South Ayalon?" I ask.

“You decide.”

The South is terrifying because of new traffic patterns requiring snap right and left decisions, so I pick the North and wait at the light for the left-hand turn. I turn to look quickly at Vered who’s studying an oversized ad of Bar Refaeli in tight jeans and a skimpy t-shirt.

“How much you think she makes a month?” she asks.

Then the light changes and the cars stream onto the highway. Even Vered snaps to heightened alert.

“Get to your left,” she barks. “Keep up speed.”

Cars to my left whiz by at top speed. A truck behind me shifts into the left lane while I’m reflexively slowing down, trying to find an opening.

“Not slower, faster,” Vered yells. “Get left.”

“They won’t let me in,” I scream.

“Signal and go!”

Finally, a small red car slows down just enough that I can squeeze inside. A car at my rear welcomes me with a honk. Vered examines the mirror.

“Go over another lane.”

“Let me stay here. It’s better.”

I’m forced to slow down, stuck behind an old jalopy moving with a great rattle. Through the rear window I can see the furry black *Shtreimels* of three Hassidic Jews.

“No, go left.”

I check the mirror. A small car that looks like the bat mobile passes me. Then a gap opens and I shift over so I'm in the second faster lane.

“Now, keep up speed,” she says.

I press on the gas, resisting my instinct to step off it. I’m sweating, but there's no way I can pull off my sweater. My pounding heart reverberates in my ears.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Stay on the Ayalon. Faster.”

“Don't I need to know?”

“I will let you know. You’re doing great. Easy peas.”

“Easy-peasy.”

“What is this easy-peasy?”

It’s what I’m not, I want to say. My legs are shaking. I want to cry. But that will come later.

"You do good, Jenny. Just keep fast.”

We pass the exit for Tel Aviv University where, during my junior year abroad, I met David, a gorgeous engineering student. He'd flown airplanes into Lebanon and knew the entire score of Jesus Christ Superstar. Then we get to a split in the road.

“Bear right," says Vered.

The road curves around like a question mark until it meets the six-lane coastal road. Two fewer lanes anyway. There was a time when we took this stretch every single Friday night,

driving to my in-laws in Herzliya, even if I preferred to make dinner at home. Soft-spoken David was aggressive on the road, even a bit of a jerk.

I drive past high-tech office buildings, a shopping center and riding stables where I had to tell Ariella, then 14, she couldn't take riding lessons because there was no one to drive her there. Ahead of me, a sporty red convertible zips in and out of lanes as if weaving a spider's web.

"Faster," Vered shouts, flicking her wrist as if I'm a horse and she's the driver.

“Where are we going?" I repeat.

“Beit Lid."

I turn on the signal to begin moving right for the exit.

"Not yet, stay in your lane. Faster. Faster."

This is what I hate most about driving: the speed. It feels like the hand of death pushing me toward my end. But it's more than that. I hate the emphasis on speed when so much of the time we should slow down. I shouldn't have rushed to marry David, leave my English graduate studies in the U.S. and come to live in this foreign country. I should have slowed down to consider the longtime implications.

"Prepare to exit," says Vered.

I manage to switch lanes, once, twice and then get off the highway**.** I shake out one hand and then the other in relief.

“Very good, Jenny. Impressing.”

“Impressive.”

“Ah, good, I see you are okay.”

We pass by a prison and I almost envy the inmates cut off from the real world. Who am I kidding? Even if I get this license, I'll never be able to drive the two and half hours of mostly highway to Ariella’s moshav.

“Isn't it time to head back?” I ask.

“My next appointment cancel. You have time?”

She's going to suggest an extended lesson. I have the time. But I'm tapped out. I long for the familiarity of my apartment, even if it's filled with landmines: David's sneakers in the closet, the two of us in straw hats from our last trip to Vietnam, the kitchen pan he used to make shakshuka. Yet, even all that is better than being on this road.

“I don’t have time for another lesson,” I say.

“Not lesson. Come, we drink coffee.”

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The closest Aroma, located in a strip mall, is crowded with soldiers from the nearby base noisily slurping Frappuccino while assault rifles bounce off their backs. Vered, who I rarely see standing, marks our place in line with a defiant assertion. She looks smaller now, out of the car. She orders a large Café Latte and I ask for a small iced coffee.

“Biscotti?” Vered asks.

“No, thanks.” Driving always kills my appetite.

She gets two biscotti anyway, waves off my proffered credit card, and we move to one of the free tables on which someone has left two dirty cups and a half-eaten muffin. She shakes her head as she takes the garbage to a bin and cleans the table with a napkin before sitting down to face me. I suddenly recognize this coffee as a gesture I might have extended to a weak English student.

"I'm guessing you don't invite all your students to coffee." I say.

She nudges me to take a biscotti. I decline. She insists, so I take it just to silence her.

"No, I want to talk to you and I want a coffee. Two birds, how do you say?"

"Kill two birds with one stone."

"Horrible. You Americans are very violent."

"So, what do you want to talk about?"

"Your fear. I see it. I feel it. I smell it." She makes an accompanying sniffing sound.

I look down. crumbling my biscotti like my granddaughter does.

"I know, it's so embarrassing."

"Not embarrassing. Normal. Believe me, every new driver is scared. With the most scared, I tell them a story about my father. In the army, he had to jump out of the plane. Vered, he says, I was very scared to do this. I don't like heights and I have asthma which he kept secret from the army. Never mind. He is up in the plane with bag on back."

"The parachute."

“Exactly. Parachute. All his friends look normal, like they’re all going for a little trip, like it’s nothing. And then they line up to jump. He watches them jump. One by one. He thinks he’s going to do pee pee from fear. It's not nice to say, excuse me, but that’s what he felt. And he thinks, what will happen if I don’t jump? And then he remembers what his commander said, ‘if you don’t jump, the person behind you won’t jump and then we lose everything.’ So, he jumps."

“Let me guess: It was great and he did it again and again.”

I don’t care if I sound cynical. Ever since I moved to this country, I've heard countless stories of bravery and heroism that only make me realize that I'm an outsider.

“Nah, his parachute didn’t open and he broke his leg coming down.”

“Oh my god, that’s terrible.”

“Not terrible. He got *Gimmel* for three weeks and during that time met my mother. I am born thanks to his jumping out of plane and breaking his leg.”

“Vered, it’s a nice story. But I really don’t see the connection to my driving fears.”

“No?”

“That everyone on the road is scared?”

“That sometimes what we most fear works out. And that you must show confidence. Fake it until you make it, right? Now finish your coffee and drive us back.”

The drive back seems faster and easier, but maybe I'm just more relaxed. When the coastal road intersects with the Ayalon, Vered tells me to remain on the coastal road which has traffic lights and so moves more slowly than the highway into the city. It’s a gift. We pass the blue ribbon of the shoreline, the part of this country I love best, all the way back home.

“Wednesday same time?” she asks when I pull up outside my building.

I get out of the car and nod. I go back upstairs as if David is inside making one of those awful vegetable drinks in our blender while listening to some political show on the radio. l will tell him that it's all his fault that at my age I have to learn driving here and not in some charming town filled with retirees in Maine. But he's not there and there's no one else who will listen.

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On the morning of the road test, I take a little extra care with my appearance. I've been avoiding the mirror for months and it shows. My long hair, which I always considered my best feature, is streaked with gray since I can't bear to sit through a coloring. I brush it as best I can and pull on tailored black pants and a button-down shirt, which I used to wear to work. I put on the gold necklace with the diamond pendant David gave me for our tenth anniversary. I feel an unfamiliar sense of hope as I walk outside to meet Vered.

There are two other students in the car, a young man and a teenage girl. The girl is driving and although she looks even younger than the minimum age of 15, she seems fully in control behind the wheel. Vered even steals glances at her cell phone, which she never does when I'm driving.

I sit in the back next to the young man who sports dreadlocks, a gamey smell and an attitude. He keeps staring at me which adds to my mounting stress.

“Jenny, right?” he finally asks in Hebrew.

“Do I know you?”

“Eitan, Eitan Weiss.”

I look confused.

“Ironi Aleph, ten years ago," he says.

I vaguely remember an especially rowdy class of 16-year-olds for whom I had no patience. That was around the time I almost divorced David. I wanted to move back to New York for a few years, just as David had promised we could when Ariella had left home, which had happened several years earlier. It would be our last opportunity before grandchildren. Just for a few years, I kept repeating. But he refused to go. And in the end, I couldn't leave him.

“Right, hello,” I say.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, now in English.

“I guess the same thing you are, trying to get a driver’s license.”

“Aren’t you too old?”

“It’s never too late to learn.”

“Two roads diverged in the woods. I still remember that fucking poem you made us memorize. Man, I hated that. You gave me a bad grade on my paper and I got hell from my parents. Do you remember that?"

“Eitan, shut up,” Vered says in Hebrew.

“You seem to have learned English well enough," I say.

“All from television and music.”

I close my eyes to indicate that our conversation is finished. I'm so happy that I'm retired. I never aspired to become a high school English teacher and never really liked it. I wanted to

write books and lecture about Jane Eyre and Great Expectations at some pastoral New England college.

When Eitan later takes his turn driving, Vered snaps at his every move.

"*Maniac*," she sneers as he gets out and I get behind the wheel for a final lesson before the test.

I pull up in the parking lot of a shopping center where inspectors pair off with the scheduled test takers as if we're at a square dance. There's one female inspector and I feel lucky when she chooses me. Girl power. But the good feeling quickly dissipates. I am terrified.

I see myself from a distance pulling out of the parking space, turning, stopping at the light, slowing down in front of a bus, waiting to merge into a circle. Time moves in slow animation as I follow her commands, praying for the end. Finally, I'm told to pull into a parking space which I succeed in doing. When I get out, my shirt is damp in the armpits. I greedily gulp in fresh air as if I'm been holding my breath. Whatever happens, I'm just elated to have finished. It's amazing how suffering can make us appreciate life.

I'm in a great mood for the next two weeks as I even agree to go out to dinner with a friend and finish reading a book. Then a short text message informs me that I've failed the road test. After a few days, I get the report informing me of the reason: driving too slowly. Failing this road test fills me with anger. I call Vered to insist that I'm discriminated against as an older driver and immigrant, since she can usually be counted upon to support such theories.

"She's right," Vered says. "You do drive too slowly."

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I fail the second test when I hit the curb while parallel parking.

I fail the third test after I pull out of the parking lot and almost hit another car.

I fail the fourth test by braking too quickly at a crosswalk to avoid hitting an old woman.

I'm done.

I send Vered a note of thanks and tell Ariella and Uzi to take the Passat. Uzi arrives the next morning. I hand over the keys feeling both relieved and sad.

“Cheer up, Jenny," Uzi says as he affixes the new key to his chain. "It's not easy for someone who's not from here to drive in Israel."

We are standing in the lot of the building where I've lived for over half my life. I was married over 30 years to an Israeli and gave birth to one. There was a time I wanted to leave and that's probably a big reason why I never learned to drive. If I had had a license, I'd have one less reason to feel I don't belong here. But all that is different now. I want to spend my remaining years among my family here. If I'm not part of this country, I don't belong anywhere.

I watch him drive away, almost hitting another car and go back upstairs. The day stretches before me. It's time to do some volunteer teaching, take an organized tour abroad, maybe even get on a dating site. I don't need driving to do any of that. But I can't move.

Then Vered texts to ask whether I'm free for coffee. We meet a few hours later at Nehama Ve Hetzi. She arrives, takes off her sunglasses, and rubs her red eyes.

"You look tired," I say.

She shrugs and takes a sip of espresso. I've been driving around with this woman for months and never wondered what kinds of demons she faces. She doesn’t wear a wedding ring,

but I have no idea whether she's a single mother, has a bank overdraft, or supports a dying mother.

"You work too much," I say.

"True, but I like my job."

"I never asked you, how did you get into this work?"

“Ah, good story. I was with my father driving in the Negev. We had just visited my brother at his base. He said his arm hurt and then the car went out of control."

"Heart attack."

"Right. I got us to the hospital. I was 14.”

“Was he okay?"

"Yes. I saved his life."

"That's an incredible story. You're one tough cookie."

"You also are tough cookie."

"Me? Hardly. Nobody would call me tough.”

“Then they are stupid. Look, you come to this crazy country without knowing the language and you teach our kids which is not easy. And then, your husband dies. This is the hard part. Driving? Anyone can do that, just look at all those *maniacs* on the roads.”

I want to tell her that that’s sometimes how it is in life. That we make it through all the tough parts because we don’t have a choice, but it's the seemingly easier tasks that unravel us.

"You're going to make me take that sixth test, aren't you?" I ask.

**

I flunk the sixth test for speeding. I find this so hilarious that I sign up for a seventh test and that's the one I pass. I call Vered first.

“That’s a shame,” she clucks. “I just found cheap tickets for London and I need more English lessons.”

“You’ll do fine.”

“Listen, I tell all my students to drive slowly. But with you, I say something different: Be fast. Be, as you Americans say, king of the road.”

I take the combination of train, bus and taxi for the last time to Ariella's. I spend the day with my grandchildren at the swimming pool watching them do flips off the diving board and holding my breath until their shining faces emerge from the water. The sun dips and I get into the Passat which smells from Uzi's clandestine cigarettes. My heart quickens and once again I'm feeling my mind disengage. The fear is still there. I lean into it as I swing onto the road leading me home.