

## Driving or What Happens When Coming Home

### Shannon Hicks

About five years after I stopped feeling, after I am in college and live at home only during summer vacations, the car is my only escape. My parents always wonder how we go through so much gas. They don't know that every night I leave the house after everyone goes to bed and drive around. The city where we live is pretty small, and you can only drive through the neighborhoods where your friends live without stopping so many times before you get bored. So every night when I leave the house, I leave town, drive south on State Road 6 through Whitetown to State Road 29. From there I drive through Hillsburg to Frayton, past the Little Theatre, and then go back north at the second stoplight in Frayton.

The whole time I listen to cassette tapes at full blast, all the windows rolled down, the wind beating at me. The whole trip takes maybe an hour, and I do it every night. Sometimes before I leave, sleep tears at me, telling me to be sensible and go to bed, but I love driving, and the empty car calls me late at night, whispering sometimes, but screaming most of the time, to come out and leave, leave the burden behind, the wall I've so carefully constructed.

Once I took the car early one evening without telling anyone where I was going, and I left and was gone a long time. We only had one car, and I was gone for about six hours that night, driving around, so nobody could leave my house. When I got back, my sister Linda started riding me, saying, "You could have at least called."

"I know," I said, "I'm sorry." On and on she kept going.

"Why didn't you call. Somebody else might have wanted the car. Why didn't you call?"

She was right. I should have called, but I didn't. And Linda didn't want to shut up. And then she got mad when I didn't get mad. "Mother," she said, "Dad," she said, "Kate isn't human. Just look at her! She won't even get mad at me. Don't the two of you find something strange about this?"

And I sat there beside her, smiling, chin tilted up. No—she couldn't make me mad at all that day.

And I keep driving.

Lately, every time I pass a hitchhiker on the highway, I want to stop and pick him up. They've all been men lately. I haven't seen a female hitchhiker since Mother got sick. Anyway, it was a Saturday night, and I was home for the weekend. I'd been out

driving, and I couldn't sleep. I hadn't been sleeping well for weeks, and I was in my room, in my bed for two hours, unable to sleep, when I heard movement in the hall and then a knock on my door. My brother Chris was outside my door. "Something's wrong with Mother," he said.

"What's wrong with Mother," I asked.

"Get dressed," he said. "We've called an ambulance."

I put on a pair of blue jeans and went out into the hall. I heard voices in Dad and Mother's bedroom. When I went in, I saw Mother in her bed. She looked stiff. Garbled sounds came from her mouth. "Kate," my father said. "Come here, she wants you."

I sat down on the edge of her bed. "What Mother," I said. But I couldn't understand any of her words. I just heard sounds. "I'm sorry, Mother," I said, "but I don't understand you." Her voice got louder and louder, but I still didn't understand anything. I looked at my father.

"Eleanor," he finally said, "it's okay. The ambulance will be here soon." And he sat down on the bed beside her, and I didn't hear his words, I just heard the murmuring tones. Mother's blond hair was pulled back like mine, wisps of hair hanging over her cheeks and forehead. When the ambulance took Mother away and Dad with her, Chris and I followed in our car.

"What happened, Chris," I asked.

"I don't know," he answered. He drove, his eyes on the road.

"You have to know something," I said.

"Like I already told you," he said, "I don't know. I just got home, and Dad had already called for an ambulance. He said she couldn't move."

"What do you think it is," I asked.

"Don't ask me, Kate," Chris said, "I'm not a doctor."

"I'm not asking you as a doctor, Chris, I just want to know what—"

"I already told you," he said, "what I know. That's it." I knew our conversation was over. I looked out the car window into the sky. I wished I was driving, or at least that I could identify constellations. Then I'd have had something to focus on. Instead of Mother. Or Chris. Or me.

Anyway, I'm not sure when the thing with the hitchhikers started. At the beginning of the summer, I think. I was driving down State Road 29 at about

midnight, and I saw a man about a mile outside of Frayton with his thumb out. He was near a light, and I saw him. I almost stopped then to pick him up, but I remembered seeing a television movie about a hitchhiker who murdered people who picked him up. So I passed him by.

After that, I saw hitchhikers on State Road 29 all the time, it seemed, more than I'd seen on 29 in years. And every time I saw one, I slowed down, but I never stopped.

I told my sister Linda that I wanted to pick up hitchhikers. "You what," she said. "You want to what!"

"I didn't do anything, Linda," I said. "I just thought about it . . . haven't you ever . . . wanted to?"

"That is the most stupid ass thing you've ever said to me, Kate," Linda said. "Pick up a hitchhiker? I can't believe this."

"I didn't do anything, Linda," I said. "I'm sorry. It's never happened before. I never wanted to pick up a hitchhiker before. But then I did. So I thought maybe you wanted to, too . . . once in a while."

"Just don't do it," she said.

And I haven't.

I just keep driving.

But this burden, it doesn't leave the second I get in the car, but by the time I am several miles down State Road 6, it lifts, as it does every night I drive, and I can see better. It isn't like how you sit in the dark and your eyes adjust to the dark after a couple of minutes, and then you can see shapes and shadows. It's like everything is in the dark, and then I leave town by State Road 6, and little lights just switch on inside my eyes. And nobody can see like I see on those nights when I drive around and the lights switch on inside my eyes. And nobody can understand like I understand. And nobody can feel like I feel. But walls are heavy, especially well-constructed walls that are inside you. They are the walls that stop your breathing and they are the walls that squeeze your lungs. And I leave, and the lights switch on inside my eyes, and the lung-squeezing walls disintegrate for an hour—until I reach town again. I re-enter my hometown from another highway.

Then I'm back in town, and I don't have much money, but as I said, my parents always wonder about the gas. So I put just a little gas in the car—not as much as I have used, but just enough so they won't realize how far I have actually driven and ask me about it.

Linda has her own car now. So she never knows how far I drive or where. Not that she would be upset—unless she paid for the gas, that is. But she is very curious and she would question the need, the importance behind my driving fifty miles

every night without any particular destination in mind. She would want to know who or what is causing me to drive around every night. She would question that without a doubt, and I would not like it.

Linda has always known how to make everybody angry, and I've never liked that because I don't like to argue with anyone because to argue, I have to feel intensely. And to feel intensely makes me vulnerable to the chaos around me.

Linda picked me up at my dormitory in May to move me home for the summer. Dad had informed me that I was needed at home this summer, regardless of any plans I might have had before Mother's illness was diagnosed. "It's Guillian Barre," he said, "and I can't do it alone anymore. And your sisters are working," he said, "and besides, Anne has her own family now. She tries, but she doesn't have the time." He cleared his throat. He does not mention my brother Chris.

The night before I moved back home, I packed the rest of my things. I packed for hours, threw away lots of things I used to think I'd keep forever. But I threw some of those things away anyway, and I packed the rest up tightly in boxes.

It rained as I packed. I saw the rain out my window, the drops of water knifing the air. I went outside and stood, letting the cold knives cut my skin for a couple of minutes. Once outside in the rain, I couldn't make myself go back in. I left, walked to the student center, around it, past a couple of classroom buildings, back to my own dormitory. Even then I didn't go in. I looked down at my thin cotton shirt, molded to my body, the rain gluing it to my chest and stomach. Where the 'V' left my chest bare, I saw the water running down into my bra. Drops of water fell from my hair onto the ground. I looked up at the sky, the rain stinging my face, and I thought about drowning on the sidewalk.

I thought I'd stand there forever contemplating ends and beginnings as the cold knives stabbed my arms, reminding me of what waited for me at home. The water dripping from my body felt like one huge, encompassing tear that I couldn't cry for my mother or for me.

Anyway, Linda was supposed to pick me up at three o'clock, so I began moving my things to the lobby at two thirty. She arrived, only fifteen minutes late, and we packed up the car and left. On the way home, I looked out at the hills and trees sliding by. I saw three crosses by a huge billboard and thought I should have known why they were there. I had gone to church all through my childhood. But I still didn't know.

Linda began to talk. "Why so quiet," she asked. I didn't answer. "Something's wrong, Kate, I can tell. What is it?" I didn't answer. I saw the sign at the edge of the highway, telling me we were thirty-two

miles from home . . . at sixty miles an hour, I thought, I would be home in thirty-two minutes. "Kate? You're mad. I can tell. Who are you mad at? Did I do something," Linda asked. It struck me as really funny that Linda should be worried that *she'd* made someone mad.

"I don't know who I'm mad at," I finally said.

"But you're mad."

"Yes, yes, I'm mad."

Linda laughed. "I'm sorry. It's not funny. I used to try to piss you off on purpose, but it never worked. It always bugged the hell out of me that you wouldn't fight back."

"Maybe that doesn't matter anymore," I said. "I made excuses for myself then, for everybody . . . You know," I said, "that I'm going to be the one who has to take care of her this summer . . ."

"I understand," Linda said.

"Do you," I interrupt, "do you understand? You've always been angry, and I was the one who tried to keep everybody happy and calm. I tried to make everyone happy, and I'm still doing it."

"I know, Kate," Linda said, "but that's not what I'm trying to say."

"What are you trying to say? You tried to make me angry, all my life, and I didn't feel it. Well, I'm feeling it now. Are you satisfied? Are you satisfied that I'm bitter now? Well I am! And I don't like the way it feels, and I don't like what it's doing to me!"

The hills and sign continued to slide by as we finished our ride in silence. When we got to the house, I opened the car door without saying anything. Linda grabbed my wrist. "Don't get out of this car mad at me," she said. "Please, Kate."

I looked up at our house. It looked empty. Quiet. Lifeless. "I wasn't mad at you to begin with," I said, and Linda let go of my arm. I grabbed a bag to take into the house to my bedroom. Forever at home. Never at home.

Linda always tried to bring us together, despite her anger, or through it maybe. Two days before Thanksgiving one year when I was still in high school, Linda declared a romantic desire for our entire family to go grocery shopping together, to

"really share this holiday." When I informed her that I already had plans and wasn't going to the grocery store, Linda's face reddened and puffed up, her eyes grew dark, and her words came out in short spurts, and she said. You know this is important to me. You care more for your friends than you do for your family. On and on she went for at least twenty minutes. And finally, I stood up, my whole body shaking, and yelled Damn it! I'm important too! Quit telling! me I'm bad! I'm not! bad! I'm not bad! I'm a person! Damn! it! and I'm going to do what I want this time! Quit! Just quit! telling me I'm bad! And you! can go! to! hell! A dead silence followed. I'm not bad, I said, I'm not bad.

And I walked out of the house.

I stayed gone for a couple of hours, sat on the cold cement at a playground in the cold without a coat, went home, got a coat, and left again.

And I came back home.

Nobody ever asked me about it . . . about my anger that night—not even Linda. Maybe, maybe if someone had, I would not have stopped feeling. But maybe not.

Because even when the chaos ends, and I have no reason to believe it might not, I know the voices will begin and reach a high-pitched wail and never stop, and I know I will hear those voices for the rest of my life.

Or maybe it's not even that at all anymore because you can't begin to feel again until you think you're out of the chaos.

So I take the car for a drive every night, and I let the lights inside my eyes switch on, and I wait for someone to say, "It's okay to drive around with your burden lifted, with your wall down. The struggle may not be over yet, Katie, but it will end."

What Linda would say, though, is "Take down your wall, Kate. The struggle is over, if we just admit the truth. This struggle is over."

But it's not. Not really. How can it be? Not when I take an excursion every night around the city I have lived in all my life. Around it . . . because I don't want to drive through it if I don't have to.