

## **My Dear, Dear Driver**

Ray Huang

There are only two bus routes in the town where I grew up. During the peak hours, a bus comes every thirty minutes; otherwise one has to stand under the burning sunlight in southern Taiwan and wait for an hour before getting on the bus. So in the winter months when the weather is nicer, we would rather walk five kilometres to the train station, where a train can take us to a nearby city, a completely different world packed with shopping malls and restaurants.

As a result, driving means everything to us in the town. When one is about to reach eighteen, the daily conversation surrounding him or her would be “Hey, have you enrolled in a driving lesson?” rather than “Hey, which university are you going to?”

I grew up with two very good friends, Sherman and Ben. Both of them got their driving licences within a month of their eighteenth birthdays, and it seemed to me that they were adults then in every sense. By contrast, I went to Canada for a seminar during that summer, and so I remained a child, a big, eighteen-year-old child, who needed a driver wherever he went.

“Last weekend, I drove my family on a trip to the Eastern coast,” said Sherman during our regular weekend hanging out at Starbucks.

“The Eastern coast? Weren’t the roads there winding and challenging to drive?” I was amazed, for he just got his licence two months ago.

“Not a big deal. You should give it a go after you got yours, the coastline is fabulous,” Ben commented, which reminded me that Ben had started driving between different cities when he was just seventeen.

There was no malice in their words, but to be honest, living in this town without a driving licence did make me feel awkward and sometimes embarrassed. Apart from being a life skill, driving also meant freedom and fleeing from the family’s control to us, for we no longer needed to keep checking the timetable in the Railway App on our phones, nor do we had to call our parents to pick us up when our weekend gatherings were about to end, but when I finally got my driving licence at the age of twenty, qualified to be promoted from the rear seat to the driver’s seat, I felt something unique that driving meant to me.

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When I studied in the primary school, my family went on a five-day trip around Taiwan every summer, as we could not afford an overseas trip. Both my father and mother drove, but every time they sat in the same car, it was always my father in the driver’s seat, which meant that he had to drive more than two hundred kilometres every day during the trip.

Towards the end of a trip, it was perfectly normal that kids would be unwilling to go home, and both of my sister and I were ordinary kids, so we sometimes showed our unwillingness on our faces. We dared not cry because we knew tears and noises called for something painful.

I recalled when I was seven, I cried when we were about to leave Taipei Zoo and go home. My aunt, who lived in Taipei, was accompanying us, and she was just an ironic contrast with my father, for she took us to every place we wanted to go and prepared whatever we dreamed to eat. It was not because I had not seen all the animals I wanted to see. I just felt how lucky it would have been to be a son of my aunt, and for this reason, I did not want to go home, but my father would never know.

“We took you on a trip to broaden your vision, not to embarrass us,” my father slapped me on my face, right in front of the crowd near the gate of the zoo.

Did I embarrass you? You embarrassed yourself by slapping your child in public, didn't you? And I could never understand how the word embarrass meant to my father.

We sometimes stayed in five-star hotels and had buffet breakfast in the next morning. I remembered clearly that I once was so content with the food and so when we were on our way back to our room, I said, “the foods were all so tasty. I'm stuffed.”

“Shut up. Don't be that rude and embarrassing again. We took you here to taste the foods not to stuff yourself. We didn't starve you at home, did we?” my father said in a threatening manner, as if I were about to utter something more discourteous.

I had used to think that silence was the wisest way to behave myself, but even if we did not cry and made no noise, it seemed wearing a poker face was also contrary to the law created by my father.

“Why are you so quiet? What's that face? Isn't it good enough that we took you out? We could've left you home doing your math problems and memorising the encyclopaedia.”

My mother would always come to us later on, explaining, “Don't mind him. Your dad's just getting too tired driving these days, so he easily lost control of his temper. Remember, he loves you as much as I do.”

On our way back home, we usually fell asleep on the tedious motorway. Sometimes, I awoke, and in my blurred vision I saw a terrifying monster in the driver's seat, the same monster who drove me to all sorts of afterschool classes, towards which I held an extreme hostility. The monster wrinkled his forehead, resisting sleepiness and forcing his eyes to focus on the road ahead. Getting too tired? Why did you not just let mom drive? You just did not like us. Stop bullshitting me with this ridiculous excuse.

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Sometimes, my little sister told me about her guess that we were not born in this family; perhaps we were in a facility and unluckily got adopted by them. I remembered seeing my mom's abdomen get big enough to accommodate a balloon when I was three, so I told my sister that she was certainly the child of dad and mom but not I. Who knew?

Or even if the blood flowing within my body did come from my father, we were just something that he could show off to his colleagues. I remembered those winter days, when I was awoken at five-thirty in the morning, it was darkness everywhere, and my father gave me five minutes to fold the duvet and to wash up. Then, I was put in front of the piano, forced to hold on to the icy flute, or to sit in front of the desk and memorise the information inside an encyclopaedia, depending on what day it was.

Among these morning routines, the one I hated the most was practising the flute, for I was not allowed to sit while practising, not to mention blowing long, long air into the thin, icy tube right after waking up in the winter morning made me dizzy, so sometimes I would lock myself up in the bedroom, only to open the door and get dragged out violently when my father was shouting my name and punching the door madly.

However, cramming stuff in a book into my head was no easy task either, especially when I was put in front of the desk drowsy, but at the thought of the upcoming test during breakfast, I could only hold back my yawn and focus my sight on the tiny fonts.

“What makes an airplane move forward?” asked my father, taking a huge bite of the sandwich.

“Newton’s Third Law of Motion. When the engine pushes the air backward, the reaction force will be exerted in the opposite direction on the aircraft,” I was chewing on the straw in my sugar-free soy milk nervously, as the test could get crazy if he ran out of questions.

“What is the aircraft in the picture on the first page you read today?”

“It’s the Boeing 747 from the China Airlines.”

“Well done,” my father nodded in satisfaction before he went to work.

Perhaps because I was trained in this way, he supposed that I had the capability to ace all the examinations at school. My father checked every one of my test papers, and he would then set a standard that I should have met; mostly 100, sometimes 95, but it never went below 90. If I scored two marks lower than the standard, I would get beaten up twice. I knew what he wanted, as I once overheard his conversation with my classmate’s father, who was also my father’s colleague.

“Congrats to your excellent son. He scored full marks in all the five subjects again. And I heard from Sammy that he won the first prize in a flute contest,” my classmate’s father said when he visited my father during the Chinese New Year.

“Oh really? He hasn’t told me about this. You know I never ask about their academic performance. As for the flute, he loves it so we just support him,” my father replied with a laugh full of vanity.

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After I entered junior high school, on my first exam, I wilfully messed up my Chinese, the subject I disliked the most. I had the consequence of doing so in my mind clearly, but I proceeded with this plan anyway, perhaps out of the rebellious tendency I developed when entering adolescence, or out of the impulse to take revenge on my father through shaming him by the poor score his son had got, or

maybe I just felt messing up my test would make me look cool in front of my new peers who barely studied.

As usual, I was beaten fiercely after my father saw the test result, but it meant nothing to me, and I was delighted when seeing him mad, seeing him no longer able to receive his colleague's flatteries. Then, I went back to my room, texting a girl in my class, whom I was extremely fond of, with my dumbphone. I was so ashamed of my dumbphone; when all my classmates were talking about mobile games they played with their smartphones, the only game available to me was Snake by Nokia.

"Was that the reason?" my father said. The door was opened without a knock, and he was standing at the entrance, staring at me furiously. "Give me the phone," he ordered.

My dumbphone was thus taken away by my father till I ranked number one on the next exam, but this was not even a punishment to me when I thought of how I should explain my sudden disappearance to that girl the next morning. From then on, when that girl and other of my schoolmates were planning for their weekends, they would say even before asking me, "never mind. Your father won't allow anyway."

During then, I could not even connect with my friends after school, for everyone had already turned to Facebook and Line and abandoned SMS by Grade 8, whilst I was still using a dumbphone with no internet function at all.

Until the weekend before I moved into the dormitory of my senior high school in the city, my father drove me to a mobile phone shop. "Pick a smartphone you like," my father said when he was switching off the engine. "You're about to leave this town, and we've seen your ability to concentrate on your study, so it's time to buy you a decent phone."

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Another thing that I could never imagine was that all my father said to Sammy's father became true after I attended high school in the city. In the evening of every Thursday, I received my father's call.

"Son, you're coming home this weekend? Do you need us to pick you up from school?"

"Uh, I think it's fine. I mean I'll just take the train, and we can meet at the train station."

"But the Friday train is always crowded, and you're carrying books home. Why don't you stay at the dorm and study whilst awaiting us?"

He was true that the Friday train really sucked, it was almost impossible to get on an express train at the rush hour even without a backpack, so I would just say okay and thanked him. During that time, I was also wondering why I became less sensitive to the word "study", and I used to be so hostile and rebellious to anyone ordering me to study, for I did not need anyone telling me this, and I would study on my own initiative. But surprisingly, I no longer heard any sense of commanding in my father's voice. As I sensed some care and concern from my father, I was scared. Was I forgiving him?

Every time I opened the door, a familiar smell filled the space of the car. That was from my favourite Shanghainese restaurant.

“Sorry son, we were in the traffic jam near the restaurant,” he always said to me, even though I had already known.

As I sat in the rear seat devouring the fried rice and the xiaolongbaos, I sometimes took a stealthy look at my father. He was still in his office shirt, and his briefcase lay on the seat next to me. Why was he so good to me? Was it because I entered the best high school?

“I ranked number two in the exam last time. I could’ve done better in math if I had spent more time practising.” I wanted him to know that I was doing well even if he did not ask, and I wanted him to be proud of me.

“That’s very good. You know all the tops come to this school, and remember, don’t stay up too late,” my father looked into the rear mirror and said.

But was I not supposed to be perfect? Where was the monster in the driver’s seat?

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It was also in my high school days that my family went on a trip to Kyoto. On our last day, when we were about to board the train back to Kansai Airport, my father suddenly stopped a few steps behind us, with his hand in the fanny pack.

“They’re all gone,” my father said with a panicked look. “The train tickets.”

It was the very first time I saw him with such a look.

We recalled that he just threw away a paper bag full of the receipts we had got during the trip. My father rushed towards the bin, which had already been emptied. I went to the service desk of JR and asked if our tickets could be re-issued if we could show them the purchase record by the credit card. They shook their heads; they were sorry but they could not.

How could my father make such a stupid mistake? I could not believe this, so I insisted that he check again to see if he had put the tickets in the luggage. We unpacked all our suitcases, and it turned out that our tickets were stored too safely in the hidden pocket of a suitcase. I let out a sigh of relief, not just because the tickets were found, but more importantly, I ultimately ascertained something. My father was not that monster obsessed with perfection and tolerating no mistake.

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A few days before I left for Hong Kong to start university, my father accompanied me to visit my paternal grandparents, who lived just next to us.

“I heard from your grandpa that everything in Hong Kong is so expensive,” my grandma said half in Taiwanese and half in Mandarin, handing me a bundle of banknotes of New Taiwan Dollars. “Take this money, and don’t starve yourself.”

“Mom,” my father interrupted. “Keep the money with you, they use Hong Kong Dollars there.”

“Really? Any difference?” asked my grandma suspiciously.

“Anyway, he can’t spend your money in Hong Kong, so you just keep it yourself.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. I thought of the birthdays of every member in my family; whenever there are two big pizzas on the dining table in my grandparents' house, it must be someone's birthday. It seemed to me that such a peculiar tradition originated from my grandma's stereotype that all the youngsters love pizza, and even though we dined with our grandparents quite frequently, we did not talk much, so perhaps they had no chance to know about our preferences at all. They would just go on to do whatever they thought we would love.

Silence seemed perfectly natural in this family. We did not greet when bumping into one another in the house. Sitting around the dining table, we ate in silence; dialogues were made only to the extent that was necessary, not to mention that my grandparents talk in a language that is unfamiliar to my generation. I guessed this has something to do with the family history. My grandparents were farmers, and they also took on contingent work to feed my father and my aunts, so they barely had any chance to sit together and talk, but when they finally could spend time together, it became quite awkward as if they had no idea what to talk about.

Nevertheless, I like this well-understood silence in my family, for I feel comfortable not having to look for something to say, and just because my father and my grandparents did not express their feelings does not mean that they were indifferent. That bundle of banknotes and those birthday pizzas both carried something inexpressible, something that used to be obscured by the lack of understanding towards them. Their concern, their warmth and their love.

Perhaps that is why the Chinese New Year's Day has always been that very day to which I look forward the most in the whole year. My aunts and their family always came back to the town in the New Year's Eve, so on the New Year's Day, the twelve of us would wake up early, stepping into the chilly morning air with our hands in the pockets of our down coats, proceeding to the temple a few blocks away to pray for peace and happiness in the subsequent new year.

My father was always the first one waking up on the New Year's Day. At first, I thought it was just because he was used to waking up early in the morning, but I gradually could hear the joy in his voice when he opened the door of my grandparents' house, where my aunts and their family stayed during the New Year's holiday.

"Rise and shine. You people from Taipei don't sleep in when you're back in Tainan," my father said as he walked into the living room and sank into the sofa. Now I think my father must have been looking forward to our walk to the temple every year, just like me.

As always, silence dominated for most of the time during our walk, but I nonetheless enjoyed the atmosphere. No particular formation, no fixed pace, just all of us walking closely in the same direction, praying for the same thing. We need not sit around a hotpot as other Chinese families do, and in fact we never had this, but we are still a solid family.

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The Chinese New Year of 2020 was not a peaceful one, however. In the afternoon of the New Year's Eve, my mother was mopping the floor, whilst my father was throwing away clothes we no

longer wore. They planned to finish the chores earlier, so that we could go to the hospital to see our maternal grandpa, whose condition had deteriorated the night before.

My mobile phone suddenly rang. It was my cousin, Andy, who was just one year senior to me. Andy and I had attended the same high school, but seldom had we met each other; in fact, most of our conversations took place during the Chinese New Year, when Andy's mother and my mother brought us to visit the house of their father, namely our grandpa.

"Ray?" asked Andy in a voice with hesitation, and as if he was suppressing something.

"It's me. What's wrong?" I asked.

"Grandpa just, just passed away at the hospital," Andy's voice was trembling.

"Wait, what? What do you mean by 'just passed away'? The hospital said his condition was deteriorating but did not say he was on the critical list," I said.

"We are no less shocked than you are. Listen, you need to tell your mom about this. I phoned her but she didn't pick up. And Grandpa will be back at the funeral parlour at around three. I'll see you then," he said before hanging up.

I dragged my heavy feet into the living room, where my parents were doing the chores as if they had been in a parallel world where nothing terrible could happen.

"Mom, Andy just called me. He's at the hospital and Grandpa just passed away," I said. I tried to make my voice calm, as my mother was emotional and I did not want to push her sorrow to the next level.

"What?" she turned towards me, the mop in her hands dropping on to the floor. "How could this happen? We were going to see him in the evening, and..."

My mother was so shocked that she did not even cry, until my father took her into his arms. My father said nothing, just patting my mother on her back.

In the subsequent week, my parents went to the funeral parlour every day. They folded paper lotus and read sutra with a monk, from early morning to late evening; they said these rituals and efforts would facilitate my grandpa's journey to the pure land in the west. At my Grandpa's funeral, I was put in the last row based on seniority, so I had a clear view of my mother and my father, who were sitting in the front row.

Some of my aunts and uncles spoke at the funeral; they talked about their memories with their dear father, then breaking down in tears. My parents did not speak, but I saw my father trembling and sobbing as if his memories with his father-in-law were all brought back. Although I had not heard of anything happening between my father and my grandpa, but my father was no less sorrowful and grieved than my mother.

When my grandpa was still conscious, he lived in a facility in the suburbs. Whenever I came back to Taiwan during the holidays, my father would drive me to the facility and spend a few hours with my grandpa in the afternoon sunshine. The receptionists of the facility were all acquainted with my father, so as soon as our car turned into the rugged lane, they opened the gate for us. My mother

came with us every time, but it was always my father manoeuvring the wheelchair for his father-in-law, and he sometimes massaged his legs to improve circulation. Even after my grandpa went into a coma and was sent to the hospital, my father still drove me there frequently to just sit beside my grandpa's bed.

"Dad, Ray came to see you again," my father would always say, when entering into the ward. We sat on the sides of the hospital bed, and even though my grandpa could no longer answer, my father kept Grandpa updated on things happening in our family, such as my sister had been preparing hard for the college entrance exam, or I was about to finish the military service. My father talked very much about our experiences in the army, which he thought my grandpa would be interested in, as Grandpa had been a soldier for more than ten years since age 18. I felt that I had witnessed something called empathy on my father.

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Several months after my grandpa's funeral, I passed the examination and finally got my driving licence.

"I just found out that I can take the six-thirty bus to the train station and then take a train to work. I'm aging and get tired easily when driving. So son, if you're going to study at a café or buy something to eat, you may drive the car. Just remember one thing, don't drive fast and be careful," my father reminded me on that night after learning the news.

From then on, after waking up in the morning, I usually saw the car key left on the table in the living room.

Here came the freedom that I had been dreaming of for so long, and I also took on my new role as a driver of my family. I drove my mother to the school she taught at when a cold wave struck, and when my sister was coming home from her school in the city on Fridays, I picked her up at the train station. Of course, I loved this new role, and I loved driving just like all of my friends. In all honesty, I thought I had a talent for driving, for I could park the car easily into any spaces on the roadside and cope with any unexpected situations on the road calmly and skilfully; more importantly, I was able to move the car into or outside the carpark of our house swiftly.

When manoeuvring the car into the carpark of our house, extra care was always needed, as the driveway suddenly got narrow and bent at an odd angle before entering the carpark. Besides, to make it more challenging, a gate was built exactly at the bend, the width of which was just about fifteen centimetres larger than the width of our car. Still, the even more unreasonable design was the triangular shape of the parking space, which meant that the car must turn left whilst passing through the gate, or it would crash into our neighbour's wall. I familiarised myself with the "operation" within half an hour, which amazed my parents so much, as my mother still did not dare to drive the car through the gate even after living in the house for twenty years.

But perhaps such confidence was not a good thing to a new driver.

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In a spring evening, I was driving home from an outdoor café where I had spent the whole day. I applied the brake to slow down the car a few metres away from the gate, and after pressing the “open” bottom on the remote control for the gate, I turned the steering wheel anticlockwise confidently as I always did, and then the heading of the car penetrated perfectly through the gate.

I returned the steering wheel to its centre, releasing the brake a little to let the car move forward. I was waiting for that ideal timing to steer left again to bring the car into the triangular space.

It’s now. I swerved left. I saw my father coming out from the kitchen with a bag of rubbish in his hand. It was too early, however.

Bump. I heard the car howling.

The front part of the car did come into the gate, and yet unfortunately, the rear part did not. It hit against the left pillar of the gate.

“Brake!” shouted my father. He threw away the rubbish bag, dashing towards his car.

I applied the brake and shifted to the parking gear, not knowing what to do next. I thought of how mad my father was when my mom caused a tiny scratch on the rear bumper when driving me to school. I was just ten years old then.

“You stupid jerk. You’ve got parking sensors on this car. Didn’t you hear the alert?” questioned my father.

My sister and I were both on the car when the car hit the wall behind the parking space, and we both noticed that the beep sounds did not get any more intense when the car was about to collide with the wall, but we dare not say anything to defend our mother. It was not until a few months later when the same exact crash happened when my father was parking did he realise that the sensors had not been functioning at all. Anyway, he thought he owed no apology to my mother, and he did not even blame the sensors.

“Get off the car,” said my father to me.

“I’m sorry,” I apologised not just for scratching his car, but also because I felt guilty about my unjustified over-confidence. I thought this would be the last time I drove until I begin to work and buy myself a car.

My father took a long, deep breath, for almost ten seconds, and said nothing more. He went into the driver’s seat and moved the car into the right position, and then we went inside the house for dinner. My mother and my sister had heard the tragedy, so there was nothing but silence throughout the meal.

“Thank you for not flying into a temper,” I said at the end of dinner.

“If the left rear part is about to hit the pillar, return the steering wheel to its centre and move forward a little bit. After you can see some space in the left side mirror, steer left again to bring the car into the space,” my father said.

When I was about to sleep, I heard someone unlocking the door to the carpark. I peered down from the balcony of my bedroom and saw my father carefully applying the touch up paint to the scratch

I caused. And the next morning, the car key was lying on the table as usual. I felt as if I had heard my father's voice saying, "everyone makes mistake, so just be careful."

For the very first time, I acknowledged some genuine changes having occurred in this family. My father was changing? I was changing? Or we both were changing?

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Soon, summer came, and it became too hot to walk to the bus stop, so my father rode a scooter to the train station instead. One night, he called my mother for a drive, as he got drunk at a gathering with his colleagues. Driving my father was such a stressful task that my mother always hated and avoided it, so I was dispatched to pick my father up.

My father staggered across the station square, and the moment he seated himself in the rear seat, a noticeable smell of alcohol struck me.

"Dad, your seatbelt," I said, before releasing the parking brake.

"Oh, yeah. You may go now," he slurred slowly.

I thought my father fell asleep, so I remained silent. I felt some weight on my shoulders as soon as the car began to move. I recollected those road trips my family went on, when I was still a little boy sleeping in the rear seat, whilst my father furrowed his brow to make himself focused. I thought I was able to understand why my father always insisted on driving us, for he regarded it as his responsibility as a father. Now, he has aged and I have grown, ready to take on his burden and offer protection to my family.

I pulled into the driveway gently so as not to awake my father and took a deep breath before navigating the car through the gate. *After seeing some space in the left side mirror, turn left.* The car passed the gate swiftly and stopped in the right position. I heaved a sigh of relief.

"My son has grown up and become a skilful driver," my father suddenly said.

I did not reply. I knew he was drunk, but I also knew that truth always lies in his drunken words. I will never forget how he once came back home drunk, and told my mother how much he loved her when my mother was cleaning up his vomit. We were all laughing. Why couldn't such truth come out more easily?

This is my father, though I decided to be different.

In late summer, when I had to fly back to resume my university, my father took a day off to drive me to the airport. After he helped me tie up the strap of the isolation gown, I said to my dear, dear driver,

"It's so good to be your son."

Not having seen his reaction, I turned around weeping, proceeding to the check-in counter in the large, empty terminal.

*THE END*