

The Long Road Back

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For someone used to driving 45 minutes maximum to get anywhere in suburbia at speeds that rarely get up to 70 mph, an eight-hour drive at 68 mph is terrifying. Add in bouts of rain that reduce visibility to 10 feet and it's my worst nightmare. For my dad, this is called "precipitation."

It's roughly 500 miles from my home in Virginia to my college in Georgia, and last September was the first time I ever made the drive. My mom was in the car with me while my dad was in his pickup truck, my stuff split between both vehicles. At first, I only worried about driving at interstate speeds. It wasn't that bad with my parents nearby, but I won't have them with me next time.



That fear channeled into my driving. I couldn't maintain speed for long, always backing off the gas instead of passing anyone I got close to in the right lane. When I did pass, I accelerated just enough to get ahead before slowing down again. Many of them passed me within a few minutes. It's a wonder no one rear-ended me.

My mom showed me how to use cruise control to stay at a consistent speed. The speed limit was 70, but I set my car to a solid 68. Even in suburbia, I drive a little under the speed limit. While it helped me cruise smoothly along the open stretches of road where no one was ahead of me, it made my anxiety worse whenever traffic inevitably congested around the exits and onramps near



towns and cities. Speeds fluctuated around 60 and brake lights pulsed. Everyone would steadily speed up, I'd turn cruise control back on, and then we were going 55 again.

Even though cruise control lets you maintain an exact speed no matter the shape of the road, it gives the car more control than the driver. I have faith in my car, but the safety of its occupants depends on me. With the car holding our speed constant and not the pressure of my foot on the pedal, my driving reflexes were thrown off. Normally I'd pivot my foot from the gas to the brake if someone cut in front of me, but my foot was flat on the floor with cruise control on. I'd raise it to the brake, double check I was actually touching the brake and not the gas, and drop out of cruise

control. What could have been a half-second response to a potential hazard was now a multi-step process with more room for error.

My experiments with cruise control ended with the first sign of rain. Colossal storm clouds lowered over the interstate a handful of miles ahead of me. Knowing this meant we could all drive a little slower didn't comfort me much. It's too easy to hydroplane and, at these speeds, flip into a ditch. I expected to come across one or two accidents. I hoped I would not be among them.

Visibility plummeted in the first few seconds. The rain was so loud, my mom and I were almost yelling at each other. If I let the white pickup in front of me drift further than one car-length ahead, his taillights turned to a soft pink glow on the other side of a wall of water. Some people surged ahead in the left lane, the gold reflections of their headlights appearing without warning. My dad was somewhere behind. The rest of us clung to each other in the right lane like kindergarteners crossing the street. I kept asking if I could pull over and wait for the rain to stop, even though I felt safer with the new group I found.

I imagined my dad's voice reminding me to look around and be aware of my surroundings. It seemed like every time I did, I saw an accident. A red truck was upside down in a tree off to the right. A white SUV left trenches in the muddy grass where it had swerved onto the median. Three cars had smashed into each other and had just been cleared off the road. The flashing lights of emergency vehicles flew by.

Traffic sped back up when rain gave way to murky sunshine, but it didn't last long before we scrunched up again. That white truck remained my guide when the lines disappeared and the guardrails looked like watery shadows. My mom encouraged me to bring my speed up to 55 while tapping her invisible brake every few seconds.

When the truck took an exit after the second bout of rain, I wanted to follow him. As silly as it sounds, I'd grown attached to my guide over the first hour and a half of driving in and out of the deluge. For the next hour of rain, I followed five or six different cars that braved the left lane and left me to speed up and find the next set of taillights.

The sun came out for the last stretch of the drive and continued to shine as I crossed the bridge into Savannah, GA. For the longest time, I dreaded being on Savannah's narrow, blocky streets with more aggressive drivers. But after eight hours on the interstate—two and a half of which felt like a fight for my life—driving in the city wasn't as scary. It helps that the speed limit doesn't go past 45 mph in the places I usually drive through.

I'll make this drive four more times. For my winter and spring breaks, mom and dad won't be in the passenger seat coaching. No one will tap their invisible brake when I approach someone else in the rain. I'll make my own decision when it's time to just pull over and wait for the sun to come out. It may take longer than eight hours by myself, but that might be what it takes for me to get home safely. 🐭

