

Egg Head (2 mins)

I don't recall why we started exchanging insults on the baseball field after school. I just remember my fourth grade classmates ganging up and pushing and shoving each other and at some point I was singled out. "Gary, you're a dopey head, yeah, lookit, lookit ... he's got an egg head!"

Stunned and hurt, I know It's true. I have seen myself in photos and I have an egg-shaped head, which seemed all right up until this moment. I stomp off, teary-eyed, towards home. The closer I get to my house, the faster I walk until I'm running and crying. I burst into the front door, drop my books and lurch up the stairs and into Mom's bedroom. She is sitting in her chair by window knitting as I fling myself, sobbing, onto her bed, tears making dark splotches on the maroon satin bedspread. She comes and sits next to me. "What's wrong, Gary?" she asks. I'm sniffing and gulping for air and I say, "I have an egg head. I have an egg head." "Who said that?" Mom asks, lightly touching the top of my head. "Robin and Tony and Jerry," I whine.

She cups my head in her hands and says, "Let me see. You have a beautiful head."

They're crazy; your head is perfectly shaped. "No it's not, I look like Humpty Dumpty," I mumble. Mom says authoritatively, "Well, I know movie stars who don't have heads as nice as you have." I stop sobbing, smile weakly and ask, "Who?" She tilts her head a little and says, "I'd say your head looks a little like Trevor Howard's." I never heard of Trevor Howard. How can I get even with Robin, Tony and Jerry by telling them I look like someone nobody ever heard of?

8 MINS
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*** LEAD FOOT 8 mins

After counting the weeks and days, I am finally sixteen and old enough to drive. I am blissfully eligible to be a certified real grownup in the human race, at least in New York State. For a suburban teenage boy, this is life's sweetest moment. After standing in line at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, clutching my birth certificate and one dollar, I now have a Driver Learner's Permit. When I proudly wave this small yellow square paper at Dad, he drops his chin, looks worried and mumbles "This is a responsibility, young man. You have a lot to learn." I can smell a lecture coming. But there's no sit-down man-to-man discussion about this. Instead, for the next few weeks, whenever Dad hauls us around in the blue Chevy, he drives much slower than usual and opens the window and uses hand signals at upcoming turns with the flowery gestures of a marching-band drum major. I know Dad is setting an example.

Dad is a timid driver but my mother is quite the opposite.

Mom is proud of her World-War-II membership in the local Women's Volunteer Ambulance Motor Corps where she learned first aid, stretcher drill, communication signaling, motor mechanics, and how to drive like a crazy race-car driver including the fine art of double-clutching. Mom tells me about the time during the war, when she drove an ambulance the eight miles between White Plains and Bronxville, along the narrow twisty Bronx River Parkway in just twelve minutes, four minutes faster than anybody else in her unit. The speed limit on the parkway was 25 MPH but Mom had a siren and she says "All limits were off." Mom proudly tells me "They called me the Lead-Foot of the Motor Corps!" Then she turns to me and, still beaming, ~~and~~ says "Come on, let me show you how to do it."

We walk towards the old blue '47 Chevy convertible and as I open the passenger door, she opens the driver's side and says "No, sit here. You're driving." I jump into the driver's seat. I'd been there before, but only when the car was in the dark garage when I was pretending to be racing down the highway.

Mom shows me all the gearshift positions and where the clutch and brake are. "You work the clutch with your left foot and the brake and accelerator pedal with your right." She shows me the handbrake lever next to the driver's door and says "When the brakes fail, that's another way to slow the car but only after you've downshifted." "Brakes fail? Downshift? WHEN the brakes fail?" I ask, "Do the brakes fail often?"

"Nope, but when they do, you need to know all the tricks. Now, let's start it up."

After a half hour of mashing gears, jerky stops and starts and trying to remember to make hand-signals, I'm sweating pretty hard. Mom is patient and forgiving and even chuckles approvingly when I occasionally get things working. She points forward and says "Let's head over to Breakneck Hill. You'll get some good practice downshifting. Breakneck Hill is the local nickname for the very steep road down to the main highway. I've always thought the name was pretty funny, until this moment. I silently wonder if it was named that way because that's where people get hurt? Mom continues, "...then we can go over to Popham Road, on the steep part and stop at the red light, facing uphill, and starting again without rolling back into the person behind you."

As we arrive at the crest of Breakneck Hill, at Mom's instruction, I press in the clutch and place the car in second gear for the long, steep descent to the red light at the bottom where Central Avenue crosses. Central Avenue is a really busy road. I'm feeling pretty grown-up now because I'm actually driving towards real traffic. It's exciting and scary all at the same time. We start moving down the long hill and suddenly, the brake pedal goes all the way to the floor and we start going faster, not slower. "The brakes aren't working.," I yell. I pump the pedal but it slips all the way to the floor. I see cars slowing for the red light at the bottom and I'm going to hit them. Mom shouts "Down Shift! Down Shift!" My mind goes blank. "Yank the hand brake!" she screams.

I forget where it is and I'm afraid to take my eyes off the impending collision. The stopped cars in front of me are getting bigger real fast.

They are stopped for the red light while traffic speeds through the green light. I don't know what to do. Mom yells, "Go around them! Go across Central ...!" A few feet before colliding with the stopped cars I swerve into the oncoming lane and see, in slow motion, whizzing cars cross in front of our hood, blurring as they pass with horns blaring. Three cars literally zoom from left and right, missing us by inches, before we roll to a stop on the other side of Central Avenue and the car jerks and stalls. My heart is pounding. Mom says very calmly, pointing to my left knee, "Find the hand brake, pull it and put the car in neutral and turn the key off." She opens her door, crosses in front of the car and opens my door. I climb out and can hardly stand. She slides onto the driver's seat and says, "That's enough today. I'll drive home. You did pretty well."

As Mom drives slowly, stopping with just the hand brake, she turns to me and says "When the snow comes, we'll practice some slides and skids. You'll need to know that. It's kinda fun."

In following weeks I learn all about starting from a stop while pointing up steep hills, down-shifting and clutch-popping jump starts. On the first snowy morning, Mom says with a wink, "C'mon, let's go for a spin. You need to know how to handle a skid on ice." I have no fear because I am getting lessons from an expert, my mom, the Lead-Foot of the Motor Corps.
