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## Learning to Turn

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## Learning to Turn

1971

Hannah boarded the downtown bus and dropped her quarter into the glass box.

"Fare's fifty cents, lady," the bus driver said. "'Less you got a senior citizen card. Then it's twenty-five."

She fished another quarter out of her wallet and dropped it into the box, thinking how long it had been since she'd been on a bus. She made her way down the aisle and took a window seat. Maybe she should get one of those cards, she thought. Then again, maybe it was worth the extra quarter not to run around announcing to the world that you were getting old. The world would already be pegging her as old--older than she was last week, when Willy had been alive, when she had been a wife not a widow.

She sat at the bus window and watched the stops go by: the Pizza Palace where the drugstore used to be, her church--she crossed herself, some tall new buildings. She thought of the place she'd shopped for several years now: the mall, with Willy sitting outside drumming his fingers on the steering wheel from the moment she opened the car door. "Don't ye be horsing around in there," he'd say. "Just get what ye need and get on with it."

The bus pulled up in front of Grants, which was Hannah's stop.

Grants, she was pleased to see, had changed little. The clothes on the mannequins were different, and their hairdos, and the colors of the lipsticks painted on their plastic faces. But there was the usual display of household odds and ends, costume jewelry, and brightly colored trinkets designed to lure children into harassing tired mothers into the store. She opened the first door she came to, walked through, and stood off to the side. The surface smell had changed: there was more perfume and flowers and less of the starch of cheap clothing and the metal of household goods. But the smell underneath, of coffee and frying foods from the lunch counter downstairs, remained the same. The aisles were still too narrow for shopping carts, but a stack of multi-colored wire baskets sat where the racks of nickel shopping bags used to be. Hannah took a basket from near the top of the pile and looked toward the first counter, which held bath powders and makeup, barrettes and cologne waters. She circled the counter twice before selecting a bottle of bubble bath which promised to smell of wildflowers. She put this in her basket, then crossed the aisle to consider what she felt like looking at next. She found she was standing in a section of sports clothes. She took a pair of sweatpants from a pile in front of her.

Hannah thought of Susan, her youngest, who wore sweatpants right out on the street as if they were regular clothes. She noticed that the ones she held were soft inside, like a baby's blanket, and their waistband was loose and adjustable with a simple string. She looked more closely. Sturdy. Roomy pockets. She could see why the young ones would like them. She put her basket down and shook the pants out full length in front of her. They were a respectable navy blue. The label said medium and pre-shrunk. Why, these would fit me, she thought, smiling at the idea of herself in such a getup. She felt the soft material again. I could just try them, she thought, and if they look foolish, well, Susan could always use another pair. She folded the pants and dropped them into

her basket, then wandered through the sports section, looking at terrycloth bands in an array of unnatural colors and articles with names of teams, some of which she recognized from her sons' conversations. She found a rack of sweatshirts and browsed through, reading names of teams and schools and beers, looking at some figures which were clearly supposed to be funny but which Hannah didn't recognize. There were some pale blue shirts, though, who's only flaw was a turtle stitched over the left breast. She picked at the turtle with a fingernail, decided the turtle could be removed, took a medium from the rack and added it to her basket.

Hannah tried on her purchases when she got home. In the bedroom mirror, she saw an old lady dressed in inappropriate clothing. "Ach," she said in disgust. "What on earth was I thinking?" She removed the sweatpants and shirt, folded them, and placed them on Willy's bed. She went and called Susan from the living room phone. "If you're coming over tomorrow," she said, "I have something you might want."

"I was going to stop by," Susan said, "just to see how you're doing."

"I'm doing fine," Hannah said. "Don't ye be worrying about me."

"Did I say I was worried? Just to say hi, have a cup of coffee."

"Well, that's fine, then."

"So, what is it you've got?"

"Sure it's nothing much. Just something I bought when I wasn't thinking."

Hannah went back to her bedroom. Even without going from store to store, the trip had tired her. It might be nice to lie on the couch and watch the television, but she had never been one for sleeping on the couch. She stretched out on her bed. Willy could fall asleep on the couch; so could all of the kids. Willy was the one who'd fall asleep and snore to shake the walls, though. She remembered how much she'd liked that when she was young, though he drowned out the radio so if she wanted to hear she had to sit with her ear almost pressed to the speaker. But that snoring came from her own husband in her own living room, which meant she had her own place to be in, not just the bits and pieces allotted to a hired girl. Willy had given her that, and a smile and a laugh, and she smiled even now to think how he had showed off for her at the hurling matches. She glanced at his bed and saw the rejected clothing laying on it. She started to get up, to put the clothing elsewhere. Sentimental foolishness, she thought, that's all that is. She lay back and closed her eyes.

The doorbell rang at four-thirty the next afternoon. It would be Susan, Hannah thought as she rose from her chair. Hannah wasn't expecting anyone else and the only ones who dropped by without calling were the kids--and all except Susan let themselves in with their keys. Susan carried a key, too, but she wouldn't use it. "Why don't ye just let yourself in?" Hannah used to ask. Susan always answered, slowly and clearly as if she thought Hannah might not understand, that she didn't live here anymore. Hannah had finally given up, deciding that Susan thought unlocking her parents' front door amounted somehow to stepping back into childhood. Now Hannah turned the key in the deadbolt and opened the door.

Susan pulled open the screen and stopped. "Nice outfit, Mom," she said.

Hannah looked down. She had forgotten about the sweat clothes. She'd decided, late this morning, that Susan might be upset to see them lying on Willy's bed. She'd picked them up, intending only to move them to her own bed, but had noticed again how soft they were. She'd closed the bedroom door, put them on, and looked in the mirror.

The woman looking back was still old, the clothing still inappropriate, but there was no denying it was comfortable. She'd tested the give of the waistband, thought about the tight solid waist of the pants she'd just removed, and decided to leave the new clothes on for a while, just to see. Now here it was half a dozen hours later and she still had them on. She shrugged. "They're comfortable. And who's to see me here?"

Susan followed Hannah into the house. "Good for you," she said.

"So I suppose you made the trip in for nothing, then," Hannah said as they reached the kitchen. She noticed Susan glance at Willy's chair, then into the bedroom at his bed. "I should've thought to call." She was glad she'd moved the sweat clothes, though there was no reason for Susan to check the bed as if Willy might be in it in the middle of the afternoon. He had not been sick. He'd died suddenly, unexpectedly, in the night. Heart, the doctors had said after the autopsy. Like flipping the light switch: on, then off. Never knew what hit him, they said. Hannah had sat looking at Willy's bed after they told her that, wondering, could it be that simple? On, off. Here, gone. Had he not sat up for a minute, or opened his eyes and known something was about to happen, perhaps called to her, though she had not heard?

"You were going to give me your sweats?" Susan asked.

Hannah nodded. "They look a bit silly on me, don't they?"

"They look great," Susan said. "Right in style. And that color's good on you." She walked into the pantry and opened the tin of cookies Hannah kept for the grandchildren. "What, no chocolate?" she called.

"On the top shelf," Hannah answered. Susan always went for the chocolate cookies, and Hannah tried to keep some around for her--a more expensive kind now than what she bought for the little ones, so she'd taken to putting them out of the grandchildren's reach.

Susan returned with a handful of cookies and a glass. She went to the refrigerator. "There's no milk," she said.

"They must have finished it," Hannah said, referring to the people who had crowded the house after Willy's funeral.

Susan nodded. "There were a lot of people," she said evenly. Hannah hoped the number of people had made the kids feel better; she had liked, herself, to see so many old friends, though the whole thing had left her awfully tired.

Susan looked around. "Do you need anything else? I could run to the store."

"Maybe later." Hannah hated to ask the kids to buy groceries for her; they always bought the wrong brands, or refused to let her pay for the purchases. She tried to remember if she'd seen any grocery stores along the busline yesterday.

"Tell ye what," she said, "Why don't ye stop by tomorrow. I'll make a grocery list and the two of us can do a little shopping."

Hannah made her shopping list during the commercials for the Thursday night movie. She usually just jotted a few things down before leaving for the store, but her lists had been based for so long on Willy's likes and dislikes and the changing tastes of children and grandchildren that she found it difficult to decide what it was that she wanted. Then there was the matter of the store. She'd gone over the route downtown in her head, then called Peg to confirm what she'd decided: there were no grocery stores on the downtown busline anymore. Willy could always be convinced to drive her to the store another day if there was something she'd forgotten. But she didn't want to be

bothering the kids with that. She was annoyed at herself, now, that she'd never learned to drive. Willy's Ford was sitting out there in the garage, with no one to use it. She thought of hiring the man next door to drive her; she'd heard of that being done. Willy hadn't liked him much, but that didn't matter now, did it? Still, it was hard to picture herself sitting next to the small Italian man with the ring of white hair and the strange smell of pipe smoke.

By the time the movie ended and the news came on, Hannah had a list of sorts. Coffee, tea, more cookies for the grandchildren. She was out of none of these, but having extra around couldn't hurt. A few things had appeared on the list out of habit: sliced turkey, American cheese, eggs. Willy had favored sandwiches of turkey and cheese; Hannah didn't like the look of store-bought turkey. And collecting eggs had been one of her jobs back home; she'd never been able to eat one since she'd understood where they came from. She crossed the eggs and turkey and cheese off the list. She reread the list and couldn't think of what to put on it for meals. Pork roast and apple sauce, she finally wrote. And bread to make sandwiches of leftover pork. Peg had told her to freeze the bread and thaw it one slice at a time, to keep it from going stale when there was just herself to eat it. Hannah put the list aside and pushed back in her recliner to watch the news. A commercial showing a sleek red car negotiating misty blue hills with sharp curves was just ending. The weather came on.

Hannah was startled when she awoke at midnight, from a dream in which she had driven the sleek red car from the port at Dublin up through Mullingar and Roscommon, past the house Yeats had lived in, and on into Gort until she stopped and stepped out of the car into the photograph on her bedroom bureau, the last she had of her mother, where the old woman stood smiling in front of the family's thatch-roofed cottage. Hannah shook her head to clear it, then was sorry she had done. She caught the echo of her mother's voice, but could not hang onto what had been said.

"Funny how you get used to things," Hannah told Susan on the way back from shopping the next day. "I used to hate that supermarket when it first went up. So many aisles, so many brands."

Susan laughed. "I remember. You used to send us, one after the other as we got old enough to drive, until the last one of us moved out of the house."

Hannah nodded. "And that was only after Mickey's closed. They're all of them gone now, the little stores. I still don't know what they need so many brands for."

"Different people like different things, I guess."

"Ye're telling me eggs in a tan box taste different than eggs in blue? Go on with ye."

Susan laughed.

Hannah twisted the handle of her pocketbook. "I was thinking a bit about your father's car."

"It's not good for it to sit," Susan said. "Dad wouldn't like us to let it fall apart. But it'll be all right for a while, Mom. Maybe Mike would like it. He always enjoyed working on cars with Dad. It might feel special to him."

"I thought about that."

"Or you could sell it," Susan said. "It can't have many miles on it."

"No. I think the farthest that car has been since yere father retired is to the supermarket."

"Well, you could sell it. If you need the money."

"I could always use the money," Hannah said. "But I thought I might keep the car."

"Keep it?"

Hannah could not bring herself to tell Susan about the sleek red car of her dream, but she could tell the idea that had occurred to her as she sat on the porch drinking her morning tea, thinking how long it had been since she'd heard her mother's voice. "I was thinking I could drive it."

Susan looked at her mother, then back at the road. "But you don't drive."

"I could learn. How hard can it be?"

Susan's fingers drummed against the steering wheel. "Didn't Dad try to teach you once?"

"That's different," Hannah said. "Cars were harder to drive back then."

"God, how he used to laugh when he told that story. Said you had two left hands and two left feet--and you kept looking at them instead of the road."

Hannah had always hated that story. "It wasn't a road we were on. It was a field behind the dump, a mud pit. And that old DeSoto had a clutch and a stick shift up here." She pointed to the steering wheel. "So much to pay attention to. All them pedals on the floor and yere father hanging onto the dashboard like he was afraid for his life, only letting go when I stepped on the wrong pedal and the DeSoto stalled. And the car was steaming hot, with the windows closed against the stink from the dump, which was seeping in all over the place anyway, I'll tell you. And ye, young lady, in the back seat screaming as well."

"You know, I think I remember that."

"But the Ford is automatic."

"C'mon, Mom. Why do you need to drive? Margaret or Hope or I will take you anywhere you want to go. You know that. Or Mike. We'd be glad to give you rides. After all, why bring up four kids if you can't get some use out of them later?" Susan laughed.

Hannah opened her pocketbook and poked around inside. "I was thinking ye could teach me."

Susan eased the car to a stop at a light and looked over at Hannah. "Mom, people your age don't just up and start driving cars."

"They do, sure. All the time," Hannah said, taking a tissue from her pocketbook and clicking it shut.

"Like who?"

"Don't ye ever read the newspaper?"

"If they're in the newspaper, maybe it's because they cause a lot of accidents."

"That's not it at all, then. They volunteer at the hospital or the senior center, or deliver meals to the ones too sick to cook."

"Since when do you want to volunteer at the hospital?"

"I never liked the smell of a hospital."

"Well then." The car moved forward again.

Hannah waited a minute. "Are you going to teach me or not?"

"I can't teach you to drive, Mom. I don't know the first thing about teaching someone to drive."

"I'm going to learn."

"Do you think Margaret or Hope will teach you? Or Mike?"

"I think the driving school will teach me. I called this morning."

Susan looked over at her mother. "Did you tell them how old you are?"

"Twenty-five dollars an hour it costs; that's what they said. And my money's as good as the next one's."

"At your age?"

"That's what they said."

Susan turned the corners quietly and stared straight ahead as she drove. She said nothing until she pulled up in front of Hannah's house. She turned to Hannah and said, "That could add up to a lot of money, Mom."

Hannah looked straight ahead. "It could that. I'll just have to learn fast, then." She snuck a corner-of-the-eye glance at Susan, who stared out the windshield, her jaw working as if she were chewing a tiny piece of gum. Hannah hoped Susan was calculating a series of numbers she did not actually know--Willy's pension, Hannah's social security, the amount of their savings-- except to know that it had never been enough.

Susan turned to Hannah. "All right, Mom. You win. I'll take you driving. This weekend."

Hannah smiled and reached for the door handle. "That would be good."

"Well, we'll see how it goes," Susan said as she opened her own door.

Susan arrived for Saturday's driving lesson at one. Hannah had already read half the driving manual she'd ordered and had taken to repeating parts of it aloud as she walked around her house. "Two car lengths behind," she'd say, wondering how long a car length was, thinking three of them might be better--but then they must know what they were talking about. She'd read about K-turns, but couldn't picture such a thing in her mind. She'd drawn a K on her telephone pad, then moved across it, using her finger as the car, but it still made no sense. She would not tell this to Susan.

Hannah insisted on taking Willy's car. Susan drove it to an empty parking lot. Hannah sat behind the wheel and Susan showed her how to adjust the seat and the mirrors. "Now, keep yere hands off the dashboard," Hannah said, remembering how nervous Willy had made her. She turned the steering wheel a little this way and that, then pushed hard on the brake pedal and moved the handle till the gear shift pointed at D. She let go of the handle. Nothing happened. She relaxed her leg muscle and the car eased forward. She slammed on the brake.

"Jesus, Mom, it's supposed to do that," Susan said.

"Watch yere language, young lady. I wasn't ready; that was just a test." Hannah eased up on the brake pedal, but left her foot on it just in case. The car moved slowly forward.

Halfway across the parking lot, Susan said, "You should take your foot off the brake pedal, Mom. You'll wear out the brakes that way." Hannah followed Susan's instructions, though she made sure she knew just how to get back to the brake when she needed it. It was nice, she thought, that this car didn't stall when it stopped.

By the end of Saturday's lesson, Hannah could drive in a large rectangle around the empty lot, turning carefully at each corner and stopping gracefully at the end. She was pleased. She invited Susan for a roast pork dinner on Sunday, and for another lesson. She read more of the driving book during the commercials for the Saturday Night Movie.

Before dinner on Sunday, Hannah could maneuver in reverse, though she planned to do as little of that as possible. She had accomplished what Susan told her was the K-turn, though she still wasn't clear on either the K or the point of the thing. She'd wanted to drive home--it was all forward, which she thought she'd got good at--but Susan said that was not a good idea.

"Tell you what," Susan said. "This is a quiet street. You drive out of the lot and down until we get to the light at that first big intersection. Then you pull over--whether the light is red or green--and I'll drive from there."

Hannah did as Susan asked. There was a stop sign on the way, and the light turned out to be red so she got to stop in the normal fashion. The lesson had gone quite well, she thought. After dinner, she suggested another lesson tomorrow.

"I can't tomorrow, Mom. I have to work. I have the afternoon shift on Wednesday, though. Why don't you kind of let things sink in until then?"

Hannah finished reading the driving manual Monday morning. Most of it was no more than common sense, she thought. Don't go too fast, stay away from moving cars, watch out for what other people are doing. Nothing her kids hadn't learned before they'd turned five. She would remember these things for the test, she was sure, though when specific numbers were mentioned she copied them out to memorize later. If she had known driving was this easy, she would've learned years ago. But then she'd tried, she reminded herself. She'd told Willy how much easier life would be, with this one needing to go to the doctor's and that one to boy scouts or church rehearsals for everything under the sun. And Willy had taken her to a muddy, slippery field and gripped the dashboard as if his maker was about to come calling for his soul.

Hannah walked out the back door and stood on the porch looking at the closed garage door. Behind the door, Willy's car sat facing outward: it was the way Willy had always parked it and Susan continued the practice, pulling the car into the driveway and over to the fence, then backing into the garage. Hannah suddenly saw the K and how it was used to turn the car around. She smiled. She wondered how heavy the garage door was. Willy had always opened and closed it in the past; Susan did it now. Hannah crossed the driveway to the garage, reached down to grab the handle, and pulled. It was heavy till she got it to her thighs, she found, then it seemed to take off on its own. Probably just my arthritis near the bottom, she thought. She pulled the door down, which was easier, then raised it again. The front of Willy's Ford sat staring at her. "My car," she said twice. It sounded strange. None of her friends had cars; when their husbands died they relied on their children or tagged along with their friends.

She thought she might spend a few minutes practicing parking the car in the garage; it might help her get over her dislike of going backwards. She went and got Willy's keys and climbed into the driver's seat. It was the first time she'd been in the car alone. She adjusted the seat and the mirrors, started the car, and eased it halfway out of the garage. She moved the lever to R and released a little pressure on the brake. The car slid smoothly back into place. She repeated the procedure, pulling a little farther each time, until she had the car all the way out of the garage. This is going well, she thought. Might as well do something useful, now I've come this far. She turned the car off, went into the house, and thought up a couple of things she could use from the department store. She locked the door behind her, restarted the car, and eased out the end of the driveway.



When the department store appeared up ahead, Hannah realized she could not make her way over to the left lane. She glanced at the store, three lanes over, as she passed it. I'll be needing a bit more practice then, she thought. She drove farther, looking for the right combination of lights and empty space to turn around. She had not been out this way for years, but when she saw the old drive-in theater she knew where she was. She took a right at the drive-in, thinking she could turn around there, but a chain blocked its entrance. That's all right, then, she thought. This is an old road; I know where this goes. She followed the road through curves and stop signs, past some places where she knew very well she could have turned around. Might as well go all the way now I'm here, she thought. Just to see.

Hannah smelled the dump before she saw it. She smiled. She sat up straight as she steered the car past the dump's entrance. The first road she came to was paved rather than dirt, but it had to be the right road. She turned onto it and drove down a ways, then pulled the car to the right side of the road and stopped. There was a large field to her left; that part was the same. Straight ahead was a group of buildings that had not been there before. The tall chain link fence of the dump was a city block off to her right, and the stink of the dump filled the car, though not as heavily as it had in the summer heat. She looked out over the field and remembered how she'd felt, Willy yelling at her: "Don't be so stupid, woman"; "Ach, ye're hopeless--ye'll never be able to learn"; "It's not a woman's place to be driving all over hell and gone in her husband's car--why ye think it is I'll never know," banging on the dashboard for occasional emphasis, clinging to the dashboard whenever she allowed the car to move the slightest bit; Susan in the back seat hearing all of it until Susan started crying--not because Hannah's driving was frightening the child, as Willy claimed, but because Willy's yelling and banging and carrying on was scaring her half to death; Hannah herself wanting to cry but refusing to give Willy the satisfaction.

Now she put the car in drive and turned it toward the field. She eased the front wheels off the pavement; the car did not slide. She pulled carefully forward and found that the field felt like the road, only bumpier. She sat for a moment, looking ahead, remembering how nervous the sea of mud had made her. Willy'd had her aim straight ahead, toward the other side of the field. "We'll see about turning if and when the time comes," he'd growled. Now she took her foot off the brake and steered straight ahead, laughing when she got halfway across the field and could see the other side. "Stupid woman, am I?" she asked. "Watch this, then." She executed her K-turn. She headed back toward the road, staring straight ahead and almost catching a glimpse, out of the corner of her eye, of Willy's hands on the dashboard. "Ye can let go, then, can't ye?" she said.

"Ah, Siobhan," she heard softly. She stopped and looked over at the empty passenger seat. No one but Willy ever used her given name, the name the Galway priest had spoken as he poured the water over her newborn forehead--and even Willy had not used it for years. She had not thought she would hear it ever again in this life.

**Tery Aine Griffin** holds an M.F.A. from the University of Michigan and a Ph.D. from NYU. Her writing has won many awards, including an Individual Artist Fellowship in Fiction, from the Delaware Division of the Arts, and has been published in several journals. She teaches at Wesley College in Dover, DE.