

Turn Signals
Louise Erdrich

Three of my four daughters were born in the dead of winter. One made it to early spring only because she was overdue. So for me the shortest days of the year and the deepest cold are a backdrop to the perilous stories of birth and the radiant exhaustion of new motherhood. Now that my three oldest daughters are in their teens, I can add driving to the pleasures and dangers of having children with winter birthdays.

Because the oldest two both took the driver's test the day after their sixteenth birthdays, much of the practice driving—with learner's permits, and me riding as the requisite adult passenger—took place on those slush-ridden, black-iced, snowbound, or low-visibility Minnesota mornings as we made our way harrowingly to school. The rite of passage was conducted on the bitterly cold asphalt of the Golden Valley driver's course. Both daughters passed the test by one point on their first try—a result recounted with pride and excitement to a mother who could react only with a terrified gulp.

Then came the big moment: my daughter would stride to the driver's side of the car, pull the door open, slide in, and drive away. Both times, I was unprepared. After all, when they took their first steps they walked *into*, not out of, my arms. Once the car had rounded the corner of the street and my daughter had disappeared, I'd stand rooted to the boulevard. Inevitably, an unpredicted ice storm would begin a few minutes later. But there was so much to be scared of in addition to the weather—all the reasons that the cost of car insurance for teen-agers is astronomical. Not to mention the other drivers. I'd experience a form of parental sorrow that should be endowed with a German portmanteau word, say, *Mutterkinderwinterfahrerschade*.

When I was on the upslope to fifty, I found that I was pregnant again. My due date was, of course, in January. When winter came that year, everything coincided—the novice driving, the hormones (mine and my teen-agers'), the wretched ice on the streets, and the gorgeous new snow. The time was fraught with my efforts to let my teens be teens, even as I seemed to be regressing into a shadowland of jitters.

My youngest daughter was born during one of those January thaws when the snow packs low to the earth, exuding a heavy mist that turns a golden peach color under halogen street lamps, and everything is muted in a fog of sunset. On road surfaces, this fog freezes to an unspeakably slick rime that you need crampons to walk on. My baby's father drove his red Dodge pickup ninety miles an hour to get to the hospital. He literally slid all the way down I-94. Everyone was somehow fine.

As we prepared to leave the hospital on a melting, sparkling morning, we realized that

my oldest daughter would have to drive me and the baby home. There was no safe place in the truck for a baby seat, and I was not allowed behind the wheel of a car. We put the new baby in the sky-blue minivan we had relied on for years. I rode. The baby slept. I was amazed at it all: our safe, orderly progress, the unhazardous conditions, our processional grandeur as we were guarded from behind by the red Dodge Ram. I had made a surprise loop, it seemed, a double-back maneuver in my life. The ride was momentous, historical, and calm. My daughter's hands on the steering wheel were properly placed at ten o'clock and two o'clock, as she had been taught. The trees were dripping. The street washed dark. We reached home, and the rest of our lives commenced.

It snowed and snowed until the snow seemed permanent. The nights were crazed, the nights were peaceful. There was the radiance and the madness, and now, three years later, another daughter—about to turn sixteen—has begun painting and unpainting her fingernails and performing other mysterious gestational rituals that will culminate, I know from experience, with her rising into the winter light, the day after her birthday, and passing her driver's test by one point. When she drives away, I'll have only the baby left. And when the baby—unthinkable thought—drives away, too, I'll stand on the boulevard for a long time before walking back into the house. Inside, in my old age, I'll take up drinking or knitting or prayer, or perhaps all three at once; I'll produce sacred three-armed sweaters that will at least keep my girls warm on winter roads.