

2015 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Essay Category

Honorable Mention: “Proceed With Caution,” by Hanna Giles

“C’mon, it’ll be fine, really. I’ve got my permit and I’ve drove a lot so far. I’m really good, I promise,” my friend Michalyn told me, giving me a pleading gaze through the car window. My stomach churned with the guilt of not trusting my friend, but deep down in my gut I had an uneasy feeling about getting into the car. Michalyn’s older sister, Miranda, was stationed in the front passenger seat, acting as the licensed adult, which made it legal for Michalyn to be driving with only her permit. Even with it being legal, however, it still scared me. It wasn’t a long distance to travel from her house to mine, however, and plus I needed the ride, so I brushed the feeling off and nodded in agreement. My boyfriend at the time, Travis, squeezed my hand as if to tell me there wasn’t any reason to worry, but it didn’t settle my nerves. Putting on a smile, I hopped in the side of her mom’s minivan she borrowed and took the seat behind hers. Travis followed, taking the middle seat.

Michalyn pulled out of her driveway and onto the slightly-slick road. The windshield wipers swished slowly, swatting away light flakes of snow. Winter had just began not even a week earlier, and the snow had yet to stick to the ground, but there was a steady fall of quick-melting crystals. Miranda clicked on the radio and skimmed through the stations and started asking about what our plans for Halloween were, to which Michalyn responded “You know we have to go trick or treating. Free candy shouldn’t be limited to just little kids!” Travis and Miranda laughed, but the humor was quickly cut off by Miranda’s surprised gasp as the car’s back tires lurched sideways. *Black ice*, I thought with horror. I watched to see the speedometer lower: Michalyn had applied her brakes, hoping to slow and steady the car. She tried correcting the wheel direction to fix our sideways angle, but she wasn’t experienced enough to know how to control a car on ice. The van only slid with more vigor, this time in the opposite direction, and hit the grass on the side of the road. The car flipped.

I felt my heart sink into my stomach as my weight became airborne and I begrudgingly realized that my seatbelt was not fastened. Time seemed to slow down, the seconds elongating as my mind raced with thoughts: why had I accepted her offer to drive me home, why hadn’t I remembered my seatbelt, what was my mother going to think when I wasn’t home on time, and why isn’t my life flashing before my eyes? I looked outside the windows to see the trees along the road-side ditch coming closer, and I stretched my hands out towards the car ceiling and side window, hoping to brace my impact. Travis tried holding me down in my seat. His arms wrapped around my waist but the moment the car was upside down and hitting the ground with a violent crash, it was futile. My head hit the roof of the car and I could hear Michalyn and Miranda scream. The car had collided with the trees on the right side of the road, stopping the van from rolling any further but leaving us upside down.

My eyes closed, perhaps out of fear or denial of the situation, and silence fell for several long moments until I heard the van’s sliding door being shoved open. Before I realized what was happening, Travis was pulling me out of the car, and I noticed Michalyn was at her sister’s door-side. Miranda was groaning, saying how she couldn’t move her head. The impact, along with

her seatbelt's restriction, gave Miranda's neck serious whiplash. She stayed sitting as still as possible and when the police arrived shortly after, an ambulance ushered Miranda away on a gurney. My nerves were rattled and shocked, but physically there was no injury aside from a few bruises, and the same applied for Michalyn and Travis. *In just a moment, we could have died... Yet we didn't*, I thought. I could not stop thinking that if we were going faster, if we had hit the trees differently, or if there were another car on the road, we would not be standing there alive.

Every person has had experiences that have triggered personal emotions and resulted in the construction of beliefs that morph one's perspective on life, helping to shape the individual that they've become. My personal experience, getting into a car accident, has had many effects on my personal life. Instead of ignoring my gut instinct I now trust my own judgment. When something makes my stomach churn with uneasiness, I won't ignore it: instinct is usually right. This event has caused me to become more cautious and attentive. No longer will I ride in a vehicle when the driver is not licensed and experienced, even if the person is a friend or family member. Also, I will make personal safety of myself, as well as others, my own responsibility and as much as possible keep others focused on the road and surroundings while driving.

Rather than performing my daily activities in a trance-like routine, I take the time to study the happenings around me and actively watch for the subtle variations of daily life. I will notice the jogger coming around the sidewalk bend, the biker rolling into the crosswalk and the impatient driver that speeds through the intersection in hopes of beating the red-light. When I am driving myself, I never speed or allow distractions, such as listening to the radio or joining in on conversations. Before entering an intersection, I always wait an extra moment simply because there are impatient drivers who do not care about safety and will still cross an intersection after the light has changed, regardless of the driver's 'experience' level. When I am a passenger, I let the person know that I would feel more comfortable if distractions are eliminated. Even from the back seat, I am always prepared to voice any concern in case the driver's attention becomes averted. Safety is always something that nags at the back of my mind now, a constant reminder that one single moment could end a life or even multiple lives.

Every person should know the danger of riding with an inexperienced driver. Likewise, everyone should realize that even a slightly distracted driver is a danger to others on the roads. A small distraction, even to someone who is well experienced, can result in a tragic collision and the loss of a loved one, friend, or even a stranger. All lives are precious, even ones of those not personally known, and should be protected and valued equally. Utmost attention is required, even when riding as the passenger. If the driver doesn't see someone or something that's in the vehicle's path, speak up quickly and hopefully the situation can be averted.

Caution and safety should never be taken lightly: always turn off the radio, ignore the conversations of others, and focus on outside surroundings when driving. While riding as a passenger, remind the driver that other people's lives are in their hands and that distractions could cost those lives. Through this experience, I learned that life is precious and can be taken at any given moment. I've become attentive and cautious, always wary of danger. I also learned that gut instinct is usually right. Never ignore the queasy feelings that arise when facing a questionable situation. I hope that others will realize the necessity of caution and take it as a personal responsibility to do everything possible to protect not only their own lives, but also the lives of those around them. Safety is never a guarantee in life, especially when it also depends on others around you, so always be attentive, eliminate distractions and proceed with caution.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

There's an effective change in tone in this essay. I appreciated the lengths you went to in the first half to contrast the ordinary dialogue at the start of the trip with the topsy-turvy experience of the actual crash. It's tricky to use writing to convey what a video would show in a flash. In the second half, I suggest taking out some of the more obvious comments on what you learned, also shortening the last paragraph. The essay is brief; as readers, we need only a brief summary.

*Catherine Frerichs is retired after many years of teaching writing, literature, and other humanities courses at Glen Oaks Community College, Albion College, and, most recently, Grand Valley State University. She is the author of *Desires of the Heart: A Daughter Remembers Her Missionary Parents* (Cold River Studio, 2010), in which she uses her parents' letters, journals, and other research to write about her parents' 40 years of working in Papua New Guinea and the costs to their children. Currently, she is working on a book that explores her relationship with her three Sudanese children whom she foster-parented for seven years and who have remained her children.*