ENGL 120: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay
Professor Rachel Kauder Nalebuff

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Ece Serdaroglu

Driving Moods

by Ece Serdaroglu ’27

In 2001, when the 7th generation of Honda Civic was first introduced, the Honda marketing team built their advertising campaign around one buzzword – reliability. As uncreative as that choice was, the team did not have much material to work with: The Civic was ugly and utilitarian, but it was sturdy, “built without compromise.” It prioritized the comfort of its rear passengers. It was the ultimate family car.

My grandmother loved her Honda Civic to death. The day my father sold the car, she went out on the balcony to watch it get towed. It was her first time outside in months. She agreed that selling the car was the smartest thing to do. The cancer had filled her lungs with liquid by then. Still, her hands trembled as they hung on to the railing.

I don’t like referring to her as my grandmother. Her name was Suheyla. That’s Arabic. It means calm, even, steady. It also means “woman who suffers.”

Suheyla was a lawyer. She was the daughter of a shopkeeper. She had two children and a husband that died before her. None of these things matter as much as the fact that she loved her car to death.

*

When I was younger, I dreaded riding in Suheyla’s car. I dreaded seeing that car pull up in front of my kindergarten every evening, louder and more worn than any other car in the driveway. Its

tarnished, coppery paint brought to my mind images of rotting leaves and rusting iron. I was ashamed of its scratched bumper, loosely hanging on to the rest of the car. I hated how low it was, how its underbelly scratched the asphalt as Suheyla drove.

The inside was not much better. The seats, covered in scratchy brown suede, were dotted with cigarette burns. The hardened, black edges of the holes poked at your skin. The air freshener (always pine) could not mask the smell of smoke that perpetually hung in the air. The floor of the backseat was always filled with knick-knacks – case files, sudoku puzzles, extra clothes – to the extent that you had to lift your feet to fit. You couldn't even close your eyes and pretend you weren't there – the motor's constant wheezing, reminiscent of Suheyla's own, would not let you.

The fact that Suheyla loved this car – this ramshackle, depressing car – was baffling to me. I couldn't understand why she'd bought it, nor why she wouldn't let anyone else drive it. Why did my patient, dependable, saint of a grandmother dote on *this* car? Why did owning this car mean so much to her?

"I know you'll love driving," she said to me, on one of those drives home from school. "I'll teach you. Every woman should know how to drive." She repeated that sentiment again and again, over the years, over many drives, over awkward glances in the rearview mirror as she fixed her lipstick. At six, not yet the woman she said I was, her insistence made no sense to me. I was only left with an impression of Suheyla's long-suffering face, her hands clinging to the first thing she owned in this life.

*

True to its advertisers' word, the Civic remained a fixture in my life throughout my childhood. Though it acquired bumps, it never broke down, or demanded the kind of special attention that

newer models do. It was a background actor in all our small-scale family tragedies, our comedies, our in-betweens. It conveyed sons home from bars, daughters from OB-GYN clinics, grandchildren from failed tests and nights out. The landscape of the backseat shifted to accommodate the needs of passengers: Among the debris of Suheyla's own life, the things you needed always peeked out.

The Civic, as steadfast as it was, had its quirks. On occasion, it would disappear and end up in the strangest places (a gas station, a beach, a parking lot), where it would crack one window open, tune its radio, and stay stationed for hours on end. My grandfather, who was used to his wife's idiosyncrasies and the car's disappearing act, never probed the issue. "Your grandma is in one of her driving moods," he would say, as if she suffered recurring fits of hysteria. "She'll be back by dinner."

And she always was. The Civic always made its way back home on time. No one ever questioned the sage diagnosis of "driving moods." No one ever asked Suheyla where she'd been, or why she'd gone there. No one ever asked where she was escaping. We knew she'd always come back from her escapades: Tired, disheveled, but reliable to a fault.

*

Suheyla's diagnosis came in 2018, months after my grandfather had died. "Like a prisoner dying just as their sentence ends," my mother joked once. We didn't tell that one to my dad.

The diagnosis itself wasn't surprising: Years of chronic pulmonary disease could have had only one logical end. Suheyla was an unproblematic patient: She consented to chemotherapy. She consented to giving up smoking. She consented to a stay-at-home nurse and monthly injections

of morphine. Within months, she'd settled a couch by the window, where she would spend her last five years surrounded by oxygen masks and respirometers.

The Civic had to go out of commission. Suheyla reluctantly gave the keys to my father so it wouldn't gather dust, but my father never really bothered to drive it. Most of the time, the Civic remained right under Suheyla's nose, visible in the parking lot. Sitting beside her, I thought about the sheer *wrongness* of seeing that tireless machine with its sails furled, like a monument to a dream since abandoned.

Of course, new generations of Civic had come out by then. The eight, ninth, and tenth generations of Honda Civic had better road grip, better suspension and no stick shifts. As newer models rolled on to the market and the demand for older models fell, my father got antsy. He needed to lift the financial burden of immunotherapy bills somehow. "It's just sitting there," he implored to his mother as she entered her second year of treatment, "it's barely worth anything. We can't wait forever."

I expected Suheyla to fight. To argue. To stick it to the men she cleaned up after all her life and say: "That's my car. I bought that car. You can't sell my car."

She did not. She was silent.

My father let her drive the Civic one last time. They loaded the backseat with the oxygen tube and the epinephrine and the wheelchair. My father claimed the passenger seat, put a pillow on the driver's seat mottled with cigarette burns, helped Suheyla reach the wheel. They made a day of it. Suheyla drove to the seaside, where she ate a sandwich and watched the waves under her son's watchful eye.

The Civic was towed that spring.

*

Roughly translated, my grandmother's gravestone says this:

Our Beloved Mother
Suheyla Serdaroglu
1938-2023
Ruhuna El Fatiha

As gravestones go, it's perfectly serviceable. It tells you she was a mother. It tells you she had a husband, who is buried next to her and whose surname she took. It tells you she was a woman of faith. But it doesn't tell you what she loved. It doesn't tell you she owned a car, and she loved her car to death.

In her last few months, she couldn't really speak, nor hear. She wheezed with every inhale. She couldn't go to the bathroom, and had to be carried to bed. She read. She solved her sudokus. She listened to the inane complaints of the relatives visiting her, nodding at all the wrong places. And as she laid on that couch, unable to wipe her own drool for coughing, she looked out the window.

Her son thought she was praying. I knew better.

Word Count: 1300