

## Wilderness House Literary Review 15/1

*William Hart*

### MY DRIVING TEACHER

Unlike the adolescent male of American myth, I was in no hurry to drive a car. I think I was reluctant to take on so much responsibility all at once. I had a sense I might not be good at driving and I was afraid of accidents. In school assemblies I'd seen blown-up photos of horrific car wrecks, with blood and bodies everywhere, so I knew what could happen almost too well. Getting hurt myself worried me less than hurting other people and their expensive vehicles, not to mention knocking our family ride out of service, jacking our insurance premium, and disappointing my parents. I put off getting a driver's license for months after I turned sixteen.

As time went by though I found it more embarrassing to ask my parents for rides. And since I planned to find a new girlfriend eventually, I needed to be ready to go on dates. Most of my buddies were driving happily and I was nearly the last man out when I finally capitulated, joining the vast majority of my fellow Americans in their commitment to vehicle mastery. I asked my mother to teach me how to drive.

One Sunday afternoon, on the wide expanse of the empty Sears & Roebuck parking lot, in our family's stick shift 1958 Ford Fairlane, Mom had me release the emergency brake, depress the clutch, and drop the transmission into first. Buzzing with the heebie-jeebies I took it from there, easing up on the clutch until the car jerked forward violently and repeatedly, killing the engine. After several tries, with Mom explaining how to do it and me screwing up, I got so frustrated and overwrought she bailed on the project and drove the angry young man home. Next Dad gave it a shot. His first lesson kicked off with us circling the block in first gear as we argued above the whine of the transmission, then he bailed—putting me back on square one.

My parents found out from friends that their son had been taught to drive by a sergeant with the Wichita Police. This veteran instructor came highly recommended and we all thought he was worth a try. Probably my folks believed I wouldn't have the brass to argue with a police sergeant.

Sergeant Rossler turned out to be a well upholstered middle-aged lawyer with an inventor's soul—and his soul was on fire. His brain child was a consolidated accelerator/brake pedal that shortened the time it takes a driver to brake. It functioned as an accelerator when depressed and as a brake when released. The sergeant was convinced it would someday be adopted worldwide, saving thousands if not millions of lives each year. He believed in it so fervently he'd had one installed on his squad car. If I understood him correctly (I couldn't believe I did) I was going to learn to drive using his questionable contraption. The sergeant and I were sitting together in his cruiser in front of our house when he pressed the footfeed and we departed the curb just as in any car with an automatic transmission. Halfway down the block he eased up on his miracle pedal and the brakes engaged, slowing us smoothly to a stop. "See," he said. "Simple."

Indeed I saw. I saw the sergeant was a little balmy. He was proposing to teach me to drive on equipment I doubted I'd ever use again. Worse, his

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invention seemed dangerous for the very reason he loved it—it combined contrary functions. There is a point in having two pedals, one to go forward and one to stop. It separates two very different mechanical outcomes in a driver's mind. I didn't share these doubts with my instructor, but I did warn myself to keep an eye on him. A guy like that can be full of surprises.

We stopped and traded places so I could drive. Despite my lack of faith in the sergeant's invention I found it easy to use. Pressing down to go forward and easing up to brake, I followed his directions as he took us on Hillside to Douglas, then west on Douglas past businesses and the East High campus into downtown, where late evening traffic flowed under streetlights. Retail stores glowed brightly, open for late shoppers among darkened office buildings. Piloting the sergeant's deep-throated and responsive cruiser empowered me enough that my main challenge became holding the speed limit.

At times I was distracted by Sergeant Rossler's pronouncements on various topics unrelated to our mission. He had many opinions, all of them definite, and I had to listen to them carefully because his driving instructions were woven seamlessly into his editorials on human folly. In the middle of downtown, as he tediously unpacked some kernel of wisdom, his order to turn left came a bit late. This meant I entered the left turn lane late and had to hit the brakes. Instinctively I pressed *down* on the accelerator instead of easing up. The vehicle surged forward toward a very large concrete traffic island that concluded the turn lane with an immovable object. "Stop! Stop! Stop!" screamed the sergeant. His extreme urgency and the high pitch of his alarm spooked me and I mashed the pedal harder and the car leapt again. With a quickness I wouldn't have thought he possessed the sergeant grabbed my leg with both hands and yanked it off the accelerator. His patrol car squalled to a halt, throwing us forward into our seatbelts. Accident averted. His amazing pedal had just saved two lives.

"*Didn't you hear me say STOP?!*" the sergeant demanded, incensed.

"I was trying to stop."

"You know what? I'm gonna get a pin for you so I can stick you to wake you up. Yeah, that's *exactly* what I'm gonna do." He had a point. My mind did tend to wander, though in this case he'd made the situation worse with his blather.

The sergeant kept threatening me with that pin during our remaining lessons, all conducted in our family Ford rather than his official vehicle probably because he didn't want to again put city property at risk. The lessons went well enough. The last one ended with an emergency braking test on the open highway. I was told to drive out of town past Beech Aircraft's production facilities humming brightly on second shift. Some miles beyond, in the pitch dark countryside, my teacher told me to take it up to seventy. With asphalt racing at us under the headlights, he said to hit the brakes.

He'd prepared me well for this moment. I knew to *not* slam the brake pedal but rather to apply firm consistent pressure. Looming in my mind was the sergeant's grisly anecdote about a former female student. In a car without seatbelts (like the one we were riding in) she'd hit the brakes so hard she was thrown into the roof, crushing her skull "like an eggshell"

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and “dying instantly.” On that occasion the sergeant presumably had been spared a similar fate by the greater gravitational force holding him down to the seat. I followed his advice carefully, passed my last test, everyone survived, and for once my teacher was satisfied with my attentiveness.

After Sergeant Rossler signed off on me he presented me with the imaginary pin, saying, “Hang onto this because you’re going to need it.” Since he’d just certified me as a qualified Kansas driver I didn’t take him too seriously. But in the years that followed I was involved in a worrying series of fender benders. Although only vehicles got hurt, my wandering mind set me up for all of them. At age twenty-two, after my seventh minor crash, this time a scarier one on the highway, I learned to stay focused behind the wheel.