

Close Call

By Thomas Sullivan

At the end of another long day, I sit in a parking lot with a student and watch a woman drive circles around our parked car. She loops repeatedly in a big black truck, flashing a peace sign and shouting “You can do it Matt, you can do it!!” She's pumping her son up for his Mock Driving Exam. At one point Matt, who is laughing in the seat next to me, throws his half-eaten apple at her. It's a perfect shot through her window, but Mom dodges her head just in time, shakes a fist in the air, and keeps circling.

I really like the mom and Matt. This is only our second time together, but we have a rapport that occasionally occurs between strangers. The first time I met Matt's mom she looked at me with a serious, I'm-a-concerned-parent expression and said, “So what's in today's lesson...lawn jobs and taking out mailboxes?”

Matt and I laugh as mom does another loop around our car. A faint odor of burnt tire is building as the truck show continues. Matt turns and looks at me.

“Ya' know, she recently survived breast cancer. She's much different now, in a good way.”

It's amazing what a life-threatening incident can do to your perspective on living. The grimly serious edge attached to “major events” seems to dissipate and then fade away. I watch with a smile as Mom finishes her circling and speeds off, her big truck hurtling out of the parking lot.

We break from the outside entertainment and get down to business. I run Matt through the initial, pre-drive setup.

“Mirrors?” I say, knowing that kids rarely bother to check these.

“Check!” Matt replies, sounding like a fighter pilot.

“Seatbelt?”

“Check!”

“Fuel?”

“Check!”

Matt tips his head back and polishes off a caffeinated energy drink in a black can with a threatening logo. I keep pace, powering down a huge cup of corrosive 7-Eleven coffee. During our last lesson Matt revealed that he has ADD, but it didn't seem to affect his concentration that much. After that admission I was expecting a sketchy session with red lights ignored and lane changes attempted without looking around, but Matt proved himself to be a safe and vigilant student.

I drop back into Serious Teacher Mode.

“Okay, so this is a Mock Exam. I'm only giving directions. You need to determine and execute the proper steps on your own. I'm only stepping in if needed for safety sake. You're in charge here. Ready?”

Matt nods, looks straight ahead through the windshield, and says, “Let's do this thing.”

We pull out of the parking lot and drive down a main road.

“Okay,” I say, “Let's take a left at the next light.”

Matt drifts into the turn lane. A minivan swinging through the intersection cuts the turn too sharply and starts heading straight at us.

Matt laughs and says, "Wrong lane buddy" before hitting his brake. The stranger keeps driving straight at us. He gets to within thirty feet of our car before realizing his error. Startled, he whips his head to the side and yanks the wheel, swerving back onto his side of the road. The minivan snakes back and forth through two over-corrections before the driver regains control. He drives past us, looking dazed.

Matt and I laugh in unison. It's a fairly close call but Matt handled it perfectly.

“Good,” I say, “you played it cautious and didn't honk. Or flip him off.”

We roll through the intersection and enter a busy four-lane road. Approaching a solid green light, I tell Matt to turn left when it's safe. Since the light is solid, and not a green arrow, we need to yield. Matt taps the brakes and we begin slowing. Without warning he suddenly hits the gas and turns the steering wheel.

What the hell?

We're in the middle of the intersection before I can react. I whip my head to the side and see two cars bearing down on us from the other direction. The closest, a mid-sized sedan, lurches to a halt. Its hood presses down violently and snaps back up as the driver blares the horn. The second, a huge black SUV with its grill at head level, actually speeds up. For a split second, time stops and I feel like I'm standing frozen while a train barrels at me. The truck is twenty feet from my open window and I hear the roar of its engine as my stomach falls away.

“Go, go, go, go, go!!!” I scream.

Matt slams on the gas. Our heads snap back and we rocket into a dead-end road.

Matt pulls to the curb and we sit silently for a moment. My heart's pounding and my head feels fuzzy. I picture medics dragging my body out of the car with the Dodge Ram insignia pressed into my forehead. The truck looked just like the one my student's mom was driving; I'm tempted to ask him if this is her idea of a joke.

The pounding slows and my head starts to clear. I chuckle and look over at Matt, our eyes meeting. I know he's as shaken as I am, and his sheepish look says he's probably expecting me to shout at him. But I never yell at kids. That's for hard guys with too much arm hair.

"You might want to give yourself a bit more room there," I say calmly.

Matt exhales and shakes his head. "Man," he says, "you've got nerves of steel."

"Well, think of it this way," I reply, "you'll never forget to yield on a solid green again. I can guarantee that."

We continue on as if nothing happened. Technically, he failed the test, so I could just terminate the lesson and plod back to the school in a dejected haze. But that wouldn't accomplish anything. Stopping this car now will require a mechanical failure, albeit a very real possibility these days, given the state of our ageing car-fleet. I still want my student to benefit from our drive, and after dodging a flaming wreck I'm sure he learned something today. That's all that really matters.

I give Matt one more try at an unprotected left turn, and he does it perfectly this time.

"Okay," I say, "we'll consider the other turn to be a life-threatening warm-up."

We roll into a residential area to finish the test. We round a corner and spot a girl up ahead. She's standing next to a bicycle, waiting by the side of the road for us to pass. As we approach, Matt checks her out and says, "Man, she's...." He stops mid-sentence when we're next to the girl, as closer inspection reveals her age.

"Young," I say, finishing his sentence. We roll into the school and park the car. The exam is done. So is another long day.

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