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Driving Mr. Ed

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"I don't care what you think," I say. "There's no way I'm ready for this yet." I am slouched down in the front passenger seat of the family minivan, still trying to find a last-minute way out of my predicament. Staring out the window at the passing scenery, I sigh loudly and squirm in my seat. I am on my way to the local high school for my first day of driver's education. I'm nervous as hell about it and would do or say just about anything to get out of going.

Mother sighs and frowns at the road. "Joelle," she says, "we've talked about this dozens of times. You're sixteen years old and it's about time you learned to drive." She adjusts the air vents so the cool artificial breeze blows more directly toward her. I can tell by the exasperated tone of her voice that she's sick of having this conversation.

Still, I can't help but ask again. After all, it can't hurt. There's always a slight chance that she just might suddenly see things my way this time. . . . Yeah, as if. But what do I have to lose? "Can't I just wait one more year?" I ask, hopeful that she'll agree to this compromise, turn the van around, and take me home.

Her voice is softer now, more pleading. "Honey," she says, "All your friends are learning to drive this summer. Why don't you want to learn too? You don't want to be the only one of your friends without a license, do you?"

Mom is always saying things like that to me. She has always been the type to follow the crowd. Whatever her friends are doing, she also does without question. In response to the old saying, she'd be the first to jump off the cliff. Mom can't accept that I'm not the type of person to care what "everyone else" is doing. I like to do things my own way, at my own speed, and on my own time. I know that drives her crazy because she's always trying to reform me.

"I don't care what my friends are doing," I say stubbornly. This will piss her off, but at this point I don't care.

"It's important to fit in," she lectures. "You should be doing what other people your age are doing when they are doing it. I don't like the fact that you're always the black sheep in the crowd. It makes you stand out too much. It's just unhealthy!" Disgusted with the whole idea, she crinkles up her nose.

"So if everyone else my age is smoking pot or screwing each other, then I should be doing that too?" I say. "Does that give me permission to do that?" I'm provoking her and I know it. I don't mean to sound rude, but I'm just so sick of listening to her preaching that "doing what everyone else is doing" lecture to me.

"You know I don't mean stuff like that," she snaps. "Besides, I don't want to be chauffeuring you around for the rest of your life." She is sitting very stiffly and her eyes are fixed on the road. She refuses to say another word to me, so the subject is closed. We don't speak again for the rest of the drive.
Mom leaves me standing on the sidewalk outside the high school and speeds away. It's almost as if she's afraid I'll try to jump back in the van before she can drive off. Well, I think to myself as I watch the van disappear, I'm here. There's no turning back now. Once more I look back down the street in the direction Mom drove. I tell myself I can do this, but I don't really believe it.

I reluctantly walk towards the school parking lot. The areas where we will be practicing our parking are indicated by plastic orange cones that look like they've already taken a few too many hits with a car. Although it is still early, the summer sun beats down on the blacktop as if it were high noon. Several kids are already gathered in small groups, sweating in the heat and chatting nervously about the morning's events. I wave at a group I know and sprint over to join them.

Marie, probably one of my best friends, is nervously chewing on a huge wad of gum, but appears calmer than I feel. "Hey, Jo," she says. "So ya didn't convince your mom to let you drop this class after all, did ya?" She has to shove the gum into her cheek to talk. This gives her already round face an exaggerated chipmunk-like appearance.

"Unfortunately no," I say. I tried to talk her out of it as much as I dared without crossing the line and really annoying her, but I don't think it worked too well, seeing that I'm here and all."

"Obviously it didn't," says Marie. "Are ya nervous?" She shifts her wad of gum to her other cheek.

"Me? nervous? I never get nervous," I say sarcastically. "Girl, I'm so scared that I almost peed my pants twice on the way over here."

Marie grins. "Yeah, I know the feeling," she says. "But hey, you and everyone else here." She pauses for a moment and then waves at someone behind me. "Hey, Zach!" she shouts.

Zach is her boyfriend's younger brother. Hal, her boyfriend, is two years older and took driver's ed last summer.

"So what's the word?" she asks. Two days ago she instructed Zach to ask Hal to tell him everything he knew about this class. She told me she wasn't about to ask herself. That, she had told me, would let Hal know she was nervous, and she wasn't about to admit being nervous in front of an older guy. She said that would embarrass him and no guy would want to "do anything" with a girl who embarrassed him.

"Hal said you're in the clear as long as you don't get Mr. Edwards," Zach says.

"I didn't know he was still living," I say. Mr. Edwards was teaching driver's ed. when my mom took the class. She didn't have him for an instructor, but she told me a few stories

"Evidently he is," says Marie. "I hope we don't get assigned to have him. I've heard horror stories about that guy that you wouldn't believe."
"I heard he grabbed the wheel while some girl was on the freeway last year," Zach offers, eager to contribute to the discussion.

"I heard that one," I say. Is that the girl he made cry or was that someone else?"

Before Zach can reply, the doors of the school swing open and the instructors step out. There are eight of them in all, but none more visible than Mr. Edwards. The sun reflects off his very bald head with a glare that's almost blinding. His dark, shieldlike sunglasses cover the top half of his face, and his mouth is stretched into a sour expression. Everyone stops talking and an eerie silence fills the parking lot.

Following close behind the instructors is a girl clutching a clipboard. Without a moment's hesitation, she starts rattling off the names of who will be driving with which instructor.

"Zach Thomas and Robert Waynes, Ms. Nordbeck," she says without looking up from the clipboard.

"That's who my brother had," he whispers to us. "I heard she's nice." He leaves us to go find his driving partner and spread the good news. We watch him bounding across the parking lot.

Marie and I wait and wonder. There are only two possible instructors left for us to be assigned to, Mr. Frish and the dreaded Mr. Edwards.

"Joelle Schmidt and Marie Stevenson. . .," says the girl with the clipboard.

"Cross your fingers," Marie says.

"I am. I am," I whisper back.

". . . Mr. Edwards," announces the girl. She checks off our names on the clipboard.

Marie groans and mumbles an obscenity under her breath."I knew it," she moans. "I just knew we'd get stuck with that awful old bastard."

"Maybe he's not as bad as everyone says he is," I say hopefully. But I know darn well that I'm Lying.

"You're Ms. Optimist all of a sudden," Marie says. "You know damn well that the stories are true. Face it, Jo, the guy's a jerk. You're just fooling yourself if you start thinking otherwise."

"O.K., so maybe I am fooling myself, but it helps calm my nerves. Besides, it's not my fault that my nerves have put me in a state of denial."

Marie shakes her head at this. "Jo, Jo." She takes the wad of gum out of her mouth, wraps it in a tissue and shoves it in her purse. Evidently Mr. Edwards does not allow gum chewing.
We shut up as Mr. Edwards approaches. I notice for the first time that day how badly I'm shaking and hope that he doesn't notice it too.

"Good morning, ladies," he sneers. "We will be driving car number six." He points to a gray Ford that is crouching near the curb, as if lying in wait for victims. He takes off, walking toward the car.

Marie and I look at each other, she shrugs, and we follow slowly behind him.

"Hmmm ...," he says as he eyes us carefully. "Who should I choose to drive first?" He swings the keys teasingly in front of our noses.

I'm wishing that I could disappear right now—or at the very least switch places with Zach. Marie is fidgeting with her watch and mouthing something silently to herself. Praying to be magically transported someplace else, no doubt, or maybe just that she won't have to drive first.

"I think the lucky party will be . . . Joelle," says Mr. Edwards. He grins nastily. "Get in the car, girls."

Marie climbs in the back seat, happy that she wasn't chosen to go first. Mr. Edwards gets in the front passenger seat. I am still standing outside the car, trying my damnedest to think up an excuse good enough to get me out of this.

"What's the matter, Joelle?" says Mr. Edwards in a taunting voice. "Are ya scared?"

This guy really is an asshole, I think. I'm not going to let him get the better of me. Summoning up all the courage I possibly can, I tug the door open and get in the car.

The view from the driver's seat is different from anything else I've ever experienced. It's almost backwards. Mr. Edwards hands me the keys, and I take them without hesitation. I buckle my seat belt and check my mirrors. He tells me to start the car and I do. Hey! This isn't so hard after all. I can do this! I'll show this old bastard that I'm not afraid of this car—or him.

I shift the car from park to drive and take my foot off the brake. Slowly and carefully, I let the car inch forward. I circle around the parking lot once. See, not so hard.

"Now," says Mr. Edwards, all business, "I want you to pull out of the school and turn right onto 25 Mile Road."

I drive toward the exit driveway. In the rearview mirror, the school looks strange, almost as if it is miles away rather than only about fifty feet. I stop at the end of the driveway, signal that I'm turning, and wait for an opening.

The street is busy and I wait for almost five minutes. Mr. Edwards grows impatient with me and growls for me to go.

"What are you waiting for?" he snaps "There was plenty of room before that blue truck for you to go."
I choose to ignore this. I know that if I would have pulled out then, I'd have been rear-ended and have points taken off my driving evaluation card, maybe even fail the class. Finally a chance does come, and I pull out onto the main road. The speed here is forty-five mph. The gas pedal feels more foreign under my foot than the brake pedal does, but I step on it anyway. The car jumps into action and we are in business. I see that I'm going at exactly the posted speed and I smile to myself because I know I'm doing O.K. so far.

"We're coming up to a stoplight," says Mr. Edwards. "I want you to make a left onto VanDyke." As we approach the light, Mr. Edwards reaches across me and flips the turn signal before I can get a chance to touch it. "You're turning left, Joelle," he says. "Remember to signal."

We travel twenty feet or so with the turn signal on, and there are still about ten feet until we reach the light. The light turns red just then. I slow the car and ease it into the turn lane. The car is creeping along and I am about to step on the brake. About five feet from the light, Mr. Edwards slams his foot down on the brake pedal on his side of the car. Again, he does this before I can react. I frown slightly and he smirks.

"The light is red, Joelle," he says nastily. "When the light is red, you stop the car."

He's just trying to throw me off by doing this, and I know it. I let it pass when he reached over and hit the turn signal before I could get a chance to do it (and I might add, long before it should have been turned on), but his braking for me did it. Not only did he slam on the brake five feet before the car should have been stopped, but he knew I was going to brake anyway. I mean, I did have the car slowed to a crawl when he did it. This guy was even more of a jerk than I had first suspected!

"Oh, yes sir," I mumble. I glare at the light. This guy is really pissing me off, I think to myself. Then I remember the warnings I've heard about not driving angry. I take a few deep breaths, and by the time the light turns green, I am calm again.

Mr. Edwards now has me driving on deserted rural back roads that have never and will never see pavement. He doesn't signal or brake for me anymore either. My confidence has been building itself up again, and I'm feeling much better.

"Now," says Mr. Edwards "I want you to make a right turn up here." He points to the road crossing the one I'm driving on.

This turn will put me back on 25 Mile Road, just about two miles farther up from where I started from. I pull up to the stop sign and survey my surroundings. On the right side of the road I'll be turning onto are the backs of the houses from the Lake Arrowhead subdivision. On the left side, raised off the road by about three feet, is a large vacant field. The only things growing there are weeds, scrawny trees, and a few large lilac bushes. The road isn't as busy this far up. Should be an easy turn, I think to myself. Feeling confident, I signal, wait for an opening in traffic, and then make the turn.

Oversteering is a common mistake for first-time drivers. I remember reading this in my driver's education textbook, but I never really knew what was meant by it. Until now, that is. I turn the car onto the right shoulder of the road. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mr. Edwards scribbling something on my evaluation card. I know I'd better correct myself before
he starts screaming, grabbing the wheel, or worse. I turn the wheel to the left and give the car a little gas.

I find myself in the left lane with another car coming right at me. Marie, who was silent for most of the drive, yelps. Mr. Edwards drops the evaluation card and the stubby pencil he has been using on the floor of the car. Oh shit, I think, I'm screwed for sure. At the last possible second, my reflexes kick in. I turn the wheel to the left again, intending only to pull over to the side of the road and wait for a chance to pull back over into the right lane.

The events of the next few moments happen so fast that I hardly realize what is going on. The car doesn't quite behave as I expect it to--that's all I know. We swerve out of the path of the oncoming car, but rather than pulling over, the car jumps the three-foot hill leading into the field and is airborne for a brief moment. I guess I gave it a little too much gas.

I'm feeling as if this is not happening to me. It's like I'm watching the action on something as distant as a TV or a movie screen. Also, everything seems to dramatically slow down, like slow motion. I realize that the car is now coasting through the field, crashing through the knee-high weeds and scrub bushes. Mr. Edwards is screaming something at me, but the ringing in my ears is too loud and I can't understand what he is saying.

My head is clearing a bit now, and I can hear him better. He's screaming at me to brake.

"Hit the brake! Hit the @&*!!%* brake!" screams Mr. Edwards. He is nearly hysterical.

I am frantic now. His yelling at me makes me feel even more terrified than I already am. My feet grope the floor of the car for something, anything, resembling a brake pedal.

Finally! My foot comes in contact with something and I slam it down as hard as I can. Wrong pedal...I realize too late that I have just floored the gas. The car jolts into action and is now flying past. A quick glance at the speedometer tells me that the car is now traveling at 60 mph through the field. The trees and bushes that were once creeping by are now flying past in a green and brown blur.

We crash through a lilac bush at least twice the size of the car. It is now that Mr. Edwards finally remembers that his side of the car is also equipped with a brake pedal. Hadn't he already used it on me once today when he didn't need to? Why not use it now in a situation that it should be used in? He slams his foot down on it and the car jerks to a halt. The three of us sit there for a full minute and don't say anything.

"Get out of the car," says Mr. Edwards.

I don't remember many details about that day. The rest of that first day after my near-miss accident is a total blur in my mind. I have a vague recollection of not being able to attend the classroom portion of the class that day on account of being hysterical. I remember the secretary in the office calling my parents to have them pick me up and then try to calm me down enough to get the story of what happened out of me. I remember my
mom picking me up and apologizing all the way home for making me do something I obviously wasn't ready for.

Funny part is, I can't remember Mr. Edwards getting the car out of the field. I can't remember if I got back behind the wheel of that dreaded car. I can't even recall how the heck I got back to the school building. Needless to say, I didn't pass the class that year.

It's now one year later. I'm 17 and have just completed my second try at driver's ed. Naturally, I took it with a different instructor--and I passed with flying colors. I am waiting outside the school building for Marie. She said she would pick me up after my final driving exam and we would go celebrate.

I'm standing here admiring my temporary permit. The parking lot is emptying now and I see Marie's car turn into the school. She pulls up to where I'm standing and I proudly display my permit through the open window.

"Congratulations, Jo!" she says excitedly. "I just knew you'd pass this year."

"Ms. Nordbeck is so much nicer than Edwards," I tell her.

I am just about to get in the car with Marie when I spot Mr. Edwards leaving the school building. "Wait here a minute," I tell Marie.

"Oh, Mr. Edwards," I call.

He turns around, and I can tell by the look on his face that he remembers me the instant he sees me. His face drains of color.

"It's you," he says accusingly. He takes a step backwards.

I strut up to him as if I'm all that and a side of fries. "I want you to see something," I say. I proudly hand over my driving permit and the evaluation card saying how well I drive a car.

He hesitantly takes them from me and then scrutinizes closely them as if he suspects forgery.

"What do ya think of that, Mr. Edwards?" I ask. I don't expect an answer and don't get one. He just stares at me with his mouth half open.

Marie yells from her car to hurry up. I take back my permit and driving evaluation slip and strut back towards Marie's car. Halfway there I turn around. Mr. Edwards is still standing in the exact same spot. I wave at him.

"See you on the road, Mr. Ed!" I call.