

John DeBon

THE DRIVING LESSON

I'm shifting into fourth and pushing seventy on a two-lane road with a posted limit of forty-five. I'm driving angry. The reason is sitting next to me in the passenger seat, staring at her hands fidgeting in her lap, afraid to look at the road and not daring to look at me.

The high beams pick up a yellow sign with a black arrow bending hard to the left. I take a little off the accelerator and go into the curve high. Even though she's buckled in, the force of the turn presses her against the passenger door. Her hands fly out of her lap like startled birds, and I hear her gasp; it's a soft sound, somehow proper, like everything about her. I come out of the turn low, letting the steering wheel spin under my palms until the car is headed straight. She lifts her head and turns her watery, pleading eyes toward me as if she's going to say something, maybe ask me to slow down because she's scared. I keep my eyes fixed on the blacktop. I won't give her the satisfaction of acknowledging she's in my car, much less that she's scared. She looks down at her lap without saying a word.

For what seems like the hundredth time since leaving the beach, I remember the night we met and wonder what the hell I was thinking? But it's no mystery. I was attracted to her from the moment I saw her. At least I was until tonight.

I met Grace at Mulligan's, an off-campus hangout that on weekends has a band and, as the sign outside its front door says, ladies drink for half-price. The place was packed and on the small stage a country band played loud with an electric edge. I stood at the bar with some guys from my dorm. Grace and her girlfriends were sitting at a table, laughing and leaning their heads together as they watched us watching them, probably wondering if we would come over, and trying to decide if they wanted us to. For our part, we strategized as if planning a military assault, and when ready downed our beers and shots to strengthen our resolve. We were all in our junior year, hardly men of the world. By some miracle we made it over to their table and they didn't turn us away, which I attribute to the math more than all the glances, body language, and maneuvering: one guy for each girl usually buys you an introduction.

At first the conversations stumbled along with everyone trying to act natural and sound clever, and everyone failing. But after we bought them a couple of rounds—why not, half price—the conversations flowed smoother and we all became more interesting.

FICTION

In the pairing that occurred, Grace and I ended up together, which was fine by me since I had noticed her right away. Slim with long brown hair and large doe eyes, she had a quiet confidence. Not the kind of stuck-up confidence some attractive girls have, but the kind that comes from being at ease with yourself. She didn't seem to sweat the little things. And there was something else about her, a sense of refinement, as though she were removed from her surroundings and yet wholly present. I chalked it up to her coming from money. Not that she said as much, but I could tell by the way she talked and the clothes she wore. Nothing over the top, but not off the rack, either.

While the others danced, laughed loudly, and ordered more drinks, Grace and I sat at the back of the table by the wall and talked about classes, campus life, and our homes. When we had said enough, we just sat together and enjoyed the band.

Over the following week, we met at the library and the cafeteria between classes, and pretty much walked every path on campus, discussing which professors we liked and didn't like, what movies we had seen and what shows we followed, the kinds of music we listened to and the causes we cared about.

On our first date, which wasn't technically a date, I took her to lunch at the pier a few miles from campus. Over the cacophony of wind, waves, and circling gulls cawing for food, we sat on a bench and ate hotdogs and fries from a roach coach in the lot. Then we walked along the shore and talked. Well, mostly I talked and she listened, and we both laughed a lot. Funny how at the time I didn't notice how quiet she was, or how she never gave away much about herself when she did speak. I guess it's the way she listened, so attentive and engaged, it gave the impression she was as much a part of the conversation as I was. Maybe I should have asked her to tell me more about herself, but I was trying to impress her and liked the way she paid attention, the way her wavy hair rode the breeze coming off the water, and how her bright, brown eyes watched me as I rambled on.

We drove back to campus and walked to the Humanities building for her next class. Before she went in, I asked her out. For a moment she seemed caught off guard and stared at me without saying a word. Certain she was about to turn me down, I started to explain that by date I meant get together for another lunch. Dozens of students streamed past, all of whom I was certain were focused on nothing else but my impending rejection.

Before I could finish my idiotic stammering, her features softened and seemed to take on an expression of gratitude, though I can't explain what made me think that. Regardless, my momentary panic was forgotten when

she said she would go out with me. Then she kissed me before heading into the building.

I can still feel her full, warm lips pressed lightly against mine.

Screw it. It doesn't matter now. Up ahead the road splits and the right lane exits to merge with the highway, meaning I can save some time and get her the hell out of my car a little sooner, which at this moment is all I want. Having these memories play in my head, forcing me to relive the past week is not what I want to do right now, but for some reason I can't make them stop.

I come up on a slow car and ride its bumper. It's a compact and my high beams must be lighting up its interior. But the small car doesn't move. In fact, the driver taps his brakes. The flash of the twin red lights meant to back me off only makes me madder, which is fine because I need to vent. I pull into the breakdown lane and punch it, my tires screeching as I pass him. His horn lets out a long, blaring complaint. I pull the wheel hard, sliding in front of him with only a few feet to spare. As the highway opens on the left, I cut in, slipping through the right lane and settling into the middle lane.

She's crying again, asking me to *please* slow down. I crank up the stereo and cut into the left lane, remembering earlier in the evening when I picked her up. How everything seemed perfect. How she seemed perfect.

I took her to Bartholomew's, a club that has decent food and a great selection of beers on tap. It's a bit of a drive up the coast but nicer than any of the college places in town. We ate their famous burgers, tried a few different microbrews, and listened to a local band that was starting to become known. We talked between sets. I suppose I did most of the talking, as usual, but she didn't seem to mind, nodding with interest at what I said and laughing at my jokes.

On the drive back I took the coastal roads to give us more time together, and I guess to set the mood. With an almost full moon and no clouds, the shoreline was a landscape rendered in shadows. The conversation had become more personal, more intimate. I made a suggestion and she agreed, so I pulled into the parking lot of a small community beach. The stars were visible despite the glare from the lights of the surrounding towns, and the moon's reflection rippled on the water. At first she seemed nervous, different from the self-possessed girl of earlier in the evening. But after a while, as we talked about our families and watched the waves roll onto the shore and then recede, trailing strips of foam lace on the wet sand, she relaxed.

FICTION

Being with her like that felt right. There was no pressure, no rush to unbutton her blouse or get into her pants before taking her home, only a comfortable sense of belonging. A part of me wanted to leave it that way, to sit with her as her eyes followed the glistening lines of surf gliding toward the beach, sharing in the tranquility of the moment. Our silence gave way to quiet conversation, and we told each other our plans for after college. While I vacillated between becoming a CPA, going into financial consulting, and several other options I was equally unenthusiastic about, she spoke of becoming a therapist specializing in domestic violence with a certainty I envied.

After that we sat in silence, once again looking out at the beach, her hand in mine. I slid a little closer and her body stiffened, but only for a second, and then she let herself lean lightly against my arm.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said, looking at the water.

I wasn’t watching the beach. I was looking at the smooth curve of her neck, and the way she brushed back her hair, looping strands behind her small, childlike ear, as if drawing a curtain from her face so I could see her more clearly.

“So are you,” I said.

She turned toward me, her face inches from mine. A breathless excitement rushed through me. I leaned forward to kiss her, but she turned and rested her head on my shoulder, her gaze returning to the water, leaving me to wonder what had just happened. Wasn’t that the moment everyone talked about? Did her head on my shoulder mean affection or friendship? I was sure from the signals I sent and received that we both understood this was not a friend date, that we had arrived at a point when some physical intimacy was expected. The night we met, all the walks and coffees between classes, our almost-date at the pier, the kiss outside the Humanities building, all indicated this was a bona fide date. Hell, even the moon and the tide seemed to confirm it.

These thoughts ran through my mind as I sat with her leaning against me, the clean, light floral scent of her hair teasing me. I ran over my options and their consequences: If I made a move and she only wanted to snuggle, it would be awkward. If I made a move and she just wanted to be friends, I would feel stupid. If I didn’t make a move and she expected me to make one, it would be tragic.

In a wistful tone, she said, “I wish everything would stay as it is now.”

Not certain what the hell that meant, I moved my arm along the top of the seat and slid my hand down onto her right shoulder. Before she could

send another conflicting signal, I leaned over and kissed her, long and with my lips parted.

I don't remember if she kissed me back. I'm sure she did, at least to some extent, but I was so ready and able that if she didn't I did not notice. I drew back to reposition myself and then stopped. She was sitting still, staring at me.

"Why did you do that?"

There was no anger or indignation in her question, just a calm inquiry void of inflection, which made it even more confusing than if she had asked in anger, since the reasons behind the kiss should have been obvious. The part of me that had enjoyed the quiet closeness we had shared moments before sounded an alarm to back off. But another part of me, a part that had enjoyed the kiss and wanted more, took control.

"What do you mean?" I said with a harshness that surprised me, and yet, when I saw her flinch, it felt satisfying. "Why do you think?"

"I'm sorry, Sean. I didn't mean to—to upset you," she said, her voice cracking a little. "All I mean is... well, did you kiss me because you wanted to, or because you thought it was expected? You know. What guys are supposed to do."

She had pulled back a little and that angered me more than her questions. I was not in the mood for a discussion of my motivation. I wanted to yell at her, make her feel the disappointment filling me. But I didn't, because in addition to being frustrated and angry, I was worried her pulling back meant my desires would not be met unless I acted quickly.

"Grace, I'm sorry. Really I am. I didn't mean to startle you. I didn't ask you out and bring you here just to... You know," I said and then smiled with as much sincerity as I could muster. "I really like you. And I thought you liked me."

"I do like you, Sean. A lot. But I—"

There had been a tremor in her voice, and though she tried to say more, all I heard was that she liked me—a lot.

"I'm glad you feel the same. This past week was special. And tonight," I said, placing my hand on her shoulder, "well, tonight we're having a good time. Let's not spoil it. All I want is—"

"Sean, I—I want to go home now."

"Why?" I asked, pulling her closer. "Look at the waves, at the moon. This place is so peaceful. We can talk some more and—"

FICTION

Her scream drove me back with the force of a hard slap. Her entire body was trembling, and when she spoke it was in a small, frightened voice, “Sean, please take me home. Please, I just want to go home now.”

Of all the emotions I felt at that moment, the strongest was sorrow—for myself. I felt as though I’d been cheated; whether for a one-time make out session or the relationship I thought might be building, I can’t say.

“Jesus Christ, are you for real?” I said, no longer able or willing to hold back my frustration. “You’re kidding, right? This is a freaking joke?”

With tears in her eyes and one arm raised defensively over her head, she winced at my words. The idea of her being frightened of me made me angrier. I started the car and said, “Okay, fine! Calm the hell down and I’ll fucking take you home. Just don’t go nuts on me!” I slammed the car into reverse and we flew backwards, then I shifted and the car rocketed forward. Gravel spat out from under the wheels. I turned on the stereo, oblivious to her sobbing as I sped out of the parking lot.

Now her exit is up ahead, and not a moment too soon, because these thoughts, these feelings are driving me crazy. I cut over two lanes, exit the highway, and zigzag through the maze of streets leading to her condo. It’s a nice neighborhood with a lot of big houses and gated complexes. I’m not speeding like before, but I’m going faster than I should. I’m not angry anymore, just annoyed. I want to put her and this night behind me.

No longer crying, she sits without making a sound, staring out the passenger window. I’ve no idea what she’s thinking, and at this point I don’t care. The townhouse her parents bought for her is up ahead on the right in one of the nicest complexes. She rents two of the three bedrooms out to two other girls.

Spoiled, pretty psycho with rich parents—it must be nice.

I consider pulling up to the curb fast and breaking hard, but what’s the point? I mean, I don’t understand why she acted like she did. For that matter, I don’t understand why I got so angry. It’s like my anger fed on itself, getting stronger and taking over. Maybe it was the same with her craziness.

I cruise up to the curb, stopping nice and easy, and wait for her to get out. A part of me wishes this night had ended differently. One minute becomes two and we’re still sitting in the car in front of her townhouse, neither of us talking. I figure she’s trying to work up the nerve to say something. Maybe blame me for being selfish, for ruining the evening, and then she’ll cry as she gets out, shouting so her roommates hear her telling me not to call anymore. Isn’t that the way these rich bitches manipulate things? They make sure everyone thinks you’re the asshole.

“I’m sorry,” she says, breaking the silence.

“Not as much as I am.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her wipe away a tear.

In a whisper she says, “I have a problem.”

I suddenly want to tell her it’s okay, that I’m the one who is sorry, but there’s still anger inside me, not as strong but still there. “Well, whatever it is, good luck with it.”

Silence again. My agitation grows. I’m not sure if it’s because I still feel like she jerked me around, or my growing regret over how I acted, or the awkwardness of this moment. It’s probably all those things and more, but knowing that doesn’t help.

The passenger door opens but she doesn’t leave. After a few more seconds, she says, “I—I was raped two years ago. You’re my first date since—since it happened. I wanted you to know it wasn’t you.”

The street I’m looking at through the windshield seems to waver, like on a hot day when you can see the heat rising from the asphalt. My stomach knots and I can’t catch my breath as her words sink in. Carefully, because I feel like I just stepped off a roller coaster, I turn and look into her eyes. Eyes brimming with tears and embarrassment, as though she has somehow failed. But I don’t think it’s me and my expectations she’s upset about failing. I think it’s herself. I want to reach out, take her hand and tell her I’m sorry. But I can’t because I’m not a man of the world, only some screwed up college junior in over his head. So I sit staring at her. As if someone else is speaking, I hear myself say, “I’m sorry, Grace. I didn’t...”

She wipes at her eyes and shakes her head. “No, don’t be. I—I thought I was ready. I like you, Sean, but— I’m sorry.” Her bottom lip quivers as she starts to say something else, but instead she climbs out without a word. The passenger door closes behind her, and I watch her walk away.