

### **"No Passing Zone"**

A few days before I turned 16, I asked my mom if she would take me to the DMV on my birthday to get my license. She told me to tell my lazy-ass father to do it. I thought about asking, but I knew he'd just yell about being broke and having to cash in some bonds or something, which really had nothing to do with him taking me to the DMV. But he was a yeller. And it didn't matter what came out of your mouth, the exact same thing always came out of his. *No! No! No! I'm broke! I'm broke! I'm broke! Blah! Blah! Blah!* And on and on it went. Besides, he worked 30 miles north of our hometown, and I knew he'd never get back in time to take me before the DMV closed.

So I made up some story about why he couldn't leave work early that day. That he had to do something, with someone, and that my mom was the only one who could take me. That royally pissed-off my mom. But everything pissed her off, especially when it came to my dad. They hadn't been on speaking terms since I was 6 so I knew, she'd never know, I didn't ask.

My mom drove a ginormous, blue, customized van with plush, velour captain seats, aluminum mini-blinds in the back-side windows, running-board trucker lights, a CB radio, and a worthless ladder up the back that only led to getting scolded when climbed. I didn't want to borrow her van for the test, just her. It was my dad's car that I had my eye on. His 1979, no power steering, stick-shift transmission, cracked dashboard, AM-only radio, faded-beige Toyota Tercel was much easier to parallel park. And that was the part of the test I'd heard they were real sticklers about.

I thought about telling my dad that I planned to borrow his car for my test, but I knew he'd get mad. I had already been yelled at for fifteen-thousand things that week, and while one more didn't seem like a big deal, he often spit when he yelled and I couldn't afford to catch his cold. Besides, he'd never know. He carpoled to work every day and when it wasn't his turn to drive (which, that week it wasn't) his car just sat all day at their meeting place in the Kmart parking lot in the middle of town.

My birthday fell on a Wednesday that year. The Wednesday before Thanksgiving, to be exact. Lucky for me it was early dismissal from school that day, which meant at 2:30, I'd be on my way to fulfilling my dream of finally getting my license. Not sure what I'd do with it once I had it because no one in my family was about to let me borrow their vehicle, and there was no way in heck that my penniless pops was going to buy me a car, but I didn't care. I still wanted my license more than anything. Even more than a date with the senior quarterback that I liked, but was too embarrassed to talk to.

The plan was: right when the early dismissal bell rang to let us out for the day, my mom was going to pick me up, we'd go to the Kmart parking lot, switch cars, drive seven minutes to the DMV, she'd wait a few more for me to pass my tests, then we'd boogie back to Kmart where we'd park the Tercel exactly where it was for the last eight hours—I'd have my license, my dad would have his car, and my mom would have something else she could be mad at that my dad didn't do. It was the perfect plan. A simple plan. A doable plan. It was my plan. And after sharing the details with my mom, she promised me that that was "*The Plan*" as well.

It rained hard all morning of my birthday. That was double bad for two reasons: One, the humidity in Central Texas would make my curled-to-perfection, fluffy bangs—flat. And two, it was raining. Some girl in my math class told me that they don't allow you to take your driving test in a torrential downpour. Not really sure why, I thought. That's why they invented windshield wipers. But she always got A's, and I didn't, which worried me that she might be right. Again.

I prayed all morning that the rain would stop. I even told God that he could put this prayer above the one about my crush on the quarterback. And by early afternoon, the clouds parted, just like the Red Sea. When the early dismissal bell rang and let us out for the day I bolted for the predetermined pickup place where I envisioned finding my mom eagerly waiting for me. Not that she had ever eagerly waited for me for anything in my life, but I thought that maybe, perhaps, this time, things would be

different. Carpools came and went but there was no sign of her big blue van. I waited. I prayed. I bitched in silence. Running out of time, and patience, I stormed into the school's office to borrow the phone. I didn't even have to ask the secretary anymore, I just waved and pointed and she nodded her head as if everything was fine. After a few failed attempts of calling my mom's kids clothing store, she finally answered.

"Mom!!!" I screamed as quietly as I could. I told her that she was late and that I've been waiting for her forever, outside.

"Oh grow up, Laura," she replied.

Boy was I trying.

She said that her store got busy and that I'd have to wait. Wait? For what? To be adopted by different parents? I begged. I pleaded. I told her that I had to get my license on my birthday or else I would die. Deep down inside she probably hoped that I would just so she could save a few bucks on raising a child, but then she probably remembered the expense of her parents' funerals.

"Fine, Laura," she said in disgust, "Wait for me outside." Her store wasn't even a mile away. Half an hour later, she arrived.

We pulled into the Kmart parking lot, right next to my dad's Tercel, and without even coming to a complete stop my mom looked over at me and casually said, "Bye."

*Bye? BYE!?* Was she freakin' kidding me, *BYE?!?!?* What did she mean, *bye?* This was when we were both supposed to climb into my dad's Tercel and drive to the DMV. This was when she was supposed to sit in the passenger seat and give me pointers on my last test drive. This was when she was supposed to realize that she had a daughter and finally take interest in my pathetic life. After a few

minutes of arguing and not getting anywhere, I figured, heck, if my mom didn't care that I was driving without a license, then why should I.

I parked my dad's Tercel on the edge of the DMV lot and timidly walked inside. I feared that the people at the DMV would ask where my parents were, and bingo, I was right. I told the lady who was sitting behind the counter that my mom was waiting for me outside. It didn't make any sense. Either did her response of telling me that they don't like administering test in these conditions and that I should come back when they reopen on Monday, when the roads were dry.

Monday? MONDAY? And what, steal my dad's car twice?

"Please," I begged with a crackly voice, "It's my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday." Not an original phrase and I'm sure she had heard it a million times. But it was the first thing I said that day that wasn't a lie. After a few words with her supervisor, she returned to the counter and said, "Okay, fine."

I breezed through the written portion of my test and was gung-ho to do the drive 'n ride. After waiting in the lobby's hard, plastic chairs for what seemed like eternity, an old white-haired guy in a faded, brown uniform walked over to me and told me that he'd be administering the road assessment. I lifted my dad's spare key into the air, shook it, and followed him outside.

The first thing he did was an external examination of the Tercel, to, in his words, "Make sure it was safe to drive." Safe? Of course it was safe. It had brakes and seat belts. What could be unsafe about this beauty? While I didn't know exactly what a safety examination involved, I did know that two of the Tercel's tires were bald, the horn only worked when the wheel was in a certain position, and sometimes you had to pop the clutch to start it because there was something wrong with something-another under the hood. But other than that, in my dad's own words, the car was just fine. I held my breath during the whole inspection. And during a few close encounters, I even clenched tight my eyes.

We climbed into the Tercel and he made a comment about it being a stick. Yep, that's right. A stick. I just knew that I was impressing the heck out of this old guy. I signaled blocks before I was supposed to. Stopped at three yellow lights. Kept my hands at 10 and 2. And didn't even bump the curb when I parallel parked. The only doozie was that the key got jammed in the ignition when I tried to start the car.

"Happens all the time," I reassured the DMV guy as I yanked the wheel left / right / left / right. I wanted to say that it happened an hour prior when I stole my dad's car from the Kmart lot and illegally drove myself to the DMV on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday because my mom had more important stuff to do than raise a child, but instead, I just smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

After returning from the 30-minute tour of our shabby little country town, I expected the old man to compliment me on my expert driving skills and keen road awareness, instead, all I got was a marked up test-checklist citing that I rode the clutch, crossed the invisible yellow line and botched the parallel parking part three times.

What? WHAT? I didn't know what the heck "riding the clutch" meant, and if the yellow line was invisible then how did he know that I crossed it. And the part that really lit my fire was the part about failing to parallel park. That part I aced. And I only tried it once. What a liar! A big, fat, old, smelly liar that was trying to ruin my sweet-sixteenth birthday. I really wanted to give the old guy a piece of my mind. But more than taking a stand, I wanted take a seat. Behind the wheel of my dad's Tercel, that is. I needed to get my license and get the heck out of there. And since I passed the test with two points to spare, I saw no point in trying to change his mind. I got a C. I passed. Just like in school. Good enough. I was more worried about the time than the grade anyway.

After thanking the old guy for almost failing me, I followed him inside. I filled out the forms. Fluffed my hair. Smiled for the camera. And pulled out my crumpled-up five.

"It's eight," the DMV lady said as she tapped her Lee press-on nails on the counter.

"Eight?" I questioned loudly while shaking inside. "But my mom told me it was only five."

Before I got out of her van in the Kmart parking lot I asked my mom for money, but she refused to give it to me. She told me to use my own money. I reminded her that I didn't have any. She reminded me that she didn't either. Finally, after a bunch of back and forth, she dug into her wallet and tossed me a five. I told her that I thought it was more than that, but more is what she refused to give me. She said that is all she gave my brother last year when he got his license, and that was all she was going to give me. Tired of hearing her tirade about how everyone in life cheats her out of something, I took what she offered and I slithered out of her sight!

There was nothing in my wallet but my student ID and the fake credit cards that came with the lousy thing. I asked if I could pay them the rest later so I could get my license and drive home that night. I couldn't. I asked if I could use the phone to call my mom to get more money. I couldn't do that either. They had a pay phone. I didn't have any quarters. And they weren't into making change for a five. After a few moments of heart-racing silence I finally looked up from the ground and said the only thing that I could, "Have a great day. Goodbye."

"Goodbye?" the woman said, a bit perplexed. As I continued to walk towards the door she motioned for me to stop and hollered, "There's no bye. Hon, you can't drive."

But I had to. That was the plan. Pass my test. Get my license. And drive back to Kmart before my dad arrived. I had no money. I had no way to get any more. I had my dad's car. I had to leave. End of story. So there. Goodbye.

The old lady remembered me saying that my mom was waiting for me outside. I told her she only stayed for a while then left, which made about as much sense as her waiting for me outside in the

first place. Since my picture had already been snapped, I didn't care if now I cried. With eyes welling up with tears, the lady pushed the phone across the counter and said, "Fiiiiiiiiine. But just this one time." Oh trust me, I wanted to say, I have no plans to ever come back to this pigsty.

My mom wouldn't take me to the DMV in the first place so I really doubted that she'd head out there now. But I had to try. Thank God for her one and only clothing-store employee, Millie. Millie was a year older than me and worked at my mom's shop part-time. I told her what happened and asked her to close up the store and bring me some money. I requested a five. I could only imagine Millie showing up with just the right amount and the annoyed DMV lady raising the price.

"Hurry," I said nervously. It was a few minutes past five.

Eternity passed. Millie still hadn't arrived. The lady said that they were closing for the day and that I had to come back on Monday. Come back? Thanks to them, I couldn't leave.

"Is someone coming to get you?" the lady asked for the tenth time.

Probably not, I thought, and once again began to cry. Moments later, Millie arrived. She hurled herself against the bullet-proof glass, waving a crisp five. The DMV lady kept saying that they're closed and that she'd only unlock the door for me to exit, and not for this ADD-ridden adolescent to enter. Millie pleaded. I pleaded. I pleaded some more. After a few huffs and puffs the lady let Millie in and snatched the money. She went back behind her perch, signed the permit, asked me to do the same, and with a long, hard breath, said "Goodnight, girls. And goodbye!!!"

Goodbye? There was nothing *good* about this *bye*. "Can I have my change, please," I asked, timidly as hell. I hated asking for money. I especially hated asking for something back that was already mine. But I knew my mom would ask for all of it back, so I wanted all of it back as well.

She proceeded to tell me that the cash box has been counted and locked and that no more change could be given until Monday—which made about as much sense as all of my lies. Millie plopped down into one of the hard plastic chairs and began to cry. Sick of teens and tears, and more than ready to go home for the long holiday weekend, the lady reached into her purse and handed me two bucks in quarters, nickels and dimes. She ushered us out the door and with my license in hand and I could finally say the one word she had been waiting to hear since the moment I arrive, "GOODBYE!!!"

Once around the corner, I thanked Millie for turning on the tears to help get my money back; that's when she told me that she was crying because she just got pulled over for speeding and spent ten minutes talking her way out of the ticket. I told her I was sorry for what happened and offered her my pocket full of change. She declined. Thank god.

By the time I left the DMV I was shaking. By the time I pulled into the Kmart parking lot, my dad was. And it wasn't because he was cold and wet from the rain that crept back in for the evening. I figured his fuming temper would dry him off, it didn't. He tried drying his glasses with his soaked shirt, which only made them more wet, and him more mad. I don't remember what he was screaming about, probably something to the effect that I was a worthless piece of poo and all I did was lie, cheat and steal. Normally, I'd disagree with that statement. That day, I only disagreed with the cheating part.

Thinking his car was stolen when his carpool dropped him off, dad called the cops, which located his not-really stolen car five minutes into our lovely drive home. Fortunately the cop recognized my dad from all the times he came to our house to break up my parent's fights. Not only did my mom constantly threaten to divorce my dad and throw his stinking-ass in jail, occasionally she'd follow through with the call part. My dad told the cop that it was all a misunderstanding, that his wife and daughter borrowed his car, and that everything was fine.

Fine? FINE? Nothing in the Van Loh household was ever fine. This escapade was going to go on long into the night. Most likely, some remnant of it would haunt me for the rest of my life. From the moment I caught sight of my convulsing father trembling in the rain in the middle of the deserted Kmart parking lot, I knew that I could kiss being wished a Happy Birthday, goodbye. But, I did have my license. And finally, I was legal to drive.