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2778 words
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Juan During Twenty Lessons

by

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Juan waits outside at 8:15. It is our first day and he is confident that not only can I drive along the side streets of Forest Hills in Queens, New York, but that I will go right through a ten lane, two-way intersection during morning rush hour and remember who has priority. Anna, the 7:15 lesson is sitting behind me. Soon we are on a very fast parkway passing Shea Stadium to my left, my efforts to follow right are almost linear.

Twenty years earlier, my first driving lesson had been with my father. Within the first hour behind the wheel of the stationwagon he had me driving in the fast lane of the expressway. The other cars made me nervous on my first day and I began accelerating to get away from them. It didn't work. There were always more in front and to the side. My father finally was able to get the car coasting at the speed limit. Lessons at home were usually limited to one and under an hour. Once, when I was five years old I was left with my father for a few hours. He decided to teach me how to write in script the entire alphabet, before my mother returned from her visit to the doctor. It did not go well, so he locked me in the bathroom with lined paper and pencil waiting, with a warning that he would only let me out once I had written out the alphabet. During the day, he came in and checked a few times. The long line of the first leg of the 'A' which would have to not go beyond the undotted top line and whose second leg would have to match it. Then the roundness of the first sideways arc of the 'B' which could not go below the dotted line and the second arc after that which would have to stop at the line after the dotted one. When Mom

came home she let me out. In the same year, he decided I should know how to swim. We went to the beach, we went in together as usual, and I thought he would hold me up to float and dog-paddle as usual. A wave started to roll in towards me, and he started walking away. He had taken me deeper in the water than before, my toes could not reach the sandy floor. I needed him to hold me up. He shouted towards me that if I didn't start to swim the wave would take me. Mother's teaching techniques were similar; my-seven year old sister was pushed off the third tier of a diving board, even after she made Mom promise not to throw her off.

Juan instructs me to pull alongside into a conclave of semi-detached houses with garages, all with several cars whose parts are in the process of being dismantled from one to make another one whole. I have accomplished an act in my first driving class: I drove someone home.

In the next two weeks, Juan and I will spend twenty hours in the beige, two-brake pedalled, four-door driving school car owned by his boss, Mario. We move on to another area of Queens; detached larger homes, no gutted cars, and Juan prepares for our next hour and forty-five minutes. He goes through dozens of tapes and under October sun and green going-to-yellow leaves we listen to Hank Williams' "Your Cheatin' Heart" and I then can decide I can drive. He listens to Country Music in the car because his wife doesn't like it at home.

To teach parking he chooses a large, dented, rusted car in a semi-abandoned industrial area: plenty of space, no hidden fire hydrants. The first attempts, he later comforts, are not too easy. Juan doesn't dance Country, he just likes to listen. We don't sing to our favorites yet.

We drive to a red brick building area and pick up Roberto. His father is proud and is almost able to hide his anxiousness over possible headlines. I read Juan's *Daily News* in the back. Juan reminds Roberto to use two hands while driving. This is Roberto's first lesson, and

he likes to drive only with one hand, he says. Juan reminds Roberto that one-handed driving is automatic failure for the test. Roberto drives me two handed to my dad's semi-detached.

I promise Juan I'll practice parking with my dad's stationwagon. My father agrees to let me drive, and backs out the car from the tight garage and I get in. The gear shift is not near my thigh but on the wheel and the emergency brake is not on my rightside but my lower left. Then a fire truck with blasting siren stops right by me and honks, it cannot get past because the car is too far out in the lane. I cannot move fast enough with one day's lesson and the truck must figure out how to squeeze by me. I go around the block, the car stalls on a curve. I don't stop quick enough on my first 90-degree parking and jump the curve, pedestrians rightly glare at me. I ask my father to drive us home.

The following day, I explain to Juan that I will not have the use of my father's car because it's at the mechanic's. Juan said he's amazed at the excuses father's invent not to give their cars to daughters. Sons are usually taught by fathers and then only need a few hours of lessons, but the girls all go through the full twenty hours of the school. As we laugh I pull out from a stationary position without signaling left while the student in the back discusses possibilities for paying Juan another day. Juan explains, that it is never possible. Two streets further on, he reminds me I must always signal from a stationary position. I drop off Miguel at his job, a Mexican-Peruvian fast food restaurant under the El train tracks. I try carefully moving around double-parked cars, trucks and pedestrians crossing in the middle of the street. But the roar of the subway as it reverbrates from above my head to my ears when it begins to be caught between the valley of buildings makes me accelerate instead of braking on red. Juan brakes.

Juan warns me never to eat at that restaurant, the grease - rancid. Since we are working through lunch, I brought along some bananas. Juan does not want one. He never eats on the job, nor does he drink any liquids. He worries about his breath in the closed up car. He worries about having gas. And toilets are not easy to find. He eats only a quick, safe

breakfast and later dinner. As we drive over to the industrial area to practice parking and U-turns, I again forget a hidden STOP sign. It is one, he reminds me for the second time, that a student automatically failed the test because of. It is not near a corner at all but rather in the middle of the block, under sycamore branches. Further along at an intersection a car blares at me for hesitating while I work out priorities. At the next light, the same car; large, battered tinted side windows, impatiently honks again as he passes me on a very red light. Juan explains that the driver can do that because he probably has already lost his license and then just racks up fines for driving without a license. Television cops had taught me that would be an impossibility in the USA (ok, maybe it could be possible in Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia).

I set up to park alongside a sports car - a dented one. It really does not work at all this time. Juan explains the problem: the driver had parked at an angle away from the sidewalk, so if I try to follow the rules for parking, it will never work, I must compensate for the driver's sloppiness and re-calculate. My difficulties with this calculation continues for the following three lessons. Only after I am comfortable with sloppy parkers am I allowed to park anywhere near a new car. It is a four-X-four and just as I turn my head to the front to shift into Drive, the owner comes out of the house in a plaid-flannel shirt and glares at Juan and me. I pull out of my parking spot and am about to follow our old procedure of reparking in the same place, but Juan says with new cars you don't do that. The owner finally lets out his breath as we leave. "It is not nice to put him through it again," Juan says.

We have now begun to listen to French Cajun music and Juan asks if I understand what they say, and is pleased with my simultaneous translation. I drive to a mechanic's garage and pick up Tony. He too must drive under the EI, and he does not speak. From the back seat I see that his neck is rigid and his jaws are muscled locked. On his first right turn, Juan must brake the car as it coasts almost into a parked car. Tony's left turns are tense also.

Later Juan says, " Tony didn't say a word for one hour and a half." Juan says tension is never a problem, but it bothers him when students don't engage.

The in-between-branches-and-leaves light that falls on the car distracts me from prioritizing rights of way. I raise the volume on Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire" and sing along. Juan and I make plans for attaching the leaves to the car. Spot supergluing each individual leaf to the car, we realize, does not work; the wind will eat up all the unspotted edges. Then after seeing an ivy-covered building, we briefly discuss that possibility, but agree the upkeep of watering the car and all the extra weight of the soil for potting the ivy in the trunk is not viable. Juan suggested the best solution: tarring the entire car then driving under falling leaves. I thought we should have a bottle of Retsina and drive around the mountains of upstate New York, after I got a driver's license. Juan agreed.

I drive to the next lesson. I would sit throughout this lesson and continue afterwards. Angelita arrives fifteen minutes late for her forty-five minute lesson with her two small children. Juan explains that he could not possibly have the children in the car, because the insurance does not cover them in case of an accident. Angelita says she was just going to drop them off at the baby sitter's. Juan agrees that it would be possible if it is close by. Angelita stops near a building, gets out and takes the kids to the sitter's. Afterwards, Juan says to turn right. Angelita says, "No. That bitch of my mother-in-law who destroyed my marriage lives just on that street and looks out the window all day." At the following right turn, fleeing that street, Angelita came close enough to hitting a parked car. Juan said, "Its ok, your mother-in-law can't come here, you can relax." Angelita, reassured herself, "It's ok, I'm doing good." When she was far enough away from her mother-in-law, Juan said, " Park." As Angelita set up to park, she explained that she had crashed her husband's car, but it was just one side and a door that had to be replaced. And he divorced her because of that car. After she finished struggling to park the car, Juan opened his door to check the distance from the sidewalk: very far. Angelita said, "I did ok, right, yeah, I am doing good." Juan remained

silent. Angelita into the quiet said, "I'm doing good." I drove Angelita to her home. She was flustered, she explained she had paid for forty-five minutes, it didn't feel like a full lesson. Juan said she was right, but that he was there when the lesson began. Angelita attempted to plead more time by explaining that her test would be the following day. Juan wished her luck.

Glancing under cars as I drive along among the light and leaves, avoiding nut-giddy squirrels, making my way to Astoria to pick up Marta. Juan lets me take care around animals. In the few driving classes I took in Brazil, the instructor scolded me frequently for stopping for pedestrians who had the right of way even if they were crossing the walkway. He explained that I could never do that in Brazil because I would break the flow of traffic and my car would be hit by the car behind me, because cars do not stop for anything. Juan and I waited as Marta undid the seat belt and went back inside to retrieve her student license.

She would have to turn the wheel to the right to back out of the driveway. She turned it to the left. Juan said, "Right." She turned the wheel further to the left. Juan said again, "Right." Marta said it would not move any further. He asked her which was her right hand. She raised her right arm. "Turn right", Juan said. Again she tried to force the wheel to the left. Juan again, asked Marta which was her right hand. Again Marta raised her right arm. Again Juan asked her to turn the wheel to the right. This time Marta did. Juan put on some Salsa music to help Marta relax. Throughout her eighth lesson, there was much confusion about when to turn right and left and remembering stop signs. Juan resigned himself to those three instructions throughout the forty-five minute lesson. Afterwards Juan said, women like Marta go from fathers who never let them have an opinion to husbands who do whatever they want with them. After my lesson, Gloria got in to drive me home. She automatically readjusted the rearview mirror to where she could see her entire face reflected, and checked her lipstick. Juan's patience was stretched after Marta. "This mirror is for cars not your lips." Rights, lefts and stops were smoother during this lesson.

Next day, Juan assured me that stress was never a problem. To prove his point, he said that his best friend only had his first heart attack a week after he retired. Lack of circulation in the legs was what I thought would be difficult to endure, after trying to regain my balance each time I left the car. (I thought that cowboys did the languid back stretching when they dismounted from their horses only because it looked good on the screen.) No, his legs didn't bother him, he walked around the car between lessons. The main problem for the instructors was hemorrhoids. Over-the-counter remedies do not seem to help. Juan said that they discovered that toothache medicine applied to the area deadens the pain for almost the entire day.

We meandered along tree-lit streets, listening to our favorite tape of Hank Williams again, " ...to melt your cold, cold heart." We sang along. I parked along an undented car. I began pulling out in a higher speed than other times. The car shot out in reverse and Juan braked it before it hit a fire hydrant.

The following day would be the last lesson before the test. Juan had me drive out to the street with the hidden stop sign. At the sycamore branch with the reddish glow behind, I stopped. Juan explained mistakes of former students on the test day. One student tried to bribe the examiner. The student later explained to Juan that in Panama he would have had to offer some money. Juan said, "We went through this already, and what did I say, 'It doesn't work like that.'" Another student on her eleventh test, without the examiner saying anything, decided to turn left. Later, Juan explained to her that the examiner said she had been doing ok until she turned. "Why did you?", asked Juan. She said the examiner had her just going straight on and she thought it was time to try something else. Juan said if the offense was minor a short skirt would help. I asked if I could ride in the car all day long. He said, no, because the insurance only covered the instructor and students, and technically I would not be a student.