

## Speed Limit

“No, no, no! You’re supposed to shoulder check first, *then* signal! What if there was a biker or some motorcyclist in your blind spot and you run them over? Road kill is nothing to joke about you know!” Layan cringed, resisting the urge to scream in frustration.

*I DID do a shoulder check! You just weren’t watching me!* She gripped the gear stick tighter, matching the force her jaw was applying to her teeth.

Jarl, her driving instructor, sighed and eased up in his seat. However, Layan knew that his right foot poised above the instructor’s brake would never ease up, not with her. Thirty seconds into her driving lesson and she already had their blood pressure shoot sky high. Well, at least it felt that way.

“Sorry about that. I think I drank too much caffeine this morning.” He attempted a joke, but she wasn’t in the mood to laugh. “Hey, don’t worry; you’ll get used to it. Just remember, check –”

“Check mirrors, signal, shoulder check, then perform manoeuvre – yes, I *know* all that!” Layan refrained from crying in frustration, knowing that Jarl was already extremely patient for having endured 42 lessons with her already. She knew; she was counting.

She was sure he secretly was as well.

She heard Jarl exhale, voicing his own patient frustration.

“At least you remember it. Calm down, and I’m sure you’ll be able to perform it without having to think about the steps one day.”

*Yeah, as if that would ever happen.* “Okay. Well, let’s try that again after turning left at this junction.” Layan complied, pressing her foot down on the accelerator before checking her rear mirror for the umpteenth time. She literally *checked*, lifting her entire head and staring for a full 3 seconds at the backwards-tunnelling scenery. “Hey, keep your eyes on the road – we do want to stay alive by the end of this lesson you know.” He chuckled nervously, throwing a smile to try to pacify her.

*That’s all he does nowadays. Grinning like a fool.* Scowling her heart, she tried to refrain from throwing his words back at him.

*“Make sure you make it obvious that you’re checking your mirrors, or the examiner might not notice it and fail you right after the exam!”* *Yeah, right.* “Sorry about that. I was just checking my rear mirror. At least there aren’t many cars around today,” she replied, preparing herself to perform the same manoeuvre again.

“Yeah. Besides, if there were, I’m sure they’d all be gone by now.” Jarl said this light-heartedly, but Layan couldn’t really tell whether he was joking or insulting her. This seemed to be happening with increasing frequency, but whether it was due to his patience wearing down or to her masked annoyance building up she didn’t know. “Okay, wait for my signal...and go for the lane change now!”

Nibbling subconsciously on her bottom lip, she checked her mirrors, signalled, shoulder checked, and oh-so-slowly leaned her steering wheel slightly towards the right. They waited in bated silence as she eased the steering wheel back to the centre and turned off the light signal. She didn't dare look at him as she accelerated, hoping that he wouldn't pick at her faults again, especially not inattentive ones.

“Yes! *That's* it! Now you've just got to remember the feeling and do it again and again in the real thing! And for the rest of your driving career of course. Or maybe you'd drop all these habits once you finally manage get rid of me.” Jarl chuckled, and out of the corner of her eye, Layan saw him throw her a cheesy grin. She sighed to herself in relief, but couldn't help wondering at the tired tone of his voice, as if he said that just to encourage her. “I know I did when I got my driving license. But maybe you shouldn't know that. It was annoying to relearn everything again though just to teach it to other people, but remember – driving is like riding a bicycle; you won't forget once you've learned the basics!”

*Tell me something I don't know, for once.* “Okay. You should know the route by now; pass the next junction but turn right at Mulberry street.”

Making sure that her speed was below the speed limit, she relaxed slightly, hoping to focus solely on her driving. Cruising along at a comfortable 45 kilometres per hour, she was just about to thank God when her hopes were dashed when he, as he almost inevitably did each time, asked her a question.

“So. How have you been lately? I know that I asked you already, but you only gave an ‘okay’. Care to elaborate?”

*I only said 'okay' for a reason...* Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, she deigned him an answer, as she always inevitably did.

“Well, that's because I was simply ‘okay’ this week. Nothing much happened; maybe I did the odd chore at home, did some homework and played a few games with Lyra. My life's pretty boring. Except the driving lessons. It's like trying to survive a war each time.” Jarl laughed at her joke, not noticing the dripping sarcasm.

“Hey, you're getting better at it, trust me. Remember your first lesson when you – ” *Here it comes, this same old stupid story. I just wish that it wasn't me who made it.* “ – mistook the signal stick for the windscreen wiper one, and freaked out at the sudden movement so spontaneously parked in the middle of the crossroad? I think the traffic warden was intentionally trying to destroy our eardrums with her whistle! Hahaha!” He snorted his laughter at the memory, although Layan could only manage to smile between her teeth. Each laugh seemed more like an insult to her nowadays, but because of the patience and tolerance Jarl had shown her all these weeks, she endured it.

“Hey, that was my first try! And at least I didn't crash and kill the both of us. Would you rather me have done that instead?” she retorted testily, yet keeping the malice out of her voice. Jarl simply smiled a ‘no thank you very much’ and proceeded to ask about her chores, what games she played with her sister, etcetera.

“So, what do you want to be when you grow up? A violinist? No, wait...that was the other girl I teach. Cellist? Ummm...”

“Actuary, remember? People who try to predict and form probabilities about the future of stock or other stuff using mathematical calculations?” She rolled her eyes. It was the 35<sup>th</sup> time that she had told him, and it had almost gotten past the point where she wanted to throw her arms up (mentally of course; she didn’t dare let go of the wheel) and say that she would grow up to be a girl who milked goats all day for a mad scientist studying about the alchemy of turning goat’s milk into yellow ponies. *However, I can only imagine what he goes through trying to teach me the same thing over and over again* her heart whispered to her. *He’s just getting old...*

“Ahh yes! That’s it! This new-fangled job that I can never remember. My own daughter was never good at maths, and she – OH! Layan! You missed the turning!” He cried out in alarm, almost causing her to jerk her arms and send them careening off the road.

“What the – shoot!” She trembled in response, thankful that she hadn’t shot past a red light, but extreme worry at going the wrong way was flooding through her veins at every passing lamppost. “Damn it; sorry! I was kinda distracted...” She stole a glance at Jarl and caught him rubbing at his temples wearily.

“Well, it isn’t too bad, we’ll just go down a different route. You’d have to get used to it anyway. Once you pass your exam, of course. But still, we’ve gone down that route so many times already! It should be reflexive by now...” He rambled on about something, but Layan was too angry to listen.

*If he wanted me to know these routes by heart, then he should stop distracting me so much! He knows I’m not good at multi-tasking; he knows that I didn’t learn stick shift because of it and yet he still tests me!* She was at the end of her tether now, and was sorely tempted to slam on the brakes, get off the car and walk home under a dark cloud of built-up rage, aggravation and despair.

“Layan? Layan, are you spacing out?” Snapping back to reality, she suddenly felt all her pent-up emotions drain away, leaving her vulnerable and lost.

“I...I’m ok.” She swallowed, trying not to break down and cry.

“Good. Well, now that you’ve taken a different path, let’s see you overtake this snail-paced lorry. Remember – the mirror check, signal, shoulder check, manoeuvre...”

Now quite, quite devoid of emotions, Layan checked the mirror, signalled, shoulder checked, changed lanes, sped up, shoulder checked, signalled again, returned to the original lane and overtook the lorry.

She was tired. Tired of her instructor, tired of giving him reasons to make her tired of him, tired with herself for being such a slow learner when it came to motor skills, but most of all, tired of driving. She simply couldn’t care anymore, even if Jarl scolded her again and again. *It’s not as if I will ever be able to please him all the time anyway, so why bother trying?*

“That was *amazing!* Very smooth and confident! Why didn’t you do this before? It seems like I’m finally getting through to you! You’ll have to buy me a thank-you present after all...ha ha! Don’t worry; I’m just joking...but I’m glad that all my efforts paid off.”

*Yeah, why do I bother...what?* She glanced at him, dumbfounded. He was even *patting her back* in congratulations, grinning all the time. Speechless, she could only stare at the road in front of her, wondering if losing her mind really helped her driving skills.

“Oh, by the way, there’s a roundabout coming up so you can do a U-turn there, and we can head back! At this rate, I honestly think you can pass! Remember this calmness; don’t be so worried all the time!”

*And whose fault is it for making me so worried?* Layan’s shoulders shrank, because even if she could deny it until she burned in hell for excessive lying, she would still know who truly is to blame.

She lacked the skill. Despite her way with numbers, her effortless use of formulas and axioms, her dexterity with calculus...*I guess there’s always a glass ceiling for each person.*

Almost, so gently, yet so subtly without thinking, she neared the roundabout, entered successfully, turned a full 180°, before...

***SCREEEEEEEEEEEEECCH!!!***

“WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?!” The fury of an enraged driver of a convertible stabbed her ears, his car swerving before he hit her. Her car, on the other hand, had screeched to a complete standstill.

“Ouch!” The aftershock of the seatbelt hit her with full force now, her mind skipping a few moments of memories. “What the...?”

“Ugh...that was close...too close.” Layan looked over at Jarl, at the expression reflecting her own stunned one on her face. But in an instant, it was gone. Whirling his head towards her with a speed that she was sure he’d get whiplash for, he took a deep breath. And literally *roared* at her.

“You IDIOT! How many times did I tell you to look and signal first *before* you change lanes to exit the roundabout? If I didn’t have a brake on my side of the car, we could have crashed into that other car!! My Lord, WHY do you have to make things so difficult?! It’s just a simple roundabout that we’ve been through countless times already! Why can’t you get any of this? I just don’t understand it! For all those math brains you have, you can’t even handle a car! And an automatic one at that! Out of all the students I’ve taught so far, I swear, I’ve spent the longest time with you and...” Jarl continued on and on, regardless of the feelings he was trampling all over with spiked boots.

Parked by the cemented platform of the roundabout, Layan could only swallow hard and watch quietly at all the other vehicles speeding by, smoothly changing to the outer lane just to avoid her car.