

Discomfort From Behind by Natetra Ly

He went with the flow, attempting to mirror the proper way to drive; his eyes were fixed on the distant vehicles ahead. It was the student's third driving practice. A Friday afternoon. *A black SUV behind me, the 40 mile speed limit sign, the gold lines separating the road, a wrinkled pearl plastic bag clinging against the curb. Observe, observe, observe.* His hands swayed along the black leathered wheel; his mind wandered from topic to topic. *I want to get this over with. I wish I could be able to drive for real.* All he could do was wait. All he could do was practice. Thoughts of negativity rambled inside his mind as he was in control; circling in an endless cycle of hopelessness. A deep gulp erupted from within. Something was building up.

"When you see the bright yellow sign with curved arrows on a sharp turn, what do you do?" the instructor asked. It became warm. "You slow down and go when it's safe...right?" the student replied. With a gentle tone, the instructor responded, "Not quite. You slow down and turn the steering wheel carefully." "Do you know why you slow down?" says the instructor. "No, I'm not sure" the student hesitantly replied. He wrapped his hands tightly on the steering wheel, searching if there was anything to help him; if there was anything to accompany him. He didn't get the answer right. "It's because you want to be able to control the vehicle when you make that sharp turn." Drops of sweat rushed down his neck and into his white collared shirt. His mind still rushing to understand the instructor's words, he suddenly stomped the brakes, jolting the instructor forward. He still believed that yielding before a sharp turn was the safe route. He hopped at the sound of the obnoxious honk that screamed from behind. It was black SUV.

It became hot. There was this intensity in the atmosphere; this unknown pressure in the air. Someone was watching. The student knew it. "It's alright. You just have to be more careful. Continue" said the instructor. The understanding tone of the instructor eased the student a bit; it was reassuring.

The instructor inspected every glimpse of movement from the student, tracing his eyes and his reaction; attempting to understand his mindset. He glances at the rear mirror. *There's no one behind me. I should be good, right?* His head was meticulously stationed at the glass from above, aiming to achieve perfection. The car was accelerating.

"STOP! STOP! STOP! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

He froze at the *different* instructor. Time stopped. Breaths slowly vanished as he gradually became aware of the situation. His hands gripped the steering wheel tightly as he was drenched in sweat. He frantically moved the wheel left, right, left, right. *What do I do?! I can't control it!* His foot locked onto the accelerator. *This is the end.*

There was a loud screech against the dirt as the braking system clashed with the accelerator. He gulped as he licked his chapped lips, facing solely at the clear windshield. Tears began swelling, running down his cheeks. He turned his head toward the instructor. A long cold sigh was all that came. *I hate myself. Why did I do that?* It wasn't right. He didn't learn anything. There was no hope.

It was quiet. There was no smoke. Nothing. The instructor exited the car and inspected the front of the vehicle. There was a small dent. The student was stiff; his back locked to the blazing seat. His posture shouted "failure." Countless cars zoomed past as rocks flinged to the crosswalks. The instructor returned into the vehicle and looked at the student with an enigmatic

smile. It was silent. “You did okay. The damage was minimal and the reaction time you had was surprising.”

Thoughts disappeared from existence; there was no trace of consciousness. *What? What happened?* His heart fluttered with relief. His shoulders instantly dropped; it was so calming. With one hand on the steering wheel, he grasped one side of his shoulder, letting out a muffled sigh.

The pressure died down. The storm subsided against the shining sun looming over the mystical tree. They made it. *He* made it. *We survived.* The car was completely intact; the minuscule dent was the only defect. Imagine if the situation had gone just a bit differently. If there was no braking, no indication of panic. If the student didn’t brake, what would happen? If the instructor stayed mellow and professional, what would happen? These thoughts processed deeply in the student. *The most important thing about driving is not just to observe, but to relax.* He now understood the responsibility; the unknown pressure that he must endure and adapt to. With a light grin on his face, the student carefully re-entered the road. The two laughed and continued the session with a lively and comforting atmosphere.