

Driving Lessons

It is 5 am. You are sitting bare, exposed in K's lap in the driver's seat of his pick up truck at the top of a hill in Carson - a petro-industrial plantation in southern California. A thin layer of sweat gives your sable skin a refined sheen. As the mist inside the truck windows begins to clear, you see inhabitants in pressed clothes and polished shoes emerging from their warm abodes, out into the morning to their cars. They can see their own breaths as they greet their neighbors across the street. You are coming down to the morning while they are waking up to it.

You'd better put on your clothes, at least your shirt.

When you see your uncle, a maintenance man at the Shell Carson Refinery, emerging from the house, you duck. K quickly puts on his shirt.

The sky grows from dim to violet. It is 5 am and you turn your head and look out over Carson, the city where you grew up as that litl' tar baby girl, to see a jungle of oil refineries and clusters of industrial parks in the distance. There is no bustling financial district, no downtown high rises or sky scrapers here. Instead, the Carson skyline is an assemblage of oil derricks, tank farms, enormous metallic anthills and beehives of distillation, reforming, cracking, coking, alkylation and blending.

The halogen glow of the street lamps dims just as the sun slowly becomes luminous, its beams spreading like butter across lawns, rooftops, resting its rays against the refineries. By 10 am the light will fully reflect the great metallic leviathans and the image will be so blinding that the American flag hanging like a billboard on the north side of the BP compound is rendered invisible.

Your eyes rest on Broad Acres Elementary School - the elementary school you attended about 20 years ago. It has always been virtually all Black - except for 1 Korean girl and 1 white boy both in your grade -- with you as the darkest and K as the highest yellow; the two extremes of the spectrum. You used to be called the field nigga and he the house nigga. You wondered if birthright entitled you to getting your ass kicked on a weekly - sometimes daily - basis. Eventually K's family moved into a white neighborhood in Orange County and the Korean girl went to Los Angeles High School, their families were upwardly mobile. But your family stayed in the hood. So you had to learn to fight, duck and run.

Thus you wanted out. You wanted out so bad you took extra part time jobs to save up for a car. The running turned into cycling turned into driving and you got out, you drove very fast to the other side of the continent, all over. Running red lights, speeding. The reckless, stoned out accidents. You didn't stop. Eventually your flagrant disregard for authority pissed the law off and they revoked your license.

It's been 8 years since you have driven - enough time has elapse so that your driving record has been wiped clean. In order to regain your license, you must pass the test. To be on the safe side, you sign up for driving lessons. You tell them you are a night person, you work best at night. So they schedule you a short refresher course - - 3 lessons plus vehicle rental for the DMV driving test -- with their nighttime driving instructor. He agrees to meet you at 10 pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays. After all, everyone knows the best time to drive in Southern California is between the hours of 11 pm and 5 am.

When you meet your driving instructor on Tuesday, at first you think you recognize him, but you are not sure.... He turns out to be K - the high yellow boy from Broad Acres. Back then, he was the skinny, nappy blonde, you used to call him “brace face.” All the other kids used to call him “puddin’ head.” Now, you observe the man, tall and lean, athletic build, all-American smile, still fair-haired, wearing Dockers and a Polo shirt - workin’ that O.C. look. Some say, you can run but you cannot hide. Well, you may have run, but K’s the one hiding.

The way he introduces himself indicates that he doesn’t remember you (and why should he...after all you were only the *darkest* of a thousand little black girls at the school), so you don’t mention it.

K says to you, “I know you have experience and this is all review - just think of it as a refresher, be open minded about it.” You just want to pass your test and get your license back, so you listen intently as he outlines his plan. “Tonight we will review basic car instruments and rules of the road. If we get through this quickly enough, we will go over parallel parking. That may be all we have time for tonight. Next session, we will practice on residential streets and surrounding business districts. In the last session, we will survey the freeways before doing a review of parking and a practice test.”

He is telling you all this as he drives you over to the large empty student parking lot on the south side of Cal State Dominguez looking down on the refineries. Once there, K matter-of-factly shows you the vehicle’s headlight switch, windshield wipers, defroster and emergency flashers.

He saunters around to the front of the car, pops the hood and points out the truck's internal organs: oil cap, air filter, battery. "Litl' junk in the trunk...Is it fully loaded?" you murmur as you each get out of the car.

He ignores your smart retort instead answering a question with a question: "Do you know your arm signals and how use the vehicle's turn signal lights?" You demonstrate, then you have to do what is known as a three-point turn: back up in a straight line and practice turning the vehicle around as you would on a narrow two-way street to park on a hill.

You find it difficult to park parallel. In fact, it makes you wonder how the Korean girl from Broad Acres fared out. You imagine you are her, probably in Santa Monica or Silver Lake, squinting over the wheel, either starting out too forward or not forward enough, and swinging either too close or too wide, not being decisive enough. After K's demonstration and your inept practice, you see that it is around midnight. You ask K to show you the freeways, take you to the beach.

And he does because he is a night person too.

You are not one to cruise Crenshaw or MLK. Instead, he drives you down the 110 Freeway to Long Beach where you have a few drinks at a jazz bar along Pacific Coast Highway. He tells you the driving instruction gig is his day job. What he really wants to do is write.

You quip, "Edgar Doctorow said that writing a novel is like driving a car at night -- You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the entire journey that way."

You prattle on about driving into a song, warm breeze blowing through your braids, the upward grades and windy turns, the periodic road-kill which you swerve to avoid. You like driving into sunsets and dramatic skies with every cloud in place, or along the coast alongside perfectly plump moons. You tell him you like driving in your car alone along the Angeles Crest Highway on a late October afternoon, when the filtered light comes through the trees. You like the feeling of coming from behind in passing lanes and the feeling of arriving at your destination, your arms tired and burning. You like being from somewhere else. You like when your tank is half full with gasoline and the rest filled with fumes, gaseous space. You like the jutting signs powerful with grace and authority. You want the song to turn into a soundtrack where every word, rhythm and tempo makes sense.

You both get drunk and restless. K begins to stroke your arm and play finger games from across the table.

When the bar closes, K drives you to the pier and you both walk out to the end of it. You kiss and talk more. He tells you about a short story he wants to write: “The story is about sex, but its not about sex, its about the ulterior motives behind sex.”

K has this theory that women are raised to know how to deal with men, how to stroke a man’s ego, make him feel powerful, deal with his insecurities, not to chastise him - in order to get what she wants. It’s a biological thing: women are always trying to get what *they* want; and men are always trying to get what *they* want. It translates into a type of emotional materialism, a type of economics in which men are trying to reap short term profits, while women are looking towards the long term gains. The

only thing is that growing up, what men learn on the streets about women really ain't about women. Women are always in control.

You pay attention as K works out his thoughts, "In my story, I want to show how a woman makes a man feel like he is independent, but it's all a ruse. The man grows to need her, he grows dependent - on the food, the sex, the care, the emotion.... When he goes out into the world, he comes back to the woman because he needs the feeling of power and independence that she provides."

While K continues, his hand creeps up your shirt, he pulls your bra up to expose your breasts and explores, fondling, squeezing your nipples. Your complexion is so dark, he can't tell where your nipples begin except for the shape. He has you up against the pier railing, your legs apart, he grinds up against you.

When the sea breeze turns nippy, he drives you home. He parks two houses up the hill from your aunt's house and you converse, indulging in a protracted game of "Seven Minutes in Heaven."

The contest starts out with him in the driver's seat and you in the passenger seat but advances to the stage where you can't help but climb onto K's lap in the driver's seat. You forget your hair. You grow hot and bothered from the inside and your clothes feel sticky so you shed them. He takes off your shirt and bra, continuing kissing your breasts. You unbutton his shirt and kissed his neck and chest. You unbutton his fly and find that he is not wearing underwear. He puts his hands around your waist and begins thrusting his pelvis upwards. You are already breathing heavily, but as he kept thrusting, you start to moan and quiver.

"Come," he whispers in your ear.

You can't believe your ears. You murmur, "K, you are driving me crazy. You are going to make me lose control."

He looks you dead in the eye and asks, "What's holding you back?"

His eyes are shining, the expression on his face is of arousal -- animalistic, slightly diabolical. He opens his eyes wide with desire, licks his lips and repeats, "You're so sexy. I love watching you this way."

Your body takes it as a challenge. Your thrusting becomes mutual, and your shivering turns into uncontrollable shaking. You begin to call his name over and over.

You come. Trembling and gasping.

When you regain consciousness, you find that the sun is yawning and stretching, people are coming out of their homes and starting up their cars to warm the engines up and go to work.

You dress. You wait until your uncle drives off, then you open the passenger door to leave.

K tells you that you should be able to pass the driving test after a couple more lessons. He asks you, "Still on for Thursday night?"

You cogitate... K's theory on men and women. Gender Economics: the study of people's behavior in the pursuit of satisfying their needs and wants in a condition of scarcity. There is the need for procreation and the desire for sex. There are supply-demand relationships, there are choices and opportunity costs, there are inflation and under-employment trends.

In this paradigm, There is No Such Thing as a Free Lunch. Love is real, but there is always a price. “There is always some kind of compromise.” - That’s how K words it. Humanity used to operate on the barter system, but in the modern economy, things are just so cut-throat. This has become a market where you must have great haggling skills so you don’t get ripped off. Some people pay too much. When a woman finds love, she often devises a plan on how to capture it with all her might. Even you have acted this way in the past but as you have gotten older, you have become conscious of the fact that love is not always such a great bargain.

You know that men have a rotation system - usually as a strategy to diversify their own supply network; sometimes as a defense to compensate for this behavior on the part of women. When a man takes a woman home, he can usually plan for everything to perfection -- except that how to get rid of the woman afterwards. After all, accidents happen. Everyone hopes for a successful trip; Nobody ever plans the ending or the exit routes until its too late. A man who doesn’t take you home knows through experience; he is skeptical, you are on rotation, - that’s why he doesn’t take you home. Too many sour relationships have left a bad taste in his mouth.

These are all possible roads. Sure there is chemistry now, but you may be disappointed, he may be disappointed, or for whatever reason, it just might not work out. Like the CD that begins with things that won’t last: a rising sun, a couple in a car, love. The end could come too quickly. Before you know it, the sun has set, the trip has ended, and you are alone. You will part, hopefully not a destructive crash and burn, but somewhere in between - on good terms.” You have been here before and foresee the imminent: Feeling loss, you will take long drives. You will feel lousy and

nostalgic under the stars but euphoric when the sun rises again. Face it, the happily-ever-after would be insufferable. You will always be as obscure as the road you travel.

You don't take it personally. After all, he's on *your* rotation. If only you could devise a crash test on a computer simulation. Picture the Production Possibility Frontier: for every widget of love produced you must trade off a widget of freedom. Love requires an object, so you choose to love the moment.

The thought of K makes you wake up horny. You toy with memories of his hair and the freckles like raised bumps on his upper back as well as chest and legs, -- so much more texture. You recall feeling each other in the dark and you mentally read his skin like brail.

Thursday night comes, you wear simply a button down denim summer dress with cute little maroon pumps. You want to show your neckline and lean legs.

K drives up in a blue Celica. He apologizes, says his truck had a minor breakdown and is in the shop - this will have to do. He has you get into the driver's seat. First you slink down single-lane residential streets where the homes have garages in front of their garages, cruise among the squat buildings in the Dominguez Technology Industrial Park, the windowless buildings look like giant dice. Then you quickly graduate to making turns onto busy two- and three- lane boulevards. You observe signs and pride yourself on being a defensive driver.

He has you turn onto a cul-de-sac at the top of a hill overlooking the refineries and pull over. You gaze out at the clusters of oil derricks lit up like a field of Eiffel

Towers, the smoke stacks and cooling tower which look like a bed of jeweled nails, the labyrinth of connecting pipes joining the refinery structures, spires and steeples.

K asks you, “What if chasing freedom is an entrapment: an end and not the means?” K is more practical. To him, freedom is a commodity, you could trade it lieu of other resources. But to you, freedom, self will, is genetic.

So you tell him your story: When you were 15, your boyfriend taught you how to drive. You were in San Bernardino on Highway 215, a running, tiresome stretch of freeway. He told you that you maneuver the vehicle through the steering wheel, the steering wheel controls the direction of the car - steer left, the car goes left; steer right, the car goes right. Getting the vehicle pointed in the right direction was only part of the driving experience. You had to pay attention, adjust for road conditions. Potholes, cars or small children coming out of nowhere, drunk drivers, Asian drivers, elderly drivers. To him, it seemed like driving was a continual stream of obstacles and complications to work out towards your destination. It seemed so much about control - so much depended on your control of the wheel.

But to you, driving is about flow. That is why you prefer to ride a motorcycle. To ride a motorcycle fast and well, you look and lean in the direction you want to go. Your body will instinctively move as if one with the bike to bring it to the direction you are looking. You are mentally more awake while riding a motorcycle and you naturally check out the black surface ahead for potholes and other possible hazards. You are mindful of the dangers, but you are not preoccupied with them. Being cognizant of your vulnerability, your focus is on the place you want to go.

K asks, “Chemistry, what do you think of chemistry?”

You tell him that true chemistry cannot be described, it can only be felt; it should remain a mysterious direct experience in your book. You tell him you'd rather not try to find the rules and laws, institutionalize it. You would just rather let it be, feel it.

Like now. Chemistry is being felt. He starts to finger your neckline which leads to him kissing you. His tongue is warm, the same temperature as yours, you probe gradually, striving for territory, sizing up the other team, mopping up the juices.

He puts his mouth on you. It's like being put under anesthesia, a sweet bliss, your fingers, hands, clench, your body wants to grasp at something. You shudder as he moves his fingers along the small of your back.

He mumbles in your ear, "Right here, I like this spot right here, guys always miss this spot but I love this spot right here." He is touching the spot where your neck meets your shoulders, he softly bites you there.

Your driving lessons develop into a game of sexual chess. He makes the opening move with a coy nuzzle and soft caresses. Your kisses counter, you unbutton his shirt and nip his shoulders. He breaks through your defense and renders you senselessly sensual. You run your offense desperately but, he fortifies his defense. Somehow, in the end, he always checkmates and you are the one stripped of your clothes.

Your skin is very sensitive, you are very conscious of the way he touches you. He plays you like a musical instrument, his plucks give rise to your sighs. You find yourself lying face down over the passenger seat. While K is riding you, he is mooning the moon.

That's how the lesson ends at 5 am the next morning.

You put on your clothes and step out of the car. You sleep for 30 minutes, shower and ride the bus to work. You work all day, no problem because you are used to all-nighters. Coffee helps.

Until Tuesday, you muse about the texture of him, the feeling of his body around you, his mass, his breath. He usually wears cologne and you cannot get a true sense of his smell until you kiss his chest and go down further.

Tuesday finally arrives. You wear a short linen wrap around skirt and a tight red pull over.

This time, K lets you drive through downtown Los Angeles with its one-way streets and hectic intersections.

As this final lesson draws to a close, you finally park and K gives you "the talk." You had anticipated it so you don't interrupt, you let him do all the talking, speak his mind.

K tells you, "The last two lessons were memorable. I am not a morning person, and yet I find myself in strange and wonderful places with you." He tells you that he thinks of you when he's masturbating, reminiscing on your smell, your voice, your skin, your feet, your mouth and the look on your face, the moment when he knows you are aroused, the sounds of bodies in motion with one another, and your harmonic sighs.

He tells you he will write a story called *Love in Carson*, about a man and a woman trying, simply, to make love, and being interrupted by car alarms, telephones,

parking attendants, and their own nagging compulsions about what they should be doing to get ahead. They will scale down their original idea. 'We don't have to make love,' the woman will say, half way into the story, 'Let's just fuck.' 'Yes," the man will reply, 'They can keep us from making love, but it takes no time or particular mood to just fuck.' But they won't even be able to do that. Too many distractions. They will be played out of a good fuck.

Sensing that you don't get what he's trying to convey, he gives you another scenario: "A man and woman are intimate and have deep feeling for one another. The man loves the woman. He is recklessly taken with her. When they are together, he freely expresses his affections. It is tempting to continue. But he does not want to hurt what they have, and there are so many factors - timing, circumstances, et cetera - that are problematic. The man is not an uncomplicated person, nor is the woman, so it is something to think about. The man sets his own coping mechanisms. Admittedly, it is a bad setup; he is a failure at such things. He has no interest in controlling the woman. This is partly selfish, because to him, she is something of a symbol of freedom and he likes to keep it that way. Freedom is fuel for ascension, and while true freedom does not exist in familial relations, it does in friendships through which people are actualized. We can't let our emotions drive us."

Clearly, K sees all this turning into a sports car careening, overturning down a Mulholland Drive cliff and unable to control even the speed at which it will plummet into the brush.

He becomes accusative: "You are stronger than me. You are like a cat able to slink, leap, and land. Maybe you have the real control because you have enough spirit

not to need to control such matters. But you are also more impetuous, and less far-sighted, in such matters. You plan not for the misfortunes of your leaps. All the while I cannot stop myself from expressing my affections for you, or from being enamored of your company. So there it is, you now know how I feel.”

Acquiescent, you sit up and face him. You continue to kiss and K slowly begins to outline your nipples beneath your shirt. He can't resist. His fingers straddle your spine as he reaches under your shirt from the back, unhooking your lacy peach bra and pulling your red shirt up. He encircles your breasts with his hands, putting one nipple in his mouth at a time. He kisses them and licks them, enveloping them in the whirlpool of his balmy mouth. It makes you shiver. In one motion, you reach over your head and pull off your shirt and bra. Then he caresses you, stroking your belly and fingering your waistline. He begins to fiddle with the knot on your linen wrap around skirt. But he is not able to untie it so he simply reaches underneath, into your panties and begins to finger you. This induces a moan. After sometime, you become half conscious of the fact that the knot and skirt have somehow fallen away.

You undo his pants and reach inside to pull out his hardness, it feels warm in your hands. He leans over you so that his penis is against your side.

He whispers, “I can't decide, I want to be inside of you, but maybe I just want to hold your image in my memory.”

After all, you conclude, K is probably correct: this is an accident waiting to happen. You put on the break and decelerate. Driving is a privilege, not a right. You remind yourself: The man and the woman are friends, just because they are sexual does not mean that they will or should make love.

As 5 am approaches, you get dressed, satisfied that your last driving lesson ends with very fond memories of his eyes in the reflection of the morning sunrise. When you first met him, you thought his eyes were brown-green. Then, perhaps because you mostly viewed them at night, you saw them as simply brown. This time, it was amazing staring into his eyes, the morning blazing sunlight brought out the bold beauty of them. You notice a bit of grey in his right, varying shades of brown throughout and yes some of that hidden green. You may have never have this pleasure again, so you watch while making love that morning. You are glad that in this position, you are forced to gaze into his soul.

K asks you, "Can I come to your house next time?"

Funny question coming from a man who won't invite you into his place. You laugh inside as it dawns on you that you could be driving a pre-owned car so to speak -- she jus' may have Lowjack, but you have radar love so you don't answer his question.

You thank him for everything: the lessons, the conversation, the love. You remind him that your agreement includes vehicle rental for the DMV test.

He confirms and tells you to make the appointment on a Monday, Mondays are good.

The following Monday, as predicted, he drives you down to the DMV and hands over his keys to you. Everything goes as planned and you pass with flying colors.

About a month later, you buy a used Honda mini-SUV, a chick car. It's good on gas mileage. The front seat slides all the way back and fully reclines. The parking

break doesn't get in your way. You even have a secret compartment for condoms. You get a better job, become more mobile (upwardly and otherwise) and get your own sweet pad. Only after that do you call on K, ask him out for drinks. You drink until you are buzzed, you bring him to your car and make love in the parking lot. You don't let your emotions drive you, so you decide not to bring him home because you can plan for everything else but how to get rid of him. And face it: if you don't master your emotions, they will make you a slave.

Since you regained your license, you've been in a few cars: the plush Lexus, the classic VW bug, the sporty Miata...You even had a guy in an SUV who tried to tell *you* what kind of car *you* should drive. With each of these experiences you find that guys try to act like what they drive, but that when you pop open the hood, in fact, it is seldom the case.

There are maniac drivers on the highway of love. People drive too fast. People drive while intoxicated. They don't watch where they are going. There are head on collisions, sideswipes, hit and runs. There are drive-by shootings. It's not like you can take out an insurance policy against accidents or theft. Even on the curvy mountain roads, you have to watch out for the occasional Winnebago that won't turn off into the passing lane and won't allow you to pass. Some people get lost through no fault of their own - they were just given bad directions. A tire could blow out or you could just run out of gas. You just might need to pull over. And when you get out of your car and are buffeted by the wind, be prepared to find that the call box is out of order. So your best advice is put on your seatbelt and drive defensively.

But that's not the story here. The lesson is simple: love is out there, somewhere in this dark lonely world, and you will chase it even though you know there's no such thing as a free lunch.

You like creeping along at dusk during rush hour traffic on the 10 Freeway going west past downtown, gazing, wondering at how the full moon looks like a pearl marble has been shot out of the barrel of the US Bank building. But when you look down, you notice that the lines of your own road have blurred beneath your wheels constantly in motion. In the end, you park your car and gaze intently out at the jungle of oil refineries and tangle of industrial parks to make sense of the drama found in between coming down in the morning and waking up to it.