

Clutch, Shift, Red Light

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I remember all too well my first traffic ticket. Being sixteen and a bit of a brash adolescent, the newfound freedom of driving was a bit intoxicating. At least there was nothing else in my system to impair my “rough-around-the-edges” driving skills.

My dad’s red Volkswagen beetle was already on its second engine and many a mile had clicked on the odometer. Still, he was probably as nervous as any parent is when they hand the keys to a child/man and pray they will return with both car and kid in one piece. I was not so concerned with such matters. Hey, at that age we’re all bulletproof...invincible...immortal! A car crash? Nah, never happen.

Fortunately I didn’t hit anything or anybody. But that hill in downtown Rome, New York was a tricky one for an auto with manual transmission. It rose at a good thirty degree angle, maybe more. At the time it felt like ninety! I kept inching the clutch in and out, riding it like I was told never to do, and trying to keep the engine from stalling while not ramming the car in front. There was plenty of traffic, too, on this hot and humid day. “C’mon!” I muttered. “Will the light ever turn green?”

The traffic light did change to the splendid color of go and the cars moved forward through the intersection. Just as I reached it, left foot pushing in the clutch, right hand trying to find the gear, the light all too quickly hit the warning yellow. I shifted. The car stalled. Horns honked.

Face burning as red as the color the light now glowed I managed somehow to restart the car and roughly jerk through the intersection. I tried to avoid the angry glances from the cars wanting their turn at the light.

As I pattered on up the hill my eyes caught the flash of headlights synchronized with the “whoop-whoop!” of the police siren. “Oh, just great” I thought and my heart sank. I pulled over and started living for real all those scenes in television shows about traffic violations and Ubercops. The humiliation continued with each passing minute feeling like a day as I tried to find the registration for the impatient policeman.

The officer wrote the ticket and handed it to me. It felt like a death sentence. Maybe it was only a moving violation, but I knew facing Dad was going to be harder than any city judge.

I got over it, like most teenagers, and time healed my wounded pride. The lesson was learned about proper driving skills, keeping your cool and the responsibility of showing up for court and taking my medicine. My wish for a dismissed charge never materialized, but a sincere contrite appearance and first offense lessened the verdict from what could have been reckless driving to just running a red light. The wheels of justice turned and, in this case, made me a better driver.

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