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Confessions of a (Middle-Aged) Learner Driver

Having been a life-long refusenik, an Esquire contributing editor gets behind the wheel

By Michael Holden PUBLISHED: 03 OCTOBER 2022



Mondadori Portfolio // Getty Images

ve been late to enough parties to know when I have missed the action,
and with driving I was way overdue. Learning at 49 years old, now that

I' the automobile and its effects are increasingly reviled, has all the hallmarks of lamentably late arrival. The cool kids have left or never even came while the diehards are doubling down, drinking and kissing anything and anyone before a less carbonated age bursts like daylight through the curtains. Still, here I am at last, so let's go.

This handbrake-turn reversal of my original intention — to swerve forever the rigours of the road — was sparked by my mother's declining motor skills. At 91, might it be easier to part her from her cherished habit by doing some of the work myself? Also, my now disabled dad said he would make good on his 1987 promise to pay for lessons.

That I am as skint today as I was then is society's crime and nobody's business. Writing is mostly luck and hard labour; it's not like I can drive a cab or anything in the downtime. Or at least it wasn't until I could. But what surprises me more than any of this is how much I came to like it at the wheel. The fundamental thing about cars, it strikes me, what they have over people and the world is that they do more or less what you want them to. Press this and that happens. What would never have occurred to me at 17 is just how seldom this is the case with everything and everyone else you run into. You might think having an ego like a burst tyre makes an older learner a safer driver. Not so.

I've had an interesting life. That and my hard-earned absence of self-esteem means that I can kid myself I'm not overly bothered about dying. For a young person, death on the road would be tragic. For me, it might even be overdue. When I approach a difficult junction, my thoughts tend less to blind spots and the procedural mnemonics of The Highway Code and more to "Who cares?" and "Fuck you."

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Mercifully for me — and everyone else on the road — I have been restrained and rescued from these drifting fantasies of destruction by my instructor. A man who I have come to love and admire and who I will never forget even if I keep at this for as long as my mother. He is a 65-year-old former DJ who told me on my first lesson that he hated this job and it was the last thing on earth he wanted to do. I said the same about driving.

We bonded, I think, in that shared confession of disdain and I confess that if I pass my test my one regret is that I might not see him again. I doubt this is mutual. I have Stockholm syndrome of the gear stick. He has, by his own estimate, had over 2,000 students. I know that I am not that special. Especially now that I am just another person, stuck in a traffic queue.

On a bike, one knows some measure of motive freedom. Driving cars this is not so. From the passenger seat you can disidentify with the

dysfunctions of the road, but when you're driving this is it and you are you. The compliance of the vehicle negated as it speeds you to a standstill. My town is where roundabouts and traffic lights go to die and seem to take you with them, one signal at a time. Though each lesson feels like an achievement, steering clear of the idling truth of urban driving for almost half a century seems sometimes the greater claim.

At least I can talk about it now. At a Christmas party I mentioned I was learning. In seconds, someone had shown me a phone picture of the sign for a notorious roundabout in Hemel Hempstead. In a minute, drive chat had consumed the room. This is the kind of stuff that used to drive me to drugs. Now I can drive though, I felt strangely comfortable around it. Comfortably numbed. Another adolescent fantasy of radicalism choked out on middle age fumes. Who knew fitting in could feel so good? It has taken over 60 hours of lessons for me and the instructor to reach our present plateau of understanding. I have stopped questioning him and The Highway Code completely and he has, I think, come to understand that I cannot be embarrassed by anything I do with the car because I have made so many mistakes before I even got into one.



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One day it clicked, and I could do it. So we wait for the test, my booked and paid-for lessons a means for us to hang out before the big day comes. I can drive and talk and listen without stalling now. I tell him what happened to me as we ride past the places I was raised. He tells me about his worst pupils: an older one who tried to kill them both, he thinks, by driving into a lamppost. The younger ones who complain on social media when they fail, the driving schools that take their side to drum up business. We might even be the highlight of each other's day. Here in our car, we feel oldest of all.

Not that old, though. When I watch Mum drive now I can see her limitations all too clearly and the great limitation heading down the road toward us all. What I had taken for a choice was also an avoidance of responsibility. In the subconscious algebra of deep denial, my never growing up and driving meant never growing old and facing everything that follows. Now the rear view and the bathroom mirror have me squarely in their sights and there is no turning back. Even if I can at last reverse, I am not sure I would want to.

Michael Holden is a contributing editor to Esquire. This piece appeared in the May-June 2020 edition of the magazine

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