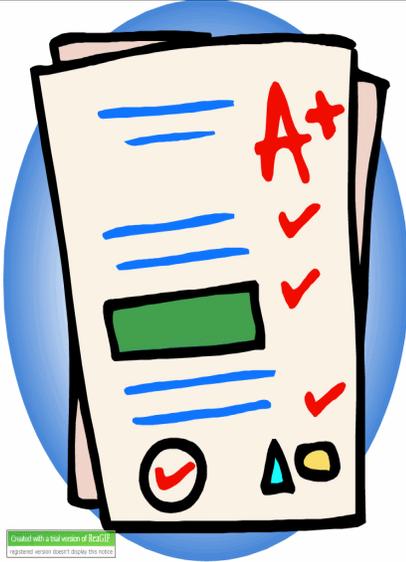


Test

by Theodore Thomas



Robert Proctor was a good driver for so young a person. The turnpike curved gently ahead of him. Travel was light on this cool morning in May. He felt rested, but alert. He had been driving for two hours.

The sun was bright but not glaring. The air smelled fresh and clean. He breathed in deeply. It was a good day for driving.

He looked at the gray-haired woman sitting in the front seat beside him. Her mouth was curved in a quiet smile. As she watched the trees and fields slip by on her side of the turnpike, Robert Proctor looked back at the road.

"Enjoying it, Mom?" he asked.

"Yes, Robert." Her voice was as cool as the morning.

He listened to the smooth purr of the engine. Up ahead he saw a big truck. It was spouting smoke as it sped along the turnpike. Behind it was a blue convertible, content to stay in line.

Robert Proctor noted this and put it in the back of his mind. He was slowly overtaking the car and the truck. He would reach them in another minute or two.

It was a good morning for driving. He pulled up and began to pass the blue convertible. Though his speed was a few miles an hour above the turnpike limit, his car was under perfect control.

The blue convertible suddenly swung out from behind the truck without warning. It struck his car near the right front fender. His car was knocked to the shoulder next to the turnpike median strip.

Robert Proctor was too wise to slam on the brakes. He fought the steering wheel to hold the car on a straight path. The left wheels sank into the soft left shoulder. The car seemed to pull toward the left. If it kept going that way, it might cross the island and enter the lane carrying cars coming from the other direction.

Robert held on to the steering wheel. Then the left front wheel struck a rock, and the tire blew out. The car turned sideways. It was then that his mother began to scream.

As the car turned, it skidded part way out into the oncoming lanes. Robert Proctor fought the steering wheel to right the car. But the drag of the blown tire was too much. His mother's scream rang steadily in his ears. As he strained at the wheel, he wondered how a scream could go on so long.

An oncoming car struck his car from the side, and spun him farther into the left-hand lanes.

He was thrown into his mother's lap. She was thrown against the right door. It was locked and held. With his left hand he grabbed the steering wheel. He pulled himself up. He turned the wheel to try to stop the spin so he could get his car out of traffic. His mother could not right herself. She lay against the door, her cry rising and falling with the spin of the car.

The car began to slow down. In one of the spins, he twisted the wheel straight and headed down the left-hand lane. Before he could turn off the pike to safety, a car loomed ahead of him.

The man at the wheel of that other car seemed unable to move. His eyes were wide and filled with fear. Beside him sat a girl with her head against the back of the seat. Soft curls framed her lovely face. She was asleep.

It was not the fear in the man's face that reached Robert Proctor. It was the trust in the face of the sleeping girl. His mother's cry still sounded in his ears.

He heard no crash when the two cars met head on at high speed. He only felt something push into his stomach. Then the world went gray. Just before darkness came, he heard the scream stop. He knew then that he had been hearing one single scream. It had only seemed to drag on and on.

Robert Proctor seemed to be at the bottom of a deep black well. There was a spot of faint light in the far distance. He could hear the rumble of a voice. He tried to pull himself toward the light and the sound. But the effort was too great. He lay still and gathered his strength to try again. The light grew brighter and the voice louder. When he tried again, he seemed to draw closer to the light and sound. He opened his eyes and looked at the man sitting in front of him.

"You all right, son?" asked the man. He wore a blue uniform. His round face seemed familiar.

Robert Proctor moved his head slowly. He discovered that he was lying back in a chair. He could move his arms and legs. He looked around the room. Then he remembered.

The man in the uniform saw the look in Robert's eyes. He said, "No harm done, son. You just took the last part of your driver's test."

Robert Proctor looked at the man. Though he saw the man clearly, he seemed to see the faint face of the sleeping girl in front of him.

The uniformed man went on talking.

"We hypnotized you to make you think you were in an accident. We do it to everybody these days before they get their driver's license. Makes better drivers of them. Makes drivers more careful for the rest of their lives. Remember it now? Coming in here and all?"

Robert Proctor nodded, thinking of the sleeping girl. She never would have awakened. She could have gone from her light sleep to the dark sleep of death. Worst of all would have been his mother's death.

The uniformed man was still speaking.

"So you think you're all set now. If you still want a driver's license, sign this application and we'll see."

Robert Proctor looked at the license application and signed it.

He looked up to find two men in long white coats. They were standing on each side of him. Somehow the sight of them made him angry.

He started to speak but the uniformed man spoke first.

"Sorry, son. You failed your license test. You're sick and need treatment."

The two men lifted Robert Proctor to his feet. He said, "Take your hands off me. What is this?"

The uniformed man said, "Nobody should want to drive a car after going through what you just went through. It should take months before you can even think of driving again. But you're ready to drive right now. Killing people doesn't even seem to bother you. We can't let your kind run around loose any more. But don't you worry, son. They'll take good care of you. They'll fix you up." He nodded to the two men. They began to march Robert Proctor out.

At the door he spoke. His voice was so full of pleading the two men paused.

"You can't really mean this," he said. "I must still be dreaming. This is all part of the test, isn't it?"

The uniformed man said, "No, son, but you can try again later."

They dragged Robert out the door, knees stiff, feet dragging. As they pulled, his rubber heels slid along the two grooves worn in the floor.