

10 minute easy read

*Keep right on to the
end of the road...*

Philip Sleight

“Yippee,” said Doris, as she looked out of the front room window, “any minute now my new life will begin. I’m going to learn to drive!” She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece for the tenth time in as many minutes. Time to put my shoes on, she thought, as she slipped off her slippers and put on her new brown laceups. When she saw the car with a big red L on the roof turn into the Avenue, she could not resist saying again, “Yippee!”

She had been a widow for three years now and she had missed Eddie very much. It would not be true to say that theirs had been an idyllic marriage, but they had rubbed along well enough. She had always known where she was with Eddie for he was totally predictable. Every day, every week, was identical with Eddie and that had a sort of security; it also had an overwhelming lack of excitement. Even his death had almost a text book quality about it.

They had been on holiday in Southport; they always went on holiday in Southport.

They had stayed at the same boarding house every year for twenty-five years.

“Mrs Mollins always makes you feel at home,” Eddie used to say every year when he booked for the following year.

They had gone for their daily walk after lunch - "A breath of fresh air will do us good, dear". But, this time, when they were only half way along the front, Eddie did not feel so good and went back to Mrs Mollins' for a little lie down. When she went to wake him for the evening meal, he was dead; he had died in his sleep from a sudden heart attack.

She had stayed on in Southport to make the funeral arrangements and a few friends came down to console her on the day. But, suddenly, the sharer of her twenty-five year routine was gone.

She lived as if he had not and it was a strange life. She missed him as she got the meal or as she sat down to watch the television. She still woke up every morning in time to get his unvarying bacon and egg for breakfast with two slices of toast - not too well done, please! She looked at the wedding present clock at twenty past seven every weekday morning and waited to hear him say, as he always had, "Well, must be off to work now. That will leave just enough margin of error. Wouldn't do to be late, would it now?"

She still did her shopping every Thursday evening, going to the same supermarket

and buying the things of which he had approved. She missed him sorely when she had to struggle onto the bus with her carrier bags. Never again would he leave her at the till and bring the car right up to the door. "There's no point having a dog and barking for him," he used to say, each and every week.

There was one time when she definitely did not miss him and that was on Saturday afternoons! Every Saturday afternoon since they had bought a television set he had sat to watch all the sport. She hated that. She used to leave the ironing so that she could escape from the television's urgent sporting din. She could not stand the four hour, high volume, hype. But now, she did not have to and Saturday afternoons had become an island of peaceful bliss that she enjoyed like no other time. Most things, however, remained as they always had been.

Suddenly, it hit her like a thunderbolt that this was nonsense. There was really no reason why she had to continue to fill her life with anything she found irksome. "I shall start doing the things I've always wanted to do. Yes, that's it!" She started to make all sorts of plans which Eddie would never have allowed. She stayed in bed till

9 o' clock and read a book! She burnt her toast, not because she liked it that way but because it made such a refreshing change. She went to the supermarket on a different day during the week and came home in a taxi. She cancelled her booking at Mrs Mollins'. Why should I want to go there again?

Then she had such an extraordinary idea that it took her by surprise! She saw a travel programme on television about driving through France and stopping at little pensions - sort of French B and B. The presenter kept talking about the wonderful smell of real French coffee that filled these establishments first thing in the morning. "I shall do that," she said aloud, "I shall learn to drive and go on holiday to France - yes, France!"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She could already smell the coffee and see the bistros on the pavement, just as she had seen on the television.

She had a word with her cousin, Edith, and she had agreed to go with her. So that was that, then; all fixed. All she had to do was pass her test.

She beamed to herself as the car drew up outside her front door, right on time. She

put on her coat and hat and strode out to learn to drive.

The first lesson, to be honest, was not as easy as she had thought, but Mr Masterson said it always took a little while to get used to the controls. She got herself and the car back home without any major mishap but when she got back indoors, she wondered whether the smell of coffee had receded a little. No, I shall persevere! Mr Masterson said most of his pupils passed in less than six months. So that will be all right then.

Edith phoned to see how she had got on and was delighted to hear that Mr Masterson expected a pass within six months.

"That's just in time for our holiday, Edith."

As she put the phone down, she could distinctly smell the coffee!

The second and third lesson were much better and Mr Masterson said he was very proud of her. "It's not easy for a mature lady to learn to drive," he consoled. Her enthusiasm could not now be dampened.

She would do it and off they would go, gliding through Brittany or Provence - in fact, anywhere they fancied.

"You're nearly ready for your test," said Mr Masterson after four months, "I think you should apply to give you added incentive."

She did and the test appointment arrived. Her excitement now knew no bounds and she raced out and bought a road map of France and spent every evening planning all sorts of routes. Edith came round one night and even she got the aroma of coffee in her nostrils! She helped Doris become word perfect on the Highway Code. When she had gone, Doris relaxed into a reverie of long, rolling, sun-drenched roads and always the thought of bistros and that wonderful smell of coffee. Proper French coffee.

The day of the test arrived and she was surprised to find that she was not at all nervous. She knew that all would be well. "If you drive as well as you have for the last few lessons," said Mr Masterson, "you cannot fail!"

But she did. When the examiner brought his hand down on his clipboard for an emergency stop, Doris unaccountably said, "Pardon!"

Mr Masterson took it all in his stride.

"Worse things happen at sea. I think you should apply immediately for a re-test."

"Yes, I will. But I'd like more lessons.

Could I have three a week? That should improve my chances, shouldn't it?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. Tell you what I'll do. I'll give you three for the price of two." Isn't that kind, thought Doris. So that's what they did.

Her second test arrived but she felt distinctly nervous this time. She was really worried about it. She got herself into an awful lather on her "dress rehearsal lesson", as Mr Masterson called it; she crashed the gears and could not do a neat three point turn to save her life. "Relax," Mr Masterson said, "if the examiner thinks you're nervous, he'll make allowances."

He may have done, but they were not enough and she failed again.

"Are you sure you want to go on?" Asked Edith when she learnt of her second failure. "Oh, yes," replied Doris with determination, "I'm going to pass this test and I'm going to France. I owe it to Eddie!" As soon as she said that she realised what nonsense it was! Eddie would not have approved of her trying to drive and would not have contemplated going to France. Had she been able to be more honest, she would have said that she was going to pass the test to spite Eddie. Either way round, she was de-

terminated to get her licence.

When she had applied for her third test, Edith dealt her a bitter blow. "I'm sorry, Doris, but I've agreed to go Morecambe with my neighbour. I hear it's very nice there. I hope it doesn't put you out and you haven't actually passed your test yet, have you?"

Doris was set back by Edith's lack of faith in her but the pungent smell of coffee wafting down the boulevards drove her to find another friend who said she would go with her.

Test followed test, all with the same result, but Doris would not be put off. "I'll show you Eddie!" She said to herself as she prepared to present herself for the seventh time.

Bill, as Mr Masterson had become to her now, was always very supportive. "I've never had a pupil fail so many times before, but I've never had a pupil who did not pass! I'm sure you'll do it this time, Doris"

The day for the seventh test dawned bright and sunny and she remembered again so forcefully why she so much wanted to pass. The day in Blackburn seemed just how she imagined the weather to be all the time in France. "I shall get there, I know I will!" She was in fine, high spirits. She had her dress rehearsal and Bill said she drove perfectly. She felt good. She could not fail. At the testing station, she had an examiner she had had before and he was her favourite. He seemed to have a better sense of humour than the others. She got in the car with him and set off for what she was sure would be the last time.

When she returned, Bill was waiting for her with a broad smile all over his face. As he jumped in the car beside her, she showed him her slip of paper and his face did not change from its look of total happiness.

"Doris," he said, "I feel we know one another so well after all this time. Let's get together and get married. We could have a wonderful life together. We could go to France for our honeymoon; we could stop at as many bistros as you wish and we could have a cup of that delicious coffee in each and every one. Please say yes.

What do you say?"

Doris was absolutely stunned and did not know what to say. She thought hard and so many thoughts whirled inside her head at this totally unexpected turn of events. At last, she said, with a broad, broad smile, "If I say yes, will you do the driving?"