

Road peevishness

How I learned to stop speeding and obey the law—and got a ticket anyway

I'm a turtle. I'm the kind of driver Alix Dobkin used to call "an old man in a hat driving a Chrysler product." I'm the white-haired woman you don't want to get behind when you have an appointment. Lover fears I go so slow I might cause accidents. I'm the type who brakes for yellow "suggested" speed signs because I don't relish meeting a monster truck on a narrow curve with no where to go but imagined frothy waters at the bottom of a

ravine.

Last week I got a speeding ticket.

If the young officer hadn't been apologetic to the point of obsequiousness, I might have done something rash—like cry.

My first speeding ticket!

My only ticket since the '70s, when I went through a toll booth without paying in a Bug full of crazy dykes. (We thought it was revolutionary fun.)

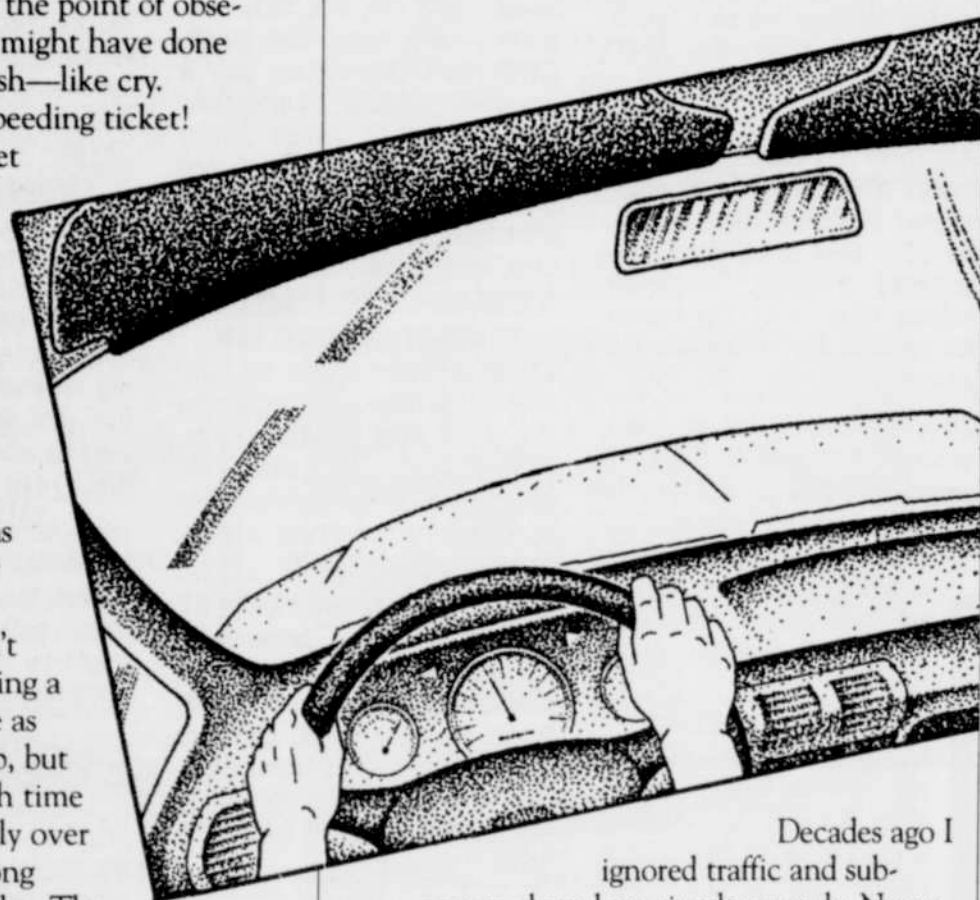
This wasn't fun. I was facing a 10-hour drive as part of my job, but I'd left enough time

so that I could drive slowly over snowy mountains and along roads threatening landslides. The trip was so long because a landslide had plugged the north-south highway I normally drive. I metamorphosed into a confused speed demon in the midst of a complex maneuver from one unfamiliar road to the next without the benefit of detour signs. This routing took me very briefly into the city's 25 mph

I bought my minivan for safety. Although the candy-apple red one my in-laws got made me froth with jealousy, I hadn't wanted a vehicle that would attract the eyes of the law. Everyone says cops go after red cars first. Convertibles, SUVs, sports cars, luxury cars—they're all supposed to get ticketed before turtles in minivans.

In my young and reckless years I raced across America, doing U-ies in unfamiliar territory. Never got stopped.

I sped wildly, hormone-fueled, along East Coast parkways in the dark of night to covert assignments. Never got stopped.



Decades ago I ignored traffic and substance abuse laws simultaneously. Never got stopped.

I'd run into New York from Connecticut, speeding along with the flow of traffic, which was more like the flow of a river at flood stage. Never got stopped.

In my cab I rode the brakes from pickup to pickup, weaving in and out of traffic as if

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speed limit. I was caught doing 40, desperately looking for directional signs.

Here's what I suspect. The cop had done something that annoyed his boss. He was assigned to drive the overpasses and underpasses on this little interchange again and again till he got dizzy. He was told to rack up enough speeding tickets to fill the whole squad's quota for the month—and it was only the 14th.

It was an easy enough assignment with all us bumpkins squinting to find our way through a corner of this town of 45,000. "He must have bagged bunches!" surmised a friend. I, of course, immediately decided the officer had pounced the minute he saw my Gore, food cop, animal protection, Human Rights Alliance, literacy, rainbow flag and Victory Fund stickers. On the other hand, it's a university town, filled with kids in dreadlocks and soccer moms alike driving vans or minivans that sport "Question Authority" decals and Darwin magnets. The cop probably thought I was a middle-of-the-roader in comparison.

other cars and people were nothing but a barrier between me and my next fare. No blinking lights ever shone in my rearview mirror.

As a commuter I concentrated only on making up for that extra time I'd spent in bed and drove as if I had a siren atop my car. But so did everyone else.

To me, New York City was one gigantic dodge-'em-car amusement park ride, the hills of New England free roller coasters. I guess my lawlessness finally caught up with me.

A ticket, though. Now, when I'm old enough to understand that I'm not immortal and that traffic laws actually protect me, now I feel like a criminal. When I really, really flouted the law, I felt only rebellious. I'm lucky to be alive. My next bumper sticker is going to read, on a background of rainbow stripes, "I Brake for Turtles."

■ LEE LYNCH is a novelist who lives on the Oregon coast and obeys the law 99 percent of the time.

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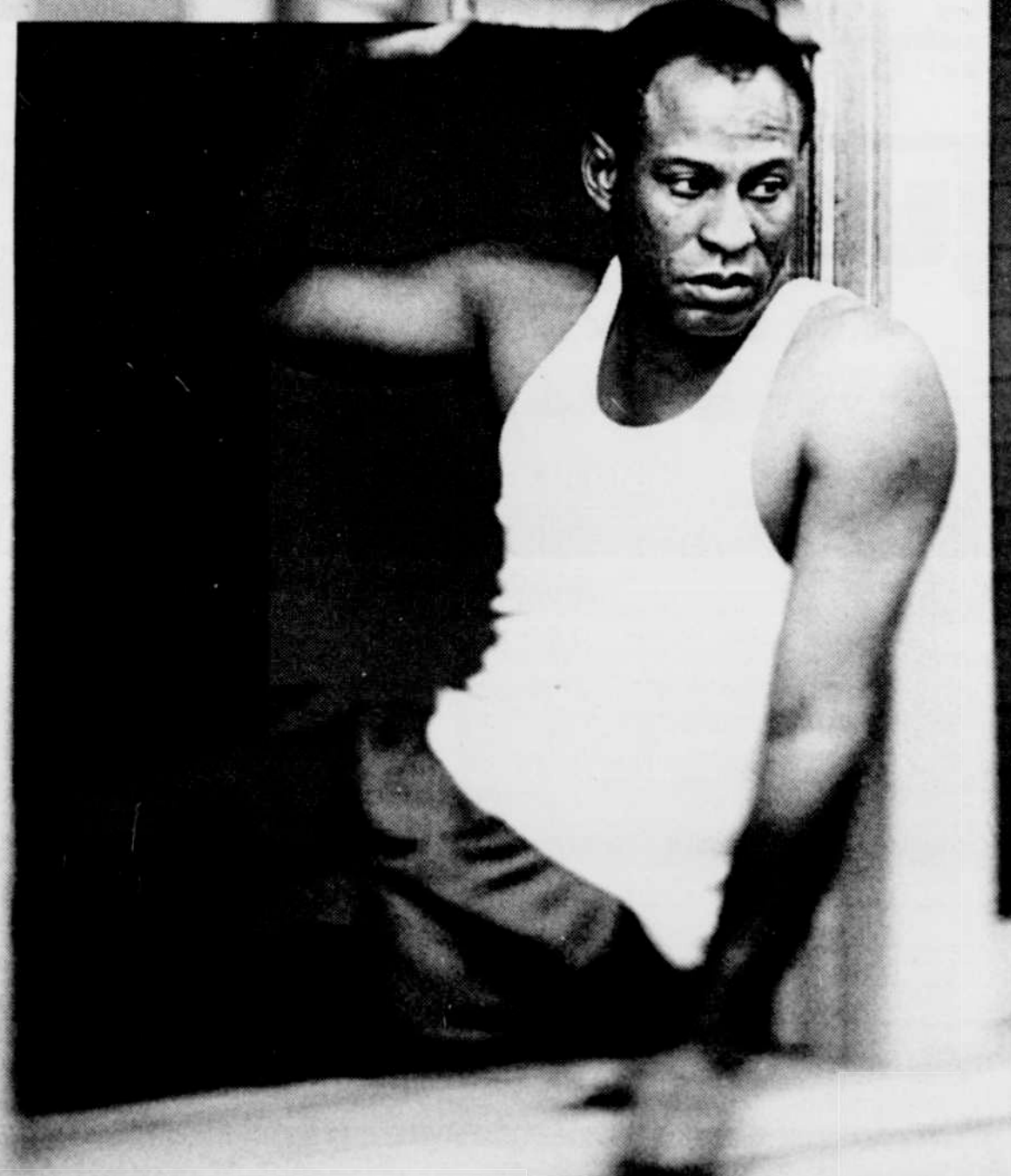


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