

Passing Notes by D. G. Driver, excerpt from Chapter One:

So much stuff cluttered the top of the desk that there wasn't enough room to lay a piece of paper flat on the surface. I really hoped Mrs. Hollstein wouldn't hold that against me when grading my penmanship. Not really wanting to use my lap all semester, I seriously hoped that some junior would get bumped out of the class and free up a real desk for me. I stuck my backpack under my chair, against the wall and corner of the desk and pulled out a pencil.

Mrs. Hollstein finally started up class after taking roll, making a seating chart and handing out her syllabus. As she droned on about how many points everything was worth, I started poking around the desktop with my pencil, allowing the tip to find old scratches in the wood and then imagining what had caused them. My pencil bumped into a groove along the very back corner of the desktop, almost hidden by the window ledge that jutted out over it by an inch or so, and stuck. Carved into the wood was something written in cursive with a heart around it.

I couldn't make out the word, although I assumed it was a name. I learned cursive in third grade and forgot it in fourth. I'd never written or read a word of it since.

I pressed my pencil tip into the carving and traced the heart and cursive letters. Some dust came up when I pulled my pencil out. Whoever had done this had carved it pretty deep, probably with a knife not a pencil. I wondered how long ago that could have been because kids got expelled these days for having plastic butter knives in their lunch boxes. We're supposed to spread mayonnaise with our fingers, I guess. Anyway, I decided the kid with the pocketknife had to have carved this valentine at least a decade ago, if not two.

The name was really elegant the way it was written, too, like something you'd see on a Hallmark card. I imagined this girl with a high pony tail and wearing a poodle skirt working hard to carve it just right one day when she was really bored in class. Maybe Mrs. Hollstein was her teacher, too. She certainly looked old enough, and she sure was boring enough.

Mrs. Hollstein rambled on about something I'd probably need to know later and got a couple volunteers to help pass out textbooks. While that happened, I pulled out a piece of notebook paper and put one corner of it over the heart. Using the side of my lead, I colored the paper until an etching of the heart showed up. I could see the name more clearly now, but it was still this mess of loops. Below the etching I tried to copy it on my own.

My first few tries were hideous looking, jerky and full of stops and starts. I would never be a professional forger—that was sure.

On my sixth try my penmanship improved. By my eighth try it was a passable copy. I'd run out of room on the paper, though, so I pulled a black permanent marker out of my backpack and tried one more time on the back of my left hand. This time, I got it just right. It was so perfect in my eyes that it seemed to actually glow and sparkle for a second.

"That looks pretty," said Jill Pietenpol over my shoulder. She was passing out textbooks and handed one to me. Actually, she dropped it in my lap because she was staring at the heart on my hand. "What kind of marker are you using to make it glow like that? I'd like to get one for my art project..." She stopped herself and cocked her head. "Oh, never mind. I thought for a second that it was... It was probably light coming in from the window." She looked up at the window to find the shades drawn. She shook her head. "So, who's Eileen?"

"Eileen?"

Jill giggled in this high-pitched nasally way that had never changed since we were in Kindergarten together. Her voice never deepened to a normal register like all the other girls in school. She was seventeen and still sounded five. My spine stiffened at the sound of it. "You've

got her name all over your paper and on your hand.”

“If it’s Eileen, that would mean a guy made the heart,” I said, mostly to myself. “No *guy* is going to write all flowery like that.”

“You’re not making a lot of sense.”

“Eileen doesn’t make sense to *me*,” I told her. I directed Jill’s attention to the heart carved in the desk. “See that? It’s old, right? You think that was done by a guy? I don’t.”

Jill just raised an eyebrow, or at least the part of her face where an eyebrow would be if she hadn’t plucked them to near oblivion. “Whatever, Mark. Just make sure Bethany doesn’t see this. If she finds out you’re crushing on some Eileen person, whoever that is, it’ll be over.”

That caught my attention. “I’m not...”

But Jill was gone—bouncing off to deliver more books and stick her nose into other people’s business.

Great, I thought. Now some rumor was going to start about me having a thing for some chick named Eileen. I didn’t even know an Eileen. Was there even a girl that went to our school named Eileen? That was an old-fashioned kind of name.

And by the way, how did Jill know Bethany and I were dating? I didn’t think she and Bethany were good friends. It was only the first day back at school. How did everyone find out so fast? I wasn’t even sure myself if Bethany was officially my girlfriend. I just kind of assumed it was going that way.

I decided to be proactive. To head things off, I snuck my cell out of my pocket. Discreetly, under my seat, using one thumb and not even looking at the keys, I texted Bethany:

Thnkn of u

I knew she probably wouldn’t reply because she was the kind of person who never texted during classes. Bethany was a straight-A student, the kind that follows the rules.

I pushed the boxes on the desk to try to make a little more room, but they wouldn’t budge. I was only working with like two inches. With a shove of my shoulder, I purchased one more inch, enough for my forearm to rest. As I lowered my hand, it came to rest on a corner of a yellowed paper sticking out from under the boxes. I tugged at it and freed it from its prison, curious as to how long it had been there.

What I found was a lined page from a 5x7 spiral notepad. A faint green line divided the page in half, and the top was frayed from having been ripped out. Written on it was a short note not addressed to anyone or signed, like something that might have been passed eons ago during a class and shoved under a box so a teacher couldn’t find it.

None of this seemed all that odd except that the words were in the exact same cursive hand as the carved “Eileen” on the desktop. It had to have been written by the same person.

Hairs raised on the back of my neck. I didn’t know why I got spooked like that. I mean, it made a certain amount of sense that once upon a time some guy sat at this desk carving his girlfriend’s name into the wood and writing a note to a friend. It’s just that, after all these years, how weird was it that I discovered them both on the same day?

I tried to read the note, but it was really hard for me to decipher it. I pulled out a fresh piece of my notebook paper and wrote the letters I thought I recognized with little placeholder dashes for the letters I couldn’t figure out. In the end, I had some horrible Wheel of Fortune game with no clues to help me decide if I wanted to buy a consonant or a vowel.

“Jill,” I called out. She was still playing teacher’s pet and flitting about the room. I waved my book at her like I had a problem with it. She huffed back over to me.

“No trading. You get what you get.” I think she was trying to sound stern, but her helium

voice just made me want to laugh at her. I stifled my smile.

"No, it's not that." I held up the fragile note and winced. "Can you read this?"

"Are you stupid, Mark?" she asked.

"No, Jill," I returned with an equal amount of attitude. "I just can't read cursive."

She gave it a once over and then handed it back without a word.

"Well?" I asked.

"It doesn't mean anything. Just some note someone passed in class once."

At the edge of my patience, I asked, "What does it say?"

"Read, Mark. What does the note *read*? A note can't say anything."

"Seriously?"

Jill did her snotty face, another thing she perfected in Kindergarten and never let go.

I tried again, rephrasing my question correctly to appease her only because I really needed to know the answer. "What does the note *read*?"

She sighed and took it back again and read out loud:

What kind of note was that? Does it even make sense? You can't even spell, let alone romance a girl. Try again.

Jill handed the letter back to me. "Does that mean anything to you? It's a little vague to me. And pretty rude."

I shook my head and stared at the cursive words, watching the loops and dots magically morph into something I could decipher.

"Hey look, Mark," Jill said. "Mrs. Hollstein said to start reading page 282. I don't know if you heard her."

"Oh," I said distractedly, "thanks." I put the note down and opened my book. Jill went back to parading around with texts and handouts.

Some weird story about a boring dinner party full of dead people passed by my eyes, but I didn't take any of it in. The note was on my mind. It was so strange to read only a part of a conversation. I wondered who this guy had been writing to and what had prompted this response. Surely he wasn't picking on lovely Eileen's letter writing skills. That wouldn't have won him any points.

To be honest, it felt a little like the letter was written to me. I had just dashed out a poorly spelled, pointless love message a moment before that note appeared.

No. That was ridiculous.

The note could be fifty, maybe even sixty, years old for all I knew.

Still, I felt compelled to pull out my phone again. Hiding it inside my book, and thankful Mrs. Hollstein was preoccupied on the phone up front arguing to someone in the front office about her class being over-full, I typed a new text. This time I used full words, which is something I'd never done before. It took a couple minutes.

You look sexy in those jeans today. Cant wait to see more of you at lunch.

Okay, so I didn't put in an apostrophe on "can't". Otherwise, I thought I spelled everything right. That was an effort too. I don't have one of those fancy smart phones with an automatic spelling corrector. I have an older phone, a hand-me-down from my mom that can't even get on the Internet. It's my fault. I accidentally drove over one phone and dropped another in a toilet. My parents said they weren't ever going to get me another good phone. If I wanted one, I'd have to buy it myself. Up until now, the cheap phone and my texting shorthand have been all I needed. I read my text again and nodded, proud of myself, feeling confident that my compliment of her awesome body would win me a kiss in public at noon.

I hit send.

When I was done, I pulled out the note and filled in the blanks on my cheat sheet with the correct letters. Now I felt like I had a key to the cursive code. If I found another note (which I knew was unlikely), maybe I could decipher it without Jill's busy-body help.

The bell rang, and I scooped up my bag from the floor and stuffed my new, heavy English textbook into it. The note and my folded up practice page went in my back pocket. I walked to my next class, waiting for the familiar buzz of my phone as Bethany texted me back with some appreciative reply.

It never came.