

Testing Drives

"In own time, Mr Perkins, go!" said the fat white hamster, putting his paws in front of his eyes, and settling down in the comfortable bed at the back of the saucer.

There was a momentary pause while Patty Perkins slipped on his dark wrap-arounds, gazed at himself smugly in the mirror and unhooked his safety-belt, before he thrust the flying-machine into Hamlabs[®] DriveTest™ mode. (Not to be confused with TestDrive™ mode, as skinny humans often do). With a crashing of gears, a profound shudder, and with never a glance over his furry shoulders, Patty pulled out of the parking bay at HamDOT[®] HQ and into the stream of traffic. Horns sounded, other saucers swerved and angry hamsters stood at their controls, chittering loudly and shaking their fists at Patty.

Walter Cress, the white hamster, snuggled closely down into the sawdust at the rear of the saucer and concentrated on a large walnut which had been placed there discreetly by Patty that very morning. Patty sped on, darting through the chimney-pots, swooping down upon startled magpies, terrifying old ladies as they were about to venture across roads. In the air above the city, HamDOT[®] had set up a roundabout around the bell-tower of an old school. Hamsters crossing that part of town were under strict instructions (penalty for infringement: exercising in a wheel for two hours) to use this roundabout. Patty approached without due care and attention, chose not to give way to other saucers approaching from the right, and scooted through the middle of the bell-tower, rather than go the long way round. He shot out the other side with a wild laugh and a crazed look in his bulging eyes.

Taking both front paws off the controls, and steering randomly with only his rear paws, Patty looked around for a piece of broccoli he remembered having put to one side a week ago. As he reached over to it, the saucer veered rapidly to the left, then downwards, executed a double loop before a huge plate-glass window at street level, then sped straight up into the sky as Patty calmly turned back with the broccoli firmly embedded in his pouch. From the back of the saucer came the crunching sound of a hamster deeply engrossed in his walnut.

Impressively, the saucer sped upwards into the blue. At forty thousand feet, when the air was getting thin, Patty Perkins levelled off and put the saucer into another vertical dive; then sat back to consider a pair of yoghurt drops which were floating in the near-zero gravity resulting from the descent. Walter Cress sat up when they reached a thousand feet and mumbled something about "Perhaps now, Mr Perkins?". Patty nodded and, with a twitch of one of his toes, pulled the saucer out of its dive in time to slice the tops off a grand display of Japanese Anemones in a small back garden, scattering a blizzard of white petals in his wake. A lady ran out of the house, shaking her fist and shouting.

"Three-point turn, Mister Perkins, if you would," nodded Walter sleepily, and settled down for a short nap. The white furry pilot cruised slowly down a quiet suburban street, at about four feet off the ground. Looking around for a suitable spot, he eventually found it: just at the place where the road curved quite radically to the left, and across the bows of an on-coming taxi, Patty pressed his pink foot on the accelerator and then executed a very deft handbrake turn, just missing four parked cars by inches. Then, because the enraged taxi-driver was emerging from his vehicle, clutching a baseball bat and very red in the face, the hamster scooted off in the opposite direction.

"Emergency stop, Mister Perkins," yawned Mr Cress. "When it suits..." Patty, groping about underneath him at that moment for a half-grape which was rolling about amongst the pedals, using his mirror to assist his search, accidentally trod on the accelerator instead of the brake. To the horror of both hamsters, when they noticed, the saucer sped towards a busy main road, solid with buses, lorries and motor-bikes. Before Patty could

swallow the grape, let alone apply the brakes, the saucer had plunged in between two huge lorries, bounced off a car windscreen, snapped off an aerial, then plunged headlong through a hedge where it shuddered to a premature, but thankful, halt on top of a wheely-bin.

“Excellent, Mr Perkins,” squeaked the white hamster, extricating himself from an avalanche of sawdust and carrot-tops which had fetched up against the front windscreen. “Most smooth. Think we return to base now? Double-quick time?”

Patty, realising that it was time for elevenses and recalling that he had a rather particular cache of seeds back home which he had had his eye on, put his foot down, sped through red lights, did not bother stopping at any “Stop” signs and certainly refused to consider giving way. Thus, he arrived back at base in double-quick time.

“Now, reverse-park, Mr Perkins,” murmured Walter. Patty slammed on the brakes of his saucer, causing the traffic behind him to shoot off dramatically in all directions. Without further ado, the saucer was pushed into reverse and Patty skilfully slid it in between two rather battered and dented saucers which - it seems - HamDOT[®] had placed there expressly for this manoeuvre. With a screeching of metal against metal, a lurch of bumper against bumper and a final kangaroo-jump when Patty’s saucer shovelled the foremost parked saucer a few feet forwards, the deed was done.

“Good. Splendid,” muttered Walter, the driving-test examiner from HamDOT[®] (Hamster Department of Travel). “You pass. Flying colours, Mr Perkins. Now, where that other walnut you promise?”