

Checking Yes FINALIST

By Anna Heetderks

The Colorado air wafted around clear and fresh, and the sun bounced brightly off the snow-capped Rockies as Uncle Mark cruised ahead of me on his mountain bike. Too far ahead of me for my liking. Worried I would lose him, I coasted fairly quickly down the hill, until I came to a curve in the road. It really wasn't much of a curve. In fact, it wasn't much of a hill. But all of a sudden my instinct for caution rudely interrupted to tell me that I wasn't going to be able to take the curve going that fast. I hit the brakes. Both of them. Turns out the front brakes were a little stronger than the back brakes. The bike, specifically the front of the bike, stopped very quickly. I kept moving. I slid across the sidewalk and into a gravel lot, landing right in front of a mildly shocked-looking Scout troop. Self-conscious and more than a little stunned, I quickly picked myself up, leaving a lot of my skin on the pavement.

Guilt-stricken Uncle Mark (it wasn't his fault, but he's sensitive about his sister's kids) guided me away from concerned onlookers over to the Safeway across the street, where he took me in the bathroom and helped me to clean off the blood and dirt. Blood. Lots of blood. It wasn't until I started to clean up with those rough, brown public-restroom paper towels that I realized how beat up I was. Nothing serious, but a lot of skin gone in a lot of different places. I started feeling light-headed. I pitched forward, and the next thing I knew, I was sitting outside the bathroom door. My three-year-old cousin appraised me, concerned. "You have a lot of boo-boos," he remarked, slightly awed.

The accident resulted in nothing more than a trip to the emergency room, a few lasting scars, and a lot of family jokes, until about a year later as I sat in the DMV, filling out the application form for my learner's permit. Do you wear glasses or contact lenses to operate a motor vehicle? Nope. Do you have a physical or mental condition that requires you to take medication? Nope. Have you ever had a seizure, blackout, or loss of consciousness? I paused. Well...there was that time last July... In my desire to be scrupulously honest, I tentatively checked "yes." Unsure, however, I ran it past my dad. "No, you didn't," he told me. "That doesn't count." So I scratched out the check mark in the "yes" box and checked "no." No problem, right? Our number was called and we marched over to the window and handed the form to the DMV lady. She scanned it critically, pausing over the medical section. She pointed to the scratched-out box. "What does this mean?" My dad explained, emphasizing that it wasn't a big deal. Not enough. The lady informed us that I would have to go to the doctor and get a check-up, and the doctor's office would have to sign a form saying that

I was physically capable of driving, and then, and only then, would I be able to come back and try again for my permit.

My dad wore his “you gotta be kidding me” look on the way home, gently but firmly explaining to me that you “never give the government a chance to say no.” We couldn’t get a doctor’s appointment for three weeks, and I tried to hold back my frustration. I was already sixteen; most of my friends already had their permits and would be able to get their licenses soon. I “cleared” my check-up, but the doctor’s office said they would have to have a copy of my treatment record from the hospital in Colorado before they could sign off on the form. Between that hangup and my dad’s busy work schedule, it was a few weeks before we could return, requisite form in my dad’s briefcase (along with all the other papers and certificates we might possibly need), to the DMV. I sat in one of those plastic chairs that is neutral in both color and comfort, doing homework and slightly raising my head each time a number was called. When it was our turn, we went up in slight trepidation and explained to a different DMV lady what had happened and gave her the form. “So actually the doctor’s office has to fax that form up to our headquarters in Richmond,” she told us. This time I wore the “you’ve got to be kidding me” look. “I can call and see if they have it?” she added sympathetically. So she went back and called, but no, the office in Richmond didn’t have it. We’d have to wait until they processed the form, which would take a few weeks.

Sighing deeply in frustration, once again we returned home. My dad and I cursed the government in general (without actually cursing, of course; my dad wouldn’t do that), lamenting in our indignation the cluelessness of all those people who think the government should run the healthcare system. It was November before the DMV had processed my form and my dad had cleared a window to take me back (we’d started in July). At that point, I was pretty sure I was suffering from DMV PTSD. This time, we were sure we had everything in order. And we did. But the DMV didn’t. As we waited, a voice came on over the loudspeaker to announce that the computer system was down. We asked how long it would take for the computers to be back up, and the lady said that the last time it happened, it took them a week to get the problem fixed. My dad took me to Chick-fil-a and bought me a consolation milkshake. I’d almost stopped being frustrated because the whole thing was just so silly. We came back a week later, and I was almost in disbelief when I passed the test and got the certificate that would allow me to finally, legally, drive.

I still recount the saga of both the bike and the DMV, usually together, since they’re interconnected. The most profound effect the whole situation had on me was the instillation of skepticism of government involvement in everyday life and a strong contempt for bureaucracy. I’d get upset when my friends and I

would debate government-run healthcare (yes, my friends and I do debate things like that; we're nerds). "See how well it works in Europe?!", they'd say. "That doesn't mean anything," I'd retort. "Our existing bureaucracies in the U.S. are a MUCH better indicator of how well government-funded healthcare would work here. We aren't Europe. Go to the DMV [here I'd practically spit the word] and consider how you would like those people running your healthcare." Bureaucracy was, and still is, one of the reasons I'm suspicious of the government getting involved in areas of my life such as healthcare.

Since then, my thoughts on the issue, like my thoughts on many other issues, have softened. When I took that tumble off my bike, my uncle didn't think twice about taking me to the ER. The bill came out to around \$900, but we had a health savings account and were able to afford it. But not every family is like my family. Some people would have to think twice before taking themselves, or their niece or nephew to the ER. I still have a scar on my arm, but if I were someone else, the piece of gravel might still be in there, too. Maybe there are people who would gladly get healthcare through a bureaucracy than have no healthcare at all. As I thought about my story more, I started to see two sides to it, two sides that were contradictory but at the same time complementary. Like my mom would say, the world isn't black and white.