

License to ... Fail
Marcela Kogan Special to The Washington Post
The Washington Post (1974-*Current file*); Feb 5, 1991;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Washington Post (1877 - 1995)
pg. C5

Vignettes

License to ... Fail

The Maryland Driving Test? Be Prepared!

By Marcela Kogan
Special to The Washington Post

On a warm and sunny Monday morning, I flunked the Maryland driving test. Ashamed, I left the Maryland Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) waiting at my own stupidity. How could I've been driving for 15 years. Everybody passes those tests. Everybody. Look at all those idiots on the road.

Apparently, I was not alone. Last September, nearly 40 percent of all people who took the road and written tests in Gaithersburg failed. I didn't know those figures in my time of doom. Nor did I realize many jokers probably were people like myself, confident drivers heaping our horns at reckless cabs and bicyclists.

Clearly, I was overreacting. But failing the driving test rekindled old pain, provoking fears I harbored as a teenager that I would not amount to anything in my life. Now a 33-year-old freelance writer, I'm better able to cope with my shortfalls. But old fears come back.

I never expected that getting a new license—my old one had expired without me realizing—would be a big production. When I took the D.C. written test after moving there 10 years ago, I simply familiarized myself with the Q&A booklet, memorizing those items dealing with legal limits for passing and parking.

Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or
microfilm.

BY MARCELA KOGAN/SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON POST

But the Maryland driving booklet—thick and unsystematic—was confusing. I planned over it during the weekend and dragged my husband out to the DMV on Monday morning, picking a location I thought was the closest to our house. I figured it would take us 20 minutes to get there.

I was wrong. After nearly two hours, we pulled into the parking lot. Luckily, the room was not crowded. Just me, teenagers and lots of foreigners. After the eye test, I sailed right through to the exam room.

Being a bit nervous is healthy since it gets the adrenaline flowing and makes you alert. But walking into the computer room, I felt calm. The examiner pointed me to my terminal and wished me luck. "I'll need it," I replied jokingly, then stroled to my seat.

"I'm sorry sir," an officer said to the man standing in front of his desk. Everybody looked up. "You got four wrong. Sir, you failed the test." Must not be too smart, I thought, feeling bad for the guy. Then I made my selection for the first question.

The screen turned beet red. "Incorrect," it shrieked. My heart skipped a beat. OK, take it slow. I focused on what I normally do on the road, but all choices seemed possible. What do I do when a car in front of me wants to parallel park? Sometimes I wait until it backs in, other times I put on my blinker, look over my shoulder and go around it. I've also beeped my horn.

By the time I was done, my screen was on fire. The computer-friendly message: Come back and try again. I walked out of the room looking down. "I can't believe I flunked that test," I wept, on my husband's comforting shoulder once we got into the car. "I'm so stupid. Nobody flunks it. Hardly anybody ever does. Even teenagers get licenses."

"Don't worry," he said, startled at my reaction. "You just need to study the book. It's not a matter of being smart. You just need to memorize it. Lots of people probably flunk it."

"Oh, yeah," I challenged. "Do you know anybody who has?"

No answer. I didn't tell any of my friends about the incident. We pulled into the parking lot of another DMV early the next Saturday and took our place at the end of the long line. My husband decided to take the test as well—he still had his D.C. license—and we both quizzed each other on how many feet you can park from the intersection, how far before you can pass.

The line crawled and people grew impatient. As lunch approached, some stepped out to buy munchies from vending machines in the building. Someone remarked the waiting line to take the road test would be just as bad. Nose on my booklet, I forgot entirely about the road test. But I

didn't worry. I was sure to pass that one—I'm fine once I'm on the street.

We made our way into the inside line and started filling out the forms. A half hour later, I reached the window. An unsympathetic government employee grabbed my forms and grimaced. "You are not supposed to fill them in red," she droned. I was afraid she was going to throw me off the line.

We zigzagged our way to another line. And waited.

"I don't understand why they have this idiotic system for waiting in lines," my husband growled, then launched into a critique of the procedures complete with recommendations. "Too bad there wasn't a suggestion box."

Our turn finally came. I read the questions carefully, placed myself behind the wheel of the little car in the illustration, yielded when it was safe, waited for the car in front of mine to park before proceeding. I only got one wrong.

I was the happiest person waiting in the next line—this time to get our eyes examined—even though every-one else was annoyed because it wasn't moving. An elderly Korean woman was holding up the line.

"Can you read the examiner. Baffled, she shook her head, mumbled something and motioned she didn't understand.

"The first line, ma'am. Can you please read the first line?"

She shook her head, gesticulated some more. People on line sighed. We stretched our necks, glaring, hoping our desperate stares would prod the bureaucrat to push her along. Several times, he repeated the instructions changing his words and straining in sign language—going nowhere.

"Ma'am, what language do you speak? Is it Korean?"

She nodded. He pulled out a piece of paper with Korean translation. Her face lit up. Yes, yes, she would be glad to read the line. We clapped at the breakthrough.

Until that moment, I did not realize I failed... I came out of shock sobbing.

The road test, I soon learned, was going to be in an obstacle course in the back of the building, not amid real-life congested traffic where I felt most confident driving. But I figured, others have passed it. I'd wing it.

The examiner—a tall uniformed man with sunglasses—sat on the passenger side. As he explained the rules, his clipboard balancing on his lap, I surveyed the course nervously. Endless rows of lanes with red flags, road signs and detours appeared before me. Cars navigated through them in slow motion, some backing up, others turning around and parking.

I was in a fog, unable to tell where the lanes started or finished.

He asked me to turn left in the second course. Confused, I drifted into the wrong-way lane of the first course. "You are in the wrong course miss," he said, but I didn't realize what was going on. He repeated I was going the wrong way and when that clicked, asked me to back out and head toward the way we came. I thought that was part of the test and followed his instructions.

When we approached the door to the building he asked me to stop. "You can come back and try again Monday," he grumbled, scribbling on his pad, then handing me a piece of paper. Until that moment, I did not realize I failed. My husband looked shocked to see me back so soon. I could not feel a thing.

I came out of shock sobbing. My husband—by then getting used to my reaction to failure—pulled me aside to comfort me. I wept long and hard. I could not face up to the adult I've become.

But that too passed. Once I regained my senses, my husband took me to a spot where we had a clear view of the course. We watched what the cars had to do to pass the test while he explained the traps.

His voice soothed me. I listened eagerly, trying to envision myself driving in the lane. I saw what I would have to do and felt less scared. We both snickered when one woman rammed into the rail while attempting a three-point-turn.

The following Monday, we were among the first in line to take the road test. I was alert, prepared. I took control of the wheel. My license photo shows a big smile.

Freelance writer Marcela Kogan is driving right along, thank you.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.