

My Cup Holders Runneth Over

Most men drift through life in a fog, waiting for some moment of clarity to give them purpose and meaning. I should know; I used to be one of them. But then something changed. On an ordinary afternoon not long ago, I drove home from the dealership in my tricked-out new minivan.

“Daddy, it’s awesome!” Leo shouted, bursting out the front door with his little sister, equally ecstatic. He was just five at the time, and Josie was two. It didn’t take much to blow their little minds—a new Bionicle for him, a red M&M for her—but I’d never seen them quite so overcome as the first time they witnessed that magical miniature van. My wife, Megan, came rushing out after them, nearly getting toppled by our dog, Chloe, who jumped up on her hind legs and drooled on the driver’s side door. The next thing I knew, we were on our first family joy ride. And when I say joy, I’m talking *joy*. From that moment on, I accepted my destiny; came to terms with my fate. For I am the man in the minivan. And now, I rejoice. I rejoice every day for my collapsible third row of seats, my built-in DVD player, the bounty of cup holders I am blessed to behold.

Long ago, you see, my life was economy-sized. There was room for just three passengers: Me, Me, and Me. Where we were headed was anyone’s guess, for in my younger years, I was lost; blind to the miracle of a Bluetooth-compatible GPS system equipped with advanced split-screen controls. I had a radar detector instead.

How it all changed is a bit of a blur. There was a wedding, and then there was a puppy. A home was purchased in New England. A wife was promoted and transferred to New York. A townhouse in Brooklyn. A new baby boy. A new baby girl. A stay-at-home dad was born. A

prescription for Xanax was filled. Grey hairs grew in, grey hairs fell out. Six years passed in six seconds. And then came the minivan.

So don't give me any aggravation, alright? I've heard it all a million times. "Does the driver's manual teach you how to be boring?" joked my hipster friend, Max, who lives in the townhouse next door with his groovy wife and cutting-edge five-year-old, though they may as well be living in some alternate universe inhabited by impossibly cool Brooklyn families who have no use for any vehicle that's not yellow with a meter on the dashboard. My younger brother, Richie, gave me a bumper sticker that said "My other car is an aircraft carrier." And some random schmuck on a Vespa—a kid who wasn't even wearing a helmet—felt entitled to remark as follows: "Betcha get a lotta ass with that car."

I was at a red light, on my way to feed the ducks in Prospect Park. "That's right, buddy," I answered. "Your mother rode shotgun last night." He flipped me off, but my kids didn't see. They were in the back seats (plural), glued to *Toy Story 3*. Have I already told you my minivan has a built-in DVD player? If I did, I feel it's worth repeating. My wife only lets them watch it on long trips, but what she doesn't know won't hurt her. When she's off at work all day, a "long trip" refers to anything longer than 60 seconds.

I used to be more like her. I worried about too much TV, too many Gummy Worms, too many toys and not enough books. But then I stopped fighting it. I gave in to it all. And now it is me you'll find at the wheel, riding high in my captain's chair.

That's what we call them in the minivan scene. Captain's chairs. Remember bucket seats? They're like those, only bigger and more spectacular. If you are considering getting a minivan—and if you're not, I feel sorry for you—I'd recommend the captain's chairs without hesitation. With each passenger happily confined to his or her personal sitting arena, hair will not

be pulled, wet fingers will not be inserted into neighboring ears, thoughts of corporeal punishment will not be taken under serious consideration. No. When you enter my vehicle, the first thing you'll observe is how orderly it is. Also cleanly. When a man takes pride in his achievement, he has a standing appointment at Park Slope Suds N' Simonizing, every Friday morning at 9:30 sharp. Here is just a partial inventory of debris you will never find in my minivan (after this Friday morning at 9:30 sharp):

- banana peel and parts
- chunk of soy dog
- fur of real dog
- school of Pepperidge Farm goldfish
- string cheese (aged)
- unknown.

It was November of 2007 when I first started fantasizing about minivans. Josie had recently been born, bringing the grand total of our family to five: two adults, two children, and one obese Labrador mutt who preferred being driven rather than walked. We took a lot of road trips that year. Let me rephrase that. We took a lot of sedan trips. Megan and I had the same two-door jalopy we'd been driving since we were footloose and child-free. In those days, we'd toss our backpacks in the trunk and get to wherever at whatever o'clock. But by November of 2007, something felt different. Specifically: the trunk.

We decided to drive down to Maryland so Leo and Josie could spend Thanksgiving with their cousins. According to Mapquest, it was supposed take four hours. I spent the first five packing the trunk. At least that's what it felt like until it became clear that the port-a-crib needed

to be strapped to the roof, and the co-sleeper, Jolly Jumper, and top half of the bathtub seat would be traveling as passengers rather than cargo. Leo covered the Jersey Turnpike in tears, but at least his shrieks were muffled by Chloe's tail, which was in front (and inside) of his mouth. He calmed down once Megan climbed into the back with an Etch-a-Sketch, wedging herself into a sliver of space between the two car seats. Josie woke up in Delaware when a tote bag of pop-up books crashed down on her head. That was my fault. I stopped short due to poor visibility. It was hard to see with the Baby Einstein crib mobile dangling over the mirror.

So this is how we got around for the next couple years, until things went from bad to worse. On a five-hour sedan trip to see our old neighbors in Somerville, Mass., it became painfully clear that Josie had developed a dependency upon "Toot, Toot, Chugga Chugga, Big Red Car," by the Wiggles. Not "Mitten the Kitten," not "Farewell to the Wiggly Trail," just "Toot, Toot, Chugga Chugga, Big Red Car." We had to play it a million hundred times in a row or else she would wail. As you might imagine, there is a wide variety of audio selections I'd rather hear on a five-hour sedan trip than "Toot, Toot, Chugga, Chugga, Big Red Car." One that comes to mind is a five-hour test of the emergency broadcasting system. But thanks to my minivan, that issue is moot. My dealer threw in a couple of wireless headsets to go with the kids' DVD player (built-in). Now they can listen, and I can get back to the 24-hour Pearl Jam station on satellite radio. Yes, it also came with that.

Such is the promise my minivan holds. Children are seen and not heard. Parents complete full sentences without interruption. Friends and family share special times in the collapsible third row of seats. Seriously, it's like a living room back there, only better because everyone gets their own air vent and cup holder. Why don't you stop by some time so I can show you around? I can't wait to see your reaction when I reveal the secret fold-out compartment under Leo's seat. It

happens to safeguard the finest pretzel rods money can buy. They're from Costco, just one of the far-flung destinations my minivan has led me to lately. She's taken me places I never dreamed I would go, from the Brooklyn Children's Museum to The Manhattan Children's Museum to The Staten Island Children's Museum. Why, just last weekend, she took me and my wife out to the 'burbs.

We had an appointment with a realtor to look at a house. It was your basic split level colonial, the kind of thing you just can't find in the city, not even here in Brooklyn—big yard, two-car garage, and a neighborhood playground notable not only for what it had (grass) but also for what it didn't (a sign at the entrance stating: "Warning. Rat Poison in This Area.") It would be tough to leave our little brick townhouse in Brooklyn, but, year after year, it's been shrinking—just like that old sedan. And year after year, our friends have been moving—to the Westchesters, Montclairs, and Winnetkas of the world. The schools are better, they tell us, and you get more house for the money. I would have called them quitters a while ago, but I don't rule anything out anymore. When a man gets a minivan, he becomes open-minded; his priorities change.

So come along, won't you? Come through my sliding rear doors and pull up a captain's chair. We don't even have to go anyplace. We can just sit here with the emergency brake on, like I do by myself some nights when I need to unwind. A guy can go kind of crazy spending all day with his kids, you know what I'm saying? How about we split a fat pretzel rod and just chill for a while? You want to see a movie? I've got *Pirates of the Caribbean* in the glove compartment. We won't even have to fast forward past the scary part. Or we can skip the movie and just crack open a few juice boxes.

Come on in, live a little, what's your rush? The way I look it, we're in this thing together.
When life deals you a minivan, you might as well enjoy the ride.