

What Should Have Been a 2 Hour Trip
By Eleanor Kakuk, CHS

In 2023 there was an estimated total of 40,990 deaths caused by motor vehicles in the U.S. according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. This is what was on my mind as I rode down the highway in my family's unreliable and now suffocatingly crowded van with what felt like half the people in Montana.

A LIST OF PEOPLE/ANIMALS IN OUR VAN NOT INCLUDING ME

My Father, overworked lawyer who loves blues music, murder mysteries, and history with an allergy to calling a handyman when something breaks

My Mother, preschool teacher with the wardrobe of Ms. Frizzle who always carries a beer cozy in her purse because she "is a goddam lady"

My Sister, bratty rat, that's all

My Uncle, walking hazard that somehow works in construction, hilarious to observe. In this story he has a re-injured back injury from chasing a turkey off his roof

My Grandmother, jazz singer, talks like velvet and wears satin, probably undiscovered royalty because she is the most glamorous person I know

My Grandfather, part-time lawyer and full-time musician, he talks like a drunk philosopher and walks like the drill sergeant he used to be

Kodiak, one of our dogs, despite our efforts he enjoys chewing on furniture and the porch deck, so we took him with us

We were cruising down the highway at the record speed of 65 mph when our van, The Gypsy Curse, decided to live up to her name. Our tire popped like a botched canning job, but without the rotting green beans. The Gypsy Curse then reluctantly limped to the side of the highway as my mother freaked out, tried to adjust something on the dashboard buttons and accidentally turned dad's music all the way up which was accompanied by a sudden putrid burning smell from the engine. It smelled like the color of manila envelopes or like someone set fire to a midlife crisis then tried to put it out with a mixture of almond milk and pee. I should probably explain our van is a bit like a cat; the only person it will let touch it is my father who absolutely hates it, meanwhile my mother considers it her precious baby but cannot get anything to work. As far as death traps go, she is very pretty, a beetle green Volkswagen with a pop-up top for camping.

I should also probably stop to explain why almost all my family was in that van together. Let's start at the beginning during WW2 my great grandparents fled from Austria-Hungary to America,

3 generations and 85 years later the Kakuk family has spread out across the country. Not that there is very much of us, we are a small family. Most of the year the family keeps in touch through ill-organized communication and last-minute Christmas packages.

A SMALL NOTE

If you give a mailperson 20 dollars, 4 shortbread cookies and can of wine they will send your Christmas package as they lock the doors at 5:01 pm on December 24th

Despite the lying about when we sent the present and false complaining about how backed up the mail gets, we are a relatively tight-knit group. Every third of July we go to Butte to light off fireworks and barbecue.

As my father wrestled with the engine, mom went to get cell service, and my sister fed dandelions to my dog who does not suffer from a surplus of thoughts. I sat on the roof being semi-helpful and passing a wrench down now and again. The sun had started to climb the mountains and its first rays burst across the highway, like orange-pink salmon leaping up a waterfall. Threatening a hot day but in a way that was vaguely pleasant. My grandparents pulled a portable blender out of their bag like a magician's hat and proceeded to make iced cocktails at 7:30 in the morning. By now my father had resolved the engine issue and we moved on the tire, I was fully helping this time. But somehow the wrench would not pull off our tire bolts, we had none the right size.

Just when we were about to give up, my uncle suddenly dropped out of the tree he was climbing, clutched his back and sort of whimpered. I thought he might have re-injured his re-injury but then he straightened and said 5 magical words, "doesn't Volkswagen use the metric system". The words hung in the air, glaring at us for how stupid we were. Almost immediately we rustled up a shirt from somewhere and put the cloth on the bolts to make up for the slight size difference, they then came off as easily as wheel bolts that still take a significant amount of effort to take off. The rest of the tire changing ran as smoothly as huckleberry syrup on your favorite white shirt. After that I remember looking around as we got in the car, not feeling suffocated by my family, but glad that I had this bunch of oddballs in my corner.