

September

WHENEVER MY HUSBAND CASUALLY SAYS, “HEY, HON, COME TAKE A LOOK at this Web site,” I know it’s going to cost me. All of our largest purchases have been preceded by my being summoned to his computer in this manner. So when he says this a few weeks before his birthday, I knew it’s really going to cost me, and I don’t mean just financially.

“Check this out,” he says, pointing. “Isn’t it cool?”

I glance at the Ford E-350 on his screen. It looks like the sort of vehicle that shuttles retirees to the local mall. “Kind of,” I reply.

He frowns and says, “It’s not just any old van. It’s a camper. It would be perfect for us. You said you wanted to see the West.”

I do want to see the West, in theory anyway. In fact, seeing the West was one of the reasons we moved with our nine-year-old son, Ben, to California. But travel takes so much planning, and as

I've gotten older I'm increasingly less willing to tolerate discomfort: the crowds, the traffic, everybody trying to reach the same place at the same time.

His fingers pound at the keyboard. "It's got captain's seats."

"What's a captain's seat?"

"That means it's very, very comfortable."

"Nice," I say, getting back to my book.

Ten minutes later, he says, "I'm going to get one for us."

"Us?" I say.

"Yes, us—you know, you and me?"

The subtext being: Aren't you lucky you married a man who wants to buy a family van as his midlife-crisis vehicle instead of a Porsche Carrera GT?

The good news is he finds a used van. The bad news is it's in South Dakota. So he pays somebody to fly to South Dakota, pick up the van and drive it back.

"It's an amazing deal," he says. "It only has fifteen thousand miles on it, and the woman is a motivated seller."

Once the van is on its way, my husband tells me the truth. The woman was not the original owner; her son was, or had been. He bought the van to go kayaking in the most untouched places. Then one day he went out in his boat and never returned. This van delivered him to his death. And now his heartbroken mother had sold it to us.

"You have to give it back," I tell him. "He died in it."

"He didn't die in it. He died in his kayak."

"Well, he might as well have died in the van," I say. "He was in the van right before he died."

My husband sighs.

I want him to be happy, us to be happy. It seems every day

we hear that another couple has decided to call it quits. More often than not in our circle, the wife leaves the husband. When talking divorce with these women—mothers, like me, of school-age children—we speak in a shorthand that ricochets around in my head like the rhymes of Dr. Seuss.

They say: Feeling dead. Dead in bed. Too much snore. There's got to be more.

I say: Turn his head. His head in bed. You'll have no more. No more snore.

Now, there are plenty of good reasons to end a marriage, but each time I hear of another impending divorce I can't help but reevaluate my own marriage. Do I want more? Does he? And how do I know if what I have is enough?

When the van finally arrives, I realize it is not the same as the one in that first picture I saw on the Web site. This is no ordinary van for transporting the elderly. It's a 4x4 Rock Crawler version, with tinted windows, a roof rack and a camper extension that explodes out the top. Built to climb rock gorges and traverse rivers, our van also features on its front bumper a cattle-guard contraption that must have been handy when plowing through herds of wildebeests in the Serengeti but is presumably unnecessary in the suburbs.

As I circle the van, trying to hide my shock, our neighbors drive by in their Taurus. The man sticks his head out the window, pumps his fist at my husband and gives a yodeling hoot of solidarity. The woman shrugs her shoulders at me, her face scrunched up, as if she's thinking, "How will this affect our property value?"

The hulking black behemoth is so big it spills out of our driveway and into the street.

"It's more of a truck than a van," my husband concedes.

“Yes,” I say. “Yes, it is.”

“Just give it a chance,” he says.

I feel turned inside out, but it’s his insides that I’m wearing on my outsides. Every time I walk out the door, it’s there: 10,000 pounds of metal, gears and after-market hydraulics, announcing to the entire neighborhood that someone in this house is having a midlife crisis.

He attempts to woo me with the van’s charms—the things he thinks will appeal to me: the shower, the portable toilet, the diesel engine.

The diesel engine! Diesels can go a million miles, he claims, and in a pinch they can run on corn and potatoes. The downside to diesel is that we can barely hear one another above the roar of the engine, and communication with Ben, who seems to be about eight feet behind us in the backseat, is impossible.

So we develop a primitive sign language consisting of exaggerated gestures. Imaginary spoon to mouth: Are you hungry? Finger pointed at crotch: Need to go to the bathroom? Mother’s head cupped in hands: Why didn’t I look at that Web site more carefully?

My husband tries to bring me on board by asking for my input: “Let’s talk about where to go on our first camping trip.”

“What about Oregon?” Ben suggests.

“Baja?” says my husband.

“San Francisco?” I volunteer, which is ten miles away.

My husband orders maps from AAA. He sketches out routes. He talks weather and strategies for trading off on driving. He doesn’t yet realize I have no intention of going anywhere in that thing. It smells of mold, plus my husband confesses that you have to empty the toilet by hand.

“What’s the point of a Porta Potti if you have to clean it out every time you use it?” I ask, trying not to gag.

“It’s for emergencies. Like if we’re stuck on the highway in a blizzard.”

“Why would we be stuck on the highway in a blizzard?”

“That’s the whole point. That we could be stuck in a blizzard. Wouldn’t that be fun? We’d be the only ones on the highway all cozy and warm.”

Because everybody else, he fails to add, would have listened to the weather forecast and stayed home.

Eventually I have to tell him: “I’m not coming on the camping trip.”

“You want us to go without you? Seriously?”

“Yes.” What I really mean is: *No, I don’t want you to go without me, but I don’t want to go where you’re going.*

My husband and son continue the trip discussions without me. They decide their inaugural camping trip will consist of a Saturday night in Point Reyes, about fifty miles from our house. One last invitation is extended, and I politely decline. Finally I am off the hook.

The morning of their expedition I climb into the van to load it with their requested dinner supplies: hot dogs, Gummi Worms and chocolate soy milk. Reaching into the cabinet, I discover something wedged into the very back. It’s a map of the Big Sioux River in South Dakota, left behind by the young man who died.

I feel strangely dislocated as I trace the blue tributaries with my finger. I imagine him looking at the map on his final day and asking himself, *Where do I go next?* He couldn’t have known that “next,” for him, was not going to be a very good place. But what choice did he have? Stay home?

His zest for life (or more to the point, my lack of zest) is startling to me. Is it possible I am the one having the midlife crisis?

I used to be less afraid. In the early years of our marriage, my husband and I climbed mountains, ran Class 3 rapids in a rickety canoe and camped along the way. On rainy nights we slept in a tent, and on starry nights we slept outside. We were in our twenties; our needs were simple.

We lived dangerously, which is to say we were up for anything. We didn't think about what things cost. We thought only about the cost of not doing things. Which is exactly why—I suddenly understand—my husband has bought the van for us.

And then, just as suddenly, news of Ben's rescheduled soccer tournament ends the excursion—for the moment, at least. But there is no stopping my boys; they decide to simply camp in the driveway.

From the window, I watch them depart. Ben is beside himself with excitement, clutching his pillow, his Nintendo DS pressed to his chest like a Bible. He looks as if he is going to the moon. They wave to me as they climb aboard. Soon I hear the *whoomp-whoomp* of a bass and shrieks of laughter—they are having a dance party.

I've hardly had a night to myself since my son was born. Back in the house I pour myself a glass of wine and eat my Burmese takeout. Later, stretched out in bed, surrounded by stacks of books and magazines, I revel in my creature comforts. But as the hours pass, a vague unease settles over me, an odd kind of claustrophobia that isn't about the physical space I'm in, but the sheltered life I'm living.

Sometime after midnight, I finally push aside the covers, grab

my pillow and drag myself from my warm bed. Outside, the chilly air smells of eucalyptus and toasted marshmallows. In the distance an owl hoots. I know the mattress will be stiff, the headroom cramped, and I won't sleep. But I open the van door and climb in anyway. The two people I love most in the world are out here, along with the promise of a richer, more adventurous life.

Once we leave the driveway, that is.

The misc is piling up all over again," says Ben the next morning.

He's hanging upside down like a bat from what is optimistically referred to as the van's penthouse bed.

It takes me a moment to realize he's talking about the miscellaneous folder I made for him, in which I've told him to stuff all his schoolwork that he doesn't quite know what to do with but he might need sometime in the future.

"Well, that's good," I say. "That's what the folder is for—to contain the misc so it's not floating around in your head."

"What's good about that?" says my husband.

Recently I confessed to him that I was feeling stressed and, well, a little down. He told me he wasn't surprised. I just had to get organized. All I needed was two lists: A for personal and Z for work. Then I needed to rank things according to importance. For instance, he proposed, A-1 might be having sex five times a week. A-25 might be purchasing that Mulberry bag. I told him I had a list already, thank you very much, and all I needed was a highlighter to know what task I needed to accomplish next. And it's true. I do have a list. The same list I print out every week that has had the same things highlighted for the past five years: finish household catastrophe plan (earthquake, fire, avian bird flu, mud-

slide), begin using meat as condiment rather than as main course, explore the possibility I may have ADD.

“Hey, Ben,” my husband says, “would you like me to help you get organized? I have a system that will make you feel a lot less anxious about all that misc.”

“No, thank you,” says Ben.

My husband sighs. “Latte?” he says to me.

Hurrah! Our camping trip is over!

“Great idea,” I say. “But let’s take the Subaru to Peet’s. It’s so hard to find parking. You wouldn’t want anybody to ding this little beauty.”

“Relax. We can have a latte right here,” says my husband. “If you’ll just move your arm and your leg and your butt about ten inches to the left, I can make one for you.”

“How about if I get out and stand in the driveway?” I say. “How would that be?”

Being with the people you love most in the world is not the same as being trapped in a van with the people you love most in the world.

I think my problem is more than just the van. I think my problem is vehicles of all kinds. I am not a person who should be allowed behind the wheel. I go a little crazy. For instance, when I am alone in the car here are some of the secret things I say:

—What the fuck, buddy?

—Could you go any slower, lady?

—Drive much, asshole?

For the record, only in the car do I call people *buddy* and *lady* and *asshole*. I think it’s an East Coast thing. My friend Renee, who is from New Jersey, says *buddy* and *lady* and *asshole*, too.

“I have to pee and I’m not using the Porta Potti,” I say to my husband.

“I’m peeing in the bushes,” says Ben.

“Go use the bathroom and come right back out and your latte will be ready,” says my husband.

His eyes are glazed, intent on the task at hand. He looks—well, he looks high. I know this look. He’s in love. With his van.

When I first met my husband he drove a beat-up old Saab with the license plate KEEMO. I asked him if this was an alternate spelling for *chemo*, as he had just survived a bout with skin cancer, but he grinned and said, “Keemo-Saab-ay—get it?”

Kemo Sabe. A friend or trusted scout. How he adored that car. I should have known what was coming.

Sometimes I think my husband married the wrong woman. There are women who would love this van. Wives who would want nothing more than to hop in it with no notice and live the 4x4 lifestyle and bathe in a contraption called a sun shower every few days. Instead he has me. I know nothing about cars and the little I do know I instantly forget. Like how to open the hood. I can never find that little black lever and I’m always in a panic when I’m trying to locate it because the only time I look for it is when the car has broken down.

Now, I am not inept in all car matters. I am an excellent parallel parker. I know exactly which lines move the fastest at the toll-booths and I weave my way in and out of traffic aggressively and artfully. I am sloppy, though. I don’t check the air pressure in my tires and I tend to ignore the squeals and creaks and leaks that are precursors to the engine’s warning light going on, leading to the

car belching steam and the AAA guy glaring at me while waiting for me to figure out how to pop the hood. He might also be giving me dirty looks because my car is a pigsty. It's one of the few places in my life where I allow myself to be a slob. About twice a year I bring it to the car wash. Yes, mine is the car that says PLEASE WASH ME! on the back window, etched in the dust by somebody's finger—a man's finger, no doubt.

My needs are simple. I just want a car that goes when I start it. Well, really what I want is a GPS. Well, *really* what I want is a woman with a kind voice who tells me when to turn left, when to turn right and who applauds me when I arrive at my final destination.

My bad car juju started with my father's brand-new 1972 Lincoln Continental. It was burgundy and had seats the color of meat. The leather was cool and smooth. It was pebbly and so much fun to lick and bite. And so I bit a chunk of leather right off my mother's headrest. That she was sitting in the seat at the time was one mistake. My other mistake was that I was far too old to be chewing on car upholstery. I can't remember my punishment, but I'm sure that it had something to do with being forced to eat a big steak, which may not sound like a punishment to you, but I assure you it was for me when I was nine.

Then right after I got my driver's permit came the episode with the Plymouth Valiant. The gas pedal got stuck. I circled the block once and my parents waved gaily at me. They waved a little less gaily the second time I came barreling around. The third time when they heard me shouting, "Help, help, I can't stop!" they looked exasperated.

"Turn the engine off!" yelled my father.

I had no idea how to do that. Was there some sort of emergency turn-the-engine-off switch?

“How?” I screamed.

My father mimed turning the key in the ignition and I followed his directions and the car sputtered to a stop.

He frequently brings up this story at Thanksgiving.

The thing about calls to adventure is you change your mind about them. At midnight they sound pretty good. At seven in the morning they are the dumbest idea you ever had. As soon as I go into the house I hate the van all over again.

And so I loiter. I brush my teeth. Throw in a load of laundry. I feel like a fugitive. At any moment I expect the front door to be kicked open and my husband to be standing there with a mug in hand. “Could you go any slower, lady?” he’ll say.

The misc is piling up all over again. I need to follow my husband’s advice. I just need to get organized. I’ll accomplish something on my list. How about attacking that catastrophe plan? Maybe that is why I’ve been feeling stuck.

HOW TO KNOW IF YOUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE

1. Your husband says: I smell smoke. Do you smell smoke? I smell smoke.
2. You say: That’s my new Hermès perfume. It’s vetiver mixed with cigar-flavored notes of tonka bean. When it dries down it smells like Apple Jacks.
3. He sniffs your wrist and says: No, I smell smoke. I’m certain that’s smoke.
4. Your son comes running into the room, tears streaming down

his face, and says: The TV blew up and is on fire. My Wii is hung. Could somebody please come reboot it before I lose my game?

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE

1. Run around in circles saying: What do we do? What do we do?
2. Try to remember the lyrics to the What to Do If There's a Fire song your son learned when he was a toddler.
3. Remember only one line of one verse: Call out for help and never hide.
4. Yell: Help! Help! at the dog while jumping up and down in front of the window.

Our friend Clyde is a firefighter. Actually he's a fire captain. He says the same thing every time he comes for dinner. "Holy shit, if there's a fire in the canyon you're screwed."

Yes, we are stupid people who live at the top of a canyon. Yes, we live in the Oakland Hills, and yes, these are the same Oakland Hills that were ravaged in the Oakland Hills Firestorm of 1991 that at its peak destroyed one house every eleven seconds. But not our hill. Not our canyon. That is what I say when Mr. Fire Captain comes to dinner.

He shakes his head and says, "If there's a fire just get out."

"Out to where?" I ask.

"Just grab Ben and run down the street."

"Well, run where?"

"Away from the fucking fire," he says. "Is there something wrong with you?"

Yes, there is something wrong with me. I'm a procrastinator

when it comes to disasters. I'm of the "lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place so stand there and hope for the best" camp. I'm also of the dirty-looks-can-change-people's-behavior camp. I'm the only one in this camp at the present moment, but I'm hoping to recruit additional members.

I march out to the van with a pen and a notebook.

"You're absolutely right," I say to my husband. "I need to be more organized. You, too, buster," I say to Ben. "You know, Dad's really good at this kind of stuff. We should listen to him."

"Your latte got cold," my husband says, "so I drank it."

"We need to make a fire evacuation plan," I tell him.

"Right now?" he says.

"We need two ways out of every room."

"What about the pantry?" says Ben.

He's a sharp kid. The pantry *is* a problem. One, because he spends so much time in there staring at the shelves, wondering what to eat and wondering who's going to make it for him and then getting all depressed because his mother is incapable of whipping up a marvelous dinner out of tomato paste, canned pineapple and bread crumbs, and two, because it's basically a closet and there are no windows, no other way to get out except for the door, which could very well be ablaze because his mother forgot to turn the burner off and melted the Teflon nonstick coating off the frying pan once again.

"From now on, limit your time in the pantry," I say. "No more than two minutes."

"Smoke alarms?" says my husband.

"We've got 'em!" I say.

"Yes, I know we have them, but when's the last time you checked the batteries?"

“There are no batteries. Remember, we took them out because the alarms kept going off every time somebody took a shower?”

Ben begins to sing. “I have a song to share with you. I have a song to share with you. If you should ever see a fire. Here are some things that you should do.”

“Good boy!” I cry. It’s that safety song he learned as a toddler. I hadn’t remembered it being such a catchy little ditty.

He continues. “And if your clothes should catch on fire. And if your clothes should catch on fire. You must stay calm and don’t start running. You need to stop and drop and roll. Yes, if your clothes should catch on fire. You need to stop and drop and roll.”

We all look at each other silently, imagining the youngest member of our family combusting. Ben climbs into my lap. My husband fiddles around with the stereo dial.

“This,” I say, “is exactly why this has been on my to-do list for five years.”

“I know it’s hard, but we have to think about these things. We need an escape plan,” says my husband.

“Okay. Let’s escape, then,” I say.

“Finally,” he says.

He starts the van and we pull out of the driveway.

It’s Sunday morning and the village is crowded. My husband has to drive around three times before he finds a parking space big enough to fit the van in. I tilt my captain’s seat way back so nobody can see me as he expertly reverses and forwards his way into the tight space. I shut my eyes.

“Wake me when you’ve parked,” I say.

Once we’re situated my husband pops the van’s penthouse top and sets up a game of Boggle.

“We’re camping in the village!” says Ben.

“And we didn’t even have to get a permit,” says my husband. “See—this baby is already paying for itself.”

Every few minutes a man raps on the window and says, “What the hell is this thing?”

Then my husband patiently explains about the Quigley suspension, how it can drive over boulders and could most certainly drive through a firestorm. Ben feels better and better. I feel better and better. I can go home and cross “Fire” off the catastrophe-planning section of my to-do list. The van is our catastrophe plan. We stay there for so long, holding court, that we get hungry and I have to leave again for more provisions.

As soon as I get out a woman accosts me.

“Shame on you, lady,” she says, glaring at the van taking up two parking spaces. “How can you drive that thing? People are dying for oil.”

“Yes, well,” I tell her. “It runs on French fries.”

“It runs on the oil they fry the French fries in,” shouts my husband from inside the van.

The woman gives me a dirty look. I shrug my shoulders. And just like that my bad car juju is over.