

CLEANING OUT THE ATTIC

So we, Blue Man and I – set out for Sacramento. We headed east. Funny thing was, we were in upstate New York. Looks like another roundabout route. But they're the best kind, as most true roadtrippers would agree.

Blue Man is the van's name. He was adopted from a Cadillac dealership in Norwood, Massachusetts in October of 1998. He's a 1992 Chevy conversion van, and carried only 9966 miles at the time.

So, essentially, in the seven years since BM had rolled off the assembly line, he had been driven an average of just about 3.9 miles per day.

As Malvi, the salesman, put it in his middle-eastern accent, "Iz bran' noo."

How did a Chevy van come to rest at a Cadillac store, I queried.

Malvi didn't know for sure, but we teamed up to postulate that some

reasonably well-to-do retired couple had thought that it would be a fun way to take their semi-annual pilgrimage from the frosty north to the sunny south. Trouble was, we figured, they soon realized that they weren't about to do any sleeping in the dang thing, they weren't exactly spring chickenish enough anymore to clamber over the center TV/VCP console to get into the back, and that they just plain wished they had gotten themselves another Cadillac instead, damn it. So they traded Blue Man in for the big car ride, and left him there for me to scoop.

BM and I hit it off right away. He knew I was gonna be a lot more fun than Mr. & Mrs. Boring had been. He would not be sitting in some driveway or garage while I piddled around town in my Caddy. No way, hozay. BM was my chariot, ready and willing to be wheeled with alacrity across North America.

Some people don't name their vehicles. I always have. The name is what makes them mine. Ford named the car Mustang, but I named her Sally.

Vehicles need names, I think. You seem to get along better with a vehicle when it carries a moniker. I've had: the Hawkmobile, my first car, a \$20 1962 Plymouth Valiant with a push-button automatic transmission; The Cruisemobile, a '66 Plymouth Belvedere that I ran into the ground; Sally, that sweet little '69 Mustang; The Roadhouse, my first van; The Moose, The Terp (a bad name for a bad van); Spuds, a Dodge Caravan that I came to loathe for its dearth of living space; Max (the king of the road), and now Blue Man.

I talk to them by name, yell at them by name, and coax them by name too. Yeah, it's a machine, and common sense says that a machine can't hear or think or feel, but, hey, common sense can be wrong. Maybe once that ignition first fires, a spark of life actually is created, but we, in our human vanity, refuse to recognize it as such. We once all thought the world was flat too, if you recall, so feel free to bite me.

Yeah, well, maybe I'm talking out my anus, too. Wouldn't be the first time. I



don't really believe all that malarkey (whatever the heck malarkey is), but I'm ready to accept it if turns out to be true.

Malarkey is one of those words that the dictionary tells you is of "unknown origin." They don't know where the hell it came from, or who started using it first or why. They say that it first appeared around 1929, that it is definitely a noun, that it means "insincere or foolish talk," and that it is synonymous with bunkum. I guess bunkum is where bunk comes from. No, not as in bunkbed, dumbass: bunk, as in "you expect me to believe all that bunk? I haven't heard such malarkey in all my days!" But, unlike malarkey, at least there is a quaint story in the etymology of bunkum: it refers to Buncombe county, N.C. and traces back to a remark made by its Congressman in 1845, who defended an irrelevant speech by claiming that he was speaking to Buncombe. From there, it's anybody's guess who spread it. Probably one of those inside government jokes. So, from then on, any time any Congressman made some irrelevant remark – yeah, like that ever happens! – the others would just wink to one another and knowingly murmur "bunkum." Or something like that.

Malarkey also has a wonderful list of synonyms! We should all make a concerted effort to incorporate these words into our daily lives: balderdash, blatherskite, bunkum, bushwa, guff, hogwash, hooey, poppycock, and twaddle.

Some of those are familiar, like balderdash and hogwash, but bushwa? blatherskite?? twaddle??? These clearly deserve more frequent usage. Next time somebody slings a shovel full of bullshit your way, deflect it with, "Stuff all that blatherskite, and tell me the truth!" or "Yer fulla twaddle, there, chum!"

I'll bet malarkey is kinda like mulligan is: dubiously named after somebody who typified its meaning. Lore has it that Mr. Mulligan took many a liberty when it came to re-hitting errant golf shots. So much so that the practice was named in his (dis)honor, and doing as Mulligan did became "taking a mulligan." [He also might have something to do with a hobo's stew. Odd dood, this Mulligan.]

So, maybe Mr. Malarkey was just a loquacious jackass whom everybody either ignored or told to shut the hell up. If it came outa Malarkey's mouth, it must be insincere and foolish. So much so that such talk became synonymous with Mr. Malarkey, the common word was born, and people who spewed such verbal rubbish were now, officially, full of malarkey. Makes one wonder what the epitaph is on Mr. Malarkey's gravestone.

I'm not sure I want to get into twaddle just yet.

But words are made by usage anyway. I make up words all the time. If my listener or reader understands what idea is behind it, then it fits the definition of "word": *a speech sound or series of speech sounds that symbolizes and communicates a meaning without being divisible into smaller units capable of independent use. (Merriam-Webster)*. Riiiiiiight.

We use words that are flat out contradictions of themselves, yet we know what they mean. How many times do you go to xerox something on your Canon photocopier? Or get a kleenex from that Scott tissue dispenser? Or a band-aid from the Curad box?

There was a time in history when humungous did not exist as a word (up until 1967, according to M-W). Or bodacious, though that word stems back to 1845, as a combination of bold and audacious, which kinda mean the same thing anyway.

But somebody made them up, others heard them, understood them, and adopted them into their own usage and the words spread like viruses until they

entwined themselves into the dictionary of the English language. [The pseudo-word “ta-ta’s” undoubtedly helped the more recent popularity of bodacious.]

Maybe “a casual drive to no place in particular” can be called a ramack, hmmm? I’m off for a ramack, honey, I’ll be back in a few days or so. I like the sound of that.

Anyway...

Max had been Blue Man’s predecessor, and he had set some pretty good standards for BM to match. Max was a white-and-black 1987 Dodge conversion van that had been through all 48 contiguous states and 9 Canadian provinces, and had totaled 279,200 miles in just over ten years. That’s an average of about 76 miles a day for a full decade, so Max was a little bit busier than Blue Man had been in his Blue Boy youth.

That noble Dodge steed had scaled Pike’s Peak, had braved Death Valley (photo, left), had served as team bus for as many as 14 people, had slain a deer, and had served as my roadtrip hotel room for at least 100 nights. Four days after I bought Max – the only vehicle I ever bought new – we took to the Interstates and sallied across the USA on a 9800-mile roadtrip from Boston through the southwest, Utah, the Dakotas, and Chicago. Then, two weeks after that, we lit out through Canada. The 3-year-30,000-mile warranty was up within the first half-year.

In the mid-90’s, Max served as my home for five months in Key West (photo, right), as I lived the life of a homeless – though gainfully employed, kinda – “vangabond” in what was definitely the best winter of my life.



As years ticked by, the goal became the Moon. Yeah, duhhh, I know you can’t drive a van to the Moon, but you can go the distance. [Note the hand-painted Moon on Max’s spare tire cover, clearly boasting his goal.] The Moon’s mean distance from earth is 240,000 miles. We passed that with ease.

He was still running great when I traded him in, but the body and interior definitely showed their quarter-million miles of wear and tear.

So, that’s where Blue Man – sometimes called Blue Dog, or some other variation – came on the scene. After more than a decade, the farewell to Max was not easy. There was still plenty of good karma left in that happy little house on wheels. So, on the way out of the parking lot of Norwood Cadillac in Blue Man, I spied Max parked around back. He looked old and sad. All the rust and dings and saggings that I had diligently ignored were showing themselves plainly. It was like some 60-year-old celebrity had removed all her makeup and stripped naked under a fluorescent light. It stopped me cold, but it was good to see. Max was ready for retirement; he had fulfilled his destiny masterfully. When he had been built, his purpose was clear: take your owner far and wide, and make sure he has a real good time. Amen, Max, old stallion.

I wheeled Blue Man slowly over to Max, and gently touched their front bumpers together in a symbolic, if not symbiotic, passing of the torch and bridging of the karma.

So, like I was about to say before I so rudely interrupted myself, we headed east

from Rochester NY to Sacramento CA. Blue Man was packed and ready for Roadrage2000. This was to be the biggest and bestest roadtrip in the history of mankind, or, at least, my part of mankind.

From the very first time I took to the open road on a journey, I have loved roadtrips. They don't even have to be to anywhere good. Like the brief roadrun in 1986 with Dugg. We drove my Caravan from Boston to Tupelo, Mississippi and back. Tupelo?? Didn't matter; we just craved getting out on the road and rolling along, and if we ended up anyplace that had a name, well, that would be just fine. If not, well, that would be hunky-dory too. A lot of people think I'm full of monkey mucus when I say this, but, to me, the journey often is at least as much fun as the destination.

Well, yeah, you're saying, of course the ride was more fun than Tupelo! But, Tupelo has tossed some gems into my stash o' blings over the years: Mr. Hobson and Eb at the batting cage, the Twilight Zone, Elvis' front porch, and banner bushwa. And you thought nothing goes on in Tupelo, you skeptical skeezix, you.

Hunky-dory is another "word" that Merriam-Webster balks at. But somewhere in England, around 1866, hunk, meaning "home-base" became involved with dory, whose origin is a mystery, and the two combined to mean "just fine, thank you." That phrase sounds like it started in a pub. Some drunken regular plopped his flabby arse onto his favorite bar stool next to his favorite pint, and, grinning with glee over feeling so at 'omey there, pronounced 'imself all 'unky-dory. People laughingly gave him shit about it that all night, and on subsequent nights, and the phrase was born. It spread to other pubs across Great Britain, and eventually across the pond to the colonies.

Now it shows up here in my Blings. All because of some limey lush. Yeeesh. Damn drunk.

As I was growing up, we were not the kind of family that would cram ourselves into a station wagon and waste eight fine summer days driving to West Bumlick for some skeeter-infested camping and a few grumpy photos. I'm glad too. That would not have been up my alley at all.

Even the scenery that so inspires me now would have been a bore in those halcyon days of youth. With such alternatives as playing baseball at the local diamond with a dozen or so other neighborhood kids, or honing my fresh golfing skills in the roughs, sands, and woods of Needham Golf Club, or pedaling my trusty bike all over suburbia – note the active, outdoor, warm weather theme – simply sitting someplace and gazing at rocks or trees or water just would not have charged my charlie. Though lacking the techno toys of the new millennium, my interest level in scenic wonders would have been a lot like Wynnies daughter Molly (right) who was clearly more inspired by her GameKid than by the splendor behind her at Cedar Breaks National Monument.

Dad traveled for a living, selling leather finishes – you know, the stuff



that makes your shoes look shiny good -- and driving much of the eastern United States in the 1950's and 1960's, when the highways were much more free and easy, when shoes were actually made of leather and actually assembled in the United States, when gas was twenty-something cents a gallon, and when big, heavy American cars and amusing little VW bugs were about the only things on the road. And when there was nothing to listen to but AM radio. Damn. He deserves a medal for that alone.

It was not uncommon for him to be gone for two weeks at a time, living in motels, and driving day after day from one city and factory to another, from Boston to Pennsylvania, to Tennessee, to Maine, before finally falling exhausted into our Dorchester home at some ungodly hour. I have faint memories from when I was a little kid, feeling his weight making my bed shift and stirring me while I was deep in my little kid sleep, being faintly aware of his familiar dad-scent, and letting his hand on my forehead slide me right back into my everything-is-OK-cuz-dad's-home dreamland. And I would sleep more soundly than ever.

Mom was the quintessential mom of that era, raising the boys almost single-handedly, giving us so much lovin', but livin' a lonely life while Dad did what he had to out on the road in order to keep us fed, clothed, and eddicated. It was a simpler time, to be sure, but it was definitely not simple.

Mom would have loved to go on roadtrips. Not the business ones, but on vacation ones. I found that out for sure only in the 1990's, after she and dad had been apart for years, when she and her boyfriend Chris -- does a 70-year-old man still qualify as a boy-friend? (Hey, folks, we need to notify the Language Patrol and find a new word for that.) -- would take roadtrips down to Florida and such places. She had that roadlove in her soul too.

No wonder I turned out to be such a gypsy-wannabe.

I remember one family road trip that we did take, when I was maybe six or so. We drove from Boston to somewhere in central Maine. It wasn't a vacation week; Dad simply brought us along -- probably at Mom's urging -- on one of his summer work trips. He worked during the days, and we hung out by the pool at the local Holiday Inn. Not exactly sumptuous Palm Beach accommodations, but WTF, I was six, I had a pool to hang out at, big brudda Bob (two years my senior) was happy to be there, and Mom was delighted just to get the hell out of Dawchestah for a few sweltering July days.

Anyway, what I remember most is the ride. I counted Volkswagens. What a frikkin dork, huh? I counted VW bugs all the way from Boston to Bangor. I was quite vigilant about it too. I dare say that my count -- and it was in the hundreds -- was pretty damn accurate.

And some roads signs. The bridge bearing the sign for "Boom Road" near Saco really cracked me up.

I still love road signs. Like the one that I first saw somewhere on an Interstate in the Midwest, with appropriate arrows for appropriate highways: St. Louis, Indianapolis, Cincinnati. What choices! Big places, all! It was like the whole USA was there for the taking. So much option and opportunity, no matter which way you picked.

And state border signs. It's



been my quest to collect photos of the "Entering ---" sign for all 49 states (c'mon, where would I find such a sign for Hawaii??). I would get about two dozen in the summer of 2000, but, well, more about that later; this is still exposition.

The best one, though, had to be the North Dakota sign, thanks to Wheels. As we entered the Siberian State, there stood the blandest welcome sign ever: typical



highway department green, with typical reflective Arial font letters, stating too simply "Welcome to North Dakota." And all across that 10' x 12' sign were a couple hundred dents, dings, and holes from short-range shotgun blasts.

Since ND was the 48th (and hence last) state on Max's list, we approached with cheer and stopped for a couple of border photos. Mine was typical, but Wheels' was a classic. He took a couple of minutes in the back of the van

getting ready, so something was obviously up. His pose: dressed only in a white bath towel wrapped around his waist, toothbrush in one hand, toothpaste tube in the other, and a totally baffled *how the hell did I get here??* look on his face as he stood next to the sign, with nothing but miles of empty prairie in sight behind him.

It wasn't until I was in my mid-twenties that I started truly roadtrippin' – when Richie and I (who would be proudly tabbed The Rude Brothers for our rather lax approach to hygiene while we were on the road) decided on a buzzed whim to drive to Colorado. He had a couple of weeks off, and I, being a teacher, had a couple of months off. We were just rollin' around the streets of Boston one mid-summer night, messin' with our minds and watchin' life kinda swirl around us, and we started musing about what we would like to do if we could. We both agreed that it would be cool to drive to the Rocky Mountains. Then, after a mutual pause, I said, "You want to do it?"

He thought for a few seconds, and replied, "We could, couldn't we?" A day and half later, we were westbound. I had my first van – the Roadhouse, a blue 1973 Dodge window van that had been customized by some mailman in Attleboro. Buying it is what opened up America's highways to me. Motel expense was prohibitive – we were much more interested in spending what little money we had on more important things, like beer – and the van allowed for total winging-it when it came to choosing a route.

Like I said, it was a simpler time, and drinking while driving was not really considered a crime back then. And Nancy Reagan's Just Say No campaign had not yet equated the occasional puff o' weed with full-blown heroin smuggling. So, if in this collection of rambling thoughts and miscellaneous memories, I refer to havin' a few beers behind the wheel, or takin' a tokey or twain, well, don't tsk-tsk me like you're my Aunt Ellie or something. Life does change. I've tried hard to sidestep maturity, but it hasn't missed me completely.

So, Roadrage2000. It's a dumb name, yeah, because there was no actual rage involved, though there was plenty of road, and there was definitely much passion for it

(and that's kinda like rage).

Roadtrip needs to be one word because it's an entity. It's not just to piss off the MS Word spellchecker and see that cute squiggly little red underscore. The phrase "road trip" is separate, like you're taking a trip, and it just happens to be on the roads. The word "roadtrip" makes the road and the trip inseparable, each syllable totally dependent on the other for its value. The trip is nothing without the roads it is on, and the road is nothing unless you are taking a trip on it.

This millennium version would be a solo roadtrip, as had become the norm by the turn of the century. The first roadtrips of the eighties and early nineties were always with at least one person. Expense was a practical reason. Gas costs only half as much when you split it with another traveler. With two, it was one third as much. [I think you get the pattern.]

Having somebody to share the fervor of the road with was another factor. [That sounds better than "loneliness", doesn't it?] Especially when extra impressive scenery loomed ahead, or when one of those really odd road freakies pops up, it's good to have somebody with whom you can share a "Holyyyyy Shiiiiiiit!" either in awe or alarm.

And when you're with good friends, the time passes well. Boozin' leads to rather active conversation, perhaps singing, perhaps even bellowing top-of-your-lungs obscenities at that herd of cows standing stupidly in the nearby field. The tunes get played loud, there is a navigator at your beck and call so you don't have to read the map while you drive, and you can cover a shitload more terrain because one of you can sleep while the other one drives. Sometimes we played trivia games, or wrote postcards, or made samiches. (You know, like ham-samiches, or tuna-samiches, or maybe even robee-samiches.)

For years, I had been somewhat wary of roadtrippin' solo. I had questions:

- Would it be too boring?
- Would I fall asleep at the wheel?
- Would the trip take too long?
- Would the cost be prohibitive?
- Would I be too much of an alcoholic if I drank that much alone? (Yeah, right, like I worried about that one.)
- Would I still enjoy it?

And I got answers:

- Not bored at all.
- Nope, at least, not that I remember.
- Nahhh. Never long enough!
- Not really. Credit cards prohibit prohibitive.
- Of course not. ;]
- And a resounding YES!

And there were freedoms that I had barely considered. As my good friend B (Dash's brother) once put it, "You can break wind with reckless abandon, and scratch your privates with impunity." Amen to that!

No agreements were necessary anymore; I could do whatever, and could go wherever and whenever my nomadic little heart desired. No sharing the sleeping space anymore; I could sprawl and spread-eagle and toss about in my sleep. I could sing along with the tunes without any goddamn disapproval.

And I could **think**.

That alone was the best advantage. The others were all trade-offs in the

companionship vs. solitude debate. But nothing – ever, anywhere – gave me so much freedom to just let my mind relax and think.

Great mysteries were pondered, and trivial nits were fretted. (I didn't pick the nits, I just fretted over them.) Schemes, storylines, tunes, workouts, websites, letters, speeches, arguments, observations, romances and resolutions were all created, enacted, or carried to some ludicrous extreme in my mind, as the broken white lines or the winding double-yellows zoomed along outside my protective metal shell.

Most of all, though, memories stirred. Things and people, long buried under piles of accumulated annoyances, would float back like congenial apparitions, and the best moments could be recalled and smiled about. Places triggered memories. Signs did too. People I saw on the road, either running or working or relaxing or lying in a pool of their own filth, would remind me of somebody from my past. Most of all, past acquaintances would pounce out from songs on my old homemade tapes – many of which had not been played in years -- sometimes flooding my eyes with nostalgia.

So, it became a good trade: the playfulness of companionship for the pensiveness of solitude. Life is too busy to just plain think. But when the highway is suitable for Cruise Control, and you have five more hours of summer sunlight, and somewhere you vaguely wanna be in a day or two or seven, and nothing but green fields and big trees and blue skies sliding serenely by, and no place in particular to call home for the night, your mind can just brush away the dust and sorta "clean out the attic."

