

GREASY RIDER



**Two dudes,
one fry-oil-powered car,
and a cross-country search
for a greener future**

GREG MELVILLE

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Greasy Rider

Preparation

Grease on earth

I drive a 1985 Mercedes 300TD wagon. It runs on waste oil from restaurant deep-fat fryers. Like nearly all (of the many) kooky ideas that arise in my cozy Cape-style home near Burlington, Vermont, the one to convert a diesel car to burn grease came from my wife, Ann Marie. She is a devout saver of the earth. She feels guilty swatting a mosquito. She cleans and reuses Ziploc bags. She forces me to use organic toilet paper, which is far from cottony soft.

I began lobbying for a second car not long after she was accepted to medical school at the University of Vermont because our soon-to-be-crazier schedules would no longer allow us to get by on one vehicle. “I want a pickup truck,” I told her. “A big, old one.”

She shook her head. “Why would you ever need a pickup truck?” Having been married to her for seven years, I knew exactly what the question and her body language implied: (1) a pickup truck burns too much fossil fuel, so it wouldn’t be cheap to drive or environmentally friendly, and (2) I, of all people, would have absolutely no use for one.

“What do you mean?” I asked in a defensive tone. “I could totally use one. I’d haul stuff. I’d get compost for the garden. I’d clear brush from the yard. I’d . . . get a snow plow.” I didn’t really plan to get a snow plow. And we could borrow a friend’s pickup on the extremely rare occasion when we needed to haul something or clear brush. But I yearned to feel the power of a V-8 engine, revving at the slightest touch from my leaden foot. I dreamed of shifting into four-wheel drive, and crushing a Prius beneath my fat tires. My truck would be red, its chrome bumpers gleaming so brightly they’d blind passing motorists. I looked pleadingly into Ann Marie’s eyes, but her stony expression didn’t soften.

She said we should buy a diesel and convert it to vegetable oil. There was an article in one of her green living magazines about someone who had done it. “You’ll be the only guy on the block with a veggie car,” she argued. I didn’t care. “You’re always ranting about politics. Now you can walk the walk.” All right, I was listening. “You’ll save a lot of money.” Very good point. Then came the kicker: “Dick Cheney will hate you for it.” Done deal.

In many ways, I’m the yang to her yin. I only take a stand on something when I think I’m getting screwed, and to me, potentially paying five dollars per gallon at the pump — and watching my hard-earned money get split between already-rich oil company executives and already-richer sheikhs — is getting screwed. Burning used french-fry grease did seem intriguing. Restaurants usually pay to get it disposed of, so they’re happy to give it away for free, Ann Marie told me. Yes, free. As in, *I won’t have to pay for the fuel that goes into my car*. While it’s true that I did have a slightly more than passing concern for the environment, I mostly saw a veggie-powered car as my chance to stick it to The Man.

Oil’s well

Converting a diesel car to run on vegetable oil is easier than people think. When Rudolf Diesel showed off his engine at the Paris’s Exposition Universelle in 1900, he ran it on peanut oil. His plan was to enable European farmers and drivers to generate their own fuel, easing their dependence on the massive energy companies of the time. Sound familiar? Today, diesel engines can still run on peanut oil. And on soybean, canola, and cottonseed oil, or even a bottle of Wesson from the grocery store

shelf. (Yes, I've done it, just to brag that I can.) Yet diesel-powered cars and trucks almost exclusively burn petro-diesel because putting fossil fuels into the pump at the corner gas station is still cheaper than planting soybeans — or canolas or whatever — and then watering, fertilizing, harvesting, and extracting the oil from them. The price gap between the two is narrowing significantly, though, as fuel prices keep climbing.

After researching old diesels, Ann Marie and I agreed upon getting a 1980s-vintage Mercedes wagon. We needed a big family car to fit our four-year-old daughter, Greer, and three-year-old son, Kai, and all of the junk that inevitably goes in tow with two young kids. Not to mention, old Benzes are known for their brawny engines and low asking prices. After two months of tracking leads, we found one about an hour south of us. A twenty-three-year-old named Ashley, who worked as a chair-lift operator at a ski resort, was selling it because she needed a four-wheel drive for mountain roads — or at least that's what she said on the phone.

A day and a half later, on a sun-bleached October morning, Ann Marie and I pulled up Ashley's long, rutted dirt driveway, checkbook in hand. I tell my kids that when I spotted the old Mercedes, it was love at first sight — and I'm not the kind to get gooey over a car. It sat there, at the top of the driveway, its skin gleaming. I peeked through the windshield and the faded pleather seats beckoned me, seductively: "Come on, big boy, set here a while," they seemed to say. "Let my old springs give your lower lumbar the kind of support you know you want. I'm cheap and ready."

I barely listened to Ashley give her brief history of the car before she handed me the keys. I turned the ignition and the engine chugga-chugged like a dream, as only a diesel can. The steering seemed a little loose — but nothing to get concerned about — and the brakes squeaked, but they still slowed the wagon adequately if I gave the pedal a firm push. I hand-cranked open the sun roof and cranked up the stereo while my wife and I took a quick spin down a bumpy farm road. The bluegrass sounds of Bela Fleck blared through the three working speakers. Sold!

We made an offer for forty-three hundred dollars — a cool five hundred below the advertised price. Ashley accepted without hesitation. I almost felt guilty, as if I had overmatched her with my shrewd haggling skills. After all, I thought, she hadn't even owned it long enough to get a Vermont inspection and she was already unloading it for a couple grand less than other old Benz wagons were selling for on eBay.

Those pangs of guilt vanished after the first big rainstorm, when water gushed inside the car through hidden leaks, filling the footwells like fishbowls. Weeks of Internet research on Mercedes discussion boards finally led me to a solution. Some tiny drain holes deep within in the engine compartment were clogged with pine needles. Then came the Vermont state inspection. Or, to put it more accurately, the failed state inspection. The mechanic told me that in order for the car to pass, I needed to replace the rusted floorboards beneath the backseat. And the brake rotors. And while I was at it, I should do something about those troubling rust holes on the doors that were on the verge of metastasizing.

It was around this time that I began to notice pools of oil forming on my driveway. If I were mechanically inclined, this is the point where I'd modestly describe all of the amazing work I did on my wagon — in my impressive tool-filled garage, where I not only tinker with cars but also craft exquisite wooden home furnishings in my free time. But I've never been mistaken for a mechanic, my garage isn't tool-filled, and most of my wooden furnishings have an IKEA label on them.

The repairs took a couple of months and cost about as much as Ann Marie and I had spent to buy the car. Yet we were unbowed. We figured as soon as we started burning fry grease, we could recoup most of our investment through gas savings. By our estimates, if we drove twelve thousand miles a year using free oil, we'd earn our money spent on the car and conversion within five years — as long

as the Mercedes didn't die on us first. All the while, we'd be reducing our emissions of carbon dioxide — global warming's main culprit — by roughly three-quarters compared with a car running on unleaded.

Once the Mercedes was somewhat fixed up, the next step was to get a veggie oil conversion kit. Although diesel engines run perfectly fine on straight vegetable oil, there's one serious drawback to pouring it straight into the gas tank, especially for people who live in a cool climate like Vermont's: viscosity. When the weather turns chilly, the oil clumps up like salad dressing left in the back of the refrigerator. With a conversion kit, the oil is poured into a separate fifteen-gallon fuel tank installed in a car trunk — or in a wagon, the back compartment where a rear seat sometimes goes. As the engine heats, it also warms the contents of the veggie oil tank (by diverting coolant). When the oil gets warm and thin enough, the driver flips a toggle switch, and voilà, the car is running on veggie power.

A few different kinds of these kits are available online. Mine was made by Greasecar, a company started in 2000 by a kid in western Massachusetts. It's perhaps the most popular supplier in the country, and more important, I knew someone who installs them. Most people who buy these kits try to do the work themselves, and I honestly considered it until Ann Marie vetoed the plan.

On the April afternoon when I picked up the Mercedes from the guy who converted it, my hand shook when I finally flipped the Greasecar switch. I felt almost as nervous as the first time I borrowed my dad's car in high school without permission. The Mercedes glided down the road, and when I opened the windows at a stop sign, the scent of energy independence (with a hint of fried chicken) nearly moved me to tears. I merged north onto I-89 and settled into the flow of sparse traffic. The speedometer read seventy miles per hour. Was it me, or did the engine actually chug a little quieter than on diesel?

From there, my final task was securing a steady fuel source. I live off Burlington's main strip-mall drag crammed with chain hotels, chain stores, chain restaurants, and fast-food joints. So finding a variety of glorious obesity-producing fryer oil was easier than pronouncing *arteriosclerosis*. The challenge, though, would be mustering up the guts to ask for it.

The ideal supplier uses nonhydrogenated oil, like canola or soybean, in its fryers, as opposed to grease from animal fat or hydrogenated oil (think shortening or margarine), which both congeal at much higher temperatures. Asian and Mexican restaurants are considered the best sources, because they hardly ever fry meats; and they tend to change their oil frequently.

Flubbing my lines

Four out of five grease-power drivers agree that the worst part of owning a veggie car is asking restaurants for oil. All right, I made that number up, but it's probably fairly accurate. Even though most restaurants pay for disposal companies to cart away their grease, the owners and managers have usually never heard of a Greasecar setup before, and they can be suspicious of people who walk in and ask to take the stuff their hands. Veggie-car Internet discussion boards — yes, there are such things — dedicate loads of space on the most successful approaches, and Greasecar even has a page on its Website called "Arranging Oil Pick-up from a Restaurant." Its three main suggestions are be professional and organized, be respectful and courteous, and plan ahead.

Though I come from a long line of salesmen, the sweet-talking gene somehow skipped me, so I obsessively followed Greasecar's instructions. First, I targeted a locally owned supplier, Alex's Restaurant, Home of Vermont Soup Company, about a quarter mile from my home. His food is mostly health conscious, so I figured the waste grease would be of decent quality. Then I planned how I'd approach Alex, the owner, whom I'd never met. To appear professional and organized, I decided to

enter the restaurant with a Greasecar pamphlet in hand and wearing clean khakis and a polo shirt rather than my normal uniform of T-shirt and jeans. To seem respectful and courteous, I planned on reciting a short sales pitch, on the many advantages that my grease collections would provide Alex.

Finally, the appointed day arrived. I sat in the parking lot for several minutes before I marched through the restaurant's front door and asked to speak with Alex. He walked behind the cash register, wearing a shirt and pants that matched the pepper color in his salt-and-pepper beard. I shook his hand, made direct eye contact, and then flubbed my lines. Miserably. Alex cut me off before I started scaring the customers. It turned out that he uses soybean oil. Perfect. He agreed to set it aside in five-gallon containers each week, so I wouldn't have to pump it from the grease Dumpster in back, which can get contaminated by rain.

Our arrangement worked well from the start. Every Thursday, I'd pick up about five gallons of oil from Alex and store it in a white plastic bucket with a lid — a routine that continues to this day. To filter the oil, I heat it in a metal gas can on my stove, and pour it through a felt bag hung in my garage. Once it's cleaned, it's deposited directly into the wagon's Greasecar tank or stored in a fifty-five-gallon drum a local soap company gave me. The filtering process takes about a half hour, and the full buckets sometimes begin to collect in the garage when I'm too lazy or busy, and there's no pressing need for fresh fuel. My garage also smells like a McDonald's, which causes my kids to drool and whine for a Happy Meal every time they go in it. (For that reason, they've been forced to store their bikes and skis in the basement.) Still, the cost benefits make these efforts worthwhile.

Before Ann Marie and I had bought the wagon, I assumed that converting a vehicle to run on veggie oil was something that only hippies do, when they're not making their clothes out of hemp. I simply needed to look at my reflection in the rearview mirror to realize that nearly anyone can operate and maintain a french-fry car. The terms *energy independence* and *renewable energy* were no longer abstract notions to me.

The beer talking

During the summer after the car's — and my — conversion, I discussed these very thoughts with Jeff, a hockey teammate of mine. We play in a noncheck league one skill level above the adult learn-to-skate program. After each game, the team gathers in the rink parking lot and splits a couple of twelve-packs, usually to commiserate over our latest loss. Considering that I work at home, I never miss these get-togethers. They give me the rare chance to talk to someone besides the dog.

“A friend of mine in Montana wants to run a car on bio-diesel,” Jeff said, sitting next to me on the hood of the Mercedes, a can of Labatt in his hand.

Like I do with nearly everyone who asks about my car, I explained the difference between biodiesels and fryer grease. Biodiesel is basically vegetable oil that's refined so it gels at a far lower temperature and has the same watery consistency as regular diesel. As a result, it can be poured into the regular gas tank without needing a conversion kit. Biodiesel is usually sold at the pump either as B20 or B5. B20 is a mix of 20 percent biodiesel and 80 percent petro diesel and B5 is a 5-to-95 ratio.

I told Jeff that I had considered using biodiesel but decided to go with grease because it's free. “I've been thinking of driving all the way to California on it. Going coast to coast without stopping at a single gas pump,” I said. Most veggie car drivers don't venture far from home, because collecting and then filtering and storing the oil is simply too complicated on the road. Someone who ventured all the way across the country would be a true grease pioneer.

Jeff asked if I had heard of H. Nelson Jackson. The name sounded familiar but I couldn't place it. At the turn of the twentieth century, he'd told me, Jackson became the first person to drive across the

country in an automobile, from San Francisco all the way to New York City.

“He was a doctor here in Burlington,” Jeff said. “You’d be going in his footsteps.”

“Or tire tracks,” I replied. A coast-to-coast adventure, cutting the apron strings of the hometown oil supplier and heading into the great beyond. “No safety net. The last great American driving challenge,” I whispered. The thought of begging for waste grease along the way made me shiver, but still, the whole concept seemed exciting.

I had heard of a few different people who had driven around the country in a van or bus powered by veggie oil. They had all brought along giant elaborate pumping, filtering, and storage systems, sometimes even on a trailer. But I didn’t know of anyone who had yet driven from one end of the country to the other in a regular old car (emphasis on old) like my Mercedes wagon without stopping at a single gas pump along the way.

“Cross the country on veggie oil! French-fry power!” I exclaimed. Or was that the beer talking?

I spent much of that night researching the potential trip on the Internet while Ann Marie and the kids slept. In 1903 H. Nelson Jackson and his mechanic journeyed from California to the East Coast in a Winton touring car — becoming the first people to drive an automobile across the country. The trip took sixty-three days. They didn’t stop at a gas pump along the way, either, because none existed back then. I had found myself a new challenge.

Enter the wingman

The kids bounced on my bed at six forty-five the next morning, forcing me to open my swollen eyes. I felt a little ashamed for spending so much time in front of the computer screen, as if I had been secretly blowing my savings account on online poker or something. After I finally got up and walked downstairs, I took the direct approach to floating the trip idea by Ann Marie as she, Greer, and Kai made buttermilk pancakes — a Saturday-morning tradition.

“I want to drive the Mercedes to California. I’m gonna do it all on grease. When can you let me leave?”

Ann Marie’s wooden spoon never broke its circular rhythm. “Ha! Right,” she said.

“Seriously. I’ve been thinking about it for a while,” I said. “You ever heard of H. Nelson Jackson?”

I detailed my scheme, and she listened patiently. When I finished, the kids were already polishing off their second helping of pancakes. Ann Marie remained silent.

“Well?” I asked.

“Absolutely not.”

“Why?” I said, flabbergasted.

“Let me count the many ways!” she said. “You want to drive across the country *alone*. In a car with almost three hundred thousand miles on it. You have no mechanical skills.” (Ouch.) “You’re terrible at reading maps.” (Ouch, ouch.) “You’ll have a really hard time getting oil. And have you forgotten about me and the kids?”

I got the message. “So you’re saying I need a wingman!”

“I don’t care if you have a wingman.”

“Think about this for a second. I get a wingman, or woman, who knows something about engines. He, or she, can help take turns driving.”

“Make that a ‘he,’” said Ann Marie. Ah, the ice had begun to melt.

“All right, he. He can take turns driving. He can read maps. He can help collect oil. He can fix the

car. It'll be just like H. Nelson Jackson and his mechanic. If I find the perfect wingman, will you let me go?"

"If you find the perfect wingman, I'll think about it. But you'll never find the perfect wingman."

"Don't be so sure," I said.

"You'll never find someone who can take that kind of time off," she said.

"Yes I will."

"No you won't." She was almost laughing at me now.

"One word: Iggy."

"Iggy!" She spat his name like a barroom curse. Iggy is an old college buddy who lives less than ten miles from us. He's divorced, and his job gives him plenty of vacation days. In his spare time, he's a volunteer firefighter and tinkers occasionally on the department's diesel trucks. Most important, he's a nerd — the kind who compares hard-drive sizes with buddies over beers instead of talking sports. Yes, the perfect wing-man — and we had taken to the road together before. More than a decade earlier, we spent a couple of weeks road-tripping through the South. I recalled that we had a good time, but for reasons that escaped me, we didn't talk to each other for a couple of years afterward.

"Yes, Iggy. I've already thought of asking him," I said, neglecting to mention that I had already e-mailed him.

Our discussion ended with breakfast, and Ann Marie still wasn't convinced that I was serious about the trip — until she found the map. I was at the hardware store in the afternoon when she discovered my study. The previous night during my research I had traced a potential route to California with a yellow highlighter. I returned home to find the map spread in front of her on the kitchen table. Her glare told me to take a seat, and I came clean with everything — including the fact that I had already reached Iggy on his cell phone, and he was gung-ho about joining me.

The negotiations with my wife stretched well into the evening before she conceded, under certain conditions. Among them, (1) the trip had to be a fairly straight shot, given the time constraints; (2) I could only leave when her school schedule was light enough; and (3) some day, somehow, I would owe her and the kids for this, big-time. Done, done, and done.

Iggy and I met the following day to begin our planning, and after a tireless hour or two of work — which required sandwiches and beers to keep our energy high — we decided our exact final destination would be BioFuel Oasis, a gas station in Berkeley, California, owned and operated by six women who filter and pump used fryer grease. The plan was to follow nearly as short of a route as possible but allow for a few sightseeing trips (mostly to appease Iggy) on the side. Because I'm a journalist by trade, and each vacation or trip I take can potentially turn into a story or two, I also plotted a few research stops along the way — at the Greasecar headquarters in Massachusetts, the American Coalition for Ethanol offices in South Dakota, and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Colorado. To supply ourselves with fuel, we planned to mooch some off of fellow veggie-car drivers who live along the route and pump the rest from restaurants. We circled the second Monday in September on the calendar as the departure date and figured it would take us eight days to make it to California. If all went well, we would be the first documented people to drive across the country in a car powered by vegetable oil. I emphasize the word *if*.

Burlington, Vermont, to Waterloo, New York

Like Lewis and Clark, with satellite radio

For the trip, I had custom-ordered two magnetic decals that read SUPPORTING AMERICA'S FARMERS. THIS CAR IS POWERED BY 100 PERCENT VEGETABLE OIL. Behind the words flew an American flag. (By playing up the patriotism angle, my hope was that we could avoid being beaten up in states where sandal-wearing Vermonters driving a German liberalmobile aren't always welcome.) On the morning of our departure, Iggy crouched beside the driver's-side door of the Mercedes, affixing one of the decals while I watched, ready to lend a hand if he needed it.

"Wow, the car looks *nice*," I told him. Water still dripped from the Mercedes onto the driveway. Iggy had spent the last half hour at the automatic car wash down the street. I didn't know its coat could still get that shiny and was amazed what a few squirts from a bottle of Armor All could do for the tires. I opened the door and peeked inside: the layer of dog hairs on the dashboard had been wiped clean, and the mud caked on the rubber floor mats was gone.

"I got it detailed," Iggy said, pressing down a corner of the decal with his palm. "I walked to the auto-parts store and picked up some stuff while I waited."

I rubbed my chin, confused. "You only detail a car when you're selling it. On a long drive, you're just gonna get it dirty," I told him. "But thanks for doing it, though."

"There was no way I was riding in this thing like that," he said.

I asked him what he got at the store, and he pointed to a white plastic shopping bag by his feet. Among Iggy's many great qualities, his two greatest weaknesses are that he tends to overprepare for every outing he takes, and he's a compulsive consumer. Inside the bag I saw a tire pressure gauge (*good idea*), a bottle of windshield washer fluid (*okay*), a door lock deicer (*I guess I could see that*), and a thick pair of neoprene gloves with tiny LED flashlight bulbs attached to the fingers (*huh?*).

"What's up with the gloves?" I asked.

He glared at me. "Well, what if you're broken down in the middle of nowhere, and it's dark, and it's cold, and it's raining?"

I wasn't sure if he was kidding. "Um, you call AAA?" I said.

"Seriously, if that's your answer, then why did you ask me to come in the first place?" he asked.

The day hadn't started exactly as we'd planned. It had been my responsibility to cobble together a pumping and filtering system for the waste grease we'd mooch from restaurants along the way. Unfortunately, by the time I woke up that morning, I still hadn't fashioned one that worked. The problem is that cold, dirty oil can get so thick, it's almost impossible to suck through a filter without blowing the safety fuse on a portable pump. I had bought two different models, which each drew power from the wagon's battery. I attached a bunch of different heavy-duty filter cartridges to them, but none of the combinations worked.

An hour before our scheduled ten o'clock departure time, Iggy had arrived at my house to see me standing on the driveway, my bare hands coated in fryer grease, tools strewn everywhere, and a lifeless pump attached to the wagon's battery. Being more of a type-A personality than I am, he'd seemed surprised when I explained the situation. He said he would have found a solution weeks before I even knew there was a problem.

"Unbelievable!" he said, shaking his head and walking inside the house to drink coffee and hang

out with Ann Marie. His message was clear: the pumping system was my job, and he wasn't going to bail me out. I cleaned up the mess and ran inside to announce that I was making a quick trip to the hardware store. I took my wife's car so Iggy could install his satellite radio system in the Mercedes and pack his gear in back. (And it was while I was gone that he went to the car wash and auto-parts store.)

Thankfully, the guy at the hardware store had been more helpful with my pumping problem than Iggy had been. He'd guided me to a cheap water-filtering system which, when testing it in my driveway afterward, worked flawlessly. By the time Iggy and I were finally ready to hit the road, the noontime bells on the church down the street had begun to sound. Ann Marie hugged us both and warned us to be good.

Then we drove away, two men feeling much like Lewis and Clark must have — minus the whole “uncharted territory” thing and the hostile enemies and exposure to the elements but plus satellite radio with more than two hundred channels. We turned onto the southbound entry ramp of I-89, about a mile from my home, and I checked the engine temperature gauge — eighty degrees Celsius.

“The oil's heated. We're a go.” I told Iggy.

“Engage, number one!” he said, and pressed the Greasecar switch on the dashboard. Our veggie-powered journey had officially begun.

I hit the power button on the ancient Blaupunkt stereo, and Willie Nelson's “On the Road Again” crackled through the three working speakers.

“Now the lyrics don't all apply to us,” I said. “Especially the part about, ‘We're the best of friends.’ But I thought this would be appropriate.”

Iggy laughed. I punched the gas pedal, and sped up to seventy-five miles per hour, leaving the motorists behind us with a sudden unexplained hankering for french fries.

First tracks

From the first mile of our trip until it ended, H. Nelson Jackson never crept far from our thoughts, almost as if he was our silent third passenger. His story began in May 1903, when he got into a friendly argument with some gentlemen at the University Club in San Francisco who said no one could possibly drive an automobile all the way across the country. I bet I could do it, he told them. We'll bet you fifty dollars you can't, they said. You're on, he said.

Jackson was a thirty-one-year-old physician and man of great means, thanks to his wife's family fortune. So he had the time and money to undertake such a perilous, and perhaps frivolous, quest. He immediately bought himself a Winton touring car, and hired twenty-two-year-old mechanic Sewall Crocker to join him as the first person ever to drive across the American continent. With minimal planning or preparation, they set off within days. Their vehicle seemed poorly equipped to handle the journey — lacking a roof and doors — and they could only scrounge one spare tire to bring along, but they were undeterred.

At the time, people barely traveled more than ten miles from their homes, compared with the average of fifteen miles Americans now commute each way to work every day. Paved roads almost didn't exist, and in some stretches of the West, Jackson and Crocker passed through areas where there was no road at all. They reached New York City sixty-three days later, their triumph opening the nation's eyes to the potential of automobile travel. Today, there are more registered cars in America than drivers.

No bet

Iggy was the first to mention Jackson, less than a half hour into the trip. Conversing with Iggy is always a workout. I burn calories doing it. He's not into light, fluffy small talk. No sports, no weather, no gossip — the rice cakes of human interaction. He loves discussing I-D-E-A-S. Yes, he can quote full scenes from *Caddyshack*, *Fletch*, and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, like any other self-respecting American male over the age of twenty-five. (In fact, I couldn't get him to stop calling me Clark Griswold on our first day.) But he's least self-conscious when he's provoking thought, discussing higher meanings, uncovering truths that no one else in the universe had even realized — or cared — were hidden. The only topics he avoids are ones that force him to share intimate details about himself.

My ideal conversations, on the other hand, are short and in-substantial — little more than filler to break awkward silences. The only times I let loose is when I've had too much to drink or when I'm alone with Ann Marie — who must really love me, considering her patience when listening to my political and moral rants. So acclimating to Iggy's style took some adjustment, but I tried hard to play along.

"We should make a bet like Jackson's," Iggy announced. "Fifty dollars."

"That makes no sense. What's it going to be? One of us would have to bet we don't make it," I said, gently petting the dashboard with my right hand. I didn't even want the car to hear us talking about such a thing.

Iggy suggested we extract a lesson from each day, which would then spawn a side trip I'd have to embark upon sometime in the future, for further investigation. I asked what kind of lesson. His answer: sustainability. He argued that if two guys could drive across the country on used cooking oil, surely there must be many other untapped green resources. I would seek them out, and report my findings.

"So how would this work?" I asked.

"Like maybe one day, we pass solar panels," he suggested. "So you have to go out sometime and investigate solar power. If you finish all of the assignments by a year from today, you win fifty dollars."

I told him that fifty bucks wasn't enough to get me out of the driveway, let alone to the far-flung reaches of America. "You're a travel writer. Each trip is fodder, no?" he said.

"Not always," I replied. "Unless someone dies on the trip. Then it becomes interesting."

"That's uncool."

"I never told you the travel writer's dirty little secret?" I said. He shook his head. "Whenever he goes somewhere, he hopes that someone bites it. The more tragic the better. Death is money in the bank. Avalanche, volcano eruption, freak meteor strike. People want to read about it, and the next thing you know, Sean Penn is buying the movie rights to it. Ka-ching."

"What if the person with you is your grandma?" Iggy asked.

"She probably lived a good life anyway," I said. "If you die, it would really help me out."

"Let's say I don't die," Iggy said.

"That would be unfortunate."

"For argument's sake, let's say I don't die. Do we have a bet?"

"What happens if the car dies before we get to California? Then all bets are off, right?"

"No way," Iggy said. "If the car dies, you keep on. Then its death will be for the greater good. And"

you'll have the death you want."

"It'd be better if you die, and the car lives, though."

"So will you do it?" he asked.

"No." The bet sounded tempting. But I was more concerned about getting across the country.

Worth the weight

Our first stop, about fifty miles down the highway, was Mark Penta's house. He had installed the Greasecar system, so I wanted him to check it out. Plus, he had promised to give us some free fuel. Mark stores hundreds of gallons of filtered fryer oil in his garage, and I didn't have any extra in reserve besides the twelve gallons in the Greasecar tank.

We spotted him standing on a ladder, painting the wooden siding of his house on the edge of a long dirt mountain road. Before I even hopped out of the car, he had hustled over to us, popped the hood and begun inspecting the engine. He wiggled a wire or hose here, exhaled a "hmmmm" there, then started talking to Iggy in mechanic lingo, which might as well have been Mandarin to me.

The gist of his inspection was that some of the return fuel lines were leaking, as was coolant from a hose connected to the Greasecar system. Mark tightened them all, but told us to keep an eye on them. He suggested we buy an extra jug of coolant to store in the car and replace the air filter — which he assured me wasn't a difficult process. "Sure, we'll do all that," I said. "And hey, you know of any restaurants nearby that would give us oil? All we've got is the ten gallons in my tank."

"I've got as much as you need. You have any spare containers?"

"A bunch!" said Iggy. I had packed nine empty five-gallon buckets.

"Well, fill them up," he replied.

I pulled out the buckets and we got to work filling them, using a hose and nozzle attached to the mammoth opaque fuel tank in his garage. Pumping gas at a gas station couldn't have been any easier or cleaner. The oil level inside Mark's tank barely sank minus the forty-five gallons we took.

"That should almost get you to the Mississippi River," Mark said.

By my crude calculations, we had just added about 360 pounds to the load.

I asked Mark if he thought the suspension system would hold the weight. Unlike most cars, my Mercedes uses a complicated hydraulic self-leveling system rather than shock absorbers and springs to keep the rear end on an even keel. I had just spent more than a thousand dollars to get it working for the trip.

"It should be fine." He pulled out a point-and-shoot camera and snapped our picture. "I would drive this car to California," he pronounced. His job done, he said good-bye.

Iggy volunteered to take a turn behind the wheel, so I slid into the passenger's seat. "We just total scored!" I said, watching Mark disappear inside his house. Iggy dreaded the prospect of going from restaurant to restaurant asking for oil more than I did. He turned the ignition and the engine chugged to life, but before he shifted into reverse we heard a mysterious, high-pitched whistle. It sounded like steam rising from a giant kettle (hidden inside the engine compartment).

"Uh-oh," I said, my heart racing. "What's that?"

"It's gotta be the hydraulic system. It's got so much weight on it now. We should ask Mark."

"I'm sure it's okay," I said, as visions of Iggy and Mark examining the car for hours danced in my head. We were still another two or so hours away from the Greasecar offices, our first stop, and the clock was ticking.

“We should really ask Mark,” Iggy repeated.

“No. I think I’ve read about old Mercedes wagons doing this. It’s fine,” I said, fibbing a little. “Let’s go.”

“All right . . .” Iggy said, his voice sounding hesitant but trailing off. He drove us away from Mark’s barn, straight-faced and silent. Our first of many, many disagreements.

Iggy’s dreamy blue eyes

The first time I met Iggy was in the darkened basement lounge of a dorm that housed the fraternity house and I were both pledging at Kenyon College. A bunch of red-faced, drunk guys had just spent an hour berating us as part of the ridiculous initiation process. My brother Mike, who graduated the previous year from Kenyon, had been a member of this fraternity, making me a legacy — which meant they pretty much had to accept me, no matter how socially maladjusted I might have been. (And I was the pimple-faced portrait of social maladjustment.) During my brief introduction to Iggy that evening, he told me he played lacrosse, came from a New York commuter town, and had just joined the volunteer fire department at the school.

His eyes are the kind of deep, engaging blue that seize your gaze and don’t let go, and they’re definitely the most striking of his relatively attractive (from what I’m told) features. Iggy had no problems finding dates on Saturday nights, though he was the kind of guy who preferred to stick to one serious, steady girlfriend. Over the next four years, I would learn about his rebellious, destructive youth; his love for the water; his aversion to introspection; his penchant for finding easy classes to take; and his deep commitment to his friends.

Upon receiving our diplomas, we both migrated to grad school in different regions but kept in touch. I sat front and center at his informal wedding on a boat, and he read a Bible passage in the church at mine. Our lives converged again the year before our tenth reunion, when Ann Marie and I fled our editorial jobs in Manhattan, recuperated for a year in Lake Placid, New York, and settled in Vermont. By then, his two boys were already potty trained and growing big. My kids began to enter the picture a few years later. Iggy divorced not long before our trip and was sharing equal custody of his kids. He was ready for the open road. Probably more than I realized.

The Nature of things

I knew Iggy had joined me on the trip for the adventure of it. He had always wanted to drive across the country and loved the wagon’s unique twist, especially because it involved something mechanical. Yet I had assumed that his environmental motivations and views on global warming exactly mirrored mine. After we turned off I-89 at White River Junction onto I-91 toward Massachusetts, I was surprised to discover I was wrong.

“You think God’s pissed about the environment?” Iggy asked, out of the blue — like most of the conversation-starting questions he posed on the trip. He’s a recovering Catholic who attends services at a Congregational church in town. “It’s strange how the so-called pious don’t give a crap about God’s creation.”

“I’ve actually looked into it. There’s almost nothing in the Bible that’s pro-environment,” I told him.

He countered that even if the Bible was taken literally, it was written for people who lived millennia ago, when humans didn’t create a negative impact on nature.

“So if there was a Bible version 1.1, today, you think it’d have something on the environment,” I

said.

“Yes,” Iggy replied. “If you believe God is all-powerful, it still took him six days to make the earth. And he even needed to rest for a day after that. He wouldn’t want it screwed up.” According to Iggy’s theory, God and Nature (with a big *N*) are the same, and Nature is already sending humanity warning signals.

“It’s arrogant to think people control Nature in any way,” he told me. “That’s why I don’t believe in global warming.”

“Like, ninety-nine percent of all climate experts totally disagree with you,” I said, stunned.

“They see the earth warming up. So they’ve made up a reason for it,” Iggy replied.

“Where are you coming from? Global warming isn’t new.” I felt my face getting flushed. Japanese scientist Manabe Syukuro was the first to create a model showing that carbon dioxide could be trapping warm air in the atmosphere in his research during the 1970s. At the time, most fellow climate experts thought the earth was actually cooling. “He saw the carbon we’re puking into the air, and knew it wasn’t good.”

“He was the first to see the earth warming up, so he found a hypothesis to explain it. That’s bad science,” Iggy said.

“You’re talking crazy.” I said. The highway signs for Easthampton, the town where Greasecar is headquartered, abruptly ended our conversation.

Factory inspection

Greasecar doesn’t publish its headquarters address. “We attract too many nuts already,” I was told by someone there on the phone. Finding it isn’t hard, though: just look for the smokestack. The company lies within a decaying, three-story-tall former rubber mill. A blackened smokestack towers behind it — a dormant monument to the smog-churning methods that birthed the Industrial Revolution. We entered the front door and climbed an ancient set of stairs to the main offices where a twenty-something kid named Ty greeted us. He wore a tattered green Greasecar T-shirt and jeans that rode low on his hips, and gave us a tour with about as much attention as he paid to choosing that day’s clothes.

Ty didn’t have much time to talk, nor did anyone else who worked there, because they were so swamped trying to meet the booming demand of Greasecar kits. Iggy and I followed him through the business and administrative area — a maze of long hallways where people scurried back and forth in office rooms with walls of unpainted sheetrock — and he gave us a rundown on the company’s history and its daily operations.

Greasecar was the creation of Justin Carven, who built his first waste-oil conversion kit as a senior engineering project at Hampshire College in 2000. After graduation, he drove around the country with a friend in a Volkswagen Westfalia van powered by grease and laden with filtering and fuel-storage equipment. He began manufacturing and selling his kits to eager customers across the country soon afterward. The company was receiving about three hundred orders per month when we visited. Like so many first-generation sustainable technology companies, Greasecar doesn’t farm its jobs overseas. All of its production and research facilities lie within the gritty Easthampton headquarters.

After a quick view of the upstairs, Ty led us to the basement, which housed the welding and shipping areas and looked like it came straight from a horror movie — down to the dim lighting, rusting pipes, and dripping water that pooled in random spots on the cement floor. Iggy and I had arrived there so late that the people who usually work in the basement were gone, except for Josiah,

whose uniform was similar to Ty's. We ran into him in a room filled with welded metal tanks, stacked practically to the ceiling. I asked about the typical Greasecar customer.

"Is it mostly liberals who drive veggie-oil cars?"

"We get a lot of far left-wingers and a lot of far right-wingers. We get a lot of farmers and a lot of family guys who just want to save a few dollars on gas," he told me. "Mostly, it's just people who think it's cool to work on cars."

Josiah spent a few minutes asking us about our trip. He and Ty spoke passionately about Greasecars and the need to find sustainable solutions for the environment, like powering cars through waste oil, if their work was a calling, not a job. As obliging as they were to Iggy and me, their time was very limited, so we allowed them to escort us into the basement hallway and thanked them for talking to us. We watched them scamper upstairs.

"I think Freddy Krueger lives down here," I said to Iggy.

"I know. I hope my tetanus shot is up-to-date."

"So is this how the revolution will be won?" I asked him.

"What do you mean?"

"The sustainable revolution. By a bunch of people working their butts off in an old mill building, with a shoestring budget, and one simple invention."

"And a dream to change the world," said Iggy, sarcastically. "Who's to say that there's going to be a revolution?" Iggy asked.

"We have no choice. It's evolve or perish, right? But to me, the little guys are leading the way."

"Who says we won't perish?"

I didn't feel like debating Iggy, so I ended the conversation. We ate dinner beneath yellowing framed photos of the Parthenon, Crete, and Mount Olympus at a Greek greasy spoon in town. Our first meal together on the road. I ordered a burger, and Iggy got a salad. It almost felt like a date. Afterward, we ran across the street to an auto-parts store, where we picked up an air filter and a jug of coolant, per Mark Penta's suggestion. Iggy also insisted on grabbing a pack of shop towels, a mini-flashlight, disposable dashboard wipes, and a magnetic Hide-A-Key holder.

I took the helm and Iggy navigated us down to I-90, which we planned to follow all the way from central Massachusetts into Minnesota. Finally, we could start making some distance. The rear was stocked with enough oil to reach well into the Midwest; Iggy and I were still speaking to each other after the better part of a day; and the highway ahead was dry and clear. Westward ho!

Toll free

Near the western terminus of the Massachusetts Turnpike, just before the New York border, we stopped at a toll booth to give the Bay State government its cut. The attendant was busy sorting money, and while I waited to pay, the scent of french fries from the exhaust wafted forward, filling the air. When he finally turned and looked down from the booth's open window, he didn't say a word and waved me through without charging us. Iggy and I were convinced we had just received our first gesture of support from a stranger.

Excited, I called Ann Marie on my cell phone. She asked our location.

"We're just outside of Albany," I said.

"Albany? That's only three hours from here."

"It is if you're going straight, but we weren't," I grumbled.

“So in other words, you’ve been driving most of the day, and you’re only three hours from our house. You’ll never make it to California like that.” I suddenly didn’t feel like talking anymore.

“Ha, ha, ha, you’re so funny I’m hanging up now.” I flipped the phone closed and turned to Iggy. “Women,” I said. “Can’t live with ’em, can’t live with ’em.”

“I heard that!” Iggy replied.

The wife

I knew of Ann Marie before I met her. It was January during my junior year in college, and I had just returned from a semester in England. A friend briefed me on her before the season’s first indoor track practice in the school’s ancient field house. Ann Marie and two other cute, blond freshmen who played on the women’s soccer team had been the talk of the campus (at least among the guys) throughout the fall.

I wish I could say I fell for her the moment she appeared, walking into the warm-up circle with some other women runners. Or that I immediately introduced myself and won her over, our souls joining forever in some unspoken romantic way. But truth be told, my first thought was, *She’s totally out of my league*. So I didn’t pay her much notice.

Fortunately, Ann Marie’s greatest character flaw is her inexplicable attraction to six-foot-four-inches-tall, scrawny blond guys with blue eyes. At a party a week later, she actually tapped me on the shoulder (me!) and started talking — and not just to ask where the beer keg was. Then I did pay her notice. I noticed how she said “tin” instead of “ten” in her Virginia accent. I noticed how she outran the other sprinters in track workouts. I noticed the straight teeth beneath the smile that never faded. I noticed that she studied in the same corner of the library every night, her blue eyes squinting over textbooks too intellectual for me to decipher. I noticed I could make her laugh.

Not long after Ann Marie and I started dating, I marched to Iggy’s dorm room to announce the news. “It won’t last long,” he snidely remarked. He was jealous! I was so pleased.

Ann Marie and I got married exactly four years to the day after she received her diploma. By then we had broken up twice, dated other people, alternately taken each other for granted, hiked fourteen hundred miles of the Appalachian Trail in one stretch, and moved to New York City. Like no one else, she still prods me to think about myself and my place in the world, and inspires me to be a better person. This is why she pisses me off so much.

The sound of “Moondance” on the radio softened my angry thoughts. “Van Morrison,” I said to Iggy.

“Van Morrison,” he echoed. “Old times.”

Images of that tour Iggy and I took through the South flashed like a slideshow. We’d brought only seven or eight CDs to play in the stereo of Iggy’s Isuzu Trooper II — Frank Sinatra, REM, Elvis Costello, the Cure, Talking Heads, a couple of others that have slipped my mind, and of course Van Morrison. To this day, I still can’t listen to *Tupelo Honey*. *Didn’t we get totally sick of each other after a couple of days?* I thought it best to sweep that memory into the mental dustbin.

We passed the southern fringe of the Adirondack Mountains in the dark, the wagon’s soft orange headlight beams leading our way on the New York State Thruway. Up to this point, we were averaging about twenty-five miles per gallon on waste oil, which was slightly better than I expected, especially with the heavy load in back. At the Iroquois Travel Plaza, we stopped to change drivers and hit the restrooms.

I deposited us into a parking spot about thirty yards from the main building’s entrance passing up

rows of empty spaces so we could get the blood flowing in our legs. Upon extracting myself from the wagon, cranky knees and all, I made eye contact with a man whose bald head reflected the streetlight above us. He stood outside a shiny new Jaguar sedan, watching me and Iggy with unabashed interest. Either he, too, had parked apart from the cluster of vehicles next to the main building to get extra exercise or — more likely — he was protecting his car from getting scratched.

Iggy and I strode into the travel plaza and split company. He headed to Dunkin' Donuts, and I walked toward the men's room. Past the doorway, a voice behind me asked in a thick Brooklyn accent, "What year's that Mercedes?"

Over my shoulder, I saw the Jaguar man from the parking lot. "Uh, nineteen eighty-five," I said.

"You drive it on vegetable oil?"

"Actually, on old french-fry grease. We get it from restaurants," I answered.

"Where you from?"

"Vermont."

"Vermont?" the man said, rubbing the smooth top of his head with his thick fingers. He looked of Mediterranean descent, and wore a gray designer V-neck sweater — probably cashmere — with a white T-shirt underneath, dark designer jeans, and chocolate Italian leather shoes that probably cost more than the last suit I bought.

"We're driving to California," I said.

He nodded. "I have a Benz."

"You do?" I asked. "An old wagon?"

"Nope. An SL500. Bought it last year. The twelve-cylinder one. It goes zero to sixty in six seconds," he announced, and I half-expected to see him thump his broad chest. A 2005 Chevy Nova could have outclassed my wagon, let alone a Mercedes sports car of that vintage — though the man did choose a proper setting for a pissing contest, I suppose. On some level, I could relate to him. American men seek validation through their cars like nothing else — myself included. Maybe my old wagon looked more impressive to others than I realized.

"Well, that's really something. Good meeting you," I said, turning toward the far end of the bathroom.

"Have a good trip," he said.

"Thanks, man," I replied, without looking back.

Iggy and I returned to the parking lot, and we topped off the Greasecar tank with some of Mark Penta's oil. He took the wheel for the evening's last stretch of driving. Chugging back onto the highway, the wagon sped from zero to sixty in about twenty-five seconds, and as it carried us across upstate New York we listened to a Monday Night Football game between the Giants and Colts. After tense start, day 1 had been a relative success.

Waterloo, New York, to Chicago, Illinois

Waterloo down

We spent Monday night in Waterloo, New York, a town wedged between two sapphire stringbeans of water in the Finger Lakes. On the outskirts are the famed vineyards of Seneca County — the Napa of upstate New York — which attract wine lovers from such faraway and exotic places as Erie, Pennsylvania. We took the last vacant room in a roadside motel.

“Why so packed on a weeknight?” I asked the pleasant, brown-haired woman behind the front desk.

“We’re a lovely vacation spot, you know,” she said, suddenly launching into all things Waterloo. It’s the birthplace of Memorial Day, we quickly discovered. Sometime around the end of the Civil War, the local druggist rallied his fellow citizens to commemorate the sacrifices of fallen hometown heroes by marching to Waterloo’s three graveyards and placing flowers on their graves. This would become an annual tradition, soon mimicked by the rest of the country. On Memorial Day weekend in 2000, the townsfolk went so far as to decorate Waterloo with twenty-six thousand American flags. “It’s a world record,” she told us.

I eyed our soon-to-be room’s electronic key card in her right hand while she continued. Waterloo is the hometown of the modern embalming method’s creator (there’s a nagging mystery put to rest) and the now-anonymous man who sketched out the plans for the Pullman sleeping car for trains and haplessly sold them to the credit-hogging George Pullman. Iggy, wide-eyed and nodding, seemed to be making mental notes, as if he planned to share this new wealth of knowledge at some future cocktail party.

Every hamlet in podunk America can boast stories of its own crucial role in some minor historical event, take more credit than is probably due for some important national holiday or pastime, or declare itself the birthplace of some obscure technological or pop cultural breakthrough. I’ve lived at different times in the hometowns of George Washington’s boyhood house, the nation’s first battle flag, and the nation’s first summer resort as well as the birthplaces of cable television, Ben & Jerry’s ice cream, and Paul Lynde (beloved for his Emmy award-winning appearances in the center square of *Hollywood Squares*). These bragging rights are invariably displayed on some massive sign beside the main road leading into town, as if nowhere else could be steeped in such important history. Though I find this kind of boosterism as endearing as the next guy, not at 10:30 p.m. after a day of driving.

“That’s really fascinating,” I told her. “I’m exhausted though, so if I could just —”

“Are you fellas LDS?” she asked.

“I’m sorry?” I said.

“What, you mean Mormons?” Iggy asked. LDS is the abbreviation for Latter-day Saints, apparently. The woman nodded.

“No,” he replied.

“Didn’t think so,” she said. “Then I bet you didn’t know the Mormon Church was born not far south of here.” She leaned across the counter, one nonbeliever to two others. I smelled mothballs. “Joseph Smith stayed at a farmer’s house down there when he wrote the Mormon Bible. The Peter Whitmer Farm.”

Now this was stuff that even I planned to use at some future cocktail party. Or would talking about the birthplace of Mormonism over alcoholic beverages be disrespectful? “Wow, my head is so full of

history now, I'm sleepy. Learning stuff is hard work for me." Finally, she handed us the key.

"You have a good night now," she commanded.

For the sake of a squeegee

Iggy and I rose at dawn the next morning to start for Chicago, where we planned to stay with my friend Jonathan — practically a member of my family growing up (in the hometown of America's first battle flag, by the way). But before we even made it back to the interstate, Iggy forced me into a Wal-Mart to pick up other car essentials he had neglected to buy on his four trips to auto parts stores the previous day.

Before I proceed, I must make something clear: I have no beef with Wal-Mart. I kind of like shopping there. If I can save a couple of extra bucks on, say, one of those chiller beer mugs that are kept in the freezer, or a set of terry-cloth towels, I'm willing to overlook that they were made by the nimble hands of preteen Chinese girls crammed into a Shanghai factory and rung up for me at the cashier register by a hardworking single mom who has no health insurance and buys groceries for her two young children with food stamps. (Alas, Wal-Mart's generous 10 percent employee discount covers produce but no other food.)

I'm even willing to ignore the slightly uncomfortable feeling I get when I drive through the boarded-up downtowns of communities where the mom-and-pop shops have been driven out of business by the "Always Low Prices!" at the Wal-Mart on the fringes. This is, after all, the nature of our market-based economy and the fulfillment of Sam Walton's American dream. Yet Ann Marie does have a beef with the company, so to avoid her wrath I try not to shop there.

Iggy was adamant about going to Wal-Mart, though, and I had insisted on paying for all parts, supplies, and repairs on the trip as one of the conditions for convincing him to come along. So I had no choice but to concede. "Ann Marie's gonna find out," I said, walking alongside him through the near-empty expanse of damp asphalt in front of the chain's Waterloo store. "She checks the bills and bank statements."

"Then pay with cash, or let me cover this," Iggy said.

"Your money's no good here."

The store's front doors slid open, and once inside, a smiling, elderly man in a blue vest (did the name on his name tag say Charon?) greeted us. There was no turning back. Iggy grabbed a shopping cart and, being well versed in the standard Wal-Mart store layout, headed directly to the auto-parts section. I followed like a zombie. Every time I walk into mega-big-box chain store, I'm overloaded from the sensory assault. Then, after getting acclimated, my chest invariably swells with pride at the volume of amazing consumer goods at my disposal. The great civilizations before us thought their lives were cushy, but could the Greeks or Romans buy a thirty-six-inch flat-screen TV for under six hundred dollars and pick up a twelve-pack of tube socks and a cute little bistro table for the back patio all in a single shopping experience? And then charge the items entirely on one low-interest credit card? Didn't think so.

Iggy was nearly as eager to get back on the road as I was, so he worked the auto-parts aisles quickly, grabbing a giant jug of motor oil, then swerving around a corner and snatching a packet of rubber gloves. Items began falling into the cart with greater (and almost alarming) speed: an extra gallon can for storing oil, a spray bottle of all-purpose cleaner, a window-washing squeegee.

"Stop!" I shouted. "No squeegee." An old man wearing a Yankees cap and clutching a bottle of Armor All turned and looked at us.

“Why not?” Iggy asked, confused.

“I have to draw the line somewhere, and I’m drawing it with the squeegee. There’s a squeegee at every frickin’ gas station between here and the Oasis. We don’t need it.”

“Fine, I’ll buy it,” Iggy said.

“Please, no. I don’t want that in my car.” Suddenly, rage overtook reason. I was damned if he was going to carry a squeegee out of that store. I reached for it, and Iggy resisted. A tug-of-war began.

“Fine,” he said, yanking it and placing it back on the shelf. “If you wanna be a five-year-old about it, I won’t get it. Geez.”

I lingered there while Iggy pushed the cart to the end of the aisle and disappeared around a corner. “Darnit!” I barked. I jogged to catch up with him, squeegee in hand. He wasn’t surprised when I dropped it into the cart. A few strides beyond, we reached the cash register and began unloading the items onto the belt. Iggy made a token move for his wallet, but I held up my hand and shook my head. “I’ve got it,” I said, and he nodded in thanks. I slid my bank card through the magnetic reader in front of me.

“How are you today?” asked the petite young woman scanning the items.

“Fine,” I said, and punched my PIN on the keypad. She gave me a smile and the receipt, and I smiled back, resisting the urge to ask how many kids she has and what her health plan was like.

All Hail the RV

The mere thought of mechanical problems made me shiver. Jackson was forced to stop fifteen miles into his trip when a tire blew. He and Crocker progressed only eighty-three miles on their first day. Iggy and I knew car malfunctions would be unavoidable but hoped for only minor ones. My worst fear was that we’d find ourselves standing on some remote stretch of interstate, next to the lifeless remains of the Mercedes and waving down a rusted pickup driven by a guy named Bubba who keeps his collection of machetes beneath his seat.

The first in what would become a gradual, steady series of malfunctions occurred less than a mile from Wal-Mart. I was driving and had flipped the turn signal before veering onto the highway onramp. The green arrow on the dashboard illuminated but didn’t blink. I flipped the signal off and then on again. Same thing. Was the problem caused by a blown fuse? Was it a not-so-subtle sign that the alternator (the heart of the car’s electrical system) was dying? I had no idea, but Iggy hadn’t noticed, and I decided not to alert him. The darkening storm clouds above us looked ready to dump their contents and I didn’t want to be standing, drenched, over the engine compartment while Iggy meticulously tried to fix what was probably a minor problem. So I kept him in the dark and manually flipped the blinker on and off each time I changed lanes. I’m a firm believer that if given enough time and positive thoughts, a car can heal itself. Miraculously enough, after about a half hour, the turn signals began to work again.

The rain began to fall just outside of Waterloo, and by the time we reached Buffalo, puddles were enveloping green fields flanking I-90 by Lake Erie. We made quick work of the forty or so mile stretch of highway that slices through the northwest corner of Pennsylvania, and stopped at a gas station near the Ohio border. Iggy filled the grease tank while I popped the hood, making the excuse I wanted to check the motor oil. Instead, I was searching for a possible cause to the (now healed) turn signal problem. I checked the alternator belt (though I later found out I was actually looking at the fan belt), and it seemed fine. I searched for any leaks or loose hoses. None. My decision to ignore the situation seemed wise. I slammed down the hood and walked to the rear of the wagon.

“We don’t need motor oil?” Iggy asked.

“Nope, looked fine,” I fibbed. I had completely forgotten to check. “What’s our veggie oil situation?” I asked.

“I just put about seven gallons in the tank to top it off, and we’ve got twenty gallons in reserve.”

“Very good!”

Chicago was about 450 miles away, so we had plenty of oil to get us there. The more miles we could squeeze out of Mark Penta’s supply, the happier I was. We were yet to approach a restaurant to beg for grease — a task I planned to put off as long as possible. Does this make me a coward? Why yes. But I like to think I’m a shrewd coward. Before catching up with Jonathan that evening, we planned to stop in a suburb south of Chicago to visit Craig, whom we’d contacted through a Greaseca Internet forum and promised to share some of his supply.

We continued west in the rain through Ohio, which wasn’t just another flat, corn-filled midwestern state where the friendly, flannel-wearing folks are never in a hurry to get anywhere. Given that we went to college there, it was *our* flat, corn-filled midwestern state where the friendly, flannel-wearing folks are never in a hurry to get anywhere.

Iggy has always been more sentimental about Kenyon, and the state, than I, though certain smells, like newly mown grass in spring or leaves blowing in the moist autumn air, will immediately transport me back to the Kenyon campus and evoke a flood of mostly pleasant memories. But on this day, the only flooding was on the highway. A constant spray of water splashed against the wagon’s underbelly sounding like a fire hose. The rain didn’t let up, leaving the traffic-clogged arteries around Cleveland slow. Not far west of the city, as we continued to hug the shores of Lake Erie, my cell phone rang. The caller ID said “Jonathan.”

“Where are you?” he asked.

“We just crossed the Cuyahoga. It’s not on fire.” I said.

“So when do you think you’ll get here?”

Before I could answer, Iggy unleashed a belch so powerful, I checked the hairline cracks on the windshield to see if they had expanded.

“What the hell was that?” Jonathan laughed into the phone.

“That was my buddy Iggy. He’s not much for manners.”

Jonathan then invited us to meet him and a friend for dinner that evening in the city. “You might want to tell your pal the burper to watch his manners.”

“I think we’ll scare everyone off. We’re really grungy,” I said.

I hung up and made two other calls, the first to the press officer for the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, in Golden, Colorado. NREL is the U.S. government’s main research facility for renewable energy. I planned to visit there on Friday, to talk to one of its biodiesel researchers. The press officer had been working to set it up.

“I can get our biodiesel guy to talk to you, but here’s the thing,” he said. “NREL does not condone support, or want to be associated with one hundred percent biodiesel fuel.”

“I assume the biodiesel guy will explain more about this,” I said.

“Yes.”

“That’s fine. That’s the kind of information I want to get. It’s not like I’m some biofuel nut,” I said, lying. “I want to hear the good and the bad.” Another lie.

We agreed on a midafternoon meeting time. I was floored. Why would the government want to

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