



## on the road

AN UNHURRIED JOURNEY ACROSS EUROPE IN A RICKETY MOTOR HOME GIVES A DAD TIME TO LEARN HOW FAMILY WORKS. BY JOHN AHERN.

**T**he old windmill on the farm near the Dutch city of Utrecht had, at some time, been painted purple, most of which had flaked away.

I entered the nearby shed and walked through a sea of beautiful antique autos towards the ugly sister in the corner.

The internet images that drew me in had clearly been like an ageing supermodel's airbrushed photo shoot. The red racing stripes were barely distinguishable through the dust. The battery cables to the open engine had certainly not featured before. If this were to be the vehicle to deliver us to the promised land, it was going to take 40 days and nights just to clean it.

I stared at the beast as Donna passed me the keys. "I've partly cleaned her to show you how it might look. See the bonnet." She pointed with pride.

I leant in and saw one section of the vehicle that was gleaming white. I opened the door and crossed the threshold as an unrecognisable smell slammed up my nostrils.

"Whoa!" I scrambled backwards. "Chemical toilet." Donna said. "It can smell a bit if left stagnant for months."

"Uh-huh," I intoned, not really wanting to know what a chemical toilet was. But I had no option. For better or worse, we owned this thing. I braved the growing wave of regret, clambered back in and

started exploring. The double bed enclosure above the driver's cabin seemed claustrophobically small, although its tiny mattress was wrapped in plastic, giving me hope that something had been maintained.

"Uh-huh." I climbed through to the driver's cabin. The basics were there: two seats, a gearstick and a radio. The 110,000 kilometres on the speedo were accurate. I sat in the driver's seat, closed my eyes and put my hands up on the steering wheel. And that was when I felt it. With the wheel gripped in my hands, the road trip became real. I squeezed the wheel tighter. I would steer this machine to another world.

Once the windows were open and the smell dissipated, I grew more interested. I'd never been inside a motor home, so I tried to pretend I knew what I was inspecting. The timber panelling was clean. The kitchen chairs were striking in their faded brown spermatozoa pattern. The bunk beds seemed perfect for the kids. There was a cupboard, a little fridge, a sink and two cooktops. But even so, I couldn't stop wondering how the four of us were going to survive in this box together.

ONE EVENING, Callum sidled up to me. "Daddy?" he whispered.

"Yes, son?"

"Jaimie said my clothes are silly."

I froze. Until now, all his major life issues had been addressed to his mum, and this was our first ever Cat Stevens father-and-son moment. I recalled my fatherhood dreams, in which I had imagined being a wise oracle for my children, dispersing sage advice like Yoda to Luke Skywalker. Now the chance to establish myself as his champion had arrived. I smiled, looked into his eyes, and, zap, I had nothing. My mind went blank. "We-e-ellll!" I drawled, buying time. "So ... ummm, you don't like that?" Spectacular! I was repeating questions back like a cheap psychiatrist. "No!"

"Wee-elll." More brain-scanning. The only thing I could think of was that I had dressed him and, yes, he did look a little silly. But I knew I must not laugh at his concerns or he might never confide in me again. "Should I tell her to ... umm ... maybe, stop saying that?"

"Yes," he spat.

Excellent, a solution! Constantly spending time with my kids had finally paid off. Daddy of the Year award coming my way. I was on a roll, so I wrapped an arm around him. "You

know what, mate? One day you're going to be pretty happy that girls are checking you out." He recoiled in shock, so I rushed on. "Well, not your sister. I mean, that would be ... sorta weird ... I suppose. But other girls. You know ... umm, girlfriends. Ones you might kiss."

"Maaaaarr-meeee!"

Our close-knit camper life had the strange effect of magnifying this and every other event. Days later, Callum strutted up to us after dinner and declared, "I ate my beans!"

*"Being wholly present, in both mind and body, was uncovering some secret joys of parenthood that I didn't know about."*

Mandy and I leapt up. At every meal, for two years without fail, we had put vegetables on Callum's plate. For two years, he had never eaten one. With the delivery of this momentous news, we scanned his plate and under the table as though looking for a diamond that had fallen out of a ring.

But it was true, he'd eaten a vegetable. This achievement would have once gone unnoticed in our time-poor, inattentive existence, but now we whooped and hollered and spun him around, dancing under the stars singing, "I ate my bean" to the tune of Abba's *Dancing Queen*. "Crisp and green ... like a tambourine, yeah yeah!" The lyrics may have needed work, but in the history of the world, never had the eating of a bean been so celebrated.

The "day of the bean" highlighted other "insignificant" achievements I had missed, like the kids' first steps and first words. Being wholly present, in both mind and body, was uncovering some secret joys of parenthood that I didn't know about or expect to care about. It made me wonder how I could make sure I was there in the future for their first catch, first lost tooth, first day at school. Imagine the singing associated with Callum's first piece of broccoli!

As we journeyed on, my mind drifted to other wild and wonderful thoughts, prompted by whatever was happening at the time. Without email, phone calls, work and other Venus fly traps of time, I was acutely focused on nothing but the immediate activity. ●

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