

## In the car...

The first car I ever occupied was the one you can see in the faded home movies my dad took in the late summer of 1943 as a chronicler in the way of new fathers. The car jolts forward, stops abruptly, jolts forward again, because my mom can't drive it. She never got to be a passable driver until Detroit came out with automatic transmissions.

The home movie is underexposed but in color, when my father was 22 years old, and there's underexposed and undernourished me crawling on the grass, in a diaper as big as me, this skinny baby with my ribs sticking out. In the background is a black Model T Ford.

It was a living survivor of the first cars ever manufactured in America. My parents called it "Daisy." I remember that, because when looking at this home movie decades later, my mother burst out that information, nostalgic and happy at the sight of this old workhorse, Henry Ford's gift to working-class Americans, making them mobile and free.

My dad drove Daisy with his wife and two little boys to a rented cottage on a lake in Northern Minnesota, a place called Detroit Lakes. In the movie my mom is shooting bulls-eyes with a bow and arrow, and my dad, shirtless, mows the lawn and clowns to the 8mm Kodak movie camera. Daisy is in all the scenes, sitting in the driveway, looking like a hat box with silly big wheels that belong on a bicycle. .

The first car I remember is the one my dad bought somewhere between the Detroit Lakes vacation and the family move to Circle Pines, Minnesota, when I was 5. It was a huge (for me) 1936 Buick, a four-door sedan with a bulbous trunk and a sleek expanse in the front for a V8 engine and the classic trademark round little portholes that marked this powerful machine as a Buick.

The interior was gray and striped and cushioned everywhere, with what seemed like soft flannel. I would often stand in the back seat to lean over the front seat so I could watch my dad expertly step on the clutch as he shifted gears, and watch in awe as he kept the car in its lane with effortless, magical little movements on the big white steering wheel, first with little hand movements to the left, then to the right, then jiggling left again, somehow knowing when to do that without worrying about it much. The car would fill with the aroma of his Lucky Strikes, and sometimes he would let me stroke his cheeks on each side of his face with my little hands. I liked the feel of the

stubble, its scratchiness, even after he shaved, that strange rough surface I did not have on my face.

It was magic just to get in that car and be able to go somewhere. If my parents gave that 1936 Buick a name – and I bet they did – I don’t remember what it was. Sometimes it would be the greatest surprise in the world, there’d be a sudden announcement that the family was to have an outing, and off we went, like to a restaurant made for people who had cars, where girls in uniforms brought the hamburgers and shakes right to our car on trays that rested on opened car windows. It was such a strange, wonderful, new luxury, the world coming to us in our cozy car. We could sit in the car and eat and talk and laugh and not worry about good manners and feel good about ourselves. That Buick was a Magic Carpet.

I remember I would sometimes press my face into the cushions of the Buick’s seats and delight in their smells. Sometimes I could run my fingers deep into the backs of the cushions and find pennies or old crumbs of food eaten in the car, or candy wrappers.

Or sometimes I was allowed to sit up front with my dad, and he’d let me play with the cigarette lighter and the radio dials. Otherwise, the radio was rarely on, because as a family – and that’s the only time I was in the car, when the whole family went somewhere – we’d sing songs. All kinds of songs we learned from singing them every night, after the dishes were done and we formed a circle around the upright piano my dad played, and we’d sing and sing and ham it up and laugh. Then we’d go do our homework and go to bed.

The singing in the car was better, though, because we could all look at each other, even my dad thanks to the rearview mirror that caught his twinkling baby-blue eyes. And with the piano absent, we heard each other better in the car, too.

Another car I got to know well in those early years of my life was the DeSoto my grandpa drove, the grandpa we all called Babu, my mother’s father. Or I should say DeSotos, because it seems every year he bought a new one. They were all so fresh and clean with new-car smell, I would press my face everywhere in that car to smell the DeSotos and special grandpa smells Babu gave off everywhere, of mints and Beeman’s gum and mouthwash and Bourbon-and-7s. Bourbon-and-7s are what he called his “medicine” that he’d offer me from time to time, just to see me wince at the taste, maybe get me to abjure all alcohol at an early age.

One thing about those DeSotos: they always had in the interior of the car a round, three-dimensional knob kind of thing stuck on the inside of the car doors, with the warrior's behelmeted head inside it. I looked like this:



I got this picture off the Internet. The thing that I remember didn't look like this, it looked like a clear plastic knob, with just DeSoto's face and torso in ancient 16<sup>th</sup> century armor. I thought his helmet was hair made out of metal. I thought maybe he was Jesus.

I had no idea who DeSoto was until Babu told me: "DeSoto discovered the Mississippi River." How that qualified him to be remembered – and then forgotten – by later generations as a car is a mystery to me now; but back then, everything was a mystery, so I assumed there was nothing special about all the truths Babu told me.

As a five-year-old, I had no idea DeSoto lived 500 years ago, or what that even would have meant: "500 years ago." I didn't know – and I didn't know this all the way until just today when I wanted to pack this Thing with some facts – that DeSoto searched the Southeast and Midwest of what would become the United States, looking for gold and a passage to China, of all places. All he managed to do, though, was wind up dying in a place called Lake Village, Arkansas, in 1542. On the banks of the Mississippi.

Some discovery.

In those days, I assumed Babu was also George Washington and Harry Truman. He had to be, since those were the only old men I had seen pictures of with white hair, and both Babu and Washington had the puffy cheeks of men wearing false teeth, so it was a safe bet – no, rather a child's unsullied view – that he imply had to be all three.

On many a Sunday afternoon, Babu would drive me and my brother Paul and my grandma, the woman we called Nana, on aimless city

tours of homes people had for sale. It was Nana and Babu's idea of fun to see what other people's houses looked like that were for sale, and how much money the people wanted for them. They would not get out of the car and actually go inside and look at the houses, just drive by them. This is how they would spend a Sunday afternoon. Paul and I would sit in the back of the car the whole time and fidget and fight and roll the windows up and down, and I would be alert for new Babu smells and the heavy perfumes of Nana, but those trips were terribly long and gave me headaches.

Babu drove what must have been 10 miles an hour, all the time, and he considered stop signs and red lights as options to consider in his pathway, but, for the most part, as nuisance obstacles to ignore. Since he was very hard of hearing and often enjoyed the world more without a hearing aid (especially in the presence of Nana), he rarely heard the curses and honking horns of those who wanted him to speed up, avoid hitting them or pay closer attention to motor vehicle laws.

It was in those years that a popular cartoon character played in cartoons at the local movie theater, the only place we saw movies then, since televisions sets were new and expensive, and our family didn't have one. This character was Mr. Magoo, an old guy happily oblivious to the world because he was blind and deaf, but he didn't let those little impediments stop him from enjoying life. Here – again thanks to the Internet's vast store of everything – is what Magoo looked like, much like Babu:

I just assumed who ever thought up Mr. Magoo had to be somebody who knew Babu.

As I grew up and my parents changed houses with great frequency, due to my dad's gradual climb to prosperity and my mother's gypsy restlessness, the cars changed, too. There came along a 1951 green Ford, more cramped than the 1936 Buick as we 4 kids got bigger and a 5<sup>th</sup> child was born, baby Eric, but it was still the place for road trip songs, Boy Scout overnight adventures and family camping trips and a place from which to watch Fourth of July fireworks. That in turn was traded in for a 1955 Chevrolet station wagon, with more room for more camping trips, this time with a bumper attachment for a homemade trailer with plywood panels and doors and compartments to stash sleeping bags, food, tents, axes, boots, blankets, tools, utensils, a gas stove – all the civilized stuff you need to get away from civilization.



And then came the divergence in cars, a fork in the road you might say, that foreshadowed the eventual divorce of my parents. In 1957 she got her own black and white Chevrolet, with an automatic shift, and due to that marvel of engineering and perhaps the pity of the motor vehicle department examiner giving her the road test, she managed after over a dozen failed attempts to pass the driving test and get her license. Years before that she drove illegally to various substitute teaching jobs all over Minneapolis with just her learner's permit. Meanwhile, my dad began a series of purchases of various tiny sports cars in the 1960s that he used for his frequent escapes to a secret life with a mistress we, of course, knew nothing about: various Triumphs, a white TR-3, then a red TR-4, then a white roadster convertible called a Morgan that looked like all engine and hood with an embarrassed afterthought of sardine space for the driver, steering wheel and tarp-like pull-up roof.

Here is what a Morgan looked like back then, except his was white:



Riding up front with my dad in the only passenger seat available was a momentous, privileged moment in my pre-teen years. By necessity, on such rare occasions everyone else in the family would be excluded from entering the sanctity of these raffish fast toys that my dad babied as little else among his possessions. These were prized moments where I, with four siblings and a mother who had to compete for his attention as well, had my dad all to myself.

But the very special feeling of being Dad's chosen passenger of the moment for whatever destination he had in mind was soon offset by

the terror of his reckless driving. He loved to attend car races, he thrilled at their speed and noise and dust, and he admired a well-engineered car, so for all I know, he knew what he was doing when he drove like a maniac. But I never had that confidence in his driving ability. He took every chance imaginable in traffic, just barely missing cars, turning corners at break-neck speeds, passing cars on highways and getting back into his lane with just seconds to spare to avert a head-on collision. It was truly hell on wheels.

I often thought he harbored a wish to kill himself in his car. To go in a burst of glory, the way he often told me he hoped his death would be, rather than the slow, pitiable kind.

Looking back now, it was a measure of his enormous personal magnetism that, despite the dangers, thinking I risked my life on every special journey with him, I came along for the ride anyway, taking the rollercoaster with the top down even in subzero weather, my eyes and face turning to ice while one hand clutched the tiny windshield and the other braced against the wooden dashboard, as if preparing to lessen the impact of the inevitable fatal crash.

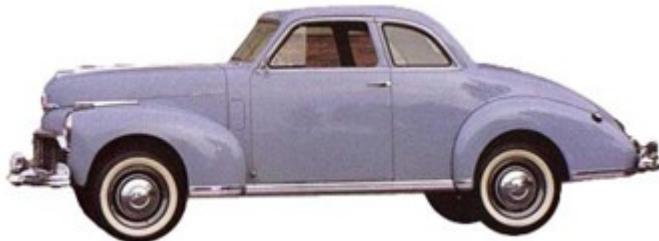
When it came to driving, my dad was the very Anti-Babu.

Cars gained an altogether different significance to me when puberty came calling. A driver's license was also a license to begin the mating dances Nature intends for human beings of the American kind. Kids at school, like Mike Straub, who otherwise might not meet the social norms of intellectual snobs like me, were embraced as pals because they had chopped-and-blocked 1932 Fords, or, as in his case, a beat-up 1946 Studebaker Champion that was as dirty and noisy and smelly and rude as Mike.

Mike and my buddy from forever, Bob Richter, would go on the prowl, or what we thought was a prowl, searching suburban streets and downtown throughways for girls to look at, or driving to the beaches or to Porkie's Drive-In or Powderhorn Park or to neighborhoods we had never been in before, in quixotic quest of a party that would surely appear and claim us. Our failures and aimlessness didn't matter, so long as we could get in the car, Mike's car, and just go somewhere, anywhere that wasn't home, with always the vague hope that somehow we, like Desoto of yore in search of gold, would find forbidden drink and welcoming girls our age who would, who would, who...well, we never were sure what would happen if we actually found what we were looking for. But we talked about it a lot, in Mike Straub's Studebaker with the radio turned to WDGY at full volume, and the windows rolled down and so we

wouldn't asphyxiate on exhaust fumes that took their exit through the back seat.

Here is what Mike Straub's car looked like when it was new and he and I were three years old:



Except by 1958, his Studebaker Champion was full of dents, rust, a blend of paint jobs, and a door on the passenger side that wouldn't fully close.

Bob, Mike and I loved it. We never did get any girls with it. But because of this car, we could stay away from home for hours and days at a time, what every teenage kid wants and needs. We were among the first teenagers in the history of the world to know freedom.

In high school I was what would be called a nerd today: braces on my teeth, big thick black-rimmed glasses; skinny as a rail, and interested in some very weird stuff, like Adolf Hitler and Nazis and teaching myself German from vinyl records checked out of the library. I was deathly afraid of girls, and so to avoid my dad's heckling about why I wasn't interested in dating, and to have a ready comeback to the longingly loving looks of girls in high school who were not, let's face it, all that good-looking (Nature groups like to like if she has to in order to get her job done), and so my excuse was simple: I didn't have a car. I didn't have a driver's license. What are ya gonna do. Who wants a date with a guy like that?

I went to high school dances to stare at the girls across the other side of the room and to go outside and smoke the Viceroy cigarettes I stole from my mother's purse that made me sick, but also made me cool with Mike and Bob.

But no girlfriends. And that was fine by me.

At age 19, I finally got my driver's license, and with it, all that that entails. The braces were off, I had fattened up while an exchange student abroad. I had discovered – to my surprise – that the reason I had been skinny all my life is because my mother, bless her heart, was

a terrible cook. I just figured food just naturally tasted like crap. But I soon found out the Swiss eat well and much, and so did I. And the Swiss girls were as delectable as their cheeses and chocolates, too, and they were as carless as me. You could date by streetcar. Or bicycle. So I did.

As a college student at the age of 20, I bought my first car, just one week after falling in love with the woman I would eventually marry. I had a summer job as a janitor, and I paid \$25 for it, a 1949 Ford. Black, of course, and with about the same old car smells and technology as my parents' first car, that Model T, the one they called "Daisy."

I had a name for my first car, too. I called it The Black Widow. The clutch barely worked, the tires were worn, it drank oil in great gulps before blowing it out its rear in big black clouds. But, clunker or not, it was my clunker, it was my car! My *own* car! Hita wouldn't always have to come and pick me up in her 1954 Chevy if we were to go anywhere. I could pick her up in The Black Widow and show her dad that I was a man, too!

Here is what a brand-new 1949 Ford looked like:



Mine, of course, looked like hell. It lasted about 3 months and then fell completely apart.

Hita's father – Papi – by the way, was a man 'way ahead of his time. He was one of the first owners of this exotic little car called the Toyota. Who knew the Japanese could make cars? Ads had been put in the Minneapolis newspaper and all over America, encouraging

people to own a Toyota dealership. The “toy” in Toyota made it seem even sillier. Papi had a tan Corolla. It lasted a long time.

In the first years of marriage with Hita, one brand of car sticks out, we had at least two of these, and a station wagon version. I am talking about, of course, the Ford Falcon, the best, toughest car ever built in America, thanks to Bob McNamara, who would go on to architect the worst, toughest war ever fought by America in Viet Nam. But the Ford Falcon was one helluva car, it could take a beating and keep coming back.

The Falcon station wagon gave way to the Land Shark, which is the name we gave a monster of a 1970s’ Oldsmobile behemoth station wagon with huge plastic seats, a beast that carted the kids to endless places on Vashon Island. Cars came and went along with the Land Shark, all sorts of cars and pickup trucks, all of them places equally good to pick up on the chirping sounds and whines and cries of children growing up, children talking with friends in the car as if you weren’t there with them, you the driver, the one place, there in the car, where for the short journey the kids were your captives and they gave up their secrets, and spoke their special kids language and words for friends only, but clues, too, to their growing souls. Kids could scramble hither and yon, do their own brand of hiding and venturing forth on the broad canvass of Vashon Island, but in the car, those golden moments, on long trips or short runs to the soccer field, in those moments in the car, we were in that closed place where the heart beats, and you can hear it, the pulsing sounds of life. How wonderfully strange and sweet that this place within a car, though itself moving, makes you sit still with the others in it, and with it the time, however brief, spent so well.

Precious times in the car for me have been times with family. Family is all there is. There is nothing else.

I think of the memories I have had in cars, and the memories my children and grandchildren will have in theirs. I think of how they might even someday achieve such greatness that their names – the very latest Mitchell or a fully loaded Carson – will be used to christen some fantastic vehicle that will propel them into a future I can no more imagine than Hernando de Soto could imagine our world today when he sat on the banks of the Mississippi in 1542.