

Memories

If You Think You Can | It Happened Here: Fosters Freeze | What's Up Doc? | A Lesson From Dad

Vacationing With the Griswolds

You're Never Too Old for Time-Outs

By Savannah Austin Pilcy



Growing up, I couldn't wait for summer. That's when my mom and dad packed up the car and took my brother and me on the highly anticipated family vacation. It was our time to relax and bond, or so we hoped. But somehow, despite our good intentions, our trips never ended up as we planned.

Each journey began in the same manner. A fight erupted over how to fit everything in the station wagon. There were four suitcases the size of coffins and garment bags filled with winter and summer clothes, no matter if our destination was the beach or the mountains. We always had three coolers stuffed with enough food to feed a third-world country, since apparently my hometown had the only grocery stores in America; and all the equipment necessary to ensure we had a good time: surfboards, rafts, innertubes, wakeboards, skis, boots, poles and a refrigerator (just a mini, of course). Because of the

sheer volume of our "essentials," we never seemed to have enough trunk space — no matter how many times my father rearranged and stuffed. Consequently, there was always an overflow into the backseat, where my brother and I were forced to sit for countless hours.

Another tradition was my father's position at the helm of the family car. Typically, he was armed with an itinerary more complex than Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Without fail, as soon as we entered the highway, he would begin to tell us the arrival times and destination points along his calculated route. And somehow, two hours after seeing the same billboard 17 times, he would admit we were lost.

My dad's sense of direction also resulted in driving around for hours looking for parking spaces. One summer on our way to Florida, my parents decided to stop in New Orleans for dinner. We passed one well-lit lot after another because there was a "closer spot." This >



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> quest for the Holy Grail of parking spaces led us to a dark alley off Bourbon Street. Our objections were all for naught, as my father, as usual, was at the wheel.

Upon returning to the alley, my mother astutely noted that when we left our van, all of the windows were intact. And, if she recalled, there were four hubcaps. Minutes later, my dad climbed back into the driver's seat, and we headed to Florida in a brown tank with no hubcaps and plastic bags for windows.

But that was all in the past. Through the years, my parents have mellowed, my brother is a college freshman and I'm a respected attorney. So when my mom announced a new family trip, I was excited. This experience would help us re-bond. And just to be safe, I would pack a DVD player.

Vacation time came, and I was ready. Nothing could make this trip stressful. Well, at least not until we got into the car. It began with the "kids" once again being stuffed in the shoebox some call a back seat, along with a PlayStation, laptop, backpack, briefcase, purse and two pillows, all of which were strategically placed between us. (Apparently, my mother had begun questioning our "bonding" potential.)

After the traditional arranging, rearranging and stuffing of belongings and bodies, we started off down the driveway on our vacation full of family fun. Then, my mom realized she'd left her cell phone at home. My father slammed the car into reverse, causing my first injury of the trip — a knot from the several items that fell from the back of the car and hit me in the head. And we hadn't even left the driveway yet. Cell phone in hand, we turned onto the street and headed down the road.

Things were quiet for almost two hours. Unlike past road adventures, we enjoyed pleasant conversation and a few laughs about our travels through the years. "This trip is going to be different," I thought.

One minute later, my brother and I began bickering over which movie to watch. An insult here, a snide remark there and soon bags and pillows were flying as jabs were thrown back and forth across the back seat. Three minutes, four bruises and seven scratches afterward, my brother and I heard something unimaginable at the ages of 20 and 26, respectively. "Don't make me pull over this car," my dad said.

Just like every other trip, my father took control of the wheel. However, this time our car was

equipped with a navigation system. I was confident we would promptly arrive at our destination without any diversions. I was wrong.

Less than an hour from our condominium, my dad began questioning the capabilities of the navigation system that had aptly directed us turn-by-turn over the past eight hours. I reassured him that this system utilized the same GPS satellites that flawlessly guided major commercial aircraft from New York to Hong Kong, and space shuttles from Cape Canaveral to the International Space Station. But it didn't help.

To my dismay, dad's Clark Griswold alter ego emerged. And minutes later, he walked out of a gas station with map in hand. I sat in the back seat, glancing back and forth between the on-screen directions with easy-to-read guidance arrows and my father, wrestling with a map of North Carolina, mumbling something about a shorter route.

Realizing that my father's "shortcut" may take us from Knoxville through Miami on the way to North Carolina, we pleaded with him to give the GPS a chance. He agreed, but only after we solemnly vowed once "that thing" got us lost, we would never again question his superior navigational ability. An hour later, we pulled into the driveway.

The next few days were relatively calm — notwithstanding the morning battles between my brother and me over the bathroom, which led to yet another round of insults and punches, followed by parental threats of groundings and time-outs.

Later that week, we decided to have a family movie night. After putting in the DVD, I stood up quickly and knocked myself out on the winding metal staircase that was conveniently located directly above the television. As my mother leaned over me with a bag of ice and my father inspected the cut to determine if I needed stitches, I glanced around the room for Aunt Edna and Uncle Eddie.

Seven days later, I limped into my house, walked over to a mirror and inspected my latest collection of battle wounds. It was then that I realized that maybe our vacations weren't "perfect" by traditional standards, but we did return home with a host of funny stories and memories that will last a lifetime. I wouldn't trade my family members, including the Clark Griswold alter ego, or our vacations for anything in the world. I eagerly await our next adventure to see where it will lead us. Although next time, I think I'll fly, packing a helmet and kneepads just to be safe. *