

## Part I

### On Turning Forty

#### Chapter 1

When I turned forty, I bought myself a new car.

This is, of course, a typical male thing to do on reaching one of those painful milestones in the aging process, but to my credit, I was about due. My vehicle of the time, a 1989 Honda Accord with over five hundred thousand miles on it, was starting to get a bit creaky and was spending more and more time in the local repair shop for little problems.

At this point the little problems were sounding uncomfortably like overtures for larger problems to come. You know what I mean. The mechanic gives you that sad, doctor-with-a-dying-patient look and tells you things like, “Well, I can patch a few of these oil leaks, but you really should start thinking about a new engine soon.”

I did not want to buy a new engine for my fifteen-year-old car. Over the last few years, I had managed to pay off the last of my school loans and credit cards. I was debt-free, still single, and was making up to fifty thousand a year as a middle-school English teacher.

And I was turning forty.

Time for a new car.

This decision at this particular crossroad of my life gave fuel to a desire that had been growing within me for some time. My life had undergone many changes over the past four decades, some good, some bad. Much had been gained, but a great deal had been lost as well. In life, I suffer from that malediction of sentimentality that makes one try to cling to the beliefs and ideals formed in early childhood that become battered, bruised, and scattered throughout the campaigns of modern-day life. I have always enjoyed traveling across the country, and in my travels, I had often found little pieces of my lost self in the most unlikely places, snatches of memory caught in new lands where no memory should be, unless there is some connection, some bond that makes us one with God and the natural world he has created. People talk about middle age as a time of “midlife crisis,” a time when people begin to feel that they are missing something.

Now, I had an idea for taking a trip unlike any I had done before. I wanted to travel around the North American continent, revisiting places and people I had known and discovering new ones in a grandiose effort to find those small missing pieces of myself.

The Accord was still running quite fine. My apartment in L.A. was only three-and-a-half miles from work, which meant that I could actually take my time in the quest for a new vehicle. This was a historic first for me. My first car, a 1976 Oldsmobile Cutlass, had been stolen and stripped while I was living in the suburbs of Massachusetts and commuting to school in Boston. I had needed a car right away. (Car dealers love it when you absolutely need a car right away; they can smell it). I had ended up with a 1978 Buick Opal, a kind of American-Japanese crossbreed, which neither nation wished to claim after a while. It lasted for two years before dying. The car after that had been an Oldsmobile Firenza. To its credit, that car, purchased brand-new in 1983, had lasted fifteen years before dying once and for all on a corner near an oldies record shop in southern California. Still, dying once and for all meant that a replacement once again had to be acquired immediately. My brother-in-law, Rocky, had helped me pick out the Accord.

Now, for the first time in my life, I found myself in a position where I could take my time shopping for a new car. It was August. My fortieth birthday was coming that January. This gave me five months to save for a down payment and pick out just what I wanted.

Here was another dilemma. When you absolutely need to buy a car, you just go out and buy the first reasonable deal that comes along. Now I was confronted with choices.

It has been said that the Eskimo language contains as many as forty words for “snow.” This is because snow has always been such an important factor in their culture. In the United States, the nation with the largest number of consumers of automobiles in the world, we have access to about forty car manufacturers, each of which offers seven to fourteen models of cars. What this means is that the American language has over four hundred words for “automobile.”

How to make a choice?

Over the past three summers, I had spent a great deal of time traveling. Back in 1986, when I had made my first cross-country trip from Massachusetts to California, I had fallen in love with the continent of North America and had made it my life’s passion to see every part of it. Places like Yellowstone and Zion had become holy pilgrimages whenever I could get together the time and the means for travel. Now, as a schoolteacher with two months off in the summer, I found myself in an ideal position to exercise my passions on an annual basis. I had toured through forty-seven of our fifty states and six Canadian provinces. I have never been to Europe, Asia, Australia, South America, or Africa. Many of my more worldly friends and relatives chide me for this and tell me that I need to expand my horizons. However, few of them have seen a full moon over the rust-colored landscape of Monument Valley. Few have seen sprays of wildflowers miraculously brushing the stony foundations in the high alpine country. Fewer still have paddled through the reedy Everglades and, suddenly and without warning, surprised two otters frolicking in a mangrove lagoon. None of them has been to the high places in the extreme north where the sun actually looks smaller and lingers longer in the summer haze. It is here that the giant Pileated Woodpecker hunts and wild blueberries grow in the mist shrouded mornings of the boreal forests. If you have witnessed any of these things, perhaps you understand my fervor. The Eiffel Tower, Venetian canals, ancient pyramids, and The Great Wall of China that can be seen from orbit are magnificent in their own rights, but they are the boon of other travelers.

Part of the magnificence of this great continent is its size, so a vehicle that is to travel the length and breadth of it must be a special one indeed.

On top of that there is my normal life, the one where I have to get up and drive to work every day for most of the year. A great big Winnebago-type thing would be most cumbersome in day-to-day life, and anything you drive in Los Angeles has to be at least somewhat practical and gas-efficient, particularly in this brave new century.

But I still needed something to carry all of my belongings. Over my forty years of travels, I have managed to accumulate a lot of stuff, much of which I wanted to take on my adventures with me. I have a mountain bike, snorkel gear, Nikon cameras, a telescope, and a plethora of camping gear. I have danced around the idea of buying a kayak, but have so far dismissed it as being less practical than just renting one in the places I need it.

So what to buy?

A van?

Too big, too gas-consuming, too seventies.

A minivan?

Too soccer-mom.

An SUV?

This, of course, is the popular choice for my age group and situation. The problem was that the mountain bike would have to ride outside on a rack. I would have preferred it on the inside in case of rain. I also wanted a vehicle I could sleep in, in case of an emergency. I had slept in the Accord a couple of times. The backseat would drop down, allowing me to lie with my feet stuck in the trunk, my head nestled between the two front seats on top of the stick shift. There had to be a better way.

What I needed was a cross between an SUV and a minivan. Unfortunately, no such animal was tooling around the highways back in the summer of 2002.

I decided to wait and make up my mind later. After all, it was only September, and I wanted to wait until at least January before making a purchase. Besides this, September always has plenty of distractions, since it is easily the busiest month in my profession, preparing for the new school year and meeting all of the bright, shiny faces that will be the focus of my attentions for the next ten months. I figured that I would probably end up with an SUV of some kind and would just have to buy a tarp to cover the bike. There was also the possibility of a pickup truck with a cap, although I have never really seen myself as the pickup truck type of personality. Too bad there was no such thing as an SUV-minivan love child.

One dark night in November I was home happily popping almonds, drinking beer, and watching a show on my big-screen TV (yes, ladies, that is what we unmarried guys do on weeknights). I was feeling very drowsy and a bit blotto by the third beer—the eighth-graders had been particularly pernicious that day—when a commercial came on. It was one of those irritating commercials that only run for about fifteen seconds, showing some new product in order to tease you a little as the first step in the advertising campaign. An odd, boxy little car pulled up to some Southwestern locale, and a bunch of grungy teens piled out of doors that opened opposite to one another, briefly revealing a surprisingly roomy interior. I blinked and missed the name of the new model, only catching the Honda logo at the end. I had only caught a quick, tantalizing glimpse of the new auto, but it was enough to snap me to attention.

That's my car. Somebody built my car!

I ran to the phone and called my friend Matt Sprenger, who teaches sixth-grade math and science.

“Matt! They built my car!”

“Who?”

“Honda.”

“What car?”

“You know. The cross between an SUV and a minivan.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I just saw it!”

“What does it look like?”

“Kind of like a box. I didn't really get a good look. But it's the SUV-minivan love child all right.”

“The eighth-graders were bad today, weren't they?”

“Heinous, but that's not the point.”

“Roger, you're one of the only people I know who uses a word like 'heinous' in regular conversation.”

“I can't believe it. They built my car!”

“I'm happy for you.”

For the next month I scanned the television frantically for another commercial. Of course, like anything else you're looking for, it continued to stubbornly elude me. One night however, my brother-in-law Rocky was in town for a business meeting and decided to stay overnight. I was in the other room when he called me over.

"Hey, Rog. Come look at this new funny-looking thing."

I walked into the living room and turned to the TV, just in time to see the grungy teens pile out of the opposite-opening doors.

"That's a wild-looking new thing, huh?" stated Rocky.

"That's it!" I cried. "That's the car I saw!"

The Honda logo came up again and this time I caught the model. It was an Element.

"Yeah," said Rocky, suddenly catching my meaning. "That thing would probably be perfect for you when you take your little trips."

"Did they say anything about how much it costs or when it will be available?"

"No, it was one of those really quick commercials. I'll call the Honda dealer where I used to work and find out about it for you."

Rocky's report was hopeful.

"The Element will be out around December. They're supposed to get about eighteen to twenty-four miles to the gallon, and they're going to run between nineteen to twenty-four thousand, depending on what you want on them. Here's another plus: they're using the same engine and chassis as the Honda CRV. Those have been out for a few years, and people seem happy with them."

Throughout the Christmas season I haunted the local Honda dealers. I picked up the literature they had received and brought it into work to get the opinions of my workmates. Not many of them knew much about cars, but you can ask teachers about anything; they always have an opinion.

"I dunno, it looks kind of funky, like a box," offered Mr. Atkinson, a special education teacher.

"I love it!" cried Mr. Crawley in his Scottish brogue. "How much are they?"

"I don't know, Roger," offered Ms. McAfee, who teaches English to the seventh grade. "I don't think women will be attracted to you in that car."

"But I'm not buying it to attract women."

"In that case, I guess it will be fine."

"It looks like a clown car," stated Mr. Sprenger.

"What do you mean, a clown car?"

"You know, like in the circus, when the square, boxy car pulls into the center ring, and a whole bunch of clowns pile out of it?"

I considered the grungy teens from the commercial. Sprenger may have had a point.

## Chapter 2

That January found me in the showroom of Harbor City Honda in the neighboring town of Wilmington. I had been looking at the Honda Element at various dealerships for the past month, and had even test-driven a blue one. Boxy-shaped or not, it had become more enticing with each viewing. It was extremely roomy, with opposite-opening doors (Sprenger calls them “suicide doors”) for easy access of equipment. It had a hatchback with a tailgate (I’ve never had a tailgate), four-wheel drive (I’ve never had four-wheel drive), and the backseats could be folded up or removed entirely. Another great part was the lack of carpeting. This meant that camping gear, mountain bikes, or any other dirty gear could be stored without leaving stains. Not only was there enough room to lie down on an air mattress comfortably, there was even a skylight in the back, so that while sleeping, I could look up at the stars.

I was hooked.

I was now in the local dealership for what I considered to be a “reconnaissance.” In less than a week I would turn forty, but in two weeks I would get my January paycheck and have what I considered to be a sufficient amount for a down payment.

I was just here to check things out.

Within ten minutes they had me inside of their office.

“So, you’re interested in an Element?”

“I am.”

“But you claim that you won’t buy one today because ...”

“I am expecting a paycheck in two weeks. That will give me enough for the down payment that I wish to make.”

The saleswoman looked hopeful. Her manager broke into a smile.

“That’s not a problem at all! You can just write two checks for us tonight. Post-date one of them for two weeks from now and we won’t cash it until then.”

The offer was intriguing, but frightening. It meant that I could have my brand-new car tonight... but now we had come to the heart of the matter.

Buying a car is always a stressful experience. You know that these people will do anything, *anything*, to get you to buy before you walk out the door. All they want to do is make a sale, and for you to make a purchase.

And *what* a purchase! The average new car costs between fifteen and thirty thousand dollars, unless you’re one of those people who have jobs that allow you to afford the thirty- to eighty-thousand-dollar variety. In any case, I was looking at up to five years of car payments and a vehicle that I would be committed to for as many as ten years.

I could feel the ice-ball forming in my stomach. I fervently wished that my sister-in-law, Cindy, were with me.

My brother Karl and his wife Cindy had raised me from the day my mother had died. In all of the dark dens of car dealerships across the nation, my sister-in-law’s name was whispered with trepidation and dread. She was merciless to them. She would grind them, balk at them, and deny them with a coldness and deliberation that would disable all of their machinations, constantly assuring them that she could easily get a better deal at the next lot. They would argue, they would plead, they would foam, they would rage, they would cry (I swear, I’d seen one of them tear up). In the end they would submit, and she would leave them wrung out, barely

realizing a profit from the sale that had been wrested so entirely from their control, just happy to have survived the experience.

But Cindy was not here. I had moved to California and she was back in Massachusetts.

“So what kind of Element can we set you up with, Mr. Taylor?”

I steeled myself. I had been working on this project for three months now. I told myself I could handle it.

“I want the EX model, with the four-wheel drive.”

The manager and the salesgirl’s pulse visibly quickened. I had just named the top-of-the-line model.

“We have one of those on our lot right now, in silver. Would you like to take a test drive?”

I decided to play it cool.

“No, thank you. I’ve already test-driven the car and I’m quite satisfied. But I was looking for it in green.”

“We can get it in green. We have an arrangement with the other dealerships in the area. We can make the swap tonight.”

“How much are we looking at?”

“I think that one is twenty-three thousand, but I’ll have to double check.”

I had already seen the silver one on the lot. The sticker had said twenty-four thousand. Was he trying to make it sound better, hook me, and then say, “Oops?” It could be an honest mistake.

“I also have a trade-in.”

“What do you have?”

“A 1989 Honda Accord. It has a lot of miles, about five hundred thousand, but it’s in reasonably good shape, and the point of a Honda is that they keep their value. It’s part of the reason I want to buy another one.”

I figured that I had him here. I was using their own sales propaganda against them.

The manager did look dutifully troubled.

“True, but five hundred thousand is a lot of miles ... ”

And so the game had begun.

In the end, I got them to agree to fifteen hundred for my old car. Not bad considering that I had only paid four thousand for it five years ago. I also scored another point. As we were closing the deal, the manager came back in.

“I’m afraid no one has a green Element available. Tell you what; I’ll knock off another five hundred dollars if you take the silver.”

In all honesty, the silver was quite handsome. For five hundred dollars it was downright beautiful.

“Sounds good to me.”

I transferred my belongings from my old car to what had now become my new car with a certain wistfulness bordering almost on guilt. We tend to become attached to the things we use day in and day out in our lives. I have already expounded upon the importance of cars to most Americans, and one cannot let go of a thing that has served so well and so loyally for five years without at least a little regret. I took a moment to stroke the hood of my old friend one last time before climbing into the driver’s seat of my new car.

Leaving the dealership, I set course for the Ports o' Call restaurant where my teacher friends were at Friday night happy hour. I noted that this car was a bit larger and higher off the ground than any other car that I had owned, and that an adjustment period would be necessary.

At the restaurant, everyone asked what had taken me so long. I took them out to the parking lot to show them. Some of them were suitably impressed. Some of them looked at me skeptically.

Sprenger just stood and shook his head.

"You bought the clown car."

"It's *not* a clown car."

"Does it have a CD player?"

"Of course."

"You need to download some circus music for when the clowns come running out."

Middle-school English teachers do not resort to violence, but they do at times utilize very colorful expletives, the likes of which I shall not report here.

### Chapter 3

In the teaching world, March is the cruelest month of all. There are no holidays in March. Christmas break is a dim memory, and we crawl towards spring break knowing that the children will return befouled with laziness throughout the dog days of May and June. The children are tired of learning at this point. The freshness of the first semester has passed, and the second semester becomes increasingly more difficult as we attempt to engage a generation of students who have, from infancy, been trained for short attention spans by television, video games, and MTV.

In April comes that one-week break which will only serve to make the kids more apathetic for the final stretch. For me, the spring break of 2003 was a chance to run a test case for my new car.

I had already found the Element quite adequate for day-to-day operations. Its suspension easily handled the pot-holed roads of San Pedro and cruised the freeways between Los Angeles and San Diego with ease. I was looking forward to the air-conditioner for the summer. My previous car had not had a working air conditioner.

For the spring break test run, I had selected Joshua Tree National Park in eastern California. Joshua Tree was ideal: it was close by—a three-hour drive—and quite inexpensive. Inexpensive was important, as I was saving my money for the summer. I had decided that with this new car, I was going to attempt a bigger, more ambitious trip than I had ever before conceived. Instead of simply crossing a section or two of the country, my plan was to actually *circumnavigate* the entire continent. I would begin in the Sierra Nevada Mountains within central California, where Sprenger, Atkinson, Crawley, and I had planned to go backpacking. From there I would cross the southwest to Texas, where I would land in San Antonio to visit a friend. From San Antonio I would cross the South to Florida in order to visit my brother, John, in Fort Myers, followed by a trip north to Georgia to visit cousins. From Georgia I would follow the Blue Ridge Highway into Virginia and thence to New England, the land of my birth, where I would reunite with friends and relatives from my younger years. After that stop, I would strike further north to Quebec; once there, I would aim to cross the provinces of Canada all the way west to British Columbia before finally turning south once again. The last leg of my journey would take me down through the Pacific Northwest, northern California, and, at last, home to Los Angeles.

For the test drive to Joshua Tree, I decided to remove the rear seats. In the Element, these can be leaned back all the way and then flipped up against the side walls. This converts the back area into a cargo bay, perfect for the mountain bike. There is a metal loop on the bottom of the backseat area and a handle on the top. A bungee cord strung between these two will secure the bike against the side of the car. This was fine for carrying the bike around to local riding trails, but for my big trip, I decided that the removal of the seats would create an even larger cargo bay, necessary for a two-month stretch tooling around the country.

With the removal of the seats, which now sat in my living room, I had adequate space for everything. The bike was bungee-corded to the right side of the cargo bay. The rest was filled with camping gear, the air mattress, the telescope, the camera equipment, and my snorkel gear (there is absolutely no use whatsoever for snorkel gear in the Mojave Desert, but remember, this was a test run for the summer trip). I sat comfortably in the driver's seat. On the passenger seat was my collection of music discs and old-time radio recordings. On the floor of the passenger's seat was my red Playmate cooler filled with Coca-Cola and ice. I was on my way.

Joshua Tree National Monument was founded in 1936, largely due to the efforts of a woman named Minerva Hoyte from Pasadena, who became concerned about the area's ecosystem. In 1994, Joshua Tree was promoted to the status of National Park, with the addition of 234,000 acres under the aegis of the Desert Protection Bill. Prior to this, it had been inhabited off and on by Native Americans, cattle ranchers, miners, and prospectors. This has been the common migration pattern for many areas of the American deserts. The story always starts with the hunter-gatherers, in this case the Pinto culture, whose people arrived in the area five thousand years ago. They were later followed by the more neoteric tribes of the Serrano, the Chemehuevi, and the Cahuilla. As the white men moved west in the 1800s, ranchers settled in the area, which was more hospitable at that time than it is today. Next came the hunters of gold and minerals, sinking deep mines throughout the land. Today, the place is a mecca for rock climbers who come from all over the world to challenge themselves on the park's various rocky structures.

Joshua Tree provides habitat for over seven hundred plant varieties, two hundred and forty types of birds, forty species of reptiles, and forty-one kinds of mammals. Among the plants is, of course, the famous Joshua tree itself, a wizened, spiny desert tree belonging to the lily family, oddly enough, that can grow as high as forty feet and live up to one thousand years. Its flowers are small, white blooms that only make an appearance for one or two weeks in the spring. Among the birds are the golden eagle and the roadrunner. For reptiles there are various lizards, six species of rattlesnakes (yikes!) and the desert tortoise, listed as "threatened" by the federal register. Mammals include the coyote, the bobcat, the kangaroo rat, and jackrabbits—lots of jackrabbits.

The drive to Joshua Tree from Los Angeles follows Interstate 10 until the turnoff to Route 62. This drive crosses a vast, open portion of the desert that for long stretches offers no shelter from crosswinds, which can be fierce in this part of the country. It was here that I stumbled upon the Achilles heel of the Element. A box-shaped vehicle is a hazardous thing to drive through unrestrained crosswinds. I found myself quickly having to develop a firm grip on the steering wheel and a keen reaction time to avoid floating into the paths of the eighteen-wheelers that roared menacingly by in the neighboring lanes.

Route 62 leads through a desert town called Twentynine Palms. Twentynine Palms plays host to a marine base, and most of its inhabitants are connected to the military in some way. It is also the last chance to get water or gas before entering the park. After stopping to stock up on both, I entered the park from the north and cruised down toward the Jumbo Rocks campground.

Along the way I pulled to a stop in order to accommodate a slowmoving natural pedestrian of the area who had neglected to use a crosswalk. It was the first time I had encountered the elusive desert tortoise in the wild. This fellow was good-sized, about fifteen inches in diameter, and seemed most annoyed at the large silver box that had stopped in front of him. He seemed even more annoyed at the schoolteacher who slipped out of the box, twisting his zoom lens onto his camera and taking aim. The tortoise stopped and resolutely pulled himself halfway into his shell, glaring at me as if threatening to disappear altogether, like Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat, unless I backed away. Taking the hint and not wishing to offend one of the natives of this place where I was only a visitor, I consented and removed myself far enough for him to feel sufficiently secure to continue trundling his way across the blacktop. I got several pictures of him with the zoom while I remained where I was, allowing my car to serve as a sort of hulking,

bellicose crossing guard until my new friend had at last gained the far side of the road and could continue on his way in comparable safety.

At the campsite I unloaded the mountain bike and cursed softly at what I found. When strapped against the backseat in short rides, it had been fine. Now, however, with the backseat removed, it had been strapped against the plastic interior of the car and had left deep scratches from bouncing as the car covered the rough terrain. Bitterly angry at myself for not having considered taking precautions, I resolved to stop somewhere on the way back in order to buy a blanket or some other kind of thick material to drape over the bike in order to protect the car's interior from further damage. I consoled myself that this was, after all, meant to be a learning experience, and now I was learning just how to make this new system work.

After a bike ride down the dirt roads of Queen Valley, I spent the afternoon wandering among formations of rock that had, over untold millennia, been carved by wind and rain into impossible sculptures of fantastic size and grandeur by a nature that mocked the builders of Easter Island and Stonehenge. The rock climbers were out in full force, taking complete advantage of this, their favorite playground. I joined them to an extent, content to scramble up upon the roots and knees of the stone giants, but no further. I have a great abiding respect for rock-climbers, but although I have no real fear of heights per se, I have a tremendous fear of falling. I lacked the equipment or the compulsion to hang like a human fly at what amounted to several stories up above the desert floor, only one wrong move away from disaster.

That night I broke out the telescope. Only a few wispy clouds ran past the half moon and a couple of neighboring planets. Saturn was particularly visible, appearing like a bright star over the desert landscape. Through the lens of the telescope it was revealed as a pale, ringed disc, eight hundred million miles away.

I cooked some food with my gas stove and ate my supper sitting on the tailgate, talking with my neighbors in the next site. I had come to learn that having a tailgate meant always having a place to sit. By ten o'clock it had become cool enough to retire for the night. I considered that it was warm enough to set up the tent, but part of this test run was to see if sleeping in the car would be practical and workable. Moving my gear to one side of the back and throwing several bags into the driver and passenger's seats, I created a little bedroom for myself within the cargo bay. There was just enough room for the air mattress to be inflated and for me to lie comfortably, my feet pointed toward the front seats and my head at the tailgate. The attachment area for the missing back seat jutted out just enough to provide a small night table for my eyeglasses and keys. Scratches to the interior notwithstanding, I decided that the test was complete—and satisfactory: In two months I would be ready to take on a continent. Snuggling into the sleeping bag, I read for about twenty minutes by the light of the rear hatch dome-light before going to sleep. Above me, through the skylight, Saturn winked down from the desert sky.