

## The Odyssey (for Boris)

TRACY MANUEL



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WRITER'S COMMENT: *I've never been big on love stories or minivans. When I looked up and realized I was writing a love story about a minivan, I panicked. I stalled. I seriously questioned whether I was making the best use of my time. I stopped questioning when I realized I'd learned as much from that four-wheeled hand-me-down of a car as from any sentient being. So here's my person, place, or thing essay for Boris the Minivan – the nicest person, place, and thing I've ever met.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *In my first assignment for UWP 18, I ask students to discover their "voice" (to think of tone, pitch, rhythm as they would if they were singing) by reflecting on an object, place, action, or event that has a particular meaning for them. I ask them, as well, to concentrate on detail, description, dialogue, and drama (the four D's) in order to make their subject come alive for their reader, who should "see" a larger idea lurking in the details and descriptions of the subject about which they choose to write.*

*In Tracy Manuel's, "The Odyssey," both a eulogy and love story, we cannot help but fall in love with her odd, old, battered hero, Boris (a.k.a. Odysseus), "a 2001 Honda Odyssey, a clumsy, silver seven-seater," who "look[s] like a big metal slipper; softly curved and dolphin-colored, with bleary, wide-set eyes that would, in time, cloud with filmy cataracts." The reader experiences both humor and nostalgia as the decrepit rhinestone and flame-flanked Odysseus ventures with Tracy, his Penelope—"a small-town teen... hand on the snakeskin wheel and foot on the squealing brakes"—to wild nights of drum playing with a band in small town Oregon venues, until he is reluctantly put to rest.*

*Our Penelope discovers, much like the Greek hero Odysseus, that we can run amok and appreciate "new vistas, new boundaries, new limits," because we have an anchor in the familiar—Boris is at once her home, her teacher, her 'Odysseus,' her love. "(If we put the tiniest bit of love into anything, we'll start to see it reflected back," Tracy Manuel writes. "It could strike at any moment in any completely stupid thing – in hubcaps, in windshields, in*

*rearview mirrors, in dangling air-fresheners that are supposed to smell like California. Unglamorous as it may seem, I'd like to think that love is the natural byproduct of learning something the right way." Indeed, Tracy has learned to write the right way.*

*If I use mostly her words to praise her piece it is because, to borrow from William Blake, her words make us see the world in a grain of sand, in a playful, humorous, detailed, exact, and captivating prose, which require reading rather than commentary.*

*Giddyap, Boris. Wherever you are.*

*And thanks, Tracy.*

—*Raquel Scherr, University Writing Program*

This is a preemptive eulogy for a minivan. It's also a love story. It might sound like a pathetic premise for an essay. But here, I hope to reaffirm what the minivan in question so patiently taught me: It's never pathetic to love something.

Boris was a good minivan.

He didn't die in my arms; my parents sold him after I moved out. I never said goodbye. I didn't slap him on the rump and say "git!" or warn his master-to-be about the Tootsie Pop hardened beneath the passenger seat. He could be anywhere now – any school drop-off loop, any gas station queue, any budget yoga center back lot. Right now, I can only imagine somebody somewhere struggling to parallel park him in an unfamiliar business district, or cursing and coaxing him to freeway speed on an unforgiving onramp. Boris had the turning radius of an aircraft carrier and the acceleration of a reluctant snail.

But Boris was an honorable van.

Boris was a 2001 Honda Odyssey, a clumsy, silver seven-seater. He looked like a big metal slipper, softly curved and dolphin-colored, with bleary, wide-set eyes that would, in time, cloud with filmy cataracts. He was also the cheap model, the low-end Odyssey – no automatic sliding doors. At first, my brother and I didn't know what we were missing. But over the years, we came to enjoy watching our friends climb into their cracker-breaded seats, click the plastic handle, and wait expectantly for the door to close. Which of course it didn't.

"You have to pull it," we'd say.

Later, one of those doors would stick and groan and rasp so horribly on its metal track that you couldn't even heave it open at all during

certain times of the year.

“Try the other side,” we’d say.

Boris was pathetic. So by the time I got my license in high school and my parents handed me the keys, I knew my life was way off track. Mostly, I had other preconceptions about my destiny. When I was little, I wanted to be a para-marine biologist with 2.5 Labradors and a pet kid and drive a hovercraft that left a trail of pure vapor – either that, or live beneath a giant mushroom by a waterfall and work from home. I was flexible that way. But even though by mid-high school I managed to scrape off most of my idealism and all of my pride, nothing ever prepared me for parking my own personal hunk of post-domestic carloaf behind the ceramics room every morning at 7:30.

And I didn’t go completely unnoticed. One day, I wound up talking to a neighbor outside the grocery store. She recognized me by my car, by Boris. She said her kids went to the same high school, and that she’d seen me drop my brother off in front of the music building with his bass a few times. Then she laughed.

“I thought you were his mom,” she said.

I was seventeen. In twenty years, I’ll be able to laugh about it too. But at the time, my brother and I knew what we felt like – yuppie larvae crawling from a urethane-coated carapace of steel and shame.

That was Boris.

However, our particular carapace of steel and shame had his perks. For one thing, Boris was big. He could carry a lot. I imagine this would’ve come in handy had I dabbled in rum smuggling or drug running in my formative years. I did, however, play drums in a few bands – an adequately swashbuckling extracurricular. And as it turned out, Boris made a fine tour bus. Begrudgingly, I appreciated his cavernous cargo hold and his dual nature as a personal “green room” where I could put on mascara without hogging the venue mirror like a third-rate diva. Boris took me and my gear and sometimes a bandmate or two to countless shows over the years, but I never got used to the sight of him parked in the back lot of a bar after midnight. I think I was always surprised he stuck around for me.

I remember one bluegrassy, Oregonian night in particular. After we finished our last set, all of us in the band broke down the stage, looped up the cables, and tried not to step on anything expensive, per usual. As we started shuffling our equipment to the curb through the boozy afterimage

of the evening, some guy got up to watch. He stood by the door with a glass once filled with hipster IPA and looked at Boris a long time. Boris, in the wee, dingy hours, a gleaming icon of American domesticity, doors flung wide, spilling over with speakers, amplifiers, guitar cases, cowboy boots, and crushed water bottles.

The guy pointed. I stopped.

“Nice rig,” he said.

It was then I decided that life was a cheap illusion and I was really living in a low-budget indie flick.

I’ll admit to a momentary blush of embarrassment. But later I began to wonder if the guy with the empty IPA was serious, or genuinely appreciative, or maybe not even drunk. After all, a top-secret little part of me *was* proud of Boris. Seen in a flatteringly ironic light, he was almost punk rock: off-brand, contrarian meta-divergence. And though he still officially belonged to my parents, I adorned him with whatever gently subversive accessories I could get away with. On his rear bumper was a peeling sticker: QUESTION REALITY, in white sans serif – confrontational, yet deliciously inscrutable. One year (for *my* birthday), my brother got Boris a sexy snakeskin steering-wheel cover. It got sticky in the summer, but I left it on. I always said that someday I’d take Boris to the shop to get hydraulic lifts put in or that I’d bedazzle his flank with flames or rhinestones or glow-in-the-dark tribal hibiscuses. Everyone loved Boris as an inside joke: hapless, helpless, hopeless. But slowly, I started to wonder: What if he *was* a nice rig?

After the Oregon incident, that question haunted me. I had to know. I made up a game for Boris and me to play. I called it “Who’s More Pathetic?” Clearly, one of us had to be. Either it was he, an aging, family star destroyer with one working door and two missing cup holders. Or it was I, a small-town teen masquerading as a soccer mom, hand on the snakeskin wheel and foot on the squealing brakes.

“Who’s more pathetic, Boris?” I’d ask. “I just bought a pint of Ben and Jerry’s and nothing else.”

Or: “Ooooooh, sorry, Boris. Only compact spaces left; guess we’ll have to park out back.”

But Boris, being the more enlightened, never bought into the whole idea, and the “Who’s More Pathetic?” game didn’t last. I remember the morning it ended. I was driving due east on my first day of community college, coming up over a gentle slope of highway. I remember light

blasting through the windshield, stale irony recirculating through the vents, and me in the driver's seat, stricken with a sudden, blinding realization.

At the top of what felt like someone else's lungs, I yelled.

"I AM DRIVING TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN MY PARENTS' MINIVAN."

I laughed uncontrollably for a few miles.

Then I patted the dash.

"I'm sorry, Boris. It's not your fault."

It wasn't. Because I realized that if driving Boris really bugged me as much as I liked to pretend, I would have done something about it long ago. Something kept me buckled in, and it wasn't my ineptitude to change the situation or some indiscriminate malice of the universe. In the end, it was nothing more than finding more to like, dare I say love, in a crusty old minivan than I ever thought I would. Or should.

It's funny how quickly we settle into the lives we'd never imagine for ourselves, how easily we fall asleep at the wheel and wake in a cold sweat miles from where we thought we'd be. This is the great mystery of the minivan, spawn of a strange subphylum of the American Dream. In a way, the minivan represents a culmination of the automobile's evolution, a point where the parade of bravado and chrome stops, yields to practicality, and makes a legal U-turn. We so often think of cars as the things that take us to new vistas, new boundaries, new limits. Less often do we think of them as the things that bring us home, sleep in our driveways, and wait in the rain outside Kmart. Maybe there's nothing pathetic about appreciating that. Some might call it settling. Mediocrity, even. But it might as easily be gratitude. Fondness. Or just a new appreciation of the familiar. Because at the end of the day, familiarity is the ultimate luxury.

Familiarity is home. And Homer's *Odyssey* was nothing but one big trip home. No one accuses Odysseus of being pathetic. Truly, "Odyssey" is a fitting and noble name for a minivan, even though I've only just realized I've spelled it incorrectly on every form the DMV has handed me for the past three years. I always used two "d"s: *Oddysey*.

Boris was odd.

But most things are. Most people, too. And our lives sometimes make sharp, unprovoked turns toward the pathetic in ways we can't always control. But when the dust settles, sometimes the only thing

left standing between us and a seemingly pathetic situation is our own carrying capacity for love. Love, and/or the shredded remains of a sense of humor.

Everyone's a teacher. But my years with Boris taught me that *everything* is a teacher. We get out what we put in. And if we put even the tiniest bit of love into anything, we'll start to see it reflected back. It could strike at any moment in any completely stupid thing – in hubcaps, in windshields, in rearview mirrors, in dangling air-fresheners that are supposed to smell like California. Unglamorous as it may seem, I'd like to think that love is the natural byproduct of learning something the right way. So to my initial statement, I add this: It's never pathetic to love something for the right reasons.

Giddyap, Boris. Wherever you are.

And thanks.