

On Bashes, Budgets, and Benzes

For the majority of people in America, the holiday season ended earlier this month. For a tiny minority of Americans, meaning 15 Southern Californians comprised of myself and 14 relatives, it would be just a wonderful, theoretical existence if that were really the case. (Before I go on, full disclosure for people familiar to me who might be confused: yes, the count of 14 relatives is accurate—it includes my wife. We are in fact related to each other, but only by marriage.)

From fall to early-winter, it's undoubtedly expensive and time-consuming enough for people only celebrating Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Festivus, Vlemkl Day, St. Spafelzornt's Day, Thatllbethe Day, the Day of Pigs, As-Yet Undetermined Day, and New Year's Eve, but for me and mine, our full plate comes with a side of full plate. While stores are placing pumpkin orders and parents are mulling over costume ideas for their kids, we begin a 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ -month stretch packed with a fat load of birthdays. Of the 15 of us, the number tacking on a year in this period is 12 (or 80%, I forget which).

Don't get me wrong; I know that on the list of life's difficulties, a "birthday party-Palooza" would probably land right near the bottom, along with "the finish on the Mercedes I inherited damn-near blinds me every time I wax it." Plus, about half of us could simply use the gift cards and money the other half gave us to buy their gifts.

Forgive me, I almost failed to mention a very important detail: one of the birthdays in this cluster is mine. (Approximately 330 shopping days until the next one—you'll need 'em.)

A few years back a dainty little wrinkle was added to the Webb household's winter expenses, on top of the presents, greeting cards, and firewood for nights dipping below 75. Our car, apparently addicted to whatever cologne the dealership's service manager used, capped 4 years of assorted annoying malfunctions with a truly elite, Hall of Fame malfunction: blown head gasket.

Don't get me wrong, we Webb's enjoy gasket humor as much as the next household. I mean, certainly there's a hearty chuckle to be had with the classic "you have a blown gasket, Mr. Customer;"/"I know that, Mr. Service Manager, but what's wrong with my car?" And don't forget the priceless "whadda ya mean, 'blown head gasket'? You mean like there's a gasket in my car that oversees a Department of Gasketry, and he got some perky little intern gasket to fellate him?" But we were in the thick of the aforementioned, annual expense-athon, had really gotten used to the whole one-less-monthly-bill thing after we paid the car off, and hoped to keep the gosh-damned thing at least longer than it takes me to grow a beard.

Sure enough, soon we found our reluctant selves buying a new car, at a dealership known for good customer service, ethical business practices, and not selling the make and model of our trade-in. We liked the one we bought and still do, and the price was fair, but it made funding relatives' gifts a little trickier. We wound up giving each a small, circular, engraved portrait of Thomas Jefferson, a good effort under the circumstances, we thought. Our loved ones, unfortunately, were unimpressed, and even seemed annoyed by our "they're even nickel-plated!" pitch.

Advice to responsible vehicle owners & buyers: if you're keeping it for the long haul, it's not ambitious enough to simply say "I plan on driving this thing till the very end." Set a more concrete goal, like "when the odometer hits 300,000," "when my youngest is out of diapers," or "when I'm IN diapers." In some cases, "the very end" turns out to be

roughly 5 minutes after it's broken in.

I also recommend being very discreet when you've made your final payment. Not every major breakdown is a coincidence; vehicles don't like it when people stop mailing out checks on their behalf, and will seize up just out of spite. If you're not careful and your E-Class sees your pink-slip arrive in the mail, you're playing footsie with a cracked block.

One more thing on those hernia-checks-but-with-singing known as birthday parties. Depending on whether you call the glass half-full or half-empty (I just call it empty-I'm a drinker), they serve either as a reminder of or a distraction from the underlying reality: someone just got older. For example, my own recent party was a positive experience partly because with all the good will and catching up with people going on, it made this vain dude forget for a while that the whole middle-age thing really ages one's middle. My pot-belly is starting to look more and more like a cauldron, and my love handles now appear to be sprouting suitcases. The other positive part? I got a lot of free stuff, and there ain't no stuff like free stuff.

When little kids are the ones being celebrated, there is one specific reminder available to their parents that really helps lower the decibel level in their heads produced by the invited mass of crazed munchkins running around, pinning donkey tails, and whacking a piñata you hope merely resembles your golden retriever. It's the fact that your kids are inching ever closer to being productive citizens. Well, technically, an argument can be made that children are productive from day one, specifically every time they fill their diapers with "product," but that's neither here nor there. No, your little candle-blowers are on their merry way to self-sufficiency.

Think about it moms: you can practically feel your junior partier-induced headache shrink as you picture your little ones no longer needing their meat cut. Your sons lugging and

putting away the groceries. Your daughters having the dexterity to braid their own hair while you kick back with a smoothie.

And dads: won't it be great when your sons relieve you of trash duty and yard work? And imagine how cool it'll be not having to take your truck to the shop once your daughters get their drivers' li...okay, now am I the only one whose headache just got worse?