

# Sooner or later, everyone needs a minivan ... Not!

BY DENIS GRIGNON

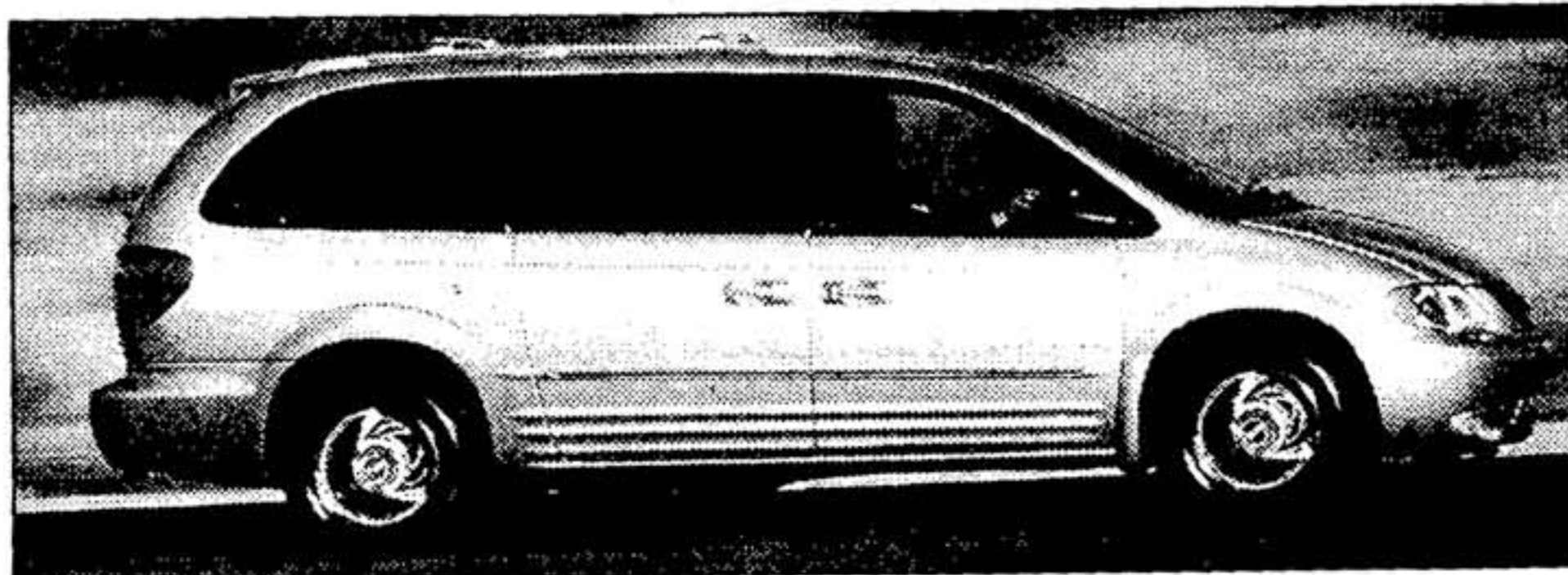
Once we were warriors. Proud. Strong. Many. In October of 1993, when Chrysler introduced its first minivan to the masses, we mocked this tarted-up delivery truck. "Never!" we shouted, as we passed them on highways — an easy feat, given they rarely traveled above 78 kilometres an hour. Yes, we all agreed this behemoth begging for suburbia even made the station wagon look hip. And it would never catch on. NEVER!

Sigh. Slowly, as The Big Three churned out more Areostars, Caravans and Luminas, our numbers dwindled, we anti-minivan warriors. Our sad decline was reflected in every watershed essay from Boomers waxing philosophic about trading in their cars and reckless youth in favour of parenthood, responsibility and 73 cup holders. But though our numbers fell, we refused to remain silent.

"They all stink of sameness," says Steve Fraser, of Kitchener, Ont. A husband and father of two small children, he equates minivans with "a fat lifestyle. One that's going nowhere. It's like these people have given up."

Ask Karen Flanagan-McCarthy, of Aylmer, Que., to describe minivans (or their drivers) and you'll get a sheep's bleat. "They represent an appalling lack of imagination." She and her husband, Paul Michel-Thibault, shuttle their five-year-old and his two teenagers in a two-door Bimmer and a used Isuzu sport-utility. The latter, he's quick to defend, "is used for the purpose it was intended ... off-road driving."

Trevor Harris of Bracebridge, Ont., is more philosophical than practical. He and his wife recently went camping with their sons, ages six and nine, in a two-door Honda. "We had everything we needed for five days," he says. Though the family disposable income is healthy,



Chrysler started the minivan mania. Above, its Town and Country.

the soft-line environmentalist says, "We're constantly being manipulated into buying more stuff. When you get a bigger vehicle, you end up buying more stuff that you don't really need. It's a vicious circle."

Alas, bigger is still better, according to those marketing wizards who look down from atop Mount Minivan. But hey, they're merely responding to consumer demand, right? Well, I turned from the mountain to the ivory tower for guidance.

"The automakers know what they're doing," says Barry Weller, a University of Ottawa geography professor specializing in transportation issues. "There's a smart relationship between them and their market. They know there's a progression to life."

His colleague, however, sociology professor Diane Pacom, is less sympathetic. She draws a clear line between the excess of the '50s and today. Whereas Mr. Weller says manufacturers were insightful, she emphatically says they were "sneaky."

"They dealt with all the problems of political correctness of these vehicles — the excess of pollution and consumption — by camouflaging them as safe, family vehicles. So the consumer doesn't have to deal with that guilt of buying what they really want. A big luxury vehicle of prestige. They can buy a minivan and say, 'I'm a good citizen.'"

I liked Ms. Pacom. She could borrow my pickup truck any time.

Though manufacturers and con-

verts may believe bigger is better, we warriors of the minority overwhelmingly didn't see them as safer. Mr. Thibault scoffs at the Windstar's five-star safety rating, claiming it's no better than many cars. "And," he says, "most people who drive these things have never had a vehicle that big. They really don't know how to drive them."

There's no comfort, either, in suggesting they're taking their own lives in their own hands. Everyone I spoke with griped about not being able to see around them when trailing one, thus putting us in danger. The notion of "family" vehicle also drew jeers. That massive expanse between driver and passenger seats — each seat often replete with its own headphone and, gawd, TV — hardly harkens back to a Brady Bunch road trip.

Perhaps the best summation for our noble loathing of all things minivan came from Mr. Fraser's wife, Melanie Reist, a lawyer in Kitchener. "They're ugly. Vehicle purgatory," she says, with conviction. "They're so utilitarian they make me wanna puke." The defence rests.

*Writer and comedian Denis Grignon makes it his mission to subvert minivan culture.*

*He and his wife, Nancy Payne, are the creative force behind Minivan World, a satirical series heard regularly on CBC Radio and making its TV debut this Sunday on CBC-TV.*

*National Post*