

An Idle Wish

One woman's hope for an exhausting driver

By April Moore

People are curious creatures. Not only are we curious about things, we're known to do curious things. For the last year and a half I have been curious as to why the mom in the minivan, who arrives early at about the same time I do for our children's after-school pickup, keeps her car idling for 45 minutes.

Yes, I know that's pretty early to get to the school, and one could make the argument that my own neurosis is far more concerning. Why not pull up to the school when the bell rings and double park like other parents? For me it's a few minutes of quiet time to kick back, read and get some writing done. At times, I'm running errands on that end of town, and instead of driving home I'll head to the school. And honestly? There's a part of me that wants to beat the lady in the minivan to the pickup lane because I'd rather be in front of her car exhaust than behind it.

Over time my curiosity about her idling engine morphed into flat-out irritation, and every weekday the sight of this purple Dodge Caravan prompted an eye roll and headshake. Perhaps she has an illness that fresh air would exacerbate? Allergies? Or maybe the car won't start once it's been shut off? And yes, I probably had a bit of righteous indignation in the mix as well.

As I sat reading one day, the buzzing noise from her running engine every 12.5 seconds began to grind on my last nerve. I'm usually not the confrontational type, but after 10 minutes of this, I worked up the courage to broach the subject with her.

I got out of my car and broke into a wide grin. She promptly smiled back, turned off her engine, and rolled down the window. In the most cheerful, non-judgmental voice I could muster, I said, "Look, I need to know. Why do you leave your car running for 45 minutes?"

She chuckled. "I don't know. I just always have."

Oh.

She had me stumped. Where was I to go from there?

"I see," I responded. "But 45 minutes is a long time. People around you have to inhale your exhaust and endure your engine noise."

She shrugged, still smiling.

I tapped my imaginary microphone. Is this thing on?

Did I really have to tell her that idling can waste more than half a gallon of fuel an hour, costing hundreds of dollars per year? That children are more susceptible to harmful emissions? That idling spews the same pollutants—nitrogen oxide, particulate matter, carbon monoxide and volatile organic compounds—that form unhealthy smog and soot as those from moving cars? That while she would be horrified if someone smoked a cigarette in her car and exposed her kids to secondhand smoke, car exhaust is four times more hazardous to their lungs?

I could sense by now that she was blissfully oblivious to health or environmental concerns, but even a classic SoCal early autumn day was apparently unconvincing, with cloud cover and a light breeze making the weather downright pleasant. I pointed out these welcome weather occurrences and what a great day it was to give the air conditioning system a break.

You know those rare moments—you see them once in a while as a parent—when you plant a seed in the brain of another, see it take root, then watch the beautiful process of revelation and realization take place?



I didn't see that happen here.

It was as though I dug straight into solid rock, inhospitable territory where ideas immediately die on the vine.

"I just have always done it," she repeated, sweet as pie. We might as well have been sharing a cocktail.

What was I left to do? It was obvious the seeds were bouncing off and landing somewhere between the seats, never to be found or reached, like a favorite pen or couple of quarters. I was left with, "Okay, now I know. Thanks." I smiled, of course, until I turned away to return to my car.

I had hoped that I at least left her with something to ponder, a concept that would not go unnoticed or forgotten. I had that hope for two seconds until she turned her car back on and rolled her window back up. For the next 30 minutes I read my book and tried to tune out the engine grind. I tried to focus on what resilient little buggers seeds can be, hoping that although this one might be temporarily lost among stale corn chips, dropped Cheerios and wayward lipsticks, it will eventually find a place to take root and blossom into a beautiful understanding.