

CAROLINE PHILLIPS



Stay in the car for a Christmas to remember

A SURVEY released last week by motor manufacturer Toyota found that the car has overtaken the breakfast table as a principal family meeting place. The evidence from the survey will be used in designing its Picnic "family fun" car.

Our family has known this for years. A long time ago, we started having family Christmases in the car. We don't have to put up many decorations because we can, if the mood takes us, park beneath the festoons of light adorning Regent Street.

And we do our bit for the environment — the tree part of it, at least — because we speed to Trafalgar Square to admire the 65ft Norwegian Christmas tree rather than splashing out on our own somewhat smaller baubled conifer.

But the major attraction of our arrangement is that space necessarily dictates numbers. Not for us the stressful plight of other families, grappling with the annual Yuletide onslaught of unwelcome relations. It has been years since great-aunt Flo asked if she could join us in the back seat.

Q LAST week, an interview with New York comedienne Joan Rivers, 62, revealed how she's keeping in shape. She's had her eyes done, her nose remodelled into a ski jump, her face and neck lifted, plus liposuction on her legs.

I was always against that sort of thing — until nature decreed that I might need it. Sometimes Princess Di could use the bags under my eyes for her gym gear.

Joan is opposed to that stern reserve the British display over cosmetic surgery. "God made plastic surgeons, too," she said. "You Brits can afford them; just buy one less car."

Perhaps we won't spend Christmas in our motor.

Q DID you see the story about the Zimbabwean MP who was fined £66 for biting off the upper lip of a fellow politician during talks to end divisions in the ruling Zanu PF Party? (The lip was produced as evidence in court.)

Wouldn't it have been politically expedient if John Major had done the same to Kenneth Clarke before his indiscreet lunch at the restaurant Nico at 90?

Q IT'S a belief that the famous are dripping in dosh, but many are really as hard up as timber beams.

Composer and cabaret artist Kit Hesketh-Harvey recently joked that his family was going broke.

Then actress Fiona Fullerton jumped on the clapped-out bandwagon to say being famous and poor is common in the theatre, but there's a pressure to behave as though you're rich. I noticed this on a US flight when a Cagney and Lacey actor insisted on upgrading, telling the flight attendant: "But I thought you always upgraded celebrities."

The reply: "Sorry sir, what did you say your name was?"



Agonising first whiff of love for Wills

PRINCE WILLIAM was hoping to have a romantic, private dinner with Baywatch babe Gena Lee Nolin.

But he had to cancel because his masters at Eton wouldn't give him time off.

By way of so-called compensation, she has sent him a signed photograph.

Quarter of a century ago, crooner David Cassidy sent me one. I guess I must have asked him. Oh, the toe-curling agonies of adolescent love.

Why not plump for finesse?

I HEAR that Alan Clark, well-nigh septuagenarian and ex-Defence Minister, might be preparing to make a surprise comeback at Westminster. He is rumoured to have called the Kensington and Chelsea constituency association office to express interest in the seat of the dramatically dumped pavement-kisser, Sir Nick Scott.

Clark, who had an affair with the wife and two daughters of South African Judge James Harkness, would fit snugly into Sir Nick's shoes — we could even call them Clarks — and might perhaps also be persuaded to kick them off to vacate his seat for Chris Patten when he returns from Hong Kong.

Otherwise the association should perhaps consider well-insulated Daniel Moylan, a rising council star of the Nicholas Soames school, who would be amply qualified to be a kind of Two Fat Ladies for the Commons and take over the Catering Committee.

So keen was the enterprising Moylan to nurture international relations that he learnt Swedish in Finland by watching dubbed John Wayne movies.

And he reached such elevated heights in Afrikaans — the Foreign Office paid its employees to take exams in the language — that they were forced to create an exam for him, a first in the history of the service.

Sir Nick didn't turn up to host his own conference drinks party but Moylan has a sense of etiquette as fine as flour.

And interviewed for the seat last year, Moylan was only last week outlining his proposals of constitutional significance at a political dinner.

Unlike Sir Nick, who famously scuppered a bill that might have improved life for the disabled, Moylan's plan was to replace K&C's inaccessible Victorian lavatories with tasteful, street-level columns designed by Sir Norman Foster.

Where tales have stings

EN route from JFK Airport to the Mark Hotel in New York a month ago, the driver told me a harrowing tale of how his wife had run away with their two young kids, then become a junkie and prostitute.

The kids were taken into care where they were physically and sexually abused.

Now the cabbie, in the first case of its kind, has issued multi-million-dollar law suits against all the relevant authorities.

The relish in his voice grew with each phrase of what — it became increasingly clear — was an invented yarn. Would the story, he wanted to know, make good television?

Ten days ago, leaving Hollywood's Chateau Marmont to drive back to Los Angeles Airport, I thought I'd got the same cabbie. Only this one said he was suing because he was a scriptwriter and one of the big studios had ripped off one of his storylines. (Something about a head that is buried in the desert.)

It's the American dream, where you pursue everything through the courts. You can't imagine a Heathrow cabbie telling you about his son suing his school because he was bullied, or of a schoolboy taking his school to court for having failed to propel him through his exams, can you?

Crawl fate in store for me

FOR those missing my colleague Peter Tory's hedgehog... earlier this year, I opened a jar of Italian pasta sauce and a little fellow greeted me. I like to call him a cockroach but, truth to tell, he was more of a runt earwig.

I rang London's Harvey Nichols store where I thought I'd acquired him but it didn't stock the sauce or the cockroach.

Later, Sainsbury's admitted it had the sauce

on its shelves, so I sent back the jar. But an aptly named Mr Cross called, gave me an earwigging (ha, ha) and said the store didn't stock that brand after all.

Mr Cross became less cross when he realised it was the fault of his sales assistant who had mistakenly told me that the sauce was Sainsbury's.

Would I accept £25 of Sainsbury's vouchers for the inconvenience? And could he bike back my lit-

tle friend in his sticky jar? The biker arrived with the multi-legged chap, having just knocked over a stationary BMW motorbike, causing extensive damage. Luckily, nobody in the jar was hurt. The biker was also unblemished.

What with motorbikes, vouchers, couriers and what not, my pasta sauce cost hundreds of pounds. Plus £2.95 for the sauce. Oh, the costs of a hibernating earwig.

Peter Tory is on holiday

MY PERFECT PRESENT

by Michael Grade



MY perfect Christmas gift would be for my team, Charlton Athletic, to be promoted to the Premiership. They are struggling in the First Division at the moment but we could still get promoted if we got our act together.

A deep depression centres over the Grade household every Saturday at about 4.55pm. If we win, there's a high, but we don't often manage it. We certainly never win more than two matches in a row. It's like a knitting pattern — win two, then lose two.

I've supported this team for 45 years, ever since my Dad took me as a boy, and I'm still waiting for a

highlight. I think there's a gene which has been isolated, which I inherited from my late father, and which my son, Jonathan, has now got from me.

He's a fellow season ticket-holder, but he travels all over the country while I can only get to the home games.

No, I'm certainly not tempted to abandon Channel 4 to go and sort them out — it's the last thing I need in my life. I'm not that much of a masochist.

They actually do have the nucleus of a good side — although that's what all football supporters say about their team.