the you who has made it this far, the you with a draft under your door or an argument under your tongue-and said, Do you feel that? The little shiver. You can layer blankets and tell yourself comforting stories. You can also stand up and close the window. Both are acts of love. Insulate or ventilate as needed. Nobody's grading. He leaned back. He fell asleep. He dreamed of a wall that breathed exactly enough, and the inside of the dream was warm in the way of things that do not apologize for being alive. He dreamed that nobody flipped anything; instead, they turned slowly, like planets, face toward, face away, in an orbit of sufficient honesty to keep them lit. And in the morning, when the sun broke like an egg over the whole bad kitchen of the world, he made coffee that didn't taste like a lawsuit. He drank it. It was warm. He smiled. It had nothing to do with R-value and everything to do with the small, ridiculous, necessary insulation called joy.

JEFF MERIDIAN

HOW NOT TO DIE IN A VAN

This collection of short stories explores the contemporary "van life" movement, from romance and drama to satire and consumer advocacy

Cover

Title: how not die in a van Author: Jeff Meridian

Burn the Dream, Save Your Soul the death rattle of camping

Burn the camping dream, save your soul, the death rattle of the diesel.A camper is a financial black hole with cup holders. A cursed object. A grinning demon in metallic paint, ready to devour half your net worth in its diesel-soaked guts.They sell you the “Golden Window.” Many years of joy, then a clean exit. Buy the new diesel camper, live like a saint, sell it just before the guillotine falls. Lose maybe 30%, they say. A clean curve on a graph, then cash out before the music stops. Perfect timing, perfect profit. A civilized story for civilized people. Manageable. Like paying rent.Nonsense. There is no window. Only the abyss.The myth of the Golden Window is a corporate hallucination. In truth, the market is plummeting into a carnival of desperation. Everyone knows the end is nigh, climate change, high taxes, zones where only zero-emission vehicles can pass. You won’t be the lone genius sprinting for the exit door, you’ll be shoulder to shoulder with thousands of panicked owners, all trying to hawk their “lightly used” diesel contraptions.The buyers circle like vultures. Your solar panels? Don’t care. The shiny kitchen? Doesn’t matter. They see only a condemned machine. A ticking time bomb. They smell your desperation. They’ll knock 40, maybe 50% off your

shining moment, two people trying to politely coerce heat into staying where it was wanted. It felt like something like love, if love were a physics lab without the grief. This is the part where, if you need it, I tell you: he did not become perfect. He became less wrong. He occasionally stood in a Home Improvement aisle holding something that claimed to be vapor open and muttered, To what end. He lost patience at parties when someone said, VanLife! So free! He occasionally lay awake at night and worried that his essays were a way of avoiding his own drafts. He forgave himself. He practiced losing in small ways until losing did not feel like exposure but like an exhale. In the summer, he and Gail went to the ocean. They did not bring a van. They brought a tent with mesh that let the wind in and left the insects outside to file complaints. He lay on his back and listened to the sound of waves negotiating with the shore like two people deciding who gets to be the big spoon. He slept and woke in alternating paragraphs. He watched dawn arrive like a person who had kept the receipt. He thought, gently, about the van he had not bought. Somewhere, it was parked beside a cliff with a view so spectacular it could not possibly be real, and a retired nurse was warm without being lied to. Maybe there was condensation, just a little, because life is wet. She would crack a window. She would put on a sweater. She would remind herself that comfort is not an enemy, but the price of it is high and often not money. On the drive back, they passed a convoy of vans, each bright with the kind of hope you learn from a screen. He raised a hand in salute. One of the drivers honked. He felt, absurdly, proud. If you’re going to break the fourth wall, Gail said, eyes on the road, now would be good. He leaned toward you-

through. You’re insufferable, Sunny said, but he meant it with a warmth that could fog up a window. In the spring, Bertrand received an email from City Hall. Norma had nominated him for an award with a title that sounded suspiciously like it had been invented five minutes prior: The Civic Candor Prize. He wore a suit that fit in certain places and not in others and gave a speech in which he tried to be funny. The audience laughed anyway, because sometimes the kindest thing strangers can do is misinterpret you. He ended with, We build containers for our lives and then argue about their contents. We pretend insulation is purely physical. It’s not. It’s the stories we tell to keep out the weather. Some of those stories are lies. Some of them are necessary. Some of them, if we are lucky, become architecture. He paused. Check your vapor barrier. Afterward, Gail squeezed his shoulder. You did it, she said. I did something, he said. They went home on the bus, because it was raining and the city was pretending to be Paris. He looked out at people inside restaurants fogging their own windows with exhalations that managed to be both ordinary and sacred. He thought about Mavis in her yurt. He thought about Cork rewiring his life. He thought about Sunny, who was perhaps still slightly allergic to truth but now carried EpiPens. He thought of himself, the man who had tried to solve a crime and had instead been hired to reduce recidivism. A week later, a stranger knocked on his door. The stranger was holding a roll of fiberglass and looking wounded. I followed your newsletter, the stranger said. I insulated my shed wrong. Bertrand invited him in. They sat at the table. They drew diagrams on napkins. They were not solving global warming. They were not flipping houses. They were, for a small

dream price, and you’ll take it, because the alternative is watching your “investment” rot in a parking lot while the world moves on. That’s not a sale. That’s a mugging in your own driveway.No calculated depreciation. But financial ruin: fuel, insurance, repairs, therapy costs. Suddenly your camper is no longer a vehicle, it’s a glowing hot potato burning your hands while you desperately search for someone to take it. But nobody wants to be the last fool holding the bomb when the zero-emission zones take effect and the taxman comes with an executioner’s smile. You’ll drown in debt while clutching your worthless camper like a corpse bride.When the environmental bans hit, you won’t be slipping out the back door with a profit. You’ll be stuck in a panic storm, thousands of owners trying to get rid of their nearly new vehicles at the same time. Classifieds will suffocate like clogged arteries.And the humiliation doesn’t end with the money. Even if you don’t sell, what then? Forget waking up by the sea, seagulls over your pillow. Those days are over. Your fate is exile. You’re not parking on the beach, not rolling into the city center. No, you’ll be driven to the fringes, industrial parks, monitored by parking attendants with clipboards. There you will leave your camper in fenced-in lots, miles away from the action, and then squeeze into a commuter bus just to get a glimpse of the places you thought you would be camping next to.This is not freedom. This is captivity. Designated zones of shame. Concrete pens where campers squat like lepers, watching the electric vehicles secure the best spots on the beach. Your camping experience is reduced to humiliation on asphalt.So, where to now? The only sensible step is seemingly insane. It’s dirty, desperate, pragmatic. Buy old, buy

cheap, buy ugly, laugh as the herd plunges over the cliff. Forget shiny and new, forget brochure fantasies. The veterans, the dirty street dogs, they know the game.The only freedom left: old, cheap, ugly. Go wild. Snag a relic. Mock the false security, play the kamikaze, enjoy the limited loss of the investment.The move is dirty, unseemly, brutally pragmatic: old heaps, battered street dogs. Buy something worn-out that has already lost most of its value, a controlled bleed-out. Survivable.Forget dignity. Build an interior out of plywood and screws, make upgrades, treat it like a one-way plane ticket, then hit the road. If it dies, bury it in a ditch, light a cigarette, and walk on. Loss limited.In the end, it's not the new owners with shiny vehicles who are laughing. It's the lunatics in rusty vans, rolling into the night with nothing to lose. Souls intact, the taste of real freedom. ##

How Not to Die in a Van

How Not to Die in a Van I didn't buy the van to flirt with death, but death kept trying small talk. Second night on the road, I parked on a spit of asphalt beside a seaside cliff that was apparently popular with people who like wind and thin coffee. Gulls shrieked like unpaid critics. Someone's lab chased salt foam and didn't listen. I had a brand-new propane stove, a half-used matching confidence, and a van with a conversion done by somebody's cousin-competent cousin, but still a cousin. I heard it while I was telling myself the hiss was just the wind across the vent. Hiss. Very quiet. Like a snake considering. Under the bench,

van. He rented a room in a house with thin walls and thick laughter. He bought a bicycle for the days he wanted the world in slow motion. He took the bus for the days he wanted to remember that he lived in a place where strangers shared air. He went camping with Gail in a car that asked very little of them besides gas and occasional affection. In November, Mavis invited him to read at an event in her yurt-planetarium, where they projected stars on the inside of the dome and drank tea that tasted like having a cold on purpose. He read an essay titled Against Cozy, which was, ironically, quite cozy. He said, We do not need to suffer to be good. But we must pay attention to what our walls are hiding. A man in the front asked, But what if I sweat in my tiny home? Then you are alive, Bertrand said. The audience laughed. He hadn't meant it as a joke. He meant it as an order. That winter, the city got colder than usual, as if the weather had read a think piece and decided to try something new. People emailed him photos of condensation on windows and asked for absolution. He told them: crack a window. Boil less water. Love more carefully. He got coffee with Sunny from time to time. Sunny had rebranded, slightly, to SunnyMade: Now with Honesty. The vans sold slower but with less guilt. Sunny seemed lighter, which is how it works when you start using screws instead of charm. You never bought a van, Sunny said once, astonishingly perceptive for a man who had, until recently, confused foil with facts. No, Bertrand said. I decided to be one. Sunny made a face. Is that a pun? Yes, he said. It's a terrible one. My point is: I'm a series of walls and wires and questionable decisions. I'm trying to insulate myself with kindness and science. I'm trying to let a little air

because unfortunately he was human. The next weeks were a montage: panels coming down, ReflectoFoil fanning the air like shame, furring strips installed like a row of small spines, mineral wool hugged into cavities like a trauma therapist. Cork the electrician arrived with an energy that could light a small town and rewired the van in such a way that would make Zeus file a formal complaint. They filmed everything. Sunny did the intro, which included a pun about being stoked that only made sense if you'd ever dated a surfer. Bertrand did the explanation, which went: Insulation is not about heat; it is about you not losing heat faster than you generate joy. Gail did the captions, which were savage and supportive like a good sports bra. People watched. People argued. Someone sent death threats about foam. Someone else sent a casserole recipe for wool. They surprised themselves by not hating each other. They surprised themselves by caring. They surprised themselves by the fact that when you say the truth and add, We were wrong, the internet didn't eat you alive; it just sniffed and moved on. Sunny's van sold to a retired nurse who said, I want to drive to the coast and remember that I am more than my pager. Bertrand refused a commission and instead took payment in the currency of his choosing: a thermal camera that didn't confuse a hand for a furnace. He started a newsletter: The Insulation Detective. He wrote about houses, yes, but also about the other things people use to avoid feeling weather. He wrote, impolitely, about nostalgia as bubble wrap. He wrote about humor as a heated blanket and irony as a draft. He wrote about love as the thing everyone pretends is 100 percent efficient when it is actually a disaster of entropy, and still somehow worth it. He did not buy a

I twisted the valve. My hand knew which way it went because I'd practiced it three times earlier with the same intensity other people reserve for CPR. The hiss faded, and the stove's little flame guttered down to nothing, a blue eyelid closing. Thirty yards away, a neighbor's camper burped. A shallow gasp, a cough. Then a panel on the side bulged out and the sliding door blew into the hedges with a noise like a dropped sauna. Blue light licked their curtains up and I learned two things before the first frantic shouts: propane does not care about your plans, and netting your hair away from fire is not a gendered skill. People ran. Someone dragged a hose like they hoped it would turn into a miracle. I stood there with the valve still warm under my palm, cheeks tight, knees doing a jittered tremor you could have used for casting dice. When the fire finally gave up, my hands were still shaking. They shook long past the questions, past the rubberneckers, past the old guy who walked over in a jacket with a lighthouse on it and said, Lot of hissing before a blow. He knew. I knew now. The next morning, the gulls continued their review. I made coffee on a small stove that didn't hiss, on a line I'd checked twice. I sat sideways in the sliding door, feet on damp grass, and tasted metal in my mouth. Fear leaves that taste. So does salt. Hard to tell which is which. It wasn't like I'd run away to join a circus. I'd left a job where the most physical danger was spilling microwaved soup on a keyboard. Thirty-eight. That liminal age where you can still sleep on a thin mattress but you'll feel judged by your lower back in the morning. I wanted velocity and smallness. I wanted nights that didn't glow with the blue pixel wash. I wanted to know what my hands were for besides typing. I got a used van with big

windows and a roof rack and the kind of paper-thin curtains that made the world feel like a theater. Solar panels, a cheap inverter, a tiny sink that coughed twice before remembering its job. The dashboard lights acted like moody roommates. Check Engine flirted. ABS sulked. The tire pressure monitor was dramatic in the afternoons and tolerant at dawn. I told myself I'd be careful. I meant it. I just didn't know what careful actually looked like yet. The state of Texas taught me. By then I'd ridden the tide line of the Gulf, crossed two bridges that hummed under their own business, and learned the hard way that if you set a cup of coffee on a counter and forget to latch the drawer below it, the universe will smear that coffee across everything you own in a thin layer of grief. I pulled into an RV park that called itself a resort because it had a pool the color of coins. Afternoon heat pressed against the van like a curious cat. The clouds came in late, out of nowhere, dark and muscled. Lightning stitched the horizon together. First drops fat as grapes. Then the sky opened like it didn't like us. In ten minutes, water ran knee-deep through the gravel lanes. Sweet gum leaves sailed past my leveling blocks like tiny green rafts. A guy in a shirt that said GATOR DAD leaned out his window and yelled, It'll pass. It's not a kidney stone, I yelled back before I remembered to be polite. He laughed. I didn't. I turned the key, listened hard, heard the faithful cough and catch of a V6 that wasn't tired of me yet. I rolled slow. The van moved through water with the reluctant grace of a cow in a wading pool. I kept the throttle steady and the wheel straight. The trick was not letting the water make the decisions. Even as my cheap camp chair floated out from under the awning like it was late for another

consultant, Sunny said. I'll pay. You'll spec it. We'll make a list: proper insulation, thermal breaks, actual science. We can brand it. 'Insane Insulation by SunnyMade.' It was the moment a detective is offered a badge. It felt like validation, which is a drug. It also felt like complicity, which is the side effect. What if we don't call it insane, Bertrand said. What if we call it something boring. Good Insulation. No one wants good, Sunny said. They want great. They want to speak to the manager. The manager is marketing. Do you mean that you don't want to sell the truth unless it is wearing sequins? Bertrand asked. Sunny shrugged. Do you want to move the needle or do you want to prove you're correct? The room had too much leather. The coffee tasted like a TED Talk. Bertrand wanted to say yes. He wanted to say no. He wanted to put the decision in a sandwich and eat it. This is the turning point, by the way. We don't always get a helpful caption in life, so consider this a favor. Yes, he said, despite his better angels who were currently hailing a cab, I will help. But not your way. My way. What's your way? Sunny asked. Pedantry with soul, Bertrand said. We tell people the truth in a way that doesn't make them feel stupid. We make a checklist. We film the inside of the walls. We break the fourth wall and the actual wall. We say: this is insulation; it goes here; this is how water is; it goes everywhere. No vibes. Sunny grimaced. Some vibes. A few. Tasteful vibes. Educational vibes, Bertrand conceded. But also receipts. So we partner? Sunny said. He extended a hand. Gail would tell him to sign nothing he hadn't read twice. His mother would tell him to be careful around people who could afford to be nice. Mavis would tell him to insulate his future with his present tense. He shook Sunny's hand anyway,

Workshopped, it could be something. Look-we both know you could also…just not do this. He looked at a pigeon that had wandered over with the casual entitlement of gods. I could. You could buy the van, she said. Make it right. Or not. You could walk away. You could move to a town where the temperature is a consistent seventy-two and the people there are known as Floridians. You could fall in love with a person who thinks R-value is a character on PBS. Choose a thing. Any thing. He went home conflicted because conflict is free and everywhere. He imagined buying the van, pulling down the cedar, releasing the ReflectoFoil like releasing a ghost into the exurbs, installing furring strips, mineral wool, a vapor barrier with the right perm rating an argument he wanted once with an engineer that ended in interpretive dance. He imagined living in it, waking up to the sound of rain like drinkable static, making coffee while his breath didn't condense on his dreams. He also imagined letting the van go, refusing to participate in the economy of curated freedom. He could take a bus. He could be the person who says We and means Me and my bicycle. He didn't decide. He slept. The sleep where you are the mattress and someone else is lying on you. The next day, the video had a surprising number of views, considering it was not a cat. Comments ranged from This is why we can't have nice vans to Haters gonna dew to R-value is Fascist; let your van be free. Sunny DM'd him: You got me. You got me good. Let's talk. They met in a coffee shop that tried to save the world on a punch card. Sunny was less sunny. He had the look of someone who'd learned the difference between aura and air exchange. I'll fix it, he said. I want your help. Bertrand blinked. Like as- As a

party. At the deepest point, the van felt light. It shivered. Floated a breath. I held very still. Tires found gravel like an old friend. Up onto higher ground and the hiss of wipers chewing their own spit. I parked at the crown of the lot. I watched the river-in-a-place-that-was-not-a-river drift past. I apologized to my pride as it sailed away with the chair. By morning, everything had drained. Someone's flip-flop stranded on a picnic table leg, a small, rubber testimony to weather. GATOR DAD did a little salute when he drove past. I saluted back. I added avoid bowls to my growing list of rules, right under propane is not a spiritual force and nothing good happens after midnight in a Walmart parking lot unless you need windshield washer fluid and perspective. Florida gave me the front blowout. A hundred degrees, endless sawgrass, a sun that found the cheap tint in my windows and mocked it. I'd watched videos. I'd practiced the move in a Walmart lot at sunrise, s-curving a little, feeling the weight shift, easing off and on the pedal like I had all day to end up at the far curb. The janitor had leaned on his long-handled dustpan and watched me like I was auditioning for a small disaster. When the tire actually went, it went with a dull whomp. The steering wheel woke up with opinions. The whole van tugged toward the ditch with a lazy insistence that felt like seduction. The impulse was to stab the brake. Panic always wants to stab something. I fed a little throttle instead. The wheel went lighter. I coaxed it straight. Talked to the van the way you talk to a dog that's excited but mostly good. Foam and dust rose behind me and then the shoulder was under me and I was a statue for a long ten seconds because that's what bodies do when they think they just started dying but didn't. A

man in a ball cap and a shirt that said GRACE CHURCH pulled up behind me and jogged over breathing like a man lied to by cigarettes for twenty years. You should buy a lottery ticket, he puffed. I already hit it, I said, staring at the long rubber carcass flapped in the grass. I'm still here. He laughed and slapped the side of the van in that way men slap machines to congratulate them for not betraying everyone. He showed me a trick with the jack and a flat piece of wood. I showed him the torque wrench I'd bought in a moment of optimism. He nodded at the tool like it had earned its keep. In Quebec, on a long grade down where the trees wear the wind in big green sheets, my brakes faded. It came on slow like a bad idea. Pedal softer. Then softer still. The smell of pennies. At first, I thought I had money on fire. Then fear, which smells a lot like hot metal if you give it a chance. I downshifted. Again. The engine complained with a sound that conveyed, in its way, that I was asking something it would do only because it liked me enough to humor me. I steered toward a rectangular dirt ramp filled with pale river rock. Runaway truck ramp, but for people who misjudged. The rocks swallowed my wheels with a surprising tenderness. The van rolled to a sandpaper stop. By the time I levered myself down to the gravel, the rotors breathed smoke in shy gray ribbons. Knees on the gritty, hot ground, I counted bolts because counting is what you do when you can't fix the past three minutes. A trucker with forearms like river pilings walked up and handed me a thermos that had seen things. Coffee so strong it reset my personality. You ride the pedal? he asked, tone flat. Not anymore, I said, and meant it. He told me about jake brakes like a pastor tells you about Proverbs. He used his hands for the shape of

without dialing. Freedom of speech, yelled a man wearing a shirt that said, I brake for metaphors. Freedom of ventilation, yelled Bertrand, a person who, if this were ancient Greece, would have been allowed to rant in the marketplace while men bought olives and tolerated him. Enough, said a voice, and the voice was a woman in a wheelchair wearing a hat knitted like a mountain. Bertrand recognized her: Mavis. She wheeled forward and put a hand on the paneling. He's right, she said. This is shiny garbage. The crowd hushed. Mavis had the gravity of someone who has accidentally attended many revolutions. I know what's in here, she said, tapping the wall. I can hear it. Like a heartbeat. This van is a poem with a bad edit. Sunny raised his hands. This is my fault, he said, and for a second Bertrand loved him for it, because confession is the only currency more powerful than guilt. I wanted to make something beautiful. I used what I could afford. I should have done better. I will discount it. Forty-eight thousand. I will put mineral wool in. I'll pull down the panels. I'll call Cork. I'll- Someone clapped. The clapping became applause. The applause became a wave that covered what had just happened with a feeling. Bertrand felt heat in his chest; it was either vindication or an early-onset ulcer. After the expo, he sat on the curb and ate a pretzel. Gail sat beside him, chewing with that deliberate slowness of someone who believes in digestion as a process rather than a challenge. So, she said, did you save America? I made it sweat, he said. He showed her the footage he'd taken-not the best angle, grainy, but definitely damp. I'll post it. I'll write a guide. The Insulation Detective's Manifesto. Catchier title, she said. With all due respect. He smiled. Insane Insulation. She chewed.

the comfort of our toes. He turned the thermal camera toward the billow, capturing the cold hull of the van as the fog crept and then vanished. Only it didn't vanish. It condensed. A line of damp formed along the rib, a constellation of droplets so cute they could sell insurance. The crowd murmured. Sunny moved forward, all teeth and de-escalation. Modern art, Sunny said. We're doing diffusion. Bertrand turned the camera screen toward a woman whose hair was a thesis. She leaned in. That's a thermal bridge, she whispered, like it was a curse you could cast on a stranger. So what? someone yelled. I live in Wyoming. I have my own bridge. So it means, Bertrand said, voice rising into the register of a kettle, on a cold morning this van will weep. Your walls will cry. Your wood will mildew. Your lungs will learn new vocabulary. Sunny put a hand on Bertrand's shoulder and said, perfectly pitched, Hey, man. You're harshing the vibe. Maybe tell us your credentials? I'm an Insulation Detective, Bertrand said. What agency? a man asked, as if there exist agencies for the policing of warmth. Self-appointed, Bertrand said, which landed like a paper airplane in a hurricane. The crowd shifted. Sunny smiled again, smizing so hard his eyes filed paperwork. Here's the thing, he said to everyone and no one. We can get lost in the weeds of numbers, or we can talk about joy. This van has joy. It's insulated enough. It breathes with you. It's not a coffin. It's a womb. Except, Bertrand said, wombs aren't supposed to mold. It escalated quickly from there. Security arrived, which is, at the end of the day, two people named Doug. They unplugged the fog machine with a ceremony usually reserved for ships. Someone on a folding chair booed. Sunny clapped, slow and in that theatrical way that calls police

mountains. He slapped my shoulder gently when he left, like we'd both admitted something. In a town in upstate New York where the main street was just enough to be called that, a railroad bridge wore a sign that said 12' but wore the dents of the confident. I stopped. Listened. Backed up slow. Smile plastered across my face like I'd won something, because for the next thirty seconds, every driver behind me leaned into their horn like they had a point to make. What I'd won was a roof. It felt like a prize I would enjoy every day. On a gray afternoon in Portland, smoke rose on the far side of town. The news said three rigs burned in an hour. Photos of char and sad chairs. No drama in my lane, but a smell of hot plastic crawled through my vents one night and that was enough. Next day, I bought a surge protector that looked like it wanted to be a robot. I bought a fire extinguisher not in plastic. The clerk asked me, Kitchen, or garage? Home, I said. She understood. In Wyoming, a head-on crash shut the highway down all afternoon. Helicopters stitched the sky. Worklights glowed even in daylight. A trooper in a hat wide as shade pushed traffic onto the shoulder and told us to park. I swung around and opened the back. Sat on my bumper and listened to grass rub its dry hands together and the little insect radios chattering. People walked up and down, then ran out of words and stood silent. Nobody honked. Everyone seemed to agree, briefly, on priorities. The only question was how long you could sit without making more trouble. A man in coveralls with grease polished into the creases of his knuckles asked me if I had water. I did. Offers orbited around the line of parked cars. Jerky, baby wipes, cigarettes, USB cords. The sky did its job. The earth held us up. I thought about the math that had

brought the two cars together at that particular unkind moment and about how little control I had if I surrendered mine voluntarily. My van tried to teach me about people in the quiet hours. Side door rolled open once in the dark with the quiet manners of thieves who were raised right. I woke to silhouettes and the sudden, intimate hush of strangers in your tiny house. They could have taken the laptop on the folded wool blanket. They could have taken the camera on the counter. They didn't, because I hadn't left them there. They slid the door shut when they left. Their courtesy felt like an insult; it was supposed to. Next day, I stopped telling the internet exactly where I was. I stopped leaving my camp chairs out like a flag. I learned that privacy was just another system to maintain. I stuck a little battery-powered alarm on the door that made a sound like a disappointed bird. I taped a note to myself near the bed that said: keys, shoes, light, move. An hour outside Reno, wind punched the van hard enough to shove me a third of the way into the next lane. I gripped. Swore at the space where I usually keep God. Turned the wheel into the push and held. A dance with a drunk partner, and look at us, we survived the song. In Utah, heat blistered the world. I bled a little air from the tires in a gravel lot while a low-slung dog panted in the sliver of shade under a bumper. In the mountains the next day, the air went thin and sharp and I bumped the tires back up. My arms learned torque values by feel. I learned to never stick my hand where a wheel could decide I didn't need it. Ants came once. A tiny army in the sugar jar. They found me because of one careless night with the lid and no rinse and the lie that I would remember to clean it in the morning. I fought them with vinegar

prevent condensation. Water is not a metaphor when it is inside your wall cavity. Nova smiled the way a yoga teacher smiles at a water bottle with lead in it. I hear you, she said. Have you considered a breathable barrier? Breathable to which molecule? he asked. The crowd tittered like an audience in a sitcom that knows the gift of a laugh track. He had a plan. It involved a fog machine, a thermal camera, and a live demonstration of how Sunny's van-this very model-trapped moisture like a conspiracy theorist traps Thanksgiving. He'd borrowed the fog machine from a nightclub he once cleaned for rent forgiveness and smuggled it under his jacket in a fake pregnant waddle. No, Gail said on the phone when he told her what he intended to do. Bertrand, I love you, I do, but this is theater. Exactly, he said. Truth is theater that can't afford curtains. He positioned himself near the SunnyMade booth while Sunny explained to a couple in matching felt hats that R-value is more of an aura. He felt like a detective in a noir who had misplaced his trench coat and replaced it with poor judgment. Ladies and gentlemen, he called out, the ancient phrase summoning a circle of curiosity. I have here, he gestured to the fog machine, which he'd labeled Myst because all technology is sexier with a vowel removed, a demonstration. The truth about breathability. Sunny's smile flattened like a soda under a tire. Friend, he said. Friend. Bertrand plugged the machine into an extension cord that snaked from the DIY Solar Stall. He aimed the nozzle at the seam where the wall met the ceiling, where he suspected an air leak conducting an unauthorized affair with the outdoors. The machine whirred. A cloud spilled. We are on a planet, he said to the onlookers, that does not particularly care for

Algorithm Doesn’t Want You To See, which turned out to be an earnest monologue about compost toilets. Do you want this? Gail asked that night, sitting cross-legged on his rug, which had more story than structure. Or do you want to want it? The van. Yes, he said. He regretted how immediately that word arrived. I want to stop being the person to whom things happen. The van is the opposite of eventlessness. It’s movement. You can get movement on a bicycle, she said. The van is just a container for the fantasy that you can keep driving and never have to arrive. Wow, he said. Harsh. Accurate. Harcurate. She squeezed his hand. Be careful with your heart. It’s R-value zero. He promised to stop texting her photos of moisture meters at 2 a.m. He promised to eat vegetables that weren’t humblebrags for plants. He did not promise to let go. Instead, he attended Vanifesto-an expo staged in a former airplane hangar, now filled with dreams in the shape of rectangles with wheels. Vanifesto was everything you suspect and then a little more. Someone was selling ethically sourced hammocks woven by people who have never seen cold. A couple named Bryce and Livi were giving a talk on Relationships in Vehicles: Getting Out Without Breaking a Window. A booth offered Boreal Seal-a sealant made of pine sap and optimism. He saw Sunny at a booth with a banner that read, SunnyMade: Homes for the Unsheltered Soul. He waited in line for the seminar on Insulation: R-value is Relative given by Nomad Nova, an influencer with bangs that obeyed an ideology. She said, Warmth is a feeling, and the crowd hummed agreement like a hive of bees who had all read the same blog post. Bertrand raised his hand. With respect, he said, which is a phrase that means nothing respectful will follow, feelings do not

and patience. I won, eventually, but only because I was more stubborn. The ants left a few scouts. I left the empty jar as a memorial to both our efforts. I learned the power of chocks. Two small wedges that could prevent all sorts of headlines. In a campground in Arizona, a class A rolled because a parking brake sulked and a man chalked the incident up to damned gravity. The RV did not accept his philosophy. It gently crushed a row of painted cacti rocks and came to rest against a tree shaped like a question mark. I chocked even on flat ground after that, like a person who appreciated consequences. The season turned. I crossed lines on a map like they were seams in a quilt that would be kind enough to hold me. I met people. Maya in a small white van with a sticker that said THIS IS MY HOUSE PLEASE DO NOT TOW. She had three plants and the calm of a person who had already made the worst mistakes and gotten past them. She showed me how to unroll Reflectix cutouts into the windows in a way that didn’t look like a space enthusiast had lost a fight. Evan, who welded for a carnival in the summers and taught kids how to read the rest of the year. He carried a torque wrench that made mine look like a toy. Also a first-aid kit that could have triaged a small war. We sat on the tailgates of our respective now-homes and compared notes. He believed that people mostly did not want to die, they just didn’t know how to not do that. He was relentless about straps and locks and venting. He never let his passengers ride in the back on interstates. I like my friends too much to make soup out of them, he said. He was funny and correct. Then the day came where I had to decide what kind of person I was going to be about all this. Southeastern Utah. The kind of red rock that makes

your retinas think the saturation's wrong. A slot canyon hike I'd been told was good. Nothing too technical. Just a bit of scrambling. Park at the end of a dirt road that crosses a wash that looks like the bottom of a dry ocean. Signs everywhere. Flash flood risk. Do not enter if storms in area. Morning sky clear as a lie. Afternoon forecast a maybe. Summer monsoon had been hitting like a drunk timekeeper, close enough and then suddenly right on top of you. I walked down to the wash and looked back at the van. Silver paint. New dents discovering old dents. A couple in a rental Jeep waved as they rattled by. He said, You heading out there too? Thinking about it. Keep an eye, he said, pointing to the horizon. He had a face that lived on alarms. His wife waved. If it goes, it goes fast. We all know what we think we'd do. Run. Float. Out-climb water like it will respect your childhood achievements. But the only honest answer is what you actually do, and you don't know that until the day comes. I drove across the wash to the other side because the trailhead seemed close, and I was tired of being sensible. The road dipped. Sand soft as bread. I bumped through and felt the van's weight settle. On the far side, I parked on a little hump of gravel that pretended to be higher than the flat ground around it. I kept the keys in my pocket because nothing was guaranteed. The hike was as advertised. Cool narrow rock. Shadows clever in the afternoon light. A hawk watched me with the professional interest of someone who sees a lot of flesh moving slower than it should. I loved the place because it felt like the world had a plan, and I had the privilege of walking through it without having to be the main point. Clouds gathered in the far distance. They were easy to ignore until they weren't. A wind

previous owner of Sunny's van through a registration that was never fully scrubbed. The previous owner was named Mavis, a 70-year-old poet with hair like the curly tail of a thought. They bought it from me two months ago, Mavis said, when he showed up with muffins because nothing says trust me like carbs. They came with a smile that had a mortgage. It was a plumbing van. My husband used it to store wrenches and regrets. Sunny turned it into a bohemian confessional and now it smells like hope. But I saw what was behind the walls. Shiny lies. He says it's breathable. So is a sieve. Why did you sell? Bertrand asked. I'm moving into a yurt that used to be a planetarium, she said, as if that were a normal sentence. People spend money to insulate themselves from the fear that they are temporary. Vans. Homes. Marriages. It all gets very warm until it gets extremely cold. Bertrand went home heavy with the weight of someone else's metaphors. He filed a complaint with the Office of Consumer Affairs, which seemed shocked he existed. He emailed a journalist who ghosted him, which is the new way of saying, Not even a no, just silence wearing a hat. He didn't sleep much. He dreamed of condensing vapor and of Sunny standing on a TEDx stage saying, Comfort is a conspiracy. He woke up late for his part-time job at a boutique where the products were candles named after emotions Guilt, But Make It Bois de Santal. You're late, said his boss, who was dressed in the zesty austerity of someone who drinks almonds. And you're sweaty. I've been investigating, he said, which does not land like you think it will. He sold three candles to a woman who felt that her living room lacked narrative arc and then took his break to watch a YouTube video titled, VanLife: The Truth the

been dreaming of buying a van not only to avoid rent but to acquire the identity of person-who-lives-in-van, which is widely believed to be a personality you can wash cold. He wanted to drive away from his mistakes, which were many and had names like, Job at a startup that made an app to remind landlords to be merciful and girlfriend who was allergic to ambiguity and possibly him. I'll think about it, he said, because if indecision were a city it would be rent-controlled. He left with photos, illegal measurements, and the number of an electrician named Cork whom Sunny recommended and then immediately warned him against using because Cork is too passionate. Back home, he made a murder board. He printed photos of other vans, of influencers with teeth like ethical knives, of foam-spray, rigid, closed-cell, open-cell, foam that could hold a secret and foam that would snitch. He connected the faces with red yarn in the shape of a thermal bridge, because leisure is wasted on people who are not deeply unwell. He called the DMV and asked about registering a spacious lie. The DMV put him on hold. He listened to non-denominational Vivaldi for seventy-one minutes and then a woman named Fiona said, Sir, if you're calling about a van conversion, you need Form RV-14. What does RV stand for? he asked. She said, Really Vague. At City Hall, he met an inspector named Norma who wore a badge that said, Ranger, Bureau of Temporary Structures and Permanent Solutions. She said, I've seen things. Tinfoil. Old sweatshirts. Whole vans insulated with records. God help us, Coldplay. Bertrand took notes like a frantic stenographer for the court of reality. He dug deeper. He found a forum that said, ReflectoFoil works if you believe. He found the

moved past me carrying a faint, improbable smell like rain hitting dust. Far away, a sound like a train. I looked at the canyon walls and pictured the math again-the math of small spaces and big ideas and how far a person can run uphill with a backpack full of snacks and regret. Back at the van, the sky looked like a bruise spreading. The couple in the Jeep idled near the wash. He had his window down. You headed out? he asked. He had an edge in his voice that cared more about my answer than I expected. I am, I said, and then a thing happened that made the decision for me but also made me count. The first water came like a rumor. Shallow sheet gliding across sand. Then more. A tide that forgot the moon. The wash went from brown to moving brown in sixty seconds, and the little voice inside me-the one that had learned the sound of a hiss, the taste of pennies, the chorus of horns-said, You are a person who lets go when it is time. The Jeep rolled forward, then stopped, then backed up. The couple's eyes were very wide. My van sat on its pretend hump. The water rose around my tires and then over my ankles because I had stepped into it without thinking. Cold water brings all your ideas into a sharper focus. I could have floored it. Tried to cut through. Maybe the belly would have scraped a little, and maybe I would have ended up sideways, and maybe I would have owned a large rectangle in a place where water wanted to be for a while. I turned the engine off. Grabbed the Go bag I had never needed before. Shoes, keys, headlamp. Wallet. Photocopies. Fire extinguisher under the seat because sometimes you love your mistakes enough to carry them with you. I locked the door because habits are stubborn. As if the water needed a key. Come up, the woman yelled through the Jeep

window, voice high now. They were already climbing the rocks on the side of the wash. The Jeep sat higher than the van. Tall tires. Clearance that looked like a lie they could maybe cash in. I'm good, I said. My voice did not carry authority or calm. It had a tremor. But it also had the new thing. That thin wire of resolve you build by not dying a few times and then deciding you would like to keep that up. We clambered to the little knoll where scrub started. The water found the places we had been standing. Logs and cans and ancient, angry chaparral swept past, mousetraps and chip bags and a pair of flip-flops that looked, heartbreakingly, like they wanted their life back. The van held fast for now. Water curled around its wheels and then climbed, curious. It rocked once and then sat still. We sat on the rocks for an hour, then two. The Jeep started once, moved forward, moved back. The man ran his hand through hair he could not decide about. The woman told me about her sister in Denver and a dog named Arthur who ate the buttons off a shirt when he got bored. Small talk to fill big space. I didn't buy the van to flirt with death, I said. Death loves a van, she said. All those edges. We laughed in that way you do when something has teeth and you show yours, politely, in return. When the water dropped enough that sand started to show in ripples like skin after a sunburn, the Jeep went first. He went slow. He kept moving. He did not stop to do anything dramatic, which is probably why he succeeded. When it was my turn, I stood in the wash up to my shins and moved rocks by hand, like I had any impact on the bigger decisions at play. The van started the way it always did-half as if annoyed at me, half as if we were both faking it. I backed up the tiniest bit to let momentum build and rolled

under the bed. There he found a hockey bag labeled Yoga Equipment. Do you mind if I- he started. Sunny said, I mind. Bertrand opted to peek anyway, the way some of us opt to press buttons that say Do Not Press because we are fundamentally American. He found ReflectoFoil-the thin shiny stuff that's more about belief than physics-stapled to the ribs like sequins on a cheap costume. Ah, Bertrand said, tilting his head. So we're reflecting our feelings. It's NASA-grade, Sunny said, his smile widening like a crack in a windshield. NASA uses it. NASA uses food, too. I don't microwave a ham and call it a shuttle, Bertrand said. He looked at the ceiling. Thermal bridging, he muttered. No furring strips. The condensation will be a prologue to mold. Wow, you're, like, really intense, Sunny said. That's cool. I love passion. What do you do? I'm an Insulation Detective, he said, bracing for the laugh. Sunny didn't laugh. He did something worse. He nodded slowly, pityingly, like a parent whose child has announced a plan to marry a lighthouse. That's so important, Sunny said. Sometimes people don't understand the invisible layers that support structural integrity. I'm a fl- A flipper? Bertrand said too quickly, like a man who turns over other men's sentences to see the underside. You're a flipper. I flip, Sunny said, in a style that rhymed with skip rather than confession. But really, I'm flipping the script on the meaning of home, you know? My clients aren't buying vans; they're buying narratives. Compelling ones. With Kapok fiber. Anyway, do you want to take it for a spin? Sixty-four, nine ninety-nine. I could make it sixty for someone who truly gets it. A bargain. It felt like a coupon for existential relief. Bertrand stood in the van and felt his future, like a draft. He'd

like maybe what you want out of life is a firm barrier between you and the unregulated temperature of other people's expectations. Exactly, Bertrand said. See? You get it. I was kidding, she said, but he was already putting on a jacket that didn't match his outfit or the decade. The next morning, the parking lot behind the Vegan Pilates Studio smelled faintly of eucalyptus and regret. The van glowed in the actual sun like a sponsored post come to life. Sunny leaned against it in overalls so clean they looked green-screened in. Hey, hey! said Sunny, radiating friendliness and possibly Vitamin D. I'm Sunny. It's more of a vibe than a name. You must be…Birdman? Bertrand, he said, then immediately regretted correcting the sun itself. I, uh, saw your listing. Sunny led him into the van, narrating in an Instagram voice: Welcome to Casa Del Sol-thirty-six square feet of freedom, liberation, and escape from linear time. We've got butcher-block counters made from ethically confused maple, induction stovetop named Persephone, full-size bed if you refold your knees, and yes, yes, yes, insulation like a cozy conspiracy. R-value? Bertrand asked. He pulled out the thermal camera as if it were a cross and the van a vampire. Sunny smiled like a politician on Dog Adoption Day. We went with the good stuff. Which, Bertrand said, specifically? Thermal harmony products, Sunny said. Non-toxic. Breathable. Foam that breathes is called a sponge, Bertrand said, aiming the camera. The screen showed a mosaic of heat that, to the untrained eye, could be mistaken for modern art. To Bertrand, it whispered secrets like, There's a stud. Also the driver's side wheel well is a cry for help. The walls glowed with too much warmth for a van claiming saintly insulation. He pressed on a panel. It bowed. He looked

forward. Water sloshed. Sand shifted. The wheels skidded left and I corrected. The wheels skidded right and I corrected. I felt the weight of everything I own decide it would like to live in the future. I reached the far side and pulled onto dirt that had the decency to be still. I breathed out something I hadn't realized I'd been holding. Back on pavement, I parked and put my head down on the steering wheel. Not in prayer. Just gravity. Then I pulled out a notebook and wrote a list. My lists had been growing, but they had also been soft. This one had spine. No riverbeds when the forecast says maybe. No hero moves. No schedules that make me pretend facts are flexible. Leave. Turn around. Live to grumble about it later. That was the turning point, if I had to name one. Not the dramas. Not the blowouts or the brakes or the thieves with manners. The moment I chose to abandon the idea that boldness needed to be loud. It could be quiet. It could be a hand on a valve in a seaside lot. It could be saying no to the part of me that loved the story more than the days between stories. After that, I became the person with checklists. Leavetaking grew its own rhythm. Windows cracked, vents open, propane off, batteries checked, mats secured, things with wheels blocked from reproduction. Shoes by the bed. Keys on the hook. Flashlight held together with tape, because humility is the glue of systems. At a small hardware store in Montana that had a cat as an assistant manager, I bought another fire extinguisher and mounted it on the back door. A man with a carpenter's pencil behind his ear watched me line up the bracket. You think you'll need two? he said. I hope I never need three, I said. He nodded like I had just passed a test he'd been giving me and I hadn't known I was taking. The toilet valve quit

like a disgruntled employee in an unventilated office in Nevada. It left, metaphorically, some paperwork. I wore gloves and a look of rue and fixed it in the heat with a wrench that wasn't the right size. The fridge died on a sixty-mile stretch with no shade and a crosswind that kept me honest. I ate the chocolate immediately and poured the milk out with ceremony. I swore an oath to vegetables that lasted forty-eight hours. I named the dashboard lights. Check Engine was Linda. Linda rolled her eyes and said, Oh, this again, whenever we climbed a hill. ABS was Trevor. Trevor was fussy. He liked dry conditions and good coffee and would leave passive-aggressive notes when he was displeased. Oil pressure was The Boss. When The Boss spoke, nobody else mattered. You'd think the list and the rituals would turn me into a person whose idea of fun was telling other people to slow down. But what happened was something stranger: I slept better. My naps got righteous. Still a person who took roads to see what was at the end of them. Still the one who would turn down some unknown grit path because a raven landed on the fence and tilted its head like it knew a secret. But I went to those places with enough rope to get back. Maya and I crossed paths again in a grocery store lot. The sunset did that trick where it turns asphalt into a mirror. We leaned against our vehicles and ate popsicles out of a bag of ice meant for fish. She took mine when I got sticky and handed me a wet wipe like a hostage negotiation. You're different, she said. You mean boring, I said. She laughed. No. You mean to sleep. Evan texted me a photo of a weld on a carnival game that looked like something a god did on a day with good music. He captioned it, Wear your belts and your boundaries. I thumbed back

Detective. The certification involved swallowing several articles on heat transfer, saying thermal bridge in a tone that implied betrayal, and buying a used infrared camera from a plumber named Denis who spelled his name with one N because, Why should I be responsible for the French language? In short: Bertrand knew enough to be dangerous, by which I mean the category of person who can ruin a dinner party with sentence fragments like, But what about vapor? and then sit back like they've thrown a grenade full of humidity. He called his friend Gail, who answered on the second ring with, I have no money and I didn't do it. Gail, Bertrand said, because saying someone's name is how you build suspense, I've found her. The van. The one that will make me moral. You mean mobile, she said. You keep mixing those up. And what do you mean 'her'? You can't just gender a van, Bertrand. It's 2025. Vehicles are non-binary or they lean truck. It's not a vehicle; it's a thesis on wheels, Bertrand said. Look at this listing. It screams 'flipper.' Rustic aesthetic, vague insulation claims, artisanal breathwork for the countertop. And the price. Sixty-five thousand dollars? For a van that was once a bored plumber's side hustle? My friend, America runs on arbitrage. Are you accusing a van of fraud? Gail asked. Because I sat through your eight-part exposé on pineapples and I can't do fruit again. He sent her the link. The seller's name was Sunny, which felt suspect to Bertrand because it's hard to trust anyone who shares a personality trait with weather. The listing said: R-value? Sure! in a tone that, if transcribed honestly, would be R-value? We have vowels! The insulation, Bertrand said, solemn. It's my job to find out what's inside. What if it's just emotions? Gail asked. It sounds

the one without the velvet case. He wipes his hands on a rag and jogs back to me, rain making his hair ridiculous. He steps into the van, tracks water on our imperfect floor, and kisses me with the certainty of a man who has decided to be known. How's the R-value out there? I ask. Decent, he says. Could be better. Come in and heat it up, I say. He laughs. He does. The hinges hold. And somewhere in the damp woods, a creek keeps gossiping, loyal to anyone who listens. We listen. We choose. We stay. ##

The Insane Insulation

The Insane Insulation At 3:17 a.m., Bertrand discovered there were more ways to feel warm than the socially acceptable ones. He had a cracked mug of black coffee that tasted like a lawsuit between a pine tree and a tire factory, a Craigslist tab open to 2002 Sprinter - Boho Luxe - 64,999 firm; feelings negotiable, and a sudden, stupefying conviction that insulation was not just a construction material but a character test. He sat in his studio apartment, which had the ambient charm of a storage unit with a dream, and tapped the listing like it was a fish that might bite if you practiced digital enthusiasm. The photos were cinematic: reclaimed cedar panels glowing like a sauna for furniture, fairy lights IOU-ing a universe, a butcher-block countertop so smooth it could moonlight as a sermon. I see you, Bertrand whispered to the van, and then louder, because whispering to machines is how you wake up neighbors. I see through you. Bertrand, to be fair to the future footnotes, had recently self-certified as an Insulation

a photo of a very small fire extinguisher living by the bed, and he said, That's cute. Put a bigger one by the back door. Sometimes you need to leave from where you didn't plan. He was right. I did. Near the end of the season, I rolled into a farm field in Kansas that a guy with a Facebook page had turned into a place where people like me spent 15 for the privilege of a quiet night and a view of stars that looked like someone had spilled salt with purpose. Clouds muscled up out of the southwest in visible bands. The radio made a sound like a cicada deciding to enroll in grad school. The sky argued with itself and then decided to fight in public. I battened down. Vents at an angle. Windows cracked at the top. Everything put away like the van was a boat. Lightning lit the field in crisp monochrome. It painted my hands white then not. I brewed coffee on a sane stove. The propane turned on with a click and a flame shaped like restraint. I texted a friend: Still alive. The message bubble hung and then went, another small miracle turned ordinary. Rain hammered the roof hard enough to make its own rhythm. The floor felt steady under my feet because I'd made it so with chocks and thought and backing up to the high side of the field. I stood in the sliding door and watched water pool where it wanted to. Not under me. The van did not try to kill me. It never had. It had asked me questions in the language of hisses and clicks and random alarms. It had given me pop quizzes and I had failed enough to know I preferred to pass. The morning after the storm, the field smelled like a farm and like a morgue because that's what honest mornings smell like: the things that have to get done and the cost of them. I poured coffee into a mug with a chipped lip and sunlight found the dust in the air and made it seem precious. The

world went about its business in the way it knows how. The dashboard lights were quiet. I liked them better when they held their tongues. I slid the notebook out and underlined the rules again. Not because I needed to, but because the motion reminded my hand that it had work it liked. Then I put the van in gear and eased out onto a road that had been there before me and would be there after. The tires hummed and the fields breathed and somewhere ahead there would be a town with a diner that made bad pancakes well, and there would be someone who would show me a picture of a dog named Arthur, and I would nod as if I had known Arthur for years. I drove. I did not die. I chose not to, every mile. That was the trick. The rest was just keeping score. ##

How Not to Die in a Van While Falling for the Person Most Likely to Kill You

How Not to Die in a Van While Falling for the Person Most Likely to Kill You The sign said CLEARANCE 12’6 in cheerful yellow paint, which would have been comforting if the bridge didn’t look like it had been built during a time when people traveled by donkey and prayer. Don’t be cute, I told the sign, pumping the brakes on my white Sprinter and squinting up at the rust and ivy and somebody’s unfortunate graffiti: LIVE FREE OR DIE LOW. Behind me, someone laid on a horn long and hard, like that alone powered the laws of physics. I rolled down my window

his worst father. The mornings when I thought about running because staying felt like making myself visible to a world that doesn’t always deserve the view. You won’t see him wake me up when I grind my teeth; you won’t see me take his phone and put it facedown when an old ghost tries to crawl out. We’re not redeemed. There’s mold somewhere we haven’t found. There’s a password that still remembers other names. There’s a community that will love us if we make a mistake they understand and crucify us if we make the wrong kind. We’re not safer than anyone. We’re just here. People ask why we chose the title. They think it’s metaphorical. It is. It’s also literal. Insulation is what keeps heat where you want it. If you do it wrong, you sweat and rot. If you do it right, you can live through a winter in a space you built with your hands. If you do it right, you can kiss someone in a storm and not hear the hinges over the hail. The other day we passed a billboard that said DON’T TEXT YOUR EX. I looked at Max. He shrugged. I texted mine, he said. I told her I hope she gets everything she wants that isn’t me. I emailed mine, I said. I told her the same. I cc’d myself because I’m petty. We’re petty together, he said, pride in his voice like a toast. I don’t know how our story ends. Maybe we get a house. Maybe the van breaks in a way that money can’t fix. Maybe we fight one too many times about a drawer and realize it was never the drawer. What I do know is that we have crafted a life that feels like the right kind of risk. The kind where you pick the foam because you want to sleep, and you seal the edges because you’ve learned not to let moisture become a metaphor, and you leave a little gap at the top because air needs a place to go. Right now, he’s looking up and his smile is

twice that year. We learned the best place to park in a small town is behind the library. We learned that sometimes you fight because you're hungry, and sometimes because you're scared, and sometimes because you can't say what you need without a perimeter. We learned the difference between leaving and not staying. When he asked me, in a coffee shop in Kansas City that thought it was in Brooklyn, to make our not-fake relationship a thing with a word on it, I asked him to define his terms. Stay, he said. With me. For now. Until it's a habit. Until it's a future. I can't promise that, I said, honest to my bones. I can promise to choose you every day I wake up and you're still you. And every day I wake up and you're not, I'll tell you, and we'll fix it or we'll leave. Promises with exit clauses, he said. My favorite genre. We chose each other again and again. We fought about a drawer pull in Montana and about jealousy in Austin and about the ethics of sponsored content in Idaho. We installed a bench in a woman's van in Tucson and made out on it because we are who we are. I'm writing this from inside the van while rain performs jazz on the roof. Max is outside helping a guy named Rooster troubleshoot his solar. I can see him through the open door: the way he moves when he knows what he's doing. The way he double-checks. The way he looks back, to make sure I'm where he left me. I always am. We are learning how not to trap moisture. We are learning how to ventilate. If you watch our videos, you'll see the witty banter and the mistakes and the steamy edits where I sit on the counter while he looks at me like I'm a star he could navigate by. You won't see the dark parts: the nights when he thought about leaving because he didn't trust that staying wouldn't turn him into

and held up one finger, the universal gesture for 'I am not dying for your impatience.' Then my phone pinged with a DM: Loved your post on low clearances! Can't wait to see how you problem-solve today ; Reader engagement is reason number forty-two to keep notifications off when my pulse is trying to break the sound barrier. Okay, I said to my van, to the bridge, to the universe, we do this by the book. My book, technically. I am the author of How Not to Die in a Van, the blog that turned my tics into traffic-color-coded checklists, worst-case-scenario drills, and soothing humor about how I really can't relax unless I've triple-checked the propane is off and the doors are locked and the fire extinguisher isn't expired. That last one just for fun. Now I grabbed my fiberglass measuring pole, hopped out, and marched to the bridge as the impatient horn turned petulant. The road was gravely underfoot, the Oregon sky low as wet wool. Cicadas sawed in the bushes. The old metal of the bridge groaned and dropped a flake of rust onto my upturned palm, like a coin from a god. Twelve six, my ass, I muttered, spotting the faint line where someone had repainted the numbers. I stretched the pole, marked the arch at my lane. Eleven ten if I was lucky. My rig was eleven eight with the roof fan. On a good day. On a bad day, it was a cry, a scream, and public embarrassment. I waved down the driver behind me, a man in a baseball cap with a red face. Hey! It's mis-marked! I shouted. You'll shave your AC! Before he could shout back, a voice said, You need a spotter? Or a therapist? I turned to find a man leaning on a tow truck parked under a dripping cedar. Everything about him said watch your wallet and your heart-lean, sun-browned forearms, a mouth that knew how to smirk and kiss and ruin you

for other mouths, eyes the color of stormwater in a ditch you don’t see until it’s too late. He wore a navy T-shirt under a grease-smeared open flannel, jeans with the kind of wear that comes from actual work, and a wrench tucked in his back pocket like a threat. I brought my own therapist, I said, tapping the checklist laminated on my passenger-side window. But sure. Spot me. He sauntered up, lazy and efficient like a big cat who knows he can outrun you. What do you got, Sprinter? Eleven what? Eight, I said. And I don’t do guys who guess. Measure. He took the pole, slid it up like he’d been born with it. Eleven ten at center, he confirmed, then tipped the pole as if to pray at me. Move left, take the crown. You’ll have an inch. An inch? I repeated. That’s an eyebrow. Eyebrows are underrated, he said gravely. Just don’t flinch. Flinching is when people lose rooftop fans. Do I look like I flinch? Yes, he said, amused. But with style. I considered my choices. Option A: back up with a line of RVs honking, probably end up in a compilation video titled ‘Ten Times Entitled Vanlifers Ruined a Tuesday.’ Option B: trust a stranger who looked like he’d robbed a county fair of all its good genetics. Option C: die under a bridge, my epitaph a plaque of my own laminated checklist. I bit my lip. The DM pinged again. Watching you! it read, with a winky face that felt like a hand at my neck. Crown, I said to the man. No flinching. Attagirl, he murmured, stepping into my lane with the confidence of a matador. I took a breath and eased forward, hugging the left arc where the bridge arched highest. My mirrors were practically making out with the rust. My heart was a drum solo. One inch feels like a universe when steel and fiberglass are plotting a high-speed elopement. The man’s hand moved in

instead of the person who uses them. Are you in love with me? I said. He swallowed. Yes. It should have been too soon. It was. The van smelled like gasoline and rain and his skin. The road hummed, indifferent to declarations. I loved him too. Not the way the movies do it, with a swelling score and a sunset. I loved him like a choice: conscious, informed, deeply inconvenient. Okay, I said. I took the passports. I ripped the photos into strips no larger than fingernails. I laid them on the dashboard like confetti at a wedding where the bride looks like me. You don’t get to disappear anymore. He looked at me like I’d arrested him in a way he wanted. No, he said. I don’t. We fixed the filter with a trick he learned from a guy in a hat in Nebraska. We drove. He stopped checking the rearview so often. I stopped checking his phone at all. Season One of The Insulation Diaries was a series of vertical videos filmed with no budget and too much honesty. It featured: - The teacher from Bakersfield, who cried when Max added a spice rack without charging her. - A montage of me swearing at foam, bleeped with the sound of a duck because our friend Kit said it was on brand. - Max admitting on camera that he’d been an idiot, which played like a sex scene to people who have never seen a man apologize. - A scene where we fight, gently but real, about a shelf he wanted to add that would have made the bed feel like a coffin. We filmed the resolution: measure twice, don’t assume. The van community hated us until it didn’t. Then it loved us until it forgot us, which is the correct trajectory for parasocial affection. Ezra sent a grudging text that read you’re annoying but useful. Tasha sent a link to a charity. We donated. We blocked three men who thought they were owed my smile. We crossed the country

van and counted screws. He returned with a Sheaf of Adult and two pastries. He kissed me with sugar on his mouth. I've been thinking, he said into my hair. About leaving. Not you. Los Angeles. The business. The story I've been selling to myself. Where will you go? I said. What if I don't go, he said. What if I stay exactly where I am and build one thing right. Like a life? Like a bench, he said. The life can grow around it. I like benches, I said. Dependable. You can cry on them. You can also make out on them. We can field test, he said, and we were ridiculous and good. I want to say there was a single turning point that made all the other points line up. Life isn't like that; points are stubborn. But there was a moment two weeks later when the van stalled outside of Grants Pass because the fuel filter had opinions. We coasted into a turnout and sat there in the heat shimmering off the asphalt. Max thumped his forehead lightly on the steering wheel. I should have told you, he said. There's something else. Of course there is, I said, not unkindly. He reached under the passenger seat and pulled out a black pouch. He unzipped it and tipped it so I could see: three passports. All his face. Three different names. I used to be an IT guy for a… procurement firm, he said. It wasn't illegal. It was… adjacent. When the van builds started going bad, I thought about running. I made a plan. I didn't go. But I kept them. I'm giving them to you. Do what you want. I stared at the faces. He'd been clean-shaven in one, hair longer in another, the same eyes color of bad water. Why me? I said. Because you call me on my bullshit without humiliating me. Because you're not nostalgic for a version of me that never existed. Because I want to be the person who hands the passports to the woman he's in love with

precise motions, tap-tap toward me, palm up, then slowing. He pointed two fingers to his eyes and back to mine. Watch me, not the bridge. I watched him. He smiled like sin and summers and survival. We cleared with a whisper that kissed my roof vent and didn't take it. A whoop rose in the chorus of honks behind us, and I exhaled the kind of breath that leaves you craving a cigarette you never want and a nap you can't afford. The man, my spotter, walked up to my window and leaned in. He smelled like hand cleaner and pine. You owe me a thank-you. And your name. Evie Hart, I said. And thank you, stranger danger. Kai, he said. Mercer. I'm a mechanic. I flirt for sport and torque specs. Your turn-ons are bolts? I asked, arching a brow. Top five, he said, eyes skateboarding over my face without apology. You headed to the rally? Am I wearing the tri-fold brochure of my own anxiety? I asked, gesturing to my van's flanks plastered with decals: How Not to Die in a Van, a cartoon me in hiking boots holding a first aid kit like a bouquet. That and the powerpoint in your eyes, he said. I'm heading there too. Hired out for the weekend. Fixing leaks, soothing egos, preventing barbeques. Preventing barbeques? Propane, he said. Someone's been messing with rigs the last few meets. Tires, gas lines, weird stuff. Could be prank-level, could be human-level stupid, could be something else. Folks get twitchy. Then I get busy. I blinked. That was the rumor-accidents that weren't accidents and a general vibe of dread. I'd written about the basics of safety at rallies because the DMs started filling with things like Saw a rig smoking last night! And Not like fun smoking! And A guy here says your blog is cute but real vanlifers don't worry. Cue my rage. You think someone's

targeting people? I asked. I think wherever there's a gathering and money on wheels, there's a crime of opportunity, he said easily. I also think you attract trouble like a magnet wrapped in skin. Is that a mechanic pickup line? I asked. Only if you like it, he said. See you at the fairgrounds, Hart. Try not to die on the way. He tapped the roof of my van twice and strolled back to his tow truck, leaving me with a flutter under my breastbone and the unsettling feeling that someone had just seen me and filed the information away. He hadn't said he followed my blog. But it bled into the way he said my name. The rally was the kind of organized chaos festival that happens when too many wheels try to make a neighborhood and succeed anyway. Food trucks, dogs in bandanas, solar panels glinting, a sunburned guy in a hat that said EAT DUST hawking composting toilet supplies. I rolled into my assigned slot and surveyed my neighbors: a retired couple with a forty-foot Class A that had more square footage than my first apartment, a tattooed woman in a school bus whose hood art was a dragon eating traffic cones, and a small silver teardrop trailer with a chalkboard sign reading HONEYMOON OR BUST. Bust, someone had scrawled under it in different handwriting. I stepped out and immediately inhaled smoke from a nearby campfire, a scent that always made my brain produce memory collages of every time I'd almost done something rash and then hadn't. My nerves buzzed, the way they did when I felt a story tug me toward it. One ping. Then another. My phone lit with DMs, most harmless: Saw you at the bridge! You saved my roof! Others, less so: Make sure you lock up tonight. I'd hate to see you lose something important. I muted the app. You look like someone who

were in a scene about treasure in a movie where everybody dies. This is yours, he said. Legally, I said. And ethically is a work in progress. I told Ezra I'd do three builds for free, he said. On weekends. People we owe. You can throw tomatoes at me while I work. Tempting, I said. But what if you did one for pay? For someone nice. I know a teacher in Bakersfield who sleeps in her car to be near her mom's chemo. Her GoFundMe stalled. You could… show your receipts in a different way. He looked at me like I'd offered him absolution and then charged him interest. You know that would be messier, he said. People will say I'm performing. That I'm trying to buy redemption. Then we film it cheap and call it The Insulation Diaries, I said. Season one: How Not to Trap Moisture or Feelings. The cutthroat van conversion community will eat us. I've been eaten by worse, I said. He smiled, a real one this time, crooked at the corner like the hinge that didn't quite line up. You should know, he said, that I want to keep you. Objects go in the van, I said. Not in men. Can I keep a toothbrush here? he said, mock-hopeful. That's a gateway drug, I said. What's the dosage? We'll see, I said. We did not sleep together that night in the sense that a PG-13 rating would balk at. We did sleep together in the ancient human sense: skin to skin, breath to breath, the small noises people make when they let someone else exist in their space. He tucked my hair behind my ear like I was a book he was reading slowly on purpose. I fell asleep with my hand on his chest, feeling the stubborn insistence of his heart. Morning smelled like rain and coffee, which is also the smell of hard choices. He left for his bank to sign papers that made his life less glamorous and more possible. I stayed in the

down with a mediator. We'll split blame like a cake neither of us deserves. I'll scrub the posts. You'll post the apology your therapist wrote you. I don't have a therapist, Max said. You will, she said. You're not special. You should add a line for me, I said. This is my van now. If any of your stans come for me, I'll film us over-insulating and call it revenge. It wasn't over. It would never be fully over. But the crowd dispersed with gossip that was less fun when it came with nuance. The DM stream slowed. The Tacoma rolled to the other side of the meadow, sulking. Max leaned against the van and let out a breath like he'd been holding it since February 2020. I'm light-headed, he said. That's shame leaving your body, I said. Or all the coffee. He turned to me. Thank you. Don't thank me, I said. You still could be lying. I probably am, a little, he said. But I'm lying less. I can work with less, I said. We stayed for the workshop on gray water management because I'm a masochist. That night we camped among pines that made the van feel like a delicate instrument. We cooked rice on the tiny stove. He stood behind me as I chopped onions and slipped an arm around my waist like a promise he'd keep if it killed him. We were closer now, not because kissing had happened, but because nothing had eaten us alive. Fake relationship, he said softly, mouth near my ear. Real chemistry, I said. Venn diagram, he murmured. The middle bit is… warm. Scientific term, I said, and leaned back into him because I could. When the title transfer finally happened in Portland-Tasha's email to the bank a parting gift, no emojis-we drove across the river and parked under a bridge whose concrete was tattooed with declarations of hope and doom. He handed me the papers like we

carries a trauma kit and a stun gun, a voice said. I do, I said without turning, because in a field of milling van people he had that presence again, like gravity had laid a hand on me. Which do you need? Kai stepped into my peripheral with a wrench in one hand and a bag of kettle corn in the other. He offered me a handful, which I took to be polite and also because it was warm and dusted in sugar and what if he'd poisoned it? I popped a piece in my mouth and waited to see if my throat closed. Riveting content, he said. Van safety influencer eats anonymous kettle corn. Will she live? Stay tuned. If I die, tell my readers I went doing what I loved, I said sweetly. Being petty and right. He laughed, the sound like a motorcycle idling between your knees and a good bottle of whiskey poured over ice. You want petty and right? Somebody's been loosening valve caps. Valve caps, I repeated. For what. Irritated squirrels? Propane, he said. And tires. Get enough slow leaks and people chalk it up to luck. Or bad maintenance. Or a sign that their marriage is failing. People project. I thought of my DMs. Of the bridge. Of the way the numbers on that sign had been painted slightly off-color. I thought of how I had built a life on anticipating the worst and the worst had started to send me winky faces. What do you want from me, Kai? I asked, aiming for breezy and hitting braced. He held my gaze like it was a wrench he fitted to a nut. A favor. The organizers want me to keep an eye out. Someone else wants you to keep your head down. Let's do neither. Let's make a scene. You're going to have to put those words in a sentence with fewer red flags, I said. What kind of scene. Fake dating, he said, grinning wicked. We'll pretend to be a couple. People talk to couples. People look at us

and see something they don’t want to eavesdrop on. Because it’s gross? I asked. Because it’s personal, he said. Trust me. You being around me gives me eyes. Me being around you gives you cover. If someone’s using your posts for their pregame, they’ll want to see you up close. Let’s make sure they see what we want them to. There it was. The ask. And the thrum in my chest that was half fear, half something I didn’t have a checklist for. I don’t fake date, I said. My readers are weirdly invested in my brand of single-person competence. Also, who said it would be fake? His mouth tilted like a confession. We can negotiate terms. Boundaries, I said, relenting because if someone was using my own words against me, I was not going to sit in my van and hope the universe disliked irony. No lying to me. Not about work, not about your past, not about your favorite font. No touching without asking. No using me as bait unless I willingly play the cheese. No sleeping in my van unless I invite you. Sans serif, he said. CONSENT in all caps. And if I’m not honest, you kick me in the shins. Deal, I said, sticking out my hand. He shook it, and his hand swallowed mine, rough and warm, a promise and a dare. By midday, we were a couple. We told the retired couple on one side that we’d met over a flat tire, which was technically true: I’d had one last year, and men like him, with hands like a map to better decisions, had stopped to help. We told the dragon-bus woman we were trying out monogamy like a new hiking trail. We told the honeymooners we were collecting stories for our grandkids, which made the bride cry and cling to her groom and shove us homemade brownies that could double as ballast. I taught a clinic called Propane Isn’t a Verb, and caught Kai leaning on a picnic table at

like this was the morning’s sermon. Someone from VanLifeWest held up a phone to record. Tasha’s mouth tightened in the way honed by years of posting calls to accountability. I have texts, she said, waving her phone like a flag. So do I, Max said. Let’s project them, shall we? Show me where I said, ‘Let’s ghost them.’ Show me where you said, ‘We’ll figure that out later.’ I’ll wait. Max, Ezra said with hurt that had seen itself in the mirror, people saw you at Duffy’s last Thursday buying drinks. I’ve never been to Duffy’s, Max said. Name a drink they serve. I’ll pretend I like it. That’s not the point. That’s exactly the point. He looked out at the circle. I’m not innocent. I made choices that hurt people. I took deposits I shouldn’t have. I thought we could outwork a pandemic. I believed the partner who looked me in the eye and said we were good. I went silent when I was ashamed. I’m sorry. I am making it right. That’s why I’m here instead of hiding. But I’m not your scapegoat so you can keep your brand clean. The meadow was quiet except for the creek’s gossip. A dog barked once and thought better of it. Tasha stared at him, then at me. She saw the beanie, the jacket, the point of our theatre. She saw the way my hand lay on the door, near Max but not on him. Her mouth curved. And you? You just love a project? I love a person who can admit the worst thing they did before you do it for them, I said. Also, your Tacoma is tailing us like a drunk spy. If you want to talk, talk. If you want a gotcha video, get a tripod. She blinked. Then she laughed, short and surprised. Ezra glared at her like she’d given away state secrets by having a sense of humor. You always were the pretty one, she told Max. It’s a terrible asset. I know, he said. I’ve suffered. Okay, she said. Okay. Here’s the deal. We’ll sit

make satire when reality is this motivated. We parked by a creek that whispered secrets. The Tacoma rolled by slowly, polite as a substitute teacher. Ezra was easy to spot: the haircut of a man who thinks success is a fade, the smile like a bruise under a bandaid. His wife, Tasha, wore athleisure like armor. Max, Ezra said when they reached us, the way people say the name of a house they used to live in. Ezra, Max said. You look healthy. I hike, Ezra said. I don't have to spend all night on Craigslist luring impressionable women. Tasha's eyes flicked to me. Hi, she said. I'm Tasha. Did he tell you that he owes us thirteen grand? Hi, I said. I'm Luna. Did you tell the internet you trusted a man with a table saw more than you trusted your conscience? This was going to be fun. Here's what we're not doing, I said. We're not letting you perform righteousness without receipts. We brought receipts. Did you, Tasha said. And are your receipts notarized or vibes? Max opened the van. He'd lined the back with folders, because apparently there is nothing like fear for making you organized. He held up papers: a list of deposits paid, costs incurred, a timeline of supply chain disasters, a spreadsheet that made me want to die. He handed Ezra a copy and Tasha another. Half the deposits, Max said, tapping a row with his finger, went to pay for materials when lumber cost as much as therapy. The other half went to rent and your car payment, which you told me you needed because your wife can't go to Pilates in a truck that smells like a shop. I stopped taking new clients when I realized we couldn't fulfill the ones we had. You kept taking them. Then you told them I stole their money because you were late on the lease. Tell your truth, but don't borrow my name. People were drifting over with their coffee cups

the back, watching me like someone memorizing a manual he'll need to throw out later. He asked smart questions in the right places, pushed me into specific safety tips that sounded casual and weren't: How do you tell if someone's touched your lines? What's a normal smell versus panic? How often do you replace gaskets? Later, he lowered his voice as a breeze lifted the scent of grilled onions and dog shampoo across our campsite. You're good, he said. If people listened, I'd be out of a job. If people listened, we'd all be out of jobs, I said. What do you hear? He flicked his eyes over the milling crowd: men in cargo shorts, women in straw hats, kids on scooters, dogs in stroller-prisons. Rumors, he said. A silver rig got its battery drained overnight. A couple found their carbon monoxide detector mysteriously disabled. A guy I know had a slow leak in his brake line. My scalp prickled. My phone pinged again with a DM: Loved the clinic! Don't get too comfortable. The van world is hungry. We spent the evening doing couple stuff in a way that didn't feel fake. He cooked-of course he did-metal spatula ringing on the skillet as he seared chicken thighs and onions, while I chopped peppers with precision I pretended was not a cry for control. We ate sitting on my bumper, our knees touching in accidental-knowing ways, and I had to keep reminding myself that this was for the mission, not because I liked how he watched me laugh as if he'd been starved and I was the first person who'd handed him anything worth chewing. When the first scream cut the night, we were mid-banter about following distances. Three seconds, I was saying. Minimum. More if your rig's heavy. I hate that number, he said. Feels like waiting for permission. That's what patience is, I said, smirking. Permission

from your better self. He opened his mouth to retort when the sound knifed the air again. Not fun. Not drunk. Real. We were moving before we had a plan, drawn toward the silver Airstream where a woman flailed on the step, her hands white on the rail. It smells! It smells like- She gagged. Kai was in, shoulder to the door, cold focus sliding over his features like a mask. I pulled my shirt over my mouth and flipped the lights on. The smell hit like a ghost-a fog of rotten eggs and fear. Gas off, Kai barked, and the husband, pale and useless, stammered I-what lever? Out, I said to the wife, coaxing her back. Everyone out. Breathe through your mouth. Don't touch any switches. We found the source in seconds-someone had cracked the stove line and left the smallest twist on the valve. It was low, insidious, the kind that makes you sleepy and stops your breath in the night. I close my valves, the woman said, starting to cry. I do. I swear I do. Kai glanced at me, something hard in his eyes. He looked at the brass fitting, then the wrench marks. Yeah, he said softly. Someone else opened it. The sheriff who'd been hired for the event to walk around and look authoritative materialized, took statements, promised patrols, and left us with the satisfying feeling of being patted on the head. I crouched on the grass and pretended to scroll my phone. DMs, again. You teach so well. So easy to follow your steps. Evie, you should be proud. The little heart emoji winked like it was trying to warn me of itself. He squatted next to me, his leg warm against mine. You okay? Yes, I lied. Evie, he said in the tone that had me visualizing surrender. Truth. No, I admitted. This is my nightmare. Someone is using my lists to hurt people. We'll make a new list, he said. I looked up at him. Rule one, I said. No one dies. He

priest act and get me arrested for something I did half of. I'd rather be annoying in public. I see, I said. So we crash the meetup. What meetup? Northwest Nomads, I said. They gather near Eugene like geese with solar panels. They'll all be there. Ezra will be there, and you can make your case, and the Tacoma can stop playing Where's Waldo. That's a terrible idea, he said, with a respect I recognized. So we'll do it, I said. He smiled like igniting was noble. Okay. If we're doing that, we need to look… not like you bought a van from a possible felon. We need to look like we did this on purpose. You mean- Fake relationship, he said. It'll play better if you look like you're with me because you see something they don't. You're using me, I said. Only if you use me back, he said, and this is how I knew he was dangerous: because power with him was a negotiation, and negotiations are my drug. We detoured into a thrift store off Exit 188, and he bought a jacket that made him look like a lumberjack who reads Zadie Smith. I found a red beanie that gave me the aggressive charm of an elf. We rehearsed a history, the way you do when you're about to lie for the right reasons: we met at a van build workshop; he kept me from screwing into my own wiring; I taught him to cook lentils. We filled the gaps with conversation that had already happened. We kissed once in a Walmart parking lot to make sure it looked good, because we were terrible and also alive. At the meetup, the meadow was a hive of vans in every possible configuration: stealth grey rectangles, artisanal wood-paneled saunas on wheels, a school bus painted like a sunrise. People hovered around camp stoves, performing casualness. Dogs wore bandanas. There was a talk scheduled at two: Avoiding Van Build Scams. You cannot

soundcheck. - The exact moment the van felt like privacy and not a crime. We did not undress fully. We explored, we asked, we laughed once when he knocked his head on a shelf and then swore and kissed me with the swear still hot between us. When we stopped, it was because we were breathless and because the storm had turned the world into an intimacy that would have been too much to squander. I'm not a good idea, he said, forehead to mine. You should know that. I don't date good ideas, I said. They bore me. He snorted, which is not a poet's sound. We should sleep. Is that the ethical choice? It's the temperature choice. We slept, awkwardly, like ships anchored too close. I woke to him in that early light you get when rain has wrung the sky clean. He was already awake, staring at the ceiling. What? I said. I think someone's following us, he said. That's the thing about Max: even his paranoia was precise. He explained as I rubbed sleep out of my eyes: the white Tacoma that had been in the gas station lot when we filled up; the same white Tacoma idling at a rest stop while we re-filled our water; the Instagram DM from a handle he recognized-EzraBuildsWithFeelings-whose phrasing was Ezra's wife's blade. I checked my phone. VanLifeWest had posted a story about scammers to watch out for. Two of the photos were obviously screen grabs from Max's personal page. The comments were a fire. The internet was having one of its bonfires. Do you want me to drop you at a bus station? I asked, meaning it. You can disappear. I can deal with the title transfer later. I can also invent a backstory where I found you and put you back into the wild like an endangered scruff. He shook his head. If I run, I validate every story they're telling. And if Ezra catches up, he'll do his hurt-

nodded, as if filing that under baseline. Rule two, he said. If anyone tries to hurt you, we hurt them back. How legally? I asked. We'll negotiate, he said, and even his smile had teeth. The next two weeks compressed like an accordion. We traveled with the caravan from Oregon's rain-slicked lumberyards to the parabola of the California coast, across desert highways that simmered like a mirage you could fall into and never get out. Our fake relationship became a dance of strategic intimacy and a game we were both winning. We kissed once in front of a particularly nosy vendor and discovered that pretending was a door you could open only if you wanted to end up on the other side, stripped of lies. We slept under the same roof because it made us look real and because the night can feel like a long hallway you need another heartbeat to cross. The accidents escalated, subtle and sharp. A tire blowout on a blind curve in Nevada that we managed with a controlled sway, my fingers bloodless on the wheel as Kai talked me down, his voice a rope I climbed hand over hand. A stolen rig in Santa Fe that careened through a campsite and left crushed coolers and shaken retirees in its wake as sirens lit the dusk; we were the ones who got the plate and gave chase long enough for the cops to corner it, my van's engine whining as Kai grinned like a wolf and said Trust me, and I did, God help me. We started seeing the pattern. The sabotage matched my content, week by week. Disable the CO detector? That was my video from last year about testing your alarms monthly. Loosen tire valve cores? That was my post on the importance of a gauge you can trust. The DMs didn't stop. They doubled. Pictures of my van from angles I hadn't been present in. Notes left under my wipers: Your lists make me feel

safe. Let’s make sure everyone learns. It wasn’t fans anymore. It was someone cosplaying competence and hiding in my shadow. We narrowed suspects and then blew the list wide open. The retired couple had a grandson who looked at my legs like he’d discovered legs were legal and wished they weren’t; he also had hands too soft to know a wrench from a spoon. The dragon-bus woman carried a knife on her belt and a brick of beeswax in her pocket; she also passed out on her roof every evening with a book over her face and no time for sabotage. The honeymooners-no comment. They barely found the bed. It was the small stuff that made me tip. A guy named Cole who ran a mobile detailing service, he liked to chat while polishing rims, and he had a tattoo of a raven that peered up from his wrist like a warning. He laughed at my jokes the way you do when you want to echo someone’s sound. He asked questions about how I vet sources and whether I quiz my audience. He took a picture with me and kept his hand light and careful at my waist, which most men thought translated to respect. He didn’t follow me on Instagram. But someone had made a burner called HuntsTheRoad that followed every single person I tagged. Kai, I said in Arizona, standing under a sky like a struck match, if this is someone I know, I’m going to need a week to scream. You can have two, he said, because he was generous with time he didn’t actually have the right to give. We were sweating in the heat one afternoon when the wasps hit. Someone had left the cap off my gray water, maybe, or someone had found a nest. They poured out of the vent like a magic trick from hell. Run, Kai said calmly, snatching my wrist as the first angry blur found my hair. We did, stumbling into the

We were a tin drum hit by God. Max filled the kettle. I can fix the cabinet hinges now, he said. Storm lighting. Very noir. Everything is noir with you, I said. Did you plan that? Only my cheekbones, he said. We sat cross-legged on the bed that took up a third of the van. Hail beat on the roof. He showed me how to brace the cabinet, where to place the screws to accommodate the cheapness. His hands were deft, a pianist’s hands forced into carpentry. You’re good at this, I said. It’s my only prayer, he said. Do you always talk like you’re auditioning for a tortured architect? He tipped his head. I can stop. Don’t, I said. It’s working. He glanced at me then, something in his mouth like a reply he edited down. We secured the last hinge, and he leaned back against the wall, breath fogging in the cold. The space was small enough that I could smell his soap-a generic courage-and the salt on his skin from leaning into the work. The lantern light made him a study in chiaroscuro: light catching on the ridge of his brow, shadow carving his cheek. I don’t do this, I said, because one of us had to. I don’t fall for a guy because he can talk about moisture barriers and regret. You’re not falling, he said. You’re assessing risk. Different thing. Are you risk? Yes. We looked at each other, hail beating the universe into pixels around us, and I felt how hunger could be both moral and not. When he leaned in, he did it slowly enough that I could have left and didn’t. His mouth was warm, warmer than the van, and careful, like he was measuring with his lips. He tasted like coffee and a dare. When I kissed him back, I heard the hinge behind my head hold; I took it as an omen. Later, inventory: - Two mugs of tea abandoned half-drunk. - His sweater on the heater, steaming faintly. - My pulse like a drummer at

that make me look worse than I am. Also because I signed the dumbest contract in human history. It's mostly prepositions and regret. So you're a martyr. I'm an idiot, he said. And sometimes a liar. And trying not to be. The span where the sky opens between exits 214 and 276 is boring in theory and religious in practice. He told me everything you tell a stranger when you hope they'll choose you even when they shouldn't. I told him everything you tell a stranger when you want them to understand why your tattoos all face you and none of them face the world. We stopped at a truck stop to pee and buy coffee that tasted like choices gone stale. You didn't ask about my ex, I said on our return to the van, because he hadn't and it felt like he was too careful. I assumed he's a saint and you're better without him. She, I said. And yes. We wanted different kinds of freedom. She wanted the kind where nothing matters because she can always drive away. I want the kind where everything matters because you chose it and you can still drive away. He thought about that. I want, he said, to build things that don't fall apart. When did you stop? He glanced at me as if measuring whether I'd see the joke or the knife. I didn't. I just started building things with cheaper screws. We pushed north until the clouds knitted heavier and the gas stations got friendlier. I was aware of him the way you are of a complicated object on a shelf: you don't want to touch it, you also really do. The van had its own personality-temperamental, chatty, vain. The cabinet doors yawned open on curves. The water pump sang like a whale. When the first storm hit, it came with hail like rice thrown at a metal wedding. We pulled off at a rest area where a sign warned us not to feed bears or influencers. The trees sighed. The rain thundered.

campground shower house, breathless and slapping at our clothes, yelping as a few determined jerks stung our ankles. He shoved open the door to the disabled stall, flipped on the water, and pulled me in fully clothed. Cold water blasted down, plastering my shirt to my skin. We yanked the curtain closed and pressed together to avoid the spray, which was everywhere, so: chaos. Don't look, I said, already laughing because adrenaline always turns into inappopriate humor for me. I'm busy being a gentleman, he said, not sounding even a little like one. By the time the wasps had settled on the other side of the curtain like an audience, my shirt was transparent and my jeans were a second skin. He was soaked, water running down the ridges of him, turned-on and trying to pretend he wasn't. Evie, he said, voice gone rough. Consent. Please, I said, on a breath that felt like a surrender note. We kissed with the kind of relief that tastes like a tongue after danger, with the kind of hunger that had been building for states, and when his hand slid under my shirt and paused, I put my hand over his and pressed. We didn't do anything that could be mistaken for not wanting. We did everything we'd been wanting to do. It wasn't neat. It wasn't quiet. It wasn't fake. After, we leaned against tile and laughed like we'd gotten away with something. He kissed my forehead and whispered, You wreck me. I said, Good, and meant it with a part of me that knew wreckage could be rebuilt. Night in New Mexico brought us the turn. We were camped on the edge of nothing, sky full of stars, when I found the receipt in Kai's toolbox: a purchase for specialized valve cores and a set of gaskets that matched the one we'd found cracked on the Airstream. My stomach fell through the floor. Kai, I said, holding up the paper

like a warrant. He looked at it, at me, and I saw it for the first time: something old and ugly in him scratching at the door. He could lie. He could tell a better story. He could eat me whole. Instead he exhaled. I used to work with a crew, he said, voice like cut gravel. Not just mobile mechanics. People who boosted rigs. I got out two years ago. I'm still an easy mark for their gossip. Those parts? I bought them to compare. To recognize when they'd been touched. It's cheaper to buy a set than to miss a variation. I stared at him, fury and hurt boiling. And you didn't tell me because? Because you wouldn't have let me in, he said, bleak. Because you'd think the worst. Because sometimes I am the worst. Is it you? I asked, which was the most insulting and honest thing I'd ever said. He flinched like I'd slapped him. No. Then who? I demanded. He raked a hand through his hair. I have a name. He looked ill saying it. Cole. The detailer. He's not with the old crew, but he's been asking questions in the wrong circles. Rumor is he wants to start something new. Not theft. Something worse. Viral sabotage. Accidents that trend. My blood iced. He's using my content. He's using you as cover. If it looks like clumsy fans, no one glues the malice to one man. I stepped back, nauseated. We tell the sheriff, I said. Now. We will, he said. But we need proof he can't wriggle out of. Otherwise? He walks and watches us through a scope. What do we do? I asked. Set a trap, he said grimly. Let him think he's staging his masterpiece. Then pull the curtain. The Texas rally was big and dusty and had a ferris wheel for absolutely no reason other than the human need to rise and fall in loops while holding someone's hand. We rolled in like a couple who had survived miles and came out glossier, which

ghoster. Alleged creative accountant. I didn't pick that username, he said. It was a gift from a troll. So the allegations are true? They're… curated. He pinched the bridge of his nose. I'll tell you everything when we're not under LED interrogation. You'll tell me on the road? Yes, he said. On the road. That's the thing about the road: it gives you rhythm, and rhythm becomes confession. Two hours later, we had left Los Angeles smearing itself in smog behind us, the van rattling like a maraca with a cough. The cabinets squeaked. The solar monitor blinked its passive-digit rage. Don't worry, Max said. I know where we can get better hinges, half the price, triple the quality. Also, that monitor is reading half because the shunt is miswired. Someone reversed the polarity. Someone? I said. He grinned. I bought it like that. Is that your line for everything? Only my mistakes, he said. Other people's mistakes are their own. We popped onto the I-5, that long concrete idea of America. I wrestled the van into its lane; the steering had a loose play that felt like guiding a shopping cart with a dream. So, I said, tell me why the internet wants your head on a pike. He sighed. We were building vans like everyone else with a table saw and a delusion. Me, my partner-Ezra-and his wife, who managed the books like a hawk that eats spreadsheets. We were not good at saying no. We took deposits. Supply chain happened. Things slipped. Ezra got spooked, made me the face because I smiled better. We lost money on three builds. I took side jobs. He said we needed to ghost the loudest clients so we could finish the quiet ones. I said no. He locked me out of the accounts and told people I'd stolen deposits so they wouldn't come after him. And you didn't sue him because? Because he keeps receipts. The kind

this felt like stepping into traffic with grace. I am not, by nature, impulsive. I am a Capricorn who loves bullet points. But I'm also a Capricorn who, two months into van life, had learned that caution is an art as well as a hindrance. I called his bank; their bored clerk confirmed the administrative nightmare. I made the transfer. I watched him watch me watching him. Now, standing in Home Improvement Nirvana as the fluorescent lights hummed like anxious bees, I wondered if my mother was right: that I had a kink for red flags. Max was a whole semaphore system. Fiberglass, I said, tapping a stack with my knuckles. Cheap. Effective. Itchy. Like my ex, he said. Foam board's cleaner. But if you don't seal it perfectly, you'll trap moisture. Mold's not just a smell. It's a lifestyle. We could spray foam it, I said. Messy but thorough. Also, you can get high if you forget to ventilate. Then we'd either die or we'd be so in love with each other that nothing else matters, he said. Romantic. Craigslist would approve. I laughed despite myself. That's the thing about me: my laugh is my Achilles' heel. People think it's more precious than it is. They show me a flair for language and a wound you can see even if they can't, and I'm toast. Foam it is, I said. I like the thoroughness. Commitment is sexy. He gave me a look that said he'd heard the word sexy and stored it in a pocket for later. Then he tilted his head, like he was trying to line up my edges with the picture in his head. Luna, he said-because of course I am named for phases-why did you really buy it? Because I like a project. And? And because the ad was shady and the van forums already hate you and I want to know why. He smiled again, that deliberate thing. You read the threads. Max VanMax, I said. Alleged deposit thief. Alleged

was actually a good cover for the fact that my nerves were shot and Kai was vibrating at a frequency that made the hair on my arms rise. We'd let word drop, through one of the chatty organizers, that I was scouting a new segment: The Ultimate Safety Drill. A staged runaway. A staged leak. Controlled, with professionals. We invited the sheriff and his bored deputy to watch me demonstrate how an emergency brake works on a slope. We brought in a small audience and pretended to fumble small things. We waited for Cole. He came with a smile and a rag tucked in his pocket, pleasant in a way that would always get him invited into your life. He asked questions and told jokes and edged closer to my rig like he was magnetized. He wore a watch with a cracked face and a look that said I'm already inside your house. The plan was simple: we'd set the test rig with a known flaw we could control. A hairline crack in the propane line that only vented if a valve was turned two extra twists past rational. We'd run the motorhome up a gentle slope and demonstrate a runaway in the safest way possible: slow, predictable, with blocks at the bottom and the sheriff standing there chewing a toothpick and pretending to care. Cole was supposed to watch. To salivate. To decide the show needed more. He did. He moved when he thought no one looked. He slipped under the rig and his hands moved like a magician's. He turned the valve that opened more than it should have. He pulled the chock. He did it with the economy of someone who's practiced and felt delicious doing it. Everything unfolded too fast with the inevitability of a math problem you got wrong three steps back. The rig rolled. The propane hissed. The sheriff, idiot, laughed. The crowd clapped because they thought they were

watching safety porn. Kai, I breathed. I've got the leak, he said, and was gone, diving for the side panel with a wrench like a weapon. The motorhome picked up speed. The blocks we'd set skittered under the tires like matchsticks. The slope was gentle, but the weight was a monster. Cole stood to the side, face alive. He wanted fire. He wanted a video of Evie Hart failing at her own gospel. Keys, I said, lunging for the door. No driver. Because on paper, no one needed to be inside. Evie, no! Kai shouted, wrestling the propane compartment open and cursing as the odorant made his eyes water. He had seconds to clamp the line before it hit air and made a molotov of the day. He needed me to not die while he did it. My readers love when I walk through the logic chain of an emergency. Step one: decide to live. Step two: trust your training. Step three: don't apologize for moving. There's no time for polite when the universe wants you meat. I grabbed the rail, hoisted myself in, and threw my body into the driver's seat as the rig creaked over a bump. The steering wheel was a door I slammed into the right space. I slammed my foot on the brake. Nothing. The hydraulic hissed like laughter. The pedal went to the floor and stayed. Parking brake, I said out loud because sometimes speaking is magic. It engaged and squealed but we still rolled. We were aimed at a low fence and beyond that another row of campers lined like dominos. You always have options. Even when you think you don't. They just get uglier. The gear lever, bless it, was manual enough to bite. I threw it into low and gunned it for a second, feeling the torque like a punch, then took my foot off. Engine compression slowed us a tick. The slowness was a thread. I pulled it. Pumped. Pumped again. The brakes grabbed in

like it was designed by Barbie's contractor. You can tell a lot about a person by their insulation choice, the man said, strolling his cart next to mine like he had googled how to look casual while possibly committing fraud. Really? I said. What does it say if you pick whatever's on sale and pray? That you're either brave, he said, or one bad screw away from heatstroke. His smile was slow and precise, as if it were a tool he kept in a velvet-lined case. He was handsome in the way that makes you suspicious-cheekbones too sharp, stubble like art direction, eyes the color of a bruise healing. His name was Max, and he'd come with the van. Not like a puppy. More like a clause. We'd met that morning because he'd posted an ad: 2012 Sprinter, clean conversion, solar, full kitchen, composting toilet, immaculate. It was… not immaculate. The cabinets were handmade in the sense that human hands had definitely tried. The solar worked if you coaxed it with sweet talk and a rubber mallet. The composting toilet was a bucket in a metaphor. I thought this was a scam, I told him when he opened the back doors to reveal a space that looked like a Pinterest board that had been left out in the rain. It could still be, he said cheerfully. But I'm not the scammiest person involved. What does that mean? Long story. A shrug. Short version: if you transfer the money, I need to ride with you to Oregon so I can hand you the signed title at my bank because my ex-business partner flagged it-he's a petty tyrant and also technically correct-and it's the fastest way to unflag it. We break up in Portland. You keep the van. I keep my dignity. He keeps the faint hope that I'll implode without him. I did not buy his van because of the van. I bought his van because my life had recently been a parade of safe choices and

close, gently, like approaching a skittish creature. If they wanted to hear, I told them about screws and dew point and honesty. If they didn’t, I bought a cinnamon bun and kept my mouth shut and ate it under a tree. Sometimes I caught myself missing the idea more than the thing. Missing the picture of me with the sweater and the horizon, the simple plot: me and my van against the world. But the world had got in, as it does, through the tiny places you don’t look. Letting it in, naming it, had taken less from me than sealing it off with carpet and dropping fairy lights in front of it. On my desk at the library, I kept a piece of felt the size of a postcard. I’d cut it from the good section, unspotted. I used it to set my mug on. It absorbed the cup’s wet ring and dried. Around it: lists for workshops, overdue notices, pencil shavings. It was neither evil nor a salvation. It was just fabric. I liked that. Sometimes a reader would pick it up between forefinger and thumb and try to figure out what it was. Sometimes I said, It used to be a lie, and watched their eyebrows do a thing I recognised. Then I’d smile. Then I’d tell them I was joking. Then I’d tell them the truth. Then I’d check out their books, because the world-its dampness and its dryness-went on regardless. I had learned to put down a barrier where it mattered and breathe when it didn’t. In the end, that felt like the closest thing to freedom I’d found. ##

The Insulation Diaries

The Insulation Diaries I met my future felony in Aisle 17 between the R-13 fiberglass and the pink foam board that looks

tiny chews. The wheel shivered and wanted to jerk. I braced my forearms and held it like it was an animal I could gentle. Outside, the world narrowed. People moved like they were in glue. The ferris wheel turned lazy, utterly unhelpful. I smelled the rotten-egg ghost and then the sharper smell of hot metal and terror. Kai cursed like it was a prayer and a promise. You’ve got it, he roared, and I believed him because if faith was a person, it was him, lying on his back under a wheeled bomb and trusting me to do my job. The fence was a chest-high run of wood and wire. I aimed not for it, but for an empty patch where two rigs had gone for tacos. Left, right, a shimmy. A chock someone had left, orphan on the gravel. My tire hit it. The tiny resistance pitched the angle and we lost a piece of energy that mattered because sometimes a straw makes the camel look up and say wait, no. I yanked the parking brake up like my arm was offended. The rig slurred its own momentum. The front tires turned into the patch I’d aimed for. We came to a stop with a lurch that bruised my hips against the seat and my chest against the wheel. Everything went silent except for my heart. I heard Kai before I saw him-a cough, a string of profanity, the clatter of a wrench on gravel. He appeared at my window, hair smeared with dirt and a smear of something that I hoped was grease and not blood. He grinned, wide and feral and full of something you can’t fake. Evie, he said. You did it. You did it, I said, a laugh hitching around the edges like it didn’t know if it was supposed to be relief or trauma. He opened the door. Out, he said, and I let him pull me, solid hand around my wrist, into the heat and the noise and the people running toward us and the stunned faces. The sheriff shook himself awake and charged at Cole, who

was trying to slink backward into the crowd. Kai intercepted him at an angle like a linebacker. Cole’s face did that thing where a charming person realizes they’re not charming anymore. He opened his mouth. Kai’s fist met it first. Consent? he asked me over his shoulder, eyes dangerous. Granted, I said. For once. They cuffed him. He spat blood and a line about how it was all an accident and we misunderstood his intentions. The deputy found a kit in his van with spare valve cores and caps and small labeled baggies with terms like BRAKE CHEW. My name was scrawled inside the lid. He’d written my catchphrases next to pictures of rigs on index cards, loops of careful handwriting that looked like love if you didn’t read the content. The crowd buzzed. A woman hugged me too hard. A guy put his hand on my shoulder in a way that made Kai shift closer, not to growl, but to anchor. When the dust settled, when the elective persecution of paperwork had drained us both enough to sit, we sat on the bumper of my van and let the night breathe around us. The ferris wheel lights blinked like a heartbeat finding a rhythm again. The sheriff muttered apologies that didn’t matter and thank-yous that did. People brought us beer. A kid with freckles asked me if I was scared. I told him yes, and that not being scared is a myth. Brave is a verb. You chose, Kai said softly, later, when it was just us and the stretch of darkness and the knowledge that morning would make this all more real. You didn’t flinch. I did, I said honestly, because sometimes the flinch is where you find your edges. But toward the wheel. He leaned his head against mine. You’re a menace. And the bravest person I know. You don’t know many people, I said, and he huffed a laugh. I turned to him and said the thing that had been burning a

was sixty-two. Her photo was two haircuts out of date. I wrote her a letter in blue pen and told her we’d found her library card in a van and also three coins. She came in two days later with three tangerines. In exchange, she said. The card was in my old handbag. I must have-well. I always put things down and then find them in other rooms. She peered at me over the tangerines. What are you building? Better mistakes, I said out loud, before my brain could snatch it back. She considered this. Good, she said. The other kind last too long. In spring Callum drove by. He parked outside my house and texted: Look out. I did. The van was the van and not the van. Inside: foil-backed insulation sealed like a spaceship. Joints taped with a neatness that made me itch to ruin it and then learned from. Ply cut precisely. No carpet. Or not yet. Maybe never. He grinned out of the window like a man who had found a thing to do with his hands that didn’t involve dialling the wrong number. Shall we? he said. I climbed in. I put my palm flat against the wall. It felt cold. It felt right. We drank tea of course from mugs that were too ugly to photograph and shared a quiet neither of us needed to fill. Outside, a robin hopped on the wing mirror. He looked in and gave the van a once-over and seemed, if not impressed, then un-warning. He darted away into a hedge that had survived more winters than we could count. I listened to the sound of the kettle and felt my lungs do their jobs. Not once did I have to cough. I didn’t buy another van. I rented one once, without carpeting, and it rained the entire time and it was fine. I drove to markets, sometimes, and if I saw fairy lights I felt my jaw set, and then I breathed, because my jaw had done enough already. When I saw people touch felt the way you touch a dog’s ear, I wandered

exactly once. There were jokes. There was a moment where a woman named Lena talked about how her mother bought cheap coats because the expensive ones made her feel like a nuisance, and how insulation was like that, and everyone went suddenly quiet because we were all thinking about coats and what we thought we deserved. After, Magda came in with a tray and slid me a mug of coffee that tasted like a middle aged truce. You're good, she said. People need it. I needed it, I said. I borrowed a tent from Nate the next weekend and we drove to the coast. We pitched it so badly that an old couple in matching fleece jackets saw fit to offer suggestions. The wind moved through us like we were colanders. Children screamed in joy or pain; it sounded the same at that volume. The tent flapped like a flag. I boiled water on a pent stove and made tea and burned my tongue an honest amount. We walked across the headland under a sky that was a sheet stirred by a giant, and sat on a flat rock and ate sandwiches that fell apart in the wind and tasted like grit and mustard. I watched the line where the water turned dark and then light and thought about all the lines I hadn't seen until I ran my finger along them. I thought about how much of my life I had covered with the van equivalent of felt: rehearsed stories, optimism, the belief that if I didn't look, it wasn't there. I thought about how the harm wasn't the damp; it was the hiding. Later, in the tent, I listened to the storm try to take us with it. I breathed. Nate snored in a way that aped sincerity. I lay on my side on a sleeping mat that admitted it was a piece of foam and nothing more. Sometimes you didn't need magic. Sometimes you needed the truth plus a decent sleeping bag. The next Monday I found Leslie in the system. She

hole in me since the shower, since the bridge, since the first time he'd looked at me like I could ruin him and he'd help. I don't want to fake this anymore. He went still. You mean- I mean I don't want to pretend to like you, I said, because the truth is sharp and clean. I want to like you while you try very hard to be a man who tells the truth. I want to write a post about being careful and brave and falling in love with someone who makes you feel safe enough to be stupid sometimes. His laugh cracked in the best place. I can do that, he said. The man part. The truth part. The making-you-safe part. The stupid I can help with too if you need it. Boundaries remain, I said. CONSENT remains, he echoed. We kissed like we had a future that could be planned for. The night softened. The DM notifications were blessedly off. The list in my head reshuffled around a new central item: allow for joy. In the morning, I filmed a video. My hair was a mess and my face looked like I'd lived, because I had. I told my readers about brake checks and trust. I told them about the saboteur-and I told them that while we can do everything right, some people will still pick at our seams. I told them about community, and how you make a safer world not by pretending danger doesn't exist, but by standing closer when it does. I didn't tell them about the shower, or the look he gives me when I balance risks and rewards. Some things belong to the road and the people in your passenger seat. We left Texas on a morning so clear it felt like a dare. As we pulled out, a bridge glowered at us with a sign that said CLEARANCE 13'2 like it meant it and had proof. Crown? Kai asked, hand on my thigh. Always, I said, and took the left arc with a margin so generous it felt like luxury. Our lists are still

laminated. Our jokes are still barbed. His past is still something that knocks sometimes, ugly and uninvited, and we answer with the deadbolt on. My fear still wakes me at four in the morning and makes me count fire extinguishers. We're still moving, through rain and desert and places where the sky is too much and the land is too honest. We fall in love between accidents, sometimes during them. We choose our story like we choose our exits: last second, sometimes, heart in throat, laughing anyway. How not to die in a van: don't be alone if you can help it. Make a checklist and then throw it out when someone's life depends on you doing something bolder. Sit on the bumper after and let someone put their hand on the small of your back like a promise he intends to keep. Plan for everything and then make room for the one thing you didn't. The road will always take. We're learning to make it give back. ##

Flamenco Brake

Flamenco Brake: Spain Without the 'S' and Occasionally the 'ABS' The hiss sounded like the ocean trying to keep a secret and failing. Is that the Atlantic? Lola whispered, a hand over her heart, eyes gone wide with the kind of awe usually reserved for auroras and men in tight pants doing flamenco footwork. Teo sniffed. It's the canister. Pause. Flash. Boom. This is how our spiritual road trip began: with a small propane tantrum in Cádiz and the realization that heaven speaks in burps and scorch marks. Cut, Lola told the GoPro on the dashboard, as if the camera were an unruly extra. Reset. We'll say it was a sunrise. Is the sunrise

Saturday works? I made a list of things I knew now: Sikaflex. Butyl tape. Sound deadening versus insulation. The difference between open-cell and closed-cell foam. Why wires needed respect and holes needed grommets and vapor barriers were not optional. How to say no to men with fox shirts. At home, the bedroom smelled like the van had, but only in my head. I opened the window and closed it and opened it again, because sometimes I liked the conversation. I closed my eyes and pictured the baby's sock. I imagined the carpenter, a man whose name turned out to be Callum, which was both on the nose and fine. He texted a week later to say: Wet out. Wire brush acquired. Found three coins under driver's seat. Who is Leslie? Her library card says she's overdue. I told him to give Leslie's card to me and thanked him. He sent a picture of the inside of the van: clean bare metal, shining with possibility that had nothing to do with felt. I felt no regret then, not even the dramatic kind. The tool library's back room smelled of cut wood and hot dust. Ten people came the first Saturday. Four men with serious hair and eyes; five women who asked better questions; and a teenager who sat in the corner with his hood up and took notes like he was saving someone's life. I began with a picture of Jasper's stall, the fairy lights blurred. Then a picture of the van the day I took it back to the bones. No commentary. Just the sequence. I am not an expert, I said, and then I told them everything. I showed them where the inlets were and where the water snuck in and what to think about when you thought about warmth. When I said the phrase vapor barrier, they nodded as if it were a relative. We practiced sealing corners on scrap and everyone's tape kept wrinkling and everyone swore,

insultingly. The sort of number that had pity in it, which I disliked on principle and accepted because I had to. I'll take it as is, he said. I'll rip it down to metal. Start again. You'll do it right? I asked, because I wanted someone to, even if it couldn't be me. Right costs, but yes. We did the money dance. I signed away my freedom, such as it was. He shook my hand and I made him take the kettle. He tried to refuse; I insisted, aggressive about generosity. He laughed again and tucked it under his arm like a baby. He drove away with his window cracked, because he understood something about endings. After, the driveway looked obscene, like a pulled tooth. Nate came and sat on the stoop with a bag of chips and a bottle of something that had a picture of a squirrel on it. We ate, looking at the space, chewing thoughtfully. That was the grown-up thing, he said when the bottle was half gone. I miss my childish thing, I said. I know. I put the bags of felt in the back seat of my car and took them to the tip. The man at the gate looked at the bags like they contained a body he didn't want to fill out paperwork for. Moldy carpet, I said. From a van. You want General Household Waste, he said, pointing. Is there a specific bin for regret? I asked. Compounding interest, he said. He didn't smile. Work wanted me back and I went. I shelved a run of books about travel and thought about how their authors had probably had their own damp moments and had edited them into charming paragraphs. I typed an email to the local tool library and asked if anyone would be interested in a workshop called Don't Die in a Van, subtitled How To Insulate Without Ruining Your Lungs. The woman who ran the library, Magda, wrote back within an hour: Yes please. We need truth more than bunting. What

supposed to smell like singed eyebrow? Teo asked, patting his face. Be honest. I look distinguished. Like a startled professor. Like a startled yak, Lola said. But sexy. Enter: Panic, the chihuahua, who had the emotional maturity of a seasoned flight attendant and the scream of a kettle. He took one look at the curling smoke ribbon and launched into Morse code. Panic enjoyed two things: being right and being wrong loudly. Also starring: Carmen VanDiego, their van, a gleaming white rectangle with aloof mirrors and a roof rack that had big I carry dreams and surfboards energy. She had been a refrigerated delivery truck in a past life, then a food truck, then a yoga studio in a gig economy's fever dream, until finally she found herself purchased by Lola and Teo with a combination of savings, sponsorships, and a crowdfunding campaign called Fund Our Soul Quest Or We'll Become Influencers Anyway. They were vanfluencers. Which is to say, they were the plague and the cure: oversharing their empathy in square frames, bargaining with the algorithm, slicing sunsets into reels. They called their channel Soul Propulsion. They said, We're on a journey to find our best selves, as if their best selves had been misfiled under S for Spain, and the Iberian Peninsula was a lost and found with tapas. Welcome, Soulmates, Lola intoned as the smoke dissipated, voice smooth as a podcast about bread. We begin our odyssey in ancient Cádiz, a city older than your therapist. This is the hiss of destiny. This is the sizzle of- -the warning label you didn't read, Teo said, holding up a singed instruction manual, the kind that whispered, You should have been a librarian. Teo wore the expression of a man who believed in science except when he needed something to be magic. He was

the kind of person who said phrases like, If you think about it, electricity is basically polite lightning, and then got shocked by toasters. The hiss was indeed the canister: their propane, praying for better owners. They turned it off. They high-fived. Panic judged them. The van hummed with a thousand unsaid disclaimers. The sky pretended it had always smelled like nothing. They posted. It got views. Comments rolled in from people named EarthDaughter and VanBro69, saying things like, Loving the authenticity, and, What's your rig setup, kings and queens? They had arrived. They were on a road trip to documentary immortality. Spain, they had decided, was basically a masterclass. The universe? A professor in a linen suit, gesturing toward the board where it had chalked: Pay Attention To The Signs. And dear reader, if a dashboard light winks, it's not flirting. Valencia came in, under a hot-breathed sky that smelled like oranges considering life choices. They parked along what used to be a river and had rebranded as a park with better marketing. Riverbeds are just rivers with commitment issues, Teo said to camera, and several meteorologists sneezed. The rain arrived like an email you don't open because you know it ends with restructuring. It committed to them. It committed so hard that within minutes the park began massaging them into motion. A flash flood scooped them up like a bored god collecting erasers. This is fine, Lola shouted over the drumroll on the roof. This is the universe washing us of old patterns. This is the universe putting us in the rinse cycle, Teo corrected, Shakiraing his shoulders as he tried to steer. I didn't consent to tumble dry. Panic surfed the dinette bench with the calm of a tiny messiah. The flood decided they would now take a

walked back to the van and thought about socks and decay and the line between help and interference. I posted the van for sale that afternoon. The listing didn't sing. There were no fairy lights or sunset shots. There were no shots of mugs steaming on the bumper. There were photos of the stripped interior, the mottled patches, the darker marks around screws, the little tide lines near the window frames. The text read: T5 camper conversion. Bought summer. Used lightly. Discovered significant damp behind carpet lining-please see photos. Insulation compromised. No vapor barrier continuity. Condensation routes via screws. Would suit someone wanting to strip and do properly. Price reflects condition. Tea kettle included. It hasn't done anything wrong. I set the price at a number that hurt. My phone pinged. People wanted to come that evening, and tomorrow, and next week. At least half asked if they could just not look at the damp if they promised to be good. One man from two towns over said he was a carpenter and had been looking for a project that would keep his hands busy through winter so he didn't ring his ex. I said, Great, six? and he said, Six is good, and I added a cough emoji and then deleted it. He turned up in a wool hat and a jacket that had actual sawdust on it from not-for-show. He ran a practiced hand along the van's ribs and made low noises that translated as, Yes, that and that. Okay. Yes. Okay. He didn't flinch when he saw the inside. He smiled when he saw the worst of it. I like an honest mess, he said. I didn't clean before you came, I said, and he laughed. He brought a moisture meter too, and we compared readings like people comparing spice levels. So, I said, when he finished poking. Do you want it? I do, he said. He named a number lower than my hurt number, but not

choice. I could clean it to presentability, mask the smell with citrus, list it as a lifestyle, say occasional dampness, and keep a straight face, and watch another me hand over cash and a dream. Or I could tell the truth and lose most of what I'd put in-money, time, a little pride. It wasn't really about a van. It was about whether the world was something you smoothed into compliance with felt or something you stripped until surfaces were honest and cold. He held out the piece of felt. I didn't take it. Keep that, I said. A souvenir. His laugh showed too many teeth. Up to you, he said, and slipped it under the trestle table as if it offended his aesthetic. I walked away without buying a cinnamon bun, which should give you a measure of my mood. Back at the T5 I sat with the door open. The market moved around me in a vague parade of sounds: laughter, arguments about bungee cords, a woman asking if those curtains came in mustard. I watched my breath fog in front of me. The van smelled like what it was. Nate slid into the passenger seat. He'd wandered off to look at knives. He looked at my face and didn't ask. Well? he said. he says I can sell. The market's strong, I said, mimicking the cadence. Is it? People love the idea of a wooden spoon. He watched me. What do you want to do? I wanted the first night back. I wanted the robin. I wanted the part of me that believed things could be the shape you saw on Instagram. I wanted not to have to decide. A woman with a baby strapped to her walked past. The baby's sock had come off. She didn't notice. I got out, picked the sock up, and jogged to catch her. Thank you, she said, breathless, when I tapped her shoulder and held it out. The sock was tiny and absurdly cheerful, with stripy animals. I watched her put it back on, fast and practiced. I

tour of three postcodes east. Carmen VanDiego, loyal but skeptical, adjusted. They found asphalt again. They found a trucker flipping a coin that looked like it had seen things. They found themselves laughing. Because this, they said into their cameras, was the point: surrender. Also, we do not have adequate flood insurance. We learned quickly that every region would offer catastrophic feedback like a tapas menu of calamity. The Andalusian mountains were a runway for their illusions. I'll just level the RV, Teo declared on a road that had dismissed the concept of level in 1745. With what? My body, apparently, Lola said, hanging off the side like a decorative saint. Do we have chocks? Do we have God? Ligatures snapped somewhere above them where the winds had discussions with the clouds. The mountains shrugged. The van canted. Panic reinvented the octave. Dear reader: there is no moral fiber in a parking brake. Gravity is unbothered by your affirmations. In La Mancha, a tire blew with the operatic confidence of a tenor hitting a high C. They limped into a service area called Don Quixote's Stop and Shop. The mechanic had a mustache that could swat flies into character arcs. That tire was a suggestion, not a commitment, he said, then proceeded to bench-press Carmen's front end with a jack and a sigh. Lola filmed his forearms in the reflective sheen of becoming the villain. People need this, she whispered. It's about resilience. It's about torque, Teo said, counting in Spanish and fluency. Uno, dos, the rest. In Barcelona, on a hillside that smelled like pine and aspiration, they discovered that spontaneous combustion is less spontaneous if you neglect maintenance schedules. A small, earnest smoke curled out of the engine bay as they admired a view

that influencers use as stock therapy. It's pine-scented ambience, Teo said with a grin that begged the gods not to notice him. They noticed. The pine smoked back. They emptied a fire extinguisher with the enthusiasm of people spraying champagne on a podium for the fifth place. The foam was celebratory. The foam was a new kind of regret. So the light that looks like a genie lamp, Lola mused, is…? Oil pressure, Teo sighed. It's not a wish granter. It's a silent scream. Madrid, in the exhaust-choked intimacy of urban patience, gifted them a semi-truck that honked existential truths. It came up behind them on the ring road and leaned on its horn like a philosopher leaning on his student loan debt. What's he saying? Lola asked, white-knuckle steering in a lane that may have been theoretical. He's saying, 'I am heavier than your dreams,' Teo answered, and changed lanes into a lane that was empirically an exit. Seville was a chase scene. More precisely: Seville was a slow-motion ballet where their van was stolen by a man wearing a shirt that said YOLO, whom they chased down the street with Lola wielding a selfie stick like a bo staff. It turns out, when you leave your keys in the ignition in a city designed by poets, a thief will compose a sonnet about your mistake and drive away with the last couplet. They recovered Carmen three streets over because the thief realized the steering made a noise that could be used to summon whales. Also, Panic bit him in the sock. This is a metaphor, Lola panted. For what? For forgiveness. Forgiveness is a steering column that costs 482 euros, Teo said, writing in the ledger of their failure. The Pyrenees arrived in footnotes and switchbacks. They climbed into altitude and found themselves Flamenco braking: stamp, stamp, pray. It's like dancing, Lola said,

Jasper said when he saw me. He put his palms on my shoulders and kissed the air by my ear as if we were at a wedding. He leaned into the van and inhaled. His nose wrinkled, but quickly, like it had been trained. You've been cooking in here? Tea, I said. Tea, he repeated, as if I'd instead said barbecue goat. I handed him the felt and he held it gingerly between forefinger and thumb like something that might bite. He turned it over. He looked up as if the answer might be hovering over my head. Bit of black, he said finally. Not uncommon. That's just on the surface of the lining. It can happen if you're, you know. Breathing. I am, I said. You'll want to treat it, right? Antimicrobial spray. We stock a thing. You spray it on the carpet and it-what's the word-neutralises. It's behind, I said. I told him about hyphae so his face could enjoy the word too. He patted the van. You've got to remember-these are leisure vehicles. They aren't for living in. I'm not living in it. I napped badly in it, occasionally. He did a little inhalation between his teeth. Well, you know. Sold as seen. A couple hovered at the next van along, breathing in the eucalyptus smell of someone else's new carpet and picturing the life I had imagined. The woman touched the felt on their van with the same reverence I'd had. The man was already doing maths in his head. I looked at Jasper. He looked at me. The market around us sizzled. Someone shouted about cinnamon buns. I thought about my savings, about all that time, about my lungs. I also thought about that woman's hand and the man already calculating. You could always sell, Jasper said, in the tone you use when you suggest a haircut to someone who has burned their hair straightener. You might even make your money back. The market's strong. There it was. The

My supervisor, Lawrence, had frowned like a man who disapproved of fungus on principle. Nate came on a Sunday with a moisture meter he'd borrowed from a friend who did bathrooms. He pressed it to different sections of the van's skin and made noises as if he were reading palms. Every time it beeped, we both said ah, and I had the feeling again that I was being tested by a teacher who had written the answers in chalk I couldn't see. So, he said, checking the dashboard where Jasper's business card rested under the cracked plastic. You going to call him, or are you going to turn feral and live in a lay-by and cough at joggers? I dialed Jasper from the driver's seat. He answered on the third ring with a brightness that made me hate him immediately. Jasper here, he sang. How's van-life treating you? It's not life so much as petri. Ah. He listened as I described the damp. I tried to be exact. He tried to be sympathetic without becoming responsible. Thing is, he said when I'd exhausted both description and breath, that's the UK. Weather does what it wants. These vans-people forget they're not houses. You need to keep them aired. It's just a little dampness. It'll be right as rain. Excuse the pun. I aired it, I said. I'd done little else. Windows? Did you crack them? I cracked them. And you used the heater? Yes. Hm, he said, almost lovingly. Well, they're sold as seen. But if you want, bring her down on Saturday. I'll have a look. Sound? Sound, I said, and imagined him telling someone else that I'd consented to being patronized. On Saturday the market glittered with fairy lights and fresh grease. The vans had their doors open like they were peacocks breathing in the adoration. I parked at the far end and carried a strip of felt with its visible mold along like evidence. There she is,

eyes luminescent with delirium. It's like you're sandals and the mountain is your mother. It's like the pads are writing their memoir, Teo said. The brakes faded like a celebrity in a trilogy. Panic took up yoga. They descended with deliberate, breath-holding grace, stopping every kilometer to let the aroma of eau de panic dissipate from the cabin. In the Picos de Europa, they discovered minimalism. We have two gears left, Lola announced, her voice the exact pitch of a kettle and a violinist agreeing to duel. Scream and Coast. I choose Coast, Teo said, and they did, sliding along with the nobility of a greased penguin. Carmen was learning new prayers. The mountains were patient. Panic kept a small diary labeled My Truth. Galicia tried to be gentle. A near miss-but the head-on kind that still managed to head-on their sense of destiny. They were in a fog as thick as nostalgia. Out of that haze came a vehicle with the confidence of a recruiter and the generosity of a tax audit. There was a breath where physics took a meeting with inevitability. They passed each other with a span of air measured in regret. Lola and Teo sat there afterward, listening to how loud a heart can get in a small room. Signs, Lola said faintly. We need to read signs. You mean the ones that say Stop? Teo swallowed. Not just the ones in my horoscope? Asturias, not to be outdone, removed a cliff beneath their parking brake. They had parked. They had made tea. Gravity had other plans and like all good antagonists, it did not explain itself. Carmen shifted a centimeter, then two, then enough that Lola found herself in a standing sprint with a kettle, and Teo somehow was both inside and outside the van, trying to wedge a rock under a tire with a conviction usually reserved for revolutionary movements. Panic

took on the shape of pure geometry and shouted the digits of pi. They survived because the rock believed in them. Or because friction is a convert if you preach hard enough. They went to a bar where a grandmother served cider with a scowl that contained three centuries of common sense. Parking brake is a suggestion, she told them, wiping a glass with a cloth that knew secrets. Gravity doesn't read your blog. In Catalonia, a test-drive ended in a home visit-through the wall. They had taken Carmen in for steering adjustments, exciting new noises included free. The mechanic tossed them the keys with the confidence of a man who has eaten lunch. Teo circled the parking lot. Carmen took umbrage at a turn. The wall, a thin layer of stucco entirely unprepared to meet someone from Madrid, met them with the shattering softness of a wet cookie. I always wanted an open-plan garage, the mechanic said, coughing dust. I suppose this is your contribution to my feng shui. We'll pay, Lola said sincerely, then did a calculation in her soul that broke several abacuses. In Extremadura, they were T-boned by their faith in rural tranquility. Picture a dusty road, a sun like a benevolent dictator, a local farmer in a tractor with a schedule. They rolled through an intersection that had long since retired from giving warnings. The tractor kissed them with industrial tenderness. Carmen spun. Panic saw his ancestors. No serious injuries, just a new appreciation for stop signs and miracles. The farmer brought them tomatoes and apologies. My father always said the city is dangerous, he shrugged, but who am I, a poet, to talk. They ate tomatoes in the shade of a catastrophe, thinking about how soft the world is and how hard we insist on making it. Zaragoza lit the fuel pump

if they were showing off a rash. It offered scientific articles that made me feel both reassured and implicated. Words stuck. Hygroscopic. Thermal bridge. Dew point-the moment when warm air throws up its hands and condenses on any cold surface and calls it someone else's fault. I learned about vapor barriers that needed to be continuous the way a parachute needed to be whole. I learned that my van was a house in reverse, a tiny steel cave trying to sweat. At night I blew my nose and stared up at the ceiling and pictured every screw like a straw for water. I thought about Jasper slapping the side of the van with affection like a farmer and the way I'd thought affection meant knowledge. I couldn't stop thinking about all the times I'd woken in it and thought, This is what life is supposed to feel like, only to have it tarnish into what my life always turned into: a practical problem disguised as an ideal. The T5 sat outside like an animal I'd dragged home. I watched people walk past it and clock their faces as if they might smell my mistake. An older man with a whippet paused in front of it, like old men do when faced with pot plants and project cars. The whippet peed on my wheel. I took that as critique or absolution, I wasn't sure. I could fix it, people said. It's just time, a woman on a forum named Mags wrote, who seemed to gut and renovate vans for the fun of it. Her pictures were crisp and her countertops were oak. You'll feel proud when you finish. When you finish. There it was, the gambler's whisper. Just a little more-money, time, faith. My savings had been the van. My job wasn't the kind that forgave absence. I worked in a library that got more complaints the quieter it got. I'd already called in sick twice because I couldn't stop coughing while shelving interlibrary loans.

it. The phrase put carpeting over it made something inside me knock. We went at the van with the piety of converts and the dispassion of undertakers. The damp mapped itself in gradients, from dark near the roof down to grave near the floor. It bloomed under the window frames. It clotted around wiring grommets. Every screw that passed from the outside to the inside had kindly carried a path for water. The metal wasn't rusted through, but it had thickened into freckles. Can you sell a lung? I asked, sitting on the step with my gloves off, because it felt better to feel. One lung. Good condition. Only lightly misted. Nate went into the house and returned with coffee that tasted like solving things. He watched me look around. So, he said, small claims? I pictured Jasper, fox shirt, the bunny-eared fairy lights, the way he'd reached inside the van and switched the light on with one finger and a smile. I pictured him as he might be now, at another market, talking to another me. What can I say? Sorry, your felt was an accessory to a crime? We could try, he said. You have pictures. Receipts. And an email that says 'sold as seen.' Nate shrugged. Morality and reality rarely take tea together. By dusk the van felt like a confession. The studs showed. The felt lay in a pile that leaked. I bagged it and double-bagged the bag. It still glowed like a guilty conscience. Kay phoned and I didn't pick up because she sounded wheezy in my head. When I lay down on the sofa that night, every muscle ticked. I slept with the window open and woke colder than a joke about men. Days filled with research. The internet offered me men on YouTube who said guys at the end of every sentence and blamed women for not understanding dew points. It offered forums where people posted pictures of mold as

flambé. It sputtered when they pulled into a service area. It's fine, Teo said, the way exhausted people say Fine like a rainbow says Beige. He tapped it one too many times and suddenly the pump introduced oxygen to a party it shouldn't have been invited to. With a whomp, a blue tongue licked the air. This is new, Lola breathed. This is bad, said every manual they'd ignored, collectively. They smothered it with a wool blanket and a fever dream. They made a note in their guidebook a Google Doc with delusions: If it sizzles, blow. If it glows, go. Granada threw in a surprise fuel-line fire because apparently Spanish cities were hosting a tapas crawl for combustion. On the bright side, we found the dashboard light's purpose, Teo said, wedging himself under Carmen while Lola practiced the ancient art of calling emergency numbers in a second language with the grace of a raccoon ordering sushi. Afterward, they stood by the Alhambra, rats of the sun, marveling at Moorish ornament, thinking about the inlaid patterns of drama they were weaving into their lives. Murcia debuted the silent-robbing ballet. They were sleeping, mouths open to dreams that involved fewer receipts, when a whisper-crew removed every portable thing not already welded to their guilt. They woke up to an absence of cameras, a missing portable solar panel, and the lingering tap dance of nimble thieves. Panic finally earn his name by screaming at a moth. Their audience, who had come for sunsets and stayed for punches in the gut, wrote comments like, This is a sign, and, You manifested challenge! Lola threw her phone into a pillow. I manifested boundaries, she hissed. Bilbao's low underpass met their roof with the tenderness of a guillotine. You don't realize how in love you are with your

roof vents until you hear them being peeled back like the lid on a yogurt. They sat under the underpass, collecting their dignity in a Tupperware. A local man in a beret informed them, in the small-schoolteacher tone that Basques are famous for, Altura maxima does not mean, ‘Try your luck.’ It means height is a finite resource. Great cities are honest, Teo said, adding a tarp to his list of necessary illusions. Tarifa became a sand-trap baptism. The wind there is a theology. It picks people up and puts them down two centimeters to the left and calls it character development. They drove onto a beach with joyous hubris, which is the only kind. They sank up to their axles in sand so fine it played the piano. Panic took one step onto the beach and was blown into Portugal. A convoy of kitesurfers pulled them free, laughing the laughter of men who crave friction. Lola filmed the rescue, hair horizontal. Teo narrated with granules in his teeth. We have been humbled, he said, spitting out a dune, by sand, which is just tiny rocks that didn’t get enough hugs. Inside the van, life continued in its own war. The black tank became a noir antagonist. It developed a voice. You think you can ignore me? it whispered every time they flushed. You think actions don’t have consequences? Who are you talking to? Lola would ask from the counter, where she was peeling cheese into concepts. The tank, Teo would reply. It’s lonely. It wants to be seen. Don’t we all, Lola said, and then the fridge committed a cheese-based war crime. Something dairy and ambitious bloomed back there, an ecosystem that filed for legal recognition. They opened the door and were punched in the face by a scent that registered as a fully realized democracy. Panic fainted. They named the smell Blue Monday and moved on with

canoe with more optimism than testing. I’ll come, he said. Don’t do anything stupid until I get there. I’m peeling. Stop peeling. I can’t. He arrived with masks and the sort of goggles that made him look like a cheerful mantis. He stood in the doorway and took the scene in: the pile of felt halos near the footwell, the wall newly naked and visibly wet, me with a patchwork of flecks on my forearms so I looked dipped in ash. What’s the plan? he asked. I thought truth and bleach, I said. He shook his head. Bleach doesn’t kill hyphae or something. He loved words like hyphae, because they sounded like they had a degree. Also, if there’s damp behind, bleach will just make it smell like a swimming pool inside a mushroom. Do you have an actual plan? My plan is to stop coughing, I said, and we both coughed. Even masked, it took all morning before we admitted we couldn’t do it without knowing the source. We untied the bungee cord of saucepans and slid out the crates. We took the mattress out and stood it wrongly on its end on the driveway, where it drank the November air like a shipwreck. The plywood boxes at the back, screwed in with enthusiasm and disparate screw types, came out with a protest. We found a sticky tide mark around the wheel arch that had never dried. When Nate lifted a section of insulation, it sighed and dripped. Vapour barrier, he said, in the tone of someone diagnosing a failed exam. He poked at the plastic that was meant to do that job. It hung in patches like confetti. In others, it was absent entirely. Don’t people just put the stuff in? I asked, thinking of Jasper’s hand on my palm. Insulation, barrier, wood? People, Nate said, and lifted his goggles to rub the bridge of his nose, do exactly what they can get away with, and then put carpeting over

its damp thumb across everything. We talked about the van's smell in euphemisms. Earthy, I said. Mountain hut. Dog spa, Kay said the day she sneezed from the minute she climbed in. She laughed, but it came out skittish. When I dropped her home, she opened the door with a haste that made me joke about kidnapping. I turned the kettle off and set it on the floor, wedging it next to the stack of enamel mugs. The puck light buzzed. On reflex, I cracked the slider a fraction. Cold moved in like a polite guest who brought a casserole and never left. I leaned down, put my face near the seam of the right-hand wall, and took a breath. There's a point where denial expires. It's subtle, like a rubber band losing its elasticity. You can keep stretching it until it doesn't spring back. Okay, I said to the van. My voice sounded like I'd smoked cigars for a decade. Okay. I picked at the corner of the felt where the wiring for the reading lamp disappeared. The adhesive held with the stubbornness of a toddler. When it finally gave, it didn't peel so much as tear, offering up furred clouds of grey. Black flecked the back of the felt, fungal constellations that looked almost pretty until you considered their ambition. The plywood beneath had gone from gold to sullen in patches. When I pressed my thumb for bravery, water welled up. By nine, I'd pulled the top section off from the slider around the back to the bed. The floor wore a beard of fibreglass and Dust That Was Not Dust. My eyes stung. Every time I coughed, the van answered. It was like living inside a bagpipe with a chest infection. I called Nate. You up? I'm always up, he said, which meant he'd been awake since five because his brain had choirs. What did the van do? I told him. He made the sympathetic suck-teeth noise of a man who had once bought a

their lives, as all heroes must. Ants, mice, and wasps unionized and elected a foreman named Pepito, who, as the story goes, had a tiny helmet and a whistle and a plan. They formed a picket line across the sink and demanded better conditions, translation: crumbs. Pepito negotiated a treaty whereby the wasps could occupy the ceiling vents and the mice would audition for Pixar in the pantry. Lola found herself making inspirational speeches to the ants. You are so small and so determined, she told them. You are micro-influencers. You have lost control of the narrative, Teo said, as a wasp did a flyby buzz that spelt PRIVACY in Morse code. He ordered screens. The screens went on strike. The wind tried to roll them. Appliances tried to ghost them. Their propane line became a long-distance relationship with danger, full of mixed signals and unplanned meet-cutes. A dashboard light blinked for days, making eye contact at dawn and dusk like a suitor with a secret. Dear reader, Lola said into the camera whisper, if a dashboard light winks, it's not flirting. It's filing for divorce. Through it all, they kept posting. The internet loves a train wreck. Especially one with a drone shot. They veered increasingly into mockumentary: deadpan cutaways in front of ancient Roman bridges where Teo would say, The arch is a metaphor for my hopes. Load-bearing and flexible, and then an unseen pigeon would relieve itself on his shoulder and he would add, Also, subject to gravity and destiny's progressive tax. And then Aragón. The finale you could feel even if you didn't know finales. A calm riverside campsite, the kind with watercolor light and children who have never been sticky. The river was polite, the trees wearing leisure. We did it, Lola sighed, as if the universe had graduated and was free to travel. A

safe place. Spain is not trying to kill us, Teo said, stretching his spine into a yes. Our optimism is. Put that on a T-shirt, Lola said, and meant it. They set up their chairs, their s'mores, their illusions. The sky put on a discount star show. Panic fell asleep with his tongue out like a party streamer. The van settled on her haunches, content. At three in the morning, the river changed its mind. They woke to water fingerpainting their ankles. The campsite was a half-minute away from Atlantis. Someone shouted in German in a way that made the water step back, but not far enough. Do we swim? Lola asked, hair already doing a Greek tragedy. We evolve, Teo said, grabbing the industrial-sized squeegee they had bought in a gas station because the algorithm told them squeegees were the new meditation bells. The squeegee became Excalibur. The water became an employee with a grievance. They fought. It was slapstick and sacrament. Teo, waist-deep, pushing water out with frantic dignity. Lola, perched on a chair on top of the picnic table, calling orders like a general in a war against damp. Panic surfed a cutting board like a saint on a tortilla. Carmen's electrical panel took on a thousand-yard stare. The river shrugged with the shoulders of a nation's worth of rainfall upstream. Here is your turning point: the cameras, perched on their shelves, were witnessing a viral moment. The kind that would extract sponsors from their burrows. The easy choice, the human-ego choice, said: film it. Make your suffering into content. Turn the flood into a thumbnail with a screaming face. Lola looked at the cameras, their little robot eyes unblinking. Teo looked at Lola, the human eye blinking too fast. Don't, Lola said. But- Don't. Help me. Please. She didn't raise her voice. She just

pressed my palm to the wall. It felt nice: soft, new, optimistic. Dampens noise. Keeps the warmth in. No condensation issues to speak of. You'll be laughing. I'd wanted to laugh. I'd wanted the version of me who wore a beanie and made coffee on a ridge and referred to places by the name of their forest rather than the name of the retail park nearby. The sign on Jasper's fold-out table read: Weekenders, Weekdays, Wanderlust. The price was high, but the foxes on his shirt were cheeky in a way that suggested honesty, and the way he moved his hands had a competence that hummed. It wasn't charlatans who put up fairy lights. You'll want to air it out a bit in winter, he'd said, making a Gemini's worth of air quotes. Just crack a window. Little dampness happens. UK, am I right? He was right about the crack a window bit, if you enjoyed paying to warm the street out of principle. That first night in the van, though, parked on the moors under a sky so clear it made me giddy, I'd believed I'd hacked life. Morning light marbled the felt. I ran a hand over it the way you stroke a new haircut. A robin hopped on the wing mirror as if to co-sign my choices. I fried an egg without setting off the smoke alarm and felt like I'd won. It had been good, at first. Two or three weekends away in late summer. I took friends. Kay brought a deck of cards and lost to everyone with a theatrically offended snort; Nate fell asleep with his head on the folded-up duvet and woke with the imprint of the stitching running across his cheek like a map of estuaries. We hung tea towels on bungee cords. We wrote our names in condensation on the windows and took pictures and decided, together, that we weren't the sort of people to post the pictures online. The sunsets did fine without us. Then autumn began to rub

before it made friends. It did not whisper. But I listened anyway. ##

The Felted Truth

The Felted Truth I woke convinced I’d fallen asleep inside a wet boot. The air in the van had a licked battery taste. Something sour threaded through it-cat litter left in a sauna, the ghost of a cabbage. When I rubbed at my eyes, the pillowcase came away damp. Not dew. Not romance. Just wet. I switched on the little puck light over the kitchenette. The felt lining on the wall looked darker in plummy islands, a bruise running from the ceiling down to the skirting of the ply. I touched it. My fingertips shined. When I sniffed them, my brain flinched. Mold didn’t smell like rot so much as memory: forgotten lunchboxes, a church hall cupboard, a pair of trainers demoted to gardening. The kettle had slept with me, as usual, tucked on its side because the T5’s counter sloped, which I’d told myself was charming. I straightened it, reasoning tea before panic, then coughed half through the boil. Steam rolled up along the felt. The fleece swallowed it. Somewhere inside the wall, something held its breath and bloomed. I’d bought my freedom in a car park with fairy lights strung between tarpaulins. Jasper had a moustache and a shirt patterned with foxes. He stood in front of a line of vans with Velcroed curtains and string of bunting and the air of a man who’d found religion in insulation. This one, he’d said, slapping the T5’s flank as if it were a dependable horse. Weekend warrior. Proper job, feel that. He

switched languages mid-sentence: from the dialect of performance to the dialect of reality. Teo put the GoPro down. He picked up the squeegee. In that quiet decision, louder than any honking semi, every calamity twisted into a new shape: not content, consequence. Not signs, science. Not feedback from the cosmos, feedback from the pipes. They were in a flood. No symbolism needed. Just friends, love, and a heroic piece of sanitation equipment. They worked until dawn peeled a corner of the night and flapped it like a flag. The water retreated, disappointed but respectful. The campsite looked like the morning after a history. The Germans gave them coffee with the stern benevolence of classical music. A woman from Zaragoza handed them towels and a lecture. The lecture contained wisdom and a recipe for lentils. They laughed, choked, cried a snip, laughed again. It was the laugh of people who had misread every horoscope and finally bought a calendar. They spent the day in sun, drying sheet by sheet, memory by memory. Panic napped inside the wheel well, dreaming of rivers learning manners. Carmen, wounded, gave a brave little beep when Teo tested a light. It wasn’t the light that had winked. It was another one, new to the chorus. They made a choice. They decided to go home. Not because they were beaten. Because sometimes the quest is a circle you draw so that you can step out of it. Because sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is stop making metaphors and buy a torque wrench. They drove north and east, each kilometer a sigh. They stopped for the things they hadn’t stopped for on the way down: a man making knives by hand; a church where the tourists whispered the way your mother whispered on the phone when she didn’t want you to know your

uncle had opinions; a café where the croissants were crisp enough to cut and soft enough to forgive. They filmed, but with gentleness, as if cameras were grandchildren and needed naps. At the border, the customs officer asked, Anything to declare? They looked at each other. Yes, Teo said. Humility. Several kilos. No fruit, Lola added. But we do have an illegal amount of candor. The officer waved them through with a smile that seemed to know that lives are lists we keep misplacing. At home, they parked Carmen VanDiego in the garage. The perfect, safe parking spot. The light was the kind of light that makes garages look like movie sets in which nothing bad happens. They turned the engine off. The silence seemed edible. We survived by weaponizing wit, friendship, and an industrial-sized squeegee, Lola summarized, because she wasn't entirely cured. They co-wrote a book. How Not To Die In A Van In Spain. Chapters included: The Hiss of Cádiz, Brake Me Up Before You Go-Go, Paella Under Pressure, Flambé Dreams and Propane Nightmares, Pepito: A Union Story, Gravity Doesn't Read Your Blog, 1000 and 1 Ways To Misinterpret a Dashboard Light, and the pièce de resistance: Atlantis, Or, How I Learned To Stop Filming And Love The Squeegee. They printed exactly eleven copies, because the algorithm had never heard of scarcity. Their friends read it and laughed so hard their honest scars ached. Their mothers read it and made them soup and phoned their therapists. Their commenters said, This is growth, and, When's the sequel, because human beings will always ask for season two. They reorganized their garage, which is to say they moved boxes from one place to a place that felt like progress. Panic adopted a chicken that

If you are reading this and thinking, Don't judge me. I like my moist. I like my denial. I like my adhesives that smell like citrus and regret, I won't judge you. But I will leave you with this: mold doesn't care about your vibe. It doesn't care about your brand. It cares about what you feed it. So does fear. And also joy. And on the topic of feeding, we made a new sandwich that week, at Irma's suggestion. Oyster mushrooms, caramelized onions, a slice of honesty, toasted until the edges were just this side of char. We named it The Turning Point. It sold out in thirty minutes. People asked what was in it. Choice, I said. Choice, Pam echoed. Exhaust, Irma added, patting the vent that hummed like a machine that had finally been listened to. Chad, wiping down the counter, smiled, shy as an apology. And a little salt, he said, because people always forget the salt. We fed people. We vented. We laughed. We stayed, sometimes, because staying is underrated. We moved, sometimes, because wheels are a suggestion, and not a bad one. The Béla Van Go kept going, fungal scars and all. Do I still wake up, once in a while, in a cold panic because a drop of condensation landed on my forehead and I mistook it for an omen? Of course. I am, after all, a person who owns a complicated machine I live inside of. But when I hear the drip, I breathe, I open a window, and I tell myself a new story, the one in which I am not the guy who signed the NDA, but the guy who sells sandwiches and admits he sweats. Is that an ending? Are we done? Endings, like vents, are just starts in a different direction. If you need something concrete, here: The mold came back once, in a corner I forgot. It was small and brave. I said, Hello, fancy boy, and cleaned it up

Unlearn. Vent. Probation, she declared. And if you say synergy in my presence, I will put you in time-out with the desiccant packets. He smiled, real and crooked. Deal. Later, we sat on camp chairs behind the Fungi-van, sweat cooling on our forearms, the air moving in ways that felt like planned breathing. Chad practiced listening. Irma told a story about a carburetor she loved and lost. Pam read aloud from a zine about emotional ventilation titled Be a Fan. I thought of the version of me who had once believed sheens and slogans and a skylight that was a hole. I thought of the version of me currently wearing an apron that said SPORELORD and wondered who he would become next. Do you miss it? Pam asked. What? The version where you were alone, she said. Where you didn't know anyone would come with a headlamp and a bag of screws. I thought being alone was the point, I admitted. The unfettered. The choose-your-own-adventure. But every choice is just the first one. You start with solitude, and then you choose who to invite in. She nodded. The horizon achieved its nightly drama. A mouse drank from a puddle. A van that used to be a bog exhaled evenly, which is as profound as I care to get about appliances. It still hissed, sometimes. It still whispered. It had opinions. But we had installed actual vents, which turns out to be more of a metaphor than I intended. I want to be the kind of person who vents instead of explodes. I want to be the kind of person who names my mold, not because it makes it cuter but because it makes it real. Max! someone shouted from the front. We're out of sporead. I'm coming! I shouted back. Which is to say: I am going. Which is to say: I am living. One more thing. There's always one more thing. Stories and cabinets both have hidden compartments.

wandered in and decided to identify as a cat. Pepito the ant foreman went missing in action, presumed retired to the potted basil. They slept in a bed that didn't threaten to roll. Two weeks later, a letter arrived. It had that official heft that makes you stand straighter. The envelope was stained with something that looked like sangria and smelled like destiny. Dear Carmen VanDiego, it read, in a font that had attended festivals. Congratulations. You have been accepted to run with the bulls. They looked at each other. There was a silence as long as a castanet. This is a joke, Teo said. Is this what spam looks like on paper? It's addressed to the van, Lola said, blinking. Who is writing to our van. Maybe the van applied on her own, Teo muttered. I mean, we anthropomorphize her all the time. Perhaps she anthropo-actualized. Spain does have paperwork, Lola said, remembering a man in Pamplona whose calves were earnest. They laughed. They framed the letter. They went to bed. In the morning, the garage was empty. The door was up, and there were tire marks like a signature. The neighbor swore they had heard a low rumble in the night, and a snatch of music, and someone shouting Ole! but it might have been a cat with aspirations. Did someone steal the van again? Teo asked, already dialing. No, Lola said slowly, looking at the letter again, as if paper could be a mirror. She left. The news that afternoon featured a shot of San Fermín. White pants, red scarves, adrenaline packaged as tradition. And there, in the crowd, unmistakable as a friend in a dream: a white rectangular shape, gleaming. People cheered. The van ran with the bulls. Carmen VanDiego drifted between horns with the grace of a swan on roller skates. A commentator said something about the new face of extreme

sports. Someone else said, Finally, a vehicle that understands festival culture. Panic and Lola and Teo watched, mouths open to catch flies of bewilderment. The bulls seemed delighted. Or confused. Or enlightened. It's hard to tell with bulls; they're very tight-lipped. Should we go after her? Teo asked, his hand on his heart as if it were an engine he could crank. Lola shook her head. I think she's on her own journey. And then, reader, the last wink. The dashboard light, in absentia, stopped blinking. Not because the problem was solved. Because sometimes you don't need the sign anymore to know what it was saying. They went outside. The garage stood there, newly honest. The sky was a lidless eye. They sat on the curb and ate the last of the cheese that had not committed crimes. They laughed and cried the way people do when something really big has gone slightly absurd. You realize, Teo said, our optimism finally saved us. How so? If Carmen wants to flirt with mortality, she can do it without us. They published their book. They took public transport and called it anthropology. They learned to read the signs. All of them. Stop. Flood Zone. No Camping. Altura Maxima. Low Battery. Friend Requests. Sometimes people wrote and said, You inspired us to buy a van. Lola would write back, We inspired you to buy a library card. Teo would add, And a squeegee. And every July, they watched the footage. Carmen VanDiego, fearless idiot, gleaming rectangle among muscle and myth, outrunning their need to narrate it. Running with the bulls, without them. Spain was not trying to kill them, after all. Spain was running with its own ridiculous dignity. And somewhere out there, maybe, Pepito, in a tiny white scarf, shouting solidarity. If we must end with a moral, let it be this: The

windows. It was not a tidy ending. There were still leaks sometimes. We found new places where water hides, like a mischievous child in a game of hide-and-seek that you're too tired to play. But the panic receded. The drama softened from major key to a hummable minor one. Even my Instagram learned to love unflattering truth; the algorithm stopped sending me men in sweaters and started sending me videos of carpenters making dovetails, which is to say, it began to respect me. Months later, on a morning when the air tasted like a promise kept, Chad came by. Of course he did. Villains, like mold, are opportunists. He arrived not in a truck, but on a rented scooter, which I chose to interpret as penance. Max, he said, which is a hard word to say without sounding like you are trying to sell someone a surfboard. Chad, I replied, very very equal. He rubbed the back of his neck. I, uh, wanted to say… you were right. About what? About the swamp spa, he said, managing to laugh at himself in a way that suggested this was a new muscle, sore and underused. They demoted me. I work in customer service now. It's humbling. Humbling, I said, tasting the word like a mushroom I didn't recognize. I thought maybe- He looked at the menu and then at me. Jobs? Jobs? Irma said, appearing like a cartoon cat. You want to work for the people you sold a boat that was a van to? Please, Chad said. I can do… marketing. I can brand things. I can talk. I can spin. Can you listen? I asked. He paused. I am learning how. We looked at Pam. Pam looked at The Manifesto, which we had framed and hung in the van above the handwashing station, because we learned at least one thing: wash your hands. It said, among other things: Admit your moisture. Make repairs. Avoid shame. Help others.

dragon guarding a princess who wants to go to college. We did. Because this is comedy, but also because this is America, and when life gives you a fungal crisis, you invent artisanal mushroom sandwiches. We painted the van a color called Anti-Mildew Twilight, which is a lie because mold is colorblind but hope isn't. We installed an exhaust fan so powerful it could inhale a lie from across the county. We got permits, a process that required me to interact with more clipboards than a high school nurse, and tested recipes until the phrase mouthfeel lost all meaning. Opening day, we parked the Fungi-van at a farmers' market swarming with people who could be described as deranged for microgreens. Chad did not show up, because that would be too on the nose, but his absence had the dramatic weight of a boo in a cheap theater. People lined up. Pam worked the register in a hat that said SPORE WHISPERER. Irma handled the grill with the elation of a person who has won a fight against entropy and now gets to make sandwiches. I chatted with customers about the van, about mold, about excessive optimism and appropriate sealants. I cracked jokes about my past: how I had tried to beat fungus with vibes. How I had named my moisture. A woman in line, hair clipped up with the determination of someone who had not been allowed to be messy for a long time, looked at the van as if it were a mirror. I bought a fixer-upper house during the pandemic, she said. It was a metaphor. How's the metaphor? I asked. It's teaching me to enjoy drywall, she said, smiling a smile that turned out to be a little soggy around the edges. We sold out that first day. And the second. And the third. The Dry Campers stopped being Dry; they ate mushrooms with the rest of us and talked about better

universe is not your mirror. It is a river. Sometimes it floods your campsite. Sometimes it carries your van to glory. Learn to swim, learn to squeegee, and for the love of god, if a dashboard light winks, buy it dinner or fix the pump. Either way, pay attention. It's much funnier that way. ##

Brake Fade and Sangria

Brake Fade and Sangria

The riverbed in Valencia had looked sleepy enough to picnic in. We had even talked about kicking a ball in it, then laughed because we didn't own a ball and there was no way either of us could afford insurance for whatever ligaments that would involve. Ten minutes later the dry became not dry. It rose without manners and, with the casual shove of a drunk uncle, lifted our van like a bread tin. The wheels lost everything to brown water and grit. Luca yelled Neutral! and I yelled something not helpful and grabbed the cabinets because that's what the body does when walls turn to strangers.

It wasn't supposed to go like that. The plan was Spain in a rattling camper with more stickers than structural integrity because Instagram had told us it was charming, and we were suckers for charm. The van was old enough to be a decade away from a museum piece and thick with stories we pretended we understood. It had a Two-Burner Adventure Stove that hissed if you looked at it wrong and a fridge that groaned like a middle

school trombone. We had given it no name, out of superstition or shame. The silence about the name felt like a pact.

We had both wanted that wandering, sun-baked life where you wake up to salt and a horizon and some small animal tries to get your bread. He wanted to fix things with advice from men named VanMan73 with ten-minute videos that cut away right before the hard part. I wanted to read in the shade of the sliding door and see old stones. We met in the middle, which turned out to be the breakdown lane of a dozen provinces.

It started for real in Cádiz, where the wind tastes like a battery and the sun goes trebuchet at four. We made tortilla on the stove under the cabinets. The burner faltered, then let out a long, thin hiss. I leaned in to make sure the flame was steady and a ribbon of fire went from the regulator to the hairs on my face as if it had been waiting for me to do something that stupid. I dropped the pan. Luca lunged for the gas. The flame caught hand skin and eyebrow and a corner of the curtains. It was a whisper more than a roar, but it was enough. We batted it out with a towel and our breath. The room stank of singed hair and butane and eggs.

We need a new regulator, I said when my heart was a mammal again.

He rubbed thumb and forefinger over his eyebrow and looked at the char on the curtain. We need the right adapter. It's the Spanish bottle. VanMan had a video.

Great. Do we go tell the ferretería we watched a man named VanMan and he's pretty sure this orange plastic thing is wrong?

tired arms. But it also leaves you with a hangover called Who am I when I am not angry at a man with a shiny blazer? Who are you? Pam asked one evening, as we watched the sun set in a manner so dramatic I wanted to file a complaint. I opened my mouth to say something clever and heard myself say the truth. I'm a person who thought the point of this was freedom, I said, gesturing to the van, to the road, to the horizon, to the grocery store where, if I were honest, I wanted to go because I was craving rotisserie chicken. But maybe the point isn't to be free from things. Maybe it's to be free with them. Mold. People. Leaks. Schedules. Owning the fact that I'm the kind of guy who wants to live in a vehicle and also the kind of guy who uses coasters. That I hate mildew but require humidity to keep my hair in check. Pam looked at me the way a good manager looks at an employee who has stopped trying to optimize their personality and started doing the job. We all have fungus, she said. Some of us just name it. And some of us turn it into a side hustle, Irma added, walking over with a Tupperware of what looked like dry brownies and smelled like a forest. What's this? Jerky. She handed me a piece. It was dense, chewy, and tasted like salt and survival. Mushroom. We're selling it at the market as Funguy Strips. Slogan: 'Spores You Can Snore Near.' That's terrible, I said, chewing. I love it. We joked about launching the Fungi-van: a mobile food truck selling umami and good decisions. I laughed. I then stopped laughing, because the idea dug its mycelium into the moist soil of my entrepreneurial cortex. Could we? I asked. Should we? Pam countered. I can fabricate a countertop that doesn't cry, Irma said. I can fit a fridge that seals like a nun. I can design a vent with the ferocity of a

where there had been metaphors. We argued about screws. We patched the skylight-hole with an actual skylight, which felt like turning a scab into a tattoo. The mold-Fancy Boy-receded, reluctantly, like a colonizer forced to return land it never owned. We posted, in unflattering photos: the rot, the fix, the receipts. The Dry Campers' Manifesto became a PDF with photos of people in ridiculous hats holding planks of wood. It spread. And, with the enthusiasm of a hawk on a mouse, a lawyer found us. Her name was Debra. She arrived in a minivan with leather seats. She wore sneakers and command. I like your story, she said, simple as that. I like it because it's boring. Companies hate boring stories that are true. Chad's company folded faster than a shiny brochure left in a puddle. There was a settlement. Buyers got repairs, or replacements, or at least apology money to buy better fans. There were interviews. Somebody stuck a microphone in my face and I said something about ethics in van-facturing and then tossed my head like I'd accomplished something real. And I had, which I say not to brag but because we are, at our core, herd animals, and sometimes the only way to move the herd away from the cliff is to point and say, That's a cliff. Months passed. Dry ones, mostly. The Béla Van Go, ironically, became more go. I learned to live with the fact that condensation is a roommate, not a home invader: you set boundaries; you communicate; you open the window even if it's cold, because romance dies in stagnation. I was less interesting at parties. People would ask, How's van life? and I would say, Reasonably ventilated, and they would move on to a man who breeds succulents. The clicks slowed. The outrage dissipated. That is, in a way, good, because perpetually clenched fists make for

We can show them the piece, he said, and the laugh he tried to paste on slid off his face and landed somewhere under the bed with all the other things.

We did laugh after, because it was easier than throat-screaming in a hardware store about regulators and adapters neither of us could name in English or Spanish. We replaced the regulator, pretended we trusted that flame again, and moved.

Spain smiled. The van shrugged.

Valencia's flood shoved us up against a plane tree that had probably been waiting all week to be useful. The side of the van kissed bark. The water pushed another inch, another. I felt the jack and the spare and the pots and the forks slide in their nests as if the van had shifted its bones. A fork hit the inside of the door and left a star.

Windows, I said.

What?

Up. I cranked mine. He reached for his, then judged the water's line like a teacher with a pointer on a map. The tree caught us enough that the current had to change its mind, and then it did.

Later, on asphalt, we listened to the engine tick cool in the sudden quiet and counted the ways we were idiots. It took twenty minutes, and we knew we were only a third of the way through.

Dry riverbeds, Luca said, twisting the ring he wore like it was a bolt. They always look…

Like postcards.

Yeah.

I let the word sit with the grit under my nails. The van smelled like mud and kitchen. My skin smelled like burned eyebrow.

We drove. We filled our days with small decisions that felt like competence and were mostly coin flips: this campsite, that pullout, those waving cousins who started talking to us before we had any chance of answering. We learned the smell of eucalyptus and hot brake pads and cheap diesel. We learned to reverse uphill so the fuel pump would stay submerged. We learned that when a cabinet latch fails on a curve, a coffee mug can become a bullet.

On a mountain pull-off in Andalusia, I tried to level us with rocks because the bed rolled us into each other like a tongue tied to its idea of humor. I slid the jack under the control arm and pumped it up. The ground was fine until it wasn't. The jack slipped. The metal kissed my shin with a surprising intimacy, and I sat down hard, the sound of my breath bouncing off the inside of the van. The blood didn't gush, which felt like a mercy and a dare.

Luca crouched. You okay?

I don't know yet, I said. I felt the bone with my fingers the way you check if the thing that shouldn't be there is there. It was where it should be. The ache bloomed slow. We wrapped it in a clean T-shirt and a strip of duct tape because this was the religion we had.

He watched the sunset and then, without looking at me, said, VanMan said always chock. I should have chocked.

I should have used my head, I said.

You did, he said. We both let the joke sit there, short-lived.

Castilla-La Mancha gave us a tire blowout that slapped the van sideways like we'd said something fresh. It happened on a stretch of road that would have been empty if it had promised to never try to kill you. The wheel shuddered, the steering wheel went mean,

sticker that said DEHUMIDIFY YOUR MIND, do what we do. Make noise. Stop this nonsense. I turned back to Chad. Rain streaked his forehead like apology. I don't sign NDAs, I said. I sign manifestos. Pam? Page two, she said. Right below 'We are not lizards; we need moisture, but in moderation.' Chad folded. Or rather, he folded the offer back into his briefcase, which is the same but looks tidier. This is going to be messy, he said. You're right, I said. It's going to be damp, too. But that's reality. He left, which is to say he performed a wet retreat, his tires spitting up arcane desert water that had once watered a cactus and now watered my sense of vindication. The rain slackened, as if approving. Okay, Irma said, cracking her knuckles. Now for the half of the story that doesn't test well: we fix it. What does fixing it look like? I asked, too aware of the hollowness under my bravado. It looks like patience, she said. And cutting out rot. And admitting you can't solve everything with essential oils. It looks like being poor for a bit. It looks like letting strangers help. How many strangers? I said, trying to inject levity because the alternative was to start crying into my dehumidifier. Enough, Pam said. More than you think, fewer than you fear. The Dry Campers formed an assembly line like ants who had all read a self-help book about community. My cabinets came out. My bed came out. My pride came out. Irma tutored me in the language of things that do not want to be wet: tongue-and-groove, vapor barrier, R-value. I learned about airflow the way some people learn about love: painfully, with a lot of backtracking, and at least once while holding an oscillating fan in my lap and whispering, Tell me your secrets. We dried. We scrubbed. We sealed. We created vents

said, meeting the eyes of my narrative like a man who had finally found his line and liked the taste of it, to stop lying. To yourself? Irma asked. Also that, I said. But mostly I want him, and I pointed to Chad with the sort of finger that would get me booted from polite society but earn me respect in a biker bar, to stop selling swamps as spas. Chad laughed. Don't be dramatic. I'm not being dramatic, I said. I'm being- Satirical? Pam offered. Literal, I said. I bought a mobile habitat from you that is more Habi and less Tat. Chad's smile was trying to leave his face without seeming rude. Max, let's be rational. Let's, I said, which is always a warning. How many of your Moldel X buyers had this problem? Statistically- No. Actual numbers. He looked at Irma, then at an exit sign that didn't exist, then shrugged. Some. Some like ten? Or some like most? Or some like we need a class action with a catchy name, like 'The Mildew Militia'? Max, he said, tone shifting. Sign the NDA. I'll take your van. You'll get a new one. We'll all walk away happy. And all the other Maxes? Pam asked, dry even in the rain. They just keep coughing until they think it's vibes? Chad's silence told me everything. Here, the story could do one of those dramatic clarinet music things. But because this is absurdist satire, what actually happened is that a dog ran by wearing sunglasses. Yes, the universe has timing. Names mattered, my college professor once said, a woman who smelled like patchouli and tenure. You are the stories you tell. And sometimes, quite literally, you are what you inhale. I'll organize a forum, Irma said, taking out her phone. We'll invite owners. Share photos. Raise a stink. She made a face. Pun not intended. And we'll ask the Dry Campers to… well, Pam sighed, fishing out a megaphone with a

and the van made a sound like something being unmade. We slid, but we didn't roll. We coasted to the verge on a rim that smelled like its own funeral.

Luca paced the shoulder. I crouched by the shredded tire and thought about the photos I had seen of couples grinning at sunsets with their legs tucked under each other and an enamel mug making them taste like wilderness. I put the spare on. Luca kept pacing like he was measuring out a yard of being useful and coming up two inches short.

He brightened. There's a video about this.

There's a video about everything, I said. Do you want to watch it before or after we die of heat exposure.

He looked at me like I had slapped him. I hadn't meant it to land like that. The little shot of mean slid back into my spine and made it itch.

We got back on the road. Barcelona's pines tried arson near a turnout where people had parked and taken selfies as if air couldn't go fire. The wind took notes and passed them around the forest. We moved on before the sirens found their full song. Madrid's autopista introduced us to the color of fear through tempered glass when a truck thought the lane we were in belonged to it. Somewhere near Seville, a stolen RV tore past us like it had been summoned by a bad idea, sirens behind it, and Luca started naming exit numbers out loud, like prayer, like practice.

Inside, cabinets popped open in a crash and turned forks into small nails. Ants learned our routes. They showed up for the sugar and stayed for the crumbs of our patience. The fridge quit during a heat wave. We watched our food die the way a child watches a

sand castle die-too aware and too slow. The milk gave up first. Then the things that could lie about themselves, the hummus and the jarred peppers. The vegetables had final dignity. I threw them away with a little salute.

We got robbed in Murcia, because of course we did. It was late, and the lot looked like every cursed lot-too light in the wrong places and too dark in the right ones. We wedged a bungee through the handles of the back doors anyway and slept like people who had not wedged a bungee through anything. In the morning the front pocket was inside out and the glove compartment an exploded moth. The cheap Bluetooth speaker was gone. The coins that weren't even enough for parking were gone. The knife was gone. They left the van and us and most of our life. We sat there with coffee from a gas station and looked at the space where cheap things had been, and I felt both stupid and relieved so hard my chest rose against the feeling like it might crack.

They didn't take the passports, Luca said.

They didn't take the friend who knew where the nearest embassy was either, I said. I looked at the door lock and its new opinion about locks.

He rubbed his jaw. It's not like we made a sign. We did everything right, he said. He said it as a dare to me, or to fate, or to the van. I didn't know which.

Tarifa sand got into the fan and into the coffee and into the sheets and tried to take the van with it, and we tried to learn how to sleep when air moved as if it had plans we weren't invited to. The dash flickered and warned us that maybe our fuel line wanted to whisper fire. Luca guessed wiring with hope. I guessed the

exceptional quality of meaning both to remember and to admit you messed up and please bring it back. Language, like water, finds paths. Max, Chad said, sliding into a lower register of voice labeled confidential andor sinister, I can make this go away. Can you? I tried a jovial tone. It came out as a yelp. Because it's raining inside my house. I can get you into a new unit, he murmured, producing a contract that smelled like laminate and regret. Upgrade. Deluxe. Finance it with our proprietary model. You sign this NDA, we replace your van, you post a few positive things- I'm sorry. I blinked rain off my eyelashes. An NDA? Just a simple agreement, he said. Standard. Routine. You promise not to mention… unresolved disagreements with physics. In return, you get a fresh start. Irma was watching me. Pam, too, arms crossed, which was twenty percent posture and eighty percent ideology. Here we were, then: the turning point, which you and I know is the part of the story where the protagonist must choose between his Instagram image and his moral backbone; between convenience and honesty; between the human urge to fix things by papering them over and the equally human urge to blow things up and rebuild from the charred studs. Also, I was physically wet, which tends to sharpen the mind. What do you want, Max? Irma asked, softly. I appreciated that she didn't say really. Do you want the van-life you imagined, or the one you have? I looked at my soggy pillow. My mushy shiplap. My Fløøf 1000, which was humming like a meditative cow. I looked at Pam, who I suspected considered herself as a semi-permeable membrane: supportive but not enabling. I looked at Chad, whose blazer was the only dry thing in my line of sight, because the world is not fair. I want, I

hand on my shoulder and then realized my shoulder was wet and decisively removed his hand. Let's talk solutions. We're using that word differently, I said. He popped the trunk. Inside: devices that looked like conch shells mated with credit card readers. Desiccant packets the size of toddlers. A glossy brochure featuring a man in a sweater leaning against a cutting board. Introducing the AirVangelist, Chad said, handing me a device that hummed with the zeal of a convert. It's like… ventilation, but brand-forward. It recycles your damp. Turns water into content. Into what? Have you thought about launching a beverage? he asked, not hearing himself. Evaporate, condense, carbonate- Irma closed her eyes. Buddy. Look, I said, taking a breath that tried to bring clarity and only brought more mildew, my van is- Alive, Chad said, beaming. It's a living space! It's supposed to breathe. Breathe less! Pam shouted over the rain, which drummed on the van like a drum circle was attempting to summon Thor. Irma knelt and tapped the lip of the skylight. Her finger came away black. Tell me something, Chad. You sell him the silicone? The sealant? The rivets made out of hope? The roof coating that says, 'Water? Never heard of her'? Chad's smile flickered. Our Moldel X line comes standard with- Stop, Irma said, not loudly, just with deadly precision. This van left the lot with a roof that would cry during a Pixar movie. You knew it. He didn't. That's why you named it something that sounds like mold. Chad chuckled. That was a joke. Interesting, Irma said. When did you recall the 2019 Moldel X for- let me guess-'waterproofing-inspired upgrades'? He blinked. There was no recall. Curious, because I just recalled it. I want to pause here to discuss the word recall, which in English has the

opposite with the calm of a coward. We both compromised. We kept moving and watched each other like people on either side of a river.

By then, my sleep had shifted into something that was more counting than rest. I measured nights in engine ticks and phantom waterlines and imagined the van's failures as animals I might be able to name. My body knew how to fling itself awake to strange noises. It learned to listen for the hum of the fridge that meant the solar panel had done its little job. It learned the absence of that hum too and how to stare at the ceiling and count ants.

I feel like we're carrying the van, I said one morning outside a Repsol in Córdoba, watching the pump count too fast and the digital numbers blink like a line of impatient friends. Like the weight moved.

It's all stress, he said, watching the liters flow like he had something to prove to them. We're fine. We've had bad luck.

I said nothing, because bad luck had begun to sound like a way of saying consequences without having to move any furniture around inside his head.

We headed for the Pyrenees because we thought more mountains would be good for our mountain of problems. The air at night got thin enough that the sheets felt like paper. The van took the grade like it had been told a joke it didn't understand. The brake fluid did what it always does when a heavy thing is asked to be light: it faded. The pedal went soft, and the smell of cooked coins slid into the cabin as if invited. The hairpins were ready to be carved by cars that had never been anything but cars. We were

a rectangular house with a steering wheel, making hard faces at physics.

Midway up, the brake pedal went hockey rink under my foot. The guardrail had scratches on it like a tattoo of previous mistakes. I eased into second, then first, then the thing the gear lever did that wasn't quite anything but made the engine sound like it would either save us or leave. The road was a ribbon wrapping itself around a mountain that didn't know we were there. My palms were a new species. Luca's hand hovered near the dash as if we had a button for prayer.

We made the lookout. He opened the door and put his forehead on the metal as if the van could give him answers through a reverse laying on of hands.

We should pull off, I said. Wait for it to cool.

We can't sit here all day, he said. He laughed a little. It came out like a cough. There's a series from a guy in Utah. He uses engine braking like-

This isn't Utah, I said. This is the place with a cliff and goats that don't pay tax.

He put his hands up, palms out, as if to stop my words or his own. He was getting thinner in small places, where a person gets thin first. I looked at the line between his eyebrows. It had deepened. My own wrists had gone to rope and bird.

The Picos stole power on a day we needed it. The van coughed up a grade and then gave us the kind of silence that was just loud enough to make you look down at your feet as if they were part of the drive train. We coasted into the kind of gravel lot that collects people who had plans ten minutes ago. A man in a hat older than

sprinkles, but a desert not today Satan-rain, where the raindrops are the shape and size of confidence issues. The van, which had been holding itself together via surface tension and lies, started to leak in places I believed to be solid. Water found a path, because water always finds a path, and it chose the one I had just scrubbed, like a cat choosing the one person allergic to it. Ah, said Irma, thoughtfully. There it is. There what is? Your skylight. I don't have a skylight. You do now. Reader, if you are imagining a minor leak, think bigger. Think indoor-water-feature big. Think city-with-canals big. The ceiling gave way with a sigh, and water poured in a steady stream onto my bed, which absorbed it with the enthusiasm of a sponge chosen to audition for a commercial. I ran for a tarp. I tripped on a cooler. The cooler opened, releasing eight cans of sparkling water that performed an interpretive dance of escape down the hill. It's okay, said a voice, serene as a yoga teacher in a burning room. Everything's fixable. The voice belonged to Chad Glossman. I recognized it immediately, because it's the same tone you hear right before an upsell, a pyramid scheme, or a philosophy degree. Chad, I said, which is also language for scorpion. Max! he cried, arms open as if the rain had been arranged to make his blazer glisten. He had emerged from a shiny truck that looked like it used a different kind of gasoline, the kind that comes with a side of smug. I saw your Instagram story about 'taming the damp'-brand synergy, by the way-and thought I'd drop by with something that might help. Help? Irma repeated, with interest, as if help were a code word in a spy movie. Chad smiled at her, mistaking danger for networking. Irma! Heard of you. You're famous in the forum threads. Max, my guy. He put a

sighed. He's having a Growth Moment. A Growth Moment. If it had a smell, it would be citrusy denial. The nearest town was a sixty-mile drive that took forty minutes because out here, the road was a straight line drawn by a drunk god. A man with a hat the size of my anxieties sold me an array of cleaners. Another man, in a store with more knives than seems reasonable for a place that sells yogurt, sold me a box fan so powerful it could blow-dry a horse. I returned triumphant, running on equal parts caffeine and ignorance. Irma! I announced. Stand back. I'll be over here, she said, already standing over there. I propped open the doors and windows, set the fan to Category Four, donned a mask that made me look like a discount Darth Vader Darth Vaguely, and sprayed. Listen: there is a big difference between responsible remediation and exorcism performed by an idiot. I was doing the second one. White foam bubbled. The mold hissed. Again: not literally. Though by now, who could say. I scrubbed with a brush that looked like it had already seen things. I feel I should mention I also sang, which, it turns out, mold is not a fan of, specifically my voice. Hours later, with every surface sticky from my efforts, I sat outside, breathing air that had not recently been in my armpit, feeling victorious in the way that only someone who has misunderstood the assignment can feel. How do you feel? Pam asked, like a school counselor. I have conquered fungus, I declared. The clouds, which had been minding their own business, rolled in. Uh oh, said a Dry Camper, the one with the beard grant. Monsoon. The forecast said- I began. Pam raised a finger. The forecast is a poem. What does that mean? It means it's lying. It began to rain. Not a New York schedule-rain, where it politely

God walked up and told us in Spanish that maybe we should try the filter. Luca followed every third word and nodded like he was catching a good song. We opened the hood. We used the rag. We put it back. We were brave enough to get onto the shoulder again. We were dumb enough to do it twice more that day.

Aragón is not a place people warn you about at breakfast. It had the kind of river that sleeps with one eye open. We found a municipally blessed parking area near the water, because the summer had taught us that sometimes municipalities bless things without reading the second page. The evening was soft. People spoke three languages within arm's reach, and the only words we shared were hello and something about the weather. We slept with the windows cracked and a sense that maybe, finally, the planet had accepted our apology without making us say it out loud.

The water rose at two in the morning. It wasn't a roar. It was a new note that the night added, and then another, and then the sound of stones being taught that they could float if they believed hard enough. We woke to a light that didn't come from any moon I remembered. It came from headlamps and a campsite on its feet. A woman in leggings and a shirt that said RUNNING IS FREE THERAPY pounded on our door and said agua in a way that did not require translation.

I slid from the bed and my knee hit the floor. It was cold through the wood and into the bit of shin I had already upset. Luca was already sitting up. The van tilted more than it had a right to.

Keys, I said. He found them because they were hanging on the hook we had promised to always use and almost always used.

I slipped into the driver's seat with my bare feet finding pedals they wouldn't thank me for. The dashboard glowed in a way I had never respected until right then. The water acquaintance with the tires graduated to something they'd remember in therapy. Outside, in the corner of my eye, a man yelled in French and a woman used German to count children who were all of the ages at once. Someone dragged a kayak like it was a dog that did not want to leave.

You can't turn it over in water, Luca said. Air intake.

I know, I said. I didn't. Not really. But I knew the shape of danger enough to nod at it.

I opened the door and the river tried to climb in like a drunk friend. I steadied the door and slid back out. My feet went numb, and the cold was so earnest I wanted to apologize to it. I grabbed the front corner of the van and felt nothing move. The current had taken a firm interest in us.

Lighten, I said, without thinking I had words left. We lighten.

What? Luca said.

Weight. Everything not bolted. Get it out.

You want to throw away-

I want to survive the mile.

He looked at me like I had slapped him again, and then he nodded. We found new shapes in our faces. We worked.

We pulled the bikes off the back and let the river take them without ceremony. I flung the crate of books that had made me feel like proof of myself when we left home and watched them go pages-first into quick water. I gripped the cast iron pan and made a noise deep in my chest that I will not share with anyone. I let it go.

Didn't respect thermal bridging. Don't worry, we've all-well, no, not all. Most. Some. He patted my arm. Pam offered me a handout from her cargo pocket. The Dry Campers' Manifesto, she said. Articles include 'On Condensation Self-Sabotage,' 'When Windows Weep,' and my personal favorite, 'You Sweated, Admit It.' I don't sweat, I said, defensively, which was a lie told by my entire body. Tell me the truth, Irma said, in a tone that suggested she could smell dishonesty. What cleaners have you used? I listed them: vinegar, tea tree oil, something with a skull on it that said Do Not Use In Enclosed Spaces, and something with a smiling orange. Irma nodded the way an experienced teacher nods while a student explains how they fixed calculus with elbow grease. Okay. So you marinated it. I thought natural products- Allow me to be precise: you made a vinaigrette. If this were a different story, this would be the part where I learned a wholesome lesson about how you cannot out-DIY the laws of physics. And I did, eventually. But first, because of who I am as a person, I made it a lot worse. Look, I said, to Irma, to Pam, to the semi-circle of solar panels and righteous opinions, to my own ego, and to you, dear reader, with whom I have established intimacy by admitting that my van was a petri dish with wheels, I can fix this. Can you? Irma removed her headlamp and pointed to the ceiling. That is not a patch job. That is a colonization. It's on the march. I can fix it, I said again, which is a phrase people say right before something explodes in a YouTube video. I'll get the strongest cleaner known to man. Don't, Irma said. That's how you end up with fumes and regrets. Respectfully, I said, in the tone of a man who has never respected anyone and also believes in magic, how hard can it be? Pam

an algorithm that studied the word trustworthy and misunderstood it; teeth you could check your reflection in; and a blazer so tight it squeaked when he raised his eyebrows. He had sold me The Béla Van Go in a parking lot behind a strip mall that smelled like aspiration and hot rubber. This model, he'd said, patting the van affectionately enough to cause a tremor in the metal, is our Moldel X. That's Moldel, like Model, but with an extra d, for… dependability. He really said that. I remember because my brain took a snapshot and labeled it, Do Not Trust. But I had trusted. He walked me through the amenities with the verbal dexterity of a charismatic raccoon. Solar. Shiplap. A composting toilet with a name that sounded like a sentient marshmallow The Fløøf 1000. A skylight that, I now realized, was actually a skylight-shaped hole. He'd dazzled me with LED twinkle lights and jibed, Who needs a landlord when your landlord is the universe? Reader, I signed. Now, months later, my van was issuing a humidity index that Noel Coward would call indecent. Open your cabinets, Irma said, donning a headlamp and a grim expression I recognized from my pediatrician's face before she told me I had swallowed a Lego. I opened the cabinets. Bread blossomed in fuzzy sweaters. Cups wore a thin moustache of fuzz. The jars of organic almond butter I had bought to impress both myself and strangers had become ominous. That's- I started. Mold, Irma said. Specifically, the Fancy Boy. The… what? The type that enjoys real estate. It's colonizing your plywood and charging rent to your shoes. From the semicircle, an audience had gathered. A guy with a beard that could get a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts nodded. Classic. Newbie mistake. Didn't build a vapor barrier.

We yanked drawers open and took what we didn't need. We put our hands in the mouths of things we had organized and touched the backs of our own throats with the loss.

Bed? he said, his voice paper thin.

Mattress stays, I said. We can sleep on wood. Bed frame out.

We ripped the slats. We threw. Luca reached for the box with his camera gear. He hesitated. He looked at me. Keep. He kept. We chose until every choice was a body part. Outside, the water was patient in its own way, which is to say not at all. The neighbor with the RUNNING shirt shouted something like Hurry and also like You can do this.

With an ugliness I would later call simple, we lightened the van. It rose a whisper. It needed more. We dragged the storage bins full of clothes to the door. We kept three T-shirts and the good socks. The rest went to the river that didn't care for soft fabric.

The van shifted upward a bit. It wasn't poetic. It was physics. I thought about the way you ask for forgiveness from the body by letting it rest and wondered if you ask a machine by taking away what it has to carry. I took the spare bed cushion and threw it. The water hugged it and took it away.

Okay, I said. Now.

I put it in gear. Not reverse, which would have let the current slide us into the park benches like a trick. First. The van did the polite thing where it asks you if you're sure. I was sure. I eased the clutch out the way you take your fingers away from an animal that might bite. The engine coughed. The tires thought about it. The neighbor in leggings put her hands on the headlight and

pushed like she was doing a wall sit under a waterfall because, I realized, she was.

The van moved. It shimmied as if it had found salsa. Luca's hand touched the ceiling and stayed there, like he could hold the van down if it tried to leave.

We got to gravel. The water hissed its annoyance and went by to destroy other things. I stopped, let my forehead hit the steering wheel, and allowed one sob. It came out like air leaving a balloon at a really slow party. I sat up. The campsite had turned into a clinic, then an office, then a neighborhood again. I watched a dog shake and make a parody of rain.

Later, when the sky had the gray light it gets before it decides what kind of day it wants to be, we looked at the space around us and inside the steel box. The van was lighter. We were too. The floor held two mugs, a camera bag, some food, and the mattress. The cabinet doors hung open like gossip. The smell was river, mud, and burned hair from another life.

Luca sat on the threshold with his legs out like a kid who had not been allowed to go into the pool. He touched the place where his eyebrow had tried to regrow after Cádiz. He looked at me and said, You were right.

About?

Surviving the mile.

His voice held no sarcasm. It was a simple admission, and it landed like a soft bird on my shoulder. I let it sit there and then let it fly off if it wanted. He reached up and pressed the ring on his finger against his lip. He did that when he was deciding whether to keep a thought.

like a support group for people who refuse to admit they bought the wrong faucet adapter. We like to keep things desiccated. Emotionally stable. Well-ventilated. Your van sounds… damp. She said damp the way some people say felony. From the patchwork back of Béla, a new character entered the scene: a smell. Rich, complex, with notes of regret, mushrooms, and couch cushion. If smells had a LinkedIn, this one would endorse me for poor decisions. Is that… compost? Pam asked, stepping backward, which was alarming, given she had just told me she was emotionally stable. It's… vibes, I said, quickly. Earthy. Irma! Pam called, cupping her hands to her mouth in a way that suggested she had summoned help from the desert before. Irma Wrench! We got a bog van! I did not like the sound of bog van. Irma Wrench arrived on a skateboard, which was somehow both incongruous and inevitable. She wore a mechanic's suit patched with jean jackets cut from the 90s and a haircut that could disassemble a carburetor by glaring at it. She skidded to a stop with the sort of precision that told you she was very, very good at practical things and very, very uninterested in nonsense. You Max? Yes. You the one who thought sealing the windows with artisanal beeswax was a good idea? I read a blog. Buddy. Irma put her ear against the van door, as if listening to a sleeping dragon. Your van is brewing. So: characters, setting, conflict. Let's pause to say, if you itched when you read that, congratulations-you're alive. Now, a story is only as good as the villain, and my villain was moisture. But because human beings are pattern-seeking creatures who refuse to let the elements be bad guys unless they show up with a face and a warranty, I had Chad Glossman. Imagine slick hair engineered by

say biodegradable toothpaste. If you've never been chastised by a drip, you haven't lived-or you own a home with a roof, which is showing off. My name is Max, and I bought a cheap, poorly designed camper because I possessed exactly the right combination of earnest idealism and catastrophically low mechanical aptitude. There was a salesman involved-there's always a salesman in any story about regret-named Chad Glossman, who assured me The Béla Van Go came investment-grade and adventure-ready, both of which turned out to be synonyms for puddle-friendly. I woke that day somewhere between Monument Valley and my own personal brain fog, parked next to a small fleet of rigs that looked like they had been curated by a dystopian catalog called Hipster Homestead. In the van-lifer ecosystem, I was a possum holding a croissant while the wolves discussed kombucha. The sun was a ruthless landlord knocking on the big blue sky and the wind was a gossip, carrying whispers of the Dry Campers, a militant community known for duct-taping their emotions and double-sealing their windows. Morning, said a woman outside my van as I opened the side door and rolled out like a log of indecision. She was wearing cargo shorts with pockets large enough to store regret and ran a dehumidifier off a solar array that looked like it could cook a roast. Pam. Short for Pamphlet. I'm Max. Short for… Max. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. Something in the van squelched. That is not a sound anybody wants to hear in their home. Or vehicle. Or home-vehicle. Pam smiled, which in the desert means you aren't trying to fight anyone. You new to Dry Rank? Dry Rank? Our community, she said, gesturing at a semicircle of RVs arranged

I wanted this to be… I don't know, the big thing, he said. I wanted to make it look like something. It keeps looking like this.

It looks like not dying, I said. It sounded harsher than I meant. He flinched, then snorted. It was a start.

We spent the morning hosing mud off things that deserved better and throwing out things that had been our personalities. People told jokes in languages I almost understood. They pressed bread on us and asked if we needed blankets and let us try their words for thank you. We said them back wrong and often.

In the afternoon, a man with a hat older than God came by again and told us, in Spanish and patience, that the municipality sometimes opened the dam without telling the people who liked to park and pretend they lived on islands. He laughed with the kind of sadness that sounded like a cough. He looked at our van, lighter now, and nodded at it as if it had found a way to be honest.

We changed after that. Not into different people, not into a different couple; we just rotated ourselves a few degrees to catch a different light. We drove slower. We stayed off highways when the van felt like a marching band after a long parade. We stopped before sundown as often as we could. We filled water whenever we passed water because we had learned that if you wait for the perfect place you sleep thirsty. And I asked the only useful question, again and again, like a mantra a child could understand: how do we survive the mile.

We also spoke honestly about fear the way you speak about a dog you love that keeps biting the mailman. It made us careful, which is to say it made us smarter. Luca started testing bolts without the kind of YouTube zeal that had made him impatient

before. He bought jack stands and used them like a man who had touched his shinbone with a van. He learned words for parts in Spanish and said them to me at the end of the day like a small kid showing you the things he had caught in the creek. Pastillas, he would say, holding up a brake pad, and I would say, Yes, but not for your head.

We took everything we didn’t need to a flea market in Zaragoza and laid it out on a blanket that had seen beaches we would never see again. A woman with hands like mine picked up the cast iron pan I had not been able to abandon twice and haggled with a joy that made me forgive her for being a thief in the way we all are when we bargain for other people’s memories. She got it for less than it was worth. She deserved it. I liked to think she cooked eggs in it and did not set any part of her face on fire.

We kept the camera. We kept the two mugs. We bought a fire extinguisher and mounted it within reach.

The van’s sticker skin had always announced us as people who had been places, which is a charade and a truth. After the flood, the stickers bubbled. I peeled off the ones that had never meant anything and kept the one that was just a black circle because it looked like a bruise.

We became careful in other ways. We did not sleep in lots that looked like they were waiting for crimes. We parked in villages and paid old men in caps five euros to watch us out of the corner of their eyes. We ate in small bars and let the weight of the day be carried by voices around us that had known each other since childhood. We sat with wine the color of people seeing each other for the first time in a week and watched towns close and open

again, until our lungs stopped burning. Hey, Beck murmured later, when the lights were off and the world had gone blessedly quiet. Yeah? Thank you for not letting me rot alone. I swallowed and pressed my face into his neck, and for a breath, the wind outside lifted and the walls held, and the truth we had built was enough to sit in. ##

Moldy Mansion The Hidden Dangers of DIY Camper Living

Moldy Mansion: The Hidden Dangers of DIY Camper Living The morning the ceiling started to hiss at me, I thought, Well, that’s new, and then I remembered I was inside a vehicle I had once-in a burst of optimism and foolishness-named The Béla Van Go. Béla, because it seemed artistic. Van Go, because it refused to stay put. In truth, the only thing that went was my health insurance premium, up like a hot air balloon inflated by my poor life choices, and the only thing artistic about it was the mold, which was creating a moody fresco above my pillow in the style of Damp Renaissance. Is that… whispering? I asked, my voice muffled by a sleeping bag that-like me-held in moisture and secrets. Not whispering, replied the ceiling, with perfect deadpan. Condensing. All right. I’ll admit it: the ceiling didn’t say that. The ceiling, if we’re going to be honest, only said drip, repeatedly and with increasing confidence. But in my defense, a slow drip at 3 a.m. can turn into a TED Talk on life choices faster than you can

knew which wood to use. He took on one rehab vanish-a van so rotten the first time he touched it, his fingers sank in knuckles-deep-and did the remediation right, slow and obsessive, using it as a series to teach people how to recognize lies. He asked me one night, months later, leaned against the van door, whether I'd move into Haven with him. I didn't answer for a minute. The truth was complicated. I loved my apartment with the too-low ceiling because it had seen me through bad weather. I loved my cheap couch and my neighbor's cat and the ugly lamp in my kitchen that everyone thought I should throw out but that only turned on when you whispered please. I loved my job and hated it and wanted to set it on fire and then roast marshmallows in the ruins. Part-time, I said finally. I'll be yours. And I'll also be mine. He nodded. I'll be yours, he said, and also mine. We'll take turns being the haven. When the first snow fell, we drove to the river and parked in a line of rigs with names painted on the sides and grilled cheese on a camping stove while the words maker space and community and rehabilitation drifted like little snowflakes in the dark. People recognized us. They asked questions and told stories and hugged us without asking, because they felt like my piece had made them safe, and news will do that to your head if you're not careful. Later, when we were alone and the heater hummed like a faithful dog, I leaned my head on his shoulder and watched our breath rise. He slid his hand into mine. In that moment, in that van, with that man, the world felt like a place you could sit inside without coughing. We were still morally gray. We were still idiots. We were also a haven built out of hands and time and making the wrong choice until we learned to make the right one, again and

their shutters. We stopped counting each mishap as proof we were failing and started counting each arrival as a quiet victory.

It didn't fix how I slept; some grooves you cut too deep. But it made waking up different. On a morning outside Teruel, I stood by the van and brushed my teeth and watched a man on a bicycle climb a hill with a steadiness I envied. He didn't look heroic. He looked like a person doing a thing that would only be heroic if you looked at it from far away. I spat in the dirt and decided that I had been looking at my life from too far away.

Luca and I fought less often after Aragón and more honestly when we did. The fights had smaller words. Don't do that, I would say, and he would say, Okay. Or he would say, I need this, and I would say, Fine, and mean it as much as I could. We had one big one, a few days after Madrid, about whether to keep going north. It lasted twenty minutes and finished with both of us on the ground outside the van, backs against the tire, dust on our calves.

I feel like I'm dragging a dream by the hair, he said, and I didn't have a decent sentence for that. I put my hand on his forearm and let the weight make its case.

Maybe, I said, we let the dream walk at its own speed.

Maybe, he said, and looked at the horizon in the way people look at menu boards they can't read.

We stopped in León and got the brakes done by a man who didn't try to upsell us because he had eyes. He showed us the pads and said words I knew now. He tapped the rotor and made a face that meant this had been dangerous. Luca nodded. He tipped more than he should have and then didn't complain about it once.

We found ourselves, by accident and some intent, at a small town fiesta near the border with Portugal. The plaza smelled like grilled sardines and hot dust and something floral that made the air feel polite. Children chased each other and screamed in a way that will be the same as long as you have children and sunlight. A woman in a dress with sensible shoes refilled our plastic cups with a red that could have been juice if you were a liar. It wasn't good wine. It was honest wine. It was sangria that tasted like summer had a job.

We leaned against the van with our cups and watched older men clap in time to a song that did not need them but was glad for them anyway. Luca pointed at the van and said, We should sell it when we get home.

Home, I said, and tried not to see the apartment with peeling paint and a neighbor who fixed his guitar late into the night.

Home, he said again. I want a door that doesn't move when I sleep.

The admission surprised me, less because of its content and more because it came without a fight. I let it sit in the air between us and swirl with the smell of sardines and cheap red.

We will, I said. And then, because honesty was a muscle I wanted to keep working, I added, I'm going to take a train south before we do. To Cádiz. I want to see that beach again and not set my face on fire this time.

He looked at me over the rim of his cup. The lights in the square had moths doing their drunk little dances. He took a sip and made his thinking face, which had gotten better at making room for me.

every time I visited, she threw them open like an act of prayer. The first night Beck slept in the van, he invited me to stay. I looked at the ceiling, the cracked white of it, the way the lights shimmered on the new paint. I remembered the rain of spores. I remembered the way he had said my. I undid my jeans and folded them over the arm of the bench he'd made from the old floor and slid under the blanket with him. His breath, against my neck, was slow and heavy and full of the kind of comfort that doesn't ask for proof. We fell asleep with the doors open, the night pressing in cool and full of sound, and woke with the light on our faces and our hands still curled into each other's like knots. When I had nightmares, sometimes, after that-a carousel of lawsuits, ceilings lowering, editorials calling me unethical-I woke to find him peering down at me with that ridiculous affectionate frown that made him look like an apology in a painting. He'd kiss my temple and go make coffee and bring me the mug with a heart in the foam he'd pretended he hadn't learned how to do. When he had his storms-the ones that made him sit up gasping at three a.m.-I'd press my palm to his chest and count his breaths with him in whispers, and when dawn came, he'd go outside and stand on the step and watch it like it could answer the question he was asking. Sometimes, in the half-light, he'd look back at me like I was the answer. We didn't get clean. We got less dirty. We learned where the mold grows-in neglect, in secrecy, in the places you don't put your hand. We ripped it out when we found it. We missed things. We tried again. I wrote a follow-up that made fewer people angry and more people make phone calls. Beck built a bench for a woman whose kid had asthma, though he never told her why he

tasted like sweat and pepper and a little like steel. He made a sound when I bit his lip that I have dreamed about since I learned that people can make sounds. It got steamy, it got messy. It was like everything else we did-too much and probably not OSHA-compliant. He pressed me against the wall where insulation had just gone back and then, swearing, dragged me to the other one that was actual wall and not something that would collapse under his enthusiasm. We laughed into each other's mouths. He said my name in a way that made me feel like a door opening for the first time. I said his like I'd been practicing in lowercase and had suddenly discovered capitals. We didn't destroy anything. We didn't hurry. We didn't pretend we weren't choosing. I knew in the way my body knew gravity that the choice would show up again in different clothes. I would want a scoop I shouldn't take. He would want to cut a corner I shouldn't let him cut. We would make each other better not because we were good but because we wanted to be. Later, sweaty and breathless and laughing at a joke that wasn't funny, we lay across the plywood subfloor and watched the lights blur. He said, We should rename her, and I said, No, and he smiled and said, Yeah. Haven's right. Haven isn't about what happens to you. It's what you build. I wrote my piece with his knee pressed to mine and Norris whistling on the stove. My editor moved commas and tried to soften my verbs. I sharpened them again. Rhett's lawyers wrote letters. Our paper wrote back. Donations poured into real nonprofit organizations that did real remediation. A woman I'd never met sent Beck a set of ceramic mugs she'd made with tiny houses etched into the sides. Marina found a rental with windows all along one wall, and

Okay, he said. I'll go east. Madrid, maybe. Museums where nothing moves unless you want it to.

We were good at this part by then: the part where you let the other person be a person. We clinked cups because we needed a sound. It sounded like plastic pretending to be glass. It was good enough.

The next morning we drove slow, because we could. The road did its snake thing. The radio picked up a station playing a love song that would have been too much if it hadn't been in a language I only half caught. We talked about selling the van without making it an indictment of the idea or each other. We discussed what we would miss. The list surprised us both. He said, The light through that dumb curtain in the morning, and I said, The way the cup holder grabs the bottom of the mug, and meant it.

We crossed into the last week like people who know the edges of their paper. We ate 1.20 coffee and 2 oranges and olives that had no business being so good. We returned to Valencia, not to the riverbed, but to a street where old women leaned out of windows and shouted at men pulling carts. I watched the dry bed from a bench and felt the slow animal of fear inside me curl up and sleep in the warm sun.

On the final day, we parked on a hill above a town that I won't name because I want it to stay what it is: white walls, a square that's the right size, a bar with a fan that looks like it shouldn't do anything but does. The van ticked its last evening ticks. We were lighter than when we started and not just in pounds.

We went to the bar. The bartender had hair he didn't trust and a T-shirt that had seen some things. He poured us sangria that

tasted like fruit and forgiveness and the cheap swirl of a good decision. We sat. We listened to a man at the end of the bar tell a story about a friend who had fallen off a ladder in the way men do when they have no opinion about gravity. We clapped when a song ended. We watched a child stand on a chair and not die of it.

You'll take the train tomorrow, Luca said. He didn't say it like a statistic. He said it like a blessing.

You'll go to Madrid, I said. You'll stand in front of a painting and pretend not to cry.

Yeah, he said, and laughed. You'll learn to make an omelet that doesn't try to kill you.

I'll buy a new pan, I said. Not cast iron.

We'll sell the van together, he said. We'll split the money. We'll argue about where to eat after and then we'll eat at the third place we propose.

And then, I said, because there had to be something after, we'll forget the ants and the exact shape of the Madrid autopista, and we will remember this sangria and the smell of those brakes and the way the water rose and the woman in the leggings, and we will be two people who did this without dying.

We drank to that. It wasn't a toast. It was a sentence. It was the right amount of true.

On the walk back, the air was the good kind of warm. We stopped at the van and pressed our hands to its side. It had been our failure and our shelter, our stupid idea and our best one. It had tried to leave us at least three times. It had brought us to this exact square for this exact cheap, perfect drink. It had taught us the boring virtues. It had taught us that the useful question is always

you could run and organizations you could call, and a pull quote that read: A home is a truth you can sit inside. Back at the co-op that night, I stood inside Haven with my hands on my hips and watched the two dehumidifiers hum like small obedient pets. The black was gone. The walls were raw and bright with new insulation. Beck had hung a strand of warm white lights because he believed in the mood even when everything was still broken. He set a teapot on the countertop that wasn't technically installed and gave it a little pat like it was a dog. Norris? he asked. Norris, I said, and my voice sounded like someone else's-someone who had slept and woken and slept again on the other side of something. He turned to look at me. There was dust in his hair and a streak of something on his cheek. There was also a softness in his eyes I had never seen directed at someone else. He put his hands on the counter on either side of me, bracing them, enclosing me in a box of warm light and the smell of cedar and detergent and him. He bent his head and rested his forehead on mine. You didn't set me on fire, he said, like he thought I needed to hear it. I would have, I said, because I needed him to know that, too. I would have burned half my life to keep you from drowning in yours. He inhaled. I know. We're idiots, I said. We are, he said. High-functioning idiots with decent tool skills. I slid my arms around his waist. He lifted his head and looked down at me, and whatever we'd been holding between our teeth for five years snapped and softened and became a word less than we were afraid of and more than we thought we deserved. He kissed me. It was not cautious. It was not polite. It was not a lean-into-fate kiss. It was two people recognizing a cliff and stepping off because they had built their own parapets. He

your phones. I'm going to AirDrop it to every device in this radius. People laughed and then realized I meant it and then went very still and then a sea of rectangles rose like fireflies. Someone screamed, Hell yes! Someone else yelled, This the content I came for! Rhett reached the steps. Two men in maker-co-op tees stepped into his path like they'd been waiting their whole lives to bodyguard a reckoning. Beck's hand found mine and held it like we were the last two people on a raft. My phone chittered as the AirDrop populated. Names pinged and vanished-iPhone of Dan, Claire's iPhone, VANMOM-like a roll call of witnesses. Around us, devices lit. I watched faces change. I watched joy turn to anger turn to something more complicated and expensive. I watched a woman who had been clapping a moment before whisper oh my god like a prayer and then pull her child closer. Rhett shoved at the men on the stairs, and one of them shoved back. The singer strummed a chord that sounded like a laugh. It was chaos for a while. Security arrived and then the actual cops. Rhett shouted about rights and property and brand slander. I gave my name and my card. Marina arrived, word spreading like mold spores, and she cried into Beck's shirt while he rubbed her back. I called my editor. He told me to get a quote from Rhett. I told him to go sit on a composting toilet. In the end, it was less satisfying than I wanted and more than I thought I'd get. Rhett denied and minimized and tried to charm. People yelled. People left. Papers would be filed. Lawyers would feast. My video would go to my paper and to a dozen attorney inboxes. My piece ran two days later-not the scorched-earth exposé I'd imagined, but a sharp, specific slice of the rot with names and numbers and a sidebar with a list of tests

How do we survive the mile. It had taught us that lighter and slower and kinder were choices we could keep making.

In the morning, the sun came through the curtain and did its dumb, good thing. We packed our bags. We left the sticker that looked like a bruise. We locked the doors and then checked them again and then, for old times' sake, wedged the bungee through the handles because we were us and because superstition is a kind of love.

He walked me to the station. I hugged him on the platform like a human aiming not to get in the way of other humans. He put his hand on my shin, the one with the scar from the jack. He pressed gently as if confirming it was still there. It was. So were we.

The train came in like trains do: a controlled arrival that makes cars look like a bad habit. I stepped on. He stayed. We nodded. No drama. No promise we couldn't keep. The doors closed. I found a seat by the window and watched the van get small, and Luca get small, and the town become an idea with a bell, and then everything turned to fields and the color of dry.

Spain stayed. The van stayed with him for a week and then got listed with a sad, honest ad. I went south and stood on the beach in Cádiz and smiled because the wind did its battery trick and I felt my eyebrows remember and did not light anything on fire. I ate an omelet in a bar that had decided to serve breakfast without telling anyone. I walked until the backs of my knees got salty. I let the day be a day.

Months later, at home, with doors that did not move in the night and walls that did not whisper rivers, I still checked latches with a little tug. I still woke to strange sounds and named them

quickly like a nurse in triage. When I cooked, I watched the flame with respect that was only partly about physics. When I got into cars, I thought about the smell of cooked coins and the way my heart had learned to sit down and wait. And when I sat on a stoop with a paper cup of cheap red, I could taste Spain if I let myself. I could see the bend of a road we didn't go down because we were tired and the way we laughed after the stove and the woman's shirt and the night we chose lighter over being who we had been. I could feel the van in my palms, the way you remember someone you loved and let go of without breaking anything essential.

Brake fade and sangria. Fear and fruit. We had found a way to not make them the same thing, and to let them live in our mouths as different names for the same lesson. We kept going, just not in the way we had imagined. Which is to say we survived the mile, and sometimes that is the entire story and enough. ##

We Practice for Emergencies at Two A M

The panel lied to me, but only at first. It blinked green, hummed like a quiet conscience, and then, at 2:11 a.m., it changed its mind and said WATERFLOW - LEVEL SIX. The tone it made wasn't a siren; it was a suggestion that we might think about panicking later, after coffee. I was the night auditor at the Parkland Suites off I-480, which is not a park and has no particular land. The sign out front lost the T years ago and nobody wanted to pay

person. Something inside me fumbled and rose, astonished and raw. He swallowed. I bought a van, he said, and his voice shook. I bought a dream. And I found a nightmare under the floor. I found mold that made my throat hurt and made my friend's nose bleed. I found rot where there should've been love. And when I asked the person who sold it to me why, he told me he was fixing other people's dreams, and sometimes you have to break eggs to make an omelet. A ripple went through the crowd. Rhett started forward. It didn't matter. Beck was a flame now. My mom used to say that a home is a truth you can sit inside, he said, and his voice steadied. This van was supposed to be my truth. The truth is, I did something stupid to get it. I used plates that weren't mine to drive it home. I did it because I have panic attacks under ceilings and I thought this was my way out. You can judge me. I judge me. But I'm telling you because if I'm going to ask someone else to tell the truth about what they're selling you, I have to tell my own. I swallowed hard. The crowd was no longer a crowd. It was a thousand listening mouths. Rhett was the only person not listening. He was barreling toward the stage with a face like a storm. Beck held out the mic to me. Lily, he said. Tell them. I could have said no. I could have told him about consequences. Instead I took the mic. I have a feed, I said. A recording. Last night, in the green room, a man told his partners that he paid to change the tests on his rehab vans. He joked about people being 'so sensitive' to mold as if allergic reactions are a personality flaw. He uses NDAs to gag the people he hurts. He built a nonprofit to funnel money into his business. If you want to see the video, I said, and my hands didn't shake at all, stand very still and hold up

set up a nonprofit to funnel donations into freedom kits that just happened to be their own merch. They talked about Marina. They joked about how some people were so sensitive, if they sucked on a mushroom, they'd see God. It wasn't enough. It was gross. It was heat. It wasn't fire. And then Rhett said, Don't worry about the old tests. I paid for new ones. We'll make sure we test on a day the bay is dry. People don't need numbers. They need a story. I pressed my thumb into my phone so hard it hurt. Beck was a wire next to me. Is this enough? he asked, low. It's not the smoking gun, I said. It's the hand that holds it. He scraped a hand over his jaw. You could ruin him with less. I could, I said. But I want him to ruin himself. The speech the next day was a hymn to hard work. He said the word community thirty-seven times. He announced the rehab line. Everyone cheered. I watched with my teeth on edge and my hands in my pockets. When he stepped offstage, a woman climbed up with a guitar and sang a song about sleeping under the stars that made me want to call my landlord and apologize for every rent check I'd ever resented. Beck touched my elbow. Now, he said. What? Now, he repeated, and pulled me toward the stage. Beck, I hissed. People were looking at us. He moved anyway. He had that look on his face-the one I'd seen when he decided to build a deck overnight for his neighbor just because the man had mentioned the word party. What are you- He mounted the stairs and took the mic from the singer between chords. She stared at him. The crowd turned. Rhett, across the lot, stilled like a predator mid-pounce. Beck held the mic like a lifeline and then looked at me. This is Lily, he said. She's a journalist. She's my- He hesitated. My. The word lay between us like a precipice. She's my

the guy with the ladder to fix it, so people checked into the Parkland Suies and tried not to look disappointed. The lobby smelled like commercial cleaner and citrus rind. The carpets had a pattern that only made sense if you were a small molecule of spilled bourbon trying to find your way to the ice machine. Nights are good if you hunger for predictability. Nights are good if your most intimate relationships are with printers and locked drawers. My life had narrowed happily to the list of things I knew and checked: reconcile credit cards, print folios, fold folios, slide folios under doors without waking anyone, brew coffee that could strip a penny, wipe fingerprints off the brass plate around the elevator buttons, make sure nobody drowned recreationally. In my version of the world, saving lives was theoretical and mostly involved putting out a wet floor sign where the lobby tile surprised the ill-timed. So when the panel blinked WATERFLOW - LEVEL SIX, my first thought, because I had learned optimism from inanimate objects, was pipe condensation and a nervous sensor. I looked up at the camera monitors, at the elevator doors closed and dumbened, at the spray of lights that meant sleeping customers, and instinct did what it always did at two in the morning. It pushed the intercom button and said, Attention, attention, we are investigating an alarm on the sixth floor. Please remain in your rooms at this time. There is no need to evacuate. It came out calm. It came out like I'd practiced in front of the mirror with the volume low so my neighbors in the staff hallway would keep sleeping. Please have a nice evening, I added, because I couldn't stop myself, because I liked the idea that someone in a bed spread with industrial-grade linens could hear a human voice

at a weird hour and feel a little less alone. The house was quiet as a church that stopped believing in miracles. Six floors up was a long walk if you took the stairs, which we told ourselves we would do in an emergency. I took the elevator, because it was an investigation, not an emergency yet, and because the red scripts that run at three a.m. in your head are written by people who need you to pretend. The elevator murmured up with a little one-two bump at exactly floors two and five, because the rails wanted to be remembered. When the doors opened onto six, the air hit my face like a wet newspaper. The carpet was dark with an enthusiasm that suggested more enthusiasm was coming. From somewhere to my right, behind the long stretch of the hallway, I heard water chew its way through ductwork and drywall. That sound, the hiss-turned-roar of pressure that has somewhere else to be, finds your kneecaps first, then climbs. Hey! a voice called, the kind that learned to be loud in rooms that didn't listen. Hey, hello? A door opened. A man in sweatpants looked out, saw the water, and went very still, his thought process visible as facial math. Uh, he said. Stay inside for a minute, I said. We might need to- A ceiling tile bowed, trembled, and let go, slapping itself onto the carpet with the grace of a failed diving board. A length of pipe flexed in the gap like a silver tendon. I recognized trouble four seconds after trouble announced itself. The red glass bulb in the sprinkler head at the bend winked and snapped, and then the hallway was a February rain that didn't care about my shoes. On the far end of the corridor, Ray leaned out of his door, chewing. He was six-two, shoulders like furniture. Pipeline work turned into three months of long-term stay when his union job went tight. He had opinions

jumped and sometimes we pulled each other back. I thought about all the times I'd sat on information because it wasn't perfectly clean and watched people get hurt. If we get caught, Beck said, he blows up Marina's life. He blows up yours. He blows up mine. He knows about the registration. His mouth thinned. What registration? I asked, too quickly. He flinched. Beck? I didn't have a title when I bought the van, he said stiffly. Not yet. The seller said it was in the mail. I… used my mom's plates. She'd- He swallowed. I was desperate. I just wanted to drive it home. You know that's illegal, I said. I know, he said. I know a lot of things. I still did it. Morally gray, Lily. You like those in your stories, right? I closed my hands around air. He'd told me the worst thing about himself expecting me to leave. Instead, I moved closer. You're not a villain, I said. You're an idiot. But you're mine. He closed his eyes like the floor had been cut from under him and then opened them again, sharp. Then let's do this ugly and right. We planted the camera. It was easier than it should have been. The green room was a carpeted cube with a faux-wood table and a tray of coffee and a staging board with bullet points for Rhett's speech-authenticity, community, wellness, freedom. Beck's hands trembled as he slid the tiny lens under the table lip. I cleaned the lens with the hem of my dress because I hated myself but not enough to blur the image. We slid out again like thieves and waited in the alley like teenagers. An hour later, the feed on my phone came alive. Rhett swept into the green room with a woman I didn't know and a man I did-the salvage dealer who had sold Beck his van. They laughed. They poured coffee. They laid out a manila folder and talked about the rehab line, about how they'd

Everything’s a security camera. Not this brand, I said. That’s one of Rhett’s sponsors. We drifted. It was nothing. It was everything. We passed a tent selling air purifiers. A crisp girl with a lanyard offered Beck a free trial. I watched her slip a card into his pocket. Later, under the neon lights, when we were back at the co-op and so exhausted my bones were soft, he pulled that piece of card out of his pocket and frowned. It wasn’t an appointment reminder. It was a note. 2 a.m., it said. Loading bay. Come alone. We went together. It was stupid. It was reckless. It was also the kind of thing we did because we were bad at pretending we didn’t want to know the truth. We dressed in black like the world’s worst spies and slid through the alley by the river until we reached a loading bay behind the venue, where pallets of LifeStraw and artisanal s’mores kits waited like soldiers. The bay door groaned open. A faint light glowed inside. I touched Beck’s wrist and felt the skip of his pulse. A silhouette detached from the shadows. I didn’t think you’d bring a date, the woman said. The crisp girl from the air purifier tent. She pulled off her hat. I know what he did, she said without preamble. I did run a test at his shop last month. He had three vans in the bay-supposedly rehabbed. All three lit up for spores when we ran air checks. He bribed my boss to suppress the report. Do you have proof? I asked, barely breathing. She smiled grimly. On a drive. Which I can’t give you. But I can give you this. She held out a small black box. It’s a wireless camera. We put them in our demo in the green room. He doesn’t know. You’re asking us to plant a camera, Beck said softly. I am asking you, she said, to protect people. Beck looked at me. I looked at him. We were always teetering at the edge of lines and sometimes we

about everything from my coffee to the proper way to seal a suitcase. We had the kind of relationship built by the repetition of small transactions: extra towels slid across a desk, late checkout granted because the system said no and I said sure, a joke here, a complaint there, the human tax you pay so the machine looks nicer. This is gonna ruin my cereal, he said. He meant it like a joke, but his voice kept the hard edge it used when he talked to his ex-wife on the phone. Do me a favor, I said, don’t walk under any ceilings that don’t like you. He snorted. So, none of them. More doors opened like eyes. A woman in an oversized T-shirt held her arms folded against the cold, blinking. Her dog, a moppy little thing with an earnest face, boot-splashed into the water. The dog loved this. The dog did not understand property damage. At the midpoint between the elevators and Room 615, there was a utility closet with a locked handle and a habit of rattling on windy days. I had a key that worked if you presided over it like you were about to confess something personal. Inside, the main floor control valve waited, and so did the annunciator that liked to tattle. I braced the door with my foot, twisted the key, shoulder-chucked it, and the door relented. The valve had a red wheel and a placard that said DO NOT CLOSE WITHOUT AUTHORIZATION. I imagined, briefly, the authorization walking down the hall with a clipboard and an espresso, about five minutes late and very sorry. The gauge needle shook between things my training had used as cattle prods. The rote part of my brain-the part that says lefty loosey like it’s a prayer-wanted to close the wheel and see if the world stopped. The smarter part, the voice I borrowed from the fire marshal with the mustache and the small jokes at the last inspection, whispered,

Don’t touch that. Call us. Do not be the hero who turned off the thing that’s supposed to make sure the building doesn’t become sad ash. I didn’t have to decide. The panel on the wall, a smaller version of the one downstairs, caught up to reality and started to scream. My phone vibrated before I could reach for the radio. The name on the screen was SAMIR - boss. Samir, owner of the Parkland Suies, had emigrated twenty years before and bought the hotel ten years before and slept badly ever since. Do not call the department, he said, no hello. His voice was grainy with sleep and calculation. It’s the same head again. I will get the sprinkler guy in the morning. Close the valve and reset the panel. I looked at water roping from the ceiling into the hallway, a shining strand of reason. It’s not a head, I said. It’s a line. The ceiling’s down. It’s… a lot of water. Close the valve, he said again. Every time they come it is a thousand dollars we do not have. Insurance is asking questions. Last month they told me we cannot keep- I don’t think this is a keep-it-night, I said. You will not pull the pull station, he said. Last time was nothing- Last time, I said, was a man smoking in the stairwell with a cocktail napkin over the smoke detector. This isn’t nothing. On the other end of the line, a sigh that sounded like a calculator drained. Do not- I hung up. The instinct was mean and clean. I went back into the hall, past Ray, who had put on shoes and the face he used when he lifted heavy things. The dog made eye contact with me and shook all the water he had into the world like a small, sincere storm. I took a breath I didn’t have time for, pulled the cover on the red box by the elevator, broke the seal, and pulled the white handle down. The building stuttered into noise like an orchestra that forgot to tune. Later, a lot of people

insulation was black with mold. Even under that pretty birch someone put in. Rhett’s eyes flickered. It happens. Not when you fix it, Beck said. Not when you say you did. Something flickered between them, a blade sliding out of sheath and then sheathing itself again. Rhett’s smile came back. Men like us? he said, touching Beck’s shoulder in a way that made me want to saw off his hand. We know risk. We know reward. We know you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. We’re talking about lungs, I said. Not eggs. He looked at me like he wasn’t sure why I was still there. You two look good, he said, bored. Cute. I am obsessed with love. She’s lucky, he told me, and in his mouth, lucky sounded like a joke. He’s lucky, I said, and stepped closer to Beck so that my hip slid against his. I audit his screws. Rhett laughed again and moved away, patting Beck’s arm as if he were awarding him an honorable mention. Enjoy the show, he said. I’ll be announcing something that will blow your mind. He’s going to announce a rehab series, Beck said. You were right. Of course, I said. He always announces the crime scene with decorative throw pillows. We didn’t have enough yet. We had his attitude, his insults, his contempt for anyone who didn’t adore him. It wasn’t a story. It was a tract. I got drinks. We walked. We watched a guy explain how he’d turned his van into a sauna. I took notes about the kind of men who build saunas into vans. Beck was quiet. He was not looking at me. It felt like something had shifted between us and I didn’t know what lever I’d pulled. We cut through between two buses and into a cluster of vendor tents. A small, glinting black lens winked under one of the tables. I stopped. Security camera, I murmured. It’s a public event, Beck said.

teeth. Lily Klein. I write for City Digest. I love press, he said. I love that you give the people stories. And what story are you giving them today? I asked. The dream, he said without irony. Freedom. Build your own life. Stop working to pay rent and start working to live. At what point, I asked, does a dream become a scam if the product makes people sick? He laughed, delighted, like I'd told a joke in a language only he understood. Everything makes someone sick, he said. We're all allergic to something. I kept my voice light. Marina said- He froze, just for a breath. Marina is a tragically negative person, he said. She signed an NDA because she wanted something for nothing. She's one of those people who thinks she can be in the community without contributing. We tried to help. She poisoned the vibe. She got a bus without heat, I said. A bus that was out of code, with a dented propane line. We took it to a mechanic. He laughed until he cried. If that story had run, he said, you'd have been sued. I have friends who own your paper. Do they own the law? I asked sweetly. Stop, Beck murmured, sotto voce, and I swallowed the rest of my sentence because this wasn't about scoring points. It was about getting him to say something he couldn't unsay. Rhett, to his credit, pivoted. What's happening with that van of yours, Beck? he asked innocently. The whisper network said you had a little water issue. Bad luck, man. You should've let me do the build. I'd have had you on the road in a week. I like doing things myself, Beck said easily, though I could feel the tension in his arm. Hands-on. I sleep better when I know what's under my floor. You always sleep well, Rhett said. It was a knife disguised as affection. Not lately, Beck said. He had stopped smiling. Not since I realized the

would have thoughts about that moment. In the moment, it was just a choice with a weight buzzing through it, the way a drill hums a second before it bites. Alarms tell a crowd the same thing, but they tell it differently to each person. The traveling nurse at 606 opened her door with a duffel already on her shoulder, her face calm enough to steadier the air. She waved at me like we were in a grocery aisle and said, You good? Define good, I said, because it was my worst habit, this compulsion to repackage a panic in brown paper and tie it with twine. It slows you down or it saves you. At two a.m. you don't get to pick. She was Lena, though I'd only learned that three nights earlier, swapping nonsense at the coffee urn about the iced machine's personality. She'd been on assignment at Metro for months. She knew elevators and emergency rooms and the way crises came in pairs. You want help? she asked. Yes, I said, surprised at how nicely the word fit. Okay, she said. You take left. I'll knock right. No elevators. She turned to the dog lady. Leash. Shoes. Grab your phone. Leave the rest. People listened to her in a way they didn't listen to me except as the disembodied voice with the authority to wake them up. I knocked on 607 and 609 and 611; the sequence of odd numbers is a muscle memory in certain jobs. Doors opened. Faces did what faces do. The man in 609 had CPAP lines pressed into his cheeks and an expression that said he'd had it with this hotel and maybe the whole county. The couple in 611 were so new they still had their luggage wrapped in plastic. There a fire? the man asked, and I said, There's water and electricity and I don't like that combination. Same, he said, and the two of them stepped into the hall in matching socks. The stairwell door yawned open

on its closer. Someone had propped it with a shoe-Ray, later I learned, because he must have guessed how much the thing hated slamming and was trying, idiot-competent, not to let it. We started people down the stairs. The alarm chased them, trilling insistently in space that wasn't built for it. Floors five and four opened into their own lives of sleep-smashed confusion. On three, a kid started to cry because everyone else looked strange. On two, the exit sign that always flickered went out entirely, which I noticed and filed away to write in the log because I didn't have time to add fear to that, too. Down in the lobby, the glass doors did their automatic open-closed-open-closed routine that always looked like a nervous tick. Outside, the parking lot had the yellow sodium glow of crime scenes and second acts. People bled into it in their winter coats and their bare legs. A man stood under the awning smoking, because nature is stronger than signage. I walked over and said, Not tonight, okay? He nodded, stubbed it, slid the cigarette behind his ear with the skill of a man who had done this a thousand times. The phone at the front desk had been shivering itself across the granite. I snatched it, dialed, and gave the address with the rhythm I'd practiced for drunk pizza orders. The dispatcher asked me if anyone was trapped, if there was visible fire, if the alarms had been silenced, if we'd turned off the power. I said no, yes to the alarms, no to the power, because I had not killed the building's brain. She said someone was four minutes out and I watched the second hand on the lobby clock try to prove her wrong. Samir called again, twice. I let it ring. Dealing with Samir while the building handled its private crisis would have turned my voice into something thin and angry. I didn't have a spare voice. In the

weed-choked lot down by the river, where old shipping cranes hunched like praying mantises over rows of vans, buses, and trucks with improbable names like Pegasus and Bessie. Vendors sold compostable toilet inserts and artisanal lantern oil and more enamel mugs than a human could use in a lifetime. A stage had been erected out of pallets. A banner read RALLY OF RIGS in letters that tried too hard. Beck cleaned up well. He wore a gray shirt with the sleeves rolled and a pair of that sinful denim. He had shaved. He looked like every daydream that had accompanied me through every mediocre date I'd had in two years and also like a man with his fists clenched in his pockets. He offered me his arm and I hooked mine through, and the jolt that went through me when our bodies slid together felt like an unacceptable truth. Ready? he murmured. No, I said, and smiled into the crowd like I had something to sell. We found Rhett holding court by a bus with a shower on the back. He was exactly as advertised-teeth, hair, eyes like a shark that had learned to smile. He draped an arm around Beck in a way that made my skin itch and said, My man, and then looked me up and down like I was a gear accessory. And who is this blinding accessory? My Lily, Beck said, and my heart had the audacity to stutter, because words were spells, and he had never said mine like that. She believes in clean lines and clean living. I'm more of a clean ethics girl, I said. He blinked. Beck squeezed my arm so lightly I wasn't sure I felt it. Rhett's smile sharpened. You're a journalist, he said. Not a question. I glanced at Beck. He had the decency to look sheepish. I didn't tell him, he murmured. He told me. He knows everybody. It's fine, I said, and held my hand out to Rhett with a smile that showed none of my

line. A rehab line for his rehab disasters, I said. Cute. You'll need a pass, he said. Press. My editor will say it's not culture. He likes me to write about pop-up cheese shops and rooftop yoga and whether polyamory is back, I said. He'll never approve an exposé about mold. Beck's mouth did that almost-smile again, even in the middle of this. Polyamory is back? Not for you, I said without thinking, and then my own words made me stutter. I mean. Keep your head on your van. He rubbed his hand over his face. You could be my plus-one. He's not going to let you in. I'm… networked, he said, wincing. I built a shelving unit for his friend's Airstream. Of course you did, I said. And this plus-one will be…? Beck inhaled. My girl. Your… what? My pulse did something rude. If you go as my date, he'll talk. He'll think you're not there as a threat because he's a misogynist who underestimates women and thinks any woman with a handsome man on her arm is a plus-one. I squinted. Are you calling yourself handsome? Yes, he said, deadpan. And also implying you on my arm might distract him. You know-strategic cleavage. Gross, I said again, because it was easier than saying yes. I can distract him with my charm. And my questions. He's never met you, Beck said. He doesn't know questions are your foreplay. Foreplay is my foreplay, I said, and he laughed out loud, that crackling sound that made the skin between my ribs feel raw and new. We agreed on a plan that was barely a plan. I'd get into the event. Beck would keep smiling. I'd get Rhett talking on record about the van. I'd ask about Marina. If I got anything useful, I'd call my editor and force his hand. If I got nothing, I'd still fix the van and go back to writing about designer pickles. Friday came hot and sticky. The event sprawled across a

mass of people in the parking lot, I saw a familiar jacket-brown corduroy, worn elbows. Mr. Watts from 520. Retired high school band teacher who would come down to the desk for hot water every night and tell me about the time his trumpet section stole all the mouthpieces before a game and how he'd known it was them and let the joke ride anyway, because adolescents need to win once in a while. He was slumped on one of the stone planters, his face gray with the kind of gray that means oxygen isn't winning. Lena was already there. She had a small kit I hadn't seen her grab, a thin bag with a cross you'd only recognize if you'd looked at a lot of thin bags. She was kneeling, her knee in a puddle. Sir? she said. Can you take a deep breath for me? Mr. Watts tried. His chest moved the way a door moves when the hinge rusts. His lips had gone from pale to the dark of a bruise. I kneeled on the planter too, knees wet immediately. He's got a tank upstairs, I said. Room 520. Portable. In the closet. He needs it for night. Lovely, she said. Can you go? I can't leave- You can. Two minutes. Go, she said. If I need you, I'll scream. It was a sentence built for compliance. I sprinted into the building, my shoes squelching. On the second floor, an alarm leg bit down hard and I almost swore out loud at the tone. On the fifth, the hallway was starting to wet, too, water creeping in under doors like an idea. I ran my keycard, shouldered 520, and turned on the small light by the door. It showed a room exactly like all the rooms: bed that wanted to look crisp, lamp that had a critical opinion of itself, chair that had been sat on by a thousand different kinds of tired. In the closet, behind a garment bag that held a suit a long time retired, the green cylinder with the handle. I grabbed it, almost tripped over the throw rug that was

not a tripping hazard so much as a tripping suggestion, and lost the handle for a second in my shaking. My lungs noticed the air at the same time my nose noticed the faint scent of warmed plastic. That’s when the power flickered, twice, and held. Buildings are like old men-they have pride and they don’t like to show frailty. On the way back past the front desk, my phone buzzed again. I didn’t check it. Outside, the cold had gotten around to remembering itself. My breath went out and came back, fogging my glasses. I handed the tank to Lena like a baton. She had the cannula on Mr. Watts like she’d put it there a hundred times in the dark. His color improved a shade. He blinked, and there he was again. He coughed a thing that had needed leaving, and then he patted my hand like I’d done something heroic when all I’d done was steal from housekeeping rules. The engine sirens arrived not all at once but as a stacking of distance: a low moan, a chorus, a sudden presence. The trucks blocked the entrance to the parking lot in that confident diagonal that only people with lightbars get away with. Firefighters piled out, chins planted in jackets, carrying axes because it is their thing and if I had those axes I’d need to invent a reason to carry them, too. The lieutenant with the helmet tilt that said he had opinions walked up to me and asked, What’s happening? Sixth-floor waterflow, I said. Pipe break. I didn’t close the valve. Good, he said, the word like applause. We got a room number? Approximately between 615 and 619, I said. Ceiling gave way. Power? Still on. He gave me a look that said he could smell the whole building through my words. We might pop the main if it’s raining on any panels. Next time you’re in that closet with the red wheel, don’t touch it, he said, anticipating the

vehicle at cost and he’d make content about the repair to cover the rest. A ragged breath. He took the van. He put me into this crappy school bus without heat. The title got… complicated. And then he sold the sprinter. He’d promised he’d fix the mold completely. Our eyes met. He sold it as-is, Beck said, gentle, like he was trying to protect her from the word. ‘A fixer-upper,’ Marina said, and suddenly there was steel in the wobble. He told me not to talk. But I see his feed and I’m so angry I can’t breathe. Do you still have your NDA? I asked. A pause. Yes. Can you send me a photo? Why? she asked, wary. Who are you? A friend, I said. And a reporter. Another pause. I can blur my last name and send you the header. An hour later, I stared at the document and wanted to laugh and throw up all at once. It was the kind of NDA you get from a lawyer who moonlights as a motivational speaker. It threatened nothing specific with a lot of adjectives. It referenced trade secrets and brand alignment. It was probably enforceable enough to make Marina’s life miserable. It was also flexible if you were, say, a journalist with a lawyer who liked eating people like Rhett for breakfast. Do not do anything without talking to me, Beck said, reading my face. You called me, I said. For what? To sit on our hands and hope we don’t grow mushrooms out of our ears? I called you to help me fix my van, he said tightly. Not to set it on fire. Then you shouldn’t have bought a matchstick, I snapped, and then the look that crossed his face made me hate myself. Beck. I’m sorry. That was cruel. He pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth, thinking. Rhett is hosting that Rally of Rigs thing next weekend, he said grudgingly. All the builders will be there. He’ll be there. He’s announcing something big, probably a new rehab

seems. He pinned me against the wall with one hand and crow-mouthed, Apologize, in a voice that did a bright, wrong thing inside me. I did because I wanted to be let go and because I wanted to see if he wouldn't. Later, when the storm that had been brewing between us for years seemed to break all at once into something new and dangerous, it would occur to me that I could have left then. Instead I stayed and cut out more of the floor and told myself it was about justice. The truth was messier. The deeper we dug, the more we found. Mold in the walls. Mold under the birch veneer. Mold in the dreams and the jokes and the lines we'd drawn around our bodies and never crossed. Every time we thought we'd reached the end of the rot, something else black bloomed on the edge of our plans. On the third day, a DM arrived from a woman whose profile picture was a dog wearing sunglasses. She wrote, I saw your comment on Vale's post. Did you buy the white sprinter? If so u might want to call me. I showed it to Beck and he said, Please tell me she's offering us a replacement van and three bowls of chicken pho. She's a stranger on the internet, I said dryly. She's offering us a Nigerian prince and a sponsored code for algae water. But I'm calling her. Her name was Marina. I had that van before you did, she said. Her voice wobbled, like she was trying not to cry. It was my home for a year. I loved it more than any apartment I ever had. What happened? I asked. I woke up coughing, she said. I had headaches and nosebleeds. Turns out the roof seam had this hairline crack, and the insulation was-anyway. I took it to Rhett's shop. He put up a video about me, about how we were going to fix it. He made me a deal. He said if I signed an NDA he'd swap me into a different

future version of me trying to make a thing stop with my hands. Stand back. Tell me if we have any mobility issues. I glanced back at a clutch of people by the hydrangeas in their winter skeletons. Mr. Watts, oxygen-dependent, now on portable. Couple from eleven look fine, if embarrassed by their socks. Dog named maybe Muffin. She is offended. Copy, he said, as if I'd said victims stable, because language is a tool and a joke at the same time, and he was working. They disappeared into the building like a foreign country's army that had read the map. I stood with the other not-heroes and watched the steam start to slip out through the top of the doorways, ghosting into the cold. People talked at me because that is what they do when the person behind the desk becomes the person with a coat on in the night and an index card of responsibility. This is ridiculous, a man in shorts said, performing outrage for his girlfriend. We're comped? he asked, and I nodded because it cost me nothing to make a promise he could scream to management about later and it cost me nothing to be kind now. Samir didn't walk. He accelerated. His sedan asked more from its engine than its engine had to give and he got out like a complaint with legs. What did I say? he asked, standing partly between me and the trucks, because he is who he is and boundaries are for other people. I heard you, I said. I also saw the ceiling. You cost me money. The ceiling would have cost you people, I said, which was too sharp but the air was full of someone else's courage and I wanted one small piece of it. Also, I said, because I couldn't stop myself, you want me to put something in the log? He rubbed his forehead with two fingers as if there were a number there he could make better with pressure. He learned long ago that survival

demands incorrect, swift math. This is why we have rules, he said, to me, to himself, to the universe that had not managed to be a perfect spreadsheet. The firefighters came back out in ones and twos, wet around the edges of their armor, and waved a tech toward the electrical room. The engine that held the pump kept its water cough up, a productive, heavy sound. The lieutenant made a motion I translated as an apology to the building. They hit the main. The lobby went dark and then backup egress lighting came on like a handful of old candles. The alarm maintained, powering from something deep and cranky. Outside, the temperature fell through my coat. It took an hour for the situation to become boredom. Crises are violent on the entry and bureaucratic on the exit. The tech with the clipboard wrote things in a handwriting that had been taught to him by old men with leather skin and white hats. He asked me for names and numbers and I gave him everything I had in the data tomb behind the front desk that we called the PMS because hospitality loves to step on its own jokes. The lieutenant told Samir things he did not want to hear about permits and upgrades. Samir did a small dance in which his face did not change but all of his blood moved. He asked for a break in the fine structure. The lieutenant might have been sympathetic in any other mood but not this one. He shrugged in the universal language of Can't. Lena sat with Mr. Watts until his breathing stopped looking like the ocean on a windy day. She shook out her sleeves and stood, and when she looked over at me, I realized for the first time what the alarm must have looked like to her through her eyes. Practice. More practice. Good call, she said. You made your boss mad for the right reasons. He'll fire me for the right

That face means lies are going to get excavated and my social life is going to get ruined. You have a social life? I have fans, he said seriously, and then he smiled at my disbelieving expression. Okay, I have a dog at the co-op named Merlin who follows me around and a sandwich guy who calls me 'carpenter daddy.' Gross, I said. Don't ever say that again. He knocked his shoulder against mine. Do what you have to do. But don't torch me to roast the marshmallows. I wouldn't, I said. I was a journalist. I lay with my nose in rot and tried to find the thing that wouldn't kill me to write down. I told myself I only burned what deserved to burn. It had taken me years to realize that sometimes deserving had nothing to do with who got scorched in the process. Over the week that followed, we became a two-person mold remediation cult. We set fans. We set dehumidifiers. We cut out ruin. We swore at the ceiling and then at each other and then at ourselves for swearing at each other. It got bad enough that I slept on Beck's pullout one night because it was too late and we were too tired and the shower at my place was broken and also because I wanted to. Because it turned out that the sound of his breath through the wall could rearrange my rib cage into something that didn't cut me when I moved. We talked with respirators on and off. He told me about waking at two a.m. with his heart pounding like someone was knocking on his chest trying to get out. I told him about my editor, who kept assigning me soft culture pieces when all I wanted was to sink my teeth into meat. We fought about whether vinegar or bleach was more effective, even though we both knew the answer was complicated. He threw me a roll of blue tape and I threw it back and hit him in the shoulder, which was a meaner thing than it

months ago flashed a familiar white van. LOADED SPRINTER, NEEDS TLC! he'd written. DM for deets. The caption read like a confession if you squinted: trust the process, sometimes you have to strip it all down to build your haven again. God, I said. Of all the men in this city you could've given money to. He winced. I didn't give him money. The listing said no middlemen. I paid a guy named Dom in cash. Rhett just signal-boosted. I exhaled. You signed anything? He hesitated. An as-is. And-don't look at me like that. He said the water pump had been quirky, but they dried it out. Quirky, I said. I hate quirky. You hate quirky on implants, he said. You loved the quirky teapot we found at the thrift store and you named him Norris, and you refused to let anyone else pour from him for three weeks. I wanted to smile. I didn't. And you chose this van because…? He raised his eyes at me, and I saw it. The reason we were friends. The reason I was under this van getting spore snow. He looked like a person who hadn't slept in months. Because I haven't slept in months, he said quietly, the way he sometimes spoke things I hadn't said. Every apartment has a ceiling too close to my face. Every time I lie down, it's like someone put a lid on me. I thought-maybe if I could build something with my hands. Maybe if I made a place where I could roll back the door and see daylight. My chest hurt like I'd inhaled something wrong. And there it was: what I wanted. To fix it. To save him. To write the story I'd promised myself I wouldn't write-The Rot We Ignore, starring an influencer with veneers and my best friend's insomnia. I put my phone away. We'll fix it, I said grimly. But I need to know if it's just one van. Or if this is a thing. He studied me. Oh no, he said. You've got your crusade face on.

reasons, too, I said. You like this job? I like being the person who can find a spare toothbrush at three a.m., I said. I am the gatekeeper of small kindnesses and coffee you can smell from space. Beyond that, it's not… you know. A life's work. You wrote something about coffee for six minutes without breathing, she said. Maybe your work's the writing you keep pretending you're not doing at the desk. I didn't ask her how she knew about the notebook under the counter. Everyone knows everything about you when you stand at a counter. They can see the way you smooth the receipt before you slide it toward them with a pen, the habits of your hands. They can see you, which is the disaster and the gift. Samir fired me at 5:04 a.m., right after the last of the hoses re-coiled and the trucks had backed off into a normal world that did not need them urgently. He did it in his office with the broken blind and the picture of his daughters at the festival, cheeks painted, and the exact smelling salt of cologne that might have been applied to a one-night stand. He did it by saying, I cannot carry someone who costs me more than he brings me, Joe, which is a sentence with the remarkable ability to be both honest and dishonest at the same time. I'm not going to argue, I said, because I was out of adrenaline and time and something that felt like grace. I will pay the rest of the week, he said, which was generous and a calculation and all the other human things. I'll leave the list for day shift, I said, the silly loyalty of a person who knows when coffee has to be prepped and doesn't want the six a.m. desk person to hate him forever. He didn't laugh, but he nodded, which I take as a kind of love when it happens and a courtesy when it doesn't. I packed the small drawer of my life:

spare uniform shirt folded in a shape only I recognized, deodorant that no one else should ever meet, the notebook with three different beginnings of things I'd meant to be essays and something that had tried to be a poem before it decided it was a grocery list. I wrote, in the log-flourish, signature, actual ink-FIRE ALARM PULLED, LEVEL SIX WATERFLOW, FIRE DEPT RESPONDED. MR. WATTS GIVEN O2. POWER OFF TO RISK AREAS. BREAKFAST UNITS SET. SORRY. J. The habit of apology runs deep; I like people who use it like a comma and I worry about people who don't. By the time I walked out into the dawn, the sky was a lake-ice blue and the sign out front said PARKLAND SU ES softly. The N in PARKLAND flickered, tried to be something, and then gave up. A crow sat on top of the E like it had opinions about lodging. The wind cut right through the cotton. I pulled my coat around me like I could hide inside my own pockets. Hey, someone said. Lena. Her hair was wet in the way that meant she'd had her head under a sink. Her face had the blankness of people after long nights when they've given their skill away for free. She held out a business card with the prompt casualness of someone who knows that handing out business cards is an embarrassing act unless you tune it perfectly. Unit clerk opening, she said. Nights. Less shouting. More charts. Same coffee. Better insurance. Ask for Lish. Tell her I sent you, and that you make choices that cost money and save people. I… I said, and didn't finish the sentence because nothing you say in that moment isn't dramatic or dumb. Thank you, I said instead, which is the only adult answer. Also, she said, you should eat breakfast like it's your job. Your face thinks you're joking. I'll take that under

crush. You'll think you can change him. You can't. He tried to smother a laugh and failed. That's rich. How many times have you tried to change me? I've learned, I said, and then regretted the way the words came out sharp. We have to start at the source. His grin collapsed on one side. Okay, woodpecker. Peck my heart. What's the source? The water tank, I said, and rapped the panel where the tank had been. Or the roof seam. Or- -or the fact that I got a deal from a guy whose smile was too white and whose Instagram had too many motivational quotes, he said softly. I turned my head. Where did you get the van, again? His eyes flickered. Marina found it. The listing was on this forum. A guy who flips vans… he had it priced to move. He said the previous owner- -had, what, fallen out of love with the lifestyle? Wanted to go live in a condo in Tampa? I could feel the awful article writing itself in my head. The thing about refusing to give in to your worst impulses is that your worst impulses are really good at bench-pressing. I told you to ask me before you bought it. You were on a deadline, he said. And I wanted to be spontaneous. You like me spontaneous. It looks good in your stories. I took my respirator off slowly. Name, I said. Give me a name. Rhett Vale, he said, and as he spoke it, the awful pieces slid into place-viral van-life darling with a YouTube channel and a jawline you could cut glass on. Rhett had built an empire teaching people how to buy buses, tear them down, and build them back up with epoxy and vibes. He did affiliate codes for everything from solar panels to cedar planks. His reels featured speeches about freedom over footage of sunsets and suggestive shots of caulking. I pulled my phone and scrolled until I found the post. Rhett's feed was a hymn to hustle. One post from three

drunk from his can of warm soda and told him he was ridiculous and then saved the pizza box when he tried to throw it away. And now here we were. The floor emitted death. The ceiling snowed spores. His smile had edges he didn't let me see. He killed the tool and slid out toward the open side door, setting his palm against the metal like it might steady him. Around us, the co-op rattled with activity: drills, clamps, a guy welding something with neon sparks. The community posted motivational slogans on the wall-Leave It Better Than You Found It-small lies we told ourselves while ripping out rotten frames. He stripped off his respirator. Beck Hart. Former architect, sometimes maker, full-time chaos. Six foot three with shoulders that had ruined more than one chair. His hair was sun-bleached and messy and his beard was spring stubble that made me itch, not that I'd say that out loud. He owned exactly one pair of jeans that fit him like a sin. We'd been friends for five years in the mutually assured destruction way that happens when two people keep saying yes to each other. I interviewed him in a cafe the first week I moved to the city for a piece about urban nomads. He bought my coffee. I took his picture. Somehow he never ended up in the article, but we ended up in each other's phones under names we'd never admit to a second party. We never dated. We did… other things. Things that felt like agreements with the devil you only realize you're making in retrospect. What if I rip it all out, he said, gazing at the horror that had been his new home. New subfloor, new insulation, everything. We bleach it, treat it, let it dry for months. Wedding vows to the dehumidifier. We'll have to find where the moisture is coming from, I said. Otherwise it will be like dating your gym

advisement, I said. The diner next door had a neon coffee cup in the window that blinked like it had heart problems. I sat at the counter and ordered pancakes because you can learn a lot about a kitchen by the way it treats batter. The waitress poured me coffee that did not strip a penny but could convincingly threaten one. My phone stacked messages on messages. One from my ex that said How's the job? in the way that isn't really a question. One from a number I didn't recognize that turned out to be Ray: u did good. cereal survived. dog pissed w delight. One from Samir, which surprised me; I'd expected space. He wrote: My brother says you did right. He was firefighter. I am still angry. But brother says be angry at water. That is hard. You can put me for reference if needed. -S. It wasn't forgiveness. It was something like a human trying. I ate the pancakes, which arrived like a hymn, and took notes in my head. The hotel didn't die. It flooded. People woke up and put on shoes. The building was a stubborn old man with a stiff back. I'd made a choice and my life had creaked and moved a little in a new direction because of it. Everything else was hours and logistics. At nine, after the sun had fully remembered itself, I went back to my apartment. My place was a studio above a nail salon where the smell of acetone waved hello if you opened the window on the wrong days. My bed was a couch if you looked fast, and my books made a wall that made better conversation than most people I knew. I slept in my clothes until two, woke up with the alarm in my ear like a ghost, and sat on the edge of the bed, the sudden unemployed yawning in front of me. I dialed the number on the card. Lish was brisk and warm. She said, We need people who can think in a panic and then fold towels, which

meant they'd been watching me from a distance forever, even if they didn't know it. She said, Come in tonight if you want a tour, and then she laughed when I tried to be funny and told me the shift started at ten and ended at six and that the coffee was worse, somehow, than mine. The nurses bring their own, she said. You'll learn tricks. At the Parkland Suies, the sign kept on flickering. People checked in and checked out. Someone somewhere reset the panel and someone somewhere dried carpet with fans that sound like small airplanes. At the diner, the waitress asked if I wanted more, and I said yes because saying yes is the way you make a life that sometimes feels like you're inside a machine. You say yes and you pick up the tank and you pull the red handle and you let someone get mad because you refused to be polite to consequences. When I showed up at the hospital that night, my discarded shirt still had the hotel starch of a different world. Lish looked exactly like a person named Lish should: composed, neutral, capable of moving six things with two hands. She walked me past rooms full of people in smaller emergencies and showed me how the forms were stacked and where the bathrooms were that nobody used. We practice for emergencies at two a.m., she said. Then we do them at three. The ones you don't practice for show up at four. Sounds familiar, I said. Good, she said, and moved on. Around three-thirty that night, a monitor alarmed itself into a squeal down the hall. A nurse was already moving when I heard it. I stepped aside. The noise had a different personality than the one at the hotel-higher, needier-and my body remembered two a.m. in a corridor that rained. I hadn't lost anything by leaving. I'd carried it here with me, all the instruction manual pages I'd torn

crinkled with the smile I couldn't see. Well, like, less than usual. I'm wearing a respirator. I tugged mine to make the point. A flurry of gray dust shot past the clear plastic. And you're a monster, letting me go under first. It's my van, he said. If it kills anyone, it should be me. You dragged me here. I bribed you with tacos. Semantic difference. Stop bickering and keep cutting, he said, and then, because he knew me, he added, Please. Lily, please. We were under a corrugated tin awning behind his warehouse co-op-former soda plant turned maker space-where the biggest DIY rigs in the city came to be birthed and baptized in sawdust. Beck's van, a long white cargo sprinter with the word HAVEN painted in faded script on the back door, looked like it had already survived a flood. Which, ironically, was our problem. Or our opportunity, depending on whether I walked out alive. I wedged the pry bar deeper under the warped slat. The wood lifted like the page of a too-sticky book, revealing velvety black underneath. I had been a journalist long enough to know different kinds of rot. Most kinds were human. This kind announced itself in a sinister perfume of wet basement and inevitability. I said, Oh, hell. Beck glanced down. That's not… good. It's alive, I said. It was a bad joke. It was also probably true. Two weeks earlier, I'd woken to a voice message of his that started with, Okay, don't get mad, and ended with, You're going to tell me I told you so, in a tone that suggested he would make peace with that outcome. He'd bought the van three months before, after a long stretch of sleepless nights and harder days. He'd done it the way he did most things-impulsively, all in, smile first, plan second. He had drawn a floor plan on a pizza box the night he decided to go for it, and I had laughed and

without sneezing. He dreamed of nothing. He woke. He opened a window. Air came in like forgiveness. He laughed, alone in the van, because laughter makes rooms feel bigger. He whispered, Thank you, to the quiet, and Sorry, to his old illusions, which had done their best with the data they had. If you are reading this in a van, perhaps with a diffuser working overtime and a poster that says Live Laugh Love Above A Leak, let me offer this closing gift. Truth is like mildew: it thrives in the dark, it smells when ignored, and it's easier to manage when you admit it's not a personal attack but a law. Turn on a fan. Call a Jasper. Join a MICE or a Spore Lore or whatever community near you has decided to be funny about the worst things. And if someone tells you the walls are alive in a way that's good vibes, tell them: the vibes are better with a vapor barrier. Also, and this is important: do not, under any circumstances, put bread in your walls. The birds will never forgive you. The mould might, but only in the way hurricanes forgive beach houses: by taking them back. ##

The Moldy Haven 2

The Moldy Haven By the time the ceiling rained spore snow onto my face, it hit me: this was not a meet-cute. This was a meet-mildew. Also, I was probably going to die. Don't inhale, Beck said cheerfully from above me. He was lying on his back inside the van's gutted belly, boots braced on the wheel well, cordless oscillating tool whining like a wasp factory. He wore a respirator with a black filter and a shirt dark with sweat, and his eyes

out and stuffed into my pockets. Weeks later, I saw Mr. Watts in the hospital lobby, upright and walking slow. He wore the suit from his closet because he had an appointment and the suit liked to be taken seriously. He recognized me with the delicate confusion of people who only know you behind a desk. You, he said, and made a trumpet out of his hands, a joke so small it almost didn't exist. You ever figure out where the extra toothbrushes are kept? Under the counter in a plastic bin with the razors, I said, without thinking, without looking. He laughed and then put his hand on my arm. I used to tell my kids, he said, that music is just well-organized air. You did that on a different instrument. I'm not a musician, I said. You did pretty good at it anyway, he said, and shuffled off toward the elevators that still smelled faintly like industrial lemon. On my days off, I learned to sleep during sunshine. On my days on, I learned the names of the women who kept the real history of the unit and where they hid the good pens. A year later, the Parkland Suites got sold. They fixed the N and lost the D. The front desk was redone in a veneer that looked expensive and wasn't. The morning desk person I liked moved on to a Marriott, because ambition is as ordinary as breakfast. Samir opened a smaller place off the highway that wasn't anybody's first choice and did fine anyway. He came into the hospital once because his brother needed stitches and he saw me and said, You look less tired, and I said, I am, which was a lie and also true. I still wake sometimes at two a.m. to nothing at all. The body likes a rhythm and keeps it out of spite. If I sit up and listen, I can hear the building telling the truth in its small ways: the hum, the whisper, the tiny click of relays. I pour myself

something terrible and sweet, stand by the window, watch the empty street accept the wind without comment. Somewhere, a panel is blinking green. Somewhere, a guy like me is doing the math with a phone in one hand and red light in his periphery and he will count cost and he'll count human and he'll be wrong or he'll be right, and either way, the morning will come and ask for pancakes. I hope he pulls the handle. I hope he has someone like Lena around, someone with a bag she didn't mean to grab but always does. I hope when he loses something for it, someone gives him a card with a number. I hope he writes down in a log, in ink, Sorry, and then goes to a world that needs him in almost the same shape but not quite, and that the door closes behind him with the soft, clean sound of a thing choosing to let go. ##

Workshop of Second Chances

Workshop of Second Chances. I wasn't planning to steal a van the afternoon I stole one, but grief had turned my moral compass into a weather vane in a thunderstorm. In my defense, the van was practically begging for it. A boxy blue beast with a crooked stripe and the faint ghost of an exterminator slogan still visible in the paint-BETTER BUGS, BETTER LIFE!-it sat in a weed-choked lot behind a biker bar on the outskirts of Portland like an aging movie star hoping for one last close-up. The listing had said 1998 Sprinter, custom build, needs love, no lowballers. I had written, Not a lowballer. Cash. Today. When the seller didn't answer, I showed up anyway, because that's the kind of man I'd become

industrial? Jamie grinned. It's less dishonest, Tony. Tony nodded slowly, like a man learning a new way to nod. I'm getting mine looked at, he admitted. You made me think. I think that's growth, Jamie said. Tony laughed. Gross growth. They stood, looking at the lighthouse, which blinked, because that's what it does, a job as simple and relentless as telling the truth. It's a lot, eh? Tony said, quietly. Being… alive inside things absolutely determined to return to the earth. It's heavy, Jamie agreed. But I think we carry it better when we know what we're carrying. Jamie went back into his van. He ran his hand along the wall. Smooth. No give. He opened the cupboard and it stayed itself. He breathed. He looked at Fern, who was thriving under a little grow light, smug in the way of succulents and people after a good haircut. A knock. It was Jasper. He slid into the booth, pulled out his sandwich from 2009, sniffed it, decided against that particular act of courage, and grinned. Ready for that Cornwall trip? Yes, Jamie said. Which is to say: not really, but willing. Jasper nodded. Good enough, he said. In mechanics and life. They drove, later, the van humming like a song you only hum when you've learned the words already mattered. On a hill near the sea, they pulled over. They watched the gulls commit their crimes. Jamie thought about how the van had taught him more by failing than it would have by behaving like an advert. He thought about mould, its quiet appetites, its talent for finding the cracks and thriving there. He thought: so do we, at our best. Do I need to tell you how it ends? We always want fireworks or moral. But endings are just places where we agree to stop because in fiction, unlike in life, you can choose your cliff. Here's mine: Jamie went to bed. He turned off the light. He slept

slow. It was precise. It had insulation that wasn’t hair. It had a vapor barrier you couldn’t see but you could feel in the absence of clamminess. It had windows that opened in ways that made metaphors feel redundant. And the nights. The nights were sometimes lonely, because truth will not spoon you. But they were breathable. He slept. In the morning, he made coffee that tasted less like bureaucracy and more like decisions you live with, the good kind. He posted pictures-yes, we must not pretend we outgrow performance because we buy a step ladder-of the van, but this time he included the guts. He put captions like: Behind every cozy light is a wire that did not electrocute me, thanks to Jasper. People thanked him. They also called him killjoy. Life is a crowd. The Dry Deniers dwindled, not because you ever convince people who practice denial recreationally, but because one by one, their vans coughed them into honesty. SunChakraDave pivoted to minimalism retreats and macrobiotic soups. He grew carnations in a shipping container. Priya sent him legal filings wrapped in butcher paper. There was a last scene, because stories demand a last scene. Jamie went back to the lighthouse car park, dressed now with knowledge and an organized toolkit. He parked with some relief, the way you park a self finally given a place to rest. Tony was there, robe less vibrant, dog more smug. New vans had arrived, some with tasteful peacock decals, one with a mural of a whale wearing a monocle. Gloria the dog pooped with imperial indifference. Tony wandered over. Heard you caused a stir, he said. On the internet and in the lungs of the nation. I’m trying to prevent coughs and coups, Jamie said. Everything else is gravy. Your van looks… less, Tony said, peering. Less… cozy? More…

since June died: the kind who brought his late wife’s urn to Craigslist deals like a lucky charm and talked to it when no one was around. This is either your idea or mine, I told the brass cylinder buckled into the passenger seat of my sensible Subaru. If it’s mine, please haunt me later, gently. The lot smelled like spilled gasoline and blackberry brambles. Men smoking on the bar’s ramshackle patio took a look at my pressed button-down and made a point of looking away. I locked the car, whispered a sorry to June’s urn, then set my jaw and walked up to the van. I wanted solidity. Wheels felt like a betrayal. A woman slid out from beneath it on a creeper with a clang that made me jump. She wore a black tank top streaked with dust, oil-slicked hair in a knot at the nape of her neck, and a tattoo of an atlas on her left shoulder. She brought her hand up to shade her eyes and looked me over like a blueprint she wasn’t sure she’d sign. Tell me you’re not the dentist, she said. I’m very much not, I said. I’m a bookkeeper. Sometimes I make bread. One eyebrow arched. We all contain multitudes, Walt Whitman. Who are you and why are you touching my van with your eyes? Elias North, I said, holding up a manila envelope that contained ten thousand dollars and an expensive slice of denial. Here for the Sprinter. The ad. She rolled up to sit, boots braced against the asphalt. That ad should’ve been taken down. Zed is a snake, but even snakes can manage Craigslist housekeeping. Zed? The name tasted like cigarettes. He didn’t mention anyone else. Shocking, she said dryly. He’s selling what he doesn’t own. I built this. And I don’t sell my work to lowballers or liars. For the record, I said, I’m neither. I’m a widower who’s tired of ending his nights with the same three

channels: the news, bourbon, and spreadsheets. I want a van. Preferably this one. She studied me for three beats, as if laying a grid over my face and mapping coordinates. Her eyes were gray, not cold so much as stormy, like water that had decided it was done pretending to be sky. The irony that I was making my pitch to a stranger in a lot behind a bar instead of a therapist was not lost on me. I'm Mara, she said. I don't care about your bourbon, but I'm sorry about your wife. And if you want this van, you're going to have to pretend to be my boyfriend for the next ten minutes. A laugh leaped out of me and then stuttered into uncertainty. That feels abrupt. Abrupt, she said, is me saying my ex-partner just pulled in with two of his least literate friends and a deep belief that he still has a stake in my shop. He will be less brave if you look proprietary. Can you act? You have the button-up for it. What if I'm terrible at acting? Mara pushed onto careful feet, wiped her hands on her shorts, and tossed a shop rag toward me. I caught it with a reflex that surprised us both. Then be honest but make it weird. Put an arm around me. Call me honey. I'll reward you with a test drive. I saw the van's curve of rust and primer and thought how stubborn desire can be. My heart was a percussion instrument. All right, I said. Honey. She snorted. We'll workshop it. A truck roared across the gravel and parked skewed, dust boiling. Zed hopped out in a leather vest that seemed to be losing a custody battle with his torso. Two other men followed, one with a neck tattoo that spelled LOKI in block letters that suggested irony had been involved in the font selection but nowhere else. Zed's eyes landed on Mara and roamed in a way that made me wish for medieval weaponry. Then they slid to the

too. I thought it was my fault. I thought it was vibes. Jamie listened until he felt like a librarian again, which as it turns out, is not so different from being a friend. Dave approached, hair shining with coconut oil and lies. We should collaborate, he said, tone smooth as a pond that knows it will drown you. No, Jamie said. A choice, again, small, significant. We should litigate, Priya muttered, stepping in front of him like an angel with a bar license. The fight didn't happen that day, because fight is a word we use for what actually takes years. What happened was a movement. The acronym MICE was rebranded, because MICE is charming, but doesn't scream fund us. Jamie and Priya and Jasper and Nan and Igor and, eventually, Toby, created Spore Lore, a network of people who lived in vans and were ready to grow mushrooms only on purpose. They held clinics at car parks. They posted videos of the strip-down process, intercut with jokes and diagrams and Nan smoking in a way that made one question whether smoke might seal a generation's leaks out of sheer stubbornness. They published a definitive guide to not making your home a petri dish, which sold in suspiciously large numbers to people in apartments, too. Jamie found a use for the van that made him both sad and proud: he turned it into an exhibit. He and Jasper and a volunteer army cut one wall off like a dollhouse and labeled everything. This is where bread goes to be regret. This is a vapor barrier. This is not a poem. Here's how to fix it. They brought it to festivals. Children pointed and said, Ew! and then learned what condensation really means, beyond a villain in a romance novel. He drove the repaired van sometimes, when he wanted to remember the point of wheels. The rebuild was expensive. It was

happens. Tears are a kind of ventilation for the head. I wanted freedom, he said. I got a box that needed maintenance. The maintenance taught me about… you know, maintenance. Of everything. Of relationships. Of bodies. Of beliefs. I'm not here to sell you bleach. I'm here to say: do not put bread in your walls. Laughter again. Timid at first. Then bigger. A wave. A tide that didn't need grace. He could feel SunChakraDave's eyes on the back of his head, like a sunlamp set to passive-aggressive. And, Jamie said, and here's the turning point, here's the moment where life picks up your narrative by the scruff and tests your chin, I had to choose. Hide it. Sell it. Or strip it and start again. I chose to strip it. Not because I'm a hero. Because I'm tired of smelling like old library sadness. He gestured to Jasper, who nodded, then to Priya, who held up an action plan in legalese, and then to a mason jar Jamie had brought onstage. Inside was a small, contained patch of mycelium grown legally for demonstration. This, Jamie said, is what it looks like when truth grows in a jar you control. It's beautiful. It's also in a jar. He finished with: Mould is like secrets. It thrives in the dark. Open a window. Or a hatch. Or a lawsuit. Silence, for a beat, the kind that could go either way. Then: applause. New, suspicious applause. Then: the slow clap of a woman in a poncho and eventually a cheer. Some of the Denier faces tightened like fruit leather. SunChakraDave stood and smiled in that way that says I am about to pivot. Beautiful, Dave said, when he took the mic. We honor the authenticity of your journey. Priya rolled her eyes so hard one could hear it. After the talk, a queue. People with breath mints. People with coughs. People who whispered versions of the same confession: I've got it

van, then to me. Who's this? Zed asked, planting himself like a toxin. Our little buyer? You're not supposed to be here, princess. I'm not buying anything from you, I said before I could decide to be cautious. You're a middleman who's confused himself with the middle. Mara's mouth flickered-approval? amusement?-and she sidled a half step into my side. I took the cue, lifted an arm, and draped it over her shoulders. The muscles beneath my palm were a map of work and intention. She leaned into me like she'd been there a hundred times. Zed's tongue made a slow, disdainful tour of his molars. He seems chatty. You trade your tools for a talking head, Voss? Don't be weird, Zed, she said. It's boring. Watch your mouth, he said. His mouth twitched toward a smile. And watch your ownership claims. I taught you half of what you know. Half of how to be ambitious and none of how to be decent, Mara said evenly. Leave. I had prepared for many things: for the van's brakes to be shot, for the engine to cough out grief, for the bar's bathrooms to be a cautionary tale. I had not prepared for how protective something in me would become, all at once, of a woman I'd met four minutes ago. It wasn't gallantry; it was recognition. She had the look of someone who'd built her own bones. Zed glanced at my arm, at the easy way Mara's hand rested at my waist like a song that knew its key. You're not her type, he said in a way that implied he was everyone's type. She likes things that can be fixed. Perfect, I said. I'm a delightfully broken toy. He laughed. Loki laughed because Zed laughed. The third man picked his teeth with a matchstick. All right, Zed said. Enough theater. You owe me this one, Voss. I fronted the shell. You fronted a debt to a bank with a router bit as collateral, she said. You did nothing.

You do nothing. I'm doing something right now, he said. I'm taking back what's mine. We're late for dinner, Mara said, and she lifted her chin toward me in a silent please don't argue. In-law dinner. We have to go smile at people who like me because I'm with him and him because he's with their memory. There was a small, precise silence. June costumed herself in our conversation like light. I felt Missed-You where lungs should be. Zed misinterpreted that silence as victory and reached for the van door handle. Stop, Mara said. Make me. It was the sort of cheap line that deserved a better movie than it was in. Mara's smile was almost friendly. Eli? Yes? Kiss me. I bent. She met me in a strike of heat that made my brain run a stop sign. Her lips were a quick equation solved in one sharp, sure calculation, and any pretense that we were only staging this for an audience fell away for the length of that pressure. When we pulled back, she looked amused at the alarm on my face. Better, she murmured. Zed's smirk died like a shorted fuse. You're trash, he said to Mara, and the lazy threat that had been slinking in his posture stood up. No, I said, because there are words you do not say to women like her. You're trespassing. He took a step. I took a step. He looked at my shoes, which probably were not half as intimidating as his boots, and I had a moment to imagine my obituary: Bookkeeper Dies In Parking Lot Trying To Defend Metal Rectangle. The biker bar's door banged open, and a wiry woman in cutoff shorts and a tee that said BLESS THIS MESS AND ALSO THIS BAR leaned out. Zed! she called. If you're going to threaten my favorite mechanic, you can do it over tacos, because I'm not doing this outside again. Also, I called a cop I dated for six months. He's already on his

mental health. He waved his arm at a projected photograph of a van interior that looked like a greenhouse had lost its way. He said, We are so afraid of decay that we have forgotten that we are all decaying, right now. Note the manipulation, Priya murmured. He's not wrong. He's weaponizing it. Jamie's turn. He stepped onto the stage. His heart beat like a drum solo in a song that did not require a drum solo. Hi, Jamie said, into the mic. His voice came back at him with a delay that made him sound like an unsure god. I live in a van. Not because I'm brave. Because I bought it on a Tuesday. Laughter. He leaned into it, the way you put your weight on a beam you hope will hold. I'm here to talk about mould. Which is a fun topic. Sexier than taxes, less sexy than… literally anything else. Let me tell you a secret: my van breathed at me this morning. Like a lover. Except it was spores. He had them. He told them about the cavity behind the shelf. He told them about the bread insulation. My walls were a sandwich, he said. And I was the filling. He said I thought I could manifest dryness. Turns out, you cannot manifest your way out of physics unless your crystals come with a Potter upcharge. He clicked to his pie chart. He thought the graphic would be terrible because he had made it at 2 a.m. with a tool designed for schoolchildren. It was gorgeous: slices labeled Denial, Defiance, Dehumidifier, and Doing It Right a sliver. Denial, he said, pointing to the largest slice. The Dry Deniers will tell you the mould is part of your journey. That is like saying your burglar is a lesson about boundaries. Maybe. But he still took the silver. Now he told them what Jasper had told him: the trifecta. Moisture. Organic matter. Ventilation. And then he did something unexpected, even to himself. He cried a little. It

they didn’t also live in biospheres. There were workshops on Sourdough on the Go, Composting Toilets: Which One Will Ruin Thanksgiving, and Macrame: Knot Just Décor. There were stands selling anything that could be described with the word nomadic in front of it. There was a stage where SunChakraDave-yes, the man bun himself-was scheduled to deliver a keynote titled: The Microbial Soul: Harmony With What Grows. Jamie went because Toby begged him to. He’s going to spin this, Toby said in a text that contained seven skull emojis and a gif of a cat emerging from a garbage can with dignity. We need someone to show the truth. Why me? Jamie asked. Because you’re not bitter yet, Toby replied. You’re funny. People like funny. Make them laugh out of their denial. Jamie is many things, but at his best, he turns humiliation into punchlines. He said yes. He said he’d bring pie charts and pies. They assigned him a five-minute slot between Nomadic Prenatal Yoga and How to Bathe in a Kettle Without Losing Dignity. He brought Jasper and Priya. He wore a shirt that said: Ask me about my spores. He made notes on a napkin because napkins are where truth lives when you can’t afford a whiteboard. SunChakraDave took the stage. He wore linen. He beamed. He had the smile of a man used to getting away with things because he calls them adventures. He talked about embracing the wet. He called mould a teacher. He said something about ancient dwellers in caves and the feminine nature of ferment. I want to be a better person, Jamie whispered under his breath, but I do want to punch that sentence. Jasper squeezed Jamie’s shoulder. Words are free. Punching is expensive. SunChakraDave spoke about a community of fungi that supports

way. Zed thought about equations, recalculated, sneered, and spat at the gravel. Enjoy your little road trip to Sad, he said to me. She’ll eat you alive. That would be convenient, Mara said, picking up a socket wrench with a clink that sounded like punctuation. I’m vegan. He backed up, did a wrist-flick that was supposed to read as menacing, and left with Loki and the matchstick man. The patrol car appeared two minutes later, lights lazily flashing, and the ex-cop and his ex-friend had an efficient conversation in which nobody got arrested but the air was improved by suggestion. When it was just me and Mara again, her shoulders sloped, a slow exhale like a tire losing air. She didn’t move away from my arm for another few beats. When she did, I felt it like weather changing. You lied, I said. About what? In-law dinner. She made a face. Would you have kissed me if I told the truth? It would have been comforting to say no. Yes, I said. But you didn’t look like someone who needed saving. You looked like someone who’d prefer a co-conspirator. Good, she said. Because I don’t do damsel. I noticed. She squinted at me like the sun had blinked. You actually want this van? Even after the snake and pony show? I want to want the van, I said carefully. I promised my wife we’d see the Redwoods together. She died before we could. I…don’t know what to do with that. Mara nodded. I lost my father at nineteen, she said, surprisingly. I took his motorcycle apart bolt by bolt because it was the nearest thing that made sense. I put it back together and drove it too fast for a summer. We choose our altars. Is that what this is? I asked. An altar I can drive into the ocean? Only if you aim badly, she said. She knocked on the van’s flank. This is Stella. She’s not finished. I was working on her when Zed

and I finally cut ties a year ago and he decided my labor was a line item on his balance sheet. I moved locations. Changed locks. Forgot to change one listing. He's opportunistic, not smart. And you want to finish her before he tries again. I want to finish her before I have to sell my organs, she said cheerfully, then not. And I need a sponsor. I'm up for a grant with a big conversion magazine-real money, real clients. They like stories. They like 'power couples in the van life space.' I don't have a partner. You have a checkbook and a face that says 'trust me to do your taxes.' It's a match made in capitalism. You want to fake-date me for… marketing. Just for the weekend, she said quickly. There's a van rally on the coast. A lot of potential eyeballs. If you play doting boyfriend, I'll give you- She looked up at the van, calculating. An obscene discount. A fair timeline. And a custom nook for that urn, if she's going with you. I felt a sensation in my chest like a door unlatched in a wind I hadn't admitted was blowing. It was ridiculous; it was crass; it was exactly the sort of thing June would have encouraged with a laugh that free-associated into the rafters. Go make a mess, Eli. Then clean it up and make bread. Okay, I said. Let's scam the algorithm. She smiled like a secret said yes. We'll workshop your vocabulary too. We spent two hours in the shade of the bar's deck, Mara pointing at wires and pipes, explaining in a voice that was low and clear how she'd designed a water system that baffled the laws of physics or at least defeated incompetence; how the solar would be enough to power a small rebellion; how the bed-platform, storage underneath, memory foam unless you're a masochist-would also fold into a sofa because some of us like to pretend we're civilized. I listened like a

bleach and responsibility. The next week was a parade of decisions, each tiny, each significant. He moved clothes into bins. He took Fern out for some air, apologizing for the trauma. He scheduled a strip-down with Jasper. He sawed. He sweated. Jasper cracked jokes like eggs, one-handed, competent, varying levels of shell. Looks like they used bread as insulation, Jasper said at one point, holding up a slice with the solemnity of communion. That's not bread. It was bread, Jasper said. Now it's philosophy. Why? Because bread is cheap and absorbent, Jasper said. Like regret. They discovered pockets of the van that had not seen light since the band Oasis still believed in itself. In one cavity, Jamie found a note from the previous owner: The walls are alive and that's good vibes. In another, a framed photo of a dog wearing a beanie. Everything was damp to the touch, including Jamie's rationalizations. In between, he'd go to the beach to breathe. He'd watch the gulls commit theft. He'd eat chips with vinegar until his mouth forgot how to feel anything but salt. He'd look at other vans, their crisp white exteriors like promises, and wonder which were safe and which were pastel prisons. He'd side-eye the Dry Deniers when they posted on the community board: Mould is just nature reminding you that you are nature. Stop being elitist about cleanliness. Jamie, dear reader, wanted to believe in ease. Ease is the red balloon always just out of reach in the carnival painting of adulthood. But he was now in a relationship with truth, which is to say: occasionally he wanted to cheat on it with a lie that wore a nice coat. And then: the meeting. VanCon do not confuse with other cons, although con is doing double duty here was a gathering of people who lived in vans and liked to pretend that

abs under beams of good choices. Freedom, he said, simply. A way to move, to be new every day. And what is it? Igor said. A way to move and bring my old self with me. He's sulking under the sink, Jamie said. Laughter. The good kind. Jasper was there, leaning against the wall, arms crossed, the repairman's face on which you could read affection, resignation, and a bunch of Greek letters representing torque. Here's the thing, Jasper said to the group, glancing at Jamie. You can remediate. You can gut. You can rebuild. You can also sell to some other sucker with a tattoo that says 'Wander.' Or you can keep living with it until you wheeze your way into an essay about ethics. The choice is your lungs'. We did a ritual, Toby said, weakly. A woman named Skylar sang at our emergency hatch. Was it sealed? Priya asked. The hatch or the ritual? Toby said. Yes, Priya said. They all cackled with the feeling of people laughing at funerals: not because it's appropriate, but because it allows air in where grief is thick and we are still biodegradable. You'll also meet resistance, Nan warned. There's a faction. The Dry Deniers. Who the- Jamie began. People who insist mould is a construct, Igor said. They say it is 'microbial patina.' They say it builds character. They will show you a photo of a Roman bath and say, 'See? Slime has a legacy.' They'll say you're fear-mongering, Priya added. They'll hashtag your posts with JustDewIt. Do not engage. Or engage, but bring pie charts. When do they meet? Jamie asked, because passive aggression tastes best served warm. Sunset, Nan said. With Bluetooth speakers. Jamie left the meeting feeling less alone and more entirely himself, which is a thing communities do when they are honest. He could choose: denial or something that smelled like

man falling through a trapdoor into a room he didn't know he'd always wanted to be in. Mara worked out of a shop in an industrial zone where river met railroad in the city's lower nerves. The shop was a cathedral of metal and intent, everything labeled, everything humming with use. A girl with purple hair and a carabiner clipped to her belt lifted a hand from a drill press and wagged fingers at me. Tamsin, Mara said. Intern. Anarchist. Breaks things for a living so we know how not to. I break things for free on the internet, Tamsin said without looking up. Is this the fake boyfriend? He's the real client, Mara said. And a decent kisser. Heat unspooled at the base of my spine in a way that drove thirteen years right off my back. I have references, I said, then realized I did not. June would have volunteered. Gross but supportive, Tamsin said, sliding goggles up onto her head. So, weekend? I sewed your sign. My what? I asked. Tamsin's enthusiastic, Mara said. She thinks we need a banner for authenticity. She's not wrong. The banner said: STELLA BUILT BY VOSS-POWERED BY LOVE. There was a tiny wrench embroidered into the heart. You're not afraid of leaning in, I said. Leaning in pays the electric bill, Mara said. If you want an earnest craftsman, go to Vermont. If you want results, go to the woman who names her batteries. You name your batteries? Koi, Juno, and Battery Who Lived, she said, deadpan. Don't embarrass yourself by being impressed. The rally was a sprawl of vans like a rainbow of survival: million-dollar new conversions tricked with cedar sauna and espresso machine; old Volkswagens held together with good intentions and stickers that said TELL YOUR DOG I SAID HI. We set up near the edge where dune grass bent toward a

Pacific that smelled like salt and possibility. I helped Mara raise the pop-top, which was like coaxing a house to grow eyebrows. She handed me a brace of bungee cords and told me stories about the other vendors, each with a nickname: Cedar Jesus, Queen of Adhesives, the Couple Who Wear Matching Vests. You sound like you're part of a secret society, I said. We are, she said. We swear to never make fun of composting toilets in public, and to always have ten percent more rivets than we think we need. You're happy here. Happy is a word with a pretty coat and a lot of holes, she said. But yes. We performed our coupledom like we had rehearsed in some previous life. It surprised me, the ease of it. The way her hand found the inside of my elbow when she needed my attention. The way she leaned back against me when we laughed at something absurd. The way she took my grief when it made itself suddenly visible-from a song, from a sticker that said LIFE IS SHORT, DON'T WAIT-and put it somewhere safe, if only for a beat. Zed appeared as sundown turned everything cinematic. He had an expression that said he believed dramatic lighting was his birthright. You really brought him, he said, as if we'd inconvenienced him by fulfilling a premise he'd tried to spoil. Hi Zed, Tamsin said sweetly from where she was painting a stripe along Stella's flank. I swear to God if you touch anything I will replace your shampoo with corn syrup. She's a poet, Mara said. I have a proposal, Zed said, because of course he did. Two thousand now to leave your name off this van and off the internet. I'll take the heat. You get invisibility. We both get peace. She gets starvation, I said. You get to pretend you didn't ruin something. You're too old to be this romantic, he shot back. People like us

on Wednesdays at the community center near the garden center that is also a community center. We talk. We cope. Sometimes we litigate. Mostly we laugh, because tears are simply unbottled humidity. Do they… fix vans? They fix perspective, Jasper said. I'll sign you up. That night, the group. Picture a circle of chairs, some with mismatched screws. A table of biscuits sweating under cling film. A poster on the wall that says: It's not a leak if you wanted a waterfall. People in the circle introducing themselves with names and their specific mould some names you don't recognize because they're both Latin and petty. Hi, I'm Priya, said a woman in a cardigan that could be used as a tent in emergencies. I'm a lawyer. Don't hate me. I bought a van to escape the law. Joke's on me. I'm now suing an influencer named SunChakraDave for selling me a sauna that only steams my shame. Hi, I'm Igor, said a man with a calculator watch and a moody child in a sling. I am statistician. Probability of mould? One hundred percent. Probability of honesty? Under two percent, depending on 'vibes.' Hi, I'm Nan, said a woman who was either seventy or timeless. When we built our first caravan, we used tar and brute force. It leaked? We smoked in it until the smoke made a skin. Listen. People have always been wet. We pretended less about it. Toby, said a blond man wearing a beanie and remorse. Former van influencer. I once used 'tide' as a metaphor for 'grace.' I deserve your scorn. Jamie introduced himself. He said the words out loud: My van has mould. The group nodded like he had said I feel lonely. Which is perhaps what he had really said. What did you want vanlife to be? Priya asked. Jamie thought. He thought of all the advertisements with their sunset pancakes and

windows don’t open because they are symbolic. And beneath the bed, congratulations, you’ve got a terrarium. He lifted the bed panel with the flourish of a magician revealing a rabbit. It was rabbits, plural, of the fungal persuasion. There was a delicate ecology sprawled there, intricate as lace and twice as alarming. Colors: white, green, black. Texture: velveteen ambition. Smell: if melancholy grew teeth. Do I… burn it? Jamie asked. Jasper grinned. Tempting. Illegal. Also the spore load would turn this town into a psychedelic festival. What do I do? Education, Jasper said. The word hit Jamie like kale. I mean, we can gut this. Strip it to metal. Treat. Seal. Rebuild properly. But that assumes you’re not married to this aesthetic of death-by-fiberboard. And it assumes you’re ready to admit you were bamboozled by the Cult of Rustic. I like fairy lights, Jamie said, defensively, as if they were on trial. You can keep fairy lights, Jasper said, kindly. Not fungus lights. The thing about truth is, it’s inconvenient. It does not arrive at convenient hours. It does not send a calendar invite with an agenda attached. It turns up while you are in your pajamas and says, Hi, I’m going to demolish your trip to Cornwall and also your identity. Why didn’t the previous owner tell me? Jamie asked, small. Jasper raised an eyebrow. Did he have a man bun? Yes, Jamie whispered. There you go, Jasper said. Also, there’s a community. There are others like you. People who were told vapor barrier is a mood, not a membrane. People who were sold snake oil that smells like pine. People who started coughing and thought it was nostalgia for office air con. A community? Jasper scratched his cheek with a grease-black thumb, leaving a comet tail. MICE. I beg your- Mould In Camper Experiences, Jasper said. We meet

don’t get a Great Love Part Two. Mara looked at him. You’ve never had a Great Love Part One, she said softly. Take your doom and go. He smiled, a toothpaste ad gone to seed, and pivoted as if we’d commanded a stage direction he was comfortable executing. It should have felt like victory, but the marrow of the night shifted. Mara shifted too, as if listening to something I couldn’t hear. At one in the morning, with the vans settled into a steady hum and the ocean writing its endless letter, we lay on the unmade bed inside Stella. The walls smelled faintly of pine and lemon oil. A string of warm lights looped above us like a constellation with a name we didn’t know. I’m going to touch your chest now, Mara said, factual, her hand hovering above my shirt. If you want me to stop, say June or stop or give me the socket wrench. Laughter pushed a startled sound out of me. That’s extremely specific. I find specificity is foreplay at our age, she said. Also, consent turns me on. It turns everyone on, I said, and when her hand slid beneath cotton to skin, I felt like a man who had been living under a low sky for a long time and someone had just opened a door. She kissed me slowly and thoroughly in a way that was less performance and more a careful mapping, like she was recording my topography for later. When her mouth found my neck, when my hand tightened in her hair, we were not careful for several breathless minutes. We stopped because Tamsin’s voice floated from somewhere outside shouting, Do I need earplugs or are we respecting the sanctity of thin walls? and Mara laughed into my shoulder until we both had tears in our eyes. I haven’t laughed in months, I said, as if confessing an affair with fatigue. Laughing is a gateway drug, she said, serious. It leads to optimism. Optimism

leads to love. Love leads to doing stupid brave things. And stupid brave things lead to basements full of regret, I offered. She tipped my chin toward her with a knuckle. Or to knowing you were alive the whole time. We slept poorly but contentedly, the way people do when they've put their bodies into a new grammar and their minds haven't learned its verb conjugations. The sabotaged screw revealed itself in the morning like a secret with a bad haircut. Stella's rear tie-down-where a safety chain was supposed to anchor-had been loosened to the last thread. It wouldn't have taken much on Highway 26 for the back door to blow, for my future to skid across asphalt like a carelessly closed box. Mara knelt, stilled, then stood so controlled I knew something was breaking somewhere I couldn't see. Zed, she said, and it wasn't a guess. Tamsin swore joylessly. He's going to die of a weird unrelated accident like a 'tragic butter incident' if he keeps this up. I looked at the salt-damped air and made a decision I could feel in my knuckles. What do we do? Because my old version of life says 'file a report' and my new version is still being beta-tested. Mara focused on me with hawk attention. We finish the install. We smile. We give a workshop at noon like we said. And then we ask Zed to meet us where he prefers to be seen-dramatically-down by the jetty. And we tell him the world is bigger than he is. That sounds like a speech more than a plan, I said. I'm trying not to commit a felony, she said wryly. Let me have rhetoric. We did the morning: we poured coffee for curious dog owners; I gave an impromptu tutorial on what not to do with your receipts if you run a tiny business; Mara taught six people in beanies how to use a rivnut tool without losing their souls. We laughed a lot, because it

was told you… fix vans? I also fix people using vans to avoid being fixed, the voice said. Because vans don't solve you; they simply relocate you and your very transportable problems. Who's calling? Jamie. Describe the smell, Jasper said, without preamble. Jamie did. Uh-huh, Jasper said. Imagine a wet dog wearing a wool sweater in a courtroom. Sorry-what? Sorry. That last bit was my lunch. You've got mould. Probably black. Possibly Stachybotrys chartarum. Maybe it's species I just insulted with my pronunciation. How're your lungs? Existential, Jamie said. Bring it by, Jasper said. Or if it can't move without shedding, I do house calls. Mobile calls. Call calls. I come to you with a van that is mostly made of tools and one sandwich I've been meaning to eat since 2009. Jasper was tall, wiry, and had the look of someone who has argued successfully with weather. His garage was behind a petrol station and in front of a field of cows who had real opinions. On the wall, there were signs. Home is where the leak is. Abs are great but have you tried torque? If you can read this, thank a teacher; if you can't, thank a public school funding policy. He strode around Jamie's van, peering underneath, knocking on panels with the authority of a landlord who actually cares. Right, he said, after ten minutes. You've got the trifecta. Which is? Jamie asked, bracing himself against the image of himself braced against things for the rest of his life, like a ship's mast in a storm of receipts. Moisture, organic material, and poor ventilation. Also known as the British soul. No offense. The person who did this build used interior paint that was essentially fondant. They insulated with what looks like a combination of recycled cardboard, carpet pad, and hope. The vapor barrier is a poem. The

plywood peeled away with a noise like turning down someone at a prom, polite but final. Behind the paneling, there was a soft wall of something white. It was not paint. It was not cloud. It was, startlingly, reminiscent of a wedding cake that had been forgotten in a barn for seven months. Hi, Jamie said, because old instincts die hard. Are you… part of the original design? The moist white fluff did not answer in words. It answered by releasing a gentle cough of spores. He gagged, stumbled out of the van, and drank the ocean with his eyes. -Pause. This is where you think: why not run? Why not call the previous owner and apply the intimate pressure of a small claims court? Remember: hope. Remember: sunk cost fallacy; the ancient human instinct to say Well, I already ate two bad oysters, might as well finish the dozen. He thought: maybe it's just surface. Maybe it's friendly. Maybe it's probiotic. Who am I to judge? People talk to their sourdough starter. Some people talk to worse. He taped the panel back with gaffer tape, which is a lot like bandaging a volcano with a Band-Aid and a wink. Manifest dryness, he said to himself, and placed three crystals near the damp patch. The crystals did nothing except sparkle in the way that makes fools think physics is flattery. By afternoon, the damp had invented a personality. It preferred jazz. It smelled like theatre seats. It responded to the dehumidifier like a queen to a gnat. Jamie lasted until night. He lay in the loft bed and listened to the van breathe, the way couples breathe together, comforting until it isn't. He got up, turned on the fairy lights. He looked at the shelf where he had squeezed the gap closed with cowardice. He sighed. He called Jasper. Torque Tongue, a voice said. Where we wrench and we roast. Um, Jasper? Jamie said. I

turned out the world loved to laugh near us. The sponsor rep from the magazine stopped by, took photos, wrote down Mara's website, and said, You two are disgustingly photogenic. When we walked to the jetty at twilight, the ocean throwing itself at the rocks like a complicated lover, Mara reached for my hand and I gave it without conditions. Zed waited with his legs dangling over the side like he wanted the water to rise and absolve him. Make it convincing, he said. I'll accept a public apology and a private payment. You're not getting either, Mara said, and the wind tugged hair into her mouth and she didn't push it away. But you are going to stop. Because if you don't, I will burn down the rest of my life to make sure yours is very small. He laughed, delighted. Where was that in bed? Busy plotting my escape, she said blandly, and he flinched. He stood, swagger a little off because pride always has a limp. All right, queen. What's your leverage? This boy's ancient jawline? I'm fifty-seven, I said. My jawline has a vintage patina. You're very proud of your bones, Zed said. Fine. Show me your teeth. You messed with her work, I said, anger making my voice unrecognizable to me, a bass I didn't know I had. Men like you always confuse cruelty with control. You're not controlling anything. You're just narrowing. Poetry, Zed sneered. No, Mara said, stepping closer. Truth. She'd hidden a length of chain under her jacket. She held it up now and looped it around Stella's bumper where the jetty met parking lot, securing the van to the rail in a clatter that sounded like decision. The tide surged, a wet animal at our boots. What are you- I began. Mara cut me a look like a request. Trust me. And stay ready. Zed watched, wary, and then grinned. This is adorable. You think you're medieval. I

think I’m done letting you make my heart small, Mara said. She flicked a lighter-a cheap green Bic, unromantic-and set the corner of our Powered by Love banner on fire. Mara, I said, because I did not want to watch her burn anything else. Stop. She shook the flame out with a terse motion and dropped the scorched cloth to the cement. See? Choices. She looked at Zed. You don’t get to own my work. You don’t get to use my fear. You don’t get to be the story. He looked at the chain, at the surf, at the crowd that had begun to gather-van people love a tableau. Cruelty and control loitered in his eyes, auditioning for another scene, then seemed to bump into an older thing: cowardice. This is boring, he said without conviction. Call me when you want to be grown-ups. He turned and stalked toward his truck, stranded himself for a second at the edge of leaving without panache, then drove away too fast so the tires could tell him he was significant. We stood in the purple hour. I let out the breath I’d been sheltering for a long time. Tamsin bounced on her toes up the path, whooping. You didn’t even have to hit him! she yelled to Mara. Character development! Shut up, Mara said, but fondly. She turned to me, and for the first time since I’d met her, she looked uncertain. I know that was theatrical. But I needed the part of my brain that only speaks in symbols to get the message. What message? I asked, gently. That I’m done leaving myself for last, she said. And that I’m allowed to ask for more than survival. The crowd dispersed with the efficiency of people who had Instagrammed what they came for. We were alone again with a van chained to a world that couldn’t promise safety. This is the part, she said to me, voice small and clear, where I say I like you enough to invite you into the mess.

nomadic before we invented hinges. Tony’s van interior was the lovechild of a Tex-Mex restaurant and a pirate ship. There was a hammock with a chandelier above it. There were five cans of air freshener labeled Scandium Breeze. There was a bicycle bolted to the wall and also to the concept of hope. Van life, Tony said, sliding bacon onto a plate as if he were not currently living inside a softly bearding aquarium. You learn hacks. What’s your build like? Boutique, Jamie said, which is the word you use when you can’t think of the word you want because it’s dangerous. I think the previous owner was… creative. Ah, Tony said, sympathy crossing his face like a cloud passes a sun that’s seen too many of Tony’s selfies. Let me guess. He posted OnlyVan content. You mean Instagram, Jamie said. Tony snorted. Right, right. InstaVan. Well, if you ever need a guy… there’s a mechanic two towns over. Jasper. Knows vans like I know how to avoid my taxes. He also knows sprouted plywood, which is a niche, but here we are. We shall get to Jasper. To do so, we need to survive Jamie’s next twenty-four hours, which involved a revelation, a self-deception, and a choice. The revelation arrived in the form of a smell. It wasn’t the heroic funk of socks. It wasn’t the romantic funk of cheese. It was the bureaucratic funk of paper left in a damp office. It had ambition. It expanded to fill the van, the car park, the space behind Jamie’s eyes. He found it by accident, as one often finds things-tripping over the rugs we lay to slippery up our lives. He knocked into the bookshelf an aesthetic sliver that could hold six books if those books were lies, and a slim paperback titled Nomad Soul tumbled, revealing behind it a gap in the paneling. From the gap, a breath of cold. Jamie wedged fingers in, pulled. A strip of

tea towel. We'll just… the dehumidifier. We'll borrow air. The dehumidifier wheezed. Somewhere, something dripped. The sound ricocheted around the van like an accusation. He made coffee on the little stove. By little, I do mean little. The stove was technically a tealight under a smug kettle, but the kettle insisted on being called artisanal heat vessel and cost more than Jamie's first car. He drank coffee sweetened by dread and looked out at the lighthouse, which stared back with a blinking patience reserved for ships and men making preventable mistakes. Look, it's at this point-early, sticky, jasmine-scented by the diffuser that exactly nobody needed-that it's my duty to tug at your sleeve and remind you: mould is not personal. It is democratic. It loves the rich with their indoor pools and the poor with their indoor rain. It loves the adventurous and the anxious alike, especially if they provide excellent moisture and a soundtrack of acoustic guitar. Do not take what follows as an indictment of Jamie. Consider it a love letter to human hope from the bacteria quietly renovating our homes. Morning! called a voice, scudding in through the window with the smell of bacon and dog. A man in a robe the color of old optimism waved a spatula. His van had a mural of a wolf wearing sunglasses. His robe had a wolf wearing sunglasses. His sense of self had a wolf wearing sunglasses. Morning, Jamie said, trying to casually wipe his eyebrows. First week? the man asked, eyes flicking to the air vents in a way that said: I have seen things that have bloomed. Second, Jamie lied. I'm Tony. This is Gloria, he said, thumb hitching back to the van, and then patted the dog, who looked embarrassed on Tony's behalf. Join us for breakfast? Jamie agreed, because human beings are very portable and we were

But you didn't sign up to be a symbol or a project. You signed up for a discount. I signed up for a weekend, I said. Then you went and became a human. That was inconvenient of me, she said softly. Mara. She met my eyes. The wind was a hand on our backs. She looked fierce and transparent and absurdly, achingly brave. I have a house with a kitchen, I said slowly, the words tasting tender and tired. It's too quiet. I sleep on one side of the bed like I'm sparing a ghost's feelings. If I sell it, I could live like a moving question. If I keep it, I could turn it into a place for other people who need a start. I thought the van would decide for me. It turns out the van is just a…van. Sometimes a cigar is just a poor choice of upholstery, she said. Sometimes it's a strategy. I want to take June to the Redwoods, I said. I also want to build something with a foundation that isn't only steel and hope. I thought I had to choose. And now? Now I think I can do both, I said. With the right accomplice. Her smile started wary and then went luminous. This is the part where you'd usually say 'too soon', she said. And I tell you I am a warning label disguised as a woman. You're a woman disguised as a woman, I said. Warnings are for appliances. She moved into me, kissed me like an answer, and when we broke apart she rested her forehead against mine. I can do weekends on the road, she said. I can do Monday morning permits for tiny homes. I can do giving my name to this-us-in real life and not because a grant wants a romance arc. And I can do repairs, I said. On ledgers. On cabinets. On hearts, slowly. Don't advertise that last one, she murmured. Or the line will be around the block. We unchained Stella together as the tide retreated, the chain heavy and easily borne. That night, Mara let me crawl around beneath the

van with her, handing her tools while she tightened what had been loosened, secured what had been risked. It was astonishing, the intimacy of repair. The way you could fall in love with the undercarriage of a thing, the breaths it took for granted. We didn't sleep until the morning pinked. Tamsin shoved donuts and coffee at us and told us the sponsor rep had emailed at 2 a.m. with the kind of glee that infected even my hangover. Things feel light right before they commit to being heavy again, and the weight was delicious. When we drove home, Stella thumped over a pothole and didn't rattle. We took the long way along the coast, June safe in her seat with a blanket tucked around her like an eccentric aunt. We stopped at a turnout and walked down to a cliff where the sea did its work unbeautifully. I took the lid off the urn and lifted a handful of ash. It was shockingly soft, like flour, like talc, like something that should mark a cheek. Do you want… Mara began, but she didn't finish because she had learned I liked to finish sentences like this myself. I want to say I'm sorry I waited, I said, and the words went into the wind like seeds. I want to say I didn't know how to live without you and now I'm going to try to live with you everywhere. We stood together, letting go in increments that were both grand and invisible. When we were finished, my hands were dusted with the past. Mara wiped them gently with a cloth she'd soaked in the ocean. I'm not a therapist, she said. But I am very good at messy practicalities. Marry me, I said impulsively, then immediately choked on my own audacity. Not now. In a…year. Or five. She laughed, wild and grateful and startled. Let's start with…falling in love for a while, she said. Then we can design an aisle out of plywood. Deal, I said, because

constrained by botanical accuracy. Fern was leaning away from the wall like an introvert at a surprise party. Jamie lived at the moment in a coastal car park that had a view of a lighthouse, three bins, and one seagull with a vindictive posture. The seagull came from a long line of seagulls that had attended finishing school in Paris and could spot a weak sandwich from space. Maybe it's just condensation, Jamie said, optimistically. Optimism is what you call denial when it's wearing a jaunty scarf. He opened a window. The van sighed, like a theater curtain, revealing moisture beading on the insulation behind the paneling. The insulation looked like hair. Not metaphorical hair. Honest-to-God hair. The previous owner had written in the ad: Insulated with eco-friendly materials. Jamie had assumed sheep's wool. He had not foreseen barber sweepings. Let's fill in the gaps, so you don't fill in the forms for me. Jamie: twenty-eight, desk quitter, soul in the shape of a baguette white, long, mildly pretentious, easy to tear. He had sold three potted plants, two chairs, and one classical guitar that had only ever known the first four chords of Wonderwall. He had adopted the van, which he named The Library, because naming things incorrectly is Jamie's kink. The Library was a 2008 van whose age did not show because it had been layered, painted, and bedecked like a corpse at the funeral of a wealthy aunt. There was a loft bed. There were fairy lights. There was a composting toilet perched with the audacity of a throne in the shower stall. The previous owner had installed cabinets using a system of screws and affirmations i.e., nothing was attached to a surface that could hold it, but everything was empowered. Alright, Jamie said, with the steady resolve of a man about to cover rotting produce with a

The Mouldy Truth

The Mouldy Truth On the third morning of Jamie’s grand nomadic life, the van coughed before he did. The walls exhaled. A fine mist of something-confidence? regret?-drifted from the join between a reclaimed pallet shelf and a wall panel wrapped in what could have been wallpaper or, knowing the previous owner, an artisan napkin. The mist settled delicately on his eyebrows. It tasted like forgotten basements and a dash of artisanal disappointment. That’s new, Jamie said out loud, because talking to inanimate objects is step three in the five stages of mobile homeownership. He had bought the van the way one buys a hat in a panic five minutes before a wedding: with equal parts aspiration and terror. And like that hat, the van was a poor fit, slightly damp, and too eager to be noticed. The advertisement had read: Fully converted Sprinter with Scandi vibes and solar. Perfect for off-grid poets and people named Jamie. Minor quirk: unique ecosystem. At the time, unique ecosystem had seemed whimsical, like finding a tiny herbal garden in the glove compartment. You know. Thyme in the timepiece. Basil in the full basilisk sense, warding off blandness. He imagined microgreens flourishing in mason jars, as he posted filtered photos captioned with world-tilting quotes like The sea is a mirror and sometimes I wink back. He ignored the clause at the bottom, elegant as a toenail: Buyer accepts van as-is. As-is had, apparently, evolved overnight into as-wet; as-fuzzy; as-if. Good morning, Fern, he said, reaching to pat the succulent that had bravely moved into a macrame sling above the kitchenette. Fern was not a fern. Fern was a succulent, but Jamie refused to be

I am a man who enjoys arrangements. We made one. It took shape over the next year like a build you don’t rush. On Mondays, I taught a free budgeting class at the community center I funded with the money from the house sale I did not regret. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I apprenticed myself to Mara and learned why curses were invented. On weekends, we rolled. We became a pair of people built on jokes and honest apologies, on foreheads pressed together after bad calls, on texts that said simply, Alive? when one of us went quiet. Zed faded into what happens to men like him; he moved to Arizona, started a coffee shop inside a shipping container, and posted shirtless photos with captions like Grind. Tamsin got asked out by someone whose first language was Poetry; we all pretended not to be smug about it. The grant came through. The magazine did a spread that called Mara the stiletto of van builds, which made her howl with laughter, because she was wearing grease-stained Converse in every photo. The world insisted on naming us a power couple. We insisted on being a couple who knew where every breaker was and how to reset it. One night, six months in, we parked outside a grove of coastal redwoods on our way south. The trees were not mystical in the way I’d expected; they were practical about being enormous. We sat on the bumper with our legs swinging and ate charred vegetables from a cast-iron pan. The moon looked like a coin. The air smelled like something older than explanation. I used to think I was a bad person, Mara said, as if we’d been having that conversation all along. Because I wanted things like vengeance and speed. Because I wasn’t sorry enough and then I was too sorry. You’re a person who lived, I said. It got complicated. You’re

a person who made spreadsheets for grief, she said. Also complicated. We're full of gray, I said. Which looks nice with blue, she said, patting Stella. And with the color of you when you're about to say something earnest. I love you, I said, because timing is an imperfect art. Good, she said without drama, then leaned into my side. Because I love you too. We went to bed early in every way that mattered and set an alarm for dawn. When the light came through the pop-top fabric, turning the ceiling into a soft box of gold, I heard Mara whisper, Hey. I opened my eyes to find her looking at me, hair a dark riot over the pillow, mouth already smiling. Hey, I said. She touched the wrinkle by my eye like it was a river on a map. You look like a man who built a life that isn't afraid of changing shape. You look like a woman who could drive a building if she had to, I said. She kissed me like she was double-checking a measurement and then like she didn't care if the shelves fit. We were not gentle, but we were careful, which is a paradox I recommend to anyone. Later, fully dressed and presenting wholesome to the trail of hikers who paused to admire Stella, we made coffee and told an older couple from Iowa that the thing about van life is that it's just life, which is messier and more exquisite than Instagram, even if you get the angle right. Do you ever feel tempted to sell it all? the woman asked, eyes gleaming the way eyes do when they contemplate road romance. Every day, I said. And sometimes we do. And sometimes we don't. But how do you choose? she said, genuinely curious. We looked at each other in the pause where the answer could be glib or true. We choose each other, Mara said, and the truth landed like a beam. We took June to the ocean one more time that afternoon because

ceiling. My lungs felt like a pair of good neighbours. The van had been a moldy haven. Haven, noun: a place where you are safe. It turned out safety was not an aesthetic. It wasn't wood panelling and fairy lights and the right enamel mugs. It was the absence of the thing that attacks you when you're not looking. It was choosing not to sleep in a biology experiment. It was owning up to the seam and then doing something about it, even if that something was walking away. I'm not going to pretend it didn't sting. Every time I saw a photo of someone's van parked on a cliff with a caption about living their best life, a small, petty part of me wanted to comment, Great, how are your sills? But the bigger part of me poured another cup of tea and sat on a chair that didn't fold and breathed air that didn't itch. People imagine turning points as climaxes, bursting and lit. Mine was quieter. It was in a diner with a sticky menu, a man stirring too much sugar, and eggs slick with ketchup. It was a mechanic's torch illuminating a seam that I didn't want to look at and then looking anyway. It was saying, out loud, I'm not going to weld, when another version of me would have insisted on learning with YouTube and a lot of denial. If I have a religion, it's this: not all defeats are failures. Sometimes the bravest thing is to decide that someone else can love a thing better than you. I wanted a rolling haven and got a biology project. Letting it go gave me back my breath. ##

account and name it something sensible like ‘boring decisions.’ And maybe buy boots that don’t let rain in. He nodded as if that was a plan he approved of. Sometimes the fantasy is the bit you outgrow, he said. Doesn’t mean it wasn’t useful while it lasted. Usefulness is not a quality we celebrate adequately. The van had been useful. It had focused me. It had taught me that freedom without maintenance is just weather. It had shown me that my stubbornness could be turned like a tap. It had introduced me to Joe’s particular brand of honesty. It had made me wear a respirator and take out things that needed removing. It had forced me to locate the seam. When it rained in the new room, the water hit the window and slid down the outside and made tracks like the ones on the van’s windscreen. I lay in bed and watched it, warm and awake, and felt relief settle in a place where shame might have gone if I’d let it. When the radiator clicked off, the silence was clean. Months later, on a grey afternoon that seemed to be waiting for someone to fix its mood, I saw the van again. In traffic, three cars ahead, its paint newly gleaming in a way that said someone had spent a weekend with a buffer. The partner with sofa hair was driving; I knew her profile. The side windows looked tight in their seals. The line of the seam under them was new metal, neat lines, unafraid. I honked, which felt stupid, and then she saw me in the rearview and laughed. She put a hand out the window and wiggled her fingers, and I wiggled mine back, and the van pulled away at the lights like a thing that had been remade on purpose. I got home and put the kettle on. The kettle rattled on the ring and complained in a way I now found charming. I poured the water into a mug and watched the steam rise and not condense into droplets on my

rituals want practice. I carried her empty urn back into Stella and placed it in the custom-built cubby Mara had fashioned, with a tiny brass plaque that read: JUNIPER NORTH, LOVED EVERYWHERE. On the drive back into the world, we argued about where to stop-she wanted tacos from a roadside stand that looked like a health inspector’s fever dream; I wanted soup. We compromised badly and ate both. My life, for all of its new improvisation, had a steady drum. I was not a man who had chosen between van and house, between road and root. I was a man who had chosen a woman who built her days out of steel and kindness, and a version of love that did not ask me to amputate any parts of myself. I still talked to June. You don’t mind, I said to the empty passenger seat once, when Mara was in the shop and I was alone and the smell of pine was thick with my sudden missing. You don’t mind that I found someone who laughs in a way that makes things grow. I like to believe I heard her answer. I like to believe the way the brake released with an easy sigh was the world saying yes. There are still days when grief arrives like a weather system and we put buckets beneath its leaks. There are still nights when Mara dreams of being chased and I wake her with the name that brings her back to shore. We take turns being the one who holds still. We take turns being the one who moves. At a different rally the following summer, someone asked us to give a talk about partnerships. I don’t know why they think we’re qualified, Mara said, tightening a bolt that had flirted with independence. We’re just two badgers in human suits. Speak for yourself, I said. I’m at least a golden retriever. Enemies-to-lovers is an overstatement, she said into the mic later, when a crowd had

gathered around our little stage made of pallets. We were more like ‘mutual-aid-to-lovers.’ He needed a van. I needed…a witness. And a tax deduction, I offered. True, she said. He also needed to be kissed even though he didn’t know that yet. I knew it, I said. I just didn’t know it was allowed to be fun again. The crowd laughed in the easy way humans do when someone tells the truth in the silly voice so the truth doesn’t scare anyone. We did a Q and A, and people asked about hinge systems and hearts. We answered both honestly. Last question, someone shouted. What’s the secret? Mara looked at me. I looked at her. Tamsin, off to the side holding a can of sparkling water and rolling her eyes, mouthed: Don’t say communication. Bananas, I said solemnly. Never underestimate potassium. And also, Mara said, forgive yourselves for how you survived before you met. The crowd made the sound that crowds make when someone goes and says the true thing out loud. Then we packed up with the unglamorous motions of loading and securing, a practiced pas de deux of straps and checks. The van settled into her suspension with a purr. The world waited. On the way home, as the city gathered us back into its complicated arms, a light rain began, the kind that pretends it isn’t rain so you stay outside and keep talking. Mara turned on the wipers and sang along to a song she swore she hated. I reached over and wrapped my hand around the handle above the glove compartment. It said hold in case of turbulence. Everyone calls it the oh-shit bar. I remembered the first time she asked me to hold on. I remembered the case she made for risk. I remembered Zed’s face when he realized we weren’t playing his game, and June’s laugh in my memory, and Tamsin’s banner with its sooty burn. I remembered

somewhere and sit with the boot open and make tea on a camping stove and the kettle would whistle and I would imagine the van as a bigger shadow parked just behind me, patient. Work settled into the rhythm it had had before I thought mobility would fix me. A coffee shop became my office again. The barista called me by my order, not my name. My ex texted and I left it on read because I couldn’t bring myself to fit them into the logic of the van decision. My sister said I was welcome in the spare room anytime I wanted and I said maybe and meant, I’ll come for Sunday lunch and leave when the gravy thickens. Two weeks after they towed it away, the welder texted me a picture of the van mid-surgery. The windows were out. The area around the frames was a map of removed rust, neat rectangles where fresh metal would go. The floor was bare, the wood long gone, the ribs freshly wire-brushed and painted with something that looked like tar. In the background, someone had written WASH YOUR HANDS on masking tape. Progress is photogenic in a way that maintenance isn’t. I wrote back: She looks naked and content. The welder sent back a photo of his partner in a respirator giving a thumbs-up. No mushrooms, the caption said. Sometimes I’d drive past Joe’s forecourt garden and see a van or three lined up like promises. He’d be under a bonnet, his trousers slipping a fraction, a rag tucked in his back pocket, talking to someone who looked exactly like me the day I said I’ll take it. He always lifted a hand when he saw me. Sometimes he’d hold up a kettle like a talisman and laugh. What are you going to do with the money? he asked, one day when we were standing in the gravel, drinking tea from the flask that had seen more of his life than most people. Not spend it on rust, I said. Put it in an

who had opinions and was trying to keep them sheathed. He handed me a mug and stood with me, both of us facing the van as if we were at a funeral we were trying not to get thrown out of for laughing. You did right, he said, softly for him. You'd have gone mad. Or hospital. I thought it would make me a person who doesn't make stupid choices, I said. Turns out I still do, but at least this one had wheels. You had a go, he said. The trick is knowing when to stop having a go. We took the last of my things out: two pans, a hook with my keys on it shaped like a fish, the memory foam that had died for my sins. The kettle went into my tote with a thunk like a chapter closing. When they drove it away, the van looked lighter, as if being claimed by someone who knew how to fight its battles had given it back a kind of dignity. The blue of the recovery truck flashed as it signalled. The dog at the garage watched it go and then looked up at me as if to say, happens all the time. I moved into a room above a shop that sold domestic appliances and repair services, a decision that felt tongue-in-cheek until it meant I could get a man to fix my washing machine with a knock on the ceiling. The room had windows that opened and closed without negotiation and a radiator that made a small, contented ticking noise when it was happy. The first night, I slept with both lungs and woke with a nose that did not protest. It felt like cheating to feel that good after a week of living like a damp sponge, but bodies are simple creatures. They reward you when you stop being stupid. I bought a second-hand estate car from a woman who'd averaged 32 mph over its whole life. It smelled like dry biscuit. I threw a sleeping bag in the back because I am not a person who learns nothing. Every now and then I'd pull off

my own face in the bar's window, a man holding a decision like a match, waiting to see which way the wind would take the flame. We drove into the rain. The van hummed like a thing made to move forward. On the dashboard, a small sticker Tamsin had made for me caught the light-half a loaf of bread, half a heart. Beneath it, in tiny letters, she'd written: Bake One, Break One, Make One. Hey, I said to Mara, and she hummed to let me know she was listening. I'm happy, I said, simple as bread. I know, she said. Me too. It felt like a confession. It felt like a vow. It felt like everything we'd built was both precarious and resilient, like a van on a cliff, like a tiny home on blocks, like a couple standing against a current. It felt like the thing you say when you've been alive long enough to know happiness is not a destination but a practice. The road opened. We took it, together. ##

The Flipper's Façade

The van took up two parking spaces like it had bought them both, glossy and primped and the color of a warning sign. Even in the dim sodium wash of the industrial lot, its paint-the particular postal-service yellow you could spot from orbit-announced itself like a trumpet. It was the kind of yellow that, back in its working days, had made dogs bark and children wave. Now it wore matte-black wheels and varnished wood inside. It looked like a tasteful sauna had swallowed a toolbox, then tried to pass for a home. Like the photos? the seller asked, hands spread wide as if he'd sculpted it from butter with his own heat. In the listing he called himself

Max. He had the shaggy beanie, cable-knit sweater, and scruff to match the persona. He could have been selling me a van conversion or artisanal soap; the outfit worked either way. It's very yellow, I said. He laughed. Ex-Deutsche Post. Best shells. They get maintained, you know? Fleet maintenance. This engine will outlive your grandchildren. Bold, I said. They don't maintain grandchildren. He grinned like we were already friends. I had parked my hatchback by the chain-link fence and brought a flashlight I didn't really need; an August evening in Hamburg still held a little light, and this lot had more lamps than charm. The smell of fried onions drifted over from a snack truck at the far end of the lot. Max had told me to meet him behind a big-box furniture store, which seemed apt; the van's interior had been furnished by someone who took the instructions home from page six of a catalog. I ran a hand along the outside. The paint was smooth, the kind of smooth achieved by sanding away history and an honest reaction to weather. The edges of the panel seams hinted at filler. But you didn't buy an old van to get excited about paint. You bought a van because walls on wheels had pulled you in, because a studio apartment that moved felt like an answer. My answer sat there pretending it had nothing to hide. Shall we? he said, sliding open the side door with a practiced swoosh. Warmth and pine and lemon oil hit me. LED strips glowed along the ceiling, reflected in the honeyed planks. Contrasts were big here: live-edge counter, tiny porcelain sink, copper faucet, recessed shelving lit like a shop window. A bed platform took up the back. A fake plant dangled in a macramé hanger. It was a van someone built for photographs. Without thinking, I knocked my knuckles against the wall.

horse. Drives well. Needs someone with more technical competence and less skin that reacts like a Victorian. Priced accordingly. Bring a respirator. The sandaled men of Facebook Marketplace did not disappoint. Within an hour I had six messages that began with what's your lowest price and one that opened with, I'm a welder by trade and my partner's allergic to cats, not vans. I messaged that one back. They arrived as a pair. A woman with hair the colour of an expensive sofa and a man with tattoos that looked like architectural drawings. They wore proper masks around their necks and looked at the van with the kind of appraisal reserved for fixer-uppers with great bones. He tapped a seam and nodded. She crouched and peered under the step, light on her phone illuminating a world of underside. She's… honest, she said. The way she said it made me like her. I don't want to pretend it's anything else, I said. I've bagged everything. It's well beyond cat litter bowls. He laughed. People do that, don't they? he said. Open a salt mine in the back and call it prevention. We went for a slow drive around the block, every clunk catalogued, every hum noted. We came back and he pointed out the rust with a gentleness that felt like he wasn't performing for me. She asked me if I'd slept in it without windows in February. I told her I was not that person anymore. They made an offer that would have made me laugh a week ago and now made me nod because any number attached to relief is a number you consider holy. I asked them if they had a way to tow it. He smiled and produced a proper towbar and a man with a truck. It was as if they lived in a world where they thought about consequences before they became disasters. Joe turned up with a flask and two mugs and an energy I recognised as someone

in. Six to start. He swore gently. A Catholic swearing, careful and fond. You can borrow a sander and make yourself useful for a month, he said. Or you can sell it as a project to someone with a welder and fewer allergies. Either way, you call it today. Your voice sounds small. Once, decisions had felt like something that arrived fully formed and announced themselves. Lately, my decisions had started as a fog that thinned until you could see one shape inside it. I thought about my lungs and the way they'd tightened at night. I thought about the crawl of rash. About the way the rain found the seam and the seam pretended not to mind. I thought about my ex texting to see if I'd landed anywhere proper yet, quotation marks implied. I thought about the little kettled ring stains on the laminate. I'm not going to weld, I said. I'd be a danger to myself, and not in a fun way. There you are, Joe said, and I could hear him light a cigarette he shouldn't be lighting. Write an honest ad. 'Spare or repair.' Describe it like you loved it and like it broke your heart a bit. You'll get a man in shorts knocking on your door tomorrow with cash and dreams. I feel like a quitter, I said. My voice didn't sound small anymore. It sounded tired. Being sensible is not the same as quitting, he said. Who told you that bollocks? Some man on the internet with a tape measure on his hip? You're allowed to redirect. I wrote the ad in the notes app on my phone, sitting on the kerb outside the garage with the dog resting his chin on my knee like I'd become a statue worth leaning on. Volkswagen T5, camper conversion, project. Honest ad: she's pretty but damp. Windows leak, seams need love and probably welding. I've stripped the interior-insulation held more water than a swimming pool, now removed. Engine pulls like a

Hollow. Not a crime, but hollow and warm in August didn't guarantee warm in January. I crouched to peer under the bed. A diesel heater sat bolted to the floor, neat black hoses disappearing into holes in the metal. Eberspächer? I asked. Yup, he said. Top-of-the-line. You'll never be cold. Seriously. I camped in Denmark in February. Toasty. In Denmark in February, you can be a lot of things. Toasty seems optimistic. The heater can run all night, he said, dropping his voice like he was telling me a secret. Four kilowatts. It sips fuel. Uh-huh. I found the fuse block and the 12-volt system. Every cable wore matching split loom and heat shrink-good detail-but half the ring terminals were stacked on a single stud like a card trick. An inverter the size of a lunchbox crouched in a cubby under the bench. On the display, the battery read a cheery 13.4 volts, the type of cheer you only saw when you were still plugged into shore power or had just driven. Can we kill the lights? I said. He obliged with a flourish. The ceiling LED strips faded to black. In the sudden quiet, I listened. The faint hum from the inverter sang its little song. Somewhere, a cooling fan whispered. I could feel the heat of the day stored in the wooden paneling, radiating slow and smug. You insulated? I asked, casual. Max's grin did a brief thing. A flash, then back. Mind the craftsmanship? He knocked the plank above the window. All cedar. No cheap shiplap. Cedar doesn't insulate. I smiled. It's just cozy wood that smells like soap. He turned that into a joke. I mean, we've got the heater. Insulation's overrated when you have a good heat source. That's a choice, I said. What's behind the walls? Sound deadening. Closed-cell foam where it counts. And bits are glued straight to the frame for stability. He gestures

toward the seam by the sliding door, where a sliver of painted metal peeked through near a corner. It's smart. Less risk of moisture. Thermal bridges, I thought. The exact places the cold would kiss the warm and make a plan. Moist air, condensation, mildew behind those glowing cedar planks. I imagined waking up to condensation beads along the screws, the inside metal sweating like a Coke can. The wood was beautiful. The wood was a scarf on a naked torso. What's the idea with the engine tune? I asked. You wrote 'mapped for efficiency' in the listing. Oh, that, he said, eager again. I had a guy do a Stage 1. The 1.9 TDI is a tank, but it wakes it up. Better torque, more efficient when you cruise. You won't feel it struggling. He hit the remote to lock, then unlock, the van like a magician warming up. The lock chirp echoed off the back wall of the furniture store, where an employee dragged a pallet jack along a ramp and didn't look at us. We can take it for a drive, he said. You'll see. Before that, I said, mind if I look underneath? He scooped up his charm. Be my guest. He wasn't wrong about the shell. The underbody had its share of surface rust, nothing you wouldn't expect from winters salted and shrugged off. The brake lines looked newer. The spare tire carrier was intact, not rotted to lace. The oil pan was wet; old stain, not a fresh drip. Someone had sprayed black undercoating over sins, which always feels like being kissed with a mouth mint. I slid back out, dust stuck to my shirt, and tapped the rear corner. Ever had a VIN check? I asked. He pulled a folder. Laminate sleeves. Receipts printed on home paper but neatly filed. A German TUV inspection report, stamps marching down the edge. A remapping invoice with a guy named Viktor's signature. He was either organized or a good

There's no version of this where you don't think about it. How many… I started, and then made a little noise that in any other context would be a laugh. Just say it. Six grand to start, he said. If the inner rails are clean. If they're not, more. And then you're going to want to replace these seals around the door. And when we take the windows out to do the frame, we'll see what we see. Could be a horror show, could be fine. I didn't have six grand. Or rather, I had a number in an account that, if aligned with a fearlessness I hadn't been born with, could become six grand. But then there was work. And eating. And the thing where adulthood is a series of moments where you decide whether you'd prefer to have heat or a dental plan. Is it… is it unsafe? I asked. And there it was. The baseline. He angled the torch, measured his words. It's not unsafe today, he said. I wouldn't drive it across the Pyrenees. But you're not there yet. You've not reached the sharp intake of breath. I nodded as if that was a number. Be straight with me, he said. What's it worth to you? Not market value. What's the… romance worth? I thought of nights by the sea that smelled like seepage. Of boiled pasta with a hint of rain. Of how proud I'd been when I'd set my little kettle to boil on a tiny stove and thought, look at me, independent, when really I was a person in a box I didn't fully understand. It was supposed to be a haven, I said. It turns out I've been living in a petri dish. He grunted. Happens, he said. You can make it right. Might take all your money and a winter of swearing. Or you can walk. There's no wrong answer. Well, there's one wrong answer. It's doing nothing and hoping. I sat in his office and dialled Joe. He picked up on the second ring and said, Tell me the number, like he'd been listening

ribs, bare bones, the emptiness of a space when you've taken away its excuse for being cosy. I had the clean relief of knowledge tempered by the dread of what knowledge asks you to do next. That night, without the insulation and the foam and the soft edges, the van amplified everything. I slept on a camping mat the width of my shoulders. Every car that passed hummed through the metal. I lay there and listened to rain find new routes on the naked skin and I felt like someone who had pulled a thread in a jumper and coaxed out a yard of it and was now a person standing still, holding soft rope, trying to decide if they liked the cold. In the morning, I took it to a garage that specialised in the brand, a neat operation tucked behind a caravan park, with a row of vans in various stages of undress and a dog that had learned to ignore the thump of a dropped spanner. The owner, a man called Mike with hands like spades and a poker face, drove it onto a lift and raised it until the van's underside was at eye level. He pointed with a torch. See that? he said, running the beam along the seam where the floor met the side. Those spot welds? They're doing their best. But you've got rot on the inner sill. Might go into the chassis rail. See that pinch seam? It's scabby. Whoever did the windows didn't seal them like I would've. Water's been getting in behind the panels for a while. You strip it inside like you did, you let it dry, that's half the fight. But if you don't arrest this… He snapped his fingers. It felt like he was snapping a twig in my chest. I tell you the number, you're going to make a face, he said. And you're going to go home and think about it. And then you'll either find a welder who'll do it for less and you'll regret it, or you'll sell, and then you'll think about it every time you see one on the road.

actor. The photos as he'd stripped the van looked right. Metal shell, ribbing, a few patches welded. No shots of insulation going in. We did the drive. Everyone says we did the drive as if the drive just happens. You can tell who's lived with old diesels by where they place their feet and how the first minute feels. The gearbox needed a polite hand. Third hesitated like it wanted you to ask properly. But it pulled. The tuned torque shoved us into a kind of confidence. We merged into evening traffic and the van settled at eighty like it belonged there. It's got soul, he said. I've eaten casseroles with more soul, I said, but I smiled. It wasn't bad. Not bad wasn't the point. He turned toward the harbor, maybe trying to romanticize the route. We passed cranes fixing shadows across the water. The smell of the river came in, a low tide and oil and something animal. A siren wound down somewhere behind us. I rested my hand on the dash and felt the vibration travel up through the plastic: a smooth hum, an old song. I'd done months of research, yes, yes, I was that person, five hundred tabs open and three notebooks. I had also done something stupider. Three weeks ago, I'd resigned from my job. Not a dramatic storm-out; a tidy notice, a half-hearted cake, a standing ovation from coworkers who would forget my name by Christmas. I'd packed up my desk and carried a plant to my car. It had been easier to say I'm going away for a while than I can't do spreadsheets for a company that sells other companies the illusion of control. And yes, part of me was chasing a picture of myself at a bonfire taking pictures of my feet and a blue enamel mug. I had wanted out. I had also wanted a home that could be wherever I put it. Max did a roundabout and we ended back at the lot. He eased into the same double-space

with a flourish, set the parking brake, and slung his arm over the seat back to grin at me. The last of the light burned low on the horizon. The snack truck switched off its neon OPEN sign. So? he said. It's quick, I said, honest. For a yellow brick. He laughed. She's peppy. He killed the engine and the cab sighed. Silence rose from the floor, along with the smell of engine heat blooming in the footwell. We sat in it for a second. I looked at the bed platform through the open curtain. A soft duvet. Throw pillows that would become floor projectiles the second we moved. In my head I put a book on that bed, a mug in a niche. I put a winter on those walls and listened to the creak of contraction and expansion and felt the damp on a February morning. He must have sensed me calculating. He leaned forward and tapped the folder again. I've got three other people interested, he said. Honestly. I posted the listing, my phone blew up. This is the nicest T5 you'll find at this price. If you want it, I'd take a deposit. That was fast, I said. It's van season. People want the life. Freedom, you know? He said it like he knew me, like he'd been spying on my open tabs. I want the life, I said. I also want my toes. He shrugged. If you're worried, we can crank the heat. You'll sweat. Insulation's the most overrated component. People overthink. You'll be fine. The confidence was a suit he wore. He wore it well because it fit, not because it was ironed. Insulation did matter. It mattered like walls matter in a house. You can live without walls, technically; you can stack furniture to make zones and call them rooms and tell yourself you're fine, then you wonder why you feel drafty and resent your choices every night at two. Mind if I pop a panel? I asked. He blinked. Pop what? Just a strip, I said. Down by the

bucket, you understand something about seriousness you didn't before. I unscrewed the first panel. It came away reluctantly. Behind it: silver-faced bubble wrap insulation that looked moon-like and sweet and absolute in its innocence. It was not innocent. The moment I touched it, my glove came away wet. The bubble wrap was a cosmetic. Under it, stuffed between the ribs like forgotten newspaper, was insulation that had once been fluffy and now had the density and colour of old bread. And the smell. Not the immediate punch of rot, but something stale and backstage. I grabbed a handful and it disintegrated like a secret you'd been keeping for too long. I wanted to drop everything and step back and scrub my skin in a hot shower. Instead I bagged and bagged. Behind the insulation, the inner skin of the van: metal with seams and spot welds and places where I wanted to see a flat, unremarkable expanse. Instead, along the seam under the window: a line of orange freckles blooming, the start of rust that the insulation had held against it like a damp cloth. It scraped. Little flakes came away on the scraper, a tiny blizzard of regret. It went like that for hours. Screw. Pry. Pull. Bag. Scrape. The floor came last. The laminate peeled reluctantly, giving up its glue as if telling me it still believed. Under it, plywood dark in the corners, soft enough that the screwdriver went in without a fight. I took it in sections and found the low points where water had pooled, where the floor had been designed to have tiny channels but had instead become a bowl. The wheel arches had been wrapped in carpet and that carpet wept when I squeezed it. By the time I stood up and pulled the mask away and wiped the sweat and condensation from my mouth, the interior of the van looked like anatomy. Exposed

felt violent. He leaned in. It's not a house, he said. You can't just paint over damp and stick a scented candle in. These things trap what you don't deal with. You leave it, it turns. You drive around with it in your lungs. That cough? He shook his head. You get to my age, that kind of cough is a ceremony. You sold it to me, I said, because fairness demanded I say it. He didn't flinch. I did, he said. And I told you it had character. Which is a cowardly way of saying there's something wrong that I can't afford to be honest about if I want to sleep at night. But listen, love. I've been here. I had one that nearly did for me. The mistake I made was pretending it wasn't there. The waitress slid plates in front of us. He put ketchup on his eggs and didn't apologise to the gods. We ate like people who had been doing something foolish and needed to rebuild. Okay, I said finally. I'll strip it. I'll see. He nodded like I'd passed a test he knew I'd pass eventually. You'll need a mask, he said. Not one of those paper things. Get a proper respirator. Gloves. A scraper. When you get to the insulation, bag it before you disturb it too much. Open everything. Think of it like… a reset. I think of it like a scary wardrobe, I said. You open the door and find out how many coats you really own. He laughed. That too. In the daylight, the van didn't look like a murderer. It looked like a patient. I pulled everything out that wasn't bolted down and piled it on the gravel behind the lay-by: the foam mattress, the cushions, the duvet with the little loops where I'd attached it to stop it sliding. A curious dog sniffed and decided I was uninteresting. I'd never worn a respirator before. When you strap one on and the seal sucks to your skin and your breath is a filtered resistance and your voice sounds like you're whispering in a

wheel well. See what's behind it. I'll be careful. I'll put it back. You want to-what, pry my walls off? Gently. With a trim tool. The way you do. All the real builders show their insulation. You didn't. I'd like to see what's back there. Could be fine. Could be damp. I'm not letting you destroy my van, he said, the humor gone. Destroy is dramatic. This is why they invented spudgers. I think we're done, he said, still smiling, but with teeth now. A white VW van rolled into the lot, low and shiny, drifted to a stop one lane over. A guy got out and lit a cigarette while staring at his phone. The wind tugged the smoke away. Everything smelled like decisions. I felt my own impatience yapping at my ankles. The temporary sublet I'd taken after leaving the job ended next week. A friend in Altona had said You can crash for a bit, which translated to Two nights and then we'll both feel weird. I had money, but not the kind you burn for long. I had a blueprint drawn on graph paper and bookmarked posts about vapor barriers. I had the idea of me living inside a thing that carried me elsewhere. I had a flipper named Max smiling at me like I was about to buy his story. I'll make an offer, I said. His eyebrows made a small triangle. His shoulders loosened a millimeter. Forty-five, I said. Plus if you let me pull a strip, and it's insulated properly, I'll bump to forty-eight. If it's bare, we go forty and I redo it. He laughed. You think I'm giving you eight thousand to rip my walls off. That's not how numbers work, I said. And twelve volt-the grounds aren't bonded. The terminals are stacked. It'll bite you later. The tune is fun, but you wrote 'economy'; that's not a lie, but it isn't the truth, either. I'm not some hack, he said. It was interesting, how fast indignation and salesmanship swapped. I didn't say

you're a hack. You're a flipper. Different problem. Wow, he said, with mock awe. Tell me how you really feel. You bought a decommissioned mail van for eight thousand, spent a month with an orbital sander and a nail gun, and now you want fifty. To someone who needs a home. If that someone wanted a photoshoot, you crushed it. If that someone wants to sleep through January without growing mushrooms- Enough, he said, hand up. I don't sell to rude people. I'm really very polite, I said. You're just not used to people who read. You're wasting my time, he said. My mouth opened. Closed. I had a choice: escalate, walk, or wedge myself deeper into a negotiation that wasn't one. Humor had less bounce when you stood on it for too long. I looked back into the van one more time. The duvet was still arranged like a promise. Max's folder lay open on the passenger seat. A page in it had a picture I hadn't noticed before: the van during tear-down, the floor bare, the wheel wells patched. The caption under it in his neat handwriting read glued battens, with arrows. Glued to metal. It was a small arrow and a big tell. Thanks, I said. Good luck. You're not serious, he said, as if I'd insulted physics. You came all the way out, and you're going to walk? For what? A piece of foam? A few pieces, I said. And a winter. He pasted on a smile, the churn of recalculating behind his eyes nearly audible. I'll have no problem selling, he said, pushing the door shut with the same flourish he'd used opening it. Yep, I said. That's the problem. The snack truck owner flipped a chair onto a table and waved vaguely in our direction. A light near the loading dock flickered and buzzed. I got into my car, watched Max drift his van across the lot and aim it at the exit. The black wheels turned. The van's yellow flank glowed

edgewise. Morning came with the kind of clarity that is not welcome. The van smelled like wet dog and disappointment. I needed a proper seal. I drove to the DIY store and bought silicone that promised miracles in all caps. It stuck to my fingers, my jeans, my dignity. I stood in the car park, hands streaked white, fumbling with the tube like I was auditioning to be the worst repairperson in a sitcom. That's where Joe found me. I knew you'd be one for projects, he said, as if appearing by a display of hosepipes was a normal social approach. He had a bag of screws in his hand and a phone tucked into his shoulder. He looked at me, the tube of silicone, the way my shoulders had shrunk, and his expression shifted just a fraction. Come on, he said. Let me buy you some food. You look like a person who hasn't fought grease with grease in a while. The diner was one of those places you don't remember deciding to like. Sticky menus. A sign that said No substitutions near a list of items that were all substitutions of some kind. Coffee that did not pretend to be anything other than coffee. The waitress topped us up as if she were watering a plant someone forgot about. Joe stirred four sugars into his, because of course he did. You got leaks, he said, because stating the obvious is free. I got leaks, I said. And a cough. And a rash that makes me look like I've been rolling in nettles for fun. You need to take it apart, he said. This isn't going to be a sachet-and-a-prayer job. You want to know where it's coming from, you strip it. Walls. Floor. The whole lot. You'll find rotten ply. You'll find insulation that's just holding water like a sponge. If the seams were done cheap at any point, you'll find rust you can poke with your finger. Gutting it, I said, because the word didn't sit well in my mouth. It

like a dragon. My phone filled with posts from the Transporter group, where men with usernames like WeldWizard and RoadSaint had opinions on everything from tyre pressure to the correct way to insulate with sheep's wool. Damp, they agreed, came with the territory. Dry it out. Keep it ventilated. Check your seals. Don't overthink it. To which my body said, develops a cough that felt like scrubbing a pan from the inside. It crept. That's what I didn't admit at first. The bedclothes felt tacky at the edges in the morning, as if the night had developed an exhale. A smell of wet coins lurked under the cheerful coffee. I got headaches that sat behind my eyes like small bored office workers. I bought antihistamines and joked to the pharmacist that I was allergic to freedom. If he heard that joke once a week, he was polite enough to pretend otherwise. On the sixth day, it rained properly. The kind of rain that rattles a roof like someone emptying a bag of nails on it. The van was good in a storm; solid, weighty. It didn't sway like a tent or complain like a terrace house. It just let itself be hammered. I found the first drip while I was making pasta. A plink into the saucepan that was not from any known source. Then another, from the seam above the back door where a strip of foreign-looking sealant sat like a scar. I got the torch and tried to track the path of the water. It ran along the inside of a metal lip and then decided, arbitrarily, to drop. I put a bowl under it. I put towels. I taped the seam in what must be the most useless application of duct tape in the history of adhesives. An hour later the towels were heavy and the duct tape hung like a tired flag. It was two in the morning when I admitted I was outmatched. The rain kept tapping as if trying to get a word in

like its own sunset. He didn't look back. I didn't cry or gnash my teeth. I did a boring thing. I went home. Home was the wrong word. The sublet smelled like someone else's detergent. The mattress had a hollow in the shape of a prior short love affair with someone who worked nights. I made a cup of tea like a person from a country that solves everything with boiling water. There were messages on my phone: a friend sending a link to a Sprinter full of fairy lights This one looks sooo cute!, a spam text about a parcel, and one from my sister. Are you alive? it said. She lived in St. Pauli and never asked if I was alive unless it was funny. I typed back: Alive. Walked away from a bad yellow decision. She sent a string of clapping hands, then a flipping pancake emoji. I didn't want to parse that. I slept badly, dreamed of condensation running down cedar like tears from a wooden saint. In the morning I went for a run on autopilot along the Elbe until the wind slapped me awake. A container ship slid past, hulking and assured. The captain up there would never fret about where the insulation went. The ship knew what it was. I didn't. I'd built a life on three skills: reading situations, making them useful, and exiting when usefulness ended. They were not romantic skills. They didn't get you bonfires on beaches. They did keep you from marrying in a dress your mother picked. They kept you from signing contracts that paid less than your coworker because he wore a tie to a Zoom call. Years ago, I'd left a start-up when the CEO called our work our baby, because I didn't want to share custody with a man who scheduled meetings at 7 a.m. to prove he could. Now I had left a different thing. I'd left the version of me who would buy a van to feel like I had a plot twist. I made a list. I do that when I think I've

lost the plot. The list had three columns: What I Want, What I Will Tolerate, and What I Won't. Under Want I wrote: a space that warms. A bed that doesn't become mildew. An honest vehicle. Under Tolerate: manual windows. Bumps. A heater that occasionally smells like hot pennies. Under Won't: lying, fresh paint over sins, salesmen who say freedom like you can buy it by the liter. I called a number from a forum. A guy in Harburg had earned a reputation for inspections that upset sellers. He spoke like a dentist, and he liked finding cavities. Bring any van, he said. I'll tell you why you don't want it. I don't have one, I said. Good, he said. Already saved you money. That afternoon, I went to see a different van. The listing had three photos taken under fluorescent light, and the van was beige. The seller was a woman named Sabine who had not bothered with a beanie or a sweater with texture. She wore a gray hoodie and had oil on her hands. The van was older, an ex-ambulance with a straight body and vinyl seats. The back contained no cedar. It contained a stretcher bracket and a dull stainless cabinet and the smell of disinfectant, sunk deep into the pores of utilitarian plastic. The heater was a Webasto, honest and ugly. The walls had foam, clearly visible where she'd pulled an access panel. I bought it to build out, she said. Then my mother got sick. I don't have time. I'm not trying to fleece anyone. Will the red cross come back to reclaim it if I sleep diagonally? I asked. She smiled without warmth. You can sleep however. It had maintenance. It is a vehicle. You can make it pretty later. Right now it is honest. She lifted the hood and flicked the fuel filter with her finger. It made a satisfying thunk. I thought about pretty later. Pretty later was a concept I respected. At twenty-three I thought

ridiculous and thrilled. I stopped for milk and a multipack of microfibre cloths because I'd read on some forum that microfibre cloths transform a van into an adult decision. The first night I parked up at a coastal lay-by with two other vans and a lorry whose driver slept with the TV on. The sunset bled across the sky and the wind smacked the side of the van and I pretended the wet smell was the sea. The second night, I slept with the windows cracked and woke with a throat that felt like I had been yelling into a pillow all night. The third night I woke to the mushroom armpit. The fourth, I found the first rash, angry little blisters marching up my wrist like someone had drawn a path. I laughed at it because laughing was easier than the other options. It felt like a joke: Look at me, the person who thought she would be a different person if only she had a sliding door. The van made domesticity performative. Every movement was a decision. Where do you put your boots so you don't trip over them? Where do you cook without frying your pillow? I learned to wedge the kettle so it didn't bang. I learned where the dishcloth wanted to live. I learned that in the morning the windscreen would weep and I could wipe it with a microfibre cloth and it would fog up again before my hand got to the glovebox. I told myself the damp was temporary, an echo of its last owner's life that would evaporate at the first sign of my attention. Just needs some air, I said out loud, because the van and I were in that stage of the relationship where talking to it felt normal. I bought bowls of salt and little tubs of silica gel and strategically positioned them like talismans against mould sprites. I put the heater on. I cracked the roof vent. I propped the back door open and sat with my legs hanging out, blowing steam

side apologising to nobody. Kitchenette, he said, sliding open the side door with a grunt. Two rings, a sink if you love dishes, little fridge. Plenty of storage. Bed folds down. She's a weekender dream. What's the catch? I asked, because there's always one. He spread his hands. She's got character. Which is to say: water stains on the ceiling fabric that had been scrubbed so hard the texture changed; a drawer that stuck and then released with a shudder; a patch of laminate at the edge of the kitchenette with a bubble like a knuckle rising beneath it. I put it into the mental column of quirks I could live with and not pay someone else to fix, which is how delusion dresses as thrift. He let me take it for a test drive. The engine thrummed like it had opinions. The steering was tight. The smell wasn't great-like a towel that had been forgotten in a bag-but he'd put an open box of bicarbonate of soda in the cup holder, which seemed… considerate. My niece loved it, he said, when we got back. Always wanted to borrow it. Festival this, beach that. But she moved to Australia and you can't exactly ship it easily, can you? These are the last honest vans, I keep telling people. I had been living in a one-bedroom with a landlord who responded to leaks by bringing a mop and explaining gravity to me. A breakup had made the space feel like walking through the absence of someone else, and my work had shrunk to a laptop and a Wi-Fi password. The van felt like a solution shaped like freedom: moveable, self-contained, mine. I'll take it, I said. Joe grinned, surprised and not. All right, love, he said. Let me throw in a kettle. Can't have you boiling water in a saucepan like a savage. The kettle rattled in a cupboard when I took it onto the ring road. Every pothole thumped like a moral lesson. I felt

I'd be pretty later-just a little more money and I could buy the shoes that made me look like I owned a boat. Pretty later had turned into functional now more times than I could count, and functional now had a way of becoming the most beautiful thing you ever saw when the world leaned hard against you. Start it, I said. She did, the engine clacked, the heater fan whirred like it had a small vendetta. The van smelled like medicated lemon. You'll need a different bed, she said. Unless you like sleeping on rails. I like my kidneys, I said. She named a price that made no one gasp. We didn't dance around each other. We did not say freedom. I told her I needed a night. She said fine. That evening I sat with numbers, cut places in the budget called cute mugs and Patagonia jacket, added categories called mineral wool and sound deadening that does not smell like despair. I wrote to my sister, who responded, Do it. She added: Mom would like you in an ambulance. I said, That's not funny. She said, It a little is. The next morning I met Sabine at a notary's office that smelled like printer ink and resignation. We signed papers. We shook hands. She gave me a look like, Well, you bought a box on wheels. Do something with it. I drove my ambulance home, and the world did not transform. Drivers cut me off. A cyclist scowled at me like I had personally underfunded infrastructure. I parked in front of my building and went upstairs to a sublet full of someone else's soap. I sat on the edge of the borrowed bed and laughed, alone, with my hands still smelling faintly of diesel and disinfectant. Over the next weeks, things that in the Max scenario would have been instantaneous became slow. I unscrewed panels. I found surprises like a surgeon who knows where spleens go but still mutters when

a blood vessel takes a weird route. I watched videos of people who built cabins into vans and shook my head when they ignored moisture like it was a rumor. I learned to hate a certain self-tapping screw that stripped if you looked at it wrong. The Webasto heater needed a glow plug; the glow plug acquired skin under my fingernails as I wrestled it; my neighbor leaned over the balcony and said, You're ambitious. My sister came over and held the other end of a batten while we debated the merits of vapor barriers until we were both too tired to care. Max sent me a message a week after our lot conversation. Or rather, the listing for the yellow van disappeared; then a new listing appeared, same shots, different nickname. The text called him Luca now. Luca wrote: Insulation? You won't need it. Heater strong. Two weeks later, I saw the yellow van on the A7 in a drizzle, passing me with a confidence I didn't always feel. A woman drove it, her hair braided and sunglasses on. The passenger had their feet on the dash. It looked like an ad. I wondered what their winter would be. I hoped the heater didn't stutter at 3 a.m. this time. I hoped they carried a dehumidifier and a nonzero amount of skepticism. In November, the cold arrived like a friend who always texted before showing up and this time didn't. The first frost put a skin on the ambulance's windows that scraped away with hard work. The heater coughed and then purred, throwing a dry heat that bit your nose. My insulation-slow and careful-held warmth like a promise kept. The first night below zero, I woke and pressed a finger to the inside wall and felt, to my actual joy, nothing damp. I laughed in the dark like a villain. It was the kind of laugh you only earned by gluing foam in places no one would ever see. I took the van out of

make a sanctuary, I say, playful and true. We already did, he says softly, and squeezes my fingers. We breathe. The van doesn't cough. Neither do I. Outside, the sea drags the edge of the world like it's sanding down something sharp. Inside, two people who used to be lies fall asleep in a room that tells the truth every single time the fan moves the air. ##

The Moldy Haven

The Moldy Haven By the third morning, the van smelled like an armpit full of mushrooms and I woke coughing like a chorus of old smokers in a bingo hall. Condensation bloomed on the inside of the windscreen in a constellation of pearls, each one sliding down in reluctant trails, as if the glass were trying to cry me a warning. I lay on my back, felt the press of memory foam trying to reclaim its shape under my shoulder blades, and thought, right, so my new home is attempting murder by humidity. Ten days earlier I'd handed over too much cash to a man named Joe in a forecourt that doubled as his front garden. He was one of those stocky men with forearms like knotted rope and a face creased with the kind of smile lines that usually come with a dog that's always underfoot. He had a grease mark running from his temple down to the corner of his mouth and he didn't bother wiping it when he noticed me noticing. That's her, he said, patting the side of the T5 as if it might spook. Matte grey, sturdy shape, tinted windows that suggested secrets, and a grin of a grille. It looked like it would plough through a hedge and come out on the other

falling wrong. She says, I think my van is making me sick. Axel looks at me. I look at him. He nods, just once. I smile at the girl like maybe we can catch her with air. I’m Maya, I say. Let me show you something. We go to the board. We draw arrows. We don’t yell. We point. We joke. We tell the truth. The girl cries, a bit. She laughs, more. She coughs, less. We find the seam. We pull it gently. Axel watches me like the sight makes something in him quiet. Later, when the girl’s van is drying in the night and the shop smells like lemons and hope, he pulls me into the shadow near the parts graveyard where we first stood. You saved her, he says. We saved her, I correct. With sexy vents. He laughs into my neck, and the sound is filthy and holy and makes me feel like the future is a thing my body can survive. He steps back, serious suddenly, hands on my arms. There was a time, he says, when I did the opposite of this. I know, I say. That’s why this means something. He exhales a yes against my mouth. The kiss is soft and greedy at once, the way we are now-gentle hoodlums at the altar of clean air and honest builds. A gull laughs, rude and perfect. We laugh into the kiss because romance is ridiculous and the ocean can be a bully and sometimes you purge the rot and find it goes all the way down to where the foundation starts. Sometimes you rebuild anyway. Later, in Sola, we lie with our feet propped on the new cabinets, windows open to the night. The fan hums. My lungs rise and fall like they trust me to keep choosing right. Axel’s hand finds mine. It fits. We’re not saved. We’re saving. It’s messy. I make a note in my phone: merch idea-The Ventilation Vixen: dirty mind, clean air. I show Axel; he groans like he loves me and hates himself and that feels like the precise balance we’ve earned. I guess we have to

the city. I parked by a lake and ate soup from a pot while listening to ducks gossip. My sister came by for a day and sat on the step with coffee and said, You look less like a spreadsheet, and I said, I still have rows and columns, they’re just wood now. We played cards on a counter I had sanded myself, and it was a little uneven and completely perfect. In January, a message pinged on a forum thread I had commented on months back, the one about flippers and ethics and the romantic delusions of people who bought into vans like they were timeshares that came with followers. A user wrote: Renamed account, but same question: heater vs insulation? Heater is cheaper. Insulation is for losers. Don’t me. I sighed and wrote back: You can burn diesel all night. Or you can build walls. If you like sleeping in a hairdryer, chase heat. If you like being held, insulate. It’s not sexy. It’s shelter. An algorithm put my comment in front of more people than I expected. The thread heated up. A few Maxes in the world rolled their eyes and posted photos of cedar. A few Sabines quietly uploaded shots of foam and tape and gloves. A guy named Viktor chimed in to say that remaps made no miracles, and someone called him a shill, and the internet performed its ancient dance. One windy night in late February, I stopped at a gas station off the A24 to pee and buy something hot and artificially flavored. As I came back out, a yellow van pulled in, black wheels glistening with wet. I looked because you always look for the versions of paths you didn’t take. The driver climbed out. She was the same woman I’d seen on the A7. The sunglasses were gone, replaced by under-eye shadows you couldn’t buy on Etsy. Nice rig, I said, because van people say that; we can’t help it. She shot me a look I recognized. That look contains I hate my

choices and This is nobody's fault but mine with a hint of I could cry in your arms. She nodded at my boxy beige ambulance. Yours looks…solid, she said. It's an ex-ambulance, I said. It's seen worse than me. We went inside and bought two hot dogs that had a sheen that felt like a hazard. Standing under fluorescent lights between a magazine rack and a display of car air fresheners shaped like pine trees, we talked. Her name was Melanie. She had bought the van from a nice guy named Luca. He took me for a drive by the river, she said, and I had to swallow a laugh because, of course. It felt like moving into a lifestyle. How's the heater? I asked gently. She stared at her hot dog. It's loud, she said. And if I run it too long, I feel like I'm breathing the inside of a toaster. The walls-well. She stopped. There was mold behind one panel. It rained inside the windows last week. I'm sorry, I said. It's my fault, she said quickly. I didn't ask questions. I didn't even know what to ask. I saw wood. I saw the plant. I thought: perfect. You can fix it, I said. It's work. But it's possible. She blinked. How? I told her about foam and tape and patience. I told her about condensation and vapor drives and cold steel worse than exes. I told her to find a Sabine and not a Luca. She ate her hot dog without tasting it and nodded like a person assigned homework after a test she'd failed. When we stepped back into the cold, our breath fogged and spun. She looked at the black shiny wheels of her van, then at my beige box. You want to look at mine? she asked, a little desperate and a little proud. I did, because I wanted the ghost of that story to stop whispering at me. We slid open the door, and the cedar glowed softly under LED strips. The plant still pretended to be alive. I knew where to look now. I pointed to the

comes from somewhere new. Somewhere with windows. Later, in our bed that is not a mat and not a motel and not a van, because we built a real room as well-yes, we did both; freedom and rootedness can kiss-Axel traces the line of my ribs with reverent fingers. Can you breathe? he asks, a half-tease, half-habit. Yes, I say. Because you learned how to be sorry. He stills. My chest moves under his hand. Air goes in. Air goes out. And you learned how to be dangerous, he murmurs. In a way that saves people. That's romance, I say dryly. Our bodies. Air. Humanity. We're disgusting. We're perfect, he says, ever morally gray, always a little arrogant, newly earned. He lowers his mouth to mine and the kiss is full of laughter and heat and the knowledge that we installed three vents in here, and one of them goes out. Our court case drags. We lose in small ways and win in bigger ones. The company changes names, then changes hands. Benji appears on a podcast that makes my teeth grind. We raise hell in the comments and then we go back to work. On quiet mornings, at the shop, Axel will lean against the van and watch me drink coffee that tastes like the first morning after a storm clears. He'll say, I'm still sorry. I'll say, I'm still dangerous. We'll laugh. We'll kiss. We'll build something clean. Sometimes we drive Sola to the coast and park her nose into the wind. We open every window like a prayer. We invite other vans to park near. We give tours that include honest rot porn-screenshots of old mold, before and afters that satisfy the human in us that likes a purge built into a glow-up. We teach. We flirt. We fight. We make up. We live. One night, months later, a girl my age comes to the shop. She stands in the doorway like a dewdrop on the edge of a leaf, one bad day away from

Apologized, becomes a thing that exists in the world. People send us photos of their own builds, asking where to cut, where to seal, which corner is lying. We answer with arrows and jokes. We make merch that says things like Sexy Air and Make It Breathe. We sell out in a week. It's ridiculous. It helps pay for the good caulk. One night, months in, when the van looks like a place again-a de-skinned animal given back its gleam-we drive her to the ocean. We open the doors. We breathe. The fan whispers like a miracle. This is better, I say. The air tastes like salt and victory. Sinner's glow, Axel says, looking at my cheeks. And yours, I say, because I am still me and I have eyes. He flushes. It is excellent. I put my hand on the new countertop and it does not feel like deceit. It feels like work. It feels like rest. I wanted you to like me, he says suddenly, eyes on the horizon. When I saw you the first day. And I wanted you to not die. The second felt more urgent. You chose right, I say, and the look he gives me is something that lives in the low-oxygen zones of the heart, where desire and respect keep their holy meeting. We christen the van without champagne; alcohol would make me think I don't need airflow. We name her Sola-like alone but sun. We do not pretend she is pure. She is complicated, like our pasts. She is honest, like our plans. I post a photo. It's not a thirst trap. It's a vent detail and a woman smiling like she didn't drown. The caption reads: we built a home that breathes. The comments are a mix of hearts and what sealant is that and one you used to be more fun. Axel leans over my shoulder. Block, he says. That's my favorite button. I roll my eyes. You used to be more fun. I was always this much of a downer, he says cheerfully. I just hid it behind abs and a drill. The laughter that pours out of me

corner by the slider, the seam where metal peeked. I showed her the screws that were cold to the touch, the places where the insulation might be an idea. She watched my finger as if it were a wand, which it wasn't. I didn't say You were had. I didn't say He lied. Those words would feel cathartic only for me. She already knew what she knew. I did say: It's fixable, again, because sometimes the exact words repeat exactly because the exact situation requires it. She smiled, and the smile made a small shelter of its own. Later, parked on a quiet road with frost turning the grass to sugar, I lay in my bed and listened to the heater tick, then hum. I closed my eyes. The van around me was not an advertisement. It was not a story someone else wrote for me. It was a box that I'd turned into a room, a dull color that wouldn't attract attention in a litigious neighborhood. The walls held the warmth, and the warmth held me. There was a point in my twenties when I thought the most important choices happened under bright lights. Will you? and Do you? and Sign here. It had taken me longer than I liked to learn that the important choices collected quietly like condensation at the edges of a decision. You didn't always notice them until you woke and the pillow was damp. You chose who you believed. You chose what you would tolerate. You chose whether pretty now was worth cold later. On a morning in March, the sun found the angle where it came through my small window, and the particles in the air looked like glitter thrown into a very cheap club. I made coffee in a dented percolator and burned my tongue and laughed because I was alone and no one could see me be an idiot. A jogger in a neon jacket passed. In the distance, a train sighed. Somewhere I couldn't see,

Max or Luca or whatever he called himself was turning a screw into a plank. He would sell that van to someone who didn’t read the forums, and I would be named a killjoy in some thread. Somewhere else, Melanie had a panel off and held a crate of foam like a shield. The world didn’t need me to fix it. The world needed me to pick my walls. There’s nothing romantic about mineral wool in your hair. There’s nothing brave about scraping rust until your arm sings. There’s nothing cute about arguing with a diesel heater about the merits of combustion in a crosswind. There is, however, something like relief when you lie down in a space that doesn’t pretend. The van creaked as it settled in the cold. The coffee tasted like cheap miracle. Out the window, the day warmed in small invisible increments. If you asked me then what freedom was, I would have pointed at the wall and said, It’s in there, where no one takes pictures. It’s the part you never see when you’re scrolling. It’s the weight of insulation you carry, the warmth you keep, the choice to walk away from a shiny lie and toward a box that can become a room if you’re patient enough to build one. I put on a hat that did not say anything about me and stepped outside into the morning. The van behind me looked like an ambulance that had decided to retire early and take up woodworking. It wasn’t yellow. It wasn’t beautiful. It was mine. And in a world where heat leaks out of everything that isn’t built on purpose, that counted for more than a flare of cedar ever would. ##

remind me when I think a shortcut is clever. Good, I say. I don’t want to date a clever boy. He’s a clever man and I know it. But he also, to my astonishment, chooses to be honest. It’s a practice, like yoga. It hurts at first. It gets easier. Then it gets harder in different ways. We do it anyway. Sometimes at night, when the shop is quiet and the moon is a stingy sliver, I feel the edges of my old life like a bruise. I wonder if I am a person who made a show out of being free and was actually in a gilded box. Axel finds me by the gutted van and leans beside me, not touching until I turn my wrist and find his hand. I’m afraid, I tell him once, because it’s the last honest thing left on my tongue. That this- I gesture at the empty shell -means I was stupid. Fear, he says, is a sign you care about the right things. You care if it’s safe. You care if it’s real. That’s not stupid. That’s holy. He smiles, slow and wolfish and true. Plus, you’re terrifying on camera. The mold monarchs will run. They better, I say, and kiss him hard enough to make my fears stop buzzing for one blessed second. We build. We make a plan that respects lungs and law. Axel insists on a ventilation path that could handle a small rock concert. We install a fan that actually extracts air, with ducting that carries steam and breath right out into the unworried sky. We pick adhesives that read like a science lab’s love letter. We paint with paints that don’t make my head hum. We leave inspection panels. We leave space for air, which is both an absence and a presence. It feels like admitting love. They do sue. It is loud and boring. The lawyer eats it like breakfast. We become a name in a line of filings. It feels less like a sword fight than a chronic condition. We take our vitamins. We sleep. We keep going. Our video series, The Ventilation Vixen The Guy Who

exhale-laughs is almost obscene in its relief. We don’t rush. There is nothing performative about the way he lays me back or the way his hands learn the map of my ribs like he’s interested in where air goes. Our clothes don’t end up on the floor like confetti; they pile in decent heaps like we are people with jobs. What happens is not something I will give the internet. It’s mine. But it is enthusiastic. It contains cursing and tenderness in equal parts. It contains something that feels like faith. In the morning, we are two people with mussed hair and clean lungs. The light goes gold through the garage windows, making our shadows bold. What now? I ask, because melodramatic is a coping mechanism. We gut your van, he says. We save what can be saved. We document. We get sued. We build anew. And when I spiral? I say. When I miss who I thought I’d be, in her pretty coffin with her fairy lights and false pine? I’ll call you the Ventilation Vixen in your ear and tell you to get your ass back to work, he says, grinning. And I’ll hold your hand until you do. I roll my eyes. Gross. Romance is gross, he says, delighting in it. The demolition is not cinematic. It is sweat and crowbars and masks that make us look like awkward superheroes. It is Axel swearing softly in Spanish when a seam puts up a fight. It is me crying quietly when a panel falls and the mold has painted it like fireworks. It’s Dani filming the ugly truth and cutting it with my snark so it goes down like bitter medicine with a chaser. We find a small shrine behind a panel: a ticket stub to Joshua Tree, a Polaroid of someone else’s legs on a van bed, a pressed flower. I hold it like it’s cursed and sacred both. Weekender, I say, half a joke, half a lament. They didn’t know, Axel says. He pockets the flower, then looks at me, caught. To

The Ventilation Vixen

The Ventilation Vixen The van coughs before I do. It’s a wet, burlap cough, like the sound a haunted sponge might make right before it kills you. I slam the fan on high. It shrieks a protest and sucks in ocean fog instead of pushing anything out. Somewhere a seal barks like it’s laughing at me. I glance around the Iron Mermaid lot-what passes for a van-life mecca in Half Moon, California-where everything smells faintly of espresso, surf wax, and aspirational debt. Your fan’s backwards, a voice says, sliding under my skin like a blade wrapped in velvet. I turn, sticky with sleep and frustration. He’s leaning on my sliding door with the casual ownership of a man who makes his living telling people their dreams are one bad weld away from snapping. He’s tall, all shoulders and gravel, with a mess of dark hair that looks like it wakes up pissed. His shirt says OKAY, AXEL in block letters, grease-stained and unapologetic. My fan is not backwards, I say. It’s-enthusiastically recirculating. You mean it’s directly feeding the mold colony I can smell from here. He tilts his head. You’re huffing a terrarium. I am not. I cough. The van coughs in sympathy. I have a strong immune system. Mm. He peeks inside like he’s the fire marshal and I’m hiding a flamethrower. Strong immune systems are great until they meet Stachybotrys. That one doesn’t care for your plucky attitude. I’m Maya, I say, because if he’s going to be condescending at least he should use my name in future testimonies. Axel, he says, as if I didn’t read it already. He tugs at a corner of my shiplap, and my van whimpers. This veneer is sweating like a sinner. Do you always neg people’s vans as a

pickup strategy, or is that a special service? Do you send them an itemized invoice after you ruin their morning, or just a bouquet of sanitizing wipes? His mouth almost smiles. Almost. I make a habit of telling people when their house-on-wheels is a petri dish, so they don't wake up with lungs like wet cardboard. Maybe I like my lungs artisanal. Cute. He squints at my overhead LED strip. Crowns Coves build? My laugh is a single syllable of pretension. Excuse me? You have their trademark corners. He taps the wood. They love a ninety-degree angle in a ninety-percent humidity state. Did you get her in person or have her shipped? First of all, she's a girl, not an it. Second, I got her from Benji at the expo. Crowns Coves contract build, slightly used. He said she only belonged to a weekender-barely any mileage. Axel's mouth goes hard. Weekenders, he says, like it's a diagnosis. I'm sorry, do you have some sort of moral objection to people only using their van on long weekends? They're the ones who make dangerous builds pretty. No one finds out until someone like you moves in and stops Instagramming. Then the mushrooms sprout. Drama, I mutter, but my throat burns. I can taste metal. I didn't cough like this last month. Or I did and pretended it was coastal allergies because the alternative was admitting the van I poured my savings into might be trying to kill me. Axel looks at me, then my van, then my ridiculous hope lamps. He lowers his voice. Can I look? Properly. I promise not to cry on your shiplap. I don't trust him. He has the energy of a man who uses the word structural as a flirty compliment. Also: the arms. The arms are a distraction and should be regulated. But the cough. The mold aura thickens. And he said Stachybotrys like he and the fungus are on first-name terms. Fine,

the ones who thought they were boring because they liked air. Axel taps softly. He doesn't come in until I say, Yeah. He leans in the doorway, a shade in a black t-shirt, eyes bottomless. You were a storm, he says. You were violent weather. Good, I say. Maybe they'll build rain gutters. He steps inside. He's so large in this small space that the idea of him is half the oxygen. We got an email, he says. From a woman who got sick like the girl I told you about. She's crying. She says she didn't know. She says she thought she was the kind of person whose body always betrays her. She didn't think to blame the pretty wood. I swallow. What do we do with that? We keep breathing, he says. We make rooms that help other people breathe. And you? I ask softly. What do you do? I help you build, he says. If you want me. If you can stand my voice when I tell you to make one more vent. He's so close now the edges of my world are his shoulders. His mouth is not soft, but it could be. He's held himself back like a gentleman with a wolf under his shirt. I am not a damsel. I am a storm. But I want him to be a harbor, just once. Tell me again, I say, my fan is backwards. He huffs a laugh. Your fan, he says, could blow a kiss or a gale if we wire it right. I close the distance. The kiss is inevitable and not gentle. It is a collision in a safe room. His hand cups my jaw like he's holding a breakable artifact that bit him anyway. His other hand is on my waist, not possessive, but sure, like we both hate the places we've been and want to build a better architecture against the night. We're careful. The heat is immediate. It would be so easy to set off fireworks in a shop full of explosives. Instead, we take the match and hold it like prayer. Okay? he says against my mouth, the word a gravelly plea. Okay, I say, and the way he

laughs with too many teeth. It's a one-off, he says. A bad batch. Dani, behind my camera, says in a voice built for disruption: We've counted twelve. The same corner cuts. The same adhesives. The same rooms you sold. Defamation- Benji starts. Fifteen-day return policy is a little light if the sickness shows up at thirty, I say. And the salvage titles you cleaned in Utah? That's not defamation; that's receipts. I hold up the papers, the hurricane's name a watermark across a dream. I look at the crowd, down the lens. I wanted freedom. I wanted to wake up by the ocean and breathe salt. I didn't want to cough myself into early yoga. Laughter bubbles, shocked and delighted. People are hungry for spectacle until they see themselves on the stage. Then they are simply hungry for truth. Benji's eyes slide to Axel. He narrows them. You, he says like an accusation. You used to run our installs. I did, Axel says. And I'm sorry. It's the simplest sentence. It rearranges molecules. The crowd murmurs like something wild just grew legs. Benji sputters. The lawyer appears like a outraged djinn, but our lawyer stands straighter. Microphones and cellphones bloom like a digital spring. We make the argument. We don't set fire to the expo, but the temperature rises. We don't break their table, but people stop sitting at it. The video goes up. It grows legs. It grows teeth. The comments are a greek chorus. By sunset, my DMs look like a class action suit having a house party. That night, on Axel's office mat that is starting to smell like me, I do not sleep. The adrenaline drain is like coming down off a cliff. I watch the video of my face saying the words. I think about the van. I think about all the girls like me who named their rigs and cried when it rained because the sound is so perfect. I think about

I say. But if you find a harmless plant, you have to leave. He climbs in, moving with unexpected gentleness in my cramped little house. He kneels by the vent and pops a panel. The metal creaks. He breathes in, a soft hiss. Bad news, he says. It's not harmless. Define non-harmless. He reaches up without looking, fingers finding a seam no civilian would notice. He slides out a strip of insulation. It's damp. It looks like cake someone's cried on. He squeezes it. More water ekes out. Your walls are sweating. I like a humid glow, I say weakly. He pulls more, and the smell rolls out-swamp breath, vinegar, and something sweetly necrotic. A middle school locker in August. My chest tightens. You should get out, he says. Fresh air. I'll show you from outside. I'm not going to- I say, and stumble out into the fog. He follows with three soggy, black-streaked panels like inconvenient truth pancakes. He lays them on the asphalt. A small crowd of dog-leashed nomads and cappuccino nomads drift closer. Axel turns into a teacher whose classroom is on fire. He points at each layer: plywood, insulation, a nameless vapor barrier that looks like it lied on its resume. See how there's no real ventilation path? It's a moisture trap. Every time you boil water or breathe aggressively- he glances at me -it condenses. It has nowhere to go but into the wood. So I've been breathing condensed dreams, I say, dry. You've been breeding mold. Between the closed-cell foam and the zero-gapped seams, it's basically a sealed petri dish. He pinches some fibers. Also, this is the wrong adhesive. See how it's gummy? Off-gassing like a politician. I swallow. The word off-gassing should not be intimate, but in Axel's mouth it is. Focus. Benji said- Benji said a lot, Axel says, eyes careful. Did he give

you the Carfax? On a van house? On the van itself. Salvage title? Flooded? The ground tilts. No. Obviously not. He said the original owner only took her to Joshua Tree twice. And then what? Parked her in the bay to mature? Did you check the VIN under the hood? I-I have the papers- You can bring them by my shop. I'll run them. You'll do what you want anyway, but at least you'll know the reasons when you keep sleeping in this. He nods toward the van with a tenderness that makes me want to shove him and kiss him. You should not be sleeping in this. Do you always ruin people's mornings or just women with good curtains? Just the ones worth saving, he says, and then he's gone, the crowd dissolving in his wake, taking the damp and the threat with them. I watch him walk away, tall and unrushed, like a man who knows he can fix things if people would stop lying to themselves. My lungs feel hostile in my chest. I hate everything about this. I open my van's side door, and the smell slaps me. I close it. I get in my car. I cough. Axel's shop looks like sin and salvation had a steel baby. It's tucked behind a surfboard repair place and a yoga studio that sells crystals named things like Lunalief. His sign, OKAY, AXEL, is hand-painted and defiant. He's under a black Sprinter when I arrive later, the vehicle hoisted like a sleeping dragon. He rolls out, wipes his hands, and glances at my van like it's a stray I feed under the table. You came, he says, as if he didn't expect it. I'm here for the VIN check, not your opinions. That was my softer voice earlier. He takes my papers. Give me fifteen. I wander the shop. It smells like hot rubber and spellwork. Photos line a corkboard: a glossy Airstream gutted to honest bone, a blue Transit with a tiny skylight like a wink, and there-my stomach

gentle. It's a start, he says. I touch his wrist. His pulse is a jackhammer under my fingers. Electricity climbs my arm like ivy. Let's make people afraid of bad air. Let's make fresh oxygen sexy. Axel's grin is slow and very, very male. You are terrifying, he tells me. And yes. Let's do it. We plan like thieves. I borrow a friend's old GoPro. Axel calls a lawyer who sounds like she eats cease-and-desists for breakfast. He texts someone named Dani who runs a burner Instagram with five million followers and a taste for expose TikToks. We sandbag, we prep, we rehearse. At the expo, the air smells like new money and cinnamon coffee. Rows of van builds gleam like teeth. People in ankle boots pet wood like it's a living thing. Benji is a walking tan with a smile that could get away with manslaughter if it bought a matching hoodie. He spots me, freezes for a heartbeat, and then his PR brain smothers his fear. Maya! he booms like I'm one of his alive successes. How's the rig treating you? Like black mold, I say brightly. I wear a shirt that says BREATHE BETTER in block letters. The Ventilation Vixen channel is live. The comments are a toast to chaos. Benji's eyes dart. Let's not do this here, he says, and his hand lands lightly on my elbow. Axel steps up a fraction faster than Benji expects, a wall in denim. Here is fine, Axel says. He's not loud, but he's unmovable. He looks like a villain who realized he'd rather not be, which is somehow worse for Benji than a cop. He looks at the camera lightly. Hi internet. Guess what we found. He gestures, and a panel comes off in a practiced swoop. The crowd gasps like an audience at a magic show where the trick is honesty. Under the shimmering veneer: mildew, rot, a careless dam of adhesive. It is worse under good lighting. It's illegal under decency laws. Benji

drops-a white low-roof that looks a lot like mine, dark waterline around the wheels like it took a bath it didn't agree to. The caption: SOCAL FLOOD '21. Axel's voice comes from behind me. You okay? I jab a finger at the photo. Is that- Not necessarily, he says gently. But could be its cousin. There were dozens hit. Crooks bought them for pennies, cleaned them up, sold them to- Weekenders, I spit. Who then-what? Sold them to saps like me? To people like you who wanted a life, he says, and I hate him for saying it so softly, like the knife he's using is merciful. I ran your plates. It's a flood salvage. The paperwork's laundered through three states. Crowns Coves did the interior. Do you have proof? He hands me a printout. It's merciless. A hurricane's name. A salvage yard in Louisiana. A photo of my van waist-deep in brown water. I stare at the thing that was my dream. It stares back, mutely accused. I can sue, I say. I can- You can stop sleeping in it. You said earlier I do what I want anyway. Guess what I want? My voice shakes. I want my house to not be a lie. I want my lungs to not itch. I want to believe I didn't fall for pretty corners like an idiot. You're not an idiot, he says. You're a human. They count on that. Do you have any air? I say. I need air. He leads me out back, where a graveyard of van organs lies under the hazy sun-fenders, fans, panels of honest metal. The breeze smells like kelp. Axel stands a step away like a lighthouse. I count breathing like I used to count miles. When my pulse stops trying to punch through my throat, I say, You seem very comfortable with this. With what? With delivering fatal news. I used to be the bad news, he says. His mouth tightens, like he said too much. Explain. He hooks his thumb through his belt loop, a move that should be illegal. I built

codes. The what? His mouth lifts. The Ventilation Vixen, I say. It's a terrible name. It's perfect. You're actually very good at names, he says. He tries not to smile. He fails. And yes. We do that, and they slap you with a cease and desist, and we ask for discovery, and they settle because they don't want you to find the receipts. I can help. He looks down at his hand like he's surprised it's offering. I'll testify I built for them. I'll show the corners. I'll be the bad guy people love to boo. You'll be their former employee who sells service packages now, I say. They'll call it sour grapes. I'll call it lungs, he says. People can watch what we rip out of your van. You'll tell them how the cough feels. I'll talk adhesives. We'll be gruesomely educational. You can quip. You're good at quipping. And the weekender crowd that paints everything sage will hate me. Some will. Some will follow you to the desert with high-quality vents. I take a breath that tastes like lemon. He watches, wary, like a handler with a fox in his care. I want to burn it down, I say. But I also want a place to sleep where I don't have to sleep alone in a man's office. I can get you a motel, he says. I don't want a motel, I say, and I don't say: the motel would feel like defeat and cheap carpet. What if-I don't want to be your project. He flinches. You're not. You're- His eyes cut away. When he looks back they're bare. You're someone who named her van and laughs when it rains. You didn't deserve this. And you did? I ask quietly. He looks like he's been asked to confess and he's tired of having secrets rattling in his cupboards. I thought cutting corners made me clever, he says. I was poor as hell. I wanted out. They paid good. I told myself the gnaw in my gut was hunger, not guilt. And now you like to tell people their fan is backwards, I say,

for Crowns Coves for a season. It was a weird year. Money was stupid. They cut corners. I thought it was resourceful. Then a girl got sick-real sick. I left. We sued. They settled. She got better. It comes back. My vision snaps to him. Why are you telling me this? Because you deserve to know. Because when you called your van a she, I liked you. And because- his voice roughens -I recognized your VIN. It's one of the flood batch. But you didn't tell me this morning, I say. Fury flares. You had your little mold show-and-tell and watched me choke. I needed you to come here, he says. If I said the word flood in the middle of the lot, someone with a gimbal would have filmed you and you'd be viral as the girl who bought the swamp. The builder would lawyer up while you were still coughing. You manipulated me, I breathe. You played me. I guided you, he says, uncompromising. Hard. I'm not sorry. You're here. You have air between your ribs tonight because you are not sleeping in that. I make a sound like a laugh and a sob had a collision. I hate that you make sense. I'm used to it, he says. He's closer now, and his smell is heat and cedar soap and something like lightning strikes. He looks at my mouth like it's a problem he shouldn't want. Stay in my guest room. I don't stay in guest rooms, I say. I stay in my home. Your van is not a home. It's a damp coffin with a fairy-light budget. His jaw ticks. You can sleep in my office. I'll roll out a mat. Or I'll pay for a motel with vents that go out. Is this because you feel guilty? I ask. Because you built for them and now you need to fix one woman at a time to justify it? His eyes go hot. I'm trying to keep you breathing. If you need to make it about my unbearable male guilt, fine. But then take the motel and send me the bill, full-rate. But don't crawl back

into that moss box because you'd rather be autonomous. I hate how aroused fury makes me. My brain is part adrenaline, part attraction, part throat itch. His bigness in my space is both a threat and a promise. I'm not a stray you get to rescue to fix your conscience. Then rescue yourself, he says, and something in me-pride, stubbornness, a feral thing-purrs at the challenge. Fine, I say. I'll stay one night. In the office. And then I'm burning it all down. He nods once, but his mouth is traitorously pleased. Good. Later, in his office, I lie on a clean mat that smells like lemon cleaner and man. He's in the garage, a symphony of tools. I cough and curse and laugh because of course my romance begins with respiratory distress. I scroll through my photos-the first day with my van, me beaming, the interior gleaming like good lies. I want to delete them. I want to post them all with captions like: don't fall for the varnish. Instead, I sleep. In the morning, Axel is a black coffee in human form. He hands me tea with honey like we're intimate. He points at a whiteboard where he's drawn something between a murder board and a kitchen makeover. We need to decide: salvage or scrap, he says. If you want to keep the chassis, we gut everything to metal, treat it, dry it, rebuild it clean. It's slower, it's expensive, it's safe. Or we sell the vehicle for parts and start fresh with a van that hasn't been to Louisiana underwater. I stare at him, sleep-tangled. You drew arrows, I say. I draw arrows when I'm not supposed to yell. And the third option? I say, because I am me. He waits. I go to the expo this weekend, I say. My heart knocks. I drag Crowns Coves in front of the weekender masses. I tell Benji I'm the Ventilation Vixen and go viral for something useful: making people care about air and safety and