

# Lost

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We had a bronzy brown Dodge van that was not a conversion van, but my dad tried to make it into a conversion van. Fold-out plywood table, top smoothed and edges rounded with a belt sander, plywood double bed platform in the back, foam rubber on top covered with chocolate brown faux velvet material fastened to the sides of the platform with a staple gun.

It was always cold in the van. In winter, in January, in Saint Paul, it is always cold. The van never warmed up. It kept the cold air inside it. It took the cold air that had seeped into it all night and drove it around all day.

We spent a lot time in the van. My dad was a preacher and was always driving us around from one far-away church place to another. Coming home when it was dark, my younger brother and sister already asleep, necks bent and heads bouncing over the bumps. I have no memories of riding in the van in the summer or spring or fall. Just the cold. Someone told my dad that the van would get warmer if he put a piece of cardboard or something in front of the radiator to block the wind. He cut up a plastic sled and wired it to the front of the grille. Bright yellow plastic with white stripes running across. It didn't really help.

It was always not starting. We'd all be packed in hugging ourselves and whining along with the starter. Then the battery would start to go so we would have to let it sit for a while. We waited and then my dad would tell us, "Let's pray. God cares about little things as much as big ones." And he would pray that God would make the van start. Assuring God that we knew he could do anything, offering God examples of things

he had done in the past: parted the Red Sea, made Balaam's ass talk, turned water into wine and even raised Lazarus from the dead—now it was the van's turn. He would hunch over the steering wheel, we all leaned forward a little. He would tentatively touch the key in the ignition, then turn it decisively.

“Ree, ree, ree, ree.” He turned the key back then quick forward again. “Ree, ree, ree, ree.” Back then forward again. “Ree, ree, ree, ree.” Then, “Damn it.” We would let it sit, pray, “Ree, ree, ree, ree. Ree, ree, ree, ree. Ree, ree, ree, ree.” “Damn it.”

We picked my dad up at the church. It was the routine. In the Morning we would drop him off first then my little brother at day care, then me and my brother and sister at school. At night my mom would pick us up from school and we'd go get my little brother, do some errands, grocery store, bank, Goodwill, stuff like that—then pick my dad up at the church.

We waited with the van running. My dad came out and locked up the church. My mom got out of the driver's side bucket seat, climbed over the center console and into the passenger side bucket seat.

My dad got in, slammed the door, slapped and rubbed his hands together for warmth, leaned forward to rub the frozen breath from the inside of the windshield with his left forearm, adjusted himself in the seat with the help of the steering wheel, put the van in drive and turned his head to my mom and smiled as he pulled out of the parking place.

“I got my check,” he said.

“Oh, you did?” Relief from my mom. “I didn't go to the store. I'll deposit it in the morning after I drop the kids off.”

## LOST

My mom and dad never said so but I had picked up that he doesn't get his check as often as he should, my dad's church being new, small and seventies experimental.

My ears are big and my eyes are big. They are always trying to pick things up, taking in the world. And everything that comes in through them will not rest in my head until I have found a context for it. Until its real meaning is discerned. Nothing is without meaning, without consequence. I have to know these things so I can figure out what needs to be done as a result.

My dad pulls the check out of the pocket of his winter coat as he drives and hands it to my mom to put in her purse. A happy ride home.

The streets of my neighborhood in late winter are like a really wide toboggan run. The asphalt is covered with a thick layer of packed down snow and ice. The sides of the street are built up past my nine year old height from months of the snowplow. Parking on the street requires leaving enough room to open the door and climb up over the pile. We kids jump from the van trying to make it to the top and not slide back down under. My mom pulls her skirt up a little, reaching with one leg, holding onto the top of the open door, trying to find a footing in the side of the pile and then sort of jumps, hoping to catch her balance and not slide back under and rip her panty hose. Most of the times she does. A lot of times she doesn't. The happy-ride-home day she doesn't.

She goes down, sliding on her knees and the toes of her boots under the van to her hips, her fingers digging into the

snow to stop her from going farther.

“Dang it. Dang it. Dang it.” This is really as mad as she ever gets. It always makes me smile a little. My big brother and I each grab an arm and pull her over the top of the pile.

The fall is more or less routine and doesn't affect the happy-ride-home feeling once we get in the house.

After dinner it changes. It turns intense. I take in the world through more than my ears and eyes. I absorb moods. Like the barometric pressure, I can feel the air change. I am watching *Adam 12* with my brothers and sister in the TV room. I look up like a dog, nose in the air. I go into the kitchen. No one there. I see through the window over the sink snow swirling thick under the back porch light. I tip toe up the back stairs to the landing. I hear my mom and dad.

“I know I gave it to you,” my dad says.

“I know you did too. I put it in my purse.”

“Well, is it in your purse? It's not in your purse.”

“Maybe it fell out in the van.”

“That's all the money we have for two weeks. At least two weeks.”

“I know.”

“Maybe check in your coat pocket.”

“I know I gave it to you.”

“I know you did too.”

“Then where is it.” None of this from my dad is spoken with a raised voice, but pushed across through barely open lips.

“Check your purse again, I'll check my coat pocket and

then go look in the van, maybe it fell out of your purse when you fell. I'll look around."

I hear the drawer of the table next to the bed open then close; I hear the click on click off of the flashlight to see if the batteries work. I hear my dad go down the front stairs

I tiptoe down the back stairs and hear the front door close as I enter the TV room. I lay down on my stomach next to my big brother and try to watch *Adam 12*.

My dad comes back in. The door shuts, cold air and snow. The intensity meter redlines. It is so thick I don't know how anyone can catch their breath. My dad goes back upstairs.

It's the storm. I know it. The check fell out when my mom fell and the wind blew it away. My dad didn't look hard enough. It could be up the block or down the block or blown up into the wheel well of a car. I go to the entry way, carefully take my coat off the hook and slip into my boots, and ease the front door open and on the other side, ease it closed. I look all those places, under the bumpers and wheel wells of every car on the block. I don't have a flashlight but the streetlights are on. I just feel around under the cars with my hands. I didn't grab my gloves or my hat. I don't care. I barely notice the cold. I didn't even zip my coat up. I don't feel panic but a desperation that I use as determination. I've got to find that check.

Then a wave of hope. I am warm. Someone, a neighbor coming from their car, saw the check blowing in the wind and grabbed it. Not recognizing the name on the check (we don't know our neighbors that well), they couldn't return it. It is, I am sure, sitting on the entryway table inside one of the

houses on this block. I decide to start on our side of the street with the houses closest to ours. Then the ones right across the street. Then the next two closest, then across the street to the next two closest, until I reach the end of the block.

Snow blowing, sidewalks yet unshoveled, tramping up on to the porches, ringing the doorbell. “Hi, I live in the yellow house and my mom lost a check, my dad’s paycheck, and it is all the money we have for at least two weeks and I was wondering if you found a check at all, like outside when you came home.” “Hi, I’m Tom Moore. I live two houses down and my mom fell and we think when she fell my dad’s paycheck fell out of her purse and maybe it blew, like in your yard or you found a paycheck?” “I’m in fifth grade with your son and my mom....”

Every house on the block, only two doors unanswered, noted but not with much hope. Could it have blown around the corner? At the far intersection from our house I decide to check the houses on the side street. “Hi, I know it is probably not possible, but I live around the corner and I thought with the wind from the storm a check could have blown, see my dad’s paycheck, we lost my dad’s paycheck....”

Nothing. I could go back and try those two houses again. Maybe someone is home by now. I turn around to head back to my street and I see my dad, stopped just two houses away, panting.

I feel afraid. I don’t know how long I have been gone. He is breathing through his mouth, he jogs a little bit to me. Through a big exhale he says, “Where were you,” not mad.

LOST

“Where did you go?”

“I was looking for your paycheck.”

My dad, is, what? Stunned. He looks like this possibility never occurred to him. Of all the places I would have gone, of all the things I would have been doing, this never entered his mind.

“Tom, you...all this time you were...Tom. You just left... we had no idea...” He couldn’t finish a thought, like he didn’t have a finished thought or was trying to choose which one he should let me know he was having.