

# **The Essentials: Stories from the Road**

*By Heather Jacks*

Welcome to the driver's seat. These stories represent the heart of the journey—the moments between the destinations where real life happens. Whether you found us on a dusty shoulder in Arizona or passing through the fog of the PCH, we're glad you're here.

# The Screwdriver, the Shovel, and the 53-Year-Old Dream

*Why I Buried My Money in a Stranger's Backyard*

It had been five years since I left Bubba the Bus with his new caretakers in Nashville, Tennessee. Rarely did a day go by that I didn't think of that 19-foot bus and smile. We had traversed the country together, navigating adventures and mishaps, spilled wine and shed tears. I had reinvented myself on that bus.

Now, at 59, I realized I had more life behind me than ahead of me. My boyfriend had taken an actual job — with a schedule and a time clock — , and we'd settled into a routine in Arizona that felt more like quicksand than solid ground. After decades of chasing gigs and living nomadic, I felt unmoored in stillness. And every day, my social media feed delivered another gut punch: someone within three degrees of separation — not six, not five, but three — had died or gotten a diagnosis. The math was getting uncomfortable. I needed to move before I forgot how.

I had my heart set on a VW Westfalia — a toast to my hippie-hearted past. I didn't know the first thing about them, but I knew the lifestyle worked for me. I spent my nights scouring Instagram and Facebook, admiring shiny

paint and flat noses. My boyfriend spent his nights quietly hunting through online ads and Facebook groups, even though he's not a VW-type dude. When I asked him why — why he was willing to spend this kind of money on a bus, something so outside his world — he said simply, “*A bus makes you happy. I want to contribute to your happiness.*”

Then, at Thanksgiving 2025, he announced a surprise: someone had sent a photo of a green 1973 Westy stored in a barn, captioned, “*You mean like this?*”

So we called and called. The owner didn't return my boyfriend's calls from a Wyoming number, but when he saw my California area code, he picked up. We talked for an hour that first time. There's a recognition that happens between hippie hearts, a frequency only certain people can hear. We both heard it, and a road trip was on.

### ***The Journey to Meet Our Bus***

We left 80-degree, sun-kissed Arizona behind and spent three days on I-10, heading toward the fog-drenched Bay Area, pulling an empty U-Haul trailer. It was Thanksgiving, so the roads were deserted — everyone else tucked in with their families while we chased a 53-year-old dream. We stayed off the busy routes, which meant ghostly quiet hotels with flickering neon signs and coffee so bad it tasted like regret brewed in a sock. But the roads were ours, and I felt like we weren't running from something — we were running to it.

We kept our expectations in check. The bus was 53 years old and had been in a “20-year slumber.” Would it be rusted? Leaking oil? Eaten by rats?

On day three, we reached our destination — a dusty, windswept town of 1,000 people, with a name we could not pronounce. We turned down a concrete slab of a road toward the “Bus Barn,” and there he was, gleaming in the sun. A lean, green time machine, and he was beautiful. Before we even finished the turn into the driveway, my usually overthinking boyfriend announced, “*We are loading him up.*”

The owner, a man named Buster, greeted us looking like a cross between Jerry Garcia and an aged Grizzly Adams. With a Coors Light in one hand and a grey beard that nearly touched his belly, he shook our hands and offered us a ride.

We piled in, and Buster picked up a flathead screwdriver off the floor. He jammed it into the hollowed-out ignition and cranked it. The green bus sputtered to life. “I couldn’t find the keys, so I improvised,” he said, tucking the screwdriver back under his seat.

As we chugged along on bald tires, he sounded exactly like a VW should: a valiant yet asthmatic lawnmower climbing a steep hill. It was the sound of pure freedom mixed with impending mechanical failure. I was hooked. When we stopped, I got out and kissed his nose.

### ***The Dog House Deposits***

We walked into the “Dog House” — a freestanding barndominium where his dog lived, which was ironically larger than the house where Buster and his wife lived. Inside was a palace of Detroit steel: a cherry-and-white ’55 Chevy, a sixties Camaro, and a rag-top VW bug.

I pulled out an envelope of crisp bills and handed them to Buster, who returned half of them and instructed me to “Start counting these into piles of tens,” while gesturing toward a box of Ziploc Freezer Bags.

I began counting the money into piles, carefully sliding each stack into a plastic bag. I didn’t question it — until he handed me a shovel.

“What’s this for?”

“To bury it.”

“You bury your money?”

“Of course. What else are you gonna do with it?” He said, as if I would be crazy to do otherwise. A recent flood, he explained, had turned his last “deposit” into a soggy mess he’d had to hang up to dry. “But these bags are extra sturdy... I guess we’ll see.”

Once the title was signed, Buster laid a hand-drawn map across a grease-stained workbench, marking the “X” where our cash would sleep, with one final instruction: “Don’t bury ’em together. Not too close to each other, but not too far from one another. I’m an old man. I don’t need a treasure hunt every time I need cash.”

### ***Outrunning the Quicksand***

Before we left, I told Buster I was naming the bus after him. His face crumpled for just a second — this gruff old goat who buried cash in his backyard — and he had to look away. “That’s real nice,” he said, voice thick. What else could I have named it? The bus practically named itself. Buster came with a story, as every good bus does.

As we pulled out of the driveway, I looked back at the field where our savings — now Buster’s retirement — lay buried in freezer-grade plastic beneath California dirt. We were towing a 53-year-old gamble back to the desert, and our hard-earned money was sleeping in a stranger’s backyard. I realized then that the only thing more dangerous than burying your life savings in the dirt is letting your soul get buried in the quiet quicksand of a life you’ve outgrown.

But as the Bay Area fog began to lift and the highway stretched out ahead of us, I felt something I hadn’t felt in a while: possibility.

Freedom doesn’t always come with the turn of a key.

Sometimes it's a screwdriver, a shovel, and the willingness to bury everything you've saved for a dream you can't let die.

# Let the Girl Ride Shotgun

*My bonus dad taught me what no shop ever expected me to know*

**B**uster the Bus was finally back where he belonged: the Arizona desert. After twenty years of exile in a dark shed, he was a regular Sleeping Beauty — though instead of waking up refreshed, eyelashes fluttering open, his mechanical parts had collectively decided to file for retirement. As he wheezed to life for the trek to a “reputable” shop in Mesa, it was clear the decades had taken their toll. He chugged down the road, marking his territory with a thick trail of exhaust, rolling on threadbare tires with a braking system that was more suggestion than function.

Yet, despite the mechanical protest, he was magnificent. Beneath the dust was a nearly flawless interior, a canvas top ready to reach for the sky, and a coat of deep, “jungle shadow” green that hummed in the desert sun. I was already imagining new curtains and planning our first road trip.

We arrived at the shop, where he was driven onto the lift for a full inspection. Two days later, we received an email inviting us to stop by to “chat” about potential repairs. We

returned to pick him up and were presented with a \$450 diagnostic bill along with a \$16,000 repair estimate, which was more than we'd buried in the California dirt to buy him in the first place.

I burst out laughing. I laughed so hard I peed my pants a little. My boyfriend silently stewed like a slow cooker. Once I'd finished laughing – and quietly confirmed that my pants were, in fact, acceptable – I addressed the shop personnel.

“Let's be honest – I came in here expecting an inflated estimate – maybe five grand – that we'd negotiate down. But \$16,000? We're not playing the same game. It's not the same ballpark, it's not the same league, it's not even the same sport. There's no need to negotiate. I'll just take my bus and go.”

As if my words had hit a brick wall, one of them piped up: “We haven't even gone over the repair list yet.”

“No,” I replied, “that won't be necessary.”

“Well, let me find the keys then,” he muttered.

“Keys? There are no keys. There's a flathead screwdriver – it's the same one I used to drive it here. I gave it to you along with a brand-new ignition switch, still in the box, because the original is busted out.”

He stood still, his stare blank. Then, dismissing me entirely, he turned to my boyfriend. And at that moment, I thought about my Bonus Dad.

### ***The Education I Didn't Know I Was Getting***

My bonus dad — the man who defined the word “stepfather” for me — spent sixty years behind the wheel of a semitruck, finally hanging up his keys at the ripe young age of eighty. I remember being a teenager, fresh off the Rez, climbing into the cab of his 1982 Peterbilt 359. It felt like a palace of leather and chrome, its long hood stretching toward the horizon, candy-apple-red paint gleaming in the sun.

Beneath us, eighteen wheels of thunder shook the earth. With a 400-horse Caterpillar diesel screaming into the future and smoke billowing from the stacks, it felt like we were invincible. My bonus dad looked like a young Waylon Jennings — thick dark hair, meticulously trimmed beard, a John Wayne swagger. And a laugh that rumbled from his toes to his top. To me, he was a superhero.

As his co-pilot, I was more than just a passenger; he made me feel necessary. Every trip had a soundtrack of Jerry Reed and a distinct aroma: the sharp scent of his Camel cigarettes mingling with the sweet, waxy smell of my red licorice vines. On those eighteen wheels, we carried our entire world — a bed, a fridge, and a sense of pure, unadulterated freedom.

When night fell, we'd pull into a "greasy spoon" that was anything but greasy. They weren't five-star establishments, but they were vibrant hubs — the original meeting grounds of a nomadic tribe, long before "nomadic tribes" became trendy. Eventually, they would be replaced by the soulless corporate travel plazas of today, but back in the '80s, these were the places where truckers gathered to swap tall tales, questionable stories, weather notes, and talk of the "Smoky Bears" lurking around the next corner.

On that open road, I was learning lessons I didn't even realize were being taught. I learned how a pair of nylons could be MacGyvered into a fan belt, that a dime could be used to plug a leaking air line and that duct tape and zip ties were the ultimate mechanical hacks. Most importantly, I learned that confidence around a machine isn't an innate masculine birthright; it's a skill practiced and accumulated, mile by mile. He didn't teach me because he expected me to become a mechanic — he taught me because he believed I deserved the power of knowing. He knew that knowledge was a shield.

### ***The \$16,000 Fiction***

Which brings me back to that "reputable" shop in Mesa, and their \$16,000 estimate for a bus we had just driven into their bay. As the mechanic continued to address my boyfriend, I tuned him out and scanned the list. The very first line was a "complete brake rebuild" for \$3,800.

I cut him off mid-sentence and asked if any of the existing parts were salvageable. The mechanic shrugged. “We don’t want to get in there and chase things down. We’re just gonna rebuild the whole thing.”

I looked him in the eye, forcing his attention away from my boyfriend and onto me. “That sounds lazy.”

The air in the shop shifted. “Are you calling me lazy?”

“Well,” I shrugged, “if the brake shoes fit. I’m just gonna take my bus.”

### ***82 Days in the Dark***

We drove Buster out of there — sans brakes — straight to a storage shed. Then, we rolled up our sleeves and made a plan. I am a Virgo, a lover of lists, a planner by birthright. I pulled out a piece of poster board and created a four-column war room: The Repair, The Shop’s Estimate, The Actual Cost of Parts, and The Final Cost.

Next, we bought the “bible” — How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive: A Manual of Step-by-Step Procedures for the Compleat Idiot. We immersed ourselves in YouTube videos, inventoried Buster’s German-born metric tools, added our own, and dug in.

The brakes were first — that \$3,800 line item. We pulled the wheels off and found something the shop hadn't noticed, or hadn't bothered to look for: the drums were practically new. As it turned out, Buster the Bus had not been entirely abandoned during his twenty years in the barn; his previous owner, Buster the Man, had been tinkering with him, whiling away the afternoon hours. The fix? A master cylinder and a brake booster. Total cost: \$267.

I wish I could say the next 82 days were a montage of competence — two plucky people, a garage radio, grease-stained hands, triumphant fist pumps. The reality was dimmer. Literally. We were working in a storage unit with a single bare bulb dangling overhead, squinting at torque specs on a phone screen, arguing about metric versus standard, and once — memorably — discovering that I had reinstalled a carburetor component upside down after an hour of painstaking effort. And from under that bus, I said some things.

We replaced the carburetors, alternator, battery, spark plugs, wires, and distributor. We greased his joints, found new tires on Facebook Marketplace, and added a modern fire-suppression system. At the end of 82 days, we had spent less than \$4,000 for all his parts and fixings.

But we found something more important: Buster's soul. Every bolt we turned, every part we sourced, every

YouTube rabbit hole we fell down at midnight — it all added up to something that a professional shop, however competent, could not have given us. We knew him now. We knew exactly where he was held together by faith and where he was held together by engineering. We knew the sound of his idle and the particular shudder he made going uphill. He wasn't just a bus we owned. He was a bus we understood.

### ***The Shield of Knowledge***

Here's the thing about that shop: they didn't present a \$16,000 estimate to a woman who knew what she was looking at. They presented it to a woman they assumed didn't.

Basic mechanical literacy isn't about becoming a mechanic. It's about being able to walk into a room, scan a line item, and say — calmly, without a flicker of doubt — “That sounds lazy. I'll take my bus.”

My bonus dad gave me that. He didn't have a philosophy about female empowerment — he just loved me and wanted me to know things. He let me ride shotgun, watch, and learn. He handed me tools I didn't know I'd need until forty years later, standing in a fluorescent-lit shop in Mesa, reading an estimate designed to make me feel small.

Today, my bonus dad is 87 years young. He wears hearing aids, he refuses to turn up and reads articles he can

barely see — but he still possesses that laugh that starts from his toes and rumbles to his top, eventually overflowing from his very being. I called him and after a few attempts at relaying the story over his considerable hearing loss, he laughed loud and proud and asked, “Did you give them a character guidance class?”

That’s all it takes, really. Let the girl ride shotgun.

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Buster the Bus — born February 13, 1973, in Wolfsburg, Germany — is currently living his best life. He has crossed borders, collected miles, and outlasted every estimate made against him. He is, in the way of old Volkswagens and old souls, more than the sum of his parts.

Next stop? 4,000 miles north to Alaska, where the air is cool, and the Shield of Knowledge will be tested against the elements.

# Why I Still Use Facebook Marketplace (And It's Not for the Money)

*How 800 transactions taught me to find the heartbeat of human connection inside a chaotic algorithm*

Long gone are the days of the Nickel and the Penny Saver — those newsprint rectangles that left ink on your fingers and had you circling phone numbers in ballpoint pens, hoping they were still good. Today, the world is digital, and my primary hub is Facebook Marketplace.

To be clear: this isn't an endorsement of Zuckerberg or the Meta-driven erosion of human connection. As a Gen X'er, I begrudgingly tolerate AI and its cronies; I've learned to coexist with the machine, even if it's an uneasy peace. But for someone who lives on the road 80% of the time, the platform is a necessity. I search, shop, and sell from the driver's seat while criss-crossing the country. After 16 years and over 800 transactions, the algorithm and I have a solid partnership — one that makes me a highly-rated “power seller” by Facebook standards.

As a relentless minimalist, I'm always amazed by what I accumulate in such a small space. I pick up “weird and

wonderful” treasures that spark immediate joy: creepy 3-D cat plates, those liquid-filled eyeball straws from the nineties, a Mickey Mouse bolo tie, or 3-D string art of bicycle-riding clowns. But eventually, the road calls for a purge. Whether it’s a five-dollar hippo candy dish or a \$40,000 tiny house, I’ve listed it all from the wide spots in the road across 37 states.

I won’t pretend otherwise: I love Marketplace. At the end of every year, I’m surprised by how much it contributes to my life in ways that transcend the monetary. It is chaotic, weird, and maddening, but it works — largely because it comes with the full theater of human flakiness. I find a treasure, I love it, and then — realizing I don’t actually need a doll-head lamp — I release it back into that digital slipstream.

The automated “Is this still available?” messages arrive like clockwork — digital ghosts I’ll never hear from again. Then some swear they are on their way to claim a treasure, some even send a pin to confirm their location, only to vanish into thin air. I can only assume aliens have abducted them.

But occasionally, the “buyer” actually shows up, bringing the drama with them.

One time, I sold an Audi TT Roadster — the same silver rocket Tom Cruise’s Ethan Hunt used to win a game of chicken in Mission Impossible II. A man arrived to inspect

it, introducing himself as “Charlie Bucket” on account of the bucket hat perched on his head. I felt a pang of hesitation; he was leaning on a hand-carved walking stick, and an Audi TT is decidedly not a walking-stick kind of car.

He assured me he could handle a manual with ease and took it for a spin. When he returned, he sat in the Audi’s luxury leather race seat for a long moment, then got out and circled the car with intense interest. Finally, he walked over to his own car — a battered Celica — popped the trunk, and with the confidence of a man closing a high-stakes Vegas deal, presented me with the portfolio of his own original paintings.

He had no money... (yet); and was offering a trade: his art for 228 horses under the hood. I had zero wall space and even less patience for the pitch. It was a hard pass.

Eight hundred transactions will teach you things they don’t put in the listing. If you can filter out the noise — the bots, the ghosts, and the people who treat your ad like a social experiment — you eventually discover the heartbeat. Once you wade through that chaos, you meet the genuine humans who remind you that even a digital marketplace is built on stories. And sometimes, those stories are exactly what I need to hear.

Nikolai drove in from the Rez in Maricopa to buy a weird tchotchke that made no practical sense. As he left, I found

myself smiling with a recognition I hadn't expected. Having grown up on Native land, I understood that particular joy of buying random things that require no justification. Later, he sent me a photo of him and his son drinking from those damn eyeball straws under a desert sunset. In that photo, the ridiculous plastic was transformed; it wasn't a corporate giveaway anymore. It was just a father and his son, being two silly boys doing something silly. In my heart, I knew exactly how that porch felt, and I heard them laughing.

Then there was Harold, who bought my paint set, brushes, and all. He uses them on quiet afternoons with his father, who is slowly losing his battle with dementia. Painting has become their bridge — a visual language for the spaces where words have begun to fail. I think about Harold and his father more than they'll ever know.

I sold my photography equipment to a man who was small, precise, and oddly pristine. He held a high-level corporate job until a day of volunteering at a children's hospital rearranged his internal compass. He walked away from the ladder to become a puppeteer. My old gear is now documenting the start of that journey — capturing the stories and puppets he brings into hospital halls to entertain and heal. I have no doubt he will be extraordinary.

A young man from Chihuahua took the bus for ninety minutes each way to buy a ten-dollar cocktail kit. The real prize for him was the stainless steel Boston shaker. Right

there on my doorstep, he pulled out his phone to show me videos of himself practicing bottle-juggling. His dream was to master flair bartending and head to Vegas. Ten dollars and a three-hour round trip — that is how much a dream can matter.

Lucy came for a blender. It was mint green — the color of her daughter's very first apartment. As Lucy talked about her first grandchild on the way, she was glowing. We both knew it wasn't really about the blender.

Finally, Johanna traveled from Navajo land for a folding table. I had accidentally given her bad directions, sending her to a Street instead of an Avenue. When she finally arrived, I met her with an apology and a bottle of cold water. She met me with a fresh stack of warm, homemade fry bread and a standing invitation to the Rez. I was, she told me, always welcome.

This is the part I can't quite explain about Marketplace — the part that keeps me listing even when the bots are relentless, the no-shows are exhausting, and a man with a bucket on his head tries to trade abstract art for a German sports car.

My stuff doesn't just sell. It lands. It finds the person it was always supposed to find next. Maybe that's just the story I tell myself from the driver's seat — but after eight hundred transactions, I've come to believe that story.

Every object is just between owners. Marketplace is where it waits.

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**If these stories resonated with you, there is more to the journey.**

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