

My internal emergency alarm hurled my body straight up at the waist, like an untethered seesaw, resulting in the immediate clocking of my forehead against the ceiling of the van. “Gah!” I whispered as I pressed a palm to my stinging brow.

Despite having lived in the van for several months now, I still somehow miscalculated the distance between my super comfy makeshift platform bed and the rectangular wood-paneled plastic light fixture directly above.

While waiting for my eyes to adjust, I dug around in the blankets, through the sleeping bag, and between the pillows in search of my phone.

It was six in the morning and my stomach was gurgling in such a way that I knew exactly what was coming.

“Gah,” I said, louder this time, wrapping an arm around my waist. “No, no, no this cannot be happening!” I hadn’t accounted for anything more than a ‘number one’ while in the van. Up until now, my method had worked well. During the days, I would be out and about—in restaurants to eat, and in internet cafés or coffee shops to work—so there were plenty of opportunities to manage number twos. But I quickly realized that I had little control over what was about to happen.

It was early May and the sun was already ablaze in St. Augustine, Florida. With very rare moments of stomach sensitivity in my adult years, I began to gather the evidence as to why my bowels demanded I wake up two hours earlier than normal. Then it hit me. Dinner.

Food poisoning? Nope. The culprit was an incredibly delicious, fully raw and therefore high-in-fiber meal that had churned its way down, down, down as I quietly slept the night away.

With another heavy gurgle, I snapped back into the present moment. Oh shit. Literally.

I had to go like never before, and it was on its way, despite my lack of preparedness. I started talking out loud, “Please just wait until I can find an open general store or coffeehouse.” To which my bowels replied, “Oh, you’re so silly. Just doing my job over here! Smiley face.”

I scooted down the bed, like a dog with butt worms, and slowly stood while actively clenching as much as humanly possible. I desperately began searching the van for an answer. “What to do? What to do?” I looked down at my bare feet, and toed the dark green, 1970s-style carpeted floor that blanketed the only open space left in the van.

A few months earlier, Dad and Nate had removed Gerty’s two rows of bucket seats and replaced them with a raised, wall-to-wall piece of plywood, which held the custom-sized mattress. The entire two-foot by four-foot space directly behind the driver’s seat held a handmade wooden storage box that contained my clothes and some books.

I glanced at the double side doors to my right, as if they’d speak some magical words that would somehow resolve my need to GO. No sooner did I feel tiny beads of sweat form between my upper lip, on the bridge of my nose, and across my forehead. My whole body began to feel warm, while somehow also generating cold chills in second-by-second waves. I’d completely forgotten about the welt that was taking shape on my noggin as I literally took to holding my cheeks together in an effort to deter the increasingly insistent number two.

My mind raced between just giving in right then and there, crapping in the middle of the van, or jumping into the driver’s seat in search of a public restroom.

Images of Golgothan chasing me down began flashing in my brain, as I feared that the simple act of sitting would trigger an undesirable response. I loved those Emerson sweatpants too much to let that happen! Then again, they were already brown anyway. Hmm.

As I tried to estimate how long it would take to drive back into the small touristy town, I noticed a mild discomfort in my neck. Even though I’m only five-foot-two, the carpeted area of the van was a hair too low, leaving my head tilted to one side. “Oh crap, oh crap,” I said to myself as my stomach gurgled, audibly this time. I knew that if all I did was continue cussing out the different acceptable words for poop, I’d soon be scrubbing it out of the van’s matted flooring.

‘That backpack is kind of old; I could tip it over and empty it out right now, take a squat, then just throw it away. No, that won’t work. What if someone tried to repurpose it? No, no, no.’

I picked up my phone, opened the Yelp! app, and searched for “coffee wifi.” This one looks good, click—doesn’t open until eight. Gah! How about this one—opens at seven. No! Rumble, growl, squeak. I couldn’t hold out much longer. I leaned forward and quietly opened the double side doors to assess a possible quick disposal right there, on the side of the road, in the residential neighborhood. ‘It won’t take long, right? No one would see me; everyone is still sleeping, right?’

The night prior, following a delightful and, as it turned out, flattering dinner, I landed a great parking spot in front of a piece of property up for sale. It was across the street from one of the restaurant’s employees, whom I met while dining at the bar that night. She assured me it was a quiet and safe neighborhood, and that no one would bother me. And to think, just twelve hours before this literally gut-wrenching moment, I was being wooed by a kind gentleman with the most stunning blue eyes and thick, black, tribal-like tattoos adorning his arms and neck.

It must have been the sassy way in which I was hunched over, sexily pointing my camera phone at a cup of chipotle kale soup. The sun was beginning to set, casting an awkward light within the restaurant, equal parts fluorescent and natural. Not the best for taking food photos, I’d learn. I held the phone horizontally, tapped the screen to select its focus, tilting it from this side to that, and tapped the screen again, until the angle and lighting was as pleasing as I could manage using an iPhone. I placed my thumb on the grey oblong shape, with an image of a tiny camera in the middle of it, notifying the application that I wished to take a photograph. With a single simulated click, the image was now stored in my phone’s memory, ready for upload and sharing on my blog and Facebook page.

Since I was the only person seated at the bar, and being almost too aware of my surroundings at the time—still adjusting to living life as a solo female traveler—I was immediately and sharply aware of the sound of a neighboring barstool being sidled up next to me.

Taking note peripherally, I continued searching for the best angle and focus for my current soupy subject. Feeling a quick pulse of embarrassment, I captured one more still, and then pressed the silver sleep button on the top of my phone and set it down. Without directly looking his way, I noticed that he’d opened a book, shoulders angled open in my direction. For a moment, I felt relieved that perhaps he was just sitting nearby because that’s what people do. We huddle; we’re pack animals; we like to be near other beings.

I took a deep self-reassuring breath and placed the green cloth napkin on my lap, making sure to fold it in half, corner to corner, with the open seam facing toward me, just like I was taught during a grad school etiquette seminar. “Every business professional should know how to properly conduct themselves during a dinner meeting or networking event,” the instructor had said. I picked up my spoon and properly pressed the back of it into the glossy orange substance, allowing the farthest edge of the utensil to tip slightly deeper, as I carefully watched its concave center fill with the chilled liquid.

“Can I read the first few paragraphs of this chapter aloud to you?” he asked as I lifted the spoon halfway to my mouth. I stopped and didn’t move for what felt like 10 minutes—meerkat style. I continued, gracefully completing the motion, and carefully sipped up the spoonful. I quickly set down the spoon and reached for a glass of room temperature alkalized water.

“Oh my goodness, so spicy!” I brought the glass to my lips and turned to face him, tipping my chin slightly to meet his gaze.

The alarming contrast of his shattering crystal clear eyes against the jet black ink that poured above the collar of his shirt and on up to the base of his chin caught me off guard. He had short, dark brown hair with natural waves that jutted out slightly over each ear.

I consciously kept my shoulders straight ahead, pointed toward the bar, displaying the intended briefness of our exchange. My forward-facing shoulders and tipped-chin reaction was practically involuntary, and it occurred to me that I was reenacting body language behavior I’d learned years earlier from Natural Horsemanship instructors. But I was doing it completely backwards. When seeking dominance or commanding attention, the horseman squares her shoulders directly at the horse. It’s only when she welcomes the horse to approach that she would turn her shoulders and look away, avoiding eye contact all together. Was I inviting this intriguing stranger into my space or asserting my dominance? Or both?

“Sorry, what? Oh, uh, sure I guess,” I blurted, thrown by his question. No one’s ever offered to read to me before as a (presumed) method of flirtation.

“My name is Jesse, by the way” he said, followed with a broad, impressive smile.

“Hi. I’m Kristin,” I said, extending my right arm to assert a formal business handshake.

Jesse went on to read page after page, describing the connection of tattoo artistry with religion history. Admittedly, it was pretty interesting stuff, though I caught myself going in and out of moments where I stopped listening and was wholly focused on the tone of Jesse’s voice, the movement of his lips, and the way the setting sunlight danced on his tattoos. I softened; we talked and ended up having a really nice dinner together. I also learned that Jesse’s tattoo shop was nearby, so he was a frequent customer at Present Moment Café. He seemed to know the staff really well, and introduced me to the bartender, who ended up encouraging me to park across the street from her place—in the residential neighborhood where I would find myself the next morning, abruptly awakened by a rumbling stomach.

Baby wipes! A recent purchase to aid in the days-without-a-shower freshening-up routine (great for armpits!), I almost forgot I had them until I was on my knees desperately clinging to the final moments before I could no longer keep it together. Another quick rotation revealed a paper shopping bag from Native Sun Natural Foods Market. I had stopped in just a few days earlier to stock up on snacks for my coastal drive from Jacksonville.

This was it. I had to. Even if I could locate a public restroom, it was too late. I emptied the double-layered paper bag (I’m so grateful to the bagger who opted to double up, oh my goodness), tore the sides a little more than a quarter of the way down, and folded them over to create a splash guard of sorts. Oh my! I placed the baby wipes by my side, pulled down my sweatpants, and carefully balanced on my heels while holding the paper bag against my bum. Success!

Oh the relief! There are no words to describe how freeing that moment was. After being overly thorough with the baby wipes—and hand sanitizer, and disinfectant spray, which I kept for the occasional van-dwelling cleanse—I dropped the dirtied biodegradable cleaning supplies into the bag with the poo monster, closed it up, and disposed of it at the nearest dump.