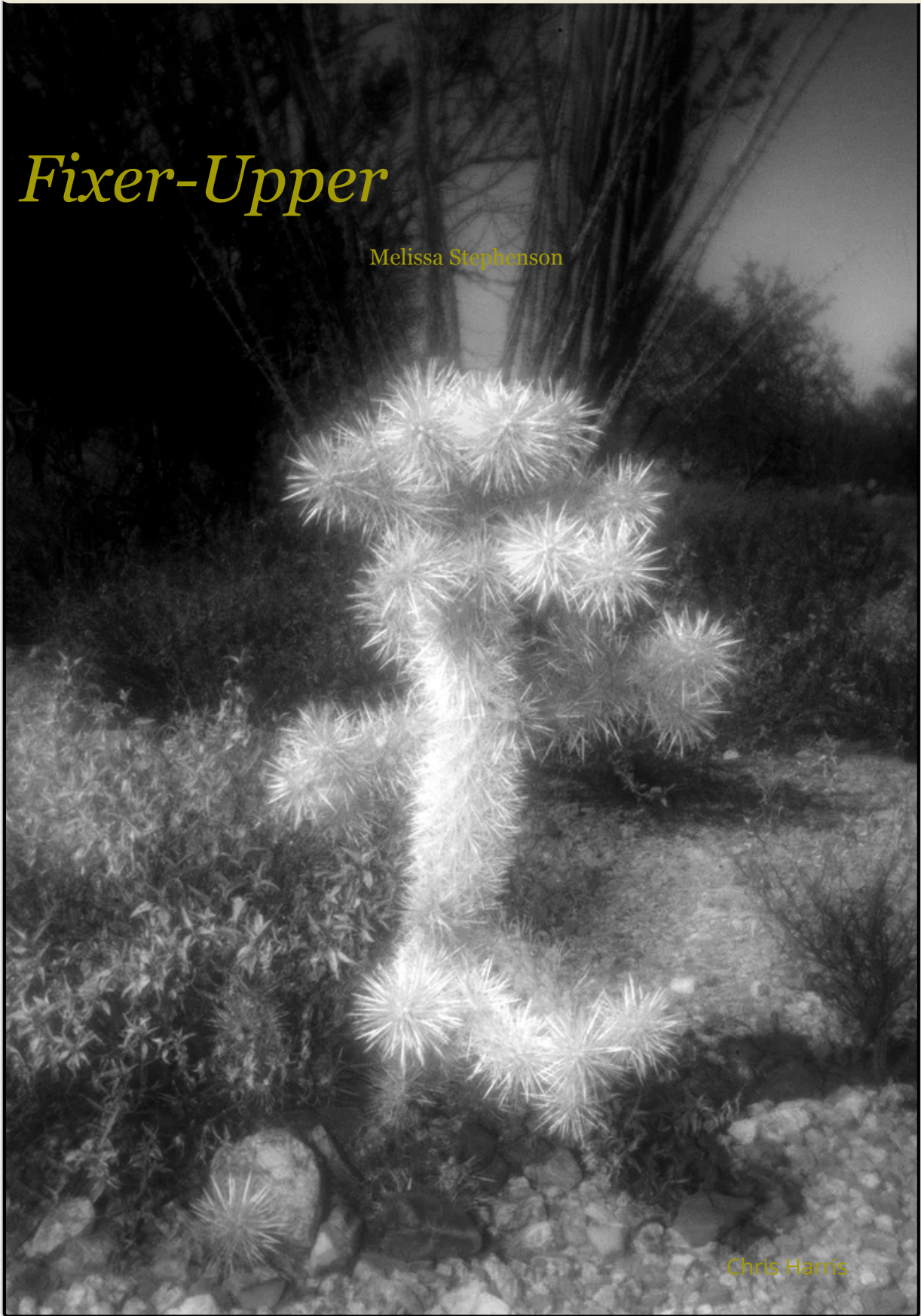


Fixer-Upper

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Chris Harris

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On January 17th of 2018, I realized the mountain valley where I live is densely populated with silver, 4-door Toyota trucks. Years ago, after I broke up with a beau, every black Jeep Cherokee set me on edge. Another ex drove a late 90's Subaru Outback, hunter green. I learned to distinguish his from the many others by its broken front grill.

That January Tuesday I passed twice in traffic the driver of a certain Toyota Tundra. Both times our paths intersected in Missoula's version of rush hour traffic, he averted his eyes. One week earlier, that man had kissed me goodnight on my doorstep and told me he loved me. We were three months into a relationship in which he'd quickly become my primary person. He'd been talking travel plans, future cohabitation. *Let's nail down dates. Let's make this happen.*

I don't want to own up to how hard I fell for him, how my whole body smiled at the thought that maybe he was *The One*—a fairy tale I'd stopped believing in long ago because why believe in something you think you can't have? I know he fell just as hard for me, if not harder. Then, without explanation, something in him busted, and so did we.

A girlfriend recently said, You like *fixer-uppers*. When it comes to cars and men, I have a weakness for overlooked gems. I take pride in replacing the broken love maps men show me by reflecting back to them the goodness I see. I'm not altruistic—these are the men I'm truly attracted to. I think they'll feel lucky to have me, that I'll be safe and appreciated in their misunderstood arms. But every time, whether it's three months or thirteen years later, I discover they are the ones slashing their tires in the night, leading me to the curb in the morning to point out the gouged rubber and say, *Look. Look what happened to me again.*

These are men who, if they were capable of love, would really, really, love me. *If if if.*

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Two weeks after the break-up, my ex-husband arrived in town. When he visits from L.A., I travel so he can stay in my house with our kids, whom I've raised solo since they were two and five. It's an atypical situation that we find much gentler than the alternative: packing everyone up to stay in a nearby hotel or vacation rental. Plus, it makes it easier for him to honor the single sentence in our legal Parenting Plan: *The father is encouraged to parent as much as he is willing.*

This visit caught me off-guard, though. Without a boyfriend, I had no place to stay. It was also February in Montana (not ideal traveling weather), and I'd come down with a cold a few days earlier. My left ear and sinus filled with fluid, and my voice was so obliterated that I could not have made a 911 call. I told my ex-husband (through pantomime and strained whispers) about my recent abandonment, and how I wished I could shrug off the hurt that had infected me.

You've had bad luck, he said. I mean your dad abandoned you, your brother, your mom. Me.

Bad luck: my brother a suicide, my father a walking ghost, my mother consumed by alcoholism, and my former husband of 13 years carving out a new life with his young girlfriend in California. Still, I worried these rejections were signs of some permanent glitch in my wiring that would doom me to love and lose again and again.

I told my three girlfriends about my freshly-wrecked love and precarious domestic situation. Though we are scattered across the country, we keep alive a years-long email chain about the things life throws our way. The first girlfriend said, *You shouldn't be alone with this.* Another, *I'll get you a ticket to come see me.* The third, *I've been there, and it's the worst.*

Despite their concern, I packed everything I might need into my Volkswagen camper van: stove, protein bars, ramen, fruit, coffee, a cold medicine, handkerchiefs for the fluid draining steadily from my sinuses, a sub-zero sleeping bag, a three gallon water jug, a giant yogurt container with a lid to piss in at night, and my ukulele. I pulled on to I-90, the cold medicine making my head feel like a helium balloon. My ex-husband once saw me take a single ibuprofen and joked, *Holy shit do you need to go to the ER?* You don't have to dig deep for the metaphor, here: I am far more comfortable caring for others than I am at caring for myself.

As I drove south, one snowy mountain range after another appeared on the horizon, crested, and vanished in my rearview. The light was moody, and I could often spy a snowstorm to the East and blue skies to the West, the van riding a seam between the two systems.

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The possibilities of the road called to me, and overwhelmed me. All of my road trips in recent years have involved a man and/or my kids. What if the van broke down? What if I hit black ice and slid quietly off the road? What if I didn't know how to get where I was going, though I had yet to decide where that was beyond *sun* and *south*? What if my heart wouldn't heal, and my voice never returned, and I lived the rest of my life a silent old maid with a yard full of broke-down cars?

Each time my mind ran away, I told myself that today I had only to make it my first stop: Lava Hot Springs in southern Idaho. Tomorrow, I could figure out tomorrow.

I coasted into Lava past sunset and parked near the hotel with the best soaking pools where I sank slowly into warm waters. For the first time in a long, gray winter, I saw stars overhead. I breathed in the mineral steam and let the heat soak into my joints, telling my body in some elemental way, *It's ok. Let go. I've got you.*

From the far side of the Buddha fountain, I heard a voice. *Hello there.* I drifted closer, through the steam, and met Maurice—a white-haired poet from Bozeman. He talked about the evils of eating wheat and was happy to hear I have an allergy that keeps me from it. He told me corn was even more toxic because of genetic engineering. He said at parties he often comes face-to-face with corn chips and homemade guacamole and agonizes while eating his own future death. He talked about taking medicinal marijuana for his arthritis and how he never knows how much to eat so sometimes he ingests too much and can't leave his house until the high passes. Finally, he asked about me.

So you sleep in your van? Maurice said. *What kind of van?*

I used my low voice reserves to tell him about Tillie, the 70's VW camper van who sparked my love of VWs. She belonged to a man who had turned away from me more slowly but just as coolly as the man I'd left 200 miles behind me, cruising the streets of Missoula in his Tundra. Tillie had taken me to Alaska in 1994. When things went south with her owner, I flew back to the states and traded my Saab for an 1984 Vanagon.

The thing about VW vans, I explained, is that they are made for nesting and questing. You can take them places you'd never expect they could go—up logging roads, into the mountains, through mud and water, fishtailing over snow—and all the while you have your home on wheels. Your kitchen, bed, belongings packed into a vehicle that is both adventure mobile and turtle shell.

Seven years ago, as I was divorcing, I bought an 1984 VW camper off Ebay and traveled to Casper, Wyoming, to retrieve her. That spring, when the kids' father showed up to get them and spotted me trying to fix the propane regulator, he said, *That van makes me so happy I'm not married to you anymore.*

I'd given up my first van for our marriage. Now I have two.

Because of the kids, I told Maurice, I recently bought a Eurovan. Still a VW. Still a camper. But it can cruise 80, has A/C, and 3-point seat belts. The bulk of my travel in the past decade revolved around two kids with specific sets of wants and needs. Packing the van means charging devices,

preparing food no one hates, remembering raincoats and lovies and first aid kits and sunscreen and puke bags and . . . things I forget, still.

I have, in fact, loved cars and road trips since the summer I turned sixteen and bought a rust-brown Toyota Corolla for \$400, though I can't recall the last time I had a running vehicle, gas money, and a week on the road in uncharted territory, alone. Perhaps that's because it's been never.

I walked to the van, drank some nighttime cold medicine, pulled the curtains, and slept a deep, dreamless sleep that is the antidote to heartbreak—a miniature death made sweet by our ability to return.

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The next day and night I spent in Salt Lake City, where I went out to dinner in cowboy boots and a dress I'd sewn myself. After that, I pushed south to a place I'd chosen based on a recommendation of a friend who believes magnets can heal all that ails us. The spot, Mystic Hot Spring, looked at first like a retirement park for fixer-uppers. A Bluebird school bus with a 70's VW like Tillie welded to the top sat next to a rainbow bus with dancing bears. Next in line: an International Harvester with a two-paned front window. One could rent these buses by the night, instead of cabins. The Mystic motto was *funky not fancy*. On a sign by the register, I read, *Nothing lasts. Nothing is finished. And nothing is perfect*. I felt right at home.

I climbed a hill and found a cast iron tub with hot water trickling into it from the shed-sized chunk of rock that had absorbed, over time, one side of the tub. Elevated above the small town, I looked over another mountain range, cracked a book, and read until sunset.

In the morning a gray-bearded man who looked like he'd stepped out of a Tolkien novel surrendered to me that same tub on the hill, just in time for sunrise. *Go ahead*, he said. *I get to do this every day*. A year ago, he'd sold his house in Salt Lake and moved to Mystic, where he rented year-round one of the buses and continued to work remotely the same gig he'd had in the city. What an idea.

I drove that day to Capital Reef National Park and fell into a kind of silent awe at the deep canyons and boulders perched on cliff edges like giant marbles. I parked at a trailhead, spotted a nine-mile route on the map, and started up a canyon in full sunlight. I brought my phone but soon saw there was no cell reception—no way to tell anyone where I'd gone, no way to call for help. The hike took me on a 1,000-foot elevation gain. I did not see another living thing during my trek, aside from some purple cacti.

After a few confusing turns where I lost my way, I realized that rock cairns marked the trail. Whenever I felt lost, I'd stop, hearing nothing but wind and my own heartbeat, and survey the landscape until I spied a cairn. I'd

run to it, spot the next, and so on. I wove my way along the edges of the canyons, higher and higher, one cairn at a time.

Relax. Let go. I've got you.

Was I scared? *Yes*. But I knew I'd be okay as long as I let go of thoughts of twisted ankles and broken legs. Four-and-a-half miles in, I found myself looking down at Navajo Knobs—the kind of geographic anomaly that could make an atheist reconsider God. I stopped, fists on hips, rib cage bared, and breathed.

Though I am not the praying sort, I prayed in a way that felt natural as coming up for air after a deep dive. I prayed for the man who'd let go of me to return to himself, for himself. I prayed to find my way and, one day, to find the right mate. I prayed to learn how to love better and live bigger. And I prayed to make it back to the car, the hot springs, and my kids without injury—a prayer that felt necessary as I descended the canyon, stopping often to break my downhill momentum, to look up, slow down, and *see*.

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I returned to Mystic that evening and read again in the bathtub through sunset, then moved to the larger pool for a soak under stars. There I met a little girl named Luna and her father.

Are you three? I asked. She smiled. *Yes*.

I told her about the purple cactus I'd seen on my hike.

You know two things you don't do with a cactus? Luna said. She spun herself in circles in her inner tube then stopped to look me in the eyes as she delivered the rules. *You don't touch it. And you never ever brush your teeth with it.*

Later, a couple women from Washington State shed their robes and slipped into the pool with me. They were a van trip of their own. One was a mother of a two-year-old, married, and grateful for this break from domestic life. The other was a single woman considering marriage with a man who already had a son. She was a little drunk, loud, and debating whether to have a child of her own so she'd have *something to love*.

There is everything here to love already, I whispered in the voice coming back to me. She nodded, perhaps listening, perhaps being polite. *Love what's here already*, I said. To her, to the friend, to myself.

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As I camped my way back to Montana, I thought about romantic love and how, in high school, my three girlfriends and I had looked to men to see

our own selves reflected. It's the tree-falling-in-the-woods quandary of identity: Without someone to adore us, did we exist?

I'd embarked on this trip fully expecting to miss the man I'd lost in a way that would turn me inside out, cannibalize me, and leave me hollow. And I did think of him. I'd seen a shitload of Toyota Tundras on the road, the idea of him riding shotgun in each one. My ghost love. Abandoner.

I recalled how one night, on our third date, we'd kissed in the parking lot, both of us smiling like mad people on love drugs, and when he walked towards his truck I'd said, *Oh my god is that yours?* He nodded, and I busted out laughing. One of my girlfriend's husbands had bought a Tundra, which became a point of tension in their marriage, a tension we'd eased with jokes about dudes who drive big trucks and soaking up all the gas and oil resources. He said, *Are you making fun of my ride?* I nodded yes, choked out an apology, and the both of us doubled over, laughing like we'd never stop being happy.

Nothing lasts. Nothing is finished. And nothing is perfect.

Though I am 43 and a strong woman comfortable at last in her own human costume, there is a part of me that feels shame over loving a man who quit loving me back. But the real surprise of that trip is that I hadn't found myself wishing to be anywhere else, or with anyone else. I was alone but not lonely. I was with me, and we agreed on everything:

Do we want to soak in the hot springs at 9:30 on a Monday? *Yes, we do.*

Do we want to eat chocolate mousse for lunch, while driving? *Yes yes.*

Do we want to stop at the Mormon thrift store and buy white sunglasses and vintage Pyrex? *We do, yes we do.*

The van had propelled me and held me through a 1600 mile road trip to the middle of nowhere. Strangers had told me things, wanting only to be heard. Seen. I'd spent a week like a tree in the woods with no one there to find my morning hair adorable, no one to give me a post-soak orgasm and comment on my strong runner's legs, no one to spoil with coffee in bed or tease with off-key ukulele songs. No one to call me *Mom, Melissa, M, or Sweetie.*

Except, I guess, there was me. I'd spent most of my adult life choosing love over isolation, only to discover on this trip the love in isolation. I don't want to always be alone, but sometimes? Perhaps I need to be. Perhaps, over decades of hardcore care-giving, I'd abandoned myself like a beater in the breakdown lane, and it was me in need of reprieve, attention, a little fixing. A rest for this voice I'd been so long missing.



Melissa Stephenson earned her B.A. in English from The University of Montana and her M.F.A. in Fiction from Texas State University. Her writing has appeared in publications such as *The Rumpus*, *The Washington Post*, *Ms. Magazine*, *ZYZZYVA*, *LitHub*, and *Fourth Genre*.

Her memoir, *Driven*, was released by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in July of 2018. She lives in Missoula, Montana with her two kids.

