

The Roadtrek was the only thing his mom had left him when she'd died last year, because it was all she had. The large Chevy camper-van sat in the driveway of Ryan Browning's house in Lawndale, California, and Ryan had taken to hauling his laptop out there in the evening, swinging the tall captain's-chair driver's seat around to face the rear, pulling out the little table that folded out from under the sink, grabbing a couple Blue Moons from the fridge, and settling in.

After his dad had left, ten years ago, Ryan's mom had sold the house in Garden Grove, put everything into the Roadtrek and hit the road. She'd lived in it full-time and once told him she had been to every state. He suspected she'd still be going strong if that Peterbilt hadn't backed over her, while she was walking across a truck-stop parking lot outside Carson City.

The Roadtrek—Ryan recalled she'd said it was a '96 (she'd gotten it used)—had everything you needed to get by: a propane two-burner stove, a small refrigerator, a couch in the rear that folded out into a bed, and even a tiny bathroom. The van was not only his wheels—his broken down '91 Escort with 200,000 miles sat in the garage—it was also his office.

It was a much more cheerful environment than his dreary dining room and provided just the right ambiance to work on his new blog. That is, it would be his new blog once he came up with a name for it and decided what it would be about. This much Ryan knew: he wanted it to be about something important, about the challenges of life, because you don't get to be thirty-four without learning something about disappointments and setbacks. At least he hadn't, and he suspected a lot of other folks hadn't either. Anyway, writing the blog entries—and he had at least a dozen of them stockpiled already—was cathartic. That and the Blue Moons helped a lot.

And when those weren't enough, Ryan would lean back and study the dozens of travel magnets that his mom had plastered on every available metal surface in the van. Small magnets from everywhere, it seemed. Mostly little squares with the names of the places she'd visited, like Bozeman and Acadia National Park. But some were other shapes, like one shaped as a wine bottle from Sonoma County and another shaped like a saguaro from Tucson.

He could picture his mom in each of those places, taking it all in. She'd never been much of an adventurous sort, but after Dad had run off to Florida with that woman from work, she'd seemed to come into her own. He originally thought it was a bad idea—in fact a dangerous one—for a woman to head out across the country alone. But after a year's worth of photos from her texts—usually a selfie of her smiling confidently in front of a glacier or a beach or a city skyline—he came to realize how this was what her life had needed. In almost every text she invited him to join her: “Meet me in the Great Sand Dunes next month,” or “I'm headed for the Smokies, come join me.” Ryan always replied that he was too busy with work, and the last thing he needed was to drop everything and head off to parts unknown.

The magnets gave him a sense of peace, and they transported him to those places where she had been. And he was there with her. A mother and son—all that was left of this family—living life and laughing and sipping pinot noir by the Russian River.

But now, of course, there was only him.