

Nathan Holic

## Oil Stains in the Driveway

You imagined hundreds of deliciously nightmarish scenarios for this neighborhood, though—when you imagined your own house, unseen in months, maybe even a year—you expected that it would be an against-all-odds prize, the lone Rhodes Scholar on a college football team full of academic non-qualifiers.

Okay, maybe you expected some damage, some wear and tear, but in your mind all of the possibilities seemed fixable. Cosmetic. You maybe imagined overgrown weeds in the front lawn, grass creepers extending into the driveway. Chipped paint, stair-step cracks in the block stucco exterior. Maybe even missing shingles, or—at the very worst, since you actually saw this in a different neighborhood—weeds growing on the roof. After all, you've seen how post-foreclosure disrepair has infected so many Central Florida subdivisions this past year, so you knew the neighborhood wouldn't allow your house to withstand the widespread withering . . . but still, you didn't expect to find a large van, paint faded to '70s porno colors, in your own driveway.

You park directly next to it, as if challenging the van over driveway ownership.

"What is this?" you ask the empty neighborhood, slamming your car door. But when you speak, there is no one around to answer you. It is mid-day, that time in a Florida summer when the sun reaches a terrible point in the sky where its rays penetrate and slip around even the largest and fullest of trees, a point so terrible it shouldn't exist, all shade seeming to disappear entirely, shadows reduced to pin-pricks, the world burning like bare feet on beach sand.

The neighborhood doesn't hear you, though, and it doesn't notice you. Parents are at work, so the cars are all gone, and children know better than to play outside when there is no cover and the black pavement is hot as a cast-iron skillet. But you are already sweating as you approach the van in your driveway. You bend to examine the undercarriage: there are cinderblocks wedged under the front tires as if to prevent the vehicle from rolling forward.

The first question on your mind is: How dare they? How could someone dare park their broken-down van in your driveway, so casually, so confidently, as if they owned the place? But you know the answer to this question. Your neighbors likely think this house is abandoned, and they are half-right. You've owned this property—you and your partner, Edwin—and you've been renting it out for the past three years. Never the same tenants two years in a row, though, and you've never met any of them. You split the responsibilities for managing the Central Florida

properties you co-owned (some were meant to be rented, others to be flipped), and this house was Edwin's responsibility. Now, Edwin is gone. "You're on your own, bro," he said, left for Atlanta, left you to hold together the depreciating business you started together, sand slipping through your fingers as you now attempt to grasp at it all.

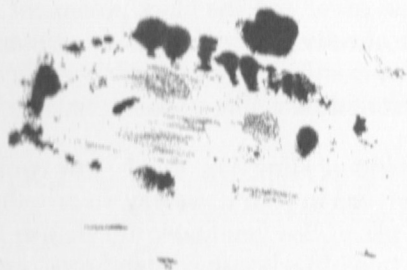
So yes, you know why someone would park their vehicle here. Why not? It looks like a foreclosure. Soon, it will be. No doubt. Without Edwin, you cannot do this. But today? Today, you are still the owner of this house . . . several months late on the mortgage, but still the owner.

The better question, then, is not "How dare they?" but rather: "Whose van is this?" And then: "How can you get it the hell out of here?"

At the curb, there is an oil spot:



Deep, black, crafted with care. Several drafts, several coats, as if this oil spot was instead someone's contribution to Orlando culture, some piece of Millennial artwork with all of the protest of graffiti and none of the beauty. There is another on the lighter pavement of your driveway, this one spotty, sketchy, as if the author is still laboring in the composing process.



And another beneath the van, though it hides in the shade of the beast.

You walk around the van, hand grazing the metal. Rust spots

here, there. Twin metal wires poking out from beneath the front bumper, looking almost like "Mad Max" weapons meant to pop the tires of anyone who drives too close.

This van has been here for months, you decide. At one time, it was running. Sure. At one time, the preferred parking spot was its owner's own driveway, but as it began leaking more and more fluids, they moved it to the street, then to the curb in front of your house, and finally—why not?—to your driveway. It has taken a while, a lot of oil stains and backfires and engine-rolling failed starts, to get here.

But one thing is certain: its owners are close.

Directly next door? Directly across the street?

You examine the houses, wonder what sort of person would own a van like this. The next-door neighbor, perhaps? It is a two-story house next door, nearly the same colors as yours, white vinyl fence separating its backyard from yours, mold starting to overtake the white vinyl in black-green patches. Over the fence, you notice the brown and yellow plastic roof of a children's play-set, swings and a slide, and also a large screened-in porch, probably a pool in there. You imagine a family . . . one with money . . . one which plans weekend cookouts, ties balloons to their mailbox for their child's birthday party. They might have allowed party guests to park in your driveway, but only to clear the road and make the area safer for that moment, after sunset, when they distributed sparklers to the gathered children or pulled the transportable soccer nets from the garage to set them up in the street. These are the oil stains in their driveway: