

Chapter One: Dethroned

Prevost Princess

3 parts vodka

1 part peach schnapps

1 part raspberry liquor

1 robust whine (optional)

Recline on couch; command husband to assemble and shake.

When my long-dreaded thirtieth birthday arrived, I really wasn't as upset as I imagined I'd be, for I had achieved a much more important milestone: my sartorial centennial. I owned one hundred pairs of shoes. Then, at age forty-four, I found myself trying to cram a mere half that number into a living space of 340 square feet.

The whole thing was Tim's fault.

When he announced he wanted to travel around the country in a converted bus for a year, I gave this profound and potentially life-altering notion all the thoughtful consideration it deserved.

"Why can't you be like a normal husband with a midlife crisis and have an affair or buy a Corvette?" I demanded, adding, "I will never, ever, EVER, not in a million years, live on a bus."

As we prepared to roll down the road for the year in our fully outfitted, luxury bus, it occurred to me that Tim had already owned a Corvette, years ago when he was far too young for a midlife crisis. While I pondered who he might be seeing on the side (and whether his having an affair might prove less taxing than living in a metallic phallus on wheels), I wedged and stuffed - and, oh my GOD! bent - the cutest little Prada mules

you've ever seen into my "closet," which was really not a closet at all, but much more resembled the cubbyhole I'd been assigned many pre-shoe-obsession years ago at Camp Cejwin. How had I let myself go from "never ever" to . . . this? Both Tim and I are shrinks, but he's obviously the better one. It took him five years, yet he whittled down my resolve, no doubt with some fancy, newfangled brainwashing technique ripped out of one of our medical journals before I could get to it.

This wouldn't have been the first time my sneaky husband tricked me into doing something I didn't want to do. Well, OK. It was only the second time (that I know of), but the first was a doozy: Almost twenty years ago, Tim lied to get me to go on our first date.

We met in 1984 when we were both married to other people. I was a fourth-year medical student living in D.C., but doing as many rotations in Tucson as I could, because that's where my first husband had just moved for graduate school. (He wanted to be an archeologist and put his studies on hold so I could finish my medical training. In return, I told him I'd do my residency wherever he wanted to get his Ph.D., not for one moment thinking he'd pick a city with no Nordstrom.) Tim was a second-year psychiatry resident in the Tucson program, and I was assigned to his team.

Although he was terribly nice and we got along well, I was, after all, happily married and didn't give him a second thought when the rotation was over. As for Tim, his marriage to Diane (or D1; I'm D2, the new and improved version. There'd better not be another upgrade) was already crumbling. Two years later, I'm the second-year resident and Tim's about to graduate. We're both divorced.

Tim and D1 had been high school sweethearts and their marriage was more a function of inevitability than compatibility. As for my ex and me, we just got married too young. Shortly after I graduated from medical school, I could see that our two-year union had been a mistake and vowed not to marry again for a long, long while.

Seven months later, I ran into Tim.

I was at a bar with a group of friends, drinking, dancing, and having a grand ole time. Tim walked in with a friend of his. Since we hadn't seen each other in nearly a year, we chatted briefly, but apparently enough for him to realize I was no longer married. Again, I didn't give him another thought - until he called a few days later.

“Hey, Doreen. It's Tim.” *What is this guy calling me for?*

“A bunch of us from my class are getting together Saturday night to go back to the bar. You know, me, Mike, Walt, Ann . . . Dave. I wondered if you'd be interested in coming?” *Did he say Dave?*

“Uh . . . sure! See you then.” Seems innocuous, right? But, you see, Tim had dangled Dave in front of me because he knew I was attracted to him. How did he know? Because every woman with a pulse was attracted to Dave. And I snapped up the bait with no more thought than the many times I'd gone home with a designer dress that didn't fit, just because it was on sale. Tim hadn't dated much since his marriage had broken up and was not in a place where he wanted to risk rejection. So, you might ask, what's wrong with arranging to go out in a group? Determine if we're compatible? Have an out if . . . ? See how good that man is at deception? There was *never* a group going out. It was always just going to be me and Tim.

That Saturday night, a few hours before we were to meet, the phone rang.

“Hey, Doreen. It’s Tim.” *What is this guy calling me for?*

“I’m really, really sorry, but everybody’s flaked out. Nobody can come tonight. I thought I’d show up anyway, hang out, have a beer. You’re welcome to join me . . . if you’re not doing anything.”

“Uh, sure. See you, then.” I couldn’t make other plans that late on a Saturday evening. *Guess I might as well go.* And, that’s *exactly* what Tim knew I’d be thinking when he’d concocted his evil plan the week before.

So we met at the bar (aptly named “The Bum Steer”). We talked, laughed, ate, talked, laughed, drank, and talked and laughed some more. *Hey. This guy’s kinda . . . wonderful.* Of course, I didn’t know that he’d hoodwinked me, yet. He waited a few weeks to tell me. By then, I was so smitten, I was actually flattered he’d gone to all that trouble. If only I’d realized it was the start of a pattern - sure, one that recurs only once every twenty years, but a pattern nonetheless. I shudder to think what he’ll make me do in another twenty.

That first night, I found myself falling. *What is going on here?* Then I remembered my vow. *I don’t want to get involved with anyone.* So I strengthened my resolve. *I can’t get involved with him.* But, all too soon, there it was: *How . . . can . . . I . . . not?* That first “date,” that wasn’t even supposed to be a date, lasted eight hours. We’ve been together ever since, progressing through the all important M’s - Monogamy, Moving in, Mortgage, and Matrimony.

And then, unfortunately, motor home.

As a pampered Princess from the Island of Long, I have always been smug in my position as role model for my friends. They marvel at how I get Tim to do:

- 1) all the ironing (by exiting the house in horribly wrinkled clothes);
- 2) all the laundry (by washing everything together, so his favorite baseball shirt turned pink);
- 3) all the dishes (by being incapable of stacking the dishwasher in an energy-efficient manner).

He also walks the dog (I'm a cat person), cleans the house (I'm a pig, but in fairness to me, the first time he suggested we split chores on a weekly basis, I said, "That's fine, honey, but on my week, I'll write a check"), and takes out the garbage (are there really any married women who still do this?). But once we announced we were doing the "bus thing," as we came to call it, my friends started viewing me with disgust. They insisted I let them down. As their husbands eyed mine with envy and tried to get him to divulge his secret recipe for spousal capitulation, the wives shunned me as if the decision to chuck everything and live in a glorified tin can was a symptom of some contagious insanity.

The most curious reaction from our married friends, however, was incredulity - not about the bus - but about the amount of togetherness the bus would require.

"How in the world can you spend twenty-four seven with each other? We could NEVER do that!" they'd say, shaking their heads in a unison of misery at the thought. Tim and I would just exchange knowing looks and try not to smile. Actually, 24/7 was the one aspect of bus life we were both looking forward to. I even think there are a few of my friends who believe I'm rather quiet, just because I never have much to contribute on

the “let’s bitch about our marriages” front. I know I’m lucky. Unfortunately, Tim knows it, too.

He loves when Joanne, one of my best buddies from residency calls. She’s one of the absolute nicest people I have ever met (second only to my husband). But she also has the absolute worst luck with men. Tim can always tell when I’ve spoken to her during the day, for as soon as he walks through the door at night, I invariably hurl myself into his arms and beg, “Don’t ever leave me!” He’ll shoot me a smug, little smile and ask, “How *is* Joanne?”

24/7? No problem. Bus? Well . . . I tried to convince myself (really I did) that my living on one was a natural fit. Although I love the idea of travel, in practice I don’t particularly like doing it; the closets are never big enough and there’s always the risk of ending up on a hotel’s first floor, which smacks way too much of camping for me. I loathe camping. In fact, my idea of “roughing it” is to stay at the Holiday Inn.

Tim and I lived in Boulder, Colorado, for ten years before we hit the road. Boulder is always at the top of every “Most Nauseatingly Healthy/Active Cities” list - though many in surrounding towns refer to it as “Nestled Between the Mountains and Reality” - so sure, I can appreciate natural beauty. I just don’t want to have to walk around in it. Besides, the whole fresh air thing is so overrated. I’m a physician. A scientist. Stale air, fresh air, it’s all the same molecules. I had so shunned the “great” outdoors, in fact, that I had never even been stung by a bee until the age of forty-three - and that was in my own house. I just like being inside. I like not getting dressed. I like not putting on makeup. I like not brushing my . . . well, never mind. Some might call me lazy. I can’t be bothered to disagree.

I'd never even realized how strange my love of the indoors was until one February, when I heard Tim talking to a neighbor in our yard. I poked my head out the door to say hello.

"Doreen! It's so nice to see you!" she exclaimed, as if I were a burn victim, finally emerging from the hyperbaric chamber. Tim, of course, couldn't resist singing out, "Guess it's six more weeks of winter!"

I had even gravitated away from patient care to doing insurance reviews so I could stay home all day, in my nightgown, with a cat on my lap. For years, Tim used to come home and exclaim in amazement, "Don't tell me you haven't gotten dressed all day!" But I was proud of my record: 118 hours without leaving the house. Once I perfected the art of not even leaving the bed in the morning, it took Tim a while to get used to this new development. But I figured he'd come around. How could he not be impressed? I found out just how one day when, seeing me sitting up against the headboard, typing away on my laptop, cell phone standing by with papers strewn about, he exclaimed, "Look at you!" At first I didn't quite get his meaning, so replied with considerable pride, "Yep. Who else doesn't have to get out of bed to work besides whores?"

"Even whores have to leave their beds to get Johns," he said with disdain.

In fact, however, I always managed to get out - technically speaking - at least once a day: In the neighborhood, I'm known as "the Mafioso" because I'll venture outside to pick up the mail or the paper in a bathrobe, like Vinny the Chin, who roamed Greenwich Village in his pajamas so if the Feds ever got anything on him, he could plead

insanity. I tried pleading insanity when I first told my girlfriends about the bus. Although they agreed with the diagnosis, it didn't seem to make them any more forgiving.

I also tried to convince myself that on a bus, I could do what I really loved (stay at home in my pajamas), while doing what I thought I should love (travel). How in the world could I ever have thought this was a bad idea? I even came to view it as a promotion of sorts: from Long Island Princess to Queen of the Long Narrow Aisle.

Tim, on the other hand, never had any reservations about the bus thing from the moment he stopped in the local newsstand and happened upon *Bus Conversions* magazine. He had found his people and his cause.

Ever since he started his private practice nearly fifteen years before, Tim would come home from work at seven or eight in the evening, then make an hour or so of patient calls he hadn't been able to get to during the day. While he often counseled people to take better care of themselves, it was not something that he himself seemed able to do with any ease, largely because he was working himself to death taking care of them. He also tried to be as available to his patients as possible and if someone asked him to take a very difficult case, he always said yes, just because he believed he could help. His practice was killing him.

As I railed against the bus thing, I accused him of wanting to do it just so he could escape psychiatry. If he really needed out, I was all for it, but why should I have to give up my life (which I was perfectly content with) for a year? While he assured me this wasn't the case, that the bus thing was something he truly wanted to do, I maintained my skepticism, although the most he would admit to was hoping the bus year would help him "mellow out." Eager to change the subject, he proceeded to ask how I myself might like

to be different by the end of the year. I cocked my head and batted my eyes, relishing this rarest of moments when my darling husband was the one to walk into a trap.

“Why?” I asked with all the sweetness I could muster. “Do you think there’s something I need to change?” Tim must have seen his bus dream flash before his eyes.

“N-no,” he stammered. “I-I just thought maybe you’d like to . . . you know . . . well . . .” His eyes seemed to roll back into his brain, desperately searching its contents for a way out of this one. Finally, he sighed.

“It’s just something I really want to do - while we’re young and can still enjoy it. I’ve done everything right all my life, the way I was supposed to do it. Now I want something for me. And I want it with you.” I suddenly had the same gooey feeling I had all those years ago, when he fessed up about tricking me to go to the bar. I gave him a kiss and said, “I’ll think about it,” but we both knew: Tim had me. Again.

He also had a point. Like many people, until we reached our late thirties, Tim and I had gone through life feeling rather invincible. Not only was it inconceivable that something bad could ever happen to us, even our very mortality seemed . . . suspect. When we hit our forties, this changed, as our contemporaries experienced sudden, unexpected tragedies: A friend was diagnosed with breast cancer. A colleague died of a heart attack in his sleep. Both of us, for the first time, could feel creaks and aches in bones we hadn’t thought about since anatomy class. Over the years, we each had treated people in our practices who had looked forward to all they planned to do in retirement, but when the time came, were too ill to travel or too devastated by the death of a spouse to live out those dreams.

Those lessons started hitting home as we officially breached middle age. We knew we were fortunate in that we would always have jobs; neurosis is a growth industry, after all. We could afford to do this now and go back to work later.

All these considerations weighed on me, swinging my decision back and forth like a fifth wheel dragged down the road. In the end, Tim finally got his way when he pointed out, “Look. We didn’t have kids so that we wouldn’t be tied down, so that we could do whatever we want, when we want. I won’t miss out on having kids without getting any of the benefits.”

Tim and I always assumed we’d have kids. It just never felt like the right time, for either of us. Yet, as the years went by, we both came to realize we didn’t miss not having them. And through seeing how much work our friends put into child rearing (particularly the necessity of leaving the house on a regular basis, for things like driving them to and then having to sit through - oh, God - soccer games), I gradually came to the conclusion that maybe motherhood just wasn’t for me. Since Tim didn’t feel strongly that he wanted kids either, at some point we agreed (especially after what we’d seen in our line of work) it wasn’t fair to a kid to have it, if we weren’t motivated to. Instead, our pets have become our kids and through them, we’ve realized that our decision was most definitely for the best. And not just for us, but for all of mankind.

Living in our house is like living with furry little Helen Kellers before the arrival of Annie Sullivan: Our two cats walk all over the table while we eat, grabbing what they can, jump on and off the bed all night, sticking their paws in our faces demanding snuggle (yeah, it’s cute - the first time) and blackmail us with blood-curdling screams

while we're on the phone (and thus not paying attention to them), resulting in more than one potential Animal Welfare investigation.

As for our standard poodle, he has gotten used to going everywhere with us. If, for some reason, we absolutely cannot take him, he shoots us a glance of utter despair as he drags his curly butt to the couch, which he knows very well he's forbidden to sit on. Of course we don't have the heart to make him get off, since he's already being so cruelly abused.

If we'd had kids, they'd be little monsters. Then they'd grow up to be big monsters. It's a benefit to the entire planet that we have chosen to remain childless. Really, the U.N. should give us a humanitarian award.

Since we had vowed years ago that not having kids would mean we would take advantage of the freedom other people our age didn't have (something we had yet to do), I finally realized Tim was right about the bus thing and agreed to his plan.

Although I wouldn't exactly say I was enthusiastic about it.

On a cold, dreary Sunday in January 2002, Tim lugged me to an RV show in Denver. Even though he had already been tainted by *Bus Conversions* magazine, he was still thinking it would be simpler to just buy some sort of trailer to live in. So we trekked through the convention center for hours and hours, holding hands. Tim always holds my hand while we walk, but for once, it felt less like affection and more like fear I would run away. Up and down the aisles we went, in and out through the various rigs: class A's, B's, and C's, fifth wheels, pop-ups, and, Lord help me, camper vans. I suspect he started with the latter, just to get me to the point where I'd be begging to live on a bigger vehicle.

The very last booth of the day, the one we nearly skipped (my Manolos were killing me), was that of Vanture Coach Manufacturing. The owner, Chris Brown and his business partner, John Frank, jovially entertained prospective clients, proudly displaying examples of their craft - the conversion of various types of vehicles, which unfortunately included buses, into motor homes.

While Chris took another poor deluded man (who stupidly hadn't been clutching his wife's hand, as she was nowhere to be found) aside, John walked up to us with a wide smile and explained why converting a bus was a much better idea than buying a ready-made RV.

"For a little more than buying one new, you can get a bus made to your very own specifications!" he enthused. Tim nodded, transfixed by the wall of bus pictures lining the Vanture booth. John continued, "They're bigger than most RVs, and of course, for men, big is always better." Tim licked his lips, images of converted school buses, double-decker buses, and flexible buses barreling down a one-way road deep into his psyche, ripping up the carefully laid foundation of my contented life in their wake. I needed to find a detour. Fast.

"In a bus," John confidently intoned, "when you take out the lavatory, the old waste tank makes a great safe!" Drool dribbled down the side of Tim's mouth. As I sized up the rapidly deteriorating situation, John sensed he had to win me over. I was just about to sink to the depths of desperation with a demure, "Honey, let's go. I have cramps," when John seemed to figure he had me figured out.

“With a bus,” he eagerly turned my way, “you can have exactly the kind of kitchen you want . . .” I cut him off with a withering look. What was I worried about? This was going to be *too* easy.

“I don’t cook.” Undaunted, he narrowed his eyes, studying me.

“In a bus,” he said evenly, hands on his hips, “you can design a washer-dryer combina . . .” I nodded toward my husband, who had by now let go of my hand to better study the bus pictures with the same rapt attention he’d used preparing for his medical board exams.

“He does the laundry,” I said, challenging John to up the ante. He took a deep breath, pursed his lips, and dropped his eyes to the floor. Slowly, his gaze rose as he took in my swollen feet, unaccustomed to a full day of wearing shoes, their twin cousins, Righty and Lefty Love Handles, and finally, the trace of an afternoon bonbon lingering on my lips. A smile crept over his face. He folded his hands on his chest and looked me right in the eyes with all the confidence of Ralph Kramden.

“In-motion satellite TV,” was all he said.

“I . . .” My hesitation sealed my fate. While most people would assume the man is the idiot in the family, in ours, Tim hardly ever watches TV. He’s too busy outside, doing stuff. I, on the other hand . . . John continued with a rush of words, circling in for the road kill.

“Your husband can be up front doin’ all the drivin’, while you lay in bed, all nice and cozy . . . in your pajamas . . . snuggling with your . . .” He noted the trace of white fluffy fur stuck to my black Gucci purse.

“. . . cat?” He shot me a questioning look. My eyes widened. John stepped back and beamed at me, triumphant.

“Tim,” I let out a weak cry. He seemed not to hear, as he stood before the display of buses in various stages of being stripped down to their skins. All that was missing were the front-end pasties, fishnet hubcaps, and tantalizing glimpses under the hoods. This called for my favorite whine: full-bodied and piercing, with much more than a hint of provocation.

“Ti-im!” Still nothing. Forget the finesse.

“TIM!” He, and the rest of humanity, turned toward me. He could see how shaken I was, but still had trouble peeling his eyes away from the bus porn before coming over.

“Take me away from the bad man,” I whimpered. He gave John a quizzical look. John gave him a barely perceptible wink and a nod. Then Tim steered me away, as he slipped a Vanture card into his pocket.

People often wonder how Tim and I could have ended up together. We count ourselves among them. Other than our occupations, I doubt you could find a more disparate pair: Tim loves the outdoors, treats everyone he meets with kindness, and has an intense need to keep busy, to accomplish things. I am more of a misanthropic couch potato. As a clinician, Tim provides care to patients. Through my insurance review work, I deny care to them. When it came time to hit the road and Tim had to give up his practice (which included being medical director of a psychiatric hospital), his patients cried. The staff cried. I even detected tears in the eyes of the janitors, for Tim is a kindred spirit to Everyman.

On weekends, this mild-mannered psychiatrist sheds his suit and tie, slaps on his safety goggles, laces up his steel-toed boots, and assumes the guise of . . . Project Nerd, Domestic Superhero. Tim tackles everything around the house. I call it his Pesky Protestant Work Ethic, and give thanks every day that I have not been given that cross to bear myself. Whether it's installing landscaping (complete with drip irrigation), cleaning gutters (repairing any leaks), or felling sick trees (chopping them into firewood for the winter), by 9 a.m. on a Sunday, my husband has done more than I'll even think about doing the entire week. (I never did understand that Army commercial. Is getting up before dawn to work your butt off really supposed to be a selling point?)

I don't want to give the impression that Tim is an angel. Far from it. He takes full advantage of his knowledge of, well, everything. Not only that, he turns my slothfulness against me every chance he gets. For example: I'm always too hot. Unless it's winter, then I'm too cold. Yes, part of the problem when the temperature drops outside is that I get around even less, but still, regulating my body heat is just not one of my strong suits and I don't think I should be penalized for having a disability. Tim, however, thinks I should get bundled up in the winter. He says I should walk around in a sweater - in my own house! To me, that smacks too much of getting dressed. I maintain I should be able to wear only my pajamas to keep comfortable and I'm more than willing to make the concession of switching to flannels, but Tim says just because I'm lazy down to a cellular level doesn't mean he should accommodate me.

When we first lived together, he noticed the temperature on the thermostat was always higher when he got home after work. But a real superhero doesn't argue, he swings effortlessly between buildings, flies around the earth to change the course of time,

and thwarts armed divisions without any artillery of his own. A domestic superhero simply waits his wife out until she finally has to leave the house to get her hair done. Then he installs a fancy, new, totally-incomprehensible-to-the-double-X-chromosome thermostat. It took me months to figure out where the “override” button was. By then, he had brought home a newer, even more incomprehensible gadget.

Thus began the Thermostat Wars which continue to this very day. Just when I seem to have finally bested my enemy, Tim escalates the conflict by procuring newer technology, and the skirmishes begin all over again with my small arms desperately trying to defuse the situation. Détente does not work with my husband. He simply refuses to negotiate, even when I force him to bear witness to my pathetic attempts at staying warm by snatching up an unsuspecting cat and sucking the heat out of my nonhuman shield. But even my royal title is no match for Tim’s superpowers and I fear I shall forever be consigned to a state of perpetual nonthermostasis.

I did achieve, however, a small victory after a deliciously satisfying escalation in hostilities the time we visited his father in Arkansas several years before the bus thing.

Maybe that’s where Tim gets his crazy ideas. Bob worked his entire life as a mail carrier, finally got to retire, and what does he do? Buys a small farm in a small town in Arkansas, running it by himself, so he can work harder than he ever had in his life. The first time we visited him was in July. July in Arkansas. In fairness to Bob, he did have the air-conditioning turned on. Just not nearly high enough. Tim had the gall to point out the irony of the fact that the number that would have made me positively ecstatic in winter was reducing me to abject misery in summer.

“Oh, PULEASE,” I cried. “Everyone knows that seventy-six degrees in winter is *not* equivalent to seventy-six degrees in summer.” Project Nerd was unmoved.

Fortunately for me, farm life requires that one go to bed right after dinner. So after Bob retired that first evening, I lowered his pitiful thermostat, a relic from a preindustrial past I had no difficulty whatsoever decoding after years of wartime service living with his son. Unfortunately for me, however, farm life also requires getting up much earlier than I could possibly consider, and the luxuriating in bed I so looked forward to on vacations was marred by rolling around in my own sweat by morning. Bob had been up for hours and had raised the temperature to a post-nuclear level.

How could two men who had not been particularly close be so alike? We were planning to go to Arkansas again during our bus year. I prayed spending more time with his father would not mean repairing the distance between them to the extent that Tim’s next harebrained scheme would involve the milking of large, dim-witted mammals.

By winter of 2003, I was calling all over the country. Because I worked at home sitting at my desk (with two cats vying for my lap), reviewing cases on the phone and Tim saw patients all day, it was logical that I be the one to search for a bus. Tim determined to teach me about all that mechanical stuff as best he could, and as usual, when my husband puts his mind to something, he gets the job done. No matter how impossible the task.

I simply can’t abide mechanical things. Still, Tim sat me down in his den, amidst stacks of *Bus Conversions* magazines, and the lessons began. A lesser man would certainly have thrown in the shop towel. I can’t even tell a Chevy from a Ford from a

Honda. Whenever Tim wants to point out a car on the road, he has to say something like, “The green one, with four doors.” How could I ever tell buses (which all tended to be painted the same, after all) apart?

A lot of couples are annoyed by their differences. Tim and I are fascinated by ours. For us, rooting around in each other’s psyches is like studying exotic animals in a zoo. As a result (and partly, I’m sure, because we’re both shrinks), there’s not much we let each other get away with. When nothing was sinking in during our first bus lesson, I tried to pass off my resistance as stupidity. “I just don’t have the head for this stuff,” I protested. Tim would have none of it.

“You just don’t want to be bothered learning it,” he maintained. As I whined that I really was trying, he got up, went into my office, and returned with one of *my* magazines. He riffled through the pages and settled on a picture at random.

“What’s this?” he demanded as he shoved it under my nose. I glanced down and reflexively blurted out, “Badgley Mischka. Spring runway collection.” Tim slammed the magazine shut with a self-satisfied grin and I shut my mouth during the remainder of his painstaking, excruciatingly detailed lessons.

Tim prepared me well - maybe too well, in fact. A typical conversation with a potential seller about his older bus went like this:

“Is it a 6V92 or an 8V92?” I asked with much more confidence than anyone who had no idea what either one was had a right to possess. I had a suspicion that the latter was more powerful, or maybe it just had two more parts. Or maybe they both had ninety-two parts, but the 8V referred to a volt thing. (Or maybe it was a vixen thing? Mud flaps on big rigs always seem to have saucy silhouettes.)

“It’s a D Deck,” he answered. Momentarily stumped, I suddenly recalled something Tim had mentioned which had managed to sink in.

“D Deck II or III?” I probed.

“It’s a III,” he answered.

“Hmm,” I mused, toying with my prey. “I’ve heard the III’s are less reliable.”

“Well, ah . . .” he struggled to respond, but I was off and running.

“Aluminum wheels? Rust problems? Five or six speed?” I finally threw him a bone. “Sounds interesting. I’ll have my husband give you a call. He knows a lot more about this stuff than I do.” The man paused.

“Ah, ma’am,” he hesitated, “it sure seems like you know enough.”

I finally happened upon a ’98 Prevost on a Volvo website. Even I knew that a Prevost was the Holy Grail of buses. Rock stars travel in Prevosts. So why not Princesses? When I called, the already low price posted on the Internet had been cut by a third.

By May 2003, the Prevost was finally parked at Vanture. We had spent nearly six months just finding this bus that now had to be renovated before we could leave on our trip in the summer of 2004.

I consoled myself with the one bright spot thus far to the whole bus thing.

Decorating!

It’s so easy to fool yourself when things are on a small scale. A twelve-hundred-dollar handblown glass sink for the bathroom? Well, if it were a house, we’d be buying two, so in a bus, we’re actually *saving* money! Of course we had to have granite counter tops in the kitchen, but did we have to get the most expensive granite known to mankind?

We fell in love with the Blue Bahia when we first spotted it at the warehouse; its intense, sparkling azure vein seeming to pulsate as it called out to us from amongst the more mundane slabs.

“What’s that?” we asked the saleswoman. She hesitated, then whispered its name with a mixture of reverence and fear worthy of one of my ancient forebears, daring to utter The Name of Yahweh.

“It’s the most expensive we have,” she apologized.

“How much?” Tim asked.

“Three-twenty a square foot,” came the reply.

“Oh, that’s not so . . . Wait a minute. You mean three *hundred* twenty dollars a square foot?” She nodded sheepishly.

“What do they do, mine it on Mars?” I demanded.

“Close,” she replied. “Under water.” Then she added in an even more hushed tone, “If any of the guys drop it, they’re summarily . . .” Her eyes darted about the warehouse as Tim and I waited, holding our breaths.

“. . . fired,” she finally confided, barely audible.

We were duly impressed. Even more so when, as designers are wont to do, she held up a sample of our lush cherry cabinets to the granite. It was an irresistible combination, but we were prepared to resist. Tim and I pride ourselves on being able to put up a united front on most anything. There was no way we would be daunted. Until she sealed the deal.

“Oooh!” she exclaimed. “It’s really going to pop your cherry.” With a promise like that, after nearly fourteen years together, we had to have it.

For the granite, the stainless steel tiles, and the custom appliqué ceiling, it was just too easy to reason, “Well, we’d never get it in a house. But, in a bus? How many square feet could we possibly need?” The answer, when it came to the merino wool window coverings from the Netherlands was so over the top, I couldn’t help but ask, “What do they do? Fly the sheep over first class and then shear ’em?”

Cost, it turned out, was to be only the first of many, many aspects of bus life we would underestimate.