



Breakdown recovery needed

Katie sets off on the search for her new life – but soon hits a bump in the road

WHEN IT IS ALLOWED, I start doing house viewings. The only vehicle I have is the Type 2 VW camper van that my fiancé and I planned to honeymoon in. Shiny cobalt-blue with 1970s flower-power curtains and white sheepskin seats, it is the least practical car imaginable for driving cross-country in. It refuses to do more than 50mph and has a panic attack if it sees a hill. The engine floods before I've even left Dalston. Eventually I set off, with a jump pack in the back and *I Will Survive* on the stereo, driving like Noddy through the Cotswolds with no power steering and dodgy breaks.

The van shudders into Somerset, where I've crammed in as many viewings as possible. I don't know what I want, so I am seeing everything.

At first I tell estate agents I want a 'project'. (Isn't this what people on *Location, Location, Location* say?) Then I see a project and realise I don't have a clue what to do with it.

I explore wisteria-covered cottages, with crumbling sandstone walls, that little old ladies have died in, and hideous revamped barns, owned by people who got rich in the '80s and stripped all the character from them. I explore mill houses in forests and farmhouses with flagstone floors and gardens overgrown with

rhubarb, where cockerels attack you as you try to look around.

PPE on viewings is compulsory. I snoop around in washing-up gloves and a mask asking muffled questions about damp.

Property in the country is different to the overpriced cupboards I saw when I bought my London flat. Now I see Tudor cottages with ancient wells in the garden and stone bread

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ovens in the kitchen. Some houses have covenants, stating the owner must not serve cream tea or sell pork, which suits me because I recently discovered that my dad was Jewish.

The van, meanwhile, is a nightmare on wheels. A windscreen wiper flies off on a motorway, a door handle breaks off in my hand. The battery dies and I attempt to use the jump pack for the first time – petrified of electrocuting myself. Locals stand at their windows shouting out advice.

The van breaks down so often that

once I'm rescued by the same RAC man twice in a day. In Gloucestershire, it skids into a ditch. I walk to the nearest farm to beg the farmer to rescue me, which he reluctantly does, towing me out with his Land Rover while tutting about city people blindly following satnavs.

Sometimes driving in the sun with the radio on, I feel so free I'm ecstatic. Sometimes I just feel exhausted. Friends tell me I am brave, but I do not feel brave. I feel desperate.

I have too much time to think on the road: of weekends my fiancé and I spent camping in this van, making rum hot chocolate on the gas, curled up with our dog in the bed.

I'm driving through Wiltshire listening to the radio when *You Make Loving Fun* – the song I was supposed to walk down the aisle to – comes on. Suddenly I can't see the road. I pull into a lay-by and sob. Listening to the lyrics, I realise this is a terrible song to get married to because it is obviously about having a fling.

I make it across Wiltshire with the oil light flashing before the van dies. The kind RAC man tells me it's fatal and offers to tow me home. Instead, I give him my ex's address and send the van back to him – the last piece of our shared life gone – then get a taxi home. ▀