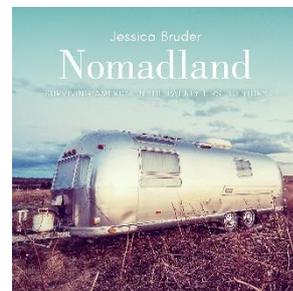


Nomadland, Surviving America in the twenty-first Century by Jessica Bruder (2020)



Foreword

As I WRITE THIS, they are scattered across the country—

In Drayton, North Dakota, a former San Francisco cab driver, sixty-seven, labors at the annual sugar beet harvest. He works from sunrise until after sunset in temperatures that dip below freezing, helping trucks that roll in from the fields disgorge multi-ton loads of beets. At night he sleeps in the van that has been his home ever since Uber squeezed him out of the taxi industry and making the rent became impossible.

In Campbellsville, Kentucky, a sixty-six-year-old ex-general contractor stows merchandise during the overnight shift at an Amazon warehouse, pushing a wheeled cart for miles along the concrete floor. It's mind-numbing work and she struggles to scan each item accurately, hoping to avoid getting fired. In the morning she returns to her tiny trailer, moored at one of several mobile home parks that contract with Amazon to put up nomadic workers like her.

In New Bern, North Carolina, a woman whose home is a teardrop-style trailer—so small it can be pulled with a motorcycle—is couch-surfing with a friend while hunting for work. Even with a master's degree, the thirty-eight-year-old Nebraska native can't find a job despite filling out hundreds of applications in the past month alone. She knows the sugar beet harvest is hiring, but traveling halfway across the country would require more cash than she has. Losing her job at a non-profit several years ago is one of the reasons she moved into the trailer in the first place. After the funding for her position ran out, she couldn't afford rent on top of paying off student loans.

In San Marcos, California, a thirty something couple in a 1975 GMC motorhome is running a roadside pumpkin stand with a children's carnival and petting zoo, which they had five days to set up from scratch on a vacant dirt lot. In a few weeks they'll switch to selling Christmas trees.

In Colorado Springs, Colorado, a seventy-two-year-old van-dweller who cracked three ribs doing a campground maintenance job is recuperating while visiting with family.

THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN ITINERANTS, drifters, hobos, restless souls. But now, in the second millennium, a new kind of wandering tribe is emerging. People who never imagined being nomads are hitting the road. They're giving up traditional houses and apartments to live in what some call "wheel estate"—vans, second hand RVs, school buses, pickup campers, travel trailers, and plain old sedans. They are driving away from the impossible choices that face what used to be the middle class. Decisions like:

Would you rather have food or dental work? Pay your mortgage or your electric bill? Make a car payment or buy medicine? Cover rent or student loans? Purchase warm clothes or gas for your commute?

For many the answer seemed radical at first.

You can't give yourself a raise, but what about cutting your biggest expense? Trading a stick-and-brick domicile for life on wheels?

Some call them "homeless." The new nomads reject that label. Equipped with both shelter and transportation, they've adopted a different word. They refer to themselves, quite simply, as "houseless."

From a distance, many of them could be mistaken for carefree retired RVers. On occasions when they treat themselves to a movie or dinner at a restaurant, they blend with the crowd. In mind-set and appearance, they are largely middle class. They wash their clothes at Laundromats and join fitness clubs to use the showers. Many took to the road after their savings were obliterated by the Great Recession. To keep their gas tanks and bellies full, they work long hours at hard, physical jobs. In a time of flat wages and rising housing costs, they have unshackled themselves from rent and mortgages as a way to get by. They are surviving America.

But for them—as for anyone—survival isn't enough. So what began as a last-ditch effort has become a battle cry for something greater. Being human means yearning for more than subsistence.

50 As much as food or shelter, we require hope.

And there is hope on the road. It's a by-product of forward momentum. A sense of opportunity, as wide as the country itself. A bone-deep conviction that something better will come. It's just ahead, in the next town, the next gig, the next chance encounter with a stranger.

55 As it happens, some of those strangers are nomads, too. When they meet— online, or at a job, or camping way off the grid—tribes begin to form. There's a common understanding, a kinship. When someone's van breaks down, they pass the hat. There's a contagious feeling: Something big is happening. The country is changing rapidly, the old structures crumbling away, and they're at the epicenter of something new. Around a shared campfire, in the middle of the night, it can feel like a glimpse of utopia.

60 As I write, it is autumn. Soon winter will come. Routine layoffs will start at the seasonal jobs. The nomads will pack up camp and return to their real home—the road— moving like blood cells through the veins of the country. They'll set out in search of friends and family, or just a place that's warm. Some will journey clear across the continent. All will count the miles, which unspool like a filmstrip of America. Fast-food joints and shopping malls. Fields dormant under frost. Auto
65 dealerships, megachurches, and all-night diners. Feature-less plains. Feedlots, dead factories, subdivisions, and big-box stores. Snow-capped peaks. The roadside reels past, through the day and into darkness, until fatigue sets in. Bleary-eyed, they find places to pull off the road and rest. In Walmart parking lots. On quiet suburban streets. At truck stops, amid the lullaby of idling engines. Then in the early morning hours—before anyone notices—they're back on the highway. Driving on,
70 they're secure in this knowledge:

The last free place in America is a parking spot.



