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Jessica Bruder

## The New Nomads: Living Full-Time on the Road

*A new kind of wandering tribe<sup>1</sup> is emerging. They're giving up traditional houses and apartments to live in what some call "wheel estate<sup>2</sup>".*

In Drayton, North Dakota, a former San Francisco cabdriver, 67, 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<sup>3</sup> multi-ton loads of beets. At night he sleeps in the van that is his home.

5 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<sup>4</sup>, the 38-year-old Nebraska native can't find a job despite filling out hundreds of applications in the past month alone. [...]

10 There have always been itinerants<sup>5</sup>, drifters, hobos, restless souls. But now, in the third 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, secondhand RVs, school buses, pickup campers, travel trailers, and plain old sedans. They are driving away from the impossible  
15 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<sup>6</sup>?*



For many, the answer seemed radical at first.

20 *You can't give yourself a raise, but what about cutting your biggest expense? Trading a stick-and-brick domicile<sup>7</sup> for life on wheels?*

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<sup>1</sup> (her) gruppering i samfundet

<sup>2</sup> *wheel estate*: (her) hus-på-hjul

<sup>3</sup> læsse af

<sup>4</sup> *master's degree*: kandidatgrad

<sup>5</sup> omrejsende

<sup>6</sup> daglige transport

<sup>7</sup> *stick-and-brick domicile*: (her) traditionel fast bolig

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.”

25 From a distance, many of them could be mistaken for carefree  
retired RVers<sup>8</sup>. On occasions when they treat themselves to a  
movie or dinner at a restaurant, they blend with the crowd. In  
mindset and appearance, they are largely middle class. They  
wash their clothes at laundromats and join fitness clubs to use  
30 the showers. Many took to the road after their savings were  
obliterated by the Great Recession<sup>9</sup>. 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<sup>10</sup> from rent and mortgages as a way to get by. They are surviving America. [...]



35 As it happens, some of those strangers are nomads, too. When they meet – online, or at a job, or  
camping way off the grid<sup>11</sup> – tribes begin to form. There’s a common understanding, a kinship. When  
someone’s van breaks down, they pass the hat<sup>12</sup>. 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  
40 glimpse of utopia.

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. [...] The roadside reels<sup>13</sup> 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  
45 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, they’re secure in this knowledge:

The last free place in America is a parking spot.

There’s no clear count of how many people live nomadically in America. Full-time travelers are a  
demographer’s<sup>14</sup> nightmare. Statistically, they blend in with the rest of the population, since the law  
50 requires them to maintain fixed – in other words, fake – addresses. [...]

Many of these people call themselves *workampers*. [...]

Workampers are plug-and-play<sup>15</sup> labor, the epitome of convenience<sup>16</sup> for employers in search of  
seasonal staffing. They appear where and when they are needed. They bring their own homes,

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<sup>8</sup> (her) folk, som bor i autocampere

<sup>9</sup> *the Great Recession*: (her) den økonomiske krise i 2008

<sup>10</sup> *unshackled themselves*: frigjort sig fra lænkerne

<sup>11</sup> *off the grid*: (her) uden for det etablerede samfundssystem

<sup>12</sup> *pass the hat*: samler ind

<sup>13</sup> (her) flyver

<sup>14</sup> befolkningsstatistikere

<sup>15</sup> *plug-and-play labor*: (her) lettilgængelig tidsbegrænset arbejdskraft

<sup>16</sup> *the epitome of convenience*: (her) den suverænt mest bekvemme løsning

transforming trailer parks into ephemeral<sup>17</sup> company towns that empty out once the jobs are gone. They aren't around long enough to unionize<sup>18</sup>. On jobs that are physically difficult, many are too tired even to socialize after their shifts. [...]

Millions of Americans are wrestling with the impossibility of a traditional middle-class existence. In homes across the country, kitchen tables are strewn with unpaid bills. Lights burn late into the night. The same calculations get performed again and again, over and over, through exhaustion and sometimes tears. Wages minus grocery receipts. Minus medical bills. Minus credit card debt. Minus utility fees<sup>19</sup>. Minus student loan and car payments. Minus the biggest expense of all: rent. [...]

These indignities underscore a larger question: *When do impossible choices start to tear people – a society – apart?*

It's already happening. The cause of the unmanageable household math that's keeping people up at night is no secret. The top 1 percent now makes 81 times what those in the bottom half do, when you compare average earnings. For American adults on the lower half of the income ladder – some 117 million of them – earnings haven't changed since the 1970s. [...]

The most widely accepted measure for calculating income inequality is a century-old formula called the Gini coefficient<sup>20</sup>. [...] What it reveals is startling. Today, the United States has the most unequal society of all developed nations. America's level of inequality is comparable to that of Russia, China, Argentina, and the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo.

And as bad as the situation is now, it's likely to get worse. That makes me wonder: *What further contortions<sup>21</sup> – or even mutations – of the social order will appear in years to come? How many people will get crushed by the system? How many will find a way to escape it?*

(2018)

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<sup>17</sup> (her) midlertidige

<sup>18</sup> blive medlemmer af en fagforening

<sup>19</sup> utility fees: faste udgifter

<sup>20</sup> Gini coefficient: model til beregning af økonomisk ulighed

<sup>21</sup> forskydninger