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NONFICTION

# In ‘Nomadland,’ the Golden Years Are the Wander Years

By Arlie Russell Hochschild

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**NOMADLAND**
**Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century**
By Jessica Bruder
Illustrated. 273 pp. W.W. Norton & Company. $26.95.

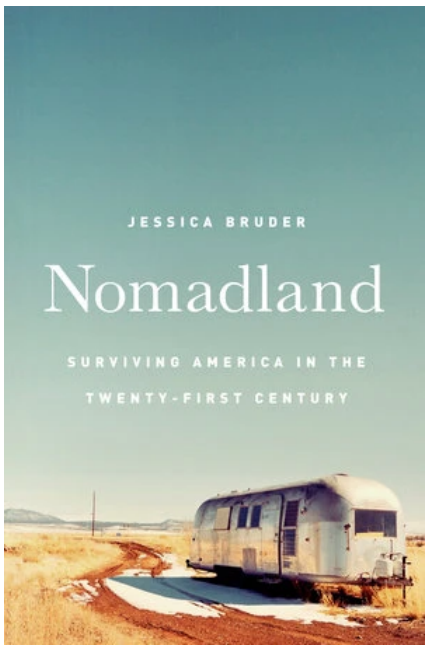
At the steering wheel of her Jeep Grand Cherokee Laredo is a silver-haired grandma named Linda May, towing her home: a secondhand, pale-yellow 10-foot-long fiberglass trailer she calls the Squeeze Inn — “there’s room, squeeze in!” — to a new job in a new place. At 65, Linda is houseless but not, she feels, homeless. She has raised two daughters, mostly on her own, and before heading off, she slept — feeling “stuck” — on the living-room couch of the rented house of her daughter and three teenage grandchildren. Formerly a long-haul trucker, a Home Depot cashier, a building inspector, an I.R.S. phone rep and a co-owner of a flooring store, Linda is heading out to a $9.35-an-hour summer job as a campground “host.” “Get paid to go camping!” the concessionaire brochure reads brightly. In the San Bernardino National Forest, she will help campers with check-in, shovel broken glass from campfire pits and mostly clean 18 toilets three times a day.

Moving “like blood cells through the veins of the country,” Jessica Bruder writes, a growing number of older people, post-recession refugees from the middle and working class, are, like Linda, crossing the land in their Jeeps, campers and repurposed buses in search of work. We meet a 67-year-old former San Francisco taxi driver who, squeezed out by Uber, unloads truckloads of sugar beets in North Dakota. We meet Chuck, a former McDonald’s vice president who lost his home on a golf course in a gated community in Myrtle Beach, S.C., and now sells beer and hamburgers at spring training for the Oakland A’s. We meet Don, a former software executive of 69 with a white goatee, who lost his savings in the 2008 crash and lost his house in a divorce. He now lives with his dog in a 1990 Airstream and works 12-hour shifts during the pre-Christmas season at an Amazon warehouse. Other nomads “pick raspberries in Vermont, apples in Washington and blueberries in Kentucky. They give tours at fish hatcheries, take tickets at Nascar races and guard the gates of Texas oil fields.” Still, it has not been easy; workers mentioned hip replacements, bad knees, a minor stroke. While many live in recreational vehicles with names like Lazy Daze, these nomads do hard work for low wages, and know how to find a free shower, cut-price dentistry and discount Viagra.

In this stunning and beautifully written book, Bruder, the author of “Burning Book: A Visual History of Burning Man,” describes her journey with Linda and her other interviews conducted in five states over three years, with more than 50 nomads in the first year alone. Bruder also worked at a beet processing

plant — “Be Part of an ‘Unbeetable’ Experience!” in the parlance of the recruitment brochure — and describes trying to catch large beets that flew off a processing machine as akin to “catching bowling balls in a pillowcase.” After a while, she gets her own van and names it Halen.

Bruder also worked at an Amazon fulfillment center, among workers in their 50s and up. “We’ve had folks in their 80s who do a phenomenal job for us,” one official for CamperForce, “a program created by the online retailer to hire itinerant workers,” said. “Some walk 15 miles on concrete floors, stooping, squatting, reaching and climbing stairs as they scan, sort and box merchandise,” Bruder notes. “Buns of steel, here we come,” an instructor tells gray-haired listeners. Amazon receives federal tax credit for hiring the “disadvantaged,” which includes those on Supplemental Security Income or food stamps. The CamperForce newsletter was upbeat: “Make new friends and reacquaint with old ones, share good food, good stories, and good times around the campfire, or around the table. In some ways, that’s worth more than money.” But nomads took the jobs for the money, toiling in warehouses where the summer heat could rise above 90 degrees and you could be asked to lift 50-pound loads. Amazon offered its workers free, over-the-counter pain-relief pills.




How are we to understand the Lindas of our nation? Is she a latter-day Okie, like one of the Joads in “The Grapes of Wrath”? Perhaps, but the Joads traveled together as a family, not alone. Or does Linda resemble migrant workers from Mexico or the Philippines? Like her, many travel alone, but they often do so with an eye to settlement or return. Unlike the black migrants from the South who, over decades, moved North and West during the Great Migration, Linda — like most of those profiled in Bruder’s book — is white; she may fear poverty, but her migration isn’t propelled by racial intimidation. Linda presumably joined black and Hispanic workers in quite a few places she worked; nearly a quarter of workers in Amazon’s more than 50 warehouses across the country are black, and 12 percent Hispanic. Other of Bruder’s nomads join guest workers from abroad picking fruit. Bruder wonders why the van-dwelling community itself, though, is “so white.” She cannot pinpoint a definitive reason among the various possibilities she raises, though she does note that “living in a vehicle seems like an especially dangerous gambit for anyone who might be a victim of racial profiling.”

From time to time, Linda meets other nomads at R.V. desert rallies. Among the largest ones is the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous near Quartzsite, Ariz., an annual winter “pop-up metropolis,” as Bruder calls it. There tens of thousands gather, some workers, some leisured, in small vans and large, parked snugly, not set apart by green lawns as they might be in a suburban tract. As in the community that blossoms around Burning Man festivals, a barber gives donation-optional haircuts. A woman offers banana-nut bread baked in her solar oven. Groups sit around bonfires to burn old bankruptcy papers and share hobo stew.

It’s hard to know how many elderly van-dwellers roam the nation. Many of Bruder’s nomads had lost their homes, jobs or both in the 2008 crash. In 2010, 1,050,500 properties were repossessed. Social Security benefits are modest, Bruder reminds us, especially for women. She also tells us that, at the time of her writing, there were only a dozen American counties and one metro area where a person working full time at minimum wage could afford a one-bedroom apartment at fair market rent.

What forces set these nomads in motion? Here I wish Bruder had given us a view from beyond the driver’s seat. For years, stockholders have taken the lion’s share of rising corporate profits, leaving a shrinking share to the middle- and working-class worker. The current administration and Congress aim to cut the nation’s safety net and to loosen regulations on banks, stirring fears of another devastating crash. The stage seems set to leave Americans on their own to travel a potentially bumpy economic road, a scene that would seem to fly in the face of the picket-fence stability and localism bandied about in conservative rhetoric. Republicans like to talk about “freedom,” but the tax reform they’re currently proposing would most likely widen the gap between rich and poor even further, reducing Linda’s freedom to stay put if she wanted to.

To Linda, the American dream has been whittled down to self-sufficiency and the open road. The tires on her Jeep are worn thin, the “check engine” gauge doesn’t work, and she suffers occasional dizzy spells. Her gumption and work ethic seem so admirable, but her van and her health seem so precarious, her hopes so vulnerable to fate.

The Lindas of America are largely invisible. When Bruder drove her own van home to Brooklyn, she began to notice vans she hadn’t noticed before — parked on a residential street, in a gas station, a store lot. As I reluctantly put down this brilliant and haunting book, I thought back to the vagabond songwriter and musician Woody Guthrie, who fled the great Oklahoma Dust Bowl of the 1930s, later riding the rails and singing, “From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters / This land was made for you and me.” Those huge, billowing clouds of topsoil that drove millions from their homes now seem safely tucked away in sepia-tinted photos of a bygone past. But without ominous clouds above to warn us of what lies ahead, the powerful force of automation and the destruction of any safety net may silently push more and more of us onto the open road.