

Backpacking Austin

By

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This book describes the author's experiences while traveling and reflect his opinion relating to those experiences. Some names, trail names, and identifying details of individuals mentioned in the book have been changed to protect their privacy. Many of the characters have been combined from a variety people to simplify the overall narrative.

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The Pulp Travel Series is to Travel Literature what Pulp Magazines were to Literary Fiction. The series is loosely based on the now long forgotten zine format. A small circulation, self published collection of writing where profit is not the primary intent of publication. Each addition to the series will focus on one part of the low budget traveling lifestyle from a personal perspective. Either a short adventure that begins by thumbing a ride to an unknown city, being dropped off at a trailhead for a long hike or riding a cheap bicycle down forgotten roads.

Although zines were mostly photocopied, this series of short travel related adventures is an evolution of that model of creation and distribution as demanded by the logistical limitations of being homeless and without an income while living on the road.

As such the Pulp Travel Series often involves the use of foul language, adult situations, imaginative use of sentence structure and has a general lack of copy editing. Please do not buy this book/zine if that is going to be a problem for your personal enjoyment.

Read the Kindle sample, it's free.

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Introduction

Imagine yourself standing on the side of the road.

Middle of nowhere Texas with all of your belongings in a trash bag slung over your shoulder.

Your hand is out, thumb extended, you need a ride.

Standing there, alone, you might begin to wonder where in life you went wrong. All I kept thinking was that this trash bag was going to make it a hell of a lot harder to hitchhike.

And I hate hitchhiking.

I had never seemed to quite get the hang of it. Eye contact, smile, nice big open friendly face. Maybe with a touch of sadness, or hope, and BOOM you'd get a ride. I had all that, and getting the ride really wasn't the part I hated. It was the ride itself, this stranger, your new best friend with whom you have to chat with until they decided to stop and let you out.

Where my life had gone wrong was that it was almost Christmas and I was broke somewhere in Texas. Which isn't a bad place to be weather wise considering I was originally from New England. Even thinking about snow and Rhode Island seemed like a million years away, but my problem was compounded by the lack of cash.

And I was more of a hobo than a bum.

The distinction is most likely lost on the majority of the population but for a man on the road it was a point of pride. The classic definition is that a hobo works and travels, whereas a bum does neither. So with a job open and ready back home I had drained the last of my checking account buying a plane ticket.

A plane flying out of Austin, Texas. A city I had always wanted to see, and also, unfortunately, no where near where I was currently standing on the side of the road.

10 days, 100 miles. Even if I had to walk I would make it.

So, 100 miles outside of Austin I levelled my thumb out over the asphalt and put on my best “broke but trustworthy” smile and hoped like hell I wouldn’t be murdered.

Or converted to anyone’s religion.

Chapter 1

I had been living in the converted barn of some woman I had found online. Upstairs, in the loft of an old unused barn that was mostly reserved for junk storage there was a small dining room table, electricity and a sliding glass door out onto the back deck. The view faced south into miles and miles of nothing Texas which allowed me to watch the sunset from the worn and weathered picnic table just outside the back door.

When I had the time I was expected to go down to the garage, another building out back, to crack and peel pecans. The closest I'd come to pecans in my entire life was those in Butter Pecan Ice Cream, but since crossing the Mississippi River they had been everywhere, laying on the streets and roads like acorns back home.

After an hour working the antique pecan cracking machine I had blisters on my fingers. I switched to peeling the cracked pecans by hand and another hour passed.

The lady who owns the farm, the lady I had just met the day before for the first time in my life is excited by how many pecans I have cracked and peeled.

"Dinner will be ready by 6pm," she tells me, "I just need you to run to the store for a few things."

No problem.

She draws me a little map since we are so far out in the country, it is 15 miles to the nearest store.

"And that's brand new," she tells me, excited to have something so close. "It just opened last week."

The drive is peaceful, her Prius is the first car that I have driven in four or five months and I notice that I never even get close to going 40 miles per hour. The store is brand new and made entirely from cedar which is the only thing you can smell outside in the parking lot. Inside you are surrounded by the smell and it feels relaxing and comfortable.

“The cedar is fantastic,” I say complimenting the owner on her new store. We make small talk while I’m picking out items on the shopping list and she happens to see the Prius parked outside.

“Don’t much like cars,” she says with the Texas drawl that makes me think she is going to spit tobacco juice on the floor.

How odd, I think. A gas station owner who doesn’t like cars. Then I notice the massive pickup outside with the fifth wheel attachment in back and realize that she prefers giant trucks. Something with power. Something that consumes lots of gasoline or diesel.

I miss both of the turns on the way back to the farm even though I’m cruising slow. I spend more time watching the cows and rolled bails of hay in the fields than I do watching for street signs.

Dinner is to be meatloaf. Just before I had arrived to take up residence in her barn she cleaned out the freezer and found a bunch of food she doesn’t remember. All of it frozen in the back and forgotten for who knows how long. The hamburger is one of them, and looking it over carefully she isn’t even sure if it is hamburger.

“If it’s no good we just wont eat it,” she tells me.

I’m not exactly the pickiest guy in the world but when it comes to leftovers three days in the fridge is pushing it for me. But I want to be the polite guest and not turn my nose up at her food, even when the first serving, the piece I cut from the outside edge, is red in the middle.

Closer inspection shows that the red is chunks of tomato. The rest is probably just the tomato juice I tell myself, just eat it and don’t look too close.

It’s the tomatoes, it’s the tomatoes, I repeat over and over in my head.

And maybe because that’s what I kept thinking over and over I wasn’t sure how we had gotten to the point in the conversation where she says, “I like to pick up roadkill when I’m driving.”

I force myself to smile and nod.

Keep chewing.

Don't look at the plate.

The next day I want to get the compost out of the way first. She doesn't normally turn the pile she had said so I just dug a hole and dump the wet, smelly vegetable refuse she has been saving for days and a peach cobbler from the back of the refrigerator that didn't rise when it had been baked.

Cover it over and stomp it down.

Next I burn all of her garbage in a barrel quite a distance from her house where there is no grass and only a pile of ashes for company. I burn paper and cardboard, mail, and what looks like tax papers. The fire takes the chill out of the morning air and I try not to notice the bones sticking out from a nearby pile of ashes.

Her husband?

I never did ask her about family. Is that impolite? Is a guest supposed to inquire or are they supposed to wait until they are told?

What exactly is the etiquette for boarding with strangers you have found on the internet?

She rounds me up as soon as I'm done and we are off to collect more pecans. The drought this year is the worst she has seen, worse than last year, which until this year was the worst, and the pecans aren't coming in like they should.

She laughs and points to a spot on the side of the road.

"I was in the bank downtown when two guys came in with guns and ski masks," she starts telling me. "You know, when the bank teller wasn't giving them the money fast enough the other one yells, just shoot the bitch. Poor girl was pregnant and terrified."

"Anyway, someone called 911 and the police set up a road block there, had enough time to have a BBQ before they finally showed up. Things are just too far apart to get away with stuff like that out here."

I smile and nod and mentally make a note not to rob banks in Texas.

By the time we get back to the farm she wants me to move some furniture. Maybe this all sounds like a lot of work just for a place to stay, a place that was supposed to be free, but she really is the sweetest old lady.

Even if she did burn her husband's body out back.

Chapter 2

You wake up in a barn somewhere in Texas and then you walk.

Homeward bound, hobo, that's how I always thought about it, the origins of the word hobo, but there is some dispute as to what it really meant. Either way I didn't really consider New England to be home anymore. Not that Texas was, or anyplace in particular for that matter.

You walk down a dirt road, off the farm and out to a gravel road. A mile later you hit asphalt, or what passes for asphalt on these back country roads, though it's more like rocks pressed into tar. A couple of hours walking, the rough road wearing your sneakers down like a belt sander, staring at cows staring back at you while they chew grass and wonder what the hell you are doing interrupting them. All the while you are hoping for pickup truck that you know isn't coming but would make your life so much easier. And then, after a while you finally get to a road with some traffic.

This is the part that I hate.

Stick out your thumb and stand there on display, the whole time thinking that one of these pickups will pull over. A big strong self assured cowboy wouldn't be worried about a little guy like me. And if they were they could ask me to get in the back. Single women, the elderly, I could understand why they didn't stop to pick me up.

Ten minutes later a white SUV is pulled over on the road a good distance away from me. She has her doors locked and the window cracked only enough so that we can hear each other.

"What's your name?" She asks, then quickly adds, "Where are you going?"

I tell her and smile, and she is nervous as hell.

"I shouldn't do this you know," she says, one finger perched above the door lock. "I mean, I'm not supposed to."

"Believe me I understand," I tell her, trying to think of a way to help her relax.

“Oh, if my kids knew what I was doing they’d kill me,” she says, unlocking the door.

“Maybe I should call someone...” she says, holding up her cell phone.

“If you’d like, I can show you my drivers license if that would help.”

“No,” she says after a moments hesitation, then puts the truck into gear. “That’ll be fine.”

From that point on she doesn’t stop talking, except to light another cigarette.

“I’m not going to Austin but you’ll be within 25 miles or so,” she explains. “A bit further down the road at least.”

60 miles, first ride? Not too bad.

Sally has been divorced since she was 29. I’m guessing she is in her 60’s right now.

“Got divorced and went to New Orleans,” she says taking another puff and cracking her window. “Didn’t know how people were, small town girl, had to catch up. Spent the next five weekends in New Orleans doing just that.”

She had gotten a divorce because her wedding anniversary was a week away from her birthday which was right before Christmas.

“He bought me one present thinking that would cover everything.”

She tells me about the lost loves of her life, the missed romantic connections that occurred so long ago and yet seem like only yesterday. She tells me about her dog, her baby, that she had to put down only last month.

“You don’t smoke do you?” She asks relighting her cigarette. “You don’t look like a smoker, that’s why I didn’t offer you one. Damn thing keeps going out cause I’m yapping so much.”

She drops me off in Elkin, TX and tells me to watch out for all the weirdo’s.

“People are just so afraid,” she says through the half open window, “everyone is so afraid that it’s hard to bring yourself to help another person.”

I walk to the other side of town thinking it will be easier to catch a ride out, thinking that there is another side of town on 290.

There isn't.

Then the thumb is out again into sporadic traffic which comes in bursts due to the stoplights and I'm afraid that no one will see me. Everyone is focused on the car in front of them or their view is blocked by the tractor trailer trucks in the slow lane. I walk two miles, half of that walking backwards, facing the traffic with my thumb out.

A stupid smile plastered to my face.

I feel like a salesman.

In between bursts of traffic I wonder why is it a thumb, where did that tradition come from?

"I can ride in back," I say quietly but forcefully into the wind every time a pickup truck drives by, trying to push the thought into the drivers head.

Only they don't hear me and never stop. The car that does pull over is an older guy, so forget what I said earlier about single women and the elderly not picking up hitchhikers. They're the only ones that do, at least on this trip.

He's an accountant and Korean War veteran born in 1935. I know that because that's the first thing he says to me after the fact that he is headed to Leander to pick up some books.

"That's a long way for books," I say, then realize that he means accounting books and hope that he didn't hear me over Creedence Clearwater Revival he has blasting from the radio.

Who'll stop the rain.

He goes on to tell me about school, elementary school to be exact, where he went and for how long before moving to another elementary school.

Oh god, it's going to be one of those kinds of rides, I think to myself. Come on 25 miles.

By the time he gets to explaining where he was in the sixth grade he suddenly says, "I just dropped out. Joined the National Guard at 14 and the Army by 17. Was discharged by the time I was 20."

OK, this is a little better.

"Married my best friend's sister, he told me not to, said it was a mistake. Well he was right about that."

From there he diverges into a convoluted personal history that included money from the mafia in the Bahamas to buy convenience stores on Key West. Something with a divorce and the ex wife of a friend being drowned in a hot tub and it being declared an accident, and I'm wondering if this is the life of an average accountant.

We get off 290 and I can see tall buildings in the distance off to the left and I realize that not once did he ask about me or why I'm hitching to Austin, though I did vaguely mention family and holidays when I got in the car.

His dog pops up from the backseat and licks my arm and he stops mid sentence and gets a sentimental look in his eye.

"Had to put my other dog down last month," he confides.

Really? That's a weird coincidence I'm thought to myself. I don't mention the previous ride or her dog because he drops me off between Lamar and Guadalupe streets in what I'm assuming is Austin. There's no where really to pull over so he just stops in the lane, blocking traffic, and wishes me luck.

50th Street.

I decide to walk in the direction of the tall buildings keeping an eye out for a place to sleep even though it's not even 2pm yet.

Chapter 3

What do I know about Austin?

Well, I know its the location of the University of Texas. And I only know that because of Charlie Whitman, former Marine who decided to go on a sniper rampage from the tower on University of Texas campus here in Austin back in 1966 if I remember right.

Killed 16 people, wounded twice as many.

Texas guntower.

That's always how I hear it in my head. And it's right there, still dominating the skyline.

Being the one thing I recognize I decide to walk in that direction. University of Texas at Austin Campus. I sit in the shade trying to relax, trying to remember where the Salvation Army was, watching all the hip and cool college kids. They're all so clean, and none of the girls make eye contact with me as I sit there with my beer cooler and my sleeping bag tied on top. At the last minute, before leaving the farm, I had found an old beer cooler, the soft sided kind that could hold a twelve pack, under the stairs. I figured that it would improve my chances of getting a ride over holding a trash bag slung over my shoulder.

Where did they set up counter snipers I wondered as I looked at the area around the base of the tower. Or did everyone just find a spot and shoot at whatever moved up there?

I kept walking down towards the public library. So many students, everywhere. Maybe I'd fit in a little better if I had a backpack. If I didn't have this sleeping bag strapped to the outside of the beer cooler. Maybe tomorrow...

Only with \$40.43 and a magic rock in my pocket I wasn't sure if a new backpack was in the cards. As it is I was handicapping myself from the get go. Use what's in your pockets or the bag. No friends, that was the rule. No social media help, which means no Facebook and no Couchsurfing.

What does that leave?

Three bagel thins with enough cream cheese for one of those, two fun sized Snicker bars, 10 oz of Bee Pollen and one very squished Little Debbie's Honey Bun.

Dismal prospects for ten days anywhere.

Maybe I could camp behind the bushes in front of the Historical Building. They're a little thin but maybe after dark...

I walk in circles on the Shoal Creek Trail from the 9th Street BMX dirt bike jumps to the skate park and back to Duncan Park and watch a homeless guy getting ready to prepare his dinner at one of the picnic tables. As early as it is the park already looks like it's filling up with local vagrants staking out their spots for the night.

I had been warned about 5th and 6th Streets, "Like NOLA during Mardi Gras," someone had said. They actually said NOLA instead of New Orleans. So, I head back out. To 12th and West, the abandoned building next to the skate shop?

Too busy.

Nothing looks good so I take a side street and it's all residential.

"Why didn't you get a map earlier?" My brain wonders.

Note to self: Locate a tourist map as soon as possible.

Then, before I realize it, I'm all the way back out at 44th Street and Guadalupe thinking about hiding out behind the shrubs and the low brick wall outside the upscale apartment building. It's on the street but maybe there is less traffic at night. Then the voice cuts into my thoughts, "Really? In the bushes? You're not very good at this are you?"

So I cut down a side street and a police car goes by and I tense up. I have no excuse to be in this area. No reason, no place to go, my sleeping bag out and obvious.

Relax, I try to tell myself, it's only 7pm. You can worry about appearing out of place later. I pass a guy muttering in a thick winter hat, guarding his shopping cart. It's so full that he has bags of stuff attached to the outside to hold even more stuff. He watches me close, standing at the edge of Central Park like he is about to duck in and go to sleep.

Meanwhile the park looks so small, I wonder if he would freak out if I slept in the same park?

Behind the Jiffy Lube on Lamar and 34th my feet are starting to burn from so much walking. I want to lay down and be done with it and standing there I consider it as a potential spot to sleep for the night. Or maybe the grassy area above where there is already cardboard laid out in the two blind spots for sleeping behind the bushes?

Instead I gave up. 8pm and I just sat there on the bench in the shadows across the street from Wheatsville Co-op because it wasn't a bus stop and the tree blocks out most of the street light.

Why didn't I bring a book?

How cold is it going to get tonight?

Why is it so hard to find someplace to sleep?

An hour later, with no questions answered I realize that the co-op had an outdoor picnic area and that it was open till 11pm. If they shut off the lights I could just sleep there in the back against the planters.

"And eat out of the bulk food bins," my brain cajoles.

I'm not even hungry and already my brain turns turns to crime for food.

Walk past the lady decked out in bright pastels and hot pink with too many bags, brushing her teeth at the bus stop. The same bus stop you passed her at over an hour ago and which she still hasn't boarded.

It turns cold just before 10pm.

By 10:30 I'm in the bathroom of the co-op putting on my long johns. My most important piece of survival equipment. Forget all that macho, apocalypse, prepper, big knife bullshit. Long Johns, hat and gloves trump a big knife anytime.

I hate the cold.

Which makes me start to wonder what I'm doing spending so much time out in it. The last couple of months it seems as if I have always been cold. If not during the day then at least at night. And here I have been progressively working my way south to avoid the cold. Did I not go far enough? Where does it not get below 50 degrees at night? And why am I flying back for another New England snow covered holiday?

If my ticket had been refundable I would have cashed it in right then.

Cash it in and run.

South.

I think about the place I passed earlier that had a sign for three day rush orders on passports. I think about Mexico. How cold is Cabo San Lucas? Or the other place with the \$300 a month hostel with free pancake breakfasts and wifi near the beach?

I could be snorkeling.

I daydream about being on the beach, in the sun. Warmth washing over my skin and the sound of the surf, rolling and crashing. I could so easily take a nap. But my eyes snap open to the sound of the overhead lights and when that happens the sensation of cold air returns. It's winter in Texas.

My backup plan for failing to find a place to sleep had been the numerous 24 hour places Austin has to offer, from fast food to coffee houses to breakfast diners. Some even with wifi. Because even if I am carrying a beer cooler and a sleeping bag I am still packing a laptop. I walked back down Guadalupe where I'd seen several 24 hour joints and popped into the first one with free soda refills and an empty dining room.

Whataburger.

No dollar menu so I spend more than I'd wanted and after paying I notice that the air conditioner is on, maybe to keep people from staying, maybe that's why the place is empty.

I pull out my laptop and get two hours of work done before the battery starts to die. There are no outlets and I had neglected to look before I paid for dinner. Plus the fact that by now the place has filled with college kids, all trying to talk louder than the table

next to them. Posing for pictures, selfies and groupies, or whatever you would call them, and texting them to people who chose to go elsewhere, or are still back in the dorms.

Back and forth they send messages and laugh.

The only people who aren't UT students, besides myself, are the two older, unkempt, drunk guys nodding off at their table. Dirty and drunk they probably have no where else to go. The manager catches them with their heads almost on the table and tells them that they have to go.

"I already called the cops," he says when they don't move fast enough. I wait for him to say something to me as the crowd turns over again and again and I'm still sitting there in the same booth.

Shivering just as much in here as I would be outside.

Something about watching the the college students after they have had a few drinks, after the bars have closed and their loud, sloppy voices in between stuffing their face with fast food makes me want to never have a drink ever again.

They are drinking for fun, something I would not do.

"If you don't drink for fun then why do you drink," my brain asks.

They're all so happy and outgoing, sloppy sure, slurring yes.

I drink for something else, not that. The truth is I don't know what that is, I don't know what it is like to have friends and be happy.

I'm a loner, out on the road.

"Let's just call my drinking self medication," I say to myself.

Watching them also made me realize how little I know about socializing. And maybe it's because they are drunk and I'm so damn sober that I despise the whole thing.

Travel is the antithesis of socializing. Maybe that's why I like it so much.

You meet a lot of people and you learn a lot of things about human behavior if you keep your eyes open. But that isn't the same as socializing.

People ask me questions if they are interested and can get out of their little box enough to build up the courage to talk to me. Unlike some homeless people I do not bite.

But even then the conversations are brief, the interaction is superficial. The thing that people do not realize is that they take away from our conversation exactly what they want to hear. Exactly what they were expecting.

It is an interesting thing to watch.

Everything they already know is correct, so I can only build on that or be a threat to it. How can you compete with a world view that believes...

...let's just say fill in the blank and leave it at that.

Belief is highly overrated.

When the Sheriff comes on duty as a detail cop for overnight security I'm thinking it's about time to leave. Then again when the pudgy off duty security guard getting burgers to go nods in my direction while chatting with the Sheriff I think it's time to go. His lips look like he said something like, "How Long," and I'm pretty sure the insecure little prick is trying to make brownie points.

And despite having no where else to go I take another sip of soda and call it a night.

I walk down the street and for a minute I consider the 24 hour Jack in the Box, good for another three hours at least, long enough to get me to sunrise. Only there is no outlet for my laptop and the manager on duty has all the customer service skills of someone who just got out of prison. They probably wouldn't kick me out I decide after noticing the homeless lady sipping a small soda and staring sadly out the window like she was just diagnosed with a terminal disease.

Or on second glance perhaps wishing she would die to be free of all this pain, the rejection of society, the unfairness of it all.

So I walk in circles, carrying the banner as it's called. Keep moving so they can't cite you for loitering. I walk and I notice a blister forming on the bottom of my right foot. I

keep walking until I'm ready to sit against a wall in a semi shadow and hope that the hanging ivy covers me enough that no one will notice me sleeping. Too many people, I think to myself looking around, and too bright. So I circle the group of buildings and notice a dark shadow in the corner behind a shed attached to the back of the building. Another quick look and it doesn't seem to be in direct line of sight to any windows and I duck into the two by three foot area and listen for anything suspicious.

That's when I realize that I have to pee really bad.

Forget it, it'll keep me awake and alert.

Chapter 4

They called it the Sioux Alarm Clock.

You drink at least a liter of water before you go to bed to insure that you'd be up early in the morning before a big hunt.

I had consumed far more than a liter of soda sitting in the burger place and now I just figured that a semi full bladder would keep me from sleeping too late and getting me caught.

I unhooked the sleeping bag from the beer cooler and checked the ground for dampness before setting it down in its compression sack as a cushion. Not much space to work with but unless someone comes in the alley behind the stores and...

Click, clunk.

... or opens the door directly in front of me!

Like a deer in headlights I waited for the door to open, to be caught in the flood of light pouring out of what I had thought was a closed storefront. Except the door doesn't open, in fact it looks like it hasn't been opened in at least a year.

Click, clack, comes the sound again from the other side of the door. Too irregular to be human. Rats. Rats in the alley behind the store where I'm going to sleep.

Great.

I try to rest in the awkward position that the shadow allows and it only manages to press my bladder more. I have to pee and I won't make it through the rest of the night. I also don't want to unnecessarily expose my position. Maybe if I pee into the gap between the shed and the wall of the building...

I hesitate for another half hour, maybe I can hold it. Then the inevitable happens, by choice or by default I was going to the bathroom. So I stand, and as far away from the shadow as I can get without being seen I pee, the most pain relieving, never ending stream of urine in my whole life.

At least I feel better, I thought as I sat back down. Only then I notice the stream rolling out of the gap between the building and the shed. Rolling out of the crack and back towards where I'm sitting. As I watch my own urine pouring back towards me it splits into two streams and there is nothing within reach to put in its way. I frantically try to push the little bit of dirt that's under me towards it in an attempt to form some sort of dam.

The closest stream stops eight inches from my sleeping bag, the other rolls over the asphalt and towards my feet taking up possible leg positions that might help me sleep better. I think about leaving, but then again, really, where else would I go

So I sit there with my hood over my head, my knees pulled tight and my head down to block out the light.

Good night.

Three and a half hour's of ass adjustments on the sleeping bag cushion, nodding off, and it starts to get light out. I can't take it anymore, I just want to stretch.

I walk some blood back into my legs and try to ignore the blister while I eat the very squished honey bun. Austin is coming to life. First the joggers and the buses, then sleepy looking people in business casual out for that "must have" cup of coffee. By that time I'm almost back downtown where the sign on the Faulkner Public Library says that they don't open until 10am on Fridays.

Now how to kill a few hours?

Is being homeless in the city always like this? Waiting for something to open so that you have somewhere to go? Or waiting for something to close so you can move in and go to sleep? Though technically free to do whatever you want you are in reality at the mercy of the surrounding population. Throw in free meals and handouts dispersed on a schedule and you have a regular routine.

6am breakfast at First United Methodist, Caritas for lunch at 11am Monday through Friday and maybe Sundays too, and you have to be at the Salvation Army by 3pm if you want that sack lunch. I'm sure it could all be varied, the occasional unexpected handout, a dumpster score, drinking or jail, but does one really want to live off of charity?

To make a profession of poverty?

I sat pondering these thoughts on a bench in front of the Texas State Capitol building, having been aware of the police officer on the bicycle watching me for sometime. She had circled wide and came up directly behind me, out of sight, and sat there, watching. She hadn't seen me taking pictures of the building, the bus stops and the exits, you know, like a tourist, and hopefully not like a terrorist. So the only thing I could think is that she must think I'm going to set up camp on the bench and fall asleep.

It takes a long time before she finally comes over and asks if I'm a student of Texas history. She watches my eyes and face for a reaction more than she listens to what I have to say. But I tell her I just got into the city and am flying home for the holidays and that seems to relax her a bit.

"I'm waiting for the public library to open so I can get online and find a place to stay," I tell her after I finish answering all of her test questions.

"They have wifi right here at the visitors center," she says pointing to the building behind me. I must not be a terrorist if she is being this helpful and Visitors Center equals brochures equals maps. The word "map" is all that goes through my head. Tourist map. I was supposed to get one of those. So I excuse myself and try not to notice how she eyes the beer cooler and sleeping bag combination, and enter the visitors center past not one, but two armed guards eyeing me suspiciously and pick up a bus and train map of the city.

\$2 to ride the bus for 24 hours? \$5 to ride the train all day? There goes \$7 of my budget exploring Austin and any towns where the train stops.

I love public transportation.

I explore Congress Street like a tourist and pour over the map making plans. Zilker Park to sleep in tonight?

By the time the library opens there is a small group of homeless people, a few of which look like they came from a shelter or halfway house, and a half dozen regular people. Housewives mostly.

The Salvation Army shelter could be an option instead of the park, though I'm not sure I want to be that kind of homeless guy. I'm not even sure if I'm supposed to be voluntarily

poor as that seems to be handicapping my options. Hasn't my life been handicapped enough? After all, how hard is it really to be homeless? I'm not mentally ill and I don't have a drug problem like most of the people out here that are generally considered "homeless". The truth is that it probably wouldn't be that hard to get a job and make a little money despite the limitations of not having a place to sleep or shower. Those are small problems that could be worked out in no time.

If it wasn't for this damn non-refundable ticket back to New England I would consider staying in Austin for a while.

Settling down, planting roots.

Besides which a homeless shelter just sounds depressing. And then there is the ethical dilemma of what if someone was turned away because I took up a much needed bed. That one haunts me a little, I'd rather it was me out on the streets than some 50 year old alcoholic diabetic with toes and fingers showing signs of necrosis.

Instead of doing anything productive like getting a job or finding a place to stay I lounge about in the library and read about hobo's and train hopping and begging from town to town and somehow it doesn't seem as glamorous as I'd made it out to be when I was younger. Had I romanticized the hobo lifestyle, put it on a pedestal as some kind of extreme experience?

There were no hobo's anymore. Not in the purest sense of the definition. Hobo's travel and work. Tramps travel but do not work, and bums neither travel or work.

Austin was filled with bums, not hobo's.

And maybe a few tramps.

The loss of respect for the hobo lifestyle that had helped to build this country, the labor that this nation depended on to bring in its grain harvests, was much less important to me that minute than the idea of crime.

Especially when the crime I was worried about was the one I was going to commit by camping illegally within city limits.

Sure, I hadn't explored enough of Austin my first night to make a final decision about where to stay and how safe it was, but having to worry about committing a crime isn't

normally something one has to think about while hiking. How could it be a crime to go to sleep?

Sure, I get the whole ordinance about sleeping or lying down on sidewalks, the general public doesn't need that kind of hassle. But sleeping anywhere else, out of sight, out of mind, being a potential crime too? That means that the very fact that I do not have money or a home makes me a criminal. An enemy of society in the eyes of the law. And by most estimates there are over 2,000 people homeless on the streets of Austin alone.

Enemies of the productive.

Impediments to consumption.

I laughed out loud at how absurd that sounded. The world isn't just some machine where the failure to consume is a punishable offense. And yet that's how the laws against the homeless sounded the more I sat there in the library doing research. And they hit home, so to speak, more so with every hour that passed, knowing that I would be out there on the streets soon enough.

I got up to leave the library and my calves hurt. It was from hiking with all the weight on one shoulder and not on my hips like the support of a good backpack. My left shoulder felt like it had been pounded by a hammer and I kind of limped my way towards Whole Foods. Sweating, the pain seemed to have increased the amount of effort required to simply walk. It's lunch time and the place is packed. I gave up looking for free samples and fought through the crowd just to get out. The place is wall-to-wall people and I don't feel like I belong.

I'm not one of them.

Goodwill is only another couple of miles outside of town and the purchase of a backpack and book set me back almost \$10. The Jansport 30 liter pack is powder blue, has a broken compression strap, reflective detailing and no waist strap. But it was the only one they had that could fit my sleeping bag inside, which goes a long way towards making me look normal.

My feet and legs ache so much as I walk to the bus stop, only the driver waves me off when I try to pay. Sporadic thundershowers expected tomorrow the weather online had said. Looking out the bus window at the gathering clouds, and maybe it was because I felt like I couldn't walk around, didn't want to have to look for a place to hide and spend

the night. A place to break the law. I was on the phone with the Austin Youth Hostel reserving a bunk for the next three nights before I knew what I was doing.

I wasn't homeless or out of options, so why pretend to be?

Chapter 5

I could hear the rain outside when I woke up in the bottom bunk.

Thankfully I'm not out in that I vaguely thought and rolled over and went back to sleep until the thought of free pancakes motivated me to get out of bed and into the common area. That's when I realized that it wasn't rain that I had heard but the sound of the fan on the air conditioning unit outside the window. While I slept the weather forecast had changed, no rain, 80 degrees during the day.

Unlike some hostels the Austin HI requires you to make your own free pancakes. I'm mad at myself for spending the money on the hostel but I figure I should try and pack in as many free calories now while I can. Between bites of maple syrup soaked pancakes I scold myself, "Why don't you just put on a dress princess?"

"I don't have anything to prove to you," I tell the voice and it quickly disappears.

My inner voice.

Socrates had his own inner voice, a daemon or daimonion, meaning a "divine something". Not to be confused with our more modern, and probably highly inaccurate, ideas about demons. Unlike Socrates whose inner voice only warned him against things which weren't in his best interest mine had always been a condescending voice that constantly accused me of being weak. Socrates had gone on to consistently listen to and trust his Daemon, or internal oracle as he called it. I mostly found mine to be annoying.

Then again there was Heraclitus who said that, "Character is for man his daimon."

So maybe the inner voice was that of my character and I had simply been refusing to listen.

Either way it was too much to think about.

I grabbed an all day pass for the bus and planned on exploring the city. Riding around all day with the route map in my pocket, my bulky sleeping bag and rain jacket stashed

back at the hostel. Instead I decided to get off the bus just before the Congress Street Bridge and hop another bus out to Zilker Park. Maybe scout out a location to camp.

But waiting for the second bus I felt like I was going to die. My head started pounding and all of a sudden I was sick to my stomach. That's when I realized that the road here had been recently paved. And the new tar or asphalt had that battleship smell.

Hot metal and hydrocarbons.

The hot and raw smell of civilization always made me sick.

I walked to try and get away from the fumes and thankfully the bus finally appeared. I wasn't sure where Zilker Park started or ended and I didn't want to ask the driver and risk looking like a tourist. That draws too much attention. Only there is no sign for the park and by the time I pull the stop cord I'm sure that I have passed most of the park.

The bus drops me off outside the Botanical Gardens, which everyone raves about but which also costs money to get in. I walk in anyway and no one stops me when I walk past the front guard shack. The girl inside is busy reading and is listening for cars. Not people on foot.

I take a leisurely lunch in the Japanese Garden overlooking the city from a small stone building and finally start to feel like the tension of having to find a place to stay is washing away. Sure, soon enough I'll be out on the streets but for now I just wanted to enjoy the moment.

Exploring the rest of the garden I noticed that there was a sign by the bathrooms. No food in the park, please keep food in your vehicle, it read. I laughed at my lunch and how all the people, all the tourists had looked at me eating. I thought it had been a perfect place for a picnic. Reading the sign again I realized that at least I did keep my food in my vehicle.

I was my own vehicle.

From there it was out of the Botanical Garden and across to Barton Spring Pool where I sat on the edge and soaked my feet and relax. The pool is free during the winter months even though the temperature stays the same year round. Really it didn't matter what time of year it was, I felt like I had all the time in the world.

The park itself seemed promising as a stealth camping location. After all, three nights at the hostel isn't forever, and at \$28 a night I wouldn't be able to stay there any longer than what I had already paid for.

Even that had broke the bank.

Then there was the sculpture garden which costs money so I skipped that and located a few decent stealth spots across the street. Only there is a homeless guy in the woods just down the hill quietly drinking who waves to me and a group of traveling kids that look like they are setting up camp behind the baseball field fence which is draped in cloth blocking them from view. Actually a really good spot to set up camp.

Austin, like New Orleans, seems to be a big spot for traveling kids and their dogs.

Oogles and their doogles, I don't really know the slang.

Is it because of easy freight train hopping or is it just because it's winter and most of them have headed south?

Some of the more perfect stealth camping spots already have cardboard stashed there for sleeping pads, a few spots even have milk crates for chairs and one spot even had a futon mattress and a small well made billy club.

Is it abandoned or is someone going to return after dark?

I hop the bus back across the bridge to 6th street, which is tame at 4pm but everyone has told me that it's like Mardi Gras at night. Walk back towards the library because it is familiar and charge my cell phone and get online. There is an urgent email from home, your bank account is empty. Some pending transactions had gone through and wiped everything out. Available balance: \$20

Frustrating, but totally expected. Now with no other choice I'll have to hobo it.

I post about my woes online and within a half an hour I have three offers of places to stay in or near Austin. One of which is almost all the way back in east Texas where I started hitching from.

Being homeless isn't hard when you have a social network to fall back on. Then again I didn't want anyone's charity.

I spend half the available balance on vodka and go to watch the bats at the Congress St. bridge. I stayed on top of the bridge and waited for sunset. Turns out bats migrate for the winter. The clouds of bats I had been hoping for didn't happen.

I walk down the bridge and spend the remainder of my balance on a huge burrito and sit on their patio drinking.

It's not so bad, I think. Being broke. I'm in Austin fucking Texas for christ's sake. I'm fed and I've got a bed.

For two more nights that is.

After that who knows.

Chapter 6

I slept past the time to get free pancakes, not like I wanted anything to eat anyway, I felt like shit. I don't want to drink ever again.

Put my shoes on and walk out of the hostel because, well because I'm supposed to go out and explore right? Only I don't feel like doing that either. \$6 and some change in my pocket, nothing left in my bank account, I walk to the closest store for a half gallon of milk and sit on a bus stop bench and stare off into space.

Man I hate drinking. Why does it always seem like such a good idea?

Buses pull over and stop for me but I ignore them. I'm not going anywhere today. Reluctantly I drag my ass back to the hostel where I trade the bus stop bench for the couch and sit and stare at my laptop. Do I go back to bed or do I find the energy to go up to the TV room?

Big decisions.

Scrounge up some free hot chocolate packets in the kitchen and use the filtered hot water dispenser down the hall to sit in front of the TV sipping hot chocolate. Then I remembered why I hate TV and shut it off and just drink the cocoa in silence.

"You should be doing something," I keep thinking to myself, but movement doesn't happen.

"At least eat something," my brain says, "maybe that'll make you feel better."

So in the community kitchen I fry up the rest of last night's unfinished burrito and I start to feel a little better. Maybe a walk, then I realize that the sun has already set. I've spent the whole day here at the hostel doing nothing.

I walk down to Lady Bird Lake, to the water's edge, and admire the city's nighttime skyline. And then I casually explore the park next to the hostel. It's under construction and some of the fencing has that same black cloth across it that blocked those travelling kids from view in Zilker Park. Maybe it's to block out the view from the street or maybe to prevent dust and dirt from spreading out into traffic. Hmm... either way I could

cowboy camp right here on the lawn and not be seen. It's relatively safe and it isn't crowded with homeless people like the trails around Zilker Park. Plus the hostel is right there if I have any problems. Slowly I start to feel better about my situation and think maybe I should just go get a pizza and call it a night. Until it hits me again as if I'm just now realizing it for the first time.

You have no money.

Oh well.

Back to the hostel where I look at the park from Google maps and notice a covered pavilion further down the trail on the other side of the hostel. In fact it looks like there are a bunch of places to stay right here in this area according to satellite view. Not the best part of the city but as long as I'm not sleeping up near the main road I should be fine.

After all, tonight is the last night I'll be in the hostel as a paying customer.

Chapter 7

65 cents and three bagel thins.

“Be careful what you wish for,” I thought to myself. It looks like I was getting my no-budget adventure whether I wanted it or not.

Sucker.

Up early enough for the free pancakes until I realized that this could be my last chance to cook and eat the box of macaroni and cheese I picked up yesterday for dinner and never ate. Too bad too because I could have used that money for a bus pass and saved myself 9+ miles of walking. As it is my calves are feeling better for the first time in days. It no longer hurts to stand up from a sitting position, which is pretty nice.

I stash my sleeping bag and rain jacket in the hostel closet where I'll have to pick it up by 10pm or be charged a \$5 storage fee and walk out to the gazebo's at the edge of Lady Bird Lake that I saw on the satellite pictures. Further down the Ladybird Trail behind the hostel. One has a low wall that blocks the wind and I figure I'll be back here by nightfall.

The clear sky looks warm and comforting but the wind is cold and the shorts don't feel like enough. On the way back out to the road I notice a guy living in the storm tunnels next to the hostel and swing wide so he doesn't see me. Down there he'd be out of the wind, no reason for him to be up near the gazebos after dark I try to tell myself.

Instead of hiking out to my planned destination I follow the pedestrian bridge across I-35 and reconnect with the Ladybird trail on the other side. I sit on a bench in the sun at the waters edge and try to warm up. I receive a text message with an offer of money to get me through the next week or so, no strings attached.

A friend of a friend offered.

Thanks, but I'm having too much fun, I lie. The cell phones battery dies after I send out the text and I sit there quietly in the sun. It's a long time before I start walking again. Under the Congress St. bridge where I stop and listen to the sounds of the bats that have refused to migrate hanging above me in the crevices of the bridge.

I keep walking and cross Lamar St. and head up to REI. Gear I can't afford, some would say I'm just teasing myself but I wanted to see if they had my dream backpack. To try it on and feel it on my back as if it was already mine.

They didn't have the exact one so I tried on the next size up. 36 liters. Nice but the hip straps are a little too big. I try the Osprey kestrel 48. Way too much storage space but the compression straps could keep it manageable with smaller loads. I wander over to the 65 and 70 liter backpacks and shake my head. Who in their right mind would carry that? Around-The-World hostel people, that's who. I laugh at the idea because for most of them even a 65 liter backpack isn't enough, often they have a rolling suitcase as well.

Just give me a 34 liter pack with a couple of patches on the side and I could go anywhere.

I will go anywhere.

I hold onto the thought, visualizing the future experience and feel it as if it is real.

The backpack, the road.

The west.

And a steady income to pay for it.

65 cents in my pocket and I can't even get a taco from the van around the corner.

I walk to the library to charge my phone and read, passing a small group of women coming out of a trendy bistro. Each hugs and kisses the next on the cheek, crushing a multitude of shopping bags they each hold between them. Layered like delicate origami with crisp sharp edges. Each only just barely touching the other, trying not to disturb each others make up or perfectly formed hair.

The library is quiet and warm and I quickly lose myself in a book. I'm more than halfway through by the time I notice the setting sun. I daydream about more adventures staring out the window at the sunset and have to kick myself to get going.

Outside it is much too cold and I turn right back around and head towards the bathroom. I laugh when I see the kid in front of me heading the same direction with long johns in his hand.

“That’s exactly what I was doing,” I say, “too cold out there not to be wearing long johns.”

His name is Henry, he is homeless and been traveling for more than a year.

“I don’t understand it,” he says through the stall door, “it was so warm last night.”

“Supposed to drop into the low 30’s tonight and tomorrow night,” I tell him thinking about how I couldn’t have picked a worse night to start sleeping outside.

“Cold front?” He asks over the bathroom stall partition as I pull my shorts over my long johns. Oh to have pants tonight.

“I don’t know, but it’ll be back up to the 50’s by Wednesday,” I tell him wondering what kind of hobo doesn’t keep track of the weather. “Have you had any trouble camping in Austin?” I ask hoping for some tips on places to go.

His answer is vague, like he is uncomfortable talking about it, so I tell him to skip it.

“Where’s a decent place to camp,” I ask him directly.

“Last time I was in town it was dog shit park,” he says, “off 29th and Guadalupe. That’s probably not the real name of the park but the cops wont bother you there.”

Last time?

“How long have you been in town?” I ask.

“Three days, we just have to get \$70 more dollars and we’re heading back to Connecticut for Christmas. First time I’ve been back there in years.”

“Me too. But I’m flying. The ticket is already paid for, I just have to wait it out until departure day.”

“Wish it was that easy,” he says as we walk out the front door of the library. “But they don’t make it any easier,” he says motioning to his girlfriend and their two dogs.

Always with the dogs.

We part ways wishing each other luck on our adventures. I pull the sweatshirt a little tighter and walk back towards Congress St. on an empty stomach. It’s only another couple of miles to the hostel but the walk will keep me warm.

I add a mile onto the trip exploring a little and still get to the hostel early. They’d hold my bag until 10pm but the front door locks at 9pm. The more time I wait the less time I have to be out in this weather stealth camping.

The girl at the front desk unlocks the storage room and I ask her if it’d be okay if I wait inside for a little while.

She hesitates but reluctantly says, “Ah, sure.” Not too committed to the idea.

I didn’t tell her I was waiting for a ride and she doesn’t give me a chance to beg for a bed and plead my hard luck story.

It’s cold out, the place is half empty!

Please!

Instead I sit at a table in the common area and repack the sleeping bag in my backpack and get the soda I left in the refrigerator and eat a sleeve of saltine crackers someone had left behind and hope the carbs will keep me warm.

I always forget, is it carbs or protein that keeps you warm?

Or is it fats?

By 9pm I’m out on the peninsula near the open structure of the gazebo. There are no lights out here and I’m hoping that plus the cold weather will keep people away. Bums and early morning joggers.

I shine my headlamp briefly around the structure and into the shadows to be sure someone isn’t already camping there out of sight.

All clear.

That leaves just the rest of the trail going out towards the end. It is already dark down that way and the cloud cover doesn't help. With the headlamp off so as not to give away my arrival should anyone be out there I start walking. Slowly.

"You don't really have to know what's down there, do you?" The voice in my head asks.

I'll sleep better knowing that no one can come from that direction.

No sooner do I start down the trail than I see them. Two people standing in the trail. Do they see me? I stop in my tracks and watch as they move slightly back and forth but always abreast of each other on the trail. Are they walking this way?

I watch them closely, still in the shadows, and I blink hard trying to clear my eyes from tears formed by the cold night air. Are they moving or are they in the same position they were in when I first saw them?

Only one way to find out.

I cautiously move towards them standing there in the dark. Closer and closer until I realize that the people are two of the supports of the gazebo at the end of the peninsula. The movement of car lights on the surface of Lady Bird Lake combined with the wind in the reeds and trees gave the false perception of movement.

Relieved I still cautiously scan the area and flash the darker shadows with my headlamp in a quick on and off rapid fire inspection. No sense in letting the beam be spotted from the road.

A flash they could turn and forget and be unable to pinpoint exactly where it came from.

I walk back to the first shelter in the dark and listen to the night. The city of Austin lit up across the lake. I unpack my hat and gloves, then the rain jacket and after 15 minutes of sitting there, wearing every piece of clothing I own, my legs are cold. The wind cuts right through my tight long johns. It's not even 10pm yet and I unpack my sleeping bag to wrap my legs while I sit there on the bench.

Sleeping on a park bench?

That's kind of funny.

My working theory was that the later it got the less likely anyone would come by. Certainly 99% of regular people wouldn't venture out this way at this time of night. That left homeless people that slept here regularly, though it was kind of cold for that, and drunks that might show up after the bars closed for whatever reason.

At least I'd hear them coming a mile away.

I watched the trail coming in, nodding off, because that's where the wind was blocked. Moved to the grass and a view of the city skyline, blocked from view of the trail by the low wall of the structure if I happened to fall asleep, I'd be invisible to anyone approaching and hopefully wake up before they were close enough to see me. Which would have to be pretty damn close.

I pulled the sleeping bag up around my shoulders and used my backpack as a pillow, wrapping the strap around my arm so that even if someone snuck up on me and tried to run off with my pack they weren't going very far.

Paranoid to the end.

Cowboy camping in Texas.

Chapter 8

I wake up before sunrise and can still feel my toes.

It's going to be a good day.

I had slept remarkably well except for that one moment when the temperature dropped so fast it was like a cold slap in the face that instantly brought me out of a dream and back to the bank of Lady Bird Lake. Just before 4am. Coldest time of the night, you could almost set your watch by it.

It was bright out, though the sun hadn't broken over the horizon yet, and I hadn't heard any joggers. I rolled over and went back to sleep.

When I did start walking to try and warm up it was with a limp. The night before I had double checked my ATM balance and the account wasn't completely empty yet. Close but not yet. A day off of walking to ride the MetroRail was exactly what I needed. I bought a soda figuring lunch would be soda and crackers and paid with a \$5 bill. The cashier counts back \$18 in change. I know I could use it, and I did ask for extra money last (the rock) but it's not mine. Like a sucker I tell the guy I gave him \$5 and not a \$20 and hand back the \$15 extra he had handed me.

"Merry Christmas," a customer coming up behind me says. Like that's my seasons good deed. It's amazing how often that happens to me. Extra cash back, order food and not be charged and every time I correct the person and pay instead of just accepting it and walking away.

The MetroRail pulls up just after I arrive, long before its scheduled to depart but the fact that it is heated puts a smile on my face. Train rides all day, I'm like a kid at an amusement park. Happy to just stare out the window and ride.

Downtown to Kramer. Walk around but skip the premium outlets wondering why everywhere has to be a destination to shop. Kramer to downtown then out to Lakeline and back inbound to Highland for the mall.

People going to work, students moving bikes and backpacks from the ACC East View Campus to the ACC Northridge Campus at Kramer. Everyone on the train all alone and quiet in their seats.

Whats the point? What good does it do? Riding back and forth, staring out the window?

Pickle research campus? How much research is still needed in the pickle area?

Maybe not as happy as the little kid with his dad who gets to jump up and down while the train is accelerating.

I ride out to Kramer because it is the last stop for this train. The #466 bus sits there waiting to take people to the Domain, upscale shopping boutique, I think I'll skip that. Limp around to see what Kramer has to offer but there isn't much.

Hop in the next train back towards downtown, southbound they call it, and spot a small camouflaged hobo camp just outside of the highland stop. A couple of tents covered in worn brown tarps in the high grass backed on one side by a wooded lot and a barb wire fence on the other. A forgotten piece of property reclaimed.

I wait on the train at the Downtown Station and ride it northbound to Lakeline, past the Austin White Lime Company, the whole time trying not to pee. There is no bathroom at Lakeline, not a public one anyway, and public urination has never really been my thing. Still, it is twenty minutes until the train pulls away and as much as I wanted to strip off the long johns I knew I had to find a place to go to the bathroom.

Across the parking lot and into the field, over some cacti and behind some trees. I think about Jeffery Dahmer getting arrested for exposing himself. He argued that he was just peeing and those kids walked up on him. Probably not, I think, poor sad cannibalistic bastard.

Then southbound again, between Lakeline and Howard it looks as if there are tons of spots in which to stealth camp. Just throw down your sleeping bag and call it a night.

I get off at Highland because I wanted a better look at the hobo jungle and I wanted to take a break from the train. Highland Mall, Austin's first indoor mall was across the road and appeared to be abandoned. The two big anchor stores that I could see were both empty and boarded up. I followed the small cluster of cars to an open door and was treated to tinny, upbeat Christmas music bouncing off hard floors and papered over

windows of stores long closed. The few retailers still working from deserted stores and carts all stared into cell phones and books, hardly looking up. There were no customers visible.

Had I missed the apocalypse?

I imagined these retailers still here after a nuclear holocaust. In the empty mall, wondering why no one responded to the Words with Friends request.

The food court had one pair of customers who were undecided as to where to eat. At every stand the retailers look up from DVD players and computer screens only to go right back after the potential customers pass their small piece of real estate.

How can this be profitable? Is consumerism really dead?

I limp to the nearest bathroom and strip off the long johns, ready for a break. The knee is getting worse. I want to sit here and eat my crackers and drink the soda I brought but it seems like a slap in the face to the retailers who had bought into the franchise of a good company in a dying mall. Even retailers have to eat.

So I limp slowly back out to catch the next train. I sit there and read like I am going somewhere, like I'm a commuter. Except I'm not going anywhere. The end of the line.

Sit in the sun and read and catch the next train going in the other direction and do it all over again. Always looking out the window for a place to sleep. Here? There? Is there a difference?

The guy across the aisle from me sips vodka from an old Gatorade bottle hidden in a cooler bag like the one I came into town with. If I grew a beard is that what I'd look like?

Just before 4 pm I notice a new tent set up near the Highland stop and think maybe it's time for another break. I get off downtown and immediately regret it. Bending my left leg in the slightest is excruciating. I limp down 6th street chuckling to myself. Way to make yourself look even more homeless.

Maybe I spent too much time on the train looking out the windows.

Put the long johns back on at the library already and think about checking the weather. If I go online I know that I will check to see if anyone else has offered assistance, and I don't want to see that, or worse, see that no one else has offered.

Charity as a type of poison that allows the weaker elements of society to flourish?

"You don't got a cigarette?" the guy outside the library asks.

He is correct, I don't have a cigarette, and yet I have to tell him, "No,"

This is what the real homeless look like.

Forget the guys laying in the sun and reading all day and hitching rides or hopping freight's. Having adventures. Being homeless is this. An uneducated mess of a person who might not be able to reintegrate into society, or at the very least serve some sort of useful function for a community greater than themselves.

They stay in one place and leech off of charity. The honest homeless, the ones here through the chances of fate as they see it, still have hope that they can pull it together, get it all back. But...

Maybe I'm wrong. Let's find out.

I limp back to the MetroRail. Two more trains northbound, no more southbound back into the city for the night. Do or die. One way, no regrets. I get on the second train to last train out. It is packed with people heading home from work. Young professionals, sales people mostly guessing from the personal and company gossip. Sales figures, commissions, ethics violations, drinking and inter office sex.

"Getting a roommate was the best thing I ever did," she says, "being in sales and going home to an empty house you just start to wallow in it you know."

The others agree.

"Stephanie should get a roommate, she's starting to go off the deep end."

"I know, did you see her screen? It was half charge-backs."

And on and on they drone. Going home to go to bed to get up and commute right back into work. I'm no longer riding the train as much as I am being processed to my destination.

I pretend to use my cell phone in the cold, outside the train station as people crowd towards their cars and connector buses. The MetroRail pulls out towards the last station on the line, the one I never had a chance to see, and I limp quietly down to the end of the parking lot and keep going into the knee high grass, past the edge of the parking lots illumination, past pad cacti to the trees spotted earlier next to the train tracks.

A small deer pops up and makes a run for it. Probably a good sign, if the deer safely sleep here then I should be good as well. Under the tree is thorny and prickly but I find a spot to listen and wait.

One more outbound train, a couple of buses that maybe could drop someone off that could be expecting to sleep here. Too thorny so probably not. I eye the deer bed closer to the light, away from the railroad tracks in the matted down grass. Much more comfortable, I think, considering it as an option. But the tree feels safe.

My knees get cold fast and I unpack the sleeping bag, lay my backpack face down to cover the reflective detailing and snuggle in for the night with one of it's straps looped around my thumb. Empty stomach from having only had the crackers to eat but it is too cold to eat any more as I settle in for the night.

The last train drops people off, buses come and go exiting the last loop through the Lakeline station maybe fifty feet from where I am sleeping. Their headlights sweep too high, blocked by the grass and low bushes. Tucked into the shadows I may as well be invisible.

I drift in and out, back and forth over the edge of a cold sleep. The horn of a freight train snaps me awake and clambers past, loud and ground shaking. I'm almost back asleep before the cars finish rolling by.

Chapter 9

You wake up because you hear car doors slam and the hiss of air brakes as city buses roll past.

Roll over and try to go back to sleep despite it being light out.

The morning northbound train rolls in and I don't even care if the conductor saw me or not. They had to have seen all those tents around Highland, what's a guy in a sleeping bag?

The morning is the kind of cold that makes you want to stay in your sleeping bag. Instead you pack it up, long before sunrise, jam it in your backpack and limp towards the train station. Ten minutes before the next southbound train is due to arrive. Some of the same faces from the night before crowd the platform. A couple of them even show signs of recognition when they look down at my long johns and shorts combo.

I read my worn paperback book the whole ride, happy again that the trains are heated, kind of dissapointed that the entire time I had spent on the trains not a single person had been asked for their ticket.

I limp towards the library, meeting people's eyes with a smile and saying good morning. The short security guard with thick glasses looks away in disgust and shakes his head, refusing to otherwise acknowledge me. Construction workers look down and away. Is it the limp? The shorts? The huge backpack or the hood and hat combo? I laugh because it is all funny. I'm not human anymore, just homeless.

If they knew how much my stomach was grumbling would they care?

Tragedy of tragedies the library doesn't open for a few more hours. So I keep limping, keeping the blood flow going, down to Whole Foods for wifi and a plastic butter knife to spread the last of my cream cheese on at least two of those bagel thins I had been hoarding. Filtered water in small 5 oz paper cups and a table with wifi in a heated, relaxed atmosphere? I'll take it.

The people laughing at the next table about having to scrape frost off of their windshields using a CD because they didn't have ice scrapers. Meanwhile I'm trying to

get the feeling back into my toes and nose. While they eat their big paid for breakfast and I eat week old bagels with the last of my cream cheese. Not really knowing where my next meal would come from.

My plan had been Barton Creek Wilderness Park for another potential place to stay, but with the limp so bad I decided to pass on that option. Everyone's eyes vote for a new pair of pants. How to do that?

Sally's, Salvation Army, for a free lunch and a request for pants?

"The nights have been cold in just shorts ma'am."

Or out to Goodwill and hope for something?

Paper money. The last two dollars go into the bus for another all day pass. Goodwill has one pair of jeans in my size and that I might wear in the real world. I marvel at the Asic's and.... and other brand name trail running and hiking sneakers on the shelf for just \$5.99. If I'd only had that selection back home. The jeans are enough, maybe too much, and I keep my fingers crossed after I hand over my credit card. Silly superstition, if it goes it goes. And it does. A new pair of second hand Levi jeans and I'm singing a new tune. Literally singing, "I've got my love to keep me warm."

No more looks from the regular people, and they try to keep the looks at my limp discrete. Maybe I'm just handicapped, there is no way for them to guess that I'm homeless anymore.

I bus back to Lamar and Whole Foods again but find myself wandering over to REI, trying on backpacks again.

The Kestrel has more loops and collapses pretty nice. I could go with the 38 liter... but for 4 more ounces I could just get the 48 liter and be prepared for any trek, anywhere and never have to skimp like I would with the 34 liter Stratos. I'm trying to think about the future. About forever.

I still have no plans when I walk out and wander over to Duncan Park. I should be in the library finishing that book before I leave. Only it is so nice out I take my shoes off for the first time in days and sit in the sun and read the book in my pack. How long ago was it that I was here? My first night, when was that? Seven days ago? Already?

Watching the homeless move into the park, staking their claim to spaces well before dark, I wondered if I should be looking for a place to sleep. Instead I read until the shadow of a building blocks out the sun and the heat. Without the sunlight a chill runs through my body. Socks and shoes back on I trudge up to the library. Third floor, usual seat against the window, the setting sun making it so warm that I consider taking off my long johns, even if it is only while I sit here reading.

Isn't there something that I should be doing?

I plug in my cell phone to charge.

No, something more. Shouldn't I be working on something, being more productive?

I read until after the sun sets. There is no rush. On the way out of the library there is a new sign for a cold weather shelter for the homeless.

Below freezing tonight, the sign warns. Let someone else have it that needs it I think to myself. I walk out the front door without having a destination in mind. Or a care for that matter. Actually I am damn happy. Maybe it's the optimism but my knee feels better. I only limp when the pain starts shooting up my leg. No matter how sharp or how long it lasts the pain can't touch my smile.

Man I feel great.

I walk up towards 29th thinking about looking for that park that Henry mentioned and am drawn by the Taco Cabana sign. Tacos sound great but the money? All you can drink soda I see walking up to the window, salsa bar. I'm at the register handing over my debit card before I know what I'm doing.

Amazingly it goes through. How much money is still left on this thing?

Two tacos and a bowl of rice. The salsa verde is the only thing with any hint of spice so I pile it on, along with jalapenos and pico de gallo from the salsa bar. That alone doubles the size of my meal. Soda refill after soda refill. It all feels so good, like I am doing everything exactly right. There is no tension or worry, no useless thoughts or noise. Everything just flows from one moment to the next.

I walk through the capitol building past the Christmas tree and music, down light covered, tree lined Congress St. to the bus stop where my still valid pass takes me back towards the hostel and my gazebo for the night.

I go out to the end of the peninsula and a fly fishing kayaker floats by in the dark. I walk back inland and his boat rocks back and forth, startled by my presence.

Unroll the sleeping bag and stretch out on the wooden bench watching the occasional shooting star and fall asleep.

Voices wake me up at 1 am, a couple out for a walk. They continue past me, wrapped in each others arms, unsure if they even spotted me as they walk out towards the end. Half an hour later they walk back, still chatting. Maybe I should have moved, the moon is so bright that I feel like I am on display. They chat and laugh and walk by and I wonder if they'll tell anyone. I wonder if they saw me.

It doesn't matter.

Chapter 10

The rowing club cruises across Lady Bird Lake barking orders from a megaphone.

“Stroke! Stroke!”

It feels like a routine. Next will be the guys doing construction and the increase in auto traffic.

Like I’ve been here before.

As if all of this is just a reenactment.

I go back to sleep for another forty-five minutes and am packed to watch the sunrise.

“That was the last night below freezing,” I think to myself, “it’ll just get easier after this.”

The difference lingers.

But the more I’m awake and focused on what needs to be done the less I hear the other side.

Or the inner voice.

I hop the first bus that passes me with only minutes to spare on my bus pass. Thinking I knew where it was going, only I was wrong. I ride it to the end. Texas University and I end up in the Student Activity Center, Texas Wranglers Fireside Lounge, and do some work on my laptop for a couple of hours. There is free filtered water, clean bathrooms, an unattended salsa bar and maybe with time I’d figure out how to get on the wifi. Are there showers here somewhere? Lockers that maybe I could use to stash my pack during the day instead of carrying it around? Cable TV in a student lounge? Why haven’t I explored the University library?

Why had I neglected this resource?

I walk out into the sun and finish reading my book below Washington's statue on the South Mall by the water fountain. That's one less pound I'll have to carry, though I still managed to pick up two other free books along the way and added them to my pack.

Down to the public library to do some research, because nothing is more important than learning something new.

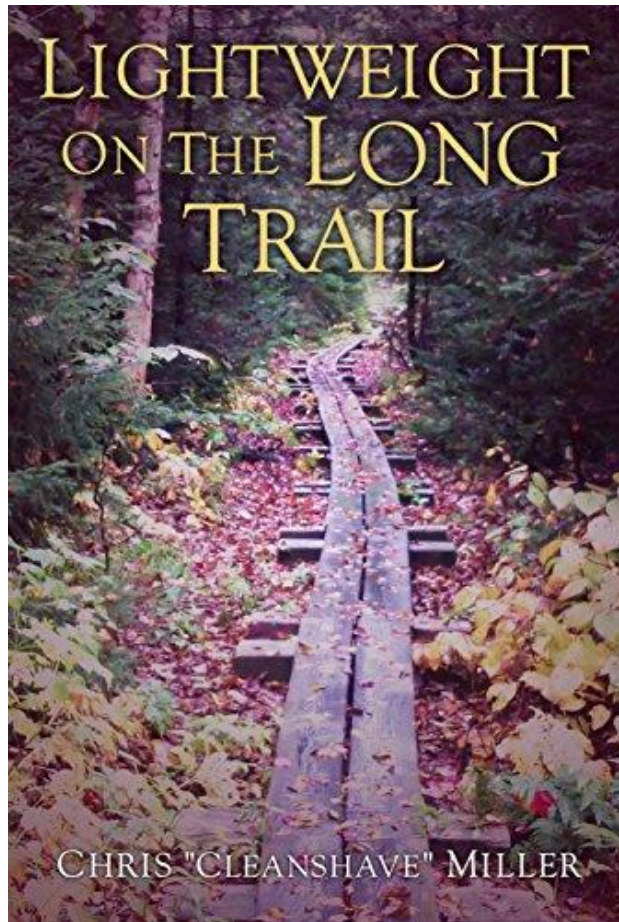
Only I'm distracted by the messages from social media. Friends of friends have offered a place to stay.

I ignore it, looking out the window for a long time, wondering if sleeping indoors is the thing to do.

There's no feeling one way or the other.

Just having a place to stash my stuff would be a bonus though, and if these people were willing to shelter a stranger, even for a night or two, they were probably worth meeting.

Also Available

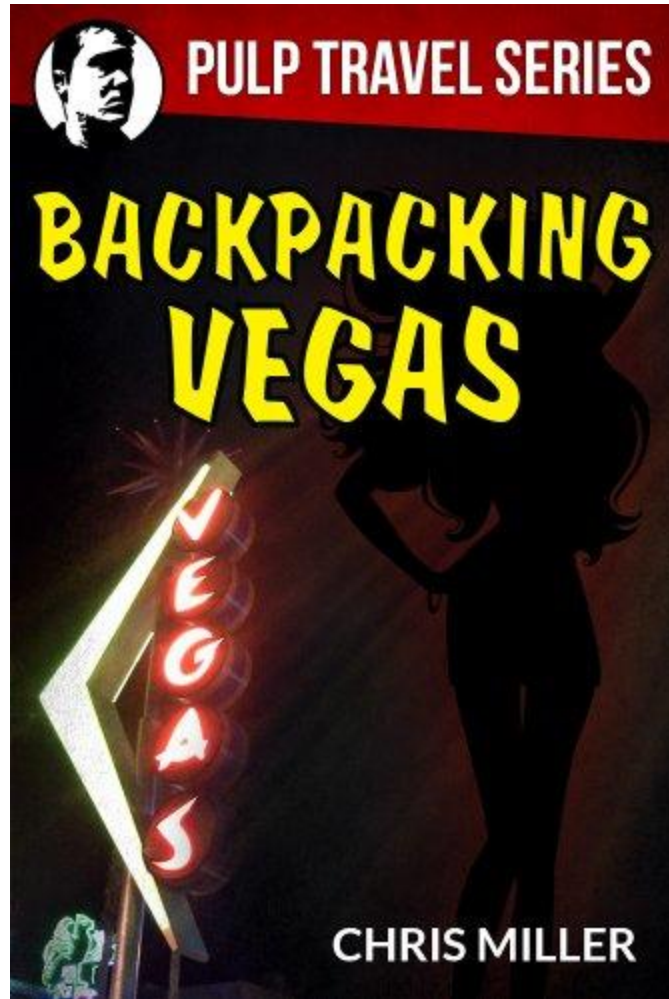


What would you do if you had just given up your apartment and donated all of your belongings to charity? For Chris "Cleanshave" Miller the answer was simple: *Go Hiking!*

Armed with only a twelve pound backpack and a sense of adventure he chose to hike the entire 272 miles of Vermont's Long Trail in what is known as an End-to-End hike.

The Long Trail, which runs along the main ridge of the Green Mountains, is the oldest long-distance trail in the United States. His hike would take him southbound, from the United States border with Canada to Vermont's southern border with Massachusetts. Along the way he would face numerous obstacles, usually brought on by poor resupply habits and questionable personal challenges, including hiking 65 miles of the trail without toilet paper, and another 100 miles without food.

So put yourself out on the trail today and read [Lightweight on the Long Trail](#)



A trip to Las Vegas doesn't have to break the bank.

When someone is killed in a car accident down the street from where he worked Chris Miller decides to get out of town and see Las Vegas. Despite having very little money in the bank, and with only a few things in a backpack he hops the first flight west.

At \$10 a night the Hostel on the Strip becomes a temporary home away from home where he shares a dorm room with strangers and searches for meaning in the first post industrial city on Earth.

This is the true story of how one person found themselves and experienced a personal transformation in Sin City.

Read [Backpacking Vegas](#) Today!

About the Author



Chris "Cleanshave" Miller is an avid hiker and low budget traveler. He has bicycle toured the East Coast Greenway to raise money for Meals on Wheels, jumped off the Stratosphere Hotel in Las Vegas, taken the Polar Bear Plunge in Newport, RI, hiked the Appalachian Trail, Vermont's Long Trail, and the Oregon Coast Trail among many others, and more recently cycled Adventure Cycling's Southern Tier on a fixed gear bicycle.

He is currently traveling the United States living out of his backpack.

Read the Blog: Cleanshave.org
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