

Starbucking

Chapter Six Knock, Knock

“There's another life out there beyond your quiet room”

To the average person, hearing knocking on a door or window is no big deal, especially if the sound is coming from a TV show or film. To me, however, that ordinarily innocuous sound is quite triggering.

To me, knocking produces a heightened fear response, a surge of adrenaline and an increased heart rate, and if I am getting ready for bed when I hear the sound, I can just go ahead and forget about it, because once jolted, my body takes an hour or two to settle down. I imagine that this can be hard to understand for most people, because other than those who have been to a drive-in cinema, or truckers, few people have listened to TV or film audio coming through car speakers. I, on the other hand, spend a significant amount of my time inside my car, and I can assure you that the sound of knocking is coming from car speakers is identical to that of actual knocking on the car windows, which I have heard countless times when hassled by police or the occasional security guard. I will save the details of all those police encounters for a later chapter, but these incidents are central to understanding one of the central pitfalls of urban camping. Now, I do not highlight the negatives in order to warn the reader away from this choice, but rather to stress that the benefits of this housing choice are so powerful that they far outweigh its downsides.

I began this book by describing the poor planning that led me to rent a motel room for just a few hours sleep during my first road trip, and that same lack

of planning cost me nearly \$2000 in those early years. Funny thing is, the first car that I bought was an Acura Integra, and that car just happened to be a hatchback with back seats that folded down. I definitely knew this, because I had driven my father's Integra during college, and those foldable back seats came in handy on many a date. Yet even as I ran up my already hefty credit card debt with motel room charges, it did not occur to me that I could sleep back there.

Even when the idea was suggested, I ignored it. During my first road trip to Seattle, I arrived at a hostel near the city centre only to learn that they were booked up, and when I asked the attendant if she could suggest another option, “oh, you have a car—you can just sleep there.”

I did not even consider it.

Instead, I went off in search of a room, nearly an hour away, and that brings me to another cost of my folly. I wasn't only wasting money during those early years, but also time. Before smartphones and ubiquitous wifi, seeking out accommodations meant that I needed to find an Internet cafe or drive around, and between that and the check-in process, I must have lost a few weeks worth of time before I wised up. Leaving one's car at or near a motel or hostel can also be risky, especially in the neighbourhoods that contain cheap lodging, and one night in Montreal my effort to save money on a hostel was undone by the loss of my laptop and other items, not to mention a smashed window.¹

Even when I was able to book quickly, travel time was also a factor. I can almost never predict where my final Starbucks of the day will be, and any lodging that I booked ahead of time was often quite a distance away. During a number of trips to Southern California, I booked at the the Hostelling International Hostel in Fullerton, and I am sure that the cost in drive time and gas was not worth the drive. Another time, in San Diego, I was beyond exhausted and booked a motel on the other side of town, but traffic across the hills was so slow that I feared I would pass out before I arrived. If I had realised that camping was an option, I would have spared myself a grueling

¹ Yes, it was stupid to have left the laptop in the car, but if this book has convinced the reader of only one thing so far, it should be that my capacity for foolhardiness was almost bottomless in my younger years.

experience.

I continued to burn time and money until sometime in 2000, when I found myself so exhausted that I was forced to pull into a rest area and lean my seat back for a nap. Anybody who has tried to sleep like this understands that one can never really get comfortable, but I managed to get enough sleep to function the following day, and I would go on to rely on this type of sleeping, when necessary, for the better part of a year (while remaining oblivious to my hatchback's most valuable feature).

According to my records, a trip to Boston in the spring of 2001 was the last time that I routinely paid for accommodations during my road trip, so it must have been during that trip when I had my breakthrough moment. I was stopped at a rest area in the middle of the day, in desperate need of a nap, and I was so uncomfortable in the front seat that I finally looked at those back seats and thought “hey, I could probably lay down back there.” As I dropped the back seats, another driver seemed to chuckle, and I'm sure I amused him further when I realised that I could not close the trunk from inside. Eventually I sorted myself out, and it goes without saying that laying down made a *huge* difference.

I cannot overemphasise the impact that this discovery would have on Starbucking, and my life.

In the years since I discovered urban camping, this once-stigmatised lifestyle has developed a sort of cachet, with the #vanlife hashtag, Instagram accounts, and blogs touting the benefits of the nomadic life and offering advice. One can find YouTube videos detailing how to set up a hatchback for camping, and an entire industry of van conversion companies has cropped up to help urban campers live the dream in style.

Other websites and blogs are tailored towards helping campers find safe parking, and I have found this to be a bit of an art. Walmart is a topic choice, because the company is welcoming of campers, and anybody who has visited one of their stores, especially along highways, has probably noticed a camper

and RVs parked towards the back.² Another common choice for campers are, of course, actual campgrounds. Unlike Walmart, these will charge a fee, but they often offer amenities like electrical hookups and running water. I myself have stayed a campground when in a remote area and too tired to reach the next town, and one thing that I enjoy about this is that if the sky is clear, the absence of city lights makes for some amazing stargazing.

I would be remiss if I did not mention one of the best films I have seen in recent memory, the Academy Award winning *Nomadland* (based on the book of the same name) that spotlighted a subculture of campers who live in vans and RVs and move from place to place in search of employment. When I saw the film, I felt a great affinity with them, especially the lead character who flatly states “I'm not homeless. I'm just houseless.” At the same time, the film was tinged with a bit of sadness, and I do not mean to suggest that choosing camping because one enjoys the lifestyle is the same as doing it out of economic necessity.

Regardless of motivation, any person camping in a vehicle, whether out in the country in a campground or in the city, needs to be careful and wary of their surroundings. In my case, driving a small hatchback, I actually have a wider range of options than those in vans or RVs, and with that flexibility come increased possibilities of “adventure”, especially in the middle of the night.

While most people might imagine the worst (like being robbed or assaulted), some of what I have experienced during my nights of camping have been quite wonderful, especially the animals. One night in Wisconsin I woke to the sound of owls hooting, and another time in Banff, I saw what appeared to be a moose munching on tree leaves in the distance, although it might have been an elk. Deer, rabbits and raccoons are quite common, and in some places I've been delighted to see the occasional fox darting past.

Camping in a vehicle, especially a small one like my Fit, also permits more weather to impact the night, and one of my favourite experiences has been when the wind is so strong that it rocks my car—no kidding, it's almost like being in a cradle. The sound of the wind can be quite soothing, as can the

² In fact, there is a Walmart Locator website that lists accommodating locations.

patter of raindrops hitting the roof and windows. Another experience I enjoy, unrelated to weather, is when I am parked near train tracks and wake up to hear a train passing by—to me, that train represents possibilities, unknown destinations, and in another life, I might have enjoyed riding the rails across the country.

Of course urban camping isn't all bunnies and raindrops. This mode of traveling and living has been peppered with hiccups, often related to my learning the dos and don'ts of where to park. Just as I made countless mistakes during my early years of Starbucking, I made countless poor camping choices that led to disturbances, irritations, and outright terror, often at the hands of police. Highway rest areas were no problem—I was only roused by police once, off I-495 in Massachusetts, and only on a couple of occasions was I disturbed by panhandlers or characters who appeared to be peering into my car. I already mentioned that most Walmarts are camper-friendly, but occasionally I was asked to move by security, or, in one instance, questioned by a cop who knew full well that the Walmart allowed parking but decided to wake me up anyway.

At the other end of the spectrum, random parking lots are the worst, especially when I made a point of parking away from other vehicles, so I would not be noticed. That is actually the worst thing a camper can do, because isolated cars attract attention, from both police and evildoers. Behind a strip mall in Tampa, for example, I was jolted awake by laughing, and as I bolted upright, I saw a pair of good ole boys about to pelt my car with beer bottles. In Dallas, behind a 24 Hour Fitness, I woke up to notice a scowling face peering in, doubtless trying to look through the tinted windows to see if anyone was in there. In Baltimore, parking in a random lot got me questioned by police, on the pretense that there had been a robbery in the area (because the first thing a burglar does after burgling is to take a nap near the scene of the crime).

Other problematic areas are residential neighbourhoods, because, frankly, people can be quite unkind to strangers, and they will react negatively to an unrecognised car. During my first trip to Laredo, I hit a deer on the interstate, and I did not want to risk driving back to Houston at night with possible

engine damage, so I pulled into the first neighbourhood I spotted and parked for the night. Shortly before daybreak I was roused by FIVE police units because someone had called in a “suspicious” car. In Tucson, I needed to look up directions on my phone and stopped in front of a house, and the homeowner began to question me, on the pretense that there had been vandalism in the area. Sometimes I attracted attention before I was even parked, as happened one night far north of Houston, in The Woodlands, when I sought out a place to overnight so I could photograph a Starbucks in the morning. For no justifiable reason (other than my having made a turn), a cop pulled me over for questioning.

I quickly learned that if I was going to park on a public street, my best options were to park either next to a business, if it was late enough that foot traffic along the sidewalk had subsided, or next to an apartment complex, where no one was likely to pay attention to an unknown car. Generally speaking, any street where my car was unlikely to stand out was a good choice, but if I was in a rental car, I had to be more discreet. My hatchbacks have had tinted windows in the back, and if I am laying down, covered in a sheet or blanket, I am hard to see, but in a rental car I am often curled up in the back seat, and quite visible. In a suburb of Tacoma, I was just about to fall asleep when I felt a shaking and heard laughter, and then I saw a group of kids running away—they must notice me sleeping and decided to have some “fun”. To anyone considering the urban camping lifestyle, I cannot emphasise enough the important of a setup that minimises the possibility of being seen, because, well, people can be assholes.

To be fair, the disturbances were not always mean-spirited. On occasion a person would act out of kindness, like a lady in San Diego who knocked on my window to see if I was okay, or the man in New Orleans who, post-Katrina, noticed me about to bed down, and said I was welcome to water from the hose. In fact, even when asked to leave a parking lot by security, some were apologetic and offered suggestions on where I could park safely.

On other occasions, the disturbances were not even human in origin—birds or squirrels landing on the roof of my car, for example, or cats getting freaky nearby. My most unnerving animal encounter was in San Diego, near some

town houses. There was no sidewalk, and I had to park partway on the grass, like the other vehicles. Hours later I woke up to an odd sensation, and after a few seconds of puzzlement I was sure I felt something crawling on me! I turned on the light, I was horrified to see hundreds (or thousands) of tiny ants crawling all over my car. Turns out that cars are not hermetically sealed, and must have parked right atop an anthill, spurring the critters to retaliate by invading my home, with a vengeance.

Another sorta animalistic³ nighttime encounter occurred when my Integra was on its last legs, alternator shot. To start the car, I had to get it rolling then pop the clutch, and every night I sought out an incline or lengthy “runway”. That night I chose the parking lot behind a 24 Hour Fitness, and a few hours later I woke up to hear voices and noticed naked bodies rising and falling in car next to mine! I wanted to drive off, so I could sleep, but with the car's battery dead, the only way to get it going was to push it, and there was no way for me to do that without disturbing the amorous couple, so I waited them out.

Sometimes the nighttime disturbances had nothing to do with me. Did you know that every night, all across the country, thieves are walking up and down the streets pulling on car doors in search of easy loot? I have witnessed this from afar, and I have also been inside my car when a thief tried to open the door (not realising that I was back there). In one instance, I was actually sitting in the driver seat, and the thief *still* did not notice me. One of my craziest such encounters was in Rochester, in what I consider to be a safe area off East Avenue. That night I was careless and neglected to lock the door, and when I awoke there was a man standing there, door open, about to search for valuables. I screamed at him out of instinct, and the scream was powerful, more like a growl, almost bearlike. The man raced away in a heartbeat, and that's why you should always lock those car doors, folks.

If I were to rank nocturnal escapades not initiated by police, I would have to choose one New Years Eve 2011, just outside the downtown Albany hotel where I was participating in a Scrabble tournament. A side street near the hotel had been a fine place to park for years, but on that night I was woken up

3 “*You and me baby ain't nothin' but mammals...*”

by a jolt, and while it did not seem strong enough to do damage, I was in a rental car and did not want to be on the hook for repairs. I had barely hopped to the front of my car to throw on some pants and shoes when the driver and passenger pulled away, and I chased after them. They must have noticed me and speed up as I fumbled with my shoes and my phone, trying to talk to a 911 dispatcher on speaker while my phone flew all over the place. We sped through city streets and ran lights, nearly causing a collision, and the pair finally ended up ramming the car into a light pole then running into what the Brits would call an “estate”. Chasing after them any further would have been dangerous and stupid, so I just changed into my clothes and waited for the police, who scolded me for having endangered myself (they might have had a gun, the officer said). As it turned out, there was no visible damage to the bumper, but they officers seemed to think that the car must have been stolen, so at least I managed to recover the vehicle for its owner, albeit with considerable front damage.

On other occasions, I have been awakened by people arguing, sometimes inside a vehicle, sometimes out on the street. One night outside of a Giant supermarket in Vienna, VA, I heard what appeared to be panicked screaming come from a van, and then I heard another passenger trying to calm the screamer. When I recounted this story on Facebook the next morning, someone chided me for not having called the police, and my response was that it irresponsible to call the police for every disturbance because doing so could have deadly consequences. If those two were indigent, or if the person screaming had been dealing with mental distress, an encounter with police could have gone poorly for both them in all sorts of ways. Calling the cops on actual thieves in the process of thieving is one thing, but I'm not going to do it just because it seems that someone might need help.

Deciding whether to report is trickier when it comes to fights between couples, even if there is body language that could indicate possible violence, or actual verbal threats. On the one hand, domestic violence is a real problem, especially against women, and we as a society should do more to stop this. On the other hand, a police response could lead to the shooting of the suspect, especially a POC, and I'm not sure that victims want their partners killed by police. In a recent case, I chose to report because the boyfriend threatened to

“beat her bloody”, and because the couple was White, the odds that he would be shot are lower. On the other hand, nearly two decades ago I reported a Black couple who had swerved their car onto a highway shoulder and proceeded to start screaming at each other, but to this day I regret my decision, because, given all the news that has come to light about how dangerous police interactions are for POC, my call could have led to their deaths, and I don't want to be responsible for another's death.

While nighttime disturbances make for my most exciting/terrifying urban camping stories, the truth is that the challenges that I have routinely faced when living out of a car are much more mundane, like finding a place to wash up. “Where do you shower” is the most common question I am asked, and I suspect that those asking grew up just as I did, believing that a daily shower is necessary for good hygiene. Heck, I grew up in Texas, where one could not walk outside for even a few minutes during the summer without becoming drenched in sweat, and I was used to showering more than once a day. A shower was often the first thing on my mind upon waking, no matter where I was, and the transition to urban camping forced me to reconsider how much I truly “needed” daily showers.⁴

When I began spending nights in my car, my first thought of the day was often about finding a shower wherever I could. Truck stops, public swimming pools, YMCAs, and gyms (when available) were early options. I even tried sneaking behind a building in the pouring rain and soaping myself up, but that turned out to be a terrible idea, and I ended up driving away with soap residue all over my torso, arms, and legs. Early on, I sought out the generosity of friends, relatives, acquaintances, even Scrabble players who might allow me use of their shower, but unless I was actually spending the night, that always felt odd to me.

I was so set on showering that even after discovering camping, every few days I would seek out a hostel or super-cheap motel just to get clean. Another option were massage or day spas, which I'd discovered a few years after I began Starbucking. Many spas have showers, and in certain cities, a half-hour massage could be had for \$30 or even \$25, which, when compared to paying

⁴ As a matter of fact, doctors and health experts have said that daily showers are unnecessary, and even counterproductive, not to mention a waste of water, but I was well into my twenties or thirties before I ever came across that message.

\$10 at a truck stop for a shower, or \$50 for a motel room, made a lot more sense. During my mega-tour of Great Britain I even discovered that some spas would allow hot tube use for a pittance, £5 I think, and of course there would be a shower in the room (for the same reason that one is supposed to shower before entering a public swimming pool, I imagine).

I suppose that it is a marker of American privilege that I grew up assuming that a shower was the only way to get clean. Fact is, washing using a cloth and a faucet (or a river) is not uncommon around the world, and I'm surprised that it took me as long as it did to realise that I could go much longer without a shower if I simply washed my face, armpit's and privates every day, or multiple times a day. The unhoused have been doing this forever, of course, and as this type of washing became part of my routine, I began to notice signs in different places, like rest areas, or bathrooms in city centres (where there are typically more unhoused) indicating that faucets were not for washing. In fact, one night I stopped at a Kinko's outside of Denver to check my email, and I made the mistake of walking in with a small towel in my hand (rather than a washcloth discreetly tucked away in my pocket or backpack), and the lone employee on duty stopped me and would not allow me into the bathroom.

Another common question is how I sleep, and many people imagine that I simply lean the front seat back. I guess hatchbacks and similar vehicles have not permeated the public consciousness, because few people ask about that possibility. Of course, I myself went years without realising that I could sleep back there, and I own the car!

With respect to comfort, it's worth pointing out that in my experience, most hatchback seats do not actually fold down flat—they will either fold down at a slight angle, or there will be a dip between the front and the back that needs to be padded if one is to sleep comfortably. My Honda Fit is the best that I have seen, short of a van or box-type vehicle, and with a few mattress cushions and additional padding, what I have in the back is, to me, almost indistinguishable from a bed. Believe it or not, the back of my car is *more comfortable* than some beds, those with mattresses that are too soft—soft mattresses are not great for my back, and on one occasion I ended up sleeping on the floor of a pricey hotel room because I could not stand the

mattress.

“How do you cook?” is another common question, and some people suggest ways to cook using a microwave, or even the engine of my car. Truth is that once most of my free time became consumed by Starbucking and Scrabble, I transitioned away from cooking so that I could spend more time traveling. Later, after I recovered from bankruptcy and began traveling with a larger budget, I became a foodie and made it a point to seek out local food (or regional favourites) wherever I was. Cooking became an afterthought, beyond basics like oatmeal, and, to be honest, there is only one thing that I miss now that I no longer cook.⁵

Cooking and showering are fascinating subjects, no doubt, but what many people really want to know is how dating works for urban campers. I cannot speak to how others in this lifestyle make it work, but for me, urban camping has had *zero impact* on my dating life (that I know of). The reason is simple—by the time that I transitioned to full urban camping, a significant portion of dating in the United States was happening via websites and apps, and online dating stopped working for me in the early aughts.⁶ Sure, over the last decade and a half I’ve had a few dates with women I met online, but we never reached the point of their needing to learn where I lived. My actual girlfriends, on the other hand, already knew a lot about me from my blogging, Starbucking, or the Scrabble community, and they accepted (or tolerated) my lifestyle for what was. I suspect that I am atypical in this regard, and I suspect that much of the growing population of urban campers *must* be dating and dealing with some interesting challenges.

Looking beyond all the challenges that I needed to overcome to sustain a life in a car, I am eternally grateful for my discovery, because camping was a lifesaver for Starbucking during my broke-ass days, as I racked up debt and approached insolvency. But even after I recovered and shored up my financial footing, every dollar not spent on lodging was a dollar that I could put towards savings or travel, especially the international travel that became a priority once I had a handle on North American Starbucks. Without urban

5 Fried spam, which is rarely found on menus across the United States, save for Hawaii, or areas with Hawaiian, Korean, or Japanese restaurants.

6 The simple explanation is that potential partners need time to warm up to my eccentricities, and most people using online dating are quick to discard a match over any perceived flaw, rather than taking the time to learn more about them.

camping, not only would my store-count milestones have come more slowly, but I would not have added nearly as many countries to my total.⁷

Those savings increased by orders of magnitude after the second major evolution in of my lifestyle, the transition to urban camping on a permanent basis, is largely due to the city of Portland, OR, my second-favourite in the nation, and perhaps the world.⁸ In the spring of 2011 I began my first contract assignment in Portland, and because in all my years of traveling to the city, I had never been bothered at night and found the weather to be reasonable, even in winter, I decided to forgo my usual hunt for a room to rent. I had no trouble finding parking where I was unlikely to be disturbed, and for the duration of that assignment, my lone incident was, ironically, in the parking lot of the 24 Hour Fitness where I had a membership. Due to a personnel change at the Lake Oswego Police Department, two new officers were patrolling the area and took it upon themselves to investigate any car they found unfamiliar.

Incidents like that would grow more rare in the 2010s, because I had learned where to park, and I continued urban camping during my San Diego assignment the following year, then again in Portland for another gig. I was undeterred even when I found a job in a colder climate, two back-to-back assignments in Massachusetts, in 2013 and 2014. That first winter up there was brutal, and I remember one absolutely miserable night during a snowstorm when parking on the streets was nigh-well impossible and I settled on brightly-lit McDonald's parking lot, with a snowplow disturbing me throughout the night.

I persisted with permanent urban camping, even in unfavourable climates, because the savings were incredible. A conservative estimate would place my savings over the last decade at \$100,000, and that is a *low* figure because it assumes about \$800 in rent a month, and no other expenses. The reality is that in some areas, like greater Boston, I would have needed to pay much more if I wanted a room free of bedbugs and in a neighbourhood where my car would be left alone. No, I think the true figure is much higher, and these

⁷ Fifty-seven as of this writing.

⁸ *Permanent* being a relative term—if I ever find a life partner, I imagine that I will need to compromise, as I did during my three years with Annie.

savings have allowed me to save much more cash, max out 401K and IRA contributions, invest in stocks and other assets, and, of course, travel internationally to a degree that would never have been possible if I had been paying rent.

It's not just the money though—urban camping has yielded benefits well beyond the financial. I already pointed out how my Starbucking became more productive without wasting hours every night seeking a room or bed—well, the principle also applies when not traveling. Without a nightly commute, I have freed up time for more productive activities, from exercising to the study and practise necessary to achieve the highest levels of Scrabble competition.

Another major benefit has been not having to put up with nasty neighbours, roommates, or landlords. Back in my renting days, I had to resolve disputes with roommates over things like temperature or laundry, or with landlords over policies or expenses. I even had to put up with craziness like listening to the landlord fight with her sister or her boyfriend, depending upon the day. I face none of those things when I'm in my car, and if ever do I happen to be parked near a disturbance, I can easily drive somewhere else.

While most people will be able to understand these practical benefits of urban camping, what is harder to describe is the single most important joy that I derive from this unconventional lifestyle choice—*freedom*. While others find nightly lodging to be a comfort, I instead find it restrictive to have to return to a specific place just to sleep. I would rather spend my time being as productive as possible, and then, when I am tired, fall asleep wherever I happen to be. The ability to camp nearly anywhere gives me a flexibility that few people enjoy, and I just cannot understand why anybody would want to sleep in the same place night after night, when this world is so large and amazing.

I guess they just don't know what they're missing.