

## NONFICTION

# This Is What It's Like to Be Homeless in New York City

By Alex Kotlowitz

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## **THIS IS ALL I GOT**

### **A New Mother's Search for Home**

By Lauren Sandler

I confess that reading about the travails of a homeless person amid all the current suffering held little appeal, but I actually found solace in the story of Camila, a pseudonym Lauren Sandler uses for the central character of her riveting new book, "This Is All I Got." Camila is a wildly impulsive, profoundly smart, deeply savvy and stunningly beautiful 22-year-old Dominican. She's also without a place to live. And as Matthew Desmond, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "Evicted," once told an interviewer, "Without stable shelter, everything else falls apart." So it does for Camila except that she holds on with a tenacious grip, to find some normalcy and to imagine an abundant future, both for herself and for her young son.

Sandler, the author of two previous books ("One and Only," "Righteous"), first met Camila at a shelter in Brooklyn in 2015 where Sandler volunteered. Camila, who it becomes clear works hard to present herself as someone in control, is dressed in a fresh white blouse and a pair of twill short-shorts, a baby-blue purse resting on her lap. Sandler writes that she sensed "her mind revving, her thoughts lurching forward as she composed herself. ... From that first meeting, I sensed that she was a woman who was hellbent on propelling herself out of this shelter, away from the circumstances of her past, toward something solid, ambitious. And as I came to experience her, within and beyond her story, one thing was clear to me: If Camila couldn't use her wits and persistence to make the system work for her, no one could."

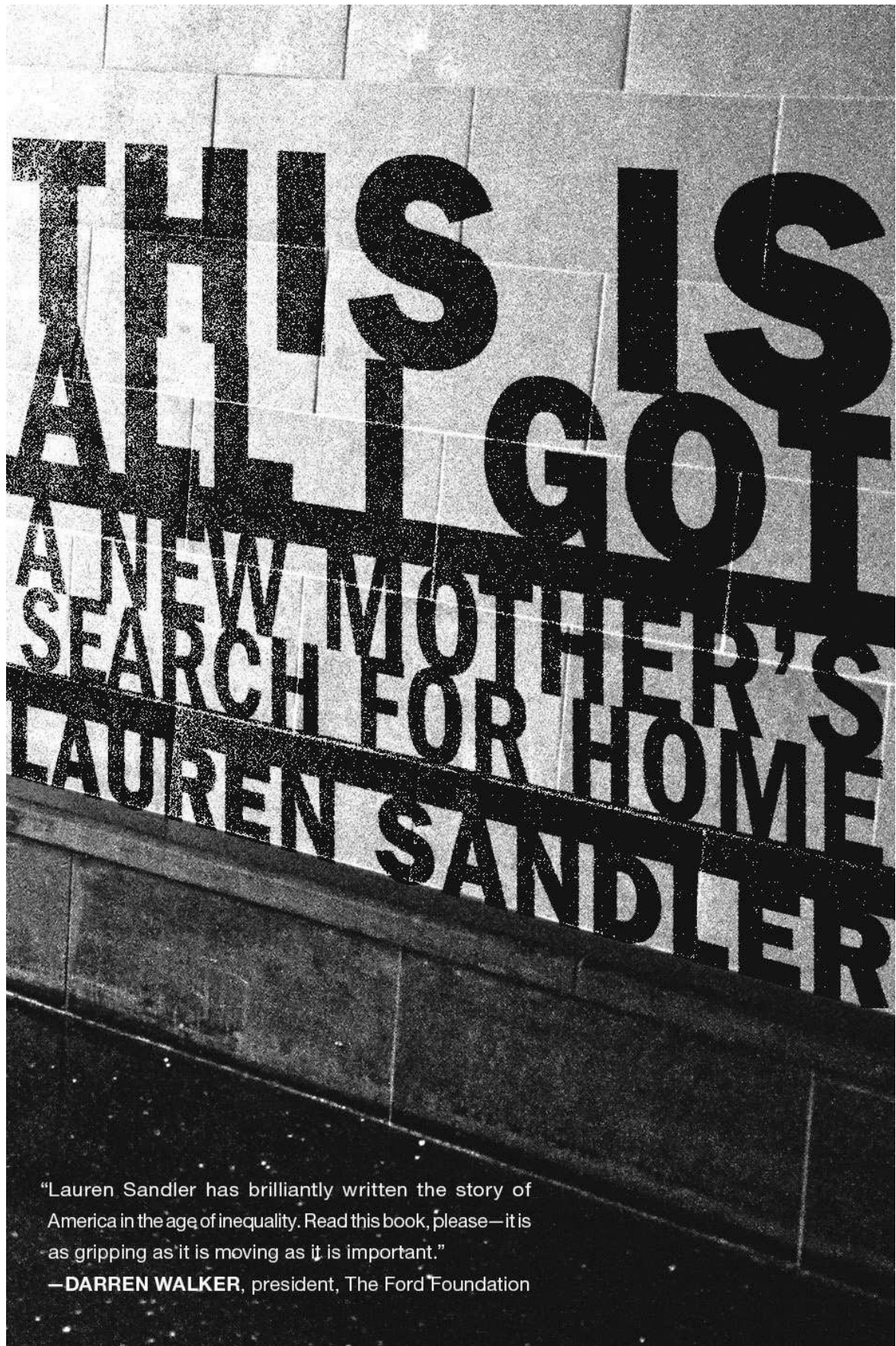
It's one of many things that make Camila so appealing. She doesn't take kindly to authority, especially when someone disrespects her. When she meets a bureaucrat, she arrives well armed. She carries her birth certificate in her backpack in case she ever needs to prove she is who she says she is. She records conversations and takes detailed notes.

The encounters are maddening. To call them Kafkaesque wouldn't do them justice. For rental assistance, Camila needs to make five separate trips to a job center, sometimes with waits of up to three hours. Once, she sits down on a plastic chair in the waiting room to find

a puddle of urine beneath her — and she has to decide whether to go to the bathroom or risk losing her place in line. We learn that in order to get marked as high priority for a unit in public housing, which has over a quarter of a million names on the wait-list, you need to have been a victim of domestic violence. So at a shelter when a woman purposefully bumps Camila, she calls 911 and insists that the police consider it a case of domestic abuse and that they write up a restraining order. Even at her young age, she's learned not to take constant humiliation personally, but rather shrugs, thinking to herself: Maybe it just wasn't meant to be.

Five years ago, 60,000 people in New York were without a home. Nationally, on any given night, roughly 555,000 are without shelter, and while the number had been declining it began to rise again in the past two years. Given the astonishingly large number of people who have lost their jobs in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, those numbers will only increase. Camila's story feels like a warning: If in prosperous times this is the best our government can do to assist those struggling to get by, then in these coming difficult times we will be able to do very little.

When Sandler met Camila at the shelter, she asked if she could spend time with her. And so over the next year, Sandler became tethered to Camila, immersed in her day-to-day life — even, if my reading is right, joining her on a date. It's a remarkable feat of reporting. Sandler seems to be always at her side.



"Lauren Sandler has brilliantly written the story of America in the age of inequality. Read this book, please—it is as gripping as it is moving as it is important."

—**DARREN WALKER**, president, The Ford Foundation

As the book opens, Camila is pregnant, and desperately hoping the father is a young man she dated while attending college in Buffalo. She texts him while in labor: "Kevin. Good morning. I think today is the day." Camila's Achilles' heel is her persistent search for someone to settle down with — her certainty that each man she meets is the one. On one occasion, she meets a young man in the afternoon and by the evening is texting Sandler that

maybe the next night she and her son will stay at his place. We come to learn, too, that more than anything she's seeking love and affirmation from her father, who is a disappointment at every juncture. When he learns she's pregnant, he blithely tells her, "You'll be on welfare, like all Mexican moms with five kids." He has at least seven kids himself, by a number of women. She also has a tenuous relationship at best with her mother, who was emotionally and physically abusive with Camila and her siblings, and kicked Camila out of the house when she was 15.

Camila refuses to be typecast. She often dresses in a black blazer and matching slacks, a slightly preppy look. She tells the other women in the shelter that she wants a nanny. "I don't want to put him in day care," she tells her fellow residents. "Nannies teach them, they learn sooner, they walk sooner. I'm concerned about putting him in a place that's not teaching him." She loves the theater, and at one point attends a production of Federico García Lorca's "Blood Wedding" — and becomes so captivated by the performance that she's 20 minutes late picking up her son, which means she has to pay a \$35 charge to the day care. She texts Sandler to ask if she wants to spend a day at the Guggenheim Museum.

Sandler's such a keen observer, her writing so cleareyed. Listen to this moment when Camila and her infant son, Alonso, enter an apartment occupied by two parents and a child; Camila has rented a room there, sight unseen, for \$160 a week. "Jovanka led Camila into the foyer. A clothesline strewn with sheets and undergarments hung overhead. Underneath, a couch was jammed against a wall, nearly invisible under all manner of clothing, shoeboxes and baby toys. An ill-fitting cardboard accordion door hung open to what had been the living room and was now Jovanka's entire living quarters, a double bed and a crib stuffed beside a couch and chair."

I read that and wanted to pull Camila out of there, to plead with her to find somewhere else to live. But of course that's the problem: She has no options. The waiting list for housing in New York City's Section 8 program — which provides vouchers for rent — has been capped at 10,000 names. It stopped taking applications in 2008. Think about that for a moment. Our government's primary program to provide affordable housing is so oversubscribed that you can't even get your name on a waiting list. What's going to happen in these subsequent months as our unemployment rolls swell? Where will people find shelter? As Camila's story underscores, and to quote Matthew Desmond again: Without a home, everything else falls apart.

Beginning in 2008, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation regularly brought together experts in housing policy to talk about the central place of safe and affordable shelter in our lives. (I was involved in some of those conversations.) What some of the foundation-funded research found I imagine would not surprise Camila, who by the age of 22 had lived in 29 places. Moving three or more times in childhood is associated with lower earning and less educational attainment later in life. One study of Latino mothers found that

poor housing conditions and overcrowding is associated with more depression and hostility. As the foundation writes on its website: "Trace the lineage of many social welfare issues today, and you will likely uncover a history of substandard, unaffordable housing."

"This Is All I Got" is a testament to the bigness of the small story, to the power of intimate narratives to speak to something much larger. Sandler wisely lets Camila's story stand on its own without lecturing us. Not to sound clichéd, but we walk in Camila's shoes. We come to understand what Sandler recognized early on: If Camila can't navigate the dearth of housing, how can others? Not only is she in search of shelter, but she's working toward her degree at a community college; she's commuting over an hour each way to day care and school; she's raising a son; she's seeking child support from her son's father; she's trying to mend relations with her parents, who separated soon after she was conceived. She is, like all of us, looking for a sense of purpose and for a livelihood, and yet without a place to live all of that feels nearly impossible to achieve.

I relished my time alongside Camila. Spirited and undaunted, she trudges forward, bathing in what little joy she finds along the way. At one point, a woman working at a job center tells Camila not to listen to those who insist that she leave school. The bureaucrat says: "They will tell you to go pick up cans in the park instead of school. Do not listen to them." She urges Camila to pursue her dream, which is to get a job in law enforcement.

"As she left the office, a beatific smile spread across her face," Sandler writes. "It was the first time I'd encountered this smile. It seemed to release itself from deep inside her body. ... Someone had seen her as worth more than minimum wage and a dead-end life." A lesson for us all.