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Wasn't It Great?

Absolutely Not. But Oddly Enough, It's Comforting to Think About.

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At first, people will go where they always went in times of disaster or need. Not to the [Red Cross](#) shelter, but to [Wal-Mart](#).

For a year or so, people won't like to describe themselves as homeless. But after a while it will be impossible not to notice, in the box store parking lots, a phenomenon that will look like a 24/7 tailgate party that keeps growing: Coleman grills, ice chests, portable DVD players, hamburger buns and Special K breakfast bars. The American campout. In the Great Depression, Roosevelt saw a third of a nation *ill-housed*. Here you are, in an alternate reality, in the Second Great Depression, ill-housed yourself.

After a while, the 18-wheelers won't arrive on time, or at all. Supply will be seriously out of whack with demand. Prices make no sense at all. You'll feel swept up in something out of control, and the only consolation will be that it's happening to everybody you know.

One skill you'll already have is the art of organized anticipation -- lining up for hours on end to get bottled water, which you'd done in the past to get the new [iPhone](#), or get the "[Harry Potter](#)" novels, or doorbust the Black Friday sales. But the lines will get longer, and people will become more angry for reasons they insist qualify as special cases -- because their child has a gluten allergy and no one in the bread line would seem to care about that anymore.

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People will go off their meds. There will be folksy, hip-hoppish ballads on the radio (free radio, not satellite subscription radio) about lost 401(k) fortunes. Your brother-in-law, who used to brew his own beer, will become one of those kooks who talk about printing their own scrip. (Their \$10 bill will nobly feature [Chuck Norris](#); Chewbacca's on the 20; Benjamin is still on the benjamins.)

The roots start showing through your highlights, and one night you'll go over to your church with a friend, to use the sink and share a bottle of Garnier Nutrisse Nourishing Multi-Lights ("golden blonde toffee swirl"), your last personal extravagance for a decade.

Your favorite neighbors will hit the road in search of work or an upbeat sense of spiritual self-determinism. Pretty soon you'll pack up and leave too, but the gas will cost too much to get wherever you think you're going, and the car will break down. Husband will set off in search of a timing belt and there you'll be, with the kids and your [Verizon](#) service down to its final minutes. You will be camped in a strange parking lot, in front of an old [Best Buy](#).

A woman will then approach you with a digital camera.

You won't even hear the soft click.

You will become the miserable -- yet iconic! -- subject of what the shooter will tell you is a "documentary photograph," about to be posted to the now federally operated [Flickr](#).

The president, meanwhile, will unveil a New-New Deal. *Time to get the nation back to work*, you will read on the Fireside Blog, with only one small problem: The majority of the unemployed labor force will not know how to do anything but sit at a computer. We will leave future generations marveling at the stark beauty of the Depression-era video games we've constructed.

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