

A Night at the Coop

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This story is only what it is. It is not meant to be representative of any other experience.

The other year, when I was [living in a cabinet](#), someone emailed me to ask if I had found a decent place to stay. “Oh, don’t worry,” I said. “I’m sleeping outside the Coop.”

For those who don’t know Cambridge, the Coop is the Harvard-affiliated bookstore in the center of town. It has an odd sort of recessed entrance, that means there’s plenty of outside-but-sheltered space to sleep at night and anyone who walks through the town late at night sees many (presumably homeless) people in sleeping bags taking advantage of it.

She didn’t believe my claim for a second and ever since that’s always irked me. Why is it so unbelievable that I might live beneath the Coop? It’s got a fantastic location (Harvard Square is perhaps my favorite place in the world), nice atmosphere, and plenty of neighbors. Is a person like me living there really so improbable?

So ever since, I’ve had it in the back of my mind that I would spend a night at the Coop. The opportunity finally arose last week, when I finally got my hands on a decent sleeping bag.

I made meticulous preparations. I took the bag and rolled it around in the dirt to scuff it up a big, so it didn’t stand out so much (this really didn’t do a whole lot, to be honest). Then I changed into sweatpants and a non-descript T-shirt. I left my shoes but put on a couple layers of socks, two subway fares and my keys. I buried the keys in a park by my house, spent one fare getting to Harvard Square, buried the other one inside Harvard, and then took my sleeping bag to a spot outside the Coop.

The digital clock hovering over us read exactly 10:00.

A musician was performing directly outside the Coop. He was quite good, sold a couple CDs, and encouraged people to visit his website. In between songs, he’d make odd jokes about songs about his lack of a girlfriend. He chatted with a less coherent fellow on a bicycle who rode by sometimes.

There was a man in an orange jacket who really got into dancing to the music, before he finally took his place on a mat outside the Coop. Another man with a green sleeping bag turned in. I watched the big crimson flags outside the store wave, marvelling at their beauty.

Around 11 a whole group of kids blew through the square, seeming somewhat drunk and laughing. Little snippets of conversation could be heard.

That's one odd thing about Harvard Square. If you sit at in the square and listen to people, you hear them talking about boys and homework. Meanwhile, I ordered breakfast once at a dingy little shop here in Davis Square, Somerville, and the girl behind the counter was arguing with the two older cooks about how the welfare policies of socialist countries affect their marriage rates, doing it as if it was the most natural thing in the world. After that, Harvard students really don't impress me.

Around 11:30 it was getting pretty empty and the musician began packing up his stuff. I didn't last much longer, so I laid my sleeping bag out along the side of the Coop and climbed inside. There were about five or six people on the other side, all tiled in nicely with each other, all in a different sort of gear.

I drifted in and out of consciousness for a bit, heard odd noises going past us on the street. Finally, I fell asleep around midnight (my usual bedtime), and didn't wake up until 5am when a subway train rolled underneath me. Everyone was still there, the day was still dark and quiet. I wanted to watch the sunrise but fell back asleep and didn't wake up until 8, by which time the sun had most certainly risen and everyone else had left. It had apparently rained overnight, because the ground was thoroughly soaked, and I tried to avoid the puddles as I went to dig out my subway fare.

It was right where I left it and I got onto the train without incident. My keys were where I left them as well and I managed to get into the apartment just in time for work.

What was so hard about that?, I thought.