

An Existence

The tartan bow tie, the name badge, the tightly pulled-back hair and tucked-in white shirt, *who is this person in the mirror?* I ask myself. The mind spirals, the questions, the questions... *How did I end up here? Am I a bad person? Do I deserve this? Does anyone truly care about me? Is it my fault? Is this karma or a lesson I was supposed to learn in life? Am I mentally ill? Am I being selfish? Let's face it, many others are far worse off. I should be grateful really.*

My story is a story shared by many unheard Brits today. We are the hidden homeless.

At some point in life you are led to believe that if you do the right thing, get an education, always work, a comfortable life awaits. When I say comfortable, I mean the basics – a roof over your head, a bed, a bathroom, food, heating and a sense of community. It turns out this is not true.

One year and three months shy of fifty, I expected I'd be sorted by now. I started work at the age of twelve, delivering early morning newspapers before school, and have undertaken numerous roles between then and now. A qualified primary teacher currently employed as a hotel receptionist (housekeeper last month) in order to have a roof over my head in my country.

What image comes to mind when you think of the homeless? I have learned that anyone can end up homeless in the UK, including those with enough money to buy a property like me.

Between ages eighteen and thirty-seven I lived in many house shares. House sharing with strangers is rarely fun, though you might meet a buddy or two. There will likely be a tenant you can't stand or fear, the one you dread bumping into, and it always feels transient – never like home.

Unforgettable memories were the girl trying to top herself, the guy pulling his own tooth out and ending up in hospital (he always left a black ring around the bath too), the guy cornering me red-faced with fists clenched in an empty house and accusing me of stealing his shoe (psychosis I reckon), the girl that kept stealing things and framing me because I had become friendly with her favourite housemate, and the two old men walking around in their teeny five-inch-almost-budgie-smuggling shorts no matter how cold it was.

Then there was the tenant in the room below me blasting his electronic music at Ministry of Sound levels every Sunday causing my room and everything in it to shake (a regular Sunday ruck ensued), the European mocking our benefits system and boasting about receiving housing benefit despite earning £400 a week in cash delivering pizzas, the girl stonewalling me because my native British friendly "Morning" or "Afternoon" greeting got on her nerves, and the guy asking if he could sleep in my room as there was a poltergeist in his. (He looked petrified. Anything's possible.)

I did meet some great house sharers too and made the odd friend from time to time but, I think, the overriding feeling when living with strangers in random house shares, paying off landlords' mortgages, is one of anxiety and restlessness. As a clean and tidy person, I never got used to other people's mess, filth and noise. People can be gross. Sharing kitchens and bathrooms is tricky – especially when different standards are at play.

Quite often you are imprisoned in your bedroom as the communal area is too crowded or small, if one exists outside the kitchen. The days of shared lounges are gone as greedy landlords use every inch of space to earn more profit. Why is no amount of money ever enough for the greedy?

During these years I taught overseas a couple of times. This allowed me to experience my own place

and relax at home which were both new to me.

By my early thirties, back in London, I was hearing about housing schemes and initiatives introduced by the government. Encouraged by this, I studied and analysed the “affordable housing” schemes on offer and came to the conclusion that most were scam-like or rather fishy indeed. I sensed that this was a future scandal in waiting – perhaps if owners tried to sell and found they could only sell within the scheme, or when they came to retire and didn’t own their properties as ‘staircasing’ was for people with disposable cash.

I’m still trying to work out why Sadiq Khan’s annual salary is £140K? He seems pretty useless to me. No offence.

There was nothing affordable about the housing on his website for a single person on a lower to average wage the last time I checked. The ‘Report a rogue landlord or agent’ form on the Mayor’s website sounded super. It led nowhere. I tried a few times after I was swindled by a very dodgy “agency” called Spacelet in London and realised that hundreds, possibly thousands, of others were being cheated by them daily. Kensington and Chelsea Council fobbed me off too as I didn’t live in their borough where these wild cowboys operated. Notting Hill, no less.

Somewhat disappointed that these housing options would not work for me, I came to the conclusion that the only way to get out of house shares and buy in London would be to teach overseas again. At reputable British international schools I could save a decent housing deposit. This goal took me to a few different countries.

After years moving around London and stints overseas, I became increasingly desperate to settle down somewhere. Home was where the heart was and my heart was in London. Perhaps I should have given up on London way before I did.

Was it too much to ask to want to live in your home city?

After two childhood friends died in close succession, I wanted to be back where I came from more than ever. If I could get a well-paid teaching job, I could probably rent a studio flat and finally be where I belonged. I could then look into what I could afford with my deposit or the possibilities of living in a commuter town.

Regardless of what you hear in the news, teachers on the whole are not well paid. Yes, they appear to do all right on the teacher pay scales and they have decent pensions (or they did before changes). Appear is the key word here. The truth is that very few get paid the higher rates if they are paid to scale at all. The more experienced they become, the more likely they are to be bullied out of the school or profession. That way schools don’t have to pay the higher rates – salaries that used to reward experience.

Others have moved into management to get higher pay. Many are offered a certain wage with a like it or lump it attitude. My friend, a fantastic teacher with sixteen years’ experience, was offered an annual salary of £25000 to take up a permanent position. The role would probably demand a fifty to sixty hour working week. Needless to say, she went overseas instead.

In decades past, things were very different.

What you don’t get told is that supply teachers are often earning close to minimum wage because the unregulated supply agencies lie their backsides off to both teachers and schools, banking tremendous commissions paid for by the taxpayer. I have even seen supply agency ads offering lucrative salaries

and private healthcare to prospective recruiter colleagues. Again, fully funded by us taxpayers.

A supply teacher may earn as low as £20000 a year while the agent earns £40000, and they cannot access the teacher pension scheme. I am not exaggerating but I digress...

The first part of the plan came together. I landed a maternity cover at a prestigious French school in London. I went private to try and earn enough to live in London, you see. I was contracted on £48000 plus teacher pension for a much easier role than those generally found in British state schools. (They would have paid me far less.)

Starting in May 2019, I stayed with a friend and expected to be able to find somewhere to live the first week of the school holidays if not before. What surprised me was how the London rental market had changed. In the past, I would pop to the local lettings agency or arrange viewings myself, see three or four rooms the same day, pick my choice then move in. Simple. Simple no more. I spent the five school holiday weeks, morning till night, researching and trying to book viewings on SpareRoom or directly with estate agents.

Since the job was on a temporary contract, I didn't want to sign up to a flat for over a grand in case it didn't go permanent and I got landed with an unaffordable tenancy. It seemed sensible to find a room in a house share or a reasonably priced studio until I was sure of my longer-term income.

During these five weeks I attended twenty-six viewings. For all the work I put in and all the ads I contacted, this was a very small number, yet far more than I would have anticipated. Twenty-four were either not really studios as advertised or bedrooms/properties that could only be called a disgrace.

I was shocked that shameless landlords were getting away with renting these hovels. Some were absolutely filthy and unkept – black grime over walls, food-stained carpets, wallpaper falling off, holes in the floor or windows. Others were cramped. Most were a piss-take. £850 a month plus bills for a two-metre by three-metre shithole?

I knew I would need a decent place to live in order to teach properly. By decent, I meant normal, not the type of room you might put up with in a war zone. After twenty-four viewings I tried hard to rent a room with a live-in landlord as surely they would keep their own place in good shape. I managed to secure two such viewings.

One was a stunning bedroom in a gorgeous house. They were interior designers. While they had a separate mini kitchen for lodgers, there was nowhere to sit with my food which would mean taking it back to my bedroom every day. I felt I wanted a little more space if signing a pricey six month contract.

The final viewing was with a live-in landlady in Chiswick where I grew up. I travelled three hours there and back, and spent an hour being interviewed by her. She gushed about her Tinder dates and the things she'd been up to. We hit it off. The next day she texted to say the room had gone to someone else.

This modern world of landlord interviews, competition for hideous rooms, unacknowledged expressions of interest, costly and time-consuming city-wide journeys had taken its toll. I wasn't actually that fussy. A bedroom and clean, tidyish shared spaces please. I didn't ask for much.

By the start of the school term, I remained trapped in temporary housing. Over the six months spent at the French school, I rented a friend's flat one month, I housesat for a few weeks, I stayed on friends' sofas or in vacated rooms for days here and there – the rest of the time I based myself at hostels. First I was at backpackers then I discovered hostels for long-termers. Long term being a fortnight minimum.

Wherever I stayed, I shared dorms with strangers.

The French school was clueless about my living situation. The irony was that I was teaching the children of the French elite in London, mixing with very wealthy individuals at a school whose fees were over £20000 per year. I adored those children and they adored me – we clicked. I got on well with their families too.

By December 2019, when I could no longer take it, when I was close to cracking and exhausted, when there was no patience left to listen to bullshit meetings about unimportant things like whether to use a green or highlighter pen for marking, I handed my notice in. (I must point out that this was a Brit, not a French co-worker. Only a brainwashed numpty from our British system could spout this tripe.)

Had the job been permanent, this could have been avoided. But it wasn't. The parents kicked off. They were upset that I was leaving. They wanted me to stay for their children as did their lovely children. I was sad and proud in equal measure. In spite of my outside struggle, I had clearly done very well.

The decision was made. I would have to brave moving to a different city outside London where I knew no one and start from scratch in my forties.

Where do you go if you know no one? Which city would be right for me? Which would offer decent job prospects and housing? If I went to the one city where I knew someone, would I be crashing in on her life?

I had tirelessly surfed the net and was still unsure. Certain regions had trained too many teachers, allowing agencies to pay criminally low rates like £80 to £90 a day before tax. I wasn't going there.

Over the years I had visited Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, York, Leeds and Newcastle, knowing one day I might be forced to move away from London. Nowhere ever felt right.

Where to go?

Realising that commuter towns were now unaffordable as well, I finally opted for the East Midlands. I could try both Nottingham and Derby. A two-for-one pin-on-a-map jump into the unknown. From there I would be able to travel back to London in a few hours to see friends if I wished to. I registered with four agencies covering the region ready for my move.

Before relocating, I planned a month break in Ireland where I have family. During my stay there, the news about a virus in China surfaced with words like epidemic and pandemic thrown into the mix. I waited a little longer to see what happened. Lucky I did as everything soon shut down in the UK. I might have found myself without accommodation or a job had I rushed my return.

A Netflix year later, I moved back as soon as things opened up in March 2021. Relieved to be going back to my country, nervous about starting from scratch in a new region, the plan was to rent a studio or one bedroom flat, supply teach, find a long-term or permanent job and buy a property. I would then start rebuilding my life and trying to make friends.

I was in for a shock, however, as now the country had reopened, the housing frenzy had begun.

I tried to make it work for about a year then gave up and accepted a teaching job overseas. I went to Ireland to see family, recover and rest before moving abroad. Unexpectedly, the employer reneged on the contract, saying my covid positive result months earlier would block entry into the country. (A

shame they didn't share this risk before I'd spent money and time on paperwork!)

After deciding against two other iffy international posts, I could neither face looking for teaching jobs nor housing. When couch potato-ing in rural Ireland had run its course, I started applying for hospitality live-in jobs in the UK as the news kept banging on about employee shortages in the sector. I thought it might provide somewhere to live and a base from where to try and start over. Again.

Now you know how I ended up here wearing a tartan bow tie.

My housing situation was never stable. I moved around quite a bit. With this kind of instability, it was very difficult to create an 'ordinary' life, the kind others might take for granted, the kind that didn't involve worrying about where to live next week, next month or, in worst case scenarios, tomorrow.

While I don't speak on behalf of the hidden homeless, I aim to shed light on obstacles and issues I face, or have faced, in the hope that someone somewhere might read this and somehow improve things:

The dirty word: 'Address'

Who knew your address could become such a sore point? If I am asked for my address, I feel the rage rising. Why does every business and service seem to need an address? There are thousands of homeless in the UK. Still, the address requests keep coming. Without a UK address I can't have a GP or a bank account, even though I am a working tax-paying Brit.

I have relied on the kindness of friends to allow me to use their addresses. I had to stop using one friend's address for mail redirection after Royal Mail sold my data to randoms and my friend started receiving mass junk mail for me. No friend signs up to this by allowing the use of their address for essential letters. When I laid into Royal Mail about it, they said, "Oh, you didn't tick the box." What box? I never saw a box.

How is it that I can pay for a service and then they make money by selling me unawares? My embarrassment led me to discontinue using my friend's address.

I asked a different friend if I could use her address for the bank and NHS. I didn't like asking this favour as it felt a bit cheeky. My friend said it was fine. I was very careful, instructing my bank and the NHS to limit mail.

Last month I was fooled again. I needed new footwear for walking. Based in a remote location with no shops, I ordered them online. I am not an avid internet shopper so when asked for my billing address alongside my delivery address, I assumed it was to ensure the debit card transaction would go through.

Shortly after paying, I realised that Go Outdoors were part of the recently hacked JD Sports Group which concerned me. Within hours of payment, I contacted their data protection department to exercise all my privacy rights. Despite my speed and follow up calls checking my request had been actioned, they started sending junk mail to my friend's address (my current bank and billing address), putting another address at risk.

Fuming.

Twice since, I have been asked for my billing address. I used Buckingham Palace. Guess what? The card transactions went through. It just shows you: it's actually all about data collection. I wonder if the palace is receiving junk mail for me? 'Hope not.

Another example is my Three pay as you go sim card. I have been with Three for a long time. I can't really get a phone contract as my address keeps changing and I don't use my friend's for anything other than the two agreed services as I don't live there and don't want to take the mickey.

Each time I call Three to top up credit or whatever, they require my postcode to verify my account. I give a postcode I moved away from ages ago which continues to pass their process. I would love to change this but fear losing my number as every breath I take seems to need a damn authentication code by text.

Last year I asked HSBC about their No Fixed Address bank account and was told I needed to be on a homeless charity register to qualify. From my understanding, hidden homeless with savings were not

eligible for help from these charities. The many skint homeless came first, understandably. Back to square one.

Why can't we simply show our ID? In the era of identity fraud and scams, wouldn't it be better to forget letters going to addresses altogether? It would certainly save many trees.

A serious problem caused by address issues is lack of access to MPs or local councils, even as contributing citizens. Consequently, our government may be totally unaware of the true number of Brits experiencing challenges.

Now and again I wanted to contact an MP but was unsure if I would be in their constituency the following day or week so didn't bother.

This location uncertainty can also turn visiting a GP or dentist, or meeting personal healthcare needs such as ordering new prescription glasses, into unreachable hurdles.

How do you think it makes a homeless person feel when asked for their address? It's like asking a singleton what their other half does, or asking the bloke with no legs if he fancies a walk.

Estate agents

How do you know if an estate agent is lying? His or her mouth is moving. Didn't we say the same about Boris? Boris was the crème de la crème of estate agent culture. Has the UK become one big fat estate agent? Hot air and fakery are rewarded and promoted.

Not only do we see this in our government, it is rife in the education system and other areas of modern society. It is a crying shame and truly frustrating for those who are driven by truth, fairness and the common good rather than money and competition.

Twenty-odd years ago, I temped at a lettings agency as an administrator. That job burst my rose-tinted honesty bubble. My first task each day was to post fake ads on property websites. I quickly learned that most of the ads in the windows and on the books were made up and, once drawn in, innocent rental seekers would be talked into the available alternatives. Needless to say, I didn't last long. A person of integrity can't cope in shady environments.

This was way before the recent housing madness. Imagine the half-truths when handed desperate home-hunters on a plate. Cynical?

After giving up on London, I tried to find housing in Nottingham, Derby, Leicester and Newcastle. Everywhere was nuts.

Who said it was easier outside London?

The sharks were out of control, making as much commission as they could, the money hunger evident in their voices if you managed to get past their voicemails. I never seemed to hear back unless a prospective tenant dropped out of a viewing or didn't take a rental. Then they were on my case, sickly sweet nicey nicey.

They didn't care that I couldn't attend the 11am next day viewing due to work as they had another nineteen viewers booked in who could. Meeting at a mutually convenient hour was ancient history. Agents could now call at 11pm and say be there at 4am tomorrow morning. If you didn't show, tough luck.

I never went to viewings with queues of property seekers as I had no intention of entering The Bidding War. Desperate or not, I have strong morals. If I think something is morally wrong, I steer clear or fight. I do not think it is right that landlords, agents or our government allow any of this to happen.

I dread to think how many hours to date I have spent looking at adverts and contacting landlords and agents. No matter how carefully you set your filters on Rightmove or Zoopla – studio/one bedroom flat minimum, no shared houses – there are hundreds of agents advertising bedrooms in shared houses as studio flats or one bedroom apartments. This wastes hours clicking into ads that were meant to be filtered out. I did contact both Rightmove and Zoopla about this to no avail.

Does anyone else feel like no one gives a toss? You try and raise an issue or solve a problem by contacting the relevant person or department and it goes round in circles or nowhere at all. I don't think it was like this two or three decades ago, was it?

Grasping the housing chaos, I swiftly changed my tick list. I had originally wanted my own flat – this soon became anything that would get me out of hostels or temporary accommodation. I ended up in two awful house shares spanning five months.

Typical routines involved walking over dropped food and lumps of meat on the kitchen floor, sinks so full they couldn't be used, overflowing bins, reeking baking trays covered in fish or meat remnants left on worktops for days if not weeks, a full length glass shower door falling on me nearly every shower, and toilets that sounded like fog horns after each flush as the landlord was too greedy to get things done properly – forcing us to live with his terrible DIY.

When water was dripping through the ceiling next to the kitchen light bulb, he told us it was fine. He owned four buy-to-lets and proudly showed off his collection of snazzy cars. Of course.

Getting a room in a house share was not easy either as advertisers specified age limits which were usually twenties or thirties, or they blocked you with the cringey, 'Tell us a bit about yourself'. (Translation: Let's see if you are cool enough to enter our hip hangout.) Many didn't bother replying.

After months of temp accommodation in Nottingham and Derby, I opened out the search to Leicester and the North East as my supply teacher agencies covered those areas. There was next to nothing in Leicester. I managed to secure a room in Newcastle as a lodger for November.

It was like being a guest in someone's house, you know, when you have to be on your best behaviour. The landlady was older, retirement age. I soon realised she wanted the rental income rather than the lodger. I got on fine with her. I was careful to as I wanted my deposit back.

The lounge was out of bounds. To get to the kitchen I had to pass through the lounge. I was not allowed to prepare food in the kitchen – it had to be prepared in the room next to the kitchen. This meant walking to and from the kitchen to get utensils. It took a week of repeated requests to get a single shelf in the fridge. (She had two full size fridges.)

She regulated the heating which meant there was none if she was out. I stayed in bed in my fleece pjs and dressing gown one snowy day as I was too cold to get up. I lasted a month.

During the weeks at her house, I continued the search. A leading room/studio rental agency in Sunderland said demand was off the charts. They had over a hundred on their waiting list ready to rent any bedroom that might come up. Mostly students.

I viewed various over-priced flats in Newcastle. I didn't express an interest after the agent told me

they would need six years of proofs of address. For someone like me, this is virtually impossible.

I was put off by others, realising they had ten page application forms. Here they would gather all your personal and financial information, and you would write a statement persuading (begging) a landlord to choose you over everyone else.

Not happening. Total insanity.

Most agents didn't bother replying to the enquiry messages I left on their voicemails or with colleagues. One didn't call back, sending a three page application form via SMS instead. If I passed this level, then they may have taken the trouble to communicate with me. I didn't reach the second page as the first asked me to upload my credit report.

If 'Currently, estate agents are not required by law to be licensed or qualified' (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/who-regulates-estate-agents/>), why are they permitted to access our sensitive data like this?

My search led me to Scotland where property seemed more affordable. I thought perhaps I should try further north even if I couldn't teach there. (Don't get me started!) Online, I saw several nice flats in Paisley and Glasgow for sale. I had never visited either place. By this stage I was up for anywhere. I saved the adverts and called the agents two days later on my day off to find out more before arranging a trip up to Scotland for viewings.

The agent said they had already sold. She said properties like these were being instantly snapped up by agents in Hong Kong. According to her, property investors hired the agents to source and buy UK properties. They didn't care about the price, they just wanted to know the rental yield. They didn't care about viewing them either.

I was not happy. I already knew our government allowed international buyers to tread on the toes of its citizens, but I felt fury nonetheless.

How was I meant to compete with buy-to-let landlords who bought without viewing? Why were they enabling overseas or second home buyers to purchase properties they left empty when loads of Brits had nowhere to live? Why were they allowing non-residents to decide what rents citizens paid and whether or not to evict them? Were we allowed to buy in their countries?

Why had renting and buying become a total mare?

I threw in the towel.

Surrendered.

As a supply teacher looking for housing, I was dealt the double agency whammy: estate agents and recruitment agents. (Insert crying and vomiting emojis here.)

Different education recruitment (supply) agencies dominate different parts of England. If housing cannot be found in their areas of operation, jobseekers may not be able to work in these regions.

Having joined four agencies after leaving London, and accepted a job overseas which subsequently fell through, the French school stopped responding to reference requests. Presumably they believed five references were enough.

It seems that my teaching career has ended, therefore, due to housing as I was unable to secure an appropriate tenancy in the areas covered by my agencies, and I cannot join new agencies or get a teaching job direct without references. Catch-22.

I bet I am not alone in this situation. Systems are interlinked and many of ours seem broken or shambolic including the pointless national employee reference obsession. (I would fix this too!)

Maybe it's a blessing in disguise as I only earned £12000 before tax the year I tried to supply and find housing outside London, and our education system is a horrible mess. I also find it infuriating that a potentially teeny-bopper supply agent with limited life experience and no specialist qualifications can earn a higher wage and have more power over my career than I do. Let's not even mention how schools and agencies treated their employees, including me, with regards to Covid precautions and safety.

Temporary accommodation

I've considered renting AirBnBs until I find somewhere to rent or buy. The worry that I'd spend all my hard-earned savings before securing a home holds me back. The average person probably has a place they can search from – possibly a family home or their current rental pad. Without this, a base is needed from where to search.

I need temporary accommodation in order to look for housing. This sounds straightforward – it isn't. In London there are lots of hostels. This is not necessarily the case in other cities and the hostels that exist may not have availability. (Even the long-term hostels in London are now full with waiting lists.)

While hostels are likely to be cleaner than house shares as they are typically cleaned every day, they are hard to bear unless backpacking or on a yoga retreat in my view. If you're eager to work or set up a new life or find yourself inadvertently stuck in one, although it is a roof over your head, it can be extremely stressful and you have no idea who is sharing your room. Are they safe and sane?

How do you concentrate on housing or job searches and applications if surrounded by blasting music, talking or other unwanted sounds? How do you attend a virtual job interview or property viewing with no quiet, private space?

I have stayed in small and large female and mixed gender dorms. You take what you can get. On a few occasions I was the only female in a mixed dorm full of men. Not my preference.

Some hostels are very, very greedy, cramming as many bunkbeds into a space as physically possible, bunkbeds 3 levels high or ends touching each other, leaving no space for guests to move or open their bags. Others are more considerate. Derby had a decent one that provided single rooms with shared bathrooms for the price of a dorm bed in London. One of the reasons I tried the East Midlands.

What slowly sends you mad is the lack of sleep, space, privacy and people themselves. Sartre's 'Hell is other people' echoes in my mind.

In a room of three to sixteen strangers (sometimes more), you can bet there will be at least one horrendous snorer, disagreements about whether the window should remain open or closed, plastic bags rustling in the early hours or at the crack of dawn as belongings are rummaged or repacked, doors banging every few minutes on entry and exit, loud tapping on laptop keys at 3am, selfish gits shouting on their mobile phones, and snoozers turning alarms off every five minutes from 5am.

Then there's the choking on suffocating perfumes and deodorants sprayed across the room, bright

lights being turned on by pissheads in the middle of the night, stumbling drunks tripping over bags and shoes in the dark, padlocks opening and closing, keys and other valuables hiding in bras and socks or under pillows (protection from strangers), the comings and goings of those working different shifts or on holiday timings, the rocking and creaking of beds as dorm sharers climb to bunks above or to the floor below, queuing for toilets or bathrooms, remembering codes or access cards to enter dorms or shared facilities (it's not amusing to forget them either!), and the sounds and smells of others eating in your bedroom.

Yuk. I'll never forget being woken at 2am by spaghetti bolognese wafting up my nostrils as the girl below me ate her evening meal on her bed after returning from work. Urghhh... There are communal areas for a reason!

Four hours later I was getting ready for work.

Needless to say, dorm sharers can butt heads or kick off as tensions rise, especially among those already stressed and increasingly sleep-deprived who find themselves reluctantly living in hostels or temporary accommodation. Hostel kitchens can also complicate this kind of living.

I was kicked out of one hostel at 10pm midweek for complaining that I couldn't cook or get water as the sinks were too full of dirty dishes. Luckily a friend took me in or I'd have been in the street with my bags at night without a plan.

Others may have passable kitchens. These are often too small or over-crowded to cook properly. I rarely ate well at hostels, usually buying quick eats or prepared salads making it all the more costly.

At times I did not feel like being in a room with strangers and their chit chat or habits first thing in the morning, so I'd get a McDonalds coffee and a Tesco's croissant or the Gregg's morning roll and hot drink combo and sit on a bench in the park. (Can't beat a budget brekkie.)

If I'd find myself alone, eating a meal on a park bench watching the world walk on by, I would think of how the stereotype used to be the homeless person sitting on the park bench. I'd wonder what the stereotype was now. Other times I'd find myself aimlessly window shopping or sitting in public spaces killing hours between check out at one hostel and check in at another.

Watching friends, couples and families out and about enjoying themselves together – recounting stories, laughing, chatting, hanging and belonging – could cause intense pain, longing and sorrow deep within.

The people I met

While my over-thinking head, talk radio, the internet and TV are my trusted companions, I have met many interesting individuals along the way, learning that there are countless reasons for ending up in hostels or temporary housing in the UK. A selection of examples follow with name changes:

*An engineer, Jim, got locked out of Saudi where he had spent most of his career due to the pandemic.

*Sidney, 85, didn't want to end up in a nursing home. He preferred being around younger generations and was teaching himself German to keep his brain active.

*Ana, a middle-aged Portuguese lady, owned her own home outright in Portugal. She was unable to cover her bills on the wages there. She worked as a waitress in London and lived in a six-bed dorm.

*James, late 40s/early 50s, had sold his house and made a huge gain at frenzied prices only to discover there was nowhere left to buy.

*Mark, a dual Canadian-Brit 30-something, came to the UK a few years ago to do live-in hospitality jobs and get to know his roots. As panicking hostels closed due to pandemic lockdowns, he was chucked out of his live-in role with no job or home to go to.

*Elif, a Turkish woman in her late 20s whose family had bought her a new build apartment in central Istanbul as a gift, said she loved her flat but felt bored. She sought excitement in London.

*David was a highly educated Zimbabwean. He held masters in maths and statistics, and used to train maths teachers in Zimbabwe. When his country's economy crashed, he relocated to the UK via teacher supply agencies to teach maths in UK secondary schools. He spoke of his shock and disappointment with the UK classroom, the students' attitudes, and the treatment of supply teachers by schools and agents. He eventually left teaching to become a live-in carer. His contracts generally lasted two to three weeks. He would stay in temporary accommodation in between these. Dreams of retiring back in his country kept him going.

*Janet, a somewhat batty retirement age Brit, went from hostel to hostel with all her possessions in a polka-dot shopping trolley. I would watch her and wonder if I was glimpsing my future.

*The two young British Muslim girls who spent the weekend partying – quickly replacing their Islamic head scarves and dress for on-trend Insta-outfits. They were over the moon to share a dorm, seeing it as a fun taste of travelling.

*Tomas, 30s, a well-to-do Portuguese man whose family owned vineyards and produced wine back home, found himself in a hostel dorm after his live-in landlord complained that he was in the lounge too much. The shared lounge and TV were part of his tenancy agreement.

*Carla, late 20s, an Italian who looked old for her age, said she had spent some nights sleeping on the streets. I only stayed one night at that hostel as it did not feel safe. I took her out for drinks and a boogie.

*Sam, 20s, a Brit, who had broken up with his girlfriend and could not afford to rent a flat solo, was planning to move out of London as soon as possible to set up his own construction business anywhere cheaper up north.

*Mike, 50s, was from Kent. When his marriage broke down, he lost everything including his home as he could not manage the mortgage on one wage. His future seemed bleak.

*Sarah, almost 30, a Brit from the Midlands, got trapped in London hostels after the Midlands ones closed down during the pandemic and she needed to find a bed quickly. She'd been at the same hostel for five months, living in a dorm of 6 changing strangers. A qualified secondary teacher and NHS practitioner, she was unable to do either job as she dedicated herself to finding a way out of the hostel cycle. She had enough savings to pay six months cash upfront for a one bedroom flat in cities away from London and was at the end of her tether as no landlord would take her. She said property owners and agents always chose other applications over hers as they believed a couple to be a safer option than a single late-20s female. She was going slightly insane before my eyes, and I totally understood.

Among the hidden homeless I met, I sensed an invisible bond, an unspoken understanding of what we have been through and the challenges that lay ahead.

Community and friends

A large part of my personal history is linked to London. This is where I grew up. This is where I made most of my close friends. This is where my favourite childhood memories were created. This is where I belong.

Being forced away from where I fit has left me with a profound sense of displacement. I may be well-travelled and worldly but nowhere feels like home except London. In London I can spend evenings with my friends who know me and have been there through thick and thin, the ones that open up to me as I open up to them. A one-hour catch up is better than any antidepressant ever could be. They are kind and generous, often reminding me that I can stay whenever I need to.

A once vivacious social butterfly, I rarely socialise these days and avoid getting to know others on the move. What's the point? Even my contact with close pals has dwindled as the prolonged housing stress means I have changed jobs, homes, locations and lifestyles with such frequency that I feel a little embarrassed and boring sharing the same old story and responding to the well-intentioned "I can't keep up with you's".

If feeling particularly low, it can be hard hearing about other people's normal life news when my life feels messed up in comparison. On the one hand, I love being in on the updates. On the other, they are a reminder of my outsider void and loneliness.

I'm not an outsider to them – I'm an outsider to everyone. Few understand no matter how much they like me or try.

I finally understand and accept this.

Mental health

For those of you who have lived conventional lives or achieved a type of social normality, imagine what it is like having your head permanently filled with one question: *what next?* A nomadic existence, no emotional support, no connections nearby, no one to really talk to or make decisions with, the constant constant worry.

Depression and anxiety are called "mental illnesses". Given a set of circumstances like mine (or worse), how would you feel? Would anxiety or depression not be the natural, healthy human response? Illness or wellness then?

Why don't I seek emotional support via mental health services? Been there, done that. Pointless. How can you open up to, or trust, professionals who start sessions with *On a scale of one to ten, how low do you feel? How often would you say you think about harming yourself if at all? Very often, often, sometimes, occasionally, rarely?* Or similar.

Can feelings be measured? Who comes up with this stuff? Opening up and getting the burden off your chest is helpful, no doubt, though not in this robotic way. Well, not for me. My mind goes straight to thoughts like *On a scale of one to ten, how likely are you to have an original thought in your head?*

At one point I had panic attacks and pains deep in my bones. These accompanied the onset of tinnitus. Nowadays, I don't feel depressed as such. More numb. This said, an anxiety-free day would be bliss.

For as long as I can recall, I have been in a state of fight or flight with racing unfocussed thoughts jumping from one thing to another, adrenaline pumping, intermittent bouts of sadness and anger, and

patience that has worn so thin, I find myself snapping at those who are simply doing their jobs and trying to help.

My stress-related irritability turns me into a diva banshee on customer service live chats, or once I finally reach a human after navigating my way passed the automated voicebot. Guilt and self-loathing immediately follow these episodes as I calm and promise myself I will not contact customer service ever again as I obviously cannot cope with it. The promise never lasts.

I am ashamed of my bad behaviour when it happens.

Once, exhausted after a 2am screaming match between two ladies in the dorm – one wanted the other to turn her reading light off as it was shining in her face, the other resisted – I had checked out of a hostel and was on a morning bus with my bags from Kings Cross headed west to the next hostel.

I sat downstairs on the seat beside the double doors at the centre of the bus. There was a guy at the back of the bus shouting, and I mean shouting, on his mobile phone. Tired, short-tempered and not overly interested in listening to this twat for the entire journey, I turned around and motioned a *turn the volume down please*. The shouty few minutes that followed went like this:

Man: Shut up!
 Me: No, you shut up!
 Man: Shut up!
 Me: No, you shut up!
 Man: Shut up!
 Me: No, you shut up!
 Man: Shut up!
 Me: No, you shut up!

The passengers' tennis heads were swinging left, right, left, right. The man, no change, shouting on his phone, telling the person loudly on the phone about my daring request, was now hovering over me trying to intimidate as he moved towards the door. Face to face we continued yelling:

Man: Shut up!
 Me: No, you shut up!
 Man: Shut up!
 Me: No, you shut up!
 Man: You are very ugly!
 Me: Have you looked in the mirror lately?!

As he got off the bus, he squashed his threatening face on the window next to me trying to scare me. I placed my middle finger on his face through the glass, shouting *Go fxxx yourself!* I then turned to the stunned bus and apologised. The two Brazilian tourists standing a metre away told me I was very brave. (A nice way of saying *you need your head read?*) I realised bravery didn't come into it. I had entered a fearless phase.

Is this what happened when you had nothing to lose?

At my stop, I exited the doors by the driver. To my surprise, his face lit up, smiling from ear to ear and giggling, he said, *Thank you! Thank you! Do you know how often I wish I could tell those idiots on their phones to shut up?*

Every cloud has a silver lining.

Wasted potential

I love a documentary and have watched all sorts. A few concentrated on famous entrepreneurs, inventors and creators. Hearing their stories, I noticed they often had their own homes sorted at a young age. It made me wonder about all the creations and solutions to problems that may have come to pass if everyone had security and stability early on.

In circumstances like mine, the only dream becomes having somewhere to call home – not being wealthy, not meeting a romantic partner, not having a family, not climbing a career ladder or career fulfilment, not pursuing a hobby or interest – and, forget thinking about acquiring ‘things’ or how you look. I used to wear a little make up, put effort into my hair and mix up my outfits. Now, I could give two hoots about my appearance.

An expert graphologist once told me I had a big brain. I took this to mean I wasn’t stupid. I bet there are plenty out there, like me, who could make significant contributions to society or their communities – be of service, volunteer, fill employment gaps, retrain, open businesses, create, invent, become academics or leaders – only to find their minds and bodies filled with varying levels of perpetual panic.

If my home life had been more settled, I wonder what I may have been or done, and the expertise I may have gained and shared.

Think of the many homeless out there wasting their potential and what the world might be missing as a result.

A message for our leaders

The news is obsessed with blaming Brexit for employee shortages. No one seems to make a connection between job vacancies and local housing. Brexit may play its part, however, I know from personal experience that housing issues can prevent people working in their fields.

When the war in Ukraine started, I shook my head and sighed as the British and Irish governments urged, ‘come here, come here’. As saddened as I was for the Ukrainians, or anyone suffering war or violence, this open welcome demonstrated how completely out of touch our leaders were with the state of affairs in their countries.

If many already based in the UK and Ireland were struggling to find anywhere to live, these vulnerable traumatised victims might face the continuation of their nightmare up against homelessness in a strange country.

A warm welcome to refugees, asylum seekers or the needy should go without saying.

Hurry up and provide affordable, quality housing for everyone then the welcome truly would be warm.

Could you lot even organise a piss-up in a brewery? To be fair, you did a superb job of the one in the garden.

Final comment

In the dark, we must seek the light.

Those who feel chained to unsatisfying or dreary home and work patterns might envy the travels, the random adventures and experiences, the lack of commitment, the unpredictable twists and turns. I crave their ordinary realities in return.

Is the grass greener?

The struggle has certainly changed me. Maybe I am changed for the better?

I understand what is important – relationships, connections and helping others.

I clearly see the disastrous effects of capitalism and greed.

I don't own or acquire needless possessions.

I know who is there for me and who is not.

I sense beyond all surfaces.

I have learned to survive in my own company and keep going. What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger. (If a tad bonkers.)

Although I never saw myself donning a tartan bow tie, would I ever have opened my curtains to this stunning view of Loch Lomond had things turned out differently?

With only a matter of days left here – the agitation, the restless sleep, the brain fog, the heart almost pounding out of my tightening chest, the short and shallow breaths, the dull ache behind the eyes and the panic pains are taking hold.

Where will I be next week?

I can't think straight.

Who knows what the near future holds.

A home, a purpose, friendships, a sense of belonging?

On behalf of all of us, I hope.