



## About QueenSpark Books

QueenSpark Books was founded in 1972 as part of a campaign to save the historic Royal Spa in Brighton's Queen's Park from being converted to a casino. The campaign was successful and it inspired participants to start collecting memories of people living in Brighton and Hove to preserve for future generations. QueenSpark Books is now the longest-running organisation of its kind in the UK.

More than one hundred books later, as part of our 45th anniversary celebrations, we are making the original texts of many of our out-of-print books available for the first time in many years.

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## About this book

*Roofless* is a collection of photographs, essays, stories and poems by homeless and ex-homeless people from Brighton. It is about survival, about battling poverty, rejection, violence, ill health and loneliness. There is anger, sadness and rebellion, but also instances of hope and solidarity and writing that, whilst often raw and uncompromising, possesses a surprising generosity of spirit.

*Roofless* attacks many commonly held prejudices and provides not just a window on the world of the homeless, but a valuable insight into the society that so often lets them down. *Roofless* provides a unique and candid snapshot of life in Brighton and Hove in 2007, seen through the eyes of homeless people.

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## ***Roofless***

### **Homeless in Brighton**

General homelessness remains a significant challenge in Brighton and Hove. For some time the city has had, in comparison to the rest of the country, a large number of rough sleepers and people who are considered to be street drinkers or dwellers. Source: Brighton & Hove Council 2006.

#### **Introduction**

This book brings together work from *Ideal Home? An Exhibition about Homelessness* - a partnership project between Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, St. Thomas Crime Reduction Initiative (formerly the Foundation Programme) and QueenSpark Books - and *Write for Life*, a programme of writing workshops for homeless and ex-homeless individuals run by QueenSpark Books.

For the most part, the homeless lead anonymous lives; they are used to the eyes of passers-by slipping away from them. Their circumstances place them within a category: street people, addicts, service users. They are seldom regarded as anything else; we know little of their personalities, imaginations or desires.

What has been apparent throughout the making of this book is that, despite - or perhaps because of - the perilous personal situations of the contributors, they have a deep need to express themselves creatively.

This book then, is not about homelessness, its causes and effects. We know these things almost as commonplaces. This is a book that focuses on thoughts, feelings and opinions, the reality of homeless people.

#### **Acknowledgements**

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John Riches, Director, QueenSpark Publishers

## ***An ideal home?***

**Simon Brown**

Home is safe

Home is where you can shut out the world

Home is a dwelling

Home is where you live

Home is where people care

There's no place like home...

there's no place like home...

there's no place like home...

Home is a base

Home is your own ground

Home is where you can raise a family

Home is where your roots are

Home is where the heart is

Home is a place where something began and flourished

Home is a place to return to

Home is peace and quiet

There's no place like home...

there's no place like home...

there's no place like home...

Home is a hostel

Home is a sleeping bag

Home is a car park

Home is a squat

Home is a car

Home is a van

Home is a sofa in someone else's room

Home is a mattress on someone else's floor

Home is a doorway

Home is a bench

Home is under a boat

Home is the streets

Home is prison

Home is a whorehouse

Home is a grave

Home, home, home...

Home you can buy

Home you can lease

Home you can lose

Home is something you wish you could keep

Home is something you can be evicted from

Home is something the bank really own

Home is an illusion

Home is where I was abused

Home is where I was beaten up

Home is where I was raped when I was a child

Home is where I ran away from

Home is where I shut the door and cried myself to sleep

Home is where I took drugs to hide my hurt

Home was a place that I was scared of

Home is what I have forgotten

Home is where I long for

Home is somewhere that does not exist anymore

Home is...

Home is an ideal place

Home is my country

Home is my city, my society, my community

Home is where I want to be

Home is my history

But I'm not wanted here

I have no home

And you ask me, what is my ideal home?

Home is a place where I can piece my life back together again

Home is what I will get

Home is something that I deserve

Home is something I am looking for

Home

My ideal home?

For now

It's a place in your heart and thoughts

### ***The Jacket***

#### **Chris Ellis**

When you live a normal life, when you have somewhere to live, you surround yourself with your past. Mementoes to reinforce memories.

For example, before all this started, before I fell below a normal life, when I worked and was secure, the only jackets I would wear would be leather.

In many ways I was lucky, all my belongings had been stashed with friends. Out of all my jackets, I took the heaviest, the warmest, not my favourite. But it was warm, pulling the zip up, snapping shut the outside buckles; almost like donning armour. I have slept (I will not and never will call it 'lived') in car parks, huddled against a wall, choosing my spot between the patches of oil, petrol and piss. I've tried sleeping in doorways - too exposed. It's called rough sleeping for a reason. Those nights, when the wine isn't enough, or it is too cold, or there are too many people about filled with booze and righteous contempt for those below them, it's rough.

So, in the months of sleeping rough, where did I live? In that jacket. It's warm, it's heavy, it's a reminder of who I once was, and what I once was. Now after many months of survival, going from moment to moment, snatching what sleep I could, too often aided by wine, there is a light. I'm now in a hostel, it's not much, but it's a locked door. It's a barrier, I can take that jacket off. I can start to rebuild.

The first night at the hostel, in that room, in my room, I carefully undressed, folding my clothes, hung that jacket behind the door, and climbed into bed. There I lay, not just naked, but naked. Even though I was in a room with a locked door and with a porter on the front desk downstairs, I didn't feel safe.

So I stood up. My clothes stayed where they were, but that jacket, I pulled it around myself, zipped up the zip, snapped closed the buckles and lay down to sleep.

My first two nights were like that. Get back to the room, undress, put on the jacket. That's where I had lived, that's what had kept me safe.

Then I started collecting all my belongings together. In one of the boxes, I had half dozen leather jackets - I looked at them, pulled them out one by one. It's only been a few days, but the first time the jacket was left hanging behind the door, and I went about town in one of the others, I was thinking - would I be safe? I was jumping at the slightest thing. I was having to keep watch and I was unable to sit in a crowded place.

That first day without my usual armour and trying on others, I ended up having to change jackets three times.

Looking at that jacket... it's where I lived. Now I think, did it keep me safe or was it a prison? Now, as I start to rebuild, I look at it.

The memories: cold stone, rancid air, waking in the morning, half asleep, trying to find the duvet. Maybe it was a prison. Maybe it had me trapped. Where did I live for the past few months in that jacket?

If I went through the pockets now, I could tell you what was in each. Inside left, hair brush; inside right, a couple of disposable razors; outside bottom right, spare lighter and cig papers. After all, when you live somewhere you know pretty much where you keep everything.

I haven't touched that jacket in days. It still hangs there. Is it a talisman of strength, or did it by its sheer weight drag me down? Did it protect me or hinder my escape?

I don't know how I feel about that jacket; about the memories it holds. But it is where I lived in some of my darkest days.

Maybe one day I will take it down, put it back on, but until then it will stay, always on display, where I can look at it. Until I can finally figure out what it all means, until I can figure out what it all meant.

### ***Fucked Up Christmas***

#### **Mark**

It was Christmas Day eight years ago and I lay on the sofa looking at the festering ulcer on my right ankle. The curtains were drawn, and I lay there alone and in pain in my gloomy little room, suffering severe withdrawal from heroin.

As I was on crutches, I had not been able to go out to steal anything to sell so I could score. So I was fucked!

I could hear the odd person going by outside, children laughing, playing, having snowball fights and building snowmen. I did not have the strength to move to look outside, and I didn't want to.

I just lay there, wallowing in my depression, cursing the day I started taking drugs. I was starving, I hadn't eaten for days. I'd spent everything on heroin.

There was a knock on the door. It was the caretaker of the building, who called through the door saying there was somebody downstairs to see me.

I couldn't face anyone. I just wanted to be left alone. I didn't answer him and drifted off back into the madness in my mind that throbbed relentlessly in time with my pounding heart. I threw a corner of my smelly blanket over my feet so I didn't have to watch the pus running out of the hole in my leg, buried my head under the pillow, and cried Christmas into oblivion.

### **See See T.V**

#### **John Wilkins**

Always looking out for me

I used to think of them as a reassuring presence. Isn't that what Big Brothers do – look out for you?

However, after a couple of months of sleeping rough I noticed that their stares were beginning to be directed at me. Up on their poles, white metallic fingers pointing, sending out a silent message: 'He's different, keep an eye on him.'

And I wondered, do you need to be protected from me now?

If my finger points at you, does it mean that you're not true?

## ***i loved more after i lost her***

### **Danny**

Looking back, I wonder why I could not show my feelings; to love and be loved. I would give anything if I could turn the clock back and show you the real me without the drink and drugs. After so many lonely years, with you and the kids always in my thoughts and prayers, I cringe at some of the things I said and did under the influence of drink; the insanity of loving drink more than you - the times that I walked out to get a drink leaving you crying, begging me to come back.

I have spent many lonely nights longing to tell you how sorry I have been, to hold you, look into your eyes and say 'I love you.' I guess it's only words, and actions speak louder than words. That's why I just stay out of your life. Maybe I am afraid to see you again, afraid to bring out all of the emotions and feelings that I have buried deep down in my heart.

Yes, I have changed. I only wish I could give you all the real love I have learned since I last saw you. Growing up is hard to do. I wish you all the happiness on your journey through life. I guess I had to lose you to find me.

You will always have a special place in my heart. I have learned so much from you. As I get to understand the meaning of love, I love you more each day.

Today I can only let go, and let God and I feel privileged for you being there as part of my journey.

God bless, Danny Boy.

### ***Wake-up call***

### **Martin Curtis**

I really am so grateful that, at the age of thirty-seven, I am still alive and healthy. What? Thirty-seven - that's well short of the three score years and ten that is the biblical quotient of how long a man should live. But, seriously though, I am lucky to be sat here writing this and for that, yes, I am very grateful.

So what could have killed me then? Why do I feel so lucky to be alive? Why this gratitude? At only thirty-seven a lot of people I know are still living as they were at twenty-seven. Physically active, going to work, children, settled place to live ...

Well, as an ex-homeless person, the factors surrounding my health are different to yours. I will explain this. If you've never ever spent a night sleeping (if one can call it that!) away from your cosy bed, and your nice warm partner and that soft carpet that you put your feet on when you get up to go for a pee; consider where you might be.

You might be searching for some place suitable to rest your head, trudging for miles on tired and aching feet, and have knackered legs and such a thirst burning at your throat. Then you find a cosy looking doorway. Cosy? Cosy my arse! It's cold. Draughty. Damp. The smell of urine and fag butts and ... sorry, you drew the short straw! The park bench

and newspaper, stuff of cartoon legend – it doesn't work. Have you tried it? Night after night, not knowing where you will lay your head? It does your head in. It really does.

So, in my youth and wisdom, I felt sorry for myself, desired to indulge myself. So I did. But not the way I should, could, might have done. These days it's different. I have a bed. I'm very grateful for that too!

How did I indulge myself? Drugs, drink, glue - whatever! Made myself feel differently, see differently the bad situation I was getting into.

So there I was, from age seventeen right through to age twenty-three, sleeping in derelict buildings when I could, doorways, tents, people's sofas if I was fortunate. And, you know, it screws with your health.

Now health isn't just physical, but yeah, my physical health ain't what it should be. Just had an abscess cut out of my groin. 'When will you learn, Martin?' I ask myself. Is this the wake-up call? I certainly hope so.

And the last wake up call? Getting sent to prison for selling drugs to an undercover policeman posing as a junkie. That was only last October. Drew a few months on remand and a place in rehab and nine months on a DRR (Drug Rehabilitation Requirement), 'Pete Doherty' group therapy programme. I lost my flat for that one.

Sometimes I am my own worst enemy. I am so very lucky not to have died – choked on my own vomit, overdosed - I've had some bloody close calls - got run over drunk, shot for stealing from bad people. Got a kicking whilst sleeping (with Valium's help) in a doorway. I even jumped off a bridge and broke my back. Funny, that one. Did me a favour.

What, you broke your own back and you say that's doing yourself a favour? Yes, it was a wake-up call. Made me show myself more self-respect - pay bills and keep the roof over my head, not get into tussles with store detectives. Lay off the smack.

So, abscess removal. Alarm. 'Wake up, Martin' (as, one day, you know you won't). But today I did and for that, I am grateful.

### ***Who are these people?***

#### **Simon Brown**

Dossers, bums, tramps, hobos and wasters.

Vagabonds, layabouts, scum and dropouts.

Druggies, alcoholics and those pitiful sun baked little old wino's....

Where do all these horrible people come from?

They can't be from where I'm from,

I wasn't brought up that way

Nutters, nerds, mad folk and windowlickers, who walk around my streets murmuring to themselves for comfort.

Who on earth are they?

Where do all these horrible people come from?

They can't be from where I'm from; I wasn't brought up that way

No... they cannot be ex-army and service veterans, old age pensioners or those without care.

They can't have been brought up in children's homes or lost their marriages, their children, their lives, their homes.

They cannot be vulnerable, lost or scared or have suffered unimaginable abuse.

Come on... Who on earth are they?

Where do all these horrible people come from?

They can't be from where I'm from; I wasn't brought up that way

Yes, I realise they are people, black people, white people, yellow, people, old people, young people, middle aged people, fat people, thin people.

But... who are they?

Where do these people come from?

No! They cannot be mothers or fathers, sons and daughters, aunties, uncles and nephews and nieces.

Who are they?

Who the bloody hell are these people who walk my streets?

Send them home.

What do you mean they have no home?

Everybody has a home

Don't they?

## ***Prisoner of War***

### **Martin Curtis**

I wake up to the glare of a strip-light overhead. I feel disorientated and imagine for a second that I am a prisoner of war undergoing interrogation. Then the feeling subsides as I realise that I am alone and that there aren't any people around to interrogate me. I still don't quite know, or perhaps don't want to acknowledge, where I am.

The cold air pierces the rough woollen blankets above me; the blankets that have been scratching my face. Was it this that woke me? Maybe it was the damp concrete and the pain it gives me in my hips and knees? The cold, the damp, the nearly-futile blankets, the invasive, privacy-depriving strip-light?

It's that bloody coldness I guess; that and the dampness seeping up through the thin layer of cardboard underneath me, compounded by the glaring light. My nose, too, is so blocked that I can't even breathe properly. Even so, the smell of Jeyes fluid registers in my brain; Jeyes fluid used in a poor attempt to wash away stale urine.

Yeah, as I wake up, I recognise it, this alien environment that, every night, I call home. My throat is parched and my taste buds numbed by the endless cans of cheap cider from last night. But I'm glad my sense of taste is shot, so I only vaguely taste what I can smell - which is rank and rancid. I can see twin lights, car headlights and hear an engine coming towards me. Now I can smell fresh exhaust fumes. My eyes take in the black stains on grey concrete walls. Stale urine, stale exhaust fumes, and only reasonably fresh disinfectant.

You are welcome to my bedroom. I sleep in a car park. As the headlights edge closer I pull the blanket over my head, wishing to close off this apocalyptic vision. I fantasize that I am elsewhere. I pull the blankets over my head to cut out the fluorescent glare. I try to return to sleep, but I can't. The cold, and damp, and cramp in my bones won't let me.

### **Dave Mitchell**

Dave Mitchell attended workshops for this project from April - August 2005. This photograph is one of a series of self-portraits that show him breaking a spoon - an implement used in the taking of heroin. It symbolizes the battle to break his habitual drug use; use which, he said, had contributed to his instability and homelessness.

Passionate about wanting to pass his message on to others, Dave's warm presence and enthusiasm in the sessions endeared him to workers and participants alike.

Dave died in his room in September 2005, from an accidental overdose.

## ***Miss X***

### **Simon Nihill**

It's hard to keep a relationship going when homeless, especially for a woman.

We found ourselves homeless, we both served prison sentences. Miss X came out one month after me. I had managed to spend my first night in Miss X's mother's flat overlooking the Thames in London, Blackfriars Bridge right next to the flat, it was a night that I had waited two years for, special.

The next day, back to Brighton. I'm in charge now. Where are we both going to sleep? This is the love of my life. Miss X can't sleep on the streets - what sort of guy am I? I have a room in St. Patrick, but my lady has nowhere. What time is it? 12 midday. Council tell her that she must come back tomorrow. Shit. The time is passing, the shops are nearly shut. Churchill Square... into the mall, Superdrug (I have to make £50, worst way). A hotel room for the night, which we managed to do. Once in bed, I asked myself why am I living like this again? Next day, back to the Council. Miss X has to put a few tears on, just to get her in to New Steine Mews. We were both clean of drugs.

I couldn't have visitors at St. Patrick, but New Steine Mews would let you have visitors so, as time passed, Miss X managed to get a flat and run off with a chef. I know, deep down, that we were not strong enough to stay together and that was the test of Miss X.

If you love something very special then there are times you must let them spread their wings and fly. Yes, clearly it hurt me, but maybe it was for the best. I don't have the worry of having to have money coming in daily. If you are a couple and can manage to stay close through thick and thin, then I'm sure you are made for each other. Street life and hostel life are tests, they break you or make you.

### ***Wish you were here?***

### **Simon Brown**

I did.

Brighton has always had a particularly strong image for me. Even before I had visited, I would hear things about Brighton. It seemed a destination that offered refuge to those less tolerated elsewhere.

Things thought queer or peculiar elsewhere, were tolerated and promoted in Brighton: new drugs, new music, new thinking were available and embraced. Gay people seemed happy to live there; bisexuals and lesbians were so much a part of the life that the acronym GBL was bandied about, to save long-winded sentences in council and police literature – even the Jobcentre wanted to get it right.

Sex, drugs and party town - Mods and Rockers, Fish & Chips, deckchairs and fetish nights. Fatboy Slim finally lured me down to dance on the beach. A superb weekend unfolded, an impromptu festival; tents and all, on various green patches around the suburbs.

The Marina came as a surprise to me as did the endless lanes of bars and restaurants, a Palace billed as a Pavilion, Piers, people, and hedonism.

This place, now real to me, was to be experienced time and again for disorganised adventures and my top five destination list now included Brighton. However, on my last return, I was really the worse for wear. As The Verve pointed out, 'The drugs don't work, they just make you worse.' I, however, wasn't sure whose face I would see again.

To find myself in Brighton, not by plan or design and to realise my potential for homelessness, and finally live it on these welcoming streets, was an experience.

Although I was skint, scared and powerless, I had a belief in Brighton as a creative and kindly town, where humans were catered for and helped to survive.

Initially, I found my mouth to be my best tool for survival, asking people for spare change. Eventually I found support via various street services and night shelters. I managed to eat, sleep and wash in relative safety and warmth. My drug problem had brought me to pathetic depths - begging and stealing, and I knew I needed to change - but how?

Again, Brighton catered for me. I accessed meetings for people like me, and rehab, funded by Housing Benefits, where people can recover. I still live here, happily, clean and in my own home. Rather than 'particular', I call the services I accessed 'peculiar' to Brighton. It seems more fitting.

I was supported, encouraged, fed and sheltered, by people, projects, and churches in Brighton. I wasn't judged for my predicament, and I was offered a solution. I learnt to understand myself and my problems, and I now offer my experience and skills to help others learn that they are not destined to stay trapped in their misery. They can access the same support, peculiar to Brighton, and get well too.

Wish you were here? If you do, just be careful what you wish for.

### ***Advice to a younger self***

#### **B**

'Do less drugs,' I would probably advise myself, if I was able to go back and have a word. Not 'don't do any,' 'cos they have been valuable to my creativity and evolution. Cannabis, for sure, has helped chill me out, and some of the chemicals have provided spiritual revelations, but doing too many has been a hindrance. William Blake said the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom, but Einstein also proved that what goes up must come down. Having flown far too high on several occasions, I have hit my head on the ceiling and come crashing down to the most miserable of comedowns. This has meant many a concussed messing up with women that I might have stood a chance with otherwise. Not only women, but also getting the other things I wanted to do in this life achieved.

Living in drug circles, the drugs have become everything. Times that I have got out of Brighton and, say, gone to a Buddhist retreat or to Sweden, where drugs are hard to come by, I have returned with a noticeable clarity, enjoying the non-addled-ness, until I got back into familiar routines once again. Of course I don't know the exact percentage of my last

fifteen years awake consciousness that has been spent in stoned-ness, but I figure it's at least eighty percent. I have still got quite a few things done, like bringing out a novel and, as of recently, making films, but reckon at thirty-one I could have done a great deal more.

A regular nine-to-five job was never anything I ever aspired to though, and I'm glad if drugs have helped keep that from becoming a reality. I'm with Bill Hicks, who said marijuana doesn't make you lazy or un-motivated, it just makes you realize you might not want to waste your life getting up early each day to go to a job you hate, when you can instead wake up at noon and do something more fun (like learn to play the sitar). I guess I have got some laziness from it - spent more time stoned dreaming than doing - but hey, no regrets. Actually when thinking about it, I reckon I have done OK. (Think I could have saved myself a lot of grief with the women failed with, and not going for a proper job.)

### ***The First Time I Received a Sentence***

#### **Simon Nihill**

I stood in a box with glass around me. Two big prison officers stood beside me. It was quiet, as the judge gave out the sentence. All that went through my head was 'how will I cope?' I was scared, but refused to show it. After the judge gave me my sentence, I heard 'Take him away.' Once down the stairs I was stripped naked and made to pull my bum cheeks apart. I was so scared I just done what was told of me.

Once the officers had left and shut the steel door, I looked at the walls with people's names and sentences on them. The smell was bad. People were just so hardened to the system that they would piss on the floor and shout abuse at the officers, who never blinked an eyelid. The bench I sat on was hard, with grooves in it.

Next door I could hear prisoners asking, 'When will the prison bus be here?' 'Five o'clock.' I heard one officer saying.

Five o'clock came, I could hear the bus upstairs reversing. The place smelt of piss and BO.

My door was opened and the handcuffs were put on me until I got to the bus. I told myself not to worry; this sentence will be served, and the less I speak, the more I will learn.

Then, the morning that my sentence finished, finally came. The taste of freedom smelt good for a couple of weeks, until I was back on the streets again. Nowhere to go, no one to help. Who said life was easy?

### ***Don't Get Caught***

#### **Danny**

People have often asked me 'Why did you become homeless?' To say it was just because of the drink or drugs, although they are a major factor, is not the whole story.

There is a total lack of responsibility, a freedom, a camaraderie and an adrenalin-fuelled survival buzz which is as liberating as it is nihilistic, that fulfils some kind of primal need within me.

Society gives us the rules to live by, but when you're homeless, most of those rules go by the board.

Why?

Because, if your homelessness is based upon a need to drink, to acquire and use the money to do so, there are no rules, except - 'don't get caught'.

You may be dependent upon your drug of choice, but, once the need is met, you can start to enjoy the superficial temporal freedoms it gives you.

It has always struck me as funny that the people who tell you to get a life and get a job are usually unhappy with their own.

So pass the bottle Danny.

### ***The Regency Project***

#### **Richard Rowland**

Three years ago, I was commissioned by Brighton Housing Trust to photograph The Regency Hotel in Oriental Place, Brighton. It has, for the past thirty years, been run as a private concern, housing the city's homeless. In 2002 the housing trust purchased the property and began a major restoration project. My role has been to document the entire process and the lives of those affected, the residents, staff and workmen, as the place embarked on a new episode in its life. The Grade II listed building was built in the early 19th century as part of the city's grand Regency vision. It started life as four individual dwellings which were used as lodging houses. Between the wars, they were combined into a single hotel. In the mid-1960s it was established as the country's first YWCA and, in 1980, it became a hostel for homeless men.

On my arrival, the building was in an appalling state - virtually uninhabitable. There were, nevertheless, still sixty residents, many of whom remained throughout the reconstruction period.

I photographed the inhabitants as well as spaces and surfaces and everyday objects. The images bear witness to past events and catch the traces of the lives that have been spent here - the lives of those that have known homely comforts, style and grace and also those that have suffered abuse, aggression and despair. Maybe now, with the restoration, will come lives that know hope.

I have tried to uncover the things that have been hidden by time or social invisibility, to show the tensions that are inherent in a place such as this and reveal the relationship in which this dwelling and its inhabitants have been enmeshed.

The project has received full support and mentoring from David Chandler and Photoworks and was fully funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

## **ANTI-LOVE RANT**

### **B**

Love. I don't believe that such a thing exists. Nothing but a temporary diminishment of loneliness and a trick to keep people reproducing when there are too many damn people already.

I don't want kids, and I don't want love.

The times I have gone with it I have made myself vulnerable, and yes, I have been hurt. I have hurt myself by allowing it to happen. But not anymore, I've learned to stop putting my hand in the fire and to stop banging my head against brick walls. Born alone and die alone - happy to stay this way in-between. Not to say I haven't got some very good friends, but my long time wanting of a special soul mate female friend, I now see to have only been a case of grass is greener syndrome.

I see few examples of lasting relationships, and then it's only to see the stress that they cause. Maybe it's just Brighton women, but those I have fallen for here have turned out to be off their heads. Sure, I've had some nice moments with a few ladies before they have turned into Mrs. Hyde. I need a lot of personal space to get on with the things that I do. So in the long run this has probably been for the best. I look at mates in relationships getting nagged and being under the thumb and I am glad that I am not enduring that.

### **Respect**

#### **Jacqui Martin**

Why is it, that if you have been given temporary accommodation because of homelessness, you are often required to top-up your rent benefit? This money is supposed to be used to feed yourself with and it is hard enough as it is, living on a small amount of money.

In my experience, much of the accommodation is sub-standard and in need of repair and I have also come across staff who are unreliable and untrustworthy.

Why do you have to have 'local connections' here in Brighton in order to get council housing? People who buy houses don't have to. Surely we all have the right to live wherever we choose? We don't need to be told where to live – why should we have to move away from friends?

Private rent is so expensive. Many of my friends who live in private house-shares pay £350-£400 each, just for one room and the share of a toilet, bathroom and kitchen, with as many as five or six people in a house.

The rents are not compatible with the wages round here, so it is very hard on the working person. Why can't we bring back the Fair Rent Board to challenge the landlords who charge these extortionate rents? There must be a way that we can look at this situation. There are many buildings which are not being used that could be converted into affordable accommodation.

Some people come to Brighton for help with drug and alcohol abuse, as there are various agencies and health centres that provide this kind of help. But it is very hard to overcome problems with drugs and alcohol whilst living on the street. You have no home or work, and you feel worthless. And, anyone who lives on the street is vulnerable; at risk of being robbed, beaten up, or even killed.

We are all human beings and deserve to be treated with respect.

### ***Snatch***

#### **Mick O**

I've been asked a lot, lately, why I can't give up my dog (Snatch) to help sort my life out. I think that the people who ask such questions haven't had a dog of their own.

Snatch is more than just a pet, she's my companion in life and she gives a lot more than she gets. She gives me unconditional love and protection. She isn't aggressive unless it's called for. I can sleep sound on the street, because I know Snatch is watching out for me. For the seven years we've been together, she has stopped people coming near me when I'm asleep; from piss-heads to Police, she's stopped the lot. She comes everywhere with me all of the time. I get so much from her. She makes me smile when I'm down.

She is part of me sorting myself out, keeping me out of nick because of my responsibilities to her. I can't give her up, I owe her so much - more than I can say.

Mick has since found accommodation at Emmaus.

### ***Gone***

#### **Coralee**

I was all alone in a big pub doorway that was closed, eating a Christmas dinner a man had bought me from Piccolo's, the day before, when I had begged him.

A girl that I'd met while being on the streets turned up and I shared my dinner and coffee with her. After we ate we took the plates and cups back and said thank you. They gave us five pounds each.

We went for a walk and it was so cold we decided to go to the car park under Churchill Square. It was warm in there. We decided to go to bed and said goodnight.

In the morning when I awoke, Chez had gone. She had taken my five pounds as well. To a homeless person, five pounds is a lot of money.

During Boxing Day, I heard that she had passed out and an ambulance had taken her to hospital. She was very poorly and had fallen into a coma. She woke up the next day, and was dead the day after that. It was all because crack cocaine had caused abscesses on her lungs and they had started bursting and poisoning her blood. This killed her.

I closed my eyes and said goodbye to a girl who was loved by a lot of people.

Drugs are very nasty.

They kill eventually.

So I'm getting away,

Before they kill me.

### ***A Very short career in heroin Supply***

#### **Paul**

This attempt at maintaining my supply of heroin for a six-day period now reads like a comedy of errors, but it reflects to me and hopefully to others, that the end of my using had well and truly arrived.

I had been courting the idea of stopping my heroin addiction for some time, and now had attained a place in rehab. It was a Monday when this plan began. The Tuesday of the following week was my planned exit from the path I was currently on. A Hostel Junkie, fast approaching prison or death, I was, however, managing to keep my spirits and appearances up, for my father in particular. I would often call him, in an attempt to secure cash for sympathy, problems I had dreamed up etc., and I was sensing this was now also coming to an end.

The problem this time was how to maintain my supply until next Tuesday. Financing options were low. I didn't want to get nicked now, so I decided to tell my Dad I had quoted for some gardening and fencing work and needed to buy materials. I could tell he was nonplussed, but I persisted over the next couple of days, telephoning progress reports and probable costs of materials etc.

Reality was, I had decided to deal drugs for the next few days. My telephone calls were regular and planned, asking banal questions like 'do you usually have to pay for materials in advance? 'cos I only have £130 and the costs are over £300'.

The end result was cash, about £220. The pissy stench in the phone box, day after day, was worth bearing for this result.

I went to another phone box with the same smell to put together a deal.

I had limited options. Most of the dealers I knew already knew me and, in fact, between them, I owed thousands of pounds for previous drug dealing ventures, all of which had failed to profit. But I was undeterred. In fact I was excited.

It was a hot, sunny day and I was feeling sweaty and quite weak by the time I had brokered a heroin deal. I could now smell vomit mixed with the more pungent urea and was glad to have only one more quick call to make.

The crack dealer sounded short, sharp and angry when I finally spoke. 'Who is dis?' he was saying.

'Me' I said. I had been retching and sneezing when he answered.

Within the hour, I had connected and walked home with both parcels. The brown one on its own would have been OK, maybe. The white one with it spelled disaster really, but still I couldn't see this, however many times it happened. I could forget the historic and probable outcome of Paul smoking crack.

In my room at the hostel I lived like a prisoner - a small, narrow, corridor like space, a bed, a wardrobe, sounds, TV, too much stuff all crammed into too small a space. It was like a strange tribal dance trying to navigate in one direction from door to bed, collecting up my pipe and paraphernalia on the way.

Within minutes my room now felt like Vietnam. The crack had me feeling as though I was under attack, surveillance and suspicion. A war zone erupted in my mind and the compulsion to look under the door was now too strong to resist.

If anyone was watching me, they'd have been in hysterics. All I could do was tiptoe about, lay down flat and see if anyone was outside my door, twitch curtains and hold my breath so I could hear them, whoever they were. This didn't reflect my business plan of getting out and about to serve up other brownheads and make my money back.

After a few hours and a very diminished supply, I had sold a few bags to the other residents to whom I had advertised my new company earlier in the day.

On my first telephone order I went down to the town centre. It turned out to be a bit of a turkey and my friend claimed to have got confused. We decided to stroll to another phone box, probably a stinker, to order another crack rock. Not good.

This is where my destiny was underlined. Whilst leaving the house I saw a police car. My decision-making process was fucked. Instead of leaving the gear at the house, I thought we may see some punters en route. The only people I saw were the same police, who were armed and decided to stop and search me.

The rest is obvious, only I didn't miss my rehab placement. I was tried, found guilty and given a six-month bail date to return for sentencing.

I made the significant changes to my life that the courts so rarely see and am writing this a free man in every sense of the word.

### ***Sergeant Siggs***

#### **Chris**

Sergeant Siggs, sinner or saviour,  
constantly watching my behaviour,  
over me just like a rash  
hindering my quest for cash.  
Even though I abhor him still,

He helped me strengthen my clean-will.

A copper born and bred and built

he'd follow me up to the hilt

of my chaotic life and plan,

I hate to say the better man.

I'll never be a friend of his

But thanks to him for saving Chris.

### ***Gimme Time***

#### **Chris**

I have spent a week now, wondering what to write, the subject: things done to survive. The past seven days haven't been easy. I've thought about it sober, I've thought about it drunk. Most of the weekend was spent in a hospital bed, it's that asthma thing.

There are things that, even now, keep me awake at night. I didn't know what to write until about 12:30 am. There is a woman where I live, her flat is just above mine. She's intelligent, witty, stunning and there's a spark between us.

Last night we shared a bottle or two of wine and played backgammon. We talked. She knows of my time sleeping rough. Last night she asked me 'Were you afraid - what made you afraid?' I could have been honest, opened up and tried explaining, or I could have come out with a glib answer. What did I say? 'There's spiders, and heights, not my thing.' She just looked at me, drank some wine and said 'That's why I can't have a relationship with you. You put up too many barriers.'

How can I tell her that I am afraid, nearly all the time? I'm afraid of me, and what would happen if I ever let go.

Nothing in my life could ever have prepared me for being on the streets and sleeping in car parks. At first there was fear for my safety. Would I be beaten up? Would I get robbed or worse? Then, as the weeks wore on, there was fear that I wouldn't be able to blag enough money for wine and fags, then the fear that I would never be able to fit back into society.

I have done things I am ashamed of, things I don't like facing or admitting to. Only once did I face violence, but my sense always taught that if you have to fight, fight to win; make sure there is no possibility of a re-match. I faced violence once and then I almost let go. I have built up defences against my emotions, to help me cope with the things that I had to do: debasing myself to get another drink, pushing self-respect aside, lying, cheating.

These memories have been pushed down where they cannot hurt me. But in doing so, it feels like I have lost something that once made me feel human.

Let me give an example. Way back, before all this, I worked in a pub. There was a customer, call him Gus, and one night he was drunk and I refused to serve him. He was angry and said 'You're nothing but a big, fat wanker.' I laughed and replied, 'Two out of three ain't bad.'

Somewhere, in the time I spent sleeping rough, I lost that ability - the ability to laugh at myself.

I hope one day to find it again, I hope this woman gives me time to find it again.

## ***The FUTURE***

### **B**

Well, another writing group reaches its end. It has been fun - good group, new friends and a chance to get back to some writing. Had been drifting off that path a bit since completion of my novel, turning my creative energies to making films. But good to keep in practice in what I have enjoyed doing from day one (well the first day that I picked up a pen) - expressing myself and telling stories with the written word.

Where do I wanna go from here? Get more into the films I reckon. Good to post them on the internet and see that people are viewing them and leaving their comments. I have already turned a few of my short stories into BMoviez and put them on youtube.com. Of course I want to keep writing too, no question about that, and the new writing group for next year sounds promising, and the idea of us lot from this group continuing to meet and share our writing even without this course's tutor facilitating us. As long as I am getting things done and can afford it. I still like to play a bit of poker, a game I have studied closely the last few years and got better at. Occasionally it gives me a nice windfall. Even with a few of these recently, I am still in debt, not only from my poker education, but bringing my book out too and drinking. Another future ambition would be to pay that off. It'd be nice to raise enough to do some more traveling at some point. Maybe work towards looking at next summer for that. Otherwise happy to have a life of making my films and writing, playing online poker, watching films, reading and having a laugh with friends. Good enough way to spend my time 'til time ends six years from now in 2012 mebbe.\*

\*according to the Mayans, who have been right about everything else.

## ***reckless in love***

### **Martin**

I have always been reckless in love and relationships. I guess I have been pretty reckless about every aspect of my life partly as a result of my being constantly in-securely housed or homeless in the past.

I remember when I first came to Brighton for a few days to stay. My girlfriend, who was in prison at the time, had given me the keys to her flat in Buckingham Road. When we had first met I had been homeless, but resolved the situation partly, perhaps even mainly, because I fancied her and needed somewhere to take her.

We'd met in Southampton, in the bail hostel. I got a studio flat sorted out which, unappreciatively, I decided was shit. It wasn't that nice, but it did give me the chance to have a romantic liaison with this girl.

Fast forward to my first visit to Brighton, to this girl's flat. I'd visited it once, before she had been sent to jail. Our relationship was based upon the fact that she needed somebody who didn't mind going to her flat and checking up on it and staying in it for a few days every month. I'd needed a shag, some female company and, if the cost of that was to look after a two-bedroom flat, close to Brighton station with sea views (I know, I know, I'd have made a darned good estate agent), then it didn't seem too onerous a task.

I got on great with my girlfriend all of the time that she was in prison - absence makes the heart etc.

My first visit to the flat, and to Brighton on my own, showed me the unique flavour of Brighton and its homeless people. Where I came from, only park bench sherry alcoholics would beg you spare change. Not so in Brighton.

I saw a young-looking girl begging down by Western Road. I was about to go shoplifting to raise some money to visit the pub and I felt all high and mighty, asking myself questions like, 'Is she physically unable to do a graft (steal) or just spineless?' But she was neither. She was cheeky, witty and pretty.

A lady, whom she had asked for change, stopped, and I, stood a few feet away, pretended to look in a shop window. I tried to think up a good way to introduce myself and not make it too obvious that I rather liked her whilst overhearing the conversation, which showed me that a) you could get serious cash begging b) my cynical view of the world and its inhabitants was not valid in Brighton and c) not every beggar is a sherry drinking piece of alki scum (I know, addict snobbery of the worst kind but that's how I used to see the world).

The conversation I heard proceeded thus: the lady said 'OK, I'll give you enough for a cup of tea.' Then in a slightly patronising and overbearingly right on way, 'Now, you do want the money for food, don't you?' The question though was pointless and Donna, the beggar, skilfully parried it. Donna replied 'Nah, I want it for hash.'

I was shocked to the core. Even more so when the lady gave Donna a fiver. As soon as the lady left I moved in.

'Oi, do you take speed. Come with me.'

Speed and methadone, Valium, alcohol and hashish later, I was safely ensconced in Donna's bed. Her cheeky, quirky personality combined with her lithe, supple and youthful body.

If it hadn't been for my girlfriend's flat, Donna could well have been more than a one-night stand.

And my girlfriend? She went off her head. Not because I was unfaithful, just that Donna was a mate of hers. Donna and my girlfriend were both equally crazy. And me? I was totally sane and stable!

Homelessness pushes people into casual flings for the sake of expedience. If someone, anyone, no matter how unsuitable, asks if you fancy going back to theirs for the night, if it is cold enough, you'll agree and consider the risks afterwards.

## **Stop**

I think this to myself, as I walk away from the man who has never spoken to me.

The same guy I have passed in the street for the last two years

Stop moaning and pick yourself up

Stop blaming others

Shut the f\*@k up!

Stop whingeing and asking society to carry you along

Stop demanding the impossible and look at yourself, just see what's wrong

Shut the f\*@k up!

Stop doing drugs and robbing off old ladies

Stop asking the world to save you

Shut the f\*@k up!

Stop blaming your parents- no one's had a great life

Stop yourself from crying when you hit a little strife

Shut the f\*@k up!

Stop picking dirty dog ends off the streets

Stop walking around all day looking at your feet

Shut the f\*@k up!

Stop asking me for money and trying to abuse me with your tears

Stop telling me 'I'm lonely and walk through your fears'

Shut the f\*@k up!

Stop acting like the artful dodger and saying 'top of the morn'

Stop looking at life through your sorry scorn

Shut the f\*@k up!

Stop saying 'spare any change'

Cos change comes from within

Stop doing all that heroin

And stop eating out of a bin

Shut the f\*@k up!

Shut the f\*@k up!

Don't contaminate me with your reality, your life and all your grief.

Just let me pass you in the street and let's just keep the eye contact brief.

Shut the f\*@k up!

I think this to myself

As I look at my reflection in the window

As I walk away from the man

Who has never spoken a civil word to me in the last two years.

### ***Running Home***

**Jo**

Oh God, please don't let him come over here.

We're on a train, Eastbourne to Brighton. No beds in Eastbourne. No hostels. No soup kitchen. Clearly, the homeless don't exist. Brighton will be better, Brighton's where it's at.

I look at Brian, he's seen him too. He's glaring down the carriage, guarded, wary. He looks like he's about to start growling.

The guy down the carriage slugs back another mouthful from the murky green bottle in his hand and sways over toward his next victims: a couple, nice looking, clean shaven man in sweater and a girl with a pink scrunchied pony-tail. He's not going to get anything out of them. The train jolts. He manages to hold onto his wine but loses his footing and almost lands on the lap of an elderly man.

'Well it weren't my fuckin' fault were it? 'Twere the poxy train!' A list of obscenities is hurled at the old man and the drunk stumbles further up in our direction.

Just don't look at him and he'll leave us alone.

I stare out of the window. Trees, cars, houses, graffiti, office blocks slide past.

I feel Brian tense next to me.

'Ya wanna bit o' me wine?'

I look up. Brian takes the bottle from the outstretched arm of the guy and takes a swig. His eyes never leave the guy's face. He hands the bottle over to me without breaking eye contact. I take a swig and grimace; the wine is like vinegar. I hand it back to the guy and look at Brian, mildly curious as to what he'll do next, having accepted the peace offering.

'I'm Jamie,' says the guy.

'Brian,' says Brian, and holds out his hand. They clasp hands arm-wrestling fashion and then touch their fists together. The bonding ritual is complete. I roll my eyes and look back out of the window. The bottle does another round and I start breathing normally again. Only Brian is still on guard, fists clenched ready in his lap. He has trust issues at the best of times.

'Can I sleep on your sofa?' Jamie's voice is whining and pathetic, obviously his best attempt at cute and adorable.

Brian shrugs, 'We ain't got no sofa mate, we're just turnin' up.'

I have never been so happy not to have a sofa.

Jamie's fiddling with something round his neck, under layers of t-shirts and stained jumpers. He's a lot skinnier than he looks. He scratches at his hair through the beanie he's wearing before giving a final yank to whatever's around his neck. A long silver chain comes free, followed by a key attached to the end.

'You can sleep on my floor,' he says.

Brian's brow furrows.

Jamie gets a tattered piece of paper out of one of his pockets and puts it on the white plastic table in front of Brian. He points at the address scrawled on it, 'That's me squat,' he slurs, 'gimme a fiver an' you can stay there too.'

There's an enormous clatter as my bag bursts open and my belongings spew out over the platform.

Shit, shit, shit... What I did not want was for Jamie to see how much jewellery I own.

I'm there on my hands and knees, scrabbling around grabbing fists full of necklaces, a CD, underwear. Jamie hands me an escaped sandal as I shove it all back in the bag. I can feel the heat coming out of my face and stare at the ground as we walk down Trafalgar Street and head into the North Laine.

When I asked why he suggested we come here, Brian had simply said 'Brighton's cool,' and I took him at his word; one place would be as good as another, anywhere, as long as

it wasn't where we came from. What I hadn't expected was to fall in love with the place on first sight. I want to stop and stare into every window, I want to explore every alley-way, speak to everyone we pass.

Jamie is swaying awkwardly across the road, he's saying how tomorrow we'll go to the day centre, he'll show us where to get food and give us the tour. When winter comes he'll teach us how to break into beach huts. It's lucky we met him.

'We'll find somewhere to live by then,' I say.

'No,' says Jamie, 'there's no beds around here, it's hard to get housed. 'We should stick with him. He knows how it all works. He gesticulates wildly as he speaks, narrowly missing a collision with a dustbin. I ignore him and concentrate on absorbing as much of the town as possible, try to look in every window as we mission past.

Jamie's squat turns out to be a derelict shop, four storeys high with a converted attic and small back garden. As far as he knows, this is the only key. A guy gave it to him along with the address at Victoria Station. I'm actually impressed.

Jamie takes a large second storey bedroom, we take the attic. I'm worried about not locking the door to our bedroom, but Jamie is just a hive of paranoia; his eyes flit from us to his bag, the window, the door. He gets all his stuff together and spends a good few minutes figuring out how to arrange as much of it as possible so it will be covered by his sleeping body. We leave him to it and retire to the attic. Brian always sleeps with one eye open and I sleep soundly on the beige carpet, curled up in the corner where the roof beams slope lowest.

I awake to the sound of *Champagne Supernova* floating up through the thin glass of the window pane. I open the window and stick my head into the late February air. Brighton is no less beautiful in daylight. Heads with hair of every colour bumble through the narrow streets below me, some giving money to the buskers - the source of the music. To me, the music is the sound of a past life: a boy I left behind. It sounds strange as a backdrop to my potential future. For a moment the guitar plucks at something inside me, but I'm disturbed by a series of crashes and bangs and the floor below me shudders. I run down the stairs.

Brian and Jamie have somehow acquired an axe, and are using it as an instrument of torture on the brickwork surrounding the ornamental fireplace in the second storey bedroom.

'What the fuck are you doing?' I yell, as another lump of plaster crashes to the ground.

'Jamie reckons we can flog this to the guy that owns the antique shop down the road.' Brian's voice is gruff from lack of sleep and too many cigarettes.

'But you're wrecking the place... This is your home, and you're destroying it!' I just can't believe their stupidity. Who in their right mind would buy anything off these two?

The day centre Jamie was talking about is called Halo and is in the Brighthelm Centre off Queens Road. The gruff, balding man behind the desk has a patch covering his left eye. He welcomes us so enthusiastically that I'm sure we must have met before.

Always nice to see a bit o' leather in 'ere,' he says, and winks with the eye that isn't covered. Brian and I are both wearing leather jackets which I guess makes us part of some gang or something. Actually, Brian comes from a family of Angels so he may not be far wrong. At least we have somebody who wants to help us out, I'm glad of the thought.

Lunch here is at 12:20pm, it seems so ridiculous that even as we hurried here, I was convinced Jamie had got it wrong. He hadn't, and at 12:20 prompt we're herded into a large hall of fold-up tables and chairs and dished up with a plate of slop which proclaims to be shepherds' pie, but in fact consists of at least sixty per cent baked beans mixed up with gravy and topped with lumpy potato and a fleck of cheese. I'm hungry enough to wolf this down and try to ignore a familiar tingling on my lips and tongue as my baked bean allergy kicks in.

After lunch we're herded out again and most people hang around smoking, playing pool and arguing. The others want to hang around too, so I take the opportunity to slope off alone.

Walking down London Road, I see a YMCA charity shop. Not a hostel, but obviously run by one and the nearest thing I can find. Inside sits a nice old lady in cardigan and floral skirt, brandishing a teacup. Her eyes widen as I explain my predicament. She doesn't say it, but I know what she's thinking: 'Too young.'

This is clearly not something she's been asked before but she hurriedly stammers out directions to the Brighton YMCA.

The YMCA is full, but the man inside tells me about another hostel: Direct Access. This one is first come first served, no waiting list. The first to call or turn up gets the room. I take down the address and phone number and head out to a phone box.

'Full,' comes the reply, but I'm encouraged to keep trying. I still don't feel like I'm getting anywhere. The thought of staying in the same building as Jamie 'til winter comes round and we can break into a beach hut is more than I can bear. I trudge back to the squat with my head down.

I think about keeping my hostel-finding mission a secret but end up recounting the whole story to Brian.

Jamie's not having any of it. 'Nah, there's never any beds in that place, been tryin' fer months. It's shit in there anyway, jus' stay 'ere an' we can go down the Peace Centre, claim squatter's right on the place.'

I nod and smile and privately decide to try calling Direct Access three times a day from now on. Maybe I should just go sleep on their doorstep.

As it happens, my first call on day two yields a result. They think there's a guy leaving soon, maybe in a couple of hours' time. I can't believe my luck. Part of me is certain that I'll be too late and somebody else will get the room. It takes over half an hour for me to run down there and find it.

From the outside you'd never guess this was a hostel. The shops on one side of the road suddenly pause and a driveway opens up into what looks like a short, squat retirement home. I check and then double check the address before ringing the bell.

The man behind the desk has a really large nose-ring that I can't stop staring at. He tells me I have good timing, there's a guy just leaving now.

The staff are warm and friendly but without being condescending or patronising, a pleasant change from some of the hostels I have stayed in before. I realise it's been a while since I had a normal interaction with a human being.

Back at the squat I start collecting my belongings and stuff them back into my bag.

'Been trying for months, have you?' I say, struggling with a zip, 'Didn't take me too long, did it? Only took two phone calls!'

Jamie is sulking. It's not my problem any more. He mutters something about owing him a fiver and stumbles out of the room. Brian helps with my bags. His ego is a little wounded by the fact it's me and not him who's sorting things out but it shouldn't be hard to get him in too, if I keep my ears open. I only feel bad that he'll have to put up with Jamie's whining 'til then.

Unpacking and allocating each of my belongings to its own little space, I can't help thinking that this has all been rather simple, like jumping off a cliff, only to discover that it wasn't a cliff at all but a slightly over-sized doorstep.

Dinner is at 7pm. The dining room is big and resembles a school canteen. We queue up with trays and pick what we would like from the day's meal. A girl with matted red dreadlocks announces herself a vegan, and she is catered for without any fuss. I sit on my own and munch happily on chicken and chips, thinking how great it is that the chicken hasn't been stuffed with baked beans, as it probably would have been at the day centre.

Later, I'm alone in my own room for the first time in weeks. Thinking is an activity I find I do very differently in public. Now, in private, can I really relax and let the corners of my mind fill the room. I lock the door and sit on the bed with a stupidly big grin on my face. The room is small and square. It has curtains at the window and, apart from the bed, covered by a green duvet, contains: one wardrobe, one chest of drawers, one small dresser, one mirror, one vase of flowers.

I open the window and hear the cry of the seagulls. I breathe in the salty air.

I live in Brighton,' I say, and smile.

### ***Babies***

(My Boys)

Side by side

Replicas of each other

You came into this world

With an enormous rush.

You fought to be first  
In that almighty push.  
Riley, you were first  
Into the light.  
Zekke, you were second  
And ready to fight.  
They gave me to hold you  
And feed straight away.  
Breastfeeding you both  
Just blew me away.  
They let you stay with me  
For only two days.  
Then up to SCBU  
They wheeled you away.  
My world then collapsed  
Because I knew that night,  
Was the last we'd ever spend  
As a unit so tight.  
And so my little boys  
Our time's at an end,  
But I'm always here for you  
To the death, you I'll defend.  
SCBU - Special Care Baby Unit

## ***Only when***

**Chris**

Over the past months I've had time to think; too much time as it goes.

There have been nights when I've re-lived past deeds and glories. At first, when I was sleeping rough, waiting for the wine to numb, there would be memories to comfort. Then, as the days and weeks passed, although no emotion, good, bad, bitter or happy. It had all happened to somebody else.

Faces would drift in and out of my not so sober mind - loves, conquests and rolling over in the night and feeling warmth.

Those dreams belonged to another time, another person. Even when I had money and would go to a bar, even when I was talking and seeing the bright spark in a woman's eyes, even then there was the doubt in myself; the feeling that if I told the truth she would go. Far better not to take the risk. Far better to keep what shreds of self-respect I had, than to have even more torn away.

Now we move to the present. Instead of being alone in the dark, waiting for the security guards to come and move me on, I have a room, music, TV, books. But still it's nothing I can call mine. How can anyone be allowed in, when even I don't know how long I can stay here.

In the early hours, the footsteps of other residents, returning from bars and clubs, echo in the corridor and yank me from sleep. Are they the security guards come to push me out into the wind and the rain?

Only when I feel secure, when I have a home, a place to lay to rest my demons, a place where I can look in the mirror and see only me, can I expect another to look me in the eyes and say "I want to know you".

## ***On attending A Writing Group***

Twelve at table

Some are able

To concentrate

But I am late

So what is new?

Two fifteen due

Now two thirty

No one shirty

So I sit down  
And lose my frown  
Two hour driven  
Tutor given  
Title is 'Sea'  
Return will she  
Getting started  
Group uncharted  
Noisy are some  
Why do they come?  
Must get a grip  
Not get the pip  
With inner muse  
Gently enthuse  
Quickly sortie  
Minutes forty  
Poem/picture  
With them hit yer  
So I contrive  
Lines twenty five  
Fate deals 'dirty'  
Makes it thirty.

## **The Write For Life Blog**

### **Dominique De-Light**

The following is taken from a blog I wrote whilst facilitator of one of the two Write for Life groups run at QueenSpark.

No privacy, no place of safety, no roof - homeless.

Drug addicts, no hopers, alcoholics, buskers, dirty, squatters, worthless, free loaders, beggars, illiterates.

They are powerless.

They are ruled by the whims of others.

They trust no one.

They are demonised and stereotyped by the media.

They have all lost something – whether it is a job, a family or a lover.

They are grieving.

Addicted to drugs, alcohol or shop lifting.

Suffering from poor health – whether from sleeping rough or through grief.

Dirty. Always dirty. That's what forces you to use the services, the need to be clean.

There are many in the group who feel they have been one or all of those things at some time, but it didn't explain the people sitting in front of me. I asked for some positives free spirits, creative and survivalists.

Writing helps - it gives people a chance to explore their experiences and balance, the individual, against the stereotype; the reality behind the assumptions.

Is there a homeless community?

Community evolves, no amount of good intentions can bring it into existence and it isn't something that can be created by the services. Homeless people meet when they attend Day Centres or use other services, but there are no such things as a 'First Base Crowd' or the 'Addaction folk.' People go to the services for what they can offer. If they didn't need them, they wouldn't go. And then there are always the self-excluders – those who trust no-one, who don't want to engage with others, whether peers or professionals.

The homeless are a community of people that are all out for themselves.

This may seem cynical, but it could also be said of society as a whole. One writer countered that selfishness is not a defining quality of the homeless community. In his

case, without the support of other homeless people, people who had given him food, clothes, even drugs, he would never have survived the streets.

Homeless people help each other - though that help, as in the gift of the one drink that tips you over the edge, can end up being destructive.

The writers agreed that, whilst there is no happy family of homeless folk, there are times, especially amongst the many small groups created by shared experiences, sofa surfing, drugs of choice, when homeless people do work as a true community.

## **Homeless in Brighton**

Places to stay if you're without a bed for the night:

Car parks, squats, doorsteps, derelict buildings, friend's sofas, the beach, under boats, under the pier, beach huts, St Patrick's night shelter.

If you're lucky, you might get temporary accommodation in a hostel or a B&B or, if your home has wheels, you may be permitted to park up in Braypool, the travellers' site in Patcham.

Brighton is an open-minded city, a holiday destination, a place to party and homeless people are drawn here for the same reasons as anyone else. If you're going to be poor and homeless, you might as well choose a sunny, relaxed seaside town. Brighton also has a wide range of services and this would seem to make it a sensible destination for the homeless. But there is one major drawback - the 'local connection' policy.

Implemented a few years ago, the council policy means that if you have no immediate relative - mother, father, siblings or adult children who have lived in Brighton for at least five years, no permanent local employment - or cannot prove (through utility bills or rent books) that you have lived in Brighton for six months out of the last twelve, or three years out the last five - the council have no legal duty to house you. Worse still, you cannot access any service for the homeless that has signed up to the policy (and as the services are funded in the main by the council they have little choice).

So, if you've lived with your partner and have never got your name on a tenancy agreement and you split up and get chucked out, not only do you have to cope with the fallout from the break-up and being homeless, but you have no access to basic support such as cheap food, washing and advice facilities. Your best, maybe your only hope, is a ticket out to a place where you do have a 'local connection', even if it's somewhere you've not been for years and where you find yourself stuck without contacts, friends or job opportunities.

## **Music**

The thing I noticed about music when I was homeless, was the lack of it.

Of course you can survive without music - but living without it can often underline the difference between belonging and being an outsider.

Apart from buskers, shop muzak or crackly day centre radios, homeless people don't get to hear much music. Some homeless people manage to hang on to cheap transistor radios, but they don't usually have it on for the music. A radio is, first of all, company.

Music is one of my favourite drugs.

Music works on many different levels, it is mood changing and addictive; playing it loud in the morning to wake up, to raise confidence or, alternatively using it to chill out. Some talked of how spliff helped them appreciate songs or how, in the old days, they'd go to raves where the music 'needed' ketamine.

One writer said homelessness had changed his music tastes; once an avid blues and jazz fan, he now prefers harsher sounds.

Homelessness makes you harder. I need angry songs I can relate to.

Some spoke of how their appreciation of music increased now they had their own homes. Listening to music was yet another loss they had suffered.

Strange, - music helped me come off heroin. Listening to music used to make me emotional. When I took heroin, it did nothing for me. On heroin, nothing touched me.

Music replaced drugs, altering mood and raising the spirit. Music played to reduce isolation. Music blasted to express frustration. Music to remind, renew and reinvigorate.

## **Friendship**

What is friendship?

Loyalty, togetherness, caring, faith, trust, reliability, honesty, forgiveness, understanding and making each other feel good.

Understanding is a quality that resonates in particular for the group. A friend is someone who understands what it's like to be on the street, to be drinking from a brown paper bag, to be searching for drugs on a cold dark night or to be down to your last 10p.

There's forgiveness too, out on the streets, though it's forgiveness born not of altruism, but out of necessity.

Living at a squat, my friends were my family. We all looked out for each other.

When someone receives their giro and it's a few days earlier than yours, they're suddenly your best buddy; a few days later and you don't want to know them.

All friendships when you're homeless have an agenda.

There are friendships that grow out of the drugs or alcohol you use.

You're friends with people you'd never dream of being friends with, the only thing you have in common is your addictions.

There's a different kind of friendship on the street. Friends are made faster, chaotic lives make for chaotic friendships. There are different sections of the community - ex army, ex cons, junkies, crack heads, drinkers and within them even narrower subsections. There are people known only by their first name and their choice of drink: 'Cider Dave' or 'Sherry Pete'.

When I was drinking, I'd go up to other drinkers - even when miles away from where I usually hung out and we'd get along, 'cause we had the booze in common.

Homeless people have no roots and no routine. Friends come and go, slipping in and out of touch. Life changes alter everything. Come out of rehab and you no longer speak 'street talk' but 'social care speak'. People leave you alone, knowing you've moved on.

Friendship has a different definition. It's about survival. You use people and they use you.

And what of old friends made prior to homeless days? Pride makes you turn the other way and duck into shop doorways. Pride stops you contacting them. You lose touch, things slide and, before you know it, it's too late to call. You need your new friends now; friends with new agendas, new priorities and new needs, people that some wouldn't call friends at all.

## **Pets**

Staffs, Lurchers, Alsatians, mongrels; homeless people aren't fussy when it comes to dogs. There are no months of considering which will be the right breed, the right temperament or the right price. Which dog usually comes down to one of two things; whether it became homeless with its owner or came free from an unwanted litter. Pet names are often imaginative, reflecting ambitions, drink of choice or physical appearance: Bogbrush, Butthead, Tennants, Brew, Peace and Love.

Homeless people have dogs for the same reasons as anyone else - they provide protection, companionship, loyalty and unconditional love. But, for someone sleeping on the streets, protection could mean the difference between life and death. Unconditional love and the responsibility a dog entails can give a homeless person a reason to keep going, a reason to survive.

A dog provides company, a talking point, a way to make new friends but it can also bring problems. Many day centres won't allow them. Jobs are hard to find when you have a dog in tow, suitable accommodation harder still. For some, a dog is the perfect excuse not to attend a group or not to get a hostel place. Sometimes it's less painful not to try, than to try and fail.

Many homeless people are successful and responsible dog owners, who use the free services of the PDSA and have cared for their pet for years. They find it offensive when people assume that their homelessness renders them incapable of looking after their pet.

On the other hand, there are some for whom the extra burden can be too much: the expense of food, the nightmare of having the dog stolen, the arrival of an unwanted litter. The stress of discipline can be hard on the emotionally fragile. The responsibility that saves some, can sink others.

And other pets? Some have had rats and some want budgies in the future, but dogs are the most practical for living on the streets, it's not like a cat would stick around...

## **Health**

Homelessness affects your health. Being exposed to the elements with no shelter or protection, a weakened immune system, little food and less sleep soon wears you down. There are the physical symptoms such as sore feet, coughs that won't go away and scabs that won't heal, but the deepest scars are caused by the mental effects of homelessness. Anxiety leads to insomnia, when the physical exhaustion from lack of sleep is overridden by the fear of being attacked. This is a very real threat; several members of the group have been assaulted whilst sleeping. Finding somewhere to sleep can be a battle in itself - one writer spoke about having to fight to secure a popular sleeping spot. Others talked of sleeping "with one eye open", of being constantly scared and having an increasingly tight chest.

Stress and its inevitable companion, depression, lead to a downward mental spiral. This is why it is so important for homeless people to access the services. Hot food, social interaction, warmth, a wash, free clothes and friendly advice have been of help to all the writers. No service is perfect, but for people in crisis they make a real difference.

Health problems can be a serious wake up call. One writer's behaviour went through a radical change after he broke his back. He couldn't run from store detectives any more and burglary was no longer an option. His life of crime was over. Later, after an operation to remove an abscess from his groin he stopped taking crack, reduced his drinking and got in touch with old friends.

Others used their health as a way to take control in a life where they felt they had no control at all. One writer, an asthmatic, stopped taking his drugs when his life started to fall apart. He discovered that the drugs had made no difference to his health. He felt much better for taking control and ridding himself of his dependence.

Having a home doesn't necessarily make you healthy and there can be a Catch 22 with health and benefits. Sometimes it seems as if the social security system wants you to be sick. One writer is taking Prozac to help his incapacity claim and another is frustrated because he wants to go back to work but has been told that if he finds a job he'll lose his temporary council accommodation. Without a job he has no way of raising a deposit for a flat. By not seeking work he will jeopardize his job seekers allowance. The only remaining option is Incapacity Benefit - which you need to be ill to get.

## **Survival**

However you end up on the street, whether you believe it is your own fault or the fault of others, the most important thing for every homeless person is - how are you going to survive? How are you going to get money?

For some, the worst things they'd ever done were jobs where they had felt the lowest of the low, such as cleaning or kitchen portering. Others had earned money by more immoral routes: selling drugs, being hired thugs, renting beds out to prostitutes. These activities were spoken about with shame, called immoral earnings and blood money. They caused people to realise that they'd sunk too low, that things had to change.

Shoplifting, begging, selling possessions to raise a little cash - anything to get by. But nothing comes without a price: the guilt of selling a present or family heirloom, the feeling of selling out the ones that love you - these all serve to crush any feelings of self-worth.

People robbed houses thinking home owners could afford it (they do have house insurance after all). Only later they realised the emotional damage they caused and how some things can't be replaced. Burglary isn't a good way to redistribute wealth.

Addictions blinded people to responsibility. Surviving meant lying; lying to others and to oneself. Surviving meant being in dead end relationships just for the company. When people are desperate, they do desperate things: borrowing money they know they'll never pay back, asking vicars for cash, committing crimes before Christmas to ensure being housed at Her Majesty's pleasure for the festive period, sacrificing their freedom for the sake of a bed and some food.

But even when homeless, the people in this group stayed writers and some managed to sell their work to the Big Issue for a little extra cash. You can take away someone's home and their possessions but you can't take away their self-belief; the belief that helped them survive, the belief that kept them fighting, the belief that keeps them wanting to put pen to paper and tell it how it is.

## **Misdemeanours**

Is it a crime to steal a loaf of bread when you're starving and homeless with no way of getting benefits or a job?

There are many homeless people who have never been involved in any illegal activity but there are those for whom crime and misdemeanours are closely linked to being or becoming homeless. We examined what it was that pushed people over the line into law-breaking.

It can start with rebellion pure and simple, rebellion against upbringing, society and the establishment. Or it can be less focused, a way to find excitement, to dispel boredom and frustration and make life a gamble. On some estates anti-social behaviour is an integral part of a culture, where joyriding and taking drugs are not so much crimes as valid pastimes. For young people who feel invincible and who are unaware of the consequences of their behaviour, it's just something to do – harmless fun.

There are others who, finding themselves on the outside without knowing why, turn to rebellion. One writer admitted that this was, for him, the main motivation; anger at a society that treats homeless people as the scum of the earth fuelled a desire for revenge. It was his way of saying "Fuck you!"

Sometimes misdemeanours are born out of sheer practicality. There is a point where breaking the law doesn't seem to be such a big step, when you have nothing to lose and you need to survive. Being without benefits or employment leads to desperation and finally anger.

Financial or emotional rewards and the improved status they might bring drove some. For others, limited horizons and the lack of knowledge of any alternatives closed down the options and dictated the route they would take.

Robbery, was by some, regarded as a political act with the old anarchist slogan 'Property is theft' as its justification. For the more romantic, the Robin Hood mentality - stealing from the rich to give to the poor - appealed, although the redistribution seldom went any further than to themselves.

The consequences of crime were discussed. How, one writer was asked, would he feel if he was the victim?

I'd be angry but at the end of the day I'd understand.

Whilst it's easy to talk about misdemeanours, the writers find it difficult to talk about things they are proud of. Though the desire and the ability to do good are definitely here. We talk about the successes that balanced out the misdemeanours. We hear how after years of charges, a participant has stopped offending, another speaks about finding the self-esteem that stopped him wanting to fight and finally one who explains the achievement of being here and making a positive impact with a piece of writing as opposed to being out there selling drugs.

## **Philosophy**

Treat others as you wish to be treated

Some are pragmatic in their attitudes - when you're homeless you live by 'street rules' - see nothing, hear nothing. Some talked of the desire to live outside mainstream society, of refusing to claim benefits and surviving solely by stealing from large corporations.

When the necessities of survival are taken out of the equation there is room for a more philosophical approach to life; talk is of respect, of caring for others and a belief in doing as little harm as possible - whether physically or environmentally. If it doesn't need mending, don't fix it. In the group there are a variety of allegiances: vegan, anti-fascist, anti-materialistic and there are those who are homeless because of their ideals - refusing to accept housing because they prefer the freedom of the street.

## **Growing Up**

For this group of writers, who've had more troubled lives than most, thinking about childhood years, whether happy or sad, is not easy. As each story came out, another layer of hurt and suffering was revealed.

The group tried to trace the course of events that had led to them becoming outsiders. One writer remembered accidentally setting fire to some curtains when he was five. He described how he had been much more scared of his mother's reaction than of any danger to himself.

There were stories from teenage years, the usual smoking and attempting to shock. Then there were the more serious memories of rebellion: lighting fires, running away from care homes, selling marijuana or adrenalin tablets.

## **Education**

No one in the group looked back on their schooldays with any fondness. For most, education had been a negative experience - the humiliation of lining up for free school dinners, the pettiness of school rules, the fights in the playground. One writer said school nearly killed him with the pressure, the discipline and the constant nagging to conform.

Everyone had been punished at some point: suspensions, detentions and the cane; but, more painful than any punishment, was the public humiliation that accompanied it, the shame and loss of status that a slap or a public telling off in front of friends could bring. The mischief people got up to was fairly low grade, setting off fire alarms, smoking, drinking, drawing comics in class, nailing a teacher's coat to a door, the usual childhood pranks; nothing to indicate that these pupils would be the ones that would end up on the streets.

All the participants thought that they'd learnt more outside classrooms than in them. It's funny that this all comes out in a writing group, an educational enterprise. But this is education that they have chosen. There is no pressure, there are no rules, everyone enjoys being here and, most importantly, they get to write what they want to write.

## **Families**

Family is a subject that throws up conflicting emotions for anyone, homeless or not. Families form us, they shape our thoughts and opinions, whether we agree or rebel; they provide us with the ground rules by which we shape our lives; they keep hold of us whether they're present or absent.

Adoption has for one of the writers, been the dominant factor in his life. Although he loved his adoptive parents he could never throw off the feeling of having been abandoned. His parents had chosen him, but in his mind, they could have chosen anyone - he didn't feel special, just different. He never thought he was valuable and has always carried a sense of rejection.

For some, families were the root cause of their homelessness, for others families have been a support. One writer recited Philip Larkin's poem 'This Be The Verse' with its notorious first line, "They fuck you up, your mum and dad," a sentiment universally recognised in the group.

## **Love**

Love is off the agenda.

Love is a subject that is approached with reluctance. Is it because the group are all emotionally stilted, or is it because love and homelessness are unhappy bedfellows? This group have written many raw and honest pieces. It is definitely the latter.

You have nothing to offer.

You feel ashamed...

Often when you're at your lowest, when a little love, which costs nothing, could really help, there is none to be found.

Loneliness, that's all you feel - empty inside. That's why you turn to drink and drugs - it fills the gap. Besides, a can only costs 70p - it's easier than a relationship.

Many end up on the street because of relationship breakdown. The men tend to be the ones that walk, maybe because women are too scared or because women tend to look after the kids. Maybe it's because women are better at talking through problems with friends.

Relationships formed whilst homeless are often unhealthy. Many are founded on financial need or drug and alcohol dependency. They become argumentative and destructive. People feel guilty, responsible for their partner's drug habits; being the 'hunter gatherer' and bringing home drugs instead of food.

Though, as one writer said, being in a relationship reminded him to eat and take care of himself. If he had been on his own, he wouldn't have bothered. Other relationships felt unequal - especially if one person is housed and the other is living on the street. One writer talked about being made to feel 'like a Hoover,' only being taken out and used when required.

Relationships are impossible when you live in hostels.

With no visitors, no overnight guests and walls made of paper, it feels as if the authorities want to deprive hostel residents of even the tiniest bit of happiness.

When you are on the street, survival takes priority. Once housed, the emotional fallout begins, people reassess themselves and begin to grieve over events that had never been part of their life's plan, whilst at the same time fearing that at any time they may lose everything again. It's a vulnerable state, no place for a relationship, too sensitive, too hurt, too raw.

Re-adjustment to 'normal' life takes time - months and, in some cases, years. It depends on the individual: whether they want to change, whether they have access to services, whether life events allow them to change. One thing we've learnt is that change is possible, but it's a slow process and before people can love anybody else, they first need to love themselves.

## **The Future**

Despite the writers' impoverished circumstances, all have grand ambitions. We discussed what they'd like to be doing in ten years' time.

Not surprisingly, considering all the writers are in receipt of benefits, money featured highly. One wanted to win the lottery and travel to the moon. Another said that, in the unlikely event of the world continuing to exist and our not being blown into cosmic particles, he wanted to win an on-line poker tournament and make a feature film with the winnings.

Another writer dreamed of spending the millions made from being a successful science fiction writer. Who knows? Every writer fantasies about a big advance, public acclaim and literary prizes. It's the dream that keep us motivated. If we think we'll never succeed, why bother trying?

These writers have passion, determination and more than the usual share of life experience. The course may have ended, but the group will still exist, bonded together over fifteen weeks, a group that we hope will continue to meet and share their work at QueenSpark.

Their work is being published by QueenSpark, some have had their writing featured in The Ideal Home? exhibition at Brighton Museum and others will feature in The Big Issue 'Streetlights' pages. Each time we've met, they've shared life experiences, their losses and their laughter. They have created their own support network. We've had honest discussions and explored painful subjects. It's been a real privilege and one of the most enjoyable writing courses I've ever run.

Whatever the outcome of their dreams, they've created emotional and powerful work, recorded here for all time. They formed a writing group and continue to write. For me that is the real success.

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