

# You Must Stay At Home

Voices from Wellingborough's homeless community



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## **Foreword**

What you are about to read is a creative piece of writing written in response to interviews with members of the homeless population local to Wellingborough in 2020.

I was commissioned by Made With Many in partnership with Support Northamptonshire for this project. The commission was created in response to the fact that many rough sleepers had been supported to find housing due to the Covid-19 pandemic. For the first time, it was possible to know where they were and how to contact them.

As such, we saw an opportunity to work with them in telling their own stories.

The work produced is predominantly inspired by these stories, though some artistic license has been taken. This work is not representative of one person's experience of homelessness – nor is it attempting to represent how any one person might experience homelessness – it is instead attempting to capture the human reality of the stories that these participants shared with me.

It's also important to note that the work is written exclusively from the participants' perspective. Any accusations made against official bodies within the work is an opinion expressed by the participant, and does not reflect the views of myself or any of the partners on this project.

Due to safeguarding reasons, all of the participants were given anonymity for this project.

I would like to thank the participants, Made With Many, Support Northamptonshire and The Wellingborough Homeless Forum for making this project possible.

I.

*“Homelessness is very complex. There’s not just one thing – there are so many things to it”.*

**When I met him, he was just – lovely.**

I joined the army first when I was 19. I served in the Falklands until 82.

**We hit it off right away.**

I started... well, not feeling strange... I just couldn't settle.

**He was bubbly and energetic – not like me. He was exciting.**

I started roaming about. I couldn't sort of settle down.

**It seemed like – in no time – we were moving in together.**

My father got me a job on British Rail, working on the track. He was trying to sort me out a bit.

**That’s when I really started to – when he started telling me about things.**

In 1985, my father was hit by train and killed.

**Even when he told me about these things, I never thought – I never really considered the effect it could be having on him.**

That sort of set me off again.

**Sometimes he’d sleep in the garden, but – you know, I never really thought anything of it.**

My mental health was all over the place.

**I just thought he liked the outdoors, you know? But it wasn’t just that. And it wasn’t just affecting him anymore.**

I kept walking out on her.

**I’d ask him why but, I’d never get an answer.**

I'd get everything I needed and just say “I've had enough” - and go.

**He’d come back eventually, but... it’d happened once, so there’s always that voice in the back of your head... what if it happens again?**

I've split up with her about four or five times.

**Every time I'd just be in the house, wandering around and wondering – you know, trying to figure out where he might be.**

I used to wander off - two or three weeks at a time. You know, when I felt down. Or felt ill. I used to roam around different parts of the country. Yorkshire - places like that. I don't know what started that off. I just wanted to get away.

**I'd try asking him. Asking why he'd do this to himself, but he'd just say:**

I wouldn't call it voluntary. It was voluntary on my part, but... I just used to do it.

**Why would he make himself homeless? Intentionally?**

I don't want to be on the streets. I've never felt comfortable on the streets. But I put myself into these situations, and then I think "what have I done this time? How did I end up back here?"

**I'm not sure he even knows why.**

The minute I used to walk out, I used to regret it - but it was out of my control. I didn't know what I was doing most of the time.

**I used to worry. It was all I could do.**

I was getting in trouble. I'm still getting into trouble, but not as often.

**We needed something to happen or – God knows what might have happened.**

I got sectioned.

**It was horrible to hear, but... you know, it meant help. Help for him, professional help. And so, after a while I started to think maybe... maybe this would be good for him.**

I had a disagreement with one of the managers there and I ended up getting arrested.

**He was found not guilty – because he didn't do anything – but because of that he lost all the help.**

All I was getting was my medication off of doctors. I wasn't getting no face to face with anybody to talk about my problems.

**Before he was getting counselling, but once he went through the legal system – all that stopped.**

I wanted the help, but the help was difficult to get. It seemed like I wasn't believed.

**He wasn't believed because he'd tried to take his own life. He's tried a few times.**

They just felt like I was attention seeking - doing it to get somewhere to live.

**He didn't want to come home. They offered him a place with the council and he refused it.**

It wasn't about housing at the time. I just didn't want to be anywhere.

...

It's not like I felt safer on the streets, I just... I don't know, I just didn't want no help.

**I never really realised how much he might be... you know, how much he might be dependent on me and where we were living together.**

If I'd not met her, I'd probably be in prison. Or I'd have hurt myself or something.

**I didn't know what to think. No matter what he said, he just keeps... leaving.**

We get on really well. She understands my situation. She's always been there for me... but when I decide to get up and go - there ain't nothing she can do about it. I just go. Leave her in a wreck... she don't know what she's done. You know, and I'm just back on the streets again. I don't like living on the streets. It's just - I just learned to accept it.

...

*So would you describe  
is like a compulsion?*

Yeah, it is. Yeah.

*“Not every homeless person is reliant on drinks and drugs. You know, there's people out there who through no fault of their own are in that situation. And they're sort of tarred with the same brush. There's people there with mental health problems and who are there, you know, through no fault of their own.*

## II.

**10 feet from your front door**, you feel the sting of winter at your neck. It's October and the nights are getting shorter. There's steam on your breath and so you shudder – then the shudder becomes a shake (an uncontrollable shake). But soon you're through your front door, welcomed by the walls – *humming...* **Warm. Comfortable. Safe.**

You **lock** the door - take off your clothes - put them in the washing machine. You push a button in the shower and step in. There's a *whirrr* in the walls and you start to wash the work day away - a wave of hot water taking the **numbness** out of your nose and fingertips.

Once the water's **run down the drain**, you search the shelves of your fridge and throw out anything passed its sell-by date. You put a chicken with potato and leak in a dish and in half-an-hour - it's **hot. Wholesome.** It fills the hole left in you from a long, consuming day.

And when the evening is done, you *flick* the kettle on - take a tea with you to be enveloped in the **soft**, heavy **shield** of your quilt. **Warm. Comfortable. Safe.**

**Morning** comes - another shower - another *flick* of the kettle. Warm toast **with butter and jam** - clean work clothes - you head out the door, where...

The Cold has been waiting.

You'd forgotten – the way it makes your body tense, your muscles scream. It stares back at you, wraps its arms around – but you **battle, bolstered** by a coat, hat and scarf – you battle back until you walk into work.

One step across that threshold and you **sink safely again**. Flick of the kettle - a second cup of tea - familiar faces saying "*hello*". You're about to remove your coat when your boss calls...

And it's just

like

that...

...

The years of service scarcely protect you - nor your **years** in the **trade**. You shake his hand - because you can't quite think of what else to do. Then you return out the way you came in – **familiar faces** facing away.

The only one to greet you - is The Cold.

Still there, still waiting...

Still **unbeaten**, you **battle** home - back until you're inside and **warm** and **comfortable** and **safe** - you start planning points of compromise - lifestyle changes to see you through this rough patch. A rough patch that opens and amplifies as the numbers in your bank account get lower...

And lower...

And lower...

And then your landlord calls...

*“He was aware that the situation was actually very, very difficult. And he knew then he needs to do something to survive. So he decided to sell his mobile and stay one week longer in this home which he rented. He knew he didn't want to come back to Poland. And he was aware that probably he will be homeless.*

*“He said he couldn't sleep during the night because every night he was just thinking about this. He was very upset - just collapsed with the situation that he's homeless - what will be - how he could cope with this.”*





### III.

You pack a bag - and notice all the things you won't be able to fit inside it.

You look around – one last time - the house you've called **home** for 15 years telling you “you've got to go”.

Outside – The Cold.

Still waiting.

You walk. And walk. And walk - **waiting to recover**.  
You walk, and walk, and walk, and walk, and walk,  
and walk...

You can't afford a taxi. You can't afford a bus. And you realise - even if you had the fare, you wouldn't spend it on a bus. You wouldn't even know where to go...

You keep thinking - **thinking** and **walking** - until you've thought and walked so much that it's dark... It's dark and so all that's left to do is find somewhere **safe** to **sleep**.

You start with a street corner. Then the shelter outside Morrisons. The entrance to the church. You **save** for a **tent**, but stop saving when you see one out in the woods - ripped and shredded and orn with **no one inside**.

One night you **slip inside** a building. Windows boarded, gates surrounding – it's old and withered and weak. Weak enough for you to **pry** your way inside – **out** of the **wet**.

Inside there are pallets and cardboard that mean you don't have to **sleep** on the **floor**.

It's dark - darker than anywhere you've seen before. The street lights feel a mile and more away. Warm. Comfortable. **Safe**.

**Safe** enough to lie down...

To let your eyelids **lower**...

To let the ache in your legs **rest**...

...But then there's a noise...

Just a *noise* but a *noise* you don't know who or what or how close...

That night, you learn how good your hearing can be.

In the morning, **sunlight** keeps you company. You take stock of what you **have** and need...

Clothes you have, food you need...

Phone you have, battery you need...

Water you need. Money you need.

You stand in the shop carrying everything you own.

There's a bottle of water... 12p.

12p...

Just out of your reach.

What **stops** you stealing is a voice. A voice of **morals** and judgement and fear - fear of being arrested, fear of being attacked - fear of becoming something you can never come back from:

A criminal...

You decide you'd rather stay thirsty.

Starving...

Still holding on to pride because **nobody** can take that away...

...

Your phone dies.

And you can't find the **food** bank.

You walk - hand in hand in hand with The Cold...

And you walk...

And you sit...

And you sleep...

And you walk...

...

And then somebody asks - "if you know about the **day centre**?".

*"It was Sunday. He went to a shopping centre to charge his phone. And after that, he just was sitting on the bench in front of shopping centre. The police came. They asked if he needs any help. And he said - yes, I do."*

#### IV.

The first thing you hear when you step inside is the flick of a kettle. Somebody brings you a **cup** and says something you haven't heard in a while.

"Hello".

They ask if they can **help** – and for a moment, you've forgotten how to ask....

You tell them you haven't eaten. That your phone is dead. That you don't know how to keep yourself clean.

And they say they have a **shower**. That they have **hot** meals. That they have **clothes - clean** and **kept** at the lowest price they can.

All around are **people** like you. Strangers with **familiar faces** – ones you recognise from puddles, windows, wing mirrors.

You **sit** and wait for your surroundings to cement – for your **social** muscles to twitch and flex – to be able to **chuckle** when someone makes a **joke**.

They **shake** your **hand**. They ask you your name.

**They see you.**

You know some are not like you. Instead, some are dressed to say they have nothing, but their eyes escape the honesty of nothing.

You look over at the door.

The Cold - still waiting....

But you're out of reach.

As the day draws to an end, it becomes clear you won't be free to stay.

You can come back **tomorrow**. Until then, there's always the night shelter - one mile and a half away.

The Cold tries to keep up - but you march forth, one and a half miles away: a **bed**. One that – for that night at least – you could call your **own**.

The **high-sprung** mattress in you mind gives way to the camp bed they offer you – it still feels worlds apart from a pallet on the floor.

**Warm. Comfortable. Safe.**

**Safe** enough to lie down...

To let your eyelids **lower**...

To let the ache in your legs **rest**...

...

But you still hear...

Hear the plans to find money.

The plans to take money.

The plans to use money - but not for **food** or **water** or **shelter** or **safety** - for escape.

Voices asking when your payment is due.

Voices that follow you.

Voices you fear: in this place you feel safe.

Fear of "problems".

Fear of violence.

Fear that nobody knows and nobody will protect.

*"If you could imagine the things that you hear - the things that you see... I really, really was - I was fearful for my life."*



V.

You're woken at half-7 the next day. The night shelter says you have to leave.

Outside is downpours of rain.

The Cold meets you at the door.

Together you walk - sleet slaps against your face - your feet sore and blistered and bleeding.

You **reach** the job centre where they sanction your pay. They say it's because you're 10 minutes late -

"20 minutes. You're supposed to be here 10 minutes before".

They don't mention last week – how you were an **hour early**, but they saw you an hour late. Instead, they give you a warning, then relinquish your **pay**. As they tell you the total, you ask if they could live on this. You're met back with silence.

A month ago, you would spend the amount in one night with **friends**, but now you know that three weeks from now - it'll be gone. And you'll still have another week to get through.

The job centre ask how the **job** search is going. If any of the **interviews** you had seemed – **promising**.

You say you thought it went well. You say you managed to get a **shower** – to save enough for **clean clothes, professional clothes**.... You say you even managed to avoid the rain on the way there.

What you don't say, is that the interviewer saw you sat in the doorway of the church the next day.

## VI.

The day centre shuts on the weekend, so you sit outside Wellingborough shopping centre, counting off the hours until Monday.

10.

11.

13.

15...

Sometimes strangers offer sausage rolls. Sometime cups of tea. But all that time – no one is as attentive than The Cold.

It holds you tighter with every **pound** you turn away. **Giving hands** you tell no - on principle. But as mundanity drags on, you lack the energy to refuse. You dream of a **deposit** – or enough for a hotel room. **Bed** to **sleep** in. **TV's** to **watch**.

### **Normalcy.**

As you dream, people are **drawn** to you. People who look like you, but are not like you.

Voices from the dark of the night shelter - asking if anybody is giving you money. If anybody is giving you food...

The days drag on. The **dreams** wilt away – and when **Monday** rolls around - you find yourself staying. **Normalcy** no longer out of reach.

*“He said ‘I don't have depression’. He experienced depression. If I can say, because I know him - this is not his words, this is mine. I know him. He is person who wants to help everyone around. And he's the last person about who he thinks. So it was very difficult for him to accept help, actually, because he was this person who was the helper. And it's quite difficult for him to sit at doing nothing - without working and without earning money.”*



## VII.

### **Family. Furniture. Friends.**

You think of them – how long it's been. How **familiar** the **air** must feel around **them**.

You call **them**. Sometimes on a **phone**. Sometimes on the street.

Some you don't want to put upon – some you believe have bigger problems: illness, occupations, other priorities...

**“But if you ever need anything...”** some would say.

And so you think...

maybe...

maybe today you do...

They talk as though they cannot see your clothes.

They talk as though you have somewhere else to go.

They talk as if the way you're living is a secret.

Shameful.

Something to go unsaid...

You meet them in the pub and they ask “if you've got no money, what are you doing here?”

It hurts too much to tell them.

Tell them you wanted to see them.

They say “talk soon”.

They say “we'll talk next week”

But next week comes - and you call - and call - and call...

You never hear their voice again.

People forget.

People fear.

You discover that – along with everything else – you've lost your friends. Lost the world you used to belong to – until you can pay your way back in.

*“People don't like to be associated with somebody that's either homeless, jobless, or they have a feeling that they are going to be - you are going to try and scrounge something off of them, no matter what it is. Some people don't like helping people - and that is the biggest problem in this country. I lost 80% of my friends because I became jobless and homeless.”*



## VIII.

**May, 2018** - my birthday last year. It was in Wellingborough, where I'd moved to 6 years ago for a work opportunity. The opportunity was for a trainee fork engineer – but I was more of a workshop assistant. I was training to become an engineer, but then I had a work place accident while moving some gas bottles. These particular bottles had been loaded with an abnormally high amount of liquid – more than double the usual amount.

It started as a groin injury, but eventually it developed into sciatica - sciatica that runs straight down my back and legs, mostly due to limping from the groin injury. I was receiving physio for a while and things worked fine - but then I rushed going back to work - and of course, I made my situation worse. I tried staying off work for a year after that - I stayed off of work for as long as I possibly could, but it put me in debt big time. Eventually, I tried to return back to work - the doctor said *no, don't go back to work* and I said - *yeah, I'm going back, I need the money.*

Everything went well for 9 months – and then all of a sudden, I couldn't move one day. The job required me to move 35 cars from one position to another. 35 cars in half-an-hour was the usual. But I couldn't move. I couldn't get in and out of the vehicle. I couldn't drive, and I'd been driving since I was 19. So after half-an-hour, I'd only moved 2.

I tried various other jobs, but it just left me worse. I've never been right since. I was told I'll probably be living with the pain for the rest of my life.

Not being able to work - my landlord offered me a smaller room in another house. It would make my bills easier was the idea. But that offer turned out to be a false promise. Instead of giving me this room, he put me up on the sofa of the house. *The room will be ready in a couple of weeks, then you can go straight into it* he says. So, he took me out of one tenancy – and onto a sofa. I was still in pain. The move cancelled my old tenancy, and when the new room then wasn't available, I didn't have a leg to stand on.

I decided to move back home – out of Wellingborough. I wanted to try and be closer to my family – but it didn't work out. See, my parents divorced when I was 18 years of age - that would have been 18 years ago. Then in 2013, we decided to downsize from our 3-bedroom house down to a 2-bedroom, because at that point, it was just me and my mom living at home - everyone else had moved out. So we downsized. And one day - my oldest brother turns up at the front door: a cat underarm; a coat on his other arm; a bag with part of his belongings; and his medication.

My oldest brother is Schizophrenic - has been since he was 17. The minute he knocked on my mum's door, I knew then I needed to move out. He needed her - and it was only a 2-bedroom place. I went straight down to my mate's and stayed with him for a while - but I suppose in a way - you could say that was my first ever experience of being homeless.

That's when I go to the council for help. And what I learn is the council can't help. They can't help me specifically, because I've not been in their borough long enough. I'd been in Wellingborough for more than three years - they weren't obliged to help me, even if I was born and raised there. I've got family there. But that wasn't enough of a local connection. They told me the only people that were obliged to help me were back in Wellingborough. *You'll have to go back.*

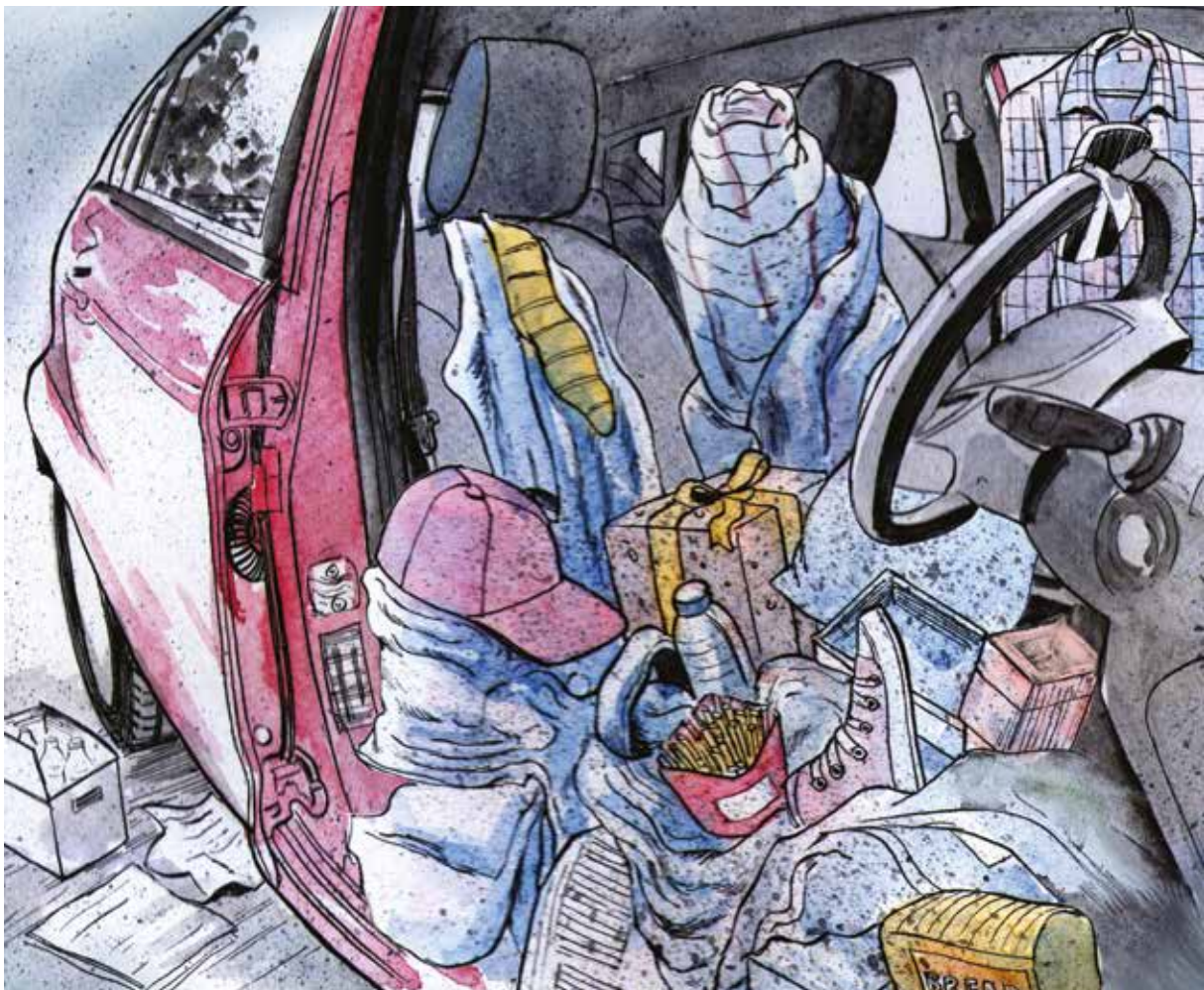
I don't ask my family for help. I have a very, very dysfunctional family. I was sexually abused when I was a kid. Not by my parents or by anyone in my family, but at the same time - it happened. A couple of them know about it and choose not to believe it. It has caused a bit of a rift. Realistically, if I'd just kept my bloody mouth shut and said nothing to nobody, we'd probably all still be talking now, but because I've opened my mouth, it is what it is. Now we're just one of those families where people only say hello to each other at Christmas times or birthdays. Every other day of the year - we're kind of non-existent.

When my parents split up, I became an alcoholic. I drank a litre and a half bottle of Vodka every single day for eight months. When I stopped drinking, I wanted something else to replace it – and so I started smoking cannabis.

Now, I knew that a few of my brothers took a dim view to it - but at the same time, it was either smoke or carry on drinking. And if I had carried on drinking, I would've been dead within 5 years. I think that's another reason why a lot of my family don't want to know me. Probably only 3 of them knew what was happening to me. 3 out of 11 – or more. But I think the majority of them would have said – he's done it to himself, let him get out of it himself.

At the same time that I was being told to go back to Wellingborough by the council, I was actually still working - still maintaining a job. But to do that I had to start sleeping in my car. Not permanently at first. Someone else would put me up, but then two weeks later – I'd lose whichever job I had because of my back. Sleeping in the car was actually making my back worse, but after I lost my job, the people who'd put me up said - well you gotta go now.

And so, by **May 2018** – my birthday – I was living in my car.



The car was a small Ford Fiesta. Little 3 door, 1.2, so it was nice and cheap on insurance and tax. That is the only car that I'd actually had brand new. Except it wasn't brand new – it'd had one previous owner. But I bought it from a dealership, so it felt brand new. Like it was my one and only personal belonging that I've ever owned, that I've ever paid for myself. I've never ever had help to pay for it. That Fiesta was kind of like my wool - my string - it just helped me keep everything together.

I still remember that day – my birthday. I can't remember if I actually managed to get some sleep the night before – but come 5 / 6 o'clock in the morning, I got the baby wipes out - gave myself a baby wipe bath. Then I had to rush around to the boot of my car to get some sort of semi-clean clothes before I went into work. I took my work clothes off each day to keep them from smelling - to try and keep them going a little bit longer. On average, I was probably only washing them once every two weeks, because I had nowhere else to wash them.

You'd find me on some weekends down the local river - and I'd quite happily take a leisurely dip. I'd use that as my main shower or bath time, even though at the same time, it just looked like I was down for a relaxing swim across the river. It did kind've feel like you were out camping – or on holiday - in the wilderness. But you get out of the water and reality sets in.

Once I had finished work - eight hours later - I used to enjoy fishing. Apart from trying to do as much walking exercises as possible, because at that point I was still recovering - I used to spend my time trying do as much fishing as possible. After that, I was back in the car - another baby wipes bath - and then I got back into different clean clothes. Comfy clothes, ones I knew I could just sit and relax in for the rest of the evening.

I would put all my personal belongings behind the passenger seat during the day, so I was able to have the driver's seat as I needed it to drive, but then come of an evening, everything would go behind the driver's seat, and I'd be able to wind the passenger seat right back - and I'd lay down on that - with my legs still bent. And that's how I slept – getting ready to go back into work the next day.

The worst part was the smell. I'd end up having takeaways for food - eating fish and chips in the car - and afterwards, I couldn't help but smell it. I'd have to sleep in that smell. Get back from work, lie down, legs bent - there it was. Day in, day out. It got to the point where I wasn't eating - I still felt full from the smell. I ended up losing my appetite. Then losing a lot of weight. Even now, my mind is still kind of remembering those old smells...

From May until December, that's how I lived. Every night, every day, every weekend.

From the very first moment I ever thought I might be homeless, I felt that little bit fortunate to still have a roof over my head, because of that car. It aided me, so to speak. Because I guarantee that if I didn't have that car, I wouldn't have made it two weeks on the streets. If I had to physically sleep outside - outdoors, I wouldn't make it two weeks. I don't know how they do. I would have given up.

I've lost that car now.

I had to sell it.

I need an automatic - because of the groin pain I struggle with a clutch. I was sleeping in my car too many times.

When I did sell it, I thought - I've just sold the one piece of my life that kept everything together.

I suppose that is the one key ingredient that most people would need to keep out of homelessness - a car. Because to hold down any kind of job whatsoever - most people would use a car. Buses and trains and stuff are few and far between.

But I believe myself to be my biggest obstacle. Not having that confidence within myself that I can do it. To tell myself I can do it. Once you get knocked down, the only person that gets you out of it is yourself. And because I've always been knocked down, I'm always kind of expecting to fail.

You've got to be able to change that perspective. If you don't, you are stuck.

And I am mentally and physically stuck.



## IX.

In the **day centre**, everyone has their **story**.

One tells you about their last birthday – sleeping in a small **Ford Fiesta**.

Another reveals a **partner**, waiting for him once he's ready to **return**.

There's the ex-addict, **teaching English** to those who moved here only months ago. No shared language, just a shared desire to **connect**.

Inevitable miscommunication leads to frustration, but “**don't give up**”. That's what the ex-addict tells them. And with time, it becomes a **mantra**. Not just for the lesson, but for all of you.

### **Don't give up.**

When nobody meets your eye for an entire weekend.

When you **wipe away** the 5 days of muck and dirt and grime on your skin and find your mobile phone missing.

When the ex-addict is attacked and beaten and stabbed - unable to outrun the past he found through a habit (the voices – still stalking).

But one day – in another absence of valuables and money and chargers - accusations fly...

And they fly at you.

Despite what you say, you begin to see the doubt in the eyes that trusted you - eyes that know temptation never truly goes away.

You feel as though you're still standing by a shop shelf, hands held firmly at your side – telling yourself you are not a criminal.

You long for when people needed **you**. When you could offer out **your hand** and **pull somebody up** – instead of holding out your hand – fearing who might let go.

**Helping others** gave you **value**. But you feel you can't help yourself. And so you must be worthless.

As middle winter rages on, the tint of the world starts to darken.

As you see the ones turned away from the night shelter, you feel like a barricade between **them** and their safety –

So you leave.

Without word or warning, you walk. Your feet grizzled and numb from journeys to the job centre, from seeking **shelter** on a showery night – but the absence of a destination stings at them.

You keep your eyes down and in their peripheral, you see how much your clothes have changed and shredded and torn – how much they hang off your body...

Eventually your feet stop – and when you look up, you find yourself standing **10 feet** from what used to be your front door.

There's a **light** on in the **kitchen window**.

And despite how easy it feels, you resist the urge to **step inside**.

You find yourself in the darkest room – in a derelict house. The last place you had of your **own**.

Inside - waiting for you, arms open wide - is The Cold.

You **lie** inside for weeks.

Your future – hung in the unknown.

And the more you feel like you're hanging – the more you think about it.

And one day, you're sitting in the darkest room in a derelict house – with a rope.

*“It was just basically I didn't care about anything. I just weren't bothered. Weeks went by. Months went by. Time just sort of went quick. And you know, nothing was happening. I was just sort of floating around. You just adjusted that way, to that standard. You know, you can't get any worse off. You're right at the bottom,*

you can't go any lower. You're on the streets begging - using any means possible to get whatever money, food or somewhere to sleep. You just can't stoop any lower. You know, there's just nothing you can do about it. You know, you haven't got an address. So it's difficult to get work. It's difficult to get Social Security money. You haven't got an address or a care of address. You know, and you just - I don't know, you just - get used to that way of being. You know, you learn to accept it."

**X.**

You look around at the room...

Not knowing how long it would take anybody to find you.

You try tying the rope – but it doesn't keep at first.

You try finding a spot to support your weight - but nothing feels right.

You wander and muse and realise eventually that... something is stopping you.

Some semblance of a **fire** still **flickers**.

**Somebody** telling you –

**don't give up.**

## XI.

The next day, you go back to the **day centre**.

You **shower** - see your **friends**.

They tell you they're sorry - and you **accept**.

Not just their apology, but their **help**.

Everything they are willing to **give**.

Because you know these **safe havens** won't stay open forever.

Winter will end.

The shelter will close.

And so you start **plotting**.

Laying out a step-by-step **plan** of how to get **back**.

It's **slow steps**. **Baby steps** - but you take them – patiently. Humbly. You find solace in the support, and whenever you feel daunted - intimidated by how long it might take – you remember **3 words**...

...

Then **help** arrives – sooner than you think.

**Help** from the most unexpected source...

## XII.

Good Evening.

The coronavirus is the biggest threat this country has faced for decades – and this country is not alone. All over the world we are seeing the devastating impact of this invisible killer. And so tonight I want to update you on the latest steps we are taking to fight the disease and what you can do to help...

You hear it first on the street.

And that's why we have been asking people to stay at home during this pandemic... you must stay at home.

When you arrive, they tell you the **shelter** must close.

"We can't keep you all under one roof".

You ask what you're supposed to do. Where you're supposed to go.

"We're sorry".

You feel yourself transported back to the hanging space – a perpetual limbo.

The siren call of the street.

The simple ease of

just

giving

up...

You try to blame them. Try to get angry. Try to tell them how it feels to be knocked back down to the bottom of the stairs.

But you can't.

Instead, you feel **gratitude**.

For what you've **had**.

What you've been **offered**.

And regret - for what you've not taken, and the pride you let get in the way.

Back on the street, you find yourself surrounded by **those who look like you** - equally adrift.

Those who understand how valuable **anything** can be against nothing.





### XIII.

Soon, you hear there's **money. Money** from the government going to the council – **money** to get everybody into a **home**.

**Everybody.**

*“There's no council housing in Wellingborough. We're talking to landlords but they're... reluctant”.*

The **hope** feels faint, but you hold on.

You're told to go to a meeting - to prove that your **life** is your life. That your struggles and circumstances are real. That you're – worthy.

*“You need to show them that you're really homeless”.*

You ask them how - but the answer isn't clear. You dress up, but they tell you to stop.

*“Don't give them a reason to turn you down”.*

You arrive at the council and prepare to be forgotten - just as you were before.

And you think you are...

Until you get a **phone call** –

*You need to pack your stuff, we're moving you.*

**Where am I moving?**

*We can't tell you.*

**What is this – secret service?**

*It's a HMO.*

**Like a hostel?**

*No, you'll have your own room.*

...

The words **ring** around in your **head**.

No TV.

No internet.

But your **own room**.

Your **own door**.

Your **own roof**.

Your **own bed**.

And before you realise it - **you're there**.

Your hand shakes...

You're not sure you'll be able to turn the key...

But as the door **opens**, you are hit with a reminder of what **life can be**.

You remember the **flame flickering** inside you as you held that rope in your hand.

It **grows** and **grows** and **burns** away The Cold - no matter how hard it wraps its arms around you.

You **sit** down on the **bed sheets** - **breathe** for a while.

**Breathe** until it's easy again.

Until the floor feels like it won't be pulled out beneath you.

And for the first time – the first time in a long time – you are **warm**.

**Comfortable**.

And **safe**.



*“I'm very much looking forward to being able to return back to church. I am actually I surfed for the Church of England. If you were to go to a church, you'd obviously see your priest and you see their people with black and white coats on - I'm one of those people with the black and white coats on in the background, helping the church run basically.”*

*“I've got a roof above my head. But for some reason, it just doesn't feel permanent and I don't feel stable. I don't feel comfortable at the moment. Whether that's down to problems and, there are the problems at the moment - I don't know. But at the moment, it's just, everything's up in the air. And I don't know where I am. I don't know if I'm coming or going.”*

*“As I said, I'm 60 now and I'm definitely not giving up. I want to be - I want to be back where I was, alright? It might have been possibly 10 months or 11 months or whatever. But I was never going to give in. I never intended to give in.”*

*“I'm getting fed up. I don't want to carry on, I want to stop, I want to change my life, I want to do this, I want to do that. But at the same time, my physical health holds me back.”*

*“I'll be a different person, I'll be a stronger person. And I'll be, as I said, I'll be more aware of people around me that might be struggling. The people that have supported me, and have helped me through all this, then they will be a lot closer to me than they are even now.”*

*“You know, the support I've been given is absolutely unbelievable. The only thing that I want to say more than anything is, I think the general public need to be a lot more aware about being able to help people that are less well off than they are. I mean, I know people do everything they can regarding food banks, and things like*

that. But I think the general public need to be aware that they can volunteer for places for the day centre, they can volunteer for places like the night shelter. And they can do a lot more to try and help people that are basically in a predicament where - through circumstances like with myself, you find yourself in a very, very different environment.”

“What I have done to try and help people that are going to be in a similar situation this winter - I've actually volunteered to do night sessions at the night shelter. So I will be there to support people that way I was supported. So I'm volunteering to work at the night shelter so that obviously I can go in there and I can work there. Because, again, I feel if you've been there and you've done it, somebody comes in - you know, "my feet are hurting". Right, you know, let's help you, you know, take your shoes and socks off. Lets, you know, like, let's try and do something for you. Because unless you've done it - now I know what it's like.... that's like, you know, a final gesture as far as I'm concerned.”

“If I go out shopping, then I'm always going to be dropping a couple of tins in a food bank, or, you know, if I see somebody on the street, and it looks like they are a genuine person, not just one of the many that are swinging the lead - I'll do whatever I can to help them there and then.”

## XIV.

The life of a rough sleeper is one of mundanity. Although you're in a **house** with 5 **other people**, some **friends**, some who will soon become ones – you're told to stay isolated. The only sign you see of the outside world are the **hot meals** that arrive from the food bank.

And so you're asked if you'd like to receive some **welfare calls** – a daily chat on the phone with one of the volunteers.

When they call, you can't help but ask –

### **How many were housed?**

*Not all. But a lot. A lot more than we could have before. It took a lot of work, and a lot of time – but we did it.*

### **And is it – working?**

*Some had to be asked to leave. Those ones didn't follow the rules.*

### **They just wanted to socialise.**

*Those aren't the rules right now.*

### **What about the others?**

*Some were told they can't be helped, but – we're working on that.*

### **They can't be helped?**

*Not a high enough priority. They were told they need to look for somewhere else to live.*

### **Like where?**

*There are some talks with landlords but – we've only found 2 so far. We're hoping for more but...*

### **But landlords don't want us as tenants.**

*They think you might be dangerous.*

**Tell them they can ask me – I'll point out the dangerous ones for them.**

*We haven't seen them for a while. Not since lockdown. (The voices). I guess they all had somewhere else to go.*

**Has anybody – you know, any of us – been affected? Have any of us – got it?**

*None.*

**None?**

*None.*

...

...

**How long am I gonna be able to stay here?**

*We don't know.*

**Will we be kicked out when this is all over?**

*We don't know.*

**I want to get better. I want to build myself back up. What do I have to do?**

*We're working on it.*

*But at present there are just no easy options.*

**XV.**

The **accommodation** is temporary.

And this is still happening.

Outside – all over – the world is still changing.

**Still fighting.**

And so we still need to **stay housed** for now.

But one day we won't.

And you know Wellingborough has no council housing.

And you know the money will run out.

And you know the pandemic will **pass**.

And so you don't know what's next...

*The way ahead is hard, and it is still true that many lives will sadly be lost.*

It's not over.

But for now, you remain –

**Warm.**

And **comfortable**.

And **safe**.



***“I'm a bit hooked on what you said about... I don't want to put words in your mouth. so please correct me - but it kind of sounds like... because of COVID-19, you're all safer?”***

*“Yes, yes, definitely. Yeah. I mean, you've definitely not put words in my mouth. I would, I would really, really agree with what you've just said to me”.*



**Ryan Leder** is a playwright and author from Northamptonshire. He attended Edge Hill University before continuing his studies at RADA. He is presently an Associate Artist with Made With Many and a New Creative with BBC Arts. His previous works include: Numbered Days (Winner of the Dame Janet Suzman Playwriting Prize), 60 Miles By Road or Rail (Royal & Derngate) and LOOP (Theatre In Black).



**Mark Reeve** was born in Buckinghamshire in 1965 and attended Great Yarmouth College of Art & Design, followed by a degree in graphics and illustration at Kingston School of Art. His folio encompasses a wide spectrum of work from book covers, character design, editorial illustration, oil painting, animation, to storyboards, political cartoons and caricature.

Past credits include DC Comics, the national press, (Mail On Sunday, Evening Standard, Independent, The Express, Punch magazine, The Week), ITV (Spitting Image, Headcases), Henson's Creature Shop, Saatchi & Saatchi and the BBC. He lives in London.



**Made With Many** is a community-led arts programme which produces events, projects and activities designed to inspire more local people than ever before to take the lead in experiencing, creating and taking part in high quality arts and cultural activities.

[www.madewithmany.org](http://www.madewithmany.org)

**Support Northamptonshire** is a collaboration of voluntary and community-based organisations leading community-led social action, supporting people who are homeless, supporting Black communities and organisations and enabling organisations to embrace digital transformation.

[www.supportnorthamptonshire.co.uk](http://www.supportnorthamptonshire.co.uk)

