

# LIFE ON THE STREET'S

Where do I begin this story? It's not important to start at the beginning as in most stories however it is important to say that unlike most homeless people I became homeless in an odd sort of way that is to say I am not nor have I been an alcoholic or a drugs user. In fact I was just an ordinary guy living a very uneventful life. I lived my life mostly according to my credit limit. I, like most men had a partner Kelly who on the surface seemed to cope with the day to day running of life's ups and downs. Little did I know how wrong I was because Kelly had a secret gambling habit. I later found out that with running behind on rent and store cards we were being evicted as of now. So there we were on the streets with only a hold all with few possessions contained within. You might think that should have been the end of us and it was nearly the end of not just the relationship but of our very lives literally. Instead it led us on a grim adventure I hope will never be repeated and so I start my story. I'll cut it short as possible so not to bore you the reader I start my story here in the park looking at the ducks being fed by passers by. Me and Kelly through various processes such as imposing on family that eventually got fed up with us and needless to say embarrassed for us. With an endless barrage of arguments that has left us estranged from our family. We were never close to people we could call friends, well not in the way that we could impose on them. So on our first day homeless and friendless with our one bag of few possessions, mainly containing crisps, bread, butter and a large bottle of pop. And in money, two pounds and twenty pence. Next pay day eight days time. The day is Monday time is approaching eleven thirty am. We are walking towards the library the weather is dull just like our silent moods. We plan on stopping there all day. I really don't know at this time what else to do. I may as well introduce myself, my name is Mark I am forty four an EX- HGV driver. I am sitting here thinking where did it all go wrong. Kelly and I pass looks of blame to each other as we pretend to be reading from books laid out in front of us. All we want right now is to remain invisible from curious eyes to blend in with our surroundings. Kelly and I are probably thinking the same way, what to do next. The last few months have been an endless paper chase across town to various departments one of which was Wigan and Leigh Housing. They made it clear that since we were in rent arrears with the council and they evicted us, we could only look at private rented properties and as luck would have it they had just the property for us to view. I said no need to view we will take it we are desperate to get off the streets. Unfortunately this turned out to be a long road to nowhere. We met up with an agent that represented various land lords, which had been contacted. We arranged a viewing of the property, our circumstances having been fully explained. After looking round we were very happy to say we loved it and ready to move in immediately. Then the first of many bombshells hit us, as he said what I need is the first months rent, a guarantor and references. We had explained prior to viewing our current circumstance and were told that you would not insist on them, following a reference from Wigan and Leigh Housing. Our policy has changed, we now insist on them. "What from this morning?" I said, Kelly was beginning to cry again. Well you no we are unable to meet your criteria that you're insisting on, so I suppose that's it then. And we left upset and disheartened, we were given others to try over the next few days they all went the same way. As we sit here the hours dragging by, it is becoming apparent that there is not much hope for us. As the library begins to close its time to wander over to the park, its cold and a little dull, we can stay until it closes and make a crisp sandwich.

Kelly said she wasn't hungry but still ate in silence while we watched the ducks in the park. Later on we moved to the bus shelter just outside the park, where we stayed through the night. That's when the first of many dark thoughts crossed my mind, about getting a way out of the misery of my life for good. Death would be a blessing right now... as we sit in silence I wonder if things will really change. I feel my part in this was to ignore Kelly's gradual sink into depression, a cry for help, I was too rapt up in my own world to notice. Now I think of the possessions that were stolen, taken into storage for thirty days until we find a place to live. That time has already passed. I imagine that our leather sofa and utilities went to a charity shop, our personal things, jewellery and clothes. A lifetime of possessions, photos that can never be replaced that were to be passed on all gone. Now we are beggars on the street desperate to find shelter. As the time slips away drip by drip minute by minute. It's really cold now it must be just

before dawn. I read once that was the coldest time, and it's true it is. In a couple of hours we can get a cup of coffee at Mc Donald's to share. I just need one more sticker off the side of a cup, which I am hoping to find in one of the bins. We stay and make our coffee last until seven o'clock. From here we're off to the phone box to ask for a crisis loan. And on to the library to keep warm and use the facilities to keep presentable. The rest of the days remained the same. What a difference the last few days have meant to me, from small hope to no hope. Kelly and I have spent days and nights on the streets now. We are looking a little rough round the edges. Luckily the weather has picked up a bit. I have not slept for the past few days and so we are going to the park again, to blend in with the picnickers in the park. And to get some much needed sleep, Kelly stayed awake while I slept. I woke up to Kelly laughing at me the first time since being made homeless. She claimed that I have been snoring for hours. We can stay in the park until it gets dark and then move to the bus stop, while I watch Kelly sleep. I am still punishing myself over our circumstances, and feeling increasingly hostile toward Kelly. Playing the blame game and feeling sorry for myself, the long lonely hours slip by agonisingly slowly. The thoughts of ending it all are more frequent now almost constant. The next few days and the situation has only got worse, though Kelly did manage to get some more money with yet another crisis loan. I have thought of spending the day on the buses an eight pound day saver will last us until eleven thirty pm. We can travel to Manchester and spend some time there wasting the hours away. And that's how it went until Saturday. People getting drunk made me think of a way to keep us safe. By going to the hospital and sitting in the waiting room, looking as if we had brought some one with us, we could spend the night and the weekend there. It's funny that at the time we were sitting in the bus shelter, that just a few metres away across the road near Morrison's facing, the taxi rank was a man that later became our closest friend. He was sleeping in the doorway of the Market Hall having been thrown out of his home by his partner of three years. Following an argument, his name not being on the rent book so he could not stay. The police later dropped him off in the town centre to fend for himself. He had been on the streets for over a month and said that he sometimes slept in the bins at the back of Iceland, when it rains to keep dry. He slept in the church yard once but was attacked by three men with a screwdriver that kicked and slashed him calling him a fat tramp. I'll skip over the next few days like a stone across the still surface of a pond.

I will start again with a trip to the housing department in Ince. This is where it was explained, that they had tried everything they could but to no avail. There was nothing else to try but a face to face meeting that was scheduled in three days time. I asked if any charities would be able to help us, as we were freezing and starving slowly to Death.

She told us the Queens Hall in Wigan will help us.

We arrived some time later and were greeted by a lovely couple. There we were given tea and toast, over which we explained what had transpired over the last few months of our lives. She informed us that Queens Hall has another branch that Help the homeless. They provide food and try and get the homeless accommodation. This was the "Brick" once a pub now a haven for the homeless.

We were welcomed by a tall middle aged woman call Trish. She sat us down, made us beans on toast, the first warm meal in days. After explaining again our situation she introduced us to others in similar positions.

Of which was Brian the man that had been sleeping just a few metres away at the taxi rank. As we spent most of the day there and got to know Brian, he told that he was staying in the Grand Hotel and one of the helpers in the Brick was in the room next to him. A woman in her early fifty's, by the name of Liz. She had been sleeping in door ways for over four weeks until she managed to get into the Grand Hotel. Trish had been absent for awhile and she returned with a rye smile. Calling us into the office for a quiet word. She told us that we had a place to stay, a room in the Grand Hotel and the Brick was picking up the bill. We sat absolutely dumbfounded until we managed to thank her again and again. A few hours later we were in, even though tired we sat almost in tears, still unbelieving and eternally grateful. During the next few weeks we would meet up with Brian and Liz and go to the Brick everyday. Kelly and Liz would help in the kitchen, and Brian and I volunteered to fit carpet tiles in the new offices. To show our gratitude to the kindness shown to us we volunteered for every task that was needed. Our time in the

Grand was to be short-lived as it was due to close, meaning once again we were to be homeless. With the Grand about to be closed and with so many residents in the same position the council felt they had to step in and help.

Priority was first given to those newly released from prison and Asylum seekers. This was due to the fact that they had a legal obligation to them. The next was drug and alcohol dependents, lastly was the residents like us. Unfortunately

This was a problem for the council as it was them that put us in the position in the first place.

Brian, Liz and some of the others also had problems with the council. Trish the manager of the Brick became our spokesperson.

The council representatives came up with a great solution to the problem, to get private lodgings. I discussed the councils Idea with Kelly, Liz, and Brian, in our room at the grand one night. I was incredible that after explaining the problems we had previously faced we still had to find our own accommodations. Brian was disheartened and Liz upset, we had acquired a friendship, a bond together. We knew in order to avoid the street again it would have to be every man for themselves, as upsetting for me and Kelly as

it was for Liz and Brian. Trish working together with me Kelly, Liz and Brian began a rigorous search for properties finding them viewing them and not meeting their requirements losing them. It was incredibly disappointing. It wasn't until the last week that things changed. Trish had received a call from Marie B from the bond scheme, with which we had signed up to. The gist of the call was a landlord who had turned three houses into flats to let and needed them filling ASAP and if she had any clients to recommend to him. As with other times, there was a small problem, the rent was one hundred and twenty five pounds p/w. Our allowance would only cover eighty five pounds p/w, but with a little negotiation we managed to get it down to just one hundred p/w for a couple and ninety p/w for a single person in one bed room flats.

This meant top-ups, I felt we had no choice in the matter and it seemed the only down side. Brian had been offered a place in the Salvation Army in Bolton.

Brian also in his forty's said he would rather stick pins in his eyes. I wouldn't blame him if he did of course. We knew it was preferable than the streets though.

We arranged a viewing for the following day. That night we discussed the matter over and no matter how bad it was we would take it.

As it turned out the flats were not that bad and so on the last day of our time in the Grand we moved in. It was cutting things close but finally the stress of the last few days was over, time to start over again. Trish had a surprise for us she had been out and got us all a kettle and pillows etc and sorted out a basic furniture pack to be delivered for free from the Queens Hall for each of us.

It was a wonderful start. We each had also been given very large food parcels. That's were this story ends or begins, depending on your point of view. We all still live together in the flats. Kelly is expecting our first child, a boy- things couldn't be better. But there is still a part of me that still lives in a sort of grey world between the dark and the light. I take tablets to make me feel more positive but I know just how easy it is to slip off the ladder. I always believed there was a safety net to catch those that fall off the ladder of life. I was wrong of course, I feel concerned for all the others to follow. In a funny way I was lucky, still scared from the experience but I am ready to move on.

One step at a time.

As a foot note we would like to thank the following agencies, The Queens Hall, The Brick Drop-in centre and the Making space day centre for their help and support through a very difficult time. We would also like to ask what side is the council on why did it come to this.? We are not criminals but we would have been treated better had we been. We should have been given a face to face meeting to sort every problem out instead of the possible Death sentence on the streets.