

King of the Squatters

jaybo

inner self publications

2020

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King of the Squatters.

Chapter 1 Children of the Revolution

I was born a revolutionary werewolf. Halloween 1968. A miracle. Just like you. A profound, yet temporary, organic life form. Way beyond our own comprehension. For all life is profound. All life is sacred. I am you, and we are the universe!

In 1968, the civilized world was exploding. Black panthers and white panthers, hippies and yippies, revolutions and riots. The old order nearly fell. The world nearly changed. But the powers that be have had thousands of years of practice.

Many people fought in the streets, many were imprisoned, and many died in the ongoing struggle for freedom and equality – the fight that I would join and dedicate my life to.

My parents, Clare and Rick, were quite ordinary, working class people, born from generations of hardship and suffering. My dad was actually as mad as fuck and had rebelled against authority all his life. In his last year, aged sixty-two, he was twice chased by the police in his car but escaped both times. His car was a seven-seater people carrier!

Rick was a joiner who would laugh at anyone who called themselves a carpenter. He said often that he was the best around. He was a big bear of a man and could drive a six-inch nail with one blow. His dad, his grandad, and all his brothers were time-served builders, sparks, tilers, plumbers.

Clare was an identical twin. My parents were handsome and beautiful when they married, but very different people and, ultimately, deeply unsuited. Clare had left school with no qualifications and was embarrassed by this. Rick had walked out of school one year early and basically told them to fuck right off.

Mum and dad married young and mum landed a menial job at Unilever's factory. Shortly afterwards, I was born, and my alcoholic, gambling father started blowing the family money. Clare had worked like a slave for all of her life, and continues to, in the desperate hope that one day she would have paid off her never-ending mortgage and become a homeowner. Success. I wish humans had never invented the concept of ownership, private property, or money.

My parents were not hippies or panthers, they were not political, and they certainly considered voting to be a waste of time. They had similar regard for religion. When I was born, Rick had a slicked-back, quiff hairstyle and skinny tie. Teddy Boy rebel without a cause. He was Elvis Presley's biggest fan and forced us to watch Elvis concerts at Christmas, whilst mocking him ruthlessly for taking so many drugs, needing fake sideburns and dying on the toilet.

Rick was a joker, a real funny guy. He loved being the centre of attention and making all his mates laugh in the pub each night. Rick went to the pub after work, every day of his life, and almost managed to die in there.

I was born in my grandparents' house because my parents were living there, as they could not afford a home of their own. Born jaundiced with a mop of black hair, I was "just like a little red Indian," according to Clare. Mum did all the childcare, and one year later my brother was born.

My mother must have been under enormous pressure. In my earliest memory, I was approximately 3 or 4 and literally being dragged along a main road by my mum. I was distraught and felt unable to walk anymore. My baby brother was in the buggy. Mum was absolutely at the end of her tether with me.

A few years later, my sister arrived, at which point Rick came home from the pub one night, with a puppy in his jacket pocket. He named our dog Bill Shankly, after Liverpool football clubs' legendary manager. Shanks never slept indoors and lived to fight other dogs, but only if they were twice as big as him. He died eighteen years later, fighting with two dogs twice as big as him, on Christmas night. Dad had said that he would record Shanks barking before he died, so we could have him stuffed with a cassette player inside him playing his bark by the front door.

With Wales visible from Liverpool, we were very lucky to have holidays in Abersoch and Conway. In Conway, we could run wild and free all day long, exploring and playing in nature – in mountains, rivers, beach and sea – parents glad we were out of the way and content in the knowledge that we would return when hungry.

Chapter 2 Violent Families and Violent Schools

Rick was physically violent to me, from a young age. He perceived that his father role required absolute control over me. He was comfortable with me living in fear of his hugely superior size, strength and violence. Aged five, I was put into primary school. I hated it immediately; all domination and control and being subjected to more physical violence. Some innocent young children were being beaten on a daily basis, at home and at school. From family violence to school violence. Subservience was beaten into children until they accepted authority and control.

On my first day in school, my mum went to the hairdressers, without telling me. When she walked me to school that morning, she had long straight hair. When she returned to collect me that afternoon, she had a short, tight perm. All curls and completely different. I did not recognise her and cried terribly, feeling I had been abandoned.

My second school memory is from just one year later. My teacher asked me which year we were in. I had no idea, the year being entirely irrelevant to me at six years old. Mrs Laskier was unimpressed and humiliated me for my stupidity. Around that time my favourite uncle affectionately nick-named me Jaybo.

My primary school was openly, even proudly, violently assaulting children, from five to ten years of age, on a daily basis. A creative range of punishments were used, from the standard thrashing on the buttocks with a wooden cane to being struck on the head with a large wooden cotton reel. Mr Ackroyd had his wooden cane 'pimped'; a small cotton reel was attached at one end for the girls and a large one at the other end for the boys. That sadist used to throw a tennis ball at your head if you were not paying attention. If the ball missed, or he felt so inclined, he would then strike your head with his modified cane.

My most memorable primary school lesson came courtesy of Mrs Dunne when I was just eight years of age. I think she believed in equality, as she was equally violent to little girls and boys, and she was as violent as the male teachers. During one lesson, our class of thirty-plus eight-year-olds was asked to name an animal beginning with a letter from the alphabet allocated to you. As we worked through the alphabet and when she came to me, I had to name an animal beginning with the letter 'S'. I immediately replied, with an absolutely straight face, "Sandwich tern," to the huge amusement of my class-mates. By eight years of age, I was already fascinated by the natural world, and especially birds. I was a keen birdwatcher, with my own binoculars, guide book, and note and sketch pad for out in the field. I had to harass my dad for months to get me the binoculars and identification guide. In Conway, I would disappear for hours, watching birds and drawing them, in bliss.

Mrs Dunne exploded. All the other kids had played ball. My insubordination was way too much. Few kids rebelled, at such a young age, in such a violent school. When the steam stopped coming out of her ears, she said, "There is no such thing." I replied calmly, "Yes there is." She said, "No, there is not!" I calmly replied, "It's a bird," knowing full well that it was. Then she shouted, "No, there is not and do not answer back!" She stormed towards me and struck me hard on the head, with her fist clenched and upturned, so I was hit on my little head with her layered, jewelled ring acting as an elaborate knuckle duster!

At that point, I had learned a very important lesson: I was cleverer than a teacher. A little rebel was born. I have hated authority, and bullies, ever since. That was 1976, and punk rock was exploding and threatening to destroy civilisation. That may all sound unbelievable now, but at the time it was as common as the sexism, racism, ageism and homophobia that riddled the most popular television and radio shows of the day.

My favourite TV shows were 'Tiswas', 'Swap Shop' and 'Why Don't You'. The opening tune to 'Why Don't You' had the lyrics, "Why don't you, get up and go and do something less boring instead?" It was all about 'do it yourself', diy, and being creative. Anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist 'Swap Shop' enabled kids to swap their games and toys with any other kids around the country, by paying the postage costs. 'Tiswas' was dedicated to zaniness and gave the kids more power than the adults. 'Tiswas' and 'Swap Shop' were on for three hours each, at the same prime time on Saturday morning, when there were only three TV channels. We flicked between the two shows and did not care that we never had anything to swap.

By ten years of age, I resented domination and violence, and the inescapable control, exerted at home and at school. Most of my pals had been allowed to play outside their house after school since they were eight. My parents held me back until I was ten, when I left primary school and changed up to what we called middle school, where I would be imprisoned for the next three years. My first school had a good reputation, but my next school had the worst reputation locally. This new chaos was a refreshing change for me. Meeting ten-year-old girls who were able to, and thought nothing of, beating up boys and even physically fighting with the teachers was interesting. My second school was just as violent as my first, but at least there we could fight back.

Then I had some freedom in the evenings at least. I made friends immediately with the craziest boys and girls. My life changed dramatically overnight, and every single night I would play out as late as possible. We were never bored and had so much fun. But I often struggled to sleep at night. I had recurring flying dreams for years as a child. I was always a bird gliding high over a coastline. Sometimes I lost the ability to remain in the air and tumbled to Earth; unable to take off again, I would try with all my might and usually awaken then, feeling physically exhausted. Years later, I was told by a dream analyst friend that flying was the most common dream linked to a desire to escape.

My middle school, for ten- to thirteen-year-olds, was mostly full of very poor kids, unlike my infant school. When I first visited some of my new pals' homes, I was shocked by the extreme poverty they lived in. Some of my infant-school pals were from bourgeois families, but no kids from middle-class families went to my second school. My new pals were wild, and I loved it.

I progressed from Saturday-morning football with the cub scouts to school youth club and discos, where ten-year-old kids were thrusting their tongues down each other's throats in kissing contests. It felt like my life was finally starting, discovering a world of possibilities beyond the overbearing eyes and punishments of family and school. It would not be long before I discovered the authority of the police, but we were fast on our bikes and knew every back-street and alleyway.

One of my closest pals was not considered to be intelligent by our learned teachers, and he hated every lesson, especially maths. At lunch break, we would go to his home nearby, and I would complete his maths homework quickly. I was good at maths. Then the fun started. Dave had owned motorbikes and entered competitions since he could mount a motorcycle. His pride and joy was his Maiko 250cc trials bike, a beast which he had to stand on milk crates to get on. We would ride the bike around some local scrubland, Dave driving and me clinging on for dear life.

One lunch hour, when we were feeling cheekier than usual, we decided to ride the Maiko in our school uniforms, without helmets, all the way down the road that ran alongside our school playground. Lots of kids saw us and cheered us on. By the time we were thirteen, Dave could strip and rebuild motorcycle engines single-handedly, self-taught of course.

Another friend had an older brother who was a punk rocker. He had bought the Sex Pistols' 'Never Mind the Bollocks' album, and, when we could, we would listen to it sneakily, while he was out. We loved it. The punk rock peacocks blew us away. I was intrigued, since the TV news had been telling us the anarchist lunatics would destroy decent society. We lived in hope.

Musically, ska had been my first love. My first cassette tapes were the debut albums by the two-tone ska groups Madness ('One Step Beyond'), The Specials ('Specials'), The Selecter ('Too Much Pressure') and The Beat ('I Just Can't Stop It'). Music rocked my world. I was a 'two-tone' junkie, obsessed, with trilby hat, two-tone shirt, tie and tasselled shoes. I wanted a ska suit and painted the '2 Tone' rude boys' and girls' symbols on my bedroom wall. It was not long before I was stealing tapes and even 12" vinyl records, because I 'needed' them and received very little pocket money each week: fifty pence, when a single cost one pound and a tape four pounds.

My dad drove me to school once. Our school's entrance had two big gates to enter and exit the gravel staff car park. Parents were not supposed to enter the car park. The staff room looked straight out onto the car park. So, my dad took great pleasure in driving in, fast, throwing the car round towards the building, and spraying the staff-room windows with gravel, before throwing me out and speeding away.

Before I left middle school, I understood that my grandad and my uncles could all build houses, single-handedly. I also understood that bankers could not build houses, but they could take them away from people, even if the people had built their own homes. That seemed grossly unfair to me.

My most memorable day at middle school was the day it closed, for good. My friend Steve Smith and I had a row and I hit him, which led to him climbing out of our classroom window and up onto the school's roof. He refused to come down for the rest of the afternoon. The kids loved this last day's entertainment, as our teacher struggled to get Steve down, unsuccessfully. Not until the final bell for the final day, did Steve come down, to the triumphant cheers of many kids. Then we all went to the end of the little road leading to the school entrance, started fires and burned our uniforms. Some kids climbed to the top of tall lamp-posts and tied their ties up there.

During the rare moments I was at home, I was never allowed to answer the door if anyone rang the bell. We all knew to hide if any unexpected person called round to our home. Throughout my entire childhood, my mum only got caught out once, for my dad's debts. I was hiding on the stairs when I saw her slam our front door into a bailiff's face.

I almost had a choice between the two local senior schools. One was for all boys, notoriously strict and violent, known as the best school in town. The second was for girls and boys, less strict but probably as violent. I desperately wanted to go to the mixed school, but my dad said, "No way. They will still remember me, and you will suffer as a result." I knew that he had walked out of his

final school one year early, and there had been an incident, but everyone who knew the details refused to talk to me about it. It took another twenty years before I found out what he had done.

I went to the all-boys senior school. Another three years of hell. Before we even started, all the kids' parents were given about twenty pages explaining what was and was not allowed, down to the millimetre width of your trousers. On our first day, about eight hundred thirteen-year-old boys gathered in the school yard to be lined up militarily in our new classes. Each teacher stood in front of their thirty-odd new boys. One bellowed "I'm Lovely," which made the unfortunate boy at the front giggle. Instantly, he was taken away to be caned, at barely nine am on his first day. The teacher who shouted was in a real 1970's time warp, with a bad suit, greasy, quiffed hair and huge facial sideburns. His name really was Mr Lovely.

My teacher was a keen marathon runner, who constantly harassed me, saying that I had the physique of a long-distance runner. I was a good runner, fit from playing football for teams inside and outside school and cycling many miles each night, as our little gang of four terrorised my home town in search of fun. Our favourite games were 'garden hopping' and 'hedge diving'. We sneakily climbed into back gardens and ran along on top of the boundary wall for as long as we could. Front gardens were not as exciting, but it was great fun diving into the top of the biggest privet hedges we could find, in the ten square-miles we covered.

As I was the first of our gang to be able to grow a mustache, Mr Robinson made the same hilarious joke each morning: "Will you wash that caterpillar off your lip?!" Thanks to my little caterpillar, I was able to buy alcohol from one dubious off-license shop. I would buy cans of Holsten pils lager, and small bottles of Pernod, so that we could all get rotten drunk and vomit. If I would have been a year or two older, I would have probably sniffed glue or taken heroin, like some of my older pals did. Some died, aged twenty-one-plus.

Instead, in our wisdom, with absolutely no drugs education at home or school, we inhaled lighter gas. High, almost tripping, in a dirty unnatural way, for less than a pound. Cluelessly destroying our young, developing brain cells. But we preferred to pool what little cash we had together and buy five pounds' worth of hashish, between three or four of us. We smoked spliffs and gave each other blow-backs all the way down, no waste.

In 1981, Britain erupted into riots. Liverpool went up in flames, like many other cities, as the people took to the streets and said "No more!" We watched the television news excitedly and wanted to go and join in, but we had no idea how to get to Toxteth, and Liverpool seemed scary at the best of times. Of the hundreds who were arrested after five days of debauchery, most were teenagers and many black. The police were less subtle with their racism back then.

From the commencement of my teen years, it had felt impossible to avoid the pressures of being a 'scally'. I guess 'scally' was shortened from 'scallywag', but scallys wore expensive clothes. The pressures so connected to football had started years earlier, when my grandad had asked me, aged eight, who I supported. As I knew all my family supported Liverpool, except him, I said Everton, happy to side with him and support the underdog. I received a half-share in a season ticket, most unexpectedly, as a result.

It was hard for me to be a good scally, as my dad blew his wages, and scally or branded fashion labels were, by definition, expensive. The same labels I wore then are still the same labels that are desirable today. Adidas, Fila, Puma... occasionally, a horse – cartoon or living – won its race for my dad, and I got the Ellesse tracksuit top or Lacoste t-shirt that no one else had. Rick was generous when he had cash and would enjoy buying a round for everybody in the pub.

Luckily for me, I was, if I say so myself, funny as well as rebellious, and I genuinely always cared for the underdog. I walked a fine line between the popular kids and the unpopular. Mostly, I got on with both, but I never forgot where I came from or where my beliefs lay.

For one English lesson, our hippy teacher Mr Balls asked us to prepare a talk on our hobbies and read them to the class. As he was a rare, 'lenient' teacher, I saw an opportunity. I wrote a talk about bird watching. My talk consisted of a list of every tit in Europe. So, I may have said 'tit' twenty times, amusing my classmates with each one. I ended my childish prank with the line, "But, of course, my favourite in Europe is the good old shag!", at which the class of thirteen-year-olds erupted into laughter.

Mr Balls looked at me and said, "Take that to Mr Scudamore." 'Scudy', as we called him, was a sadist. He enjoyed lashing young boys on the buttocks with his cane and probably did it several times a week. But he took it one step further. He made the boys bend over with their heads below the brass door handle, in his office. If he struck you so hard that you jolted your body upwards, you cracked the back of your head on the brass door handle!

Years later, I became very interested in libertarian, and free, education. I discovered that a government report had been written in 1959, decades before, which stated that caning children was "barbaric". No wonder Pink Floyd's 'We Don't Need No Education' was a huge hit.

I was actually awarded my 'sports colours', a special tie, because I was good at sports, several types of which I was forced into, like cross-country running, rugby and cricket. Our house was the worst at sports out of the three in my senior school. One day, we had to play cricket against the best house. As the wickets were being set up, my mate and I walked to the outer edge of the pitch and started making daisy chains. The sports teacher hated us both, and the feeling was mutual. He stormed over and gave us a bollocking for our floral frolicking.

To start the match, our best, yet average, bowler faced the best batsman in the school. He played for the county and took cricket very seriously. On the very first bowl of the match, he struck the ball so hard and high I almost had time to say to my friend, "Watch me catch this." If we would have fully considered how to evade participation, my buddy and I would have gone to the far boundary on the other side of the ground, where only left-handed people would have struck the ball. As the heavy, hard cricket ball flew high through the air towards me, I knew it would have to take my hand off for me to drop it. I caught the ball, and my hand stayed attached to my arm. Our team collectively roared with laughter, as the teacher and batsman's heads sank deeply into their hands.

I hated every day of my final school, and I hated every day imprisoned with my exploding nuclear family. Only running wild each night with my mates kept me sane. I would be late home every single night, rushing up to my bedroom with excuses. One night my mum tried to keep me indoors. She never tried again. Only rarely would I take my closest pals to my home. I was embarrassed that my dad might show up. We preferred hanging out on the streets, chasing girls and creating spontaneous mischief.

My dad had tried to make some profit from selling houses. He would buy a house that needed work, and our family would move into it. Dad fixed it up whilst we lived in it. Once the work was complete, we would move again. By the time I was sixteen years old, I had lived in seventeen houses.

For our school's leaving party, we had a disco. My pals and I had drunk as much lager as we could get our hands on and two bottles of home-brew wine, which a mate had stolen from his dad. Even though I had been warned not to drink the bottles dry due to the sediment at the bottom, I did. I was very drunk, and towards the end I knew that I needed to vomit. Not wanting to miss an opportunity,

I asked my pals to get me to Scudy's office, which was adjacent to the assembly-room disco. They managed, so I threw up all over the hated head-master's door. I was then carried home like a baby in the huge arms of the toughest kid in school and delivered to my mum. Followed by my first experience of a spinning bed.

During my final school year, the children were all told that, when we left, we would all be given a reference: a few sentences saying that you had attended the school. Exceptional pupils might have got a sentence or two more. So, it came as an amusing surprise to me that, when I left, they refused to give me a reference. The school refused to even admit that I had attended their children's prison for three torturous years. I know of no other kid that happened to, and I prefer not to say why, except that there was an incident with fireworks, and they could not prove that it was me.

Chapter 3 Saving the Planet

When my sister was twelve years old, she surprised our whole family by turning vegetarian. As a result, she had to cook her own meals. Her dedication impressed me. Our dad was a rampant carnivore and ridiculed her.

Aged fourteen, I had become a paid-up member of Greenpeace, the environmental organisation, who were using direct action to save whales from slaughter and were trying to 'save the planet', as the polar ice caps melted rapidly. At fourteen pounds' annual membership, this required a significant financial contribution from me. I had a paper-round paying five pounds a week. I also worked on building sites with my dad occasionally.

Upon becoming a paid-up member of Greenpeace, one received an A2-sized, double-sided poster, which I immediately stuck on my bedroom wall. One side showed Antarctica, with details about the rapidly melting pole. The other side explained how, since the industrial revolution (the blink of an eye in humanity's history), we had carelessly ravaged our only home, mother earth.

Greenpeace made me aware of issues like the depletion of the rain forests, particularly the Amazon, loss of Giant Redwood trees, illegal hardwood logging, rising sea levels directly affecting some of the poorest countries, greenhouse gases and CO₂ emissions destroying the protective ozone layer, increasing global temperatures and desertification, soil depletion, loss of coral reefs, acidification of the oceans, mass extinctions of animals, dioxins, and pollution of the air, the soil, the water and the seas. Issues that had been known about and discussed since the 1960s. None of my friends seemed interested, but it seemed vitally important to me.

When Greenpeace began, they rapidly gained notoriety, sailing their small fishing boat right in front of enormous industrial whaling ships, so that the whales could hopefully escape. There is a documentary movie called 'How to Change the World' about Greenpeace's beginnings, with some great, original footage.

Basically, a rag-tag bunch of some mushroom-taking hippies, with guts and determination, they managed to borrow a little old fishing boat from the retiring owner and set sail, heading straight for the whale slaughterers. One original member, Paul Watson, left Greenpeace disgruntled, to start 'The Sea Shepherd'. Paul and co amassed a small fleet of decent ships and never stopped risking their lives, around the world's oceans. Three quarters of the earth is covered with oceans, yet it is hardly protected.

Chapter 4 Welcome to the World of Work

The release from school, the relief that I had waited desperately for, filled me with hope. Nothing could possibly be worse than the daily torture of school – or so I thought. Sixth form, college or university was absolutely off my radar. Not an option even if I had wanted to go. My dad had said for years, “When you are sixteen, you can do what you want.” When I hit sixteen, it changed to “As long as you are under my roof, you pay your way and do as I say.”

I started a joinery apprenticeship, after dad had words with a mate. Working-class nepotism. Except it was not really a joinery apprenticeship, but a labouring job. Really physically hard, filthy work, ripping out old houses, with only a flimsy paper mask to protect my lungs from all the toxic dust. Each night, I needed two baths to get clean, for thirty-five pounds a week. One day, the boss found me asleep on the front doorstep of the house we were clearing. Exhausted. The working day had not started, and I was waiting for the boss to open the house. He told me there was no joinery apprenticeship and laid me off.

I signed on to the dole in 1984, to receive the vast sum of sixteen pounds per week. Mum wanted and took ten, to my horror. My brother, the golden boy, was being relatively pampered through sixth-form A-levels. Mum had always said she wanted me to become an accountant because I was OK at maths, and accountants earned lots of money.

Then mum found an advert for a job vacancy at a surveying practice: trainee surveyor in the planning department. I had been good at technical drawing in school, so I applied. I got the job and nearly died as the senior partner explained how my long-term prospects were excellent, but in the meantime I would be paid thirty pounds for a forty-hour week. My mate was welding for the council, raking in one hundred and fifty pounds a week, if he did some overtime.

Our little gang of four, that had gone through so much together since ten years of age, began falling apart. All my friends had jobs that were supposedly inferior to my profession, i.e. manual jobs, and they all earned considerably more than me. I could not afford expensive scally uniforms, and I no longer wanted to try. When I was twenty-one years old, I attended my first funeral. Funerals are not supposed to be full of twenty-one-year olds. A friend, who had played in our football team since our mid-teens, died. Unknown to us, Davey had been addicted to heroin.

The surveying practice that I worked for agreed to pay for my driving lessons. They needed me to drive to make more money for them. They asked if I wanted to become a qualified surveyor and, if so, they would pay for an expensive correspondence course. This meant I worked five days when day-release was available and free. The driving lessons were great, but I hated the intense studying in my private time, and I did not like the people I worked with except the lovely receptionists, who were hilarious. Drawing plans was fine, and I went out on site a lot to measure everything I drew.

Chapter 5 Welcome to the Universe of Magic Mushrooms

Whilst I was still living at my parent’s house, my buddy, Jerry, came to live with us, due to problems he was having at home. One day, we bought two match-boxes full of dried magic mushrooms and ate one each. Jerry started having a bit of a bad time, so I intuitively walked him down to the promenade. The tide was high and wild. Huge waves crashed over the sea wall. He chilled and we enjoyed nature’s glory, inside and out. We learned important lessons. Do not take mushrooms if you have problems on your mind. They are a sacred offering from nature, to be respected, which work best in natural surroundings, not towns or cities.

By the age of eighteen, I had tried cannabis, amphetamine, LSD and magic mushrooms. Mushrooms became my favourite celebratory drug, although I rarely picked or took them until years later. In a large field a friend's older brother had shown us, we picked our first liberty cap mushrooms. Within a couple of hours, we could collect a thousand to dry and keep until the following season in autumn.

We used to put small, free parties on in a stunning location near Snowden. I offered magic mushrooms for free to anyone interested and always suggested taking only ten, if anybody was trying one of nature's sacred offerings for the first time. I was tired of meeting people who had taken them once and been put off for life. So many people had taken one hundred without understanding or respecting the phenomenal fungus. Everybody at our little parties loved them.

My best friends were Paul and Carol, a local cannabis dealer and his girlfriend. I hung out at their place most nights. One day after a profitable deal, they told me they were taking me to Amsterdam, all expenses paid. I remember little about that first trip except Carol throwing up at ten am on the first day. We had only arrived and gone straight to a coffee shop at eight am, dragging the owner out of bed in our enthusiasm. She blamed the twenty-four-hour bus journey and was fine for the rest of the debauchery.

On our return journey, we smoked the last of our herbs on the ferry. We were so high we did not think it would be a problem getting off and back onto the coach. But Paul's hand-luggage was a plastic bag with a big glass bong sticking out of the top and a cannabis grower's guide book inside. They dragged him away and held up our coach, but thankfully they waited. When Paul walked out of their offices, he shouted, to everyone's amusement, "It was a bend over and lift yer bollocks up."

After three years and several failed exams, I changed surveying company. I was assistant to an extremely old-fashioned, elderly establishment snob, who screwed me royally for the next three years. I constantly asked for a pay rise. He repeatedly replied, "You need to bring fees in at three or four times the rate I pay you." I sneakily went through the accounts and discovered I had brought in one hundred and twenty thousand pounds' worth of fees in the previous twelve months. He was paying me twelve thousand per year. I could have killed him.

During my surveying career, I witnessed some houses that looked new being demolished. I asked my boss about them, and he told me they were only twenty years old. I was horrified. That was my introduction to built-in obsolescence. Capitalist production had been turned on its head, changing from producing things to last as long as possible to producing things to last only for a set, much shorter period. Built-in obsolescence was incorporated into everything commercially produced, from socks to wind turbines.

The architecture profession disgusted me. How could they train for seven years, as long as doctors, to design appalling homes? Conventional modern housing was essentially toxic!

Although my dad had always told me I would end up working on building sites, killing myself manually, just like him, he never envisaged me working on building sites in a suit, as an accidental surveyor. My brother Nick had passed A-levels and had a suit job at an insurance company. One morning as we dressed for work, I heard music coming from his room which I had never heard and was utterly drawn to. It was 'Searching Seek and Destroy' from Metallica's first album. Until then, I was still listening to Pink Floyd.

Later, Nick played me Slayer's first album, which I loved. Nick and his pals were into Dungeons and Dragons and live role-playing. They would stay up all night playing and disregarded the ridicule they received from my dad and me. One of Nick's mates was called Wiggy. He shaved the

sides of his head into a Mohican hair style. Wiggy wanted to run away with the new-age travellers to Stonehenge and free festivals.

I loved Wiggy's rebelliousness. He had a cassette benefit tape, for the 'Travelers Aid Trust', recorded by various artists. Each band had two tracks. The moment I heard the ska punk songs, 'Civilisation Street' followed by 'All Messed Up Together' by Culture Shock, my life changed forever.

It seemed obvious that the words 'magic' and 'liberty caps' were associated with psilocybin, one of nature's many transcendent substances. Discovering Terence McKenna's book *Food of the Gods* was another life changer. Terence was a visionary and historian, of nature's profound offerings and potential. He explained how humans had respected, and ingested, all kinds of mushrooms, flowers and roots, since walking the bountiful Earth. He also traced the shamanic herstory of medicine through to its destruction and take-over by orthodox religion.

Chapter 6 Discovering Anarchism

I discovered from my mother, of all people, that my long-term girlfriend, Michaela, had been sleeping around. I drove straight to Birmingham where she lived, struggling to believe the devastating news, tears flowing, 'Slayer' blasting on the stereo. Upon my arrival, she burst into tears and begged me to marry her. By this time, I did not consider that I knew much in life, but I knew one thing – that marriage seemed ridiculous and was not for me.

Feeling on the verge of a nervous breakdown I followed a strong intuitive urge to go to the library for a book about anarchism. During my work lunch hour, I went to Liverpool's central library and asked if they had any books on anarchy. This was before the internet, and a librarian searched through their card index system for some time, humming and herring. Before raising her head looking perplexed. She informed me that the index had fifty-two titles listed under anarchy, but apparently forty-eight of them had been stolen! I could have laughed and cried at the same time.

I would hate to upset Cliff Harper, but his *Graphic Guide to Anarchy* had not enticed anyone. I devoured the book. It changed my life; it saved my life and it inspired my life. To discover an artist's perspective on anarchism was food for my soul. However, having been conditioned or socialised, like everybody else in civilised society, I briefly remained under the illusion that intelligence was measured by qualifications, universities and academia.

After three years' employment with a Cambridge graduate, who had so many letters after his name he almost had the alphabet, I felt I needed to read an academic history of anarchy before feeling confident and proficient enough to discuss such lofty ideals with those who held power and authority.

Liverpool had one of my favourite bookshops in the country. 'News from Nowhere' was a radical women's cooperative with over forty years' experience and a strong anarchist leaning. They had been firebombed and attacked by fascists several times, but just kept getting stronger. There, I found Peter Marshall's huge book *Demanding the Impossible. A History of Anarchism*. Peter was a university philosophy lecturer and I eagerly read his eight-hundred page epic history of the anarchists' struggle for freedom and equality. Then I was ready to take on the world.

I actually had my own office at work, with a big, old, wooden desk that angled in around me at each end and a large sash window that looked out onto the hustle and bustle of the street below. My mum was so proud, and for my twenty-first birthday she had bought me a dark green, leather writing block with fake gold embossing around the edges. My promotion, supposedly, from working class

to middle class – because then I had become a surveyor, not a dole scrounger or labourer or joiner – pleased my mother greatly. She pushed me harder than ever to pass the exams, no doubt in the hope that one day I would earn lots of money and be able to help her out with her never-ending mortgage payments.

But with each day I was nearing liberation from the rat race, emancipation from a slave mentality. The most important thing to me was reading my big new book of anarchy. I did not finish it; I did not need to. I had fully discovered my calling. I was an anarchist through and through, and there was nothing anyone could say or do about it. It was not long before I knew I had to dedicate the rest of my life to the long and ongoing struggle for dignity and liberty, for anarchism. I was a dreamer and knew that without dreams and dreamers nothing would ever change for the better.

I believed the word ‘anarchism’ was the most ‘blackened’ word in modern history. No pun intended. Followed only by ‘feminism’. The powers that be had good reason to tarnish a ‘philosophy’ that was based on transcending their power and control, and putting it into the hands of the ordinary people.

I read everything I could on anarchist history and practice, including work by Noam Chomsky, Emma Goldman, Pieter Kropotkin, Louise Michel, Errico Malatesta, Ethel Macdonald, Mikhail Bakunin, Voltairine De Cleyre, Nestor Makhno, Buenaventura Durruti, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Elisee Reclus, and The Bonnot Gang. I did not like the restriction of labels but considered anarchism to be the label beyond labels. It saddened me that people could be scared of a word, whether spoken or an inky pattern on paper. Yet many books had been burned, and dreamers killed, in the struggle for freedom and equality.

The anarchist Class War (CW) federation were strong and notorious then, selling 10,000 copies of their paper, each fortnightly issue. I liked CW, as did many Merseyside anarchists, and seriously considered joining them. But I felt unsure as to how seriously they were being taken by ordinary people. Some saw CW as a bit of a joke, only out to shock, rather than to actually help transform society.

The only other anarchist organisation that I was aware of was the Anarchist Communist Federation (ACF). Only a few years before, I thought I had invented communism. Since then, I have met a few other well-intentioned folks who have also invented communism. Around that time, I also became vegetarian. I wanted to live as respectfully and responsibly as I could, treading lightly and simply on the earth. I believed in liberty and dignity, freedom and equality, cooperation and mutual aid. I believed we could run our own lives.

I knew I was an anarchist born and bred, but the word ‘communist’ was not my favourite. However, I sent my subscription fees, and joined my third ever group, after the Dennis the Menace Fan Club and Greenpeace: the ACF. Expecting perhaps five hundred members, I was gutted to discover they only had fifty. When I joined, three other people had also joined from Merseyside, so we met up to form a local group. The national group got very excited, thinking that insurrection was brewing in Merseyside.

I plunged head-first into the ACF, so excited to find out what other anarchists were like in the flesh. Sadly, it was disappointing, and I was much more comfortable amongst the autonomous Merseyside Anarchist Group (MAG), who were solidly working class and no fans of the ACF. At my first MAG meeting, in The Irish Centre, I spoke to Shane, the first vegan I had ever met, and we became friends. Another guy asked if anyone wanted to help him smash up his abusive boss’s flash Jaguar car. I nearly offered but felt a bit shy at my first meeting.

Our Merseyside ACF group were more than family to me, and I loved them all dearly. I will call them Laura, Rick and Morty. Laura and I were in our early twenties, and she was a wonderful poet but struggling with her mental health. Rick was ten years older than me. He called everyone comrade, which embarrassed me deeply, but he was dedicated and had a little car which he drove all over the country to protests and conferences. Morty was twenty years older than me and the dearest human being I had ever met.

The four of us initially attended everything we could, for joining the ACF was a hugely important decision for all of us. Sadly, Laura became incarcerated in the mental health system for a while, but Rick and Morty became entrenched in my life. I believe we would have all died for each other, and the cause, at the time.

On my first trip to London with the guys, I had to visit Freedom Books, the oldest anarchist bookshop who printed *Freedom* newspaper, the oldest anarchist newspaper on the planet, running for over one hundred years. I bought Peter Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread*, William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* and Marie Berneri's *Journey Through Utopia*. The Advisory Service for Squatters had their office above the shop. As the building had a huge crack in it, I offered to become the *Freedom* surveyor, saying I would inspect the crack every time I visited the capital. That weekend, I experienced my first squat party, in a huge, packed building in Hackney.

Rick and Morty were very different people, but they both blew me away in their own ways. Of all the ACF members, I got on with these two the best. I struggled to become friendly with other ACF members and quickly recognised obvious but unspoken hierarchies and leaders. It was also disappointing for me to hear Karl Marx's *Das Kapital, Volume Two* discussed more than any anarchist book. They pressurised me to read it, so I never did.

Chapter 7 Permaculture

Permaculture had been called 'anarchy in action'. I agreed with that. Discovering permaculture was liberating. Permaculture is short for permanent culture. It was a fairly recent concept created by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in New Zealand, which spread around the world. Not easy to describe briefly, but I would say that permaculture is a creative design system for life, respecting and learning from nature. There were no set or standard patterns for permaculture.

An inspired couple of friends in Liverpool started a group called 'Green Loops'. Fans of permaculture and raving Green Loops amassed a few solar panels and wind generators, a substantial battery bank and a couple of big old marquees with a loose group of up to fifty people. We went to green gatherings and festivals providing our own energy, put on very popular DJ workshops for kids, sold organic vegan food and generally had a ball with techno parties in the nights. It was not long before we earned a reputation, as we had some party animals and one or two unfortunate accidents. Green Loops had the foresight to rent six adjoining allotment plots when allotments were unpopular. They started a community allotment and planted a forest garden at Otterspool, growing lots of organic fruit and vegetables.

I had discovered alternative currencies, local exchange trading systems, cooperatives, for both housing and workers, and considered them to be inspiring and radical, if not necessarily revolutionary. Anarchy for me was, amongst other things, about voluntary mutual aid, cooperation 'replacing' competition, and empathy 'replacing' judgement. Hating living in a private, rented flat from a slum landlord, I decided to move into a housing co-operative in Toxteth, a radical housing co-op that my partner already lived in. To become a member of any cooperative you just needed to agree with their aims and objectives and pay the token sum of one pound.

In housing co-ops, each member is essentially a landlord and a tenant. Anyone can sit on the management committee, where all related matters are discussed and dealt with. I sat on the committee for two years and never ceased to be amazed at how six or so pretty ordinary people looked after eighty-two homes, worth over three million pounds. We were practising self-organisation and self-management, and I loved it. Whereas previously I had only perceived a new world possible after revolution and bloodshed, I began to comprehend the possibilities of beginning to create a new world in the shell of the old.

At that time, in the Toxteth, Riverside ward, the lowest voting figures that I had ever heard of occurred. Just eleven percent of the people eligible to vote actually bothered. Almost ninety percent of the people had bluntly refused to partake in the sham that was called democracy. It had been said many times that if voting changed anything, they would ban it. The ‘common as muck’, ‘salt of the earth’ people of Riverside understood well that if voting changed anything, they would make it illegal, and, don’t vote, it only encourages them.

After leaving work, I went to study philosophy and politics as a mature student. I had only wanted to study philosophy, but that was not possible. ‘Politricks’ was turgid and philosophy blinkered. Some universities had included anarchism in their syllabus. Most continued to ignore the challenging ‘philosophy’. I considered universities to be about controlling and restricting adults. Like schools, they conditioned people to be subservient and accept the status quo. Rather than helping people to fly, they clipped people’s wings.

In politics, we were told that there were only capitalist or communist systems for organised human societies. Whether run by dictators or so-called democracy, no matter. In neither politics nor philosophy were we even allowed to consider alternative forms or any kind of experimentation. Chomsky said, in what was called the most important speech of 2019, “The only important question is whether organised human society will continue to exist.” He defines anarchism, at its simplest, as always questioning authority.

I left after one year, disillusioned. The only things that stuck in my mind were that there is no absolute truth, only subjective opinion, that no two people can see the same colour, it was all personal perception, and work from either Socrates or Aristotle or from Plato’s musings on contemplation and socialising. The latter considered contemplation to be the highest form of human activity and also considered socialising to be extremely important. He pondered how much time and energy were best spent on each. His concept of socialising consisted of one person saying something while another listened with one hundred percent attention. That person then, under no pressure, deeply considered what the first person had said. After fully absorbing and considering their response, they replied. And so on.

That struck me deeply. Although it was two thousand years ago and entirely different to our internet generation’s faster, faster, faster culture, where all attention spans appear to have been lost, it seemed to hold a key to real personal and collective development, at its best. It seemed respectful and responsible, where every conversation would be cherished and everybody had the potential to grow and be creative, all the time. I believed modern civilised society could certainly benefit from slowing down drastically and reconnecting with each other, and the universe, deeply. I was of the opinion that intelligent people asked the most questions, and the most intelligent people tended to be the most rebellious.

Shane’s mother bought him the *Dictionary of Political Correctness*. I read it eagerly, surrounded by politically correct, middle-class activists. I was tired of people being ridiculed for accidentally using the ‘wrong’ words, by the ‘word police’. Political correctness had been invented by student groups in America. After reading the book, I felt less intimidated and concluded that p.c., not police

constable, ultimately played into the power games that had always existed, according to one's education. p.c. was guaranteed to keep the working class well away from activism. The working class were already too busy working to just try to survive. It seemed to me that maliciousness and/or prejudice were the key factors if anyone was to judge and try to police anyone else.

About that time, we were at The Big Green gathering with Green Loops. I was smuggled in underneath a mass of heavy tarpaulins and nearly suffocated on a scorching summer's day, as we queued up in one of our trucks. I later met 'the naked guy', who walked the length and breadth of Britain, naked, to try to change the prudish attitudes of the public towards our beautiful and profound bodies. I was surprised to meet him in jeans and a jumper and literally asked him why he was not naked.

That early evening, I meandered around, checking the site out and looking for fun. As I neared a small marquee, a sign was being pushed into the ground. It read 'psychedelics workshop. 6pm.' I attended and was mind-blown by the amazing people and their stories.

Later that summer, the naked guy was doing his thing at a protest in London. He accidentally provided footage for one of the funniest things I ever saw. He climbed up to the top of a street lamppost, naked of course, and was pursued by two riot-clad police, completely tooled up. One of the riot cops climbed up after him. As the cop tried to tug him down by his ankle, naked guy shouted, "It's not my fault I've got genitals!"

Chapter 8 Raving Revolutionary

Luckily for me and many ravers since, The Prodigy did for rave culture what The Sex Pistols did for punk. I was too young for punk rock, but perfect for the rave explosion. The rave explosion, just like punk before it, threatened to end civilised society. Again, we lived in hope. And who better to take me to my first illegal warehouse rave than my little sister?! It was a mind-blowing, life-changing experience. Thousands of people flagrantly breaking the law to have a wild party on ecstasy. At first, we were all speed and alcohol, but then got onto ecstasy which helped us dance with abandon all night long until the sun rose over our dusty grey town. But it would not take long before our ever-fearful politicians would attempt to make ecstasy and even repetitive beats, i.e. rave music, illegal.

In the ACF, I was ridiculed, particularly by Rick, for being a raver or, as they called us, 'lifestylists'. I believe I was not taken seriously by the ACF's hierarchy and felt ignored often, which bored me and ultimately stopped me from speaking at meetings for the entire five years that I remained a member.

After the staleness of the ACF, it was liberating to discover the green anarchists with their inspiring paper and magazine in Britain and America. We had set up an Earth First! (EF) group in Liverpool, and EF were setting up protest camps all over the country, under their slogan, 'no compromise in defence of the earth.'

I began discovering whole worlds that I had not known existed: autonomists, primitivists, situationists, egoists, surrealists, Dadaists and more. I had discovered diy culture and lifestyles, and the world of zines (diy booklets, originated from fanzines), as well as the free information network (FIN), which had been born out of the free festival movement, and was hooked.

Our Merseyside ACF group had regularly produced a newsletter, which we imaginatively called *Resistance*. A double-sided sheet of A4, to which I contributed and helped distribute. I was very happy to participate in the creation of a free, local, diy, anarchist propaganda newsletter. Seeing my

words in type seemed to make them more important. We received little response, and some of Rick's pieces embarrassed me terribly. Morty, on the other hand, had an outrageous talent with words and expression, which melted my heart. If Morty and I were at all labelable, we were green anarchists with an interest in all flavours of anarchism.

With EF groups springing up all over the country at every new road proposal site, we had the numbers and energy to mount a huge protest at the proposed Newbury bypass site. The government and road builders wanted to destroy nine miles of ancient forest to knock minutes off the commuter's journey time around Newbury. Hundreds of assorted forest defenders set up camps all along the nine-mile stretch of ancient woodland. We hired a transit van in Liverpool and filled it with twenty folk all up for it, we cooked a lot of vegan flapjacks and I drove us all south.

As well as all the camps at ground level, many people got creative and built a huge network of tree houses with walkways in between. Spectacular, with all the hugely colourful and diverse folk going feral in the forest. Even though it was January and the earth was covered in snow, spirits were high. The locals were extremely supportive, offering baths and even cooking and delivering us roast dinners on Sundays. Newbury attracted assorted crazy folk from all over the country. Free food and lawless fun with the forest outlaws even attracted the good clean folk from Friends of the Earth (FOTE). We dug tunnels, jumped on diggers and did everything possible to stop them or slow them down and cost them as much money as possible. The pixies were out sabotaging every night.

One of our friends Julian had grown up in Newbury and played in the ancient woods as a child. Devastated by the proposal, he decided to build a tree house in the tallest tree that they wanted to destroy, about fifty metres high. It was horrifying to watch him being dragged out of his tree house by the neck, with no safety ropes. Julian still fought with all his might.

EF was born in America. One of its founders was named Judi Bari. One morning when she got into her car to start it, it exploded. The powers that be had planted the bomb. EF were hardcore but Green Anarchist (GA) were perhaps more extreme. There was also the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and Animal Liberation Front (ALF), all banners under which anyone could act and remain anonymous. Ted Kaczinski took direct action against some specific universities in America. He wrote a green anarchist manifesto, which he forced a newspaper to print, but ultimately got caught because his brother recognised his handwriting.

I drove as many people to Newbury as often as I could. Once, we met Julian Cope, The Teardrop Explode's singer, with many solo records also under his belt. He wore a fluorescent yellow vest just like the police, and on the back, in the same font and colour the police used, it said 'polite'. Julian had brought crucial supplies of tobacco and cider and threw them up to us in the trees straight over the heads of the police and security forces.

My Christian, anarchist, punk friend Shane always came with us. He had a striking Mohican of dreadlocks down to the back of his knees. He introduced me to the world of zines and anarcho punk. I loved the diy world, especially handmade zines, booklets from A4 down to micro-zines at A6 and smaller. Most zines were A5 sized, the format Shane and I would use for the next ten years, to create Merseyfin. At Newbury, we decided to pool our dole money and create our own FIN. I described Merseyfin as our souls screaming together. We hated the mainstream media. I showed everyone I could Noam Chomsky's 'Manufacturing Consent' movie. Noam was the best-known anarchist intellectual, on the planet.

Chapter 9 Becoming a Terrorist

In 1994, the government brought out the Criminal Justice Act (CJA), in a catch-all attempt to deal with ravers, travellers, squatters, protesters in general, and even 'normal' people. We all became 'terrorists' under this legislation, which was scary at first. After the yuppie decadence of the 1980s, the tide had well and truly turned. The establishment had tried to eradicate the travellers and anarchists, at the 'Battle of the Beanfield' in 1984, but in the early 1990s we were on the ascendancy, growing rapidly, and even taking the upper hand. It felt like we were winning. Resistance was fertile.

I had become a terrorist in 1994, like so many other disgruntled folks, according to the CJA. I had never expected to be called a terrorist in my life. For wanting to dance! All I wanted was the best for everyone. As Bob Marley had sang, "as long as there are first- and second-class citizens there will always be war." When I left work, I made myself some important promises: that I would never have a boss again, never wear a watch again and never brush or cut my hair again.

My hair was going into wild organic dreads. My mum had been devastated when I gave up surveying. She had been unimpressed when I gave her the ACF's pamphlet, *As We See It*. Probably due to the small paragraph on the last page about armed revolution. But when I let my hair dread organically and started wearing the maddest clothes I could, that finished her off. We had never been close, but at that point the distance between us became vast. She wanted a clean-cut surveyor, not a crusty, anarchist, freedom fighter.

When I had discovered anarchism, I had been happy to spend three hours talking to any random stranger on the street about freedom and equality, respect and responsibility, liberty and dignity. My mother, brother and sister had all individually told me that, essentially, they agreed with my analysis and dreams.

My mum used to cover herself in all kinds of chemicals, deodorants, perfumes and hair-sprays. I was a committed soap dodger. The last time we ever got into her car and shut the doors, we both turned towards each other, opening our windows, and exclaimed, "You stink!"

Shane and I decided to take our first trip to Ireland. We got to Liverpool's Irish ferry terminal early one morning, and Shane knocked on the window of a car to ask for a lift on board whilst I rolled a cigarette. I had barely lit my roll up, expecting us to have to speak to lots of car drivers before one let us board with them, when Shane returned grinning. A nice guy let us drive onto the ferry with him, impressed that we were hitch hiking. He then bought us breakfast.

I had little money and Shane had his credit card. When we arrived in Dublin, we caught a bus to Galway, full of excitement. Shane went to a cash point and returned gutted. His card would not work in any of the Irish cash machines. We hardly had any cash for our long weekend. Wishing to spend our meagre funds wisely, we researched pubs and discovered that not only was The Roisin Dubh (Black Rose) described as the most alternative pub in town, but they also held gigs in their sizeable band room. We went straight there.

Eager, we arrived before the bands started. The place was almost empty. Shane bought us two pints which we drank slowly. When I went to the bar, I seemed to be being ignored. Eventually the barman came to me. I politely asked for two pints. He said I could not have any. Confused, I asked again, stone-cold sober. He told me he could not serve me. I remained calm and realised it may have been a case of mistaken identity, so informed him that it was my first time in the pub and indeed my first time in Ireland. He told me he could not serve me and that I would have to leave!

Being used to prejudice for merely coming from Liverpool, in London and beyond, I knew that many Irish folk happily describe Liverpool as Ireland's second capital, so it was not that. Shane was from London, and we both had dread lock Mohicans, and the Roisin Dubh was supposed to be alternative. The barman, who was possibly the boss, got his biggest bouncer to escort me out. I never lost my cool and told the bouncer that his boss was an authoritarian control freak. The bouncer agreed.

Shane and I left without fuss but deeply disappointed to have basically experienced some form of inexplicable prejudice. We followed our noses and came across an interesting-looking pub. Inside, it was packed. We saw stairs so went upstairs, where we squeezed into two seats. The atmosphere was nice and lively. Then someone from a random table stood up and started singing. Every single conversation stopped as everyone seemed enthralled by the woman's beautiful voice. After her song, she sat down and conversations resumed. Throughout the evening different people sang and everyone listened. It was a beautiful experience.

I read a newspaper article about divorce in Ireland which, unbelievably, had only been made legal – in one of the last bastions of catholicism – two years before. My heart wrenched for perhaps millions of people who had been legally trapped in abusive or dead marriages. My mother had been devastated when my dad left her. She believed in one partner for life and considered herself 'on the shelf'. She thought she would never know love again. I sent her a message saying that was nonsense and she should get over to Ireland, her mother's homeland, as the Irish were partying. The divorce statistics had increased by eight hundred percent, as the newly liberated Irish folk began to come to terms with the situation.

Chapter 10 Reclaim the Streets

For me, the 1990s mostly consisted of diy culture, under the umbrellas of the FINs, EF and Reclaim the Streets (RTS). RTS was genius in my opinion. The first one happened around about the same time as the CJA. A small mini car was prepared by cutting it in half and having its engine and floor removed. Four people inside ran the car to Camden high street, an extremely popular and busy area of London.

The little mini car just happened to completely break in half. A tripod made from long scaffolding poles was rapidly erected, and somebody climbed to the top and refused to come down, in the middle of the busiest street. A sound system and about three hundred people turned up, and a party began, as the street was temporarily reclaimed for a party, sand pits for the kids and all.

RTS was all about reclaiming the usually dirty and dangerous streets and turning them into a party. 'Temporary Autonomous Zones' were secretly planned, by a consciously anarchistic team, who produced some beautifully inspiring literature, and incredible actions. The first Camden action lasted for hours. It was such a refreshing success that other street parties followed shortly afterwards, exploding across Britain, before spreading globally.

My favourite RTS, the biggest and most notorious, occurred in 1996. RTS locations were always kept secret, with only a date, time and meeting point publicised on their artistic, anarchistic posters and flyers. When an RTS was planned for central London in summer, we had to be there. A very large crowd gathered in a train station at eleven am, waiting for a signal. The crowd got bigger and bigger, until we were bursting out of the station. The police watched and tried to anticipate what we would do. The atmosphere was electric. One guy decided to get naked, jump onto a car, bend over and shake his ass at the police.

Then people started running, getting faster – tens, hundreds, thousands of people, stronger and braver together, fearless. Where was the party? Near the front, I could not believe my eyes. We were running towards the end of the M41 motorway! Only a few stray cops were there. Presumably they never thought a motorway could be on RTS's radar. We ran through the few hopeless cops, laughing as they were powerless. Tripods and three big sound systems were being rapidly set up along half a mile of the motorway. They could not stop us setting up three sound systems and getting tens of thousands of people onto the last half-mile of motorway into central London.

RTS was theatrical at times, and here one woman, walking on huge stilts and wearing a very large dress down to the ground, carried out quite a direct action stunt. Someone hid inside the dress with a pneumatic drill and drilled holes in the fast lane on the motorway, into which tree saplings were planted.

When the world's most powerful leaders met for the G7 in 1998, in Birmingham, England, a bunch of us went from Liverpool for an anti-G7 RTS party and protest. Resultantly, we closed down central Birmingham's road network, causing absolute chaos, and approximately fifty thousand people surrounded the building containing the world's leaders. They had wanted to hold a meeting to further globalise the world with neo-liberal economics but fifty thousand of us had different ideas, wishing for a world beyond capitalism.

So, Tony Blair *et al* were surrounded by a fifty-thousand-strong rabble, containing people from all walks of life, fluffy pacifists to spiky anarchists. What would happen next? The world leaders shat themselves, cancelled their meetings and all flew away from the top of the building in their helicopters, leaving an elated and jubilant crowd below to party the night away, to the sound of illegal repetitive beats.

Obviously the G7/8 were not slow to learn from that eye-washing experience. They never again arranged meetings in city-centre locations. They had been deeply humiliated, and the world knew. Subsequent meetings were arranged in isolated rural locations with huge security fences extended for miles around the venues, with masses of police, security, dogs and helicopters, of course. They felt like militarised zones.

Perhaps the craziest weekend of my life consisted of a wedding, or more accurately a pagan hand fast ceremony, on the Saturday and an RTS on the Sunday. A friend called 'Blowpipe' had wanted to marry Jenny, on top of Glastonbury Tor, on summer solstice. They wanted to write their own vows and renew them each year if so desired. No church or standardised vows were required. We hired a van and filled it with twenty lunatic friends, and I drove us south to Glastonbury. As one of only two drivers, I agreed to drive to Glastonbury, and Sharon would drive to Bristol for the RTS on the Sunday.

We arrived late afternoon. The hand fast in the evening was surreal, on a beautifully sunny, mid-summer solstice. As well as our colourful crew, many other assorted nut-cases were on top of the tor to watch the sunset. After the ceremony, we drank a big bottle of brandy, and some of us took very small doses of magic mushrooms. I would never recommend drinking strong alcohol with mushrooms, but that night we did.

Most of us were awake all night and took great pleasure watching the sunrise on Sunday morning, until the extremely angry landowner appeared screaming that we had to move our van. At this point, I realised Sharon was in absolutely no fit state to walk, never mind drive. The only option I saw, before the police came, was for me to quickly drive us all away from the tor to Bristol, so I did.

Thankfully, Bristol is not so far from Glastonbury, and I coped with the drive smoothly, until we hit Bristol. The usually bad traffic had almost ground to a halt, because of an RTS that had just started. Most of our eager crew got frustrated and decided they wanted to walk, as it would be quicker. So, most of them got out, leaving me and 'Orange', who was suffering horribly from the night before. His orange mohawk had flopped, and the make-up on his face, so carefully applied the night before, was now a total sticky mess. Only a few minutes later and in my wing mirror, I saw a lone policeman running up from behind us, through the traffic. Instantly I knew he was coming for us and he was.

When he got alongside my door it was hard for me not to laugh, as he wore a small Dennis the Menace badge on his tie. He was convinced that we had a sound system in the back of the van. RTSs would often have more than one sound system, especially the big ones. In the crawling traffic, I opened the side door for the cop and he jumped backwards when he was greeted only by Orange's deranged face and smile, mohawk all stuck in his melting make-up. We were allowed to go on our way, and I breathed a huge sigh of relief that I had not been breathalysed, for I would have been seriously over the limit.

We eventually parked up and met our crew. But this RTS felt different. You could feel the electricity in the air. CW's founder, Ian Bone, lived in Bristol, and there were many spiky anarchists fed up with 'hippies on drugs'. The street party soon turned into a full-blown riot. As my partner and I ran from the police in the central shopping area, a full brick flew over our heads and shattered a whole shop window right next to us. As we ran, someone shouted at us, "You're all sheep on drugs!"

During the summer or autumn of 1999, something happened that disturbed many anarchists and activists, deeply. RTS's London office was raided. That was bad enough, but the fact that it was raided by the American Federal Bureau of Investigation felt like a paradigm shift in British protest. Shortly afterwards, it became public knowledge that every phone conversation between Britain and Ireland had been monitored, throughout the nineties, and that every email in Britain was being monitored, by GCHQ in England and the National Security Agency in America. Surveillance gone mad, or less subtle.

A documentary was made about RTS, called *Reclaim the Streets - The Film*.

Chapter 11 Africa and India

I had the best days of my life in Africa. Aged twenty-six, I felt extremely privileged to spend nine glorious weeks in southern Africa. My brother, Nick, to my shame, was working at the second-biggest casino in South Africa. As his two-year contract came to an end, we planned what felt like my first holiday since I had gone to Torremolinos in Spain, aged eighteen with my mates, to drink and be lairy English idiots. I had been growing cannabis in a secret grow-room, which I had built in my flat. Nick and I were close back then. We had not seen each other in some years, as he had been working on ships. We had arranged for me to fly over for the last month of his employment, then we would travel together. I sold my crop to pay for the flight to Johannesburg and have some spends.

As I had only ever flown to Spain before, this was incredibly exciting for me. I tried, ridiculously, to tell myself that this would be a well-earned holiday and that I could turn my political head off for a short rest. When I landed at Johannesburg and got into a taxi, the driver asked me if I had heard of the taxi wars. I replied no, and he informed me that some taxi companies were shooting guns at each other. As we drove the short distance to Nick's home, I saw large holes in the road signs and asked the driver about them. He calmly replied, "Target practice. Welcome to South Africa." My plans for a non-political holiday were immediately crushed.

Nick's casino was enormous, with a surrounding village for the two thousand staff, all completely fenced in, protected from the natives. The casino and its staff were surrounded by a township on three sides, shanty home to ten thousand very poor, African folk. A small chosen few Africans were employed at the casino, as the South African middle class were becoming established, shortly after apartheid had officially ended.

I quickly felt the simmering hatred just below the surface. One night in the staff bar, I realised a young African woman was glaring at Nick and me. When I asked him why, he informed me that during apartheid she had been a political activist, from a very young age. She had witnessed many appalling things, including 'necklacing', where burning tyres had been placed over people's heads. Nick had basically grassed on her about something. I was so embarrassed. I wanted to strangle him and go and apologise to her. He said I would be wasting my time and, to my shame, I did not try. She had an immense, intense energy. I think she would have eaten me alive. My political activism had been nothing, compared with hers.

On my third night, we heard gun shots, just metres away from our back garden. I was way out of my comfort zone, but I loved it. Nick's friend, Nathan, had taken a liking to me and wanted us to hang out all the time. He had finished his contract early, after being diagnosed with epilepsy. The day he found out he had twenty-three seizures. He was a short man with small-man syndrome, which I discovered when we went to the pub. Four big, white South African guys were playing pool, and Nathan picked a fight with them, smashing his pool cue on the table to break it and threatening them all. I don't know how we got away with that one, and I tried to avoid Nathan as much as possible afterwards.

Nick used to drive to Swaziland, the poorest country in the world at the time, to buy cheap cannabis and supply the casino staff. As their contracts were almost complete, they were slack coming back once and just drove onto the casino complex without showing their security passes. Their car was known. They came to the house to drop off the herbs, then went to work leaving me home alone with two kilos of weed. I smoked and kicked back for the evening.

Then, a boom, boom, boom nearly smashed the front door in. I opened it before the five giant, white South African police smashed it down. This is what they said to me and I quote, "You fucking English. Think you can come here and do what you want. We know you have got drugs. Tonight, we are going to put you in the compound and you are going to be the girlfriend of every black man in there." The compound was the prison in the township for black folk. I turned into a gibbering wreck. Then to my shock and relief they said, "Get the drugs out of the house, we'll be back," and left. Shortly afterwards my brother casually waltzed in from work, as I immediately lunged for his jugular. He moved the cannabis and the police did not return.

Back then, Johannesburg was considered to be the most dangerous place in the world, with eighty thousand gun-related crimes a year. I was eager for my brother's work to end and for us to go travelling to Zimbabwe, to leave the city behind and head off into wild Africa. We drove north in his battered old car, to go on safaris, canoeing and white-water rafting. After only a few hours' driving, the car broke down, in the middle of nowhere, as night was falling. We had been told that, if you break down at night, you could be in serious danger, not from animals but from people. We did not see any people or animals. South Africa is vast, with only a few huge cities housing many of her people.

Neither Nick nor myself were any good with mechanics. We managed to patch up the car and continued the journey to our safari centre destination. We arrived in Zimbabwe at midnight, pitch black, no light or sound pollution, just the orchestra of crickets. Then I came out with a genius suggestion: to make a spliff and go for a walk. So, we did.

We walked out of our base camp, which consisted of some fancy huts with no fences. We walked along a dirt track, to the midnight sound of the jungle, getting high. Sheer bliss. We came to a T-junction with another track, the grass all around us up to waist height. We paused at the junction, pondering whether to head back to the base camp, when suddenly, from maybe thirty metres away, the vegetation started crashing down towards us, as what can have only been a lion was running straight at us, for dinner!

Nick, after two years in Africa, knew, and had told me, if we come across any dangerous animals do not run. Make yourself as big and loud as possible. Jump, shout, scream and stand. Do not run. So, obviously, I turned to run, as the lion was running very fast straight at us. As I turned, Nick screamed at the top of his voice, "Fuckin' freeze!" Exactly at this moment, the crashing turned ninety degrees, and we were safe. The lion was spooked enough to let us live another day.

Next day, we went on a five am safari with a guide and a few other folks in an open jeep. An hour after we set off, the jeep ran out of fuel, to our bemusement. Some people were worried, as the guide left us in the jeep and went off on foot for fuel. We saw wild dogs and were told they were the rarest sight around.

We went to Victoria Falls, an incredible, nine-mile-long waterfall. One of the natural wonders of the world. Utterly breathtaking. I felt incredibly privileged to be there. And incredibly small, humbled indeed by nature's majesty. It felt like the freshest air that I had ever breathed. I fell in love with Zimbabwe. Victoria Falls had a cross-road of two dirt roads, a few small businesses, campsite and hotel back then. Bizarrely, my brother had booked us into the hotel.

My beard was seriously thick, and I wanted to trim it. I used my brother's beard trimmers, shaved half of it off, then the batteries ran out. I had no option that night other than to go down for dinner, sitting amongst the posh guests, with half a beard. I had fun resting my face on one hand then the other, hoping that people were seeing me, with a beard, and without a beard, wondering what I was eating.

We had bought some cannabis from a young, local guy. He had two joints' worth of local herbs, wrapped up in a leaf and tied with twine, quite beautifully. When Nick bought all of the guy's weed, on our first day, we should have known that the word would have soon got around. Then, each morning as we left the hotel, there would be up to twenty guys, waiting for us, desperate to sell us all of their weed. We felt like bizarre celebrities.

We went white-water rafting on the mighty Zambezi river. Eighteen rapids in one day on one of the most exhilarating and dangerous rivers in the world. Before we got into the rafts, we had to sign a piece of paper with lots of words on it, which only needed to say, "No bother if I die, here are my fifty pounds."

We had a choice of going in an inflatable raft with the guide alone rowing or in a raft where everyone rowed. We chose the latter and put our kit on. Each rapid had a name. It only took us four before our raft flipped right over. Some talented kayakers were on hand to help anyone struggling to swim back to their raft, after being flipped. Three weeks previously, somebody had been trapped in a 'washing machine', an underwater circular current, and drowned.

Our raft flipped four or five times out of eighteen rapids. The last rapid of the day was called 'Oblivion'. Every raft in front of us was flipped over, attempting to ride this monster rapid. Remarkably, our raft just about made it, although we lost most of the crew, including our mouthy Australian guide. I am so pleased that we paid the extortionate rate for the film that the organisers

made from our long day's rafting. The look on my face when I realised that my brother and I were the only two people remaining in our boat, after successfully riding Oblivion, is priceless.

The best days of my life may have occurred on the magnificent Zambezi river. We went on a three-day canoeing trip down the river from Victoria Falls, along the Zambia–Zimbabwe border. We had two guides aged just nineteen and twenty-one. As we set off on our river adventure, Nick asked the guides if they had guns, to which they replied no. He told them he had been on the same trip with the same company the previous year and the guides had guns. They did not seem interested. I wondered if the wildlife had calmed down and turned vegetarian.

In the forty-plus degrees heat, we canoed about twenty kilometres a day, setting off at five am each morning. By eleven am we had to rest, due to the sizzling midday sun. At nightfall, we pulled our canoes up onto slightly raised sandy islands in the river, pushed our oars into the ground and placed our mosquito nets over them, resting on the sand. Hey presto, bedrooms! Having hippopotami, with their young, nearby each night was nerve wracking. The hippos come out of the water each night and are the biggest killers in Africa. But hearing lions yawning nearby made it more difficult to sleep.

We saw elephants, giraffes, hyenas, incredible birds, insects and baobab trees. On our next trip we went to Kruger Park – a huge national park, apparently the size of Wales. Two young guides drove us through some of this park. They told us they had both been employed for three years as guides but had never seen a leopard. The afternoon was mesmerising, but the park was fenced and gated, and you had to be out by six pm. As our tour neared its end, we started to drive towards the gate, and then I suddenly screamed and pointed at the dried-up river ahead. A leopard was casually strolling down the river. We stopped close by, but it was not phased. It jumped up a small tree and lay on a big branch, legs dangling over the edge. My heart was in my mouth and, although the guides had finally seen a leopard, we could only drool over her briefly, before having to leave.

Our next excursion was to Lake Kariba, which is also the size of Wales. We hired a guide with a small speed-boat and set off with supplies of food, beer and little leaves full of weed. The guide looked out onto the vast lake and asked us where we wanted to go, to our amusement. We pointed to some distant trees, and off we sped. Before we knew it, we were in a kind of mango grove, water really shallow, trees all around, then what the fuck?! We were drinking and smoking, but how the hell did we suddenly arrive at knee height to an enormous elephant? We could almost touch it. This guide was good. The elephant was completely happy with us being so close. I did not like to be so close to the enormous animal, so we slowly moved back out to clear water.

The population of South Africa was approximately twenty million, consisting of eighteen million people of colour, native Africans, two million white, Dutch, German and English Afrikaans, and one million Asian people of Indian origin. How had two or three million people oppressed and controlled eighteen or nineteen million people? Of course, the answer was, as always, with the monopolised violence of the state.

Nine weeks in southern Africa opened my eyes. Quite a reality check to witness and experience first-hand. It was a pleasure, a kind of holiday, and I did not get eaten nor imprisoned. The wealth dripping off the second-largest casino, surrounded by ten thousand people in the township sleeping under one or two pieces of corrugated metal, made me very angry. Little wonder I smoked nine ounces of mild cannabis. My tongue turned green.

After I had returned to Liverpool, a TV advert caught my attention. It had been made by a charity organisation who worked with African children. The advert was a simple close-up on a man's face

talking. He spoke slowly and calmly and said, "Every time you blink your eyes, an African child dies!" The advert was banned shortly afterwards. I did not recall any other advert being banned.

Two years after spending time in Africa, I was lucky enough to go to India, again with my brother. My only other long-haul flight, for the sum of ninety pounds, last minute. We flew to Goa airport and on arrival had the good fortune to benefit from some mistake by the tour company, which led to us being put up gratis in a palatial hotel, overlooking a huge lake surrounded by palm trees. Then we were driven in a courtesy coach into Goa.

On arrival, a local guy took me completely by surprise, when he thrust a long, metal, pointed rod deep into my ear hole. Pressing gently, he wanted to clean my ears, for cash. I freaked out as he refused to remove his sharp, metal rod. I did not want my ears cleaned by this hard-selling wax remover. Eventually, he got the message.

We found a basic beach hut that had everything we needed for nine rupees a night. Our previous palace had cost five hundred rupees a night, for those who paid. Nick and I stood out, with his white, blond dreads and my Mohican of dreads. It took no time before a fixer latched onto us, and we figured we could work with him. We had fake clipper lighters to stash our drugs inside, and he soon connected us to some lovely, oily hash. Each night, we climbed a nearby hill to a fort and got high watching the sunset.

One evening, we went to a restaurant on the edge of a forest. As we ate, I realised that my feet were being savaged by mosquitoes. I could not finish my food, and we had to rush away on our rented moped back to our shack. I could not sleep a wink that night, as I scratched the fifty-odd bites. Next morning at sunrise, I dragged Nick from his bed to drive to a chemist for some cream to relieve my feet and ankles.

We drove a few hours south on the fifty-cc moped to central Goa, and came within a hair's breadth of being smashed to smithereens by a large truck. We found a pharmacy, bought cream, and I sat outside and caked it all over my throbbing feet. Such relief, as I smeared it on thickly. As we had not been to this area, we decided to go and check out the beach.

Bearing in mind that I had not slept, it had not occurred to me that by eleven am the white sand would be scorching hot, and it was. My feet and ankles, which were completely covered in cream, then got covered in red-hot sand that stuck and set me off screaming and running into the sea. My feet, then in twice as much pain, began turning a horrendous orange colour. I think I was close to serious, even permanent, burns. That night, I had to sit with my feet and ankles in a bucket of cold water all night. No sleep, but I think it may have saved my feet from permanent damage.

We were a bit late for the heady days of Goa's trance parties, although some were still happening in the woods and beaches, at secret locations. We were determined to experience at least one Goan trance party. When we heard of one, we bought some LSD and got on our bike. We searched unsuccessfully and eventually gave up, deciding to take our acid and just chill on the beach, not far from our shack. We found a nice place and rolled a spliff each. The acid was kicking in as we neared the end of our spliffs, and it was well and truly dark.

Suddenly, intuitively, I thrust my spliff into the sand, just as two policemen grabbed us from behind! By the scruff of the neck, they just started dragging us into the woods a few metres behind. I saw their truncheons swinging and thought that we were going to have to fight with them. I felt as though they were going to beat us up, but they had grabbed my brother's spliff and wanted money. We had been told that in situations where the police found your drugs, you just needed to give them twenty pounds and everything would be OK.

But those guys seemed to take pleasure in telling us that they had caught the son of an English Member of Parliament shortly beforehand with an ounce of cannabis and that he had been jailed for nine months. Next, they told us that they knew which hut we lived in, and they wanted all of our money or we were going to prison. I was relieved that we had not had to fight but gutted that they wanted all of our money. I had taken the huge sum of fifty pounds with me to spend in India. Nick had been stuck on a ship for six months and had two thousand pounds with him!

The police told my Nick to run home and bring all the money we had if we wanted to avoid jail. My brother sped off, while the police held me. I could hardly breathe. If he brought all the money, we were fucked. If he did not, maybe we would be more fucked. He returned shortly afterwards and stuffed a wad of notes into a policeman's hand. Then, Nick had a full-blown asthma attack! Although he had asthma, I had never witnessed him having an attack. I panicked. It was horrible to see him like that, and I did not know what to do. The police freaked out and literally ran away.

After what felt like an eternity, he snapped out of it, completely fine. As he smiled a huge, cheeky grin at me, I realised what I had just witnessed. An Oscar award-winning performance from Nick. He had not only tricked the police with his fine acting performance, he had also tricked his own brother. It was hard asking him how much money he had given to the police. He said, "Don't worry. I didn't give them any of yours, only forty of mine."

The next morning, we decided to hop on our motorbike and go to see the jail nearby, as you do. A very old building, looking dark and damp. Tiny round windows allowed the prisoners to look out across a beautiful river estuary to the sea. The entrance gates to the prison were not locked, and there was just a hand-painted sign on each one of them. Nick stepped inside the gates and put his face in between the signs, asking me to take a photo, just as some prison guards started shouting and running towards us. Picture taken, we jumped on the bike and rode away.

Chapter 12 Things You Do for Love

I left India after only two very short weeks, due to an ultimatum from Liz, my partner. Although we had only been together for six months, she told me that, if I was not back in Liverpool by her birthday, then she would leave the country. I was besotted, and foolishly I did as she asked. Nick sent me a postcard four months later saying that he had been having a great time.

When I got back, I found out that Liz had been lying to me for six months about her background. She confessed to having attended an expensive private school. That was devastating news to a young, hot-headed, class warrior like myself. She knew that I would never have entertained a relationship with a middle-class girl, no matter how cool I thought she was.

When she told me, I would have split up with her instantly; however, she was prepared. Liz then told me even more devastating news. She had been raped at knife point, by a Hungarian lorry driver, before being dumped on the roadside, the year before. For that reason, I felt I could not leave her. We stayed together for the next three years and had a child together.

Liz had been a massive inspiration to me when we met. Into herbalism, facial and body massage, reiki, acupuncture and permaculture. She was a revolutionary, bisexual, feminist, who had been in open relationships, vegan and an excellent cook. I went vegan when we first got together. I had never met anyone like her. Beautiful, even with the mercury poisoning on her face, which had been the result of a broken thermometer in her backpack. The thermometer had monitored her temperature for the rhythm method of contraception, but it had broken and got into her skin cream.

Liz was petit and dready, popular and confident, and had lived in a permaculture project on an island off Croatia after dropping out of university. Liz had lived in tree houses, for months, at the camp trying to prevent the M65 motorway extension being built, near Preston. At the eviction, it took four police officers, holding one of her limbs each, to remove her. That same night she had been all over the TV news; that was how her parents discovered what she was doing with her life, instead of studying.

I was, as I mentioned, on the voluntary management committee for our housing co-operative. During a meeting in our large communal back garden one day, we heard that Phoolan Devi had been killed in India. I wanted to cry and scream and was horrified that few people were aware of India's 'greatest' female bandit.

Phoolan had a horrific life after her arranged marriage when she was just nine years old, but managed to escape and join bandits in the mountains. She earned a lot of respect amongst the male-dominated bandits and was awarded her own gang. Phoolan became a legendary 'Robin Hood'-type character, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. She was eventually forced to surrender and was imprisoned. On her release, she became a politician. Phoolan was illiterate, but thankfully her life story was recorded verbally and a book written about her life. A movie was also made, called 'Bandit Queen', which caused riots in India upon its release. Then a young man shot her dead. I wanted to return to India and track him down.

One day I received a phone call from Liz that would impact my health severely. She told me that she had been raped by a guy she knew the previous evening. I went directly to her apartment to look after her as best I could. Liz felt unable to go outside for the next two weeks.

Angrily I wanted to attack the guy who was considerably bigger than me but Liz was absolutely against violence.

My ears began ringing under all the stress and they did not stop, night and day. Day after day, loudly. Previously I had experienced a small short whistling in one ear after a live concert but it had always been brief and at a low volume before disappearing. Now the ringing was not only loud and in both ears it actually felt like it filled my head and it would not cease.

So although I had no faith in mainstream medicine I went to my doctor seeing no other alternatives. As usual he seemed to have no time or interest and remarkably wrote me a prescription for depression.

I got a second opinion from another doctor whom I had recently met. Tinnitus. Incurable. But there is a support group. At the packed support group I listened to a big tough looking guy describe how he was almost on his hands and knees when he had gone to the hospital for help. My heart sank. Luckily I was advised to go to hospital for a masking aid.

I went to the hospital and almost had to beg the doctor for a masking aid. Looking like hearing aids they actually blow air into one's ear which distracted from the ringing but reduced hearing. The doctor explained that the ringing was in my brain and if I lost the masking aid I would need to pay a considerable amount of money for another.

Chapter 13 The Battle of Seattle

In November 1999, many thousands of people gathered together in Seattle, America, to continue the challenges against the G8 and the world's leaders. Things really kicked off in Seattle, and viewers around the planet witnessed the violent repression of peaceful protesters, as well as all-out rioting

when Seattle turned into a mini war zone. The 'black bloc' did not want to sit and link arms, singing songs of peace, whilst being blasted with tear gas and water cannons. They wanted to kick the capitalist system until it broke.

Many innocent protesters were hurt, and some seriously injured, whilst many symbols of capitalism from McDonald's restaurants to banks were graffitied, had their windows smashed and were looted and burned. The American dream was over.

It saddened me that the division between 'fluffies' and 'spikies' remained. Division not unity. Since the 1960s or since the 1690s, divide-and-rule has been the oldest tool of repression, to maintain the status quo of first- and second-class citizens. Some see pacifism as the only route towards change, and some see violence as the only route to change. As long as we stay divided, we remain oppressed.

Some wonderful human beings have become well-known pacifist leaders or icons, like Martin Luther King, John Lennon and Gandhi. They all got assassinated. And, as some people are aware, Gandhi was only chosen by the British government as an acceptable spokesperson because of the armed revolutionaries who fought long and hard enough beforehand to worry the British.

I have enormous respect for Ward Churchill and his work, a Native American who got into academia and wrote the best work on the Native American history that I am aware of. One of his books was called *Pacifism as Pathology*. Unlike Chomsky, Ward lost his job at the university. The best-known anarchist on the planet, Noam Chomsky, had been called the most important intellectual alive!

The 'millennium bug' was a not-so-clever myth, created by the powerful elites, due to their very real fear that the revolutionary build-up throughout the 1990s would create insurrection and possibly even full-blown revolution. That fairly simple, hugely publicised lie claimed that, come midnight on December 31st 1999, all the world's computers would fail. All the computer addicts, and the 'play station nations', panicked and fell for the great lie. The lie that saved civilisation.

Chapter 14 Fatherhood

Early in 2001, the most natural, the most profound thing happened to me. I became a father to a baby girl. Liz's pregnancy had been difficult, and she had refused to see me for a month. I experienced perhaps my strangest ever experience. I don't think phantom pregnancy is the term for what I experienced, but perhaps. One day as Liz and I were lying in bed, I started feeling like I had a large spiral being growing inside my stomach. It felt as though it was swelling and growing whilst spiralling, and it did not stop. It really freaked me out, as I felt like it was going to explode out of me.

My difficulties with my Liz had become heavy during her pregnancy. I was scared when she would not see or speak me. When her due birth date became imminent, precisely one day before they were due to induce our baby's birth, Liz tried to start an argument with me, but I refused to join in. She became very angry and told me I was not welcome at the birth of our baby. I cannot describe how that broke my heart.

I had been fully involved in Liz's pregnancy, being absolutely as supportive and helpful as possible. We watched videos about natural home births, and she wanted to be at home with a birthing pool, but that did not happen. We attended many classes together. Liz's mother came up to be with her for the birth instead of me. She also had no problem with my being excluded. We had only ever met once before, and I did not like her or her husband. He had worked all his career lecturing in

expensive private schools. Those people were not from the same world as me, and they were extremely cold to me.

Liz went into hospital to give birth, and I waited at home alone, up all night, while her mother rang me every hour to say everything is OK. Approximately seven am next morning I got the call, "It's a beautiful baby girl." I went straight to the hospital and saw and held my angel.

In the ward there were twenty-three other mothers. Only three even tried to breast-feed. Two gave up quickly, leaving my partner to be the only breast-feeding mother on a ward of twenty-three. Tragic. When I was breast-fed, one in ten babies were. Instead of the most natural, healthy, free way of feeding our babies, one of the most evil global corporations appeared to be winning. Nestlé wanted no-one to breast-feed but, instead, everyone to buy their powder, to feed our magical new bundles of life. On a global scale, Nestlé might have devastated poor countries for years, pushing mothers' most natural, free resource and bonding with babies out to be replaced by their expensive, synthetic, powdered products.

Three or four days later, and mother and babe were home. Babe stayed with mum the entire first week, and I discovered the magic of holding new life in my arms, supporting her little head. Having my angel sleep for hours on my bare chest, heartbeat to heartbeat, sheer bliss.

After seven days, I was allowed to do my childcare at home. I gave up everything to look after our baby, from eight am until eight pm, every day. I wanted shared, equal, childcare. I gave every last drop of my energy to our baby girl, and I loved it, utterly adoring her.

None of my friends nearby had kids, or at least babies, so I spent a lot of time alone with her. The most tiring, most rewarding thing I have ever done. It hurt deeply that I was not allowed to have our baby overnight. Liz had assumed ruthless, absolute control over our baby, and I felt utterly powerless. It took another three years before I was allowed to care for my own child overnight.

We had struggled to choose a name for our new babe and had not wanted to know if our child would be a boy or girl, so we had compiled a list of thirty names between us. When our little girl was born, I found it almost impossible to settle on one name, to label her with for life. Now, I love the idea of humans choosing their own names and changing them at will. We had six weeks to choose our babe's official name to register for the birth certificate.

Liz and I had our own apartments in the same housing co-operative, across the street from each other, just a zebra crossing between our homes. On the last day before we had to register, we arranged to meet at eleven am next day to go and do so. When I rang her doorbell, there was no reply. Surprise, shock, fear all set in. I rushed to the city-centre offices, only to find out that she had been and gone thirty minutes previously. And then the crash really began. Liz had kept me off the birth certificate and registered her surname to our daughter. I did not care about the surname, at all, but had no idea of the world of hell that was opening up in front of me. The beginnings of what I would face as a father. Absolutely powerless.

After I had cared for my babe twelve hours a day, every day, for one and a half years, it came as an indescribable shock, to be informed, totally out of the blue, that in six weeks' time to the exact day, my pride and joy, my reason for existence, would be taken three hundred miles away to live, for good. I was told that there was nothing I could say or do about it. That is exactly what happened to my daughter and me.

I had realised that Liz and I had no future in a loving relationship. I had come to the conclusion that she was an authoritarian, control freak, and could not stand that. I wished for a partnership of

equals, with equal parenting rights and responsibilities. I had informed Liz that I no longer loved her and no longer wanted to be in a relationship with her, but that that had absolutely no reason to affect our relationship with our daughter. She freaked out.

I had six weeks, to the day, to carry on with twelve-hours-a-day childcare, trying to pretend everything was normal, before my little girl would be taken away, hundreds of miles from her father and half of her family. As I tried desperately to hold things together, a dear friend offered to make a film of me and my baby daughter, together in our last days before separation. He did a wonderful job of capturing how close we were, and how much fun and laughter we always had. I hope one day she gets to see the film that shows the bond we had.

Our housing co-op had a large garden with our own small woods, backing onto a park. Over the years, builders had dumped rubbish there. I decided to clean the woods. The resident robin red breast enjoyed feasting as I up-turned the soil daily. We became close and sometimes I almost trod on her as she feasted close to my feet.

One day as I sat for a break, I sensed something flying straight towards my head. I thought a stone had been thrown from the park and dropped my head. I was wearing a woolly hat. Then I felt a small weight land on my head I froze in ecstasy. Then she flew off and landed on a nearby branch. I felt profoundly moved that a wild robin had actually landed on my head.

The computer systems had not all crashed, and neither had civilised society, in the new millennium. It was not long before the evil elite were once again deviously scheming, and generally fucking over all the good folk of the world. September 11th 2001 saw an incredible stunt as, supposedly, two terrorist planes crashed into America's World Trade Centre in New York. The civilised world was frozen to their screens, but it was not long before the official version of events was being rubbished. For some intelligent people, it came as no surprise that the American government then had the excuse it needed to go and further terrorise the Middle East. That was the beginning of the terror decades, twenty years of lying, scaremongering and false flag attacks. And they called us terrorists!

Chapter 15 Becoming a Man

My dad had inadvertently helped me realise that I did not want to be any kind of man, in the conventional sense. I have challenged the patriarchy conditioned into me, and civilised society, ever since. I read widely about libertarian education and free schools and then immersed myself in literature concerning revolutionary parenting. I loved the work done by the anarchist 'lib ed' collective, especially their work on the phenomenal importance of play.

I also discovered an incredible book, with perhaps the worst title I ever came across. The *Continuum Concept* was about how children were raised in the 'uncivilised' world. I discovered the idea that it takes a village to raise a child, that many positive male and female influences are enriching for all concerned, and that tribal-culture mothers share breast-feeding. I read as widely as I could about radical men's groups, devouring everything the Achilles Heel collective published.

A friend Jonathon and I decided to start a men's group. Having no idea really how we would go about it, short of a little publicity and word of mouth, we just allowed things to happen organically. We hired a little room and hoped maybe six people would come. To our great surprise, thirty guys turned up for our first little experiment.

We were purposefully anarchic and spontaneous, not wanting any dominant or controlling behaviour, with equal respect for everybody, whatever their background or orientation. We wanted everybody to feel equally valued. I believe all expression is valid and all feelings justified. Laura

and I had concluded that we were all, always, the perfect outer expression of our inner understanding. I loved that. One Buddhist, who participated in our men's group, got a bit heavy with his little gong, but otherwise the few gatherings I went to were enlightening. Everyone enjoyed and benefitted from them deeply.

After a few men's groups, my last six weeks with my baby drew to a close. The night before she was due to be taken away, her mother's parents arrived. Instead of parking their big, black, expensive Saab car behind their daughter's house, as they had always done previously, they parked it right outside my windows! It took all my strength not to go and smash it up, for I had smashed numerous expensive cars up before, because I hated cars and car culture. I could not bear the idea of losing my baby, and their car tortured me all night long. But I was absolutely powerless, and they had absolute power over me. Smashing that car up may have delayed her kidnap, for a little while, but it would have then been used against me, when otherwise they had no reason whatsoever to take my angel out of my life and me out of hers.

That torturous night, and for several nights afterwards, I ran hard at my living room's partition wall and slammed my body into it as hard as I possibly could. An extreme, self-harming reaction to the legal theft of my baby girl. Thankfully, I did not smash my body up or break a hole through the wall.

I plummeted way down into a deep, dark hole as winter kicked in. My sister came to the rescue and asked me to go and stay with them in Spain for a while, so I did. This possibly prevented my suicide. My sister was very kind, and the Spanish sun helped no end. I dragged myself back up and rebuilt myself, ready for the beginning of travelling thousands of miles every year and a ten-year battle for access to my innocent little girl.

Parents know how demanding looking after a baby is. Doing this in a city with no money was utterly exhausting physically and emotionally but equally rewarding, and I was elated for every second with my babe. Initially, I had nowhere to stay in the south, so used to camp. Mum said babe could not stay in a tent overnight. So, before attending an anarchist book fair, I made a handwritten flyer explaining my situation, asking if any good folk might be able to let me stay overnight occasionally, sharing the load. I took eighty copies and distributed them. I had been told I could see my daughter every six weeks. I had been told by her mother that she would be brought to Liverpool regularly. She was never brought to see me, not one single time.

I received only one response from my flyer at the book fair, from a wonderful woman named Gloria. Face to face, I explained my situation briefly to Gloria. She responded by telling me that I was welcome to stay with her every six weeks. I stayed at Gloria's place for the next three years and had the pleasure of looking after my little girl overnight for the first time there. My daughter and I played our first games of airport and swearing hangman there, which she loved. Gloria was extremely kind and hospitable, and I was eternally grateful to her.

I was allowed to see my daughter for five days, every six weeks, initially. As she grew up and became a little easier to care for, my access was gradually reduced by her mother. The frequency of my visits was progressively reduced, as was the number of days I was allowed to see her when I was there.

Chapter 16 Fathers 4 Justice

An organisation called Fathers 4 Justice (F4J) erupted from nowhere and quickly gained notoriety with their high-profile direct actions, drawing attention to the plight of thousands of fathers, innocently prevented from seeing their children. F4J quickly amassed ten thousand paid-up

members. Our group in Liverpool formed with fifty members, and there I listened to some of the most heart-breaking stories that I had ever heard.

I remember Nick saying to me that I was not fighting hard enough. I almost thought the same thing myself at first but soon realised that some 'fights' are 'rigged' and cannot be won. In Britain, a mother needs no reason, no wrong-doing of any kind by a father, to separate a child from their father, potentially for life! F4J was yet another life-saver for me. Whereas most of my family and friends seemed to back away from me when I most needed support in my life, at F4J we were all in the same boat, and it helped us to share our experiences. The first stories I heard at F4J about the 'state-sanctioned child abuse' tore me apart.

I was possibly the only member in our group who had any experience of direct-action protest or diy zines and any understanding of how the mainstream media works. After hearing the broken words of some caring, broken men, I really wanted to create a zine containing our own stories in our own words. But most of our guys were tough, working-class blokes not used to showing their emotions, never mind talking and writing about them.

However, I was a good listener, and, when some of them spoke with me about the devastation they suffered since separation from their precious kids, they agreed to begin writing their stories down so we could make our own book. Over the next few weeks, several of the men came to me and quietly, but proudly, told me they had started writing their stories down on paper. Some of the guys had not been very successful at school and some had barely attended. There are still people in Liverpool and beyond who leave school barely able, or unable, to read and write. Unfortunately, the project did not reach fruition.

F4J carried out many high-profile actions. Our local group, like all the groups nationally, were mostly just ordinary guys, often gentle and sweet. One of them said to me that he thought that the worst things happened to the nicest guys because the perpetrators knew that they would get away with it. F4J were nothing like the professional protesters that I had been surrounded by for the previous ten years. Nobody was questioning anyone else's political, philosophical or spiritual beliefs. We were all experiencing what an anarchist friend described as his 'living bereavement'. Simply prepared to do whatever we could to get our message across and our babies back into our lives.

Several of these guys carried out actions dressed as superheroes, spider man and the like, and this was quickly ridiculed and turned into a stereotype by the mainstream media. One of our guys dressed up and climbed all the way up to the roof of the huge metropolitan cathedral, dragging a mattress up with him to sleep on because he was not planning on coming down quickly. He stayed on the roof for four days and nights. At one London action, I watched in horror as one of our guys breached Buckingham Palace's fence and ran towards the queen's home. Nearby, a sniper appeared and trained his rifle on the guy as he ran. I honestly thought that I was going to witness a devastated father get shot dead in broad daylight, because he could not see his child!

Thankfully, mostly courtesy of Sir Bob Geldof, we got some decent mainstream television coverage. Bob got a few hours to himself. Tony Blair even promised to change the law and give fathers some parental rights, still a long way short of equality. But this never materialised, and the situation remained bleak in the UK.

F4J had appeared overnight, from nowhere, primarily because its founder, Matt, had poured thousands of pounds of his own money into the organisation to start it. The sheer need for the group explained its explosion across Britain. F4J burned brightly, briefly, before the media turned

ruthlessly against the group and Matt, when they revealed that he was struggling with alcoholism. How I longed for the day when empathy finally replaced judgement.

The criticisms of F4J came thick and fast, and at times it was even difficult for me to admit my membership. Shortly before that time, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had agreed to a ceasefire. Consequently, a new group had then formed, calling itself the 'real IRA'. I dreaded the same thing happening to F4J, but it did.

The powers that be had hatched a brilliantly simple death-blow to F4J. The only thing you could take for granted about an F4J action was that some or all of the guys would go for a drink in a nearby public house afterwards. And these non-political guys were not thinking anyone would be evil enough to infiltrate them. After an action in Birmingham, the guys went to a pub and had a few drinks and banter. Working-class people like humour. We use it a lot. It's a survival method. Laughing in the face of adversity. When someone suggested kidnapping the prime minister's son, it could simply have been an innocent joke after a few pints. Perhaps it was a serious suggestion. I was not there. Or it was an infiltrator. It could have even been media, but I doubt it. I have a hazy memory that Channel 4 news proved it was infiltration. Whatever the source, it was the death-blow for real f4j.

Chapter 17 Social Centres

A long-running debate had concerned what we called 'social centres'. These were spaces that were either squatted or rented, with or without a legal tenancy agreement. The debate continued, and social centres continued to open and close. Often anarchist or autonomous spaces and usually in city centres, but not necessarily so. There is no definition of what a social centre may or may not be.

Whilst we had our ACF, EF, hunt saboteur and animal rights groups, every variety of socialist and communist group, plus numerous workers and housing co-operatives, we had no common space to come together socially and politically. Some of us had visited other social centres in Bradford, Brighton, Edinburgh, Leeds and London, and we desperately wanted a space to call our own in Liverpool.

It came as an enormous surprise when Rick rang me to tell me news from nowhere: the bookshop had a basement, and they had approached us to ask if we would be interested in looking at it as a potential social centre. Buzzing, we met up with one of our good friends from the bookshop co-op, and she took us to their basement, telling us it was full of rubbish. I could not believe my eyes, for the bookshop was big, but the basement was even bigger. I was asked if I thought we could ever clear up and clean and make the space usable. I knew we could clear it in a weekend and in a month or two make it really nice.

Liverpool's third anarchist social centre had begun. Our new landlords could not have been more helpful, giving us six months' rent free and an extremely cheap rent thereafter. Some of the older guys from MAG had told us about the 'Mutual Aid Centre', which they had squatted and created in the 1980s, first on Whitechapel and then Seel Street.

We cleared our new basement space with a growing team of eager helpers. We patched up plasterwork, had our electrician friend get the electrics up to standard, and began making the vegan kitchen and cafe space and installed a toilet. The space was already nicely divided, with a main area for gigs, workshops and meetings. We started a library and information point for local and global protests and actions.

We formed different groups for different tasks, set up a web page with a calendar of events and started meetings open to anyone, although we wanted our space to run along the anarchist principles of no leaders, hierarchy or dominating behaviour. We agreed by consensus that the space would be vegan with horizontal organisation. Remarkably we agreed upon a name for the centre in five minutes. Jonno's suggestion that we should be called 'Next to Nowhere' (NTN) made everyone laugh, as were next to News from Nowhere. And then, how could the cafe collective choose any name other than 'Food from Nowhere'?!

Our events calendar quickly filled up, and we rented the space really cheaply to groups we felt aligned to. We put our first gigs on and had nights for, and run by, teenagers, with one or two of our adults quietly in the background, just in case.

We delayed the official opening night for some months, until we had all our health and safety and other bureaucratic requirements fulfilled. The energy and atmosphere were everything we could have hoped for and more. One or two people, including myself, got a bollocking for smoking cannabis out of the back door, and two people had a physical fight which resulted in them both being barred. This caused a problem, as one of the guys was our spark and he claimed self-defence. He never forgave us.

Having a social centre made us a part of an international network. We received and gave sleeping space to international anarchists from Russian, Mexican and north American groups as well as many individuals. I felt speechless and embarrassed by our relative luxuries when our friends from Oaxaca, Mexico, screened their dvd about their daily struggles to survive. These were the bravest people I had ever met. They had not only managed to make a very powerful dvd, but produced copies to show and distribute around Europe, squatting, hitching and skipping as they went. They were skint. And how can I ever forget us discussing a request from one American group, wanting to make bicycle pornography in NTN?

The Cowley Club in Brighton, with the brand new Schnews building behind, was most impressive when I visited with Shane. The Cowley Club had decided to become a member's club and you had to sign in. This was my first visit to B-right-on, the most radical/revolutionary city in Britain at the time. A strange mix of squatters and anarchists, together with a huge gay community and a large number of Londoners staying at their second homes by the sea, with London just one hour away.

Schnews was legendary on the underground. Starting as just a single sheet of A4 paper, it was the alternative news sheet, always up to date with all the struggles and protests. It was free or donation, and I read it eagerly for years. They went on to create dvds and annuals compiling their news sheets, always available very cheaply. It was a pleasure to meet this incredibly dedicated team and see them at work. Shane and I slept in the roof space. We got very excited about a local activist who had inherited seventy thousand pounds and was willing to give ten thousand each to seven social centres. Sadly, we were too late to benefit from this activist's windfall.

My second-favourite social centre was the '1 in 12 Club' in Bradford, which was the oldest social centre in the country. I was told it was called '1 in 12' because that represented the number of anarchists in the country. Our crew stayed the weekend for an anarcho punk festival and watched Doom, Oi Polloi and other bands. I tried to sleep in the roof-space but it was not easy with music playing below.

Chapter 18 Poetry

I had been writing sporadic, personal poetry, since the age of fourteen, never showing anyone, more therapeutic than ego driven. When I was given my first big, old personal computer, I decided to type

up fifty of my poems to learn how to use it. I gathered together all of the poems that I had written since the age of fourteen and was surprised that it totalled more than two hundred poems.

With experience of creating diy zines, I accidentally created my first poetry collection, which I called 'free thinkers are dangerous. poems for people long and short.' On the first page, I included the second poem I had ever written, called 'teen-age'. It was not long before I was trying, very nervously, to sell copies on the streets of Liverpool, to try and boost my meagre dole money. At first, I was terrible and used to print a small picture of a guy from the world freestyle beard championships on the back cover so I could use his incredible octopus like beard as a distraction from the fact that I was trying to sell my homemade booklet full of my heart and soul screaming through the poetry inside. It worked and I gained confidence.

I had two strokes of luck to set up 'inner self publications' (ISP), my diy, anarcho, publishing empire. I stumbled into two separate stationery shops due to close down. I bought all the ink and kit I needed for my printer to self-fill for pennies, as the guy was literally off to the airport to leave the country. Even better, I bought five hundred pounds' worth, ten boxes containing five reams each, of quality recycled paper, for the vast sum of fifty pounds. It took three summers and several book and zine fairs, but I managed to sell two thousand copies of my two poetry collections. I collaborated with a few other like-minded souls, and ISP helped a few other people get their work out when otherwise they might not have been able to.

Selling hand-made poetry zines on the streets of Liverpool brought many interesting meetings and experiences. I had not considered that any young people would be interested, but I was proved very wrong and sold almost as many to teenagers as I did to adults. My 'teen-age' poem resonated with them, and I was humbled many times when young people told me they loved my zine. Some teens and adults told me 'free thinkers' had changed their lives for the better. No financial rewards could ever have been comparable.

My most memorable moment occurred when five or six young boys approached me, smiling. I did not recognise them and felt certain I had not sold them a copy, but one clutched a copy in his hand, perhaps from a sibling or friend. He had a short mohawk haircut dyed bright red. He told me that they all loved my poetry and had started a punk band together. I asked them what their band was called. He told me they had not got a name, but they were going to name themselves after me. I nearly choked.

During one trip to London to see my daughter, attend the anarchist bookfair, and sell my poetry zines, I walked down Brick Lane, as Gilbert and George, two of my favourite artists meandered past. I ran after them, to their amusement, and offered them one of my poetry zines, which they accepted gratefully. I think they offered me a cup of tea, and I declined, awe struck.

I went to do my duty as the self-appointed Freedom surveyor. When I got to Freedom Books, an elderly guy, with his trousers held up by a piece of thin rope, was locking the door. He asked me if I fancied a cup of tea, on him. I accepted and we went to a nearby cafe. We chatted for a while before I asked his name. When he replied Donald, I asked if he was Donald Roum, to which he nonchalantly replied yes. Donald was a 'legend', who had drawn his anarchist, anti-war cartoons, for sixty or more years. I asked him how Freedom had ever managed to get such a large building in a prime London location. He smiled and said, "We bought it cheap, in the middle of the second world war."

As I walked to my local shop one day, I saw the most beautiful woman that I had ever seen. Her beauty and energy turned my knees to jelly. She was slender in her tight crop top, and, as she

sauntered slowly along the street, her blue camouflage pants seemed to hang impossibly onto her hips. With tight afro curls in her hair and olive brown skin, I wondered if she was Spanish.

I stared, frozen in time, as she swaggered towards the city. My heart pounded, desperate to speak to her, but my 'political correctness' held me back. Her energy and beauty seemed somehow otherworldly, and I could not contain myself. I had never just approached any woman before, but I jogged after her, thinking it would have been unbearable to never see her again. As I stood in front of her, fumbling for words, she gave me an enormous smile. We swapped phone numbers and I glided away, as high as a kite. Her name was Jamila, and she was from Saudi Arabia.

When we met up, Jamila began revealing her incredible life story. She had been born into the original Saudi Arabian royal family. But Jamila had spent her childhood planning how to escape the regime that she hated. I realised that she was in terrible danger of being killed. And I could not help falling deeply in love with her.

When Jamila had been a young girl, she had been taken to work with her mother and witnessed people being tortured. She stopped talking for two years. Jamila had not been able to leave her home or mix with other children. She had never experienced love, and when she was eighteen she had developed leukaemia. Her father had been a dissident writer and organic farmer, who was later jailed by the state and drugged so heavily that he never recovered, because of his inky shapes on paper. When Jamila had been hospitalised, her dad insisted that she drank as much of his organic grape juice as possible and eat nothing else. They believed that the organic grape juice had cured her. I imagined that their positive states of mind, and belief in 'self healing', had probably also helped.

Jamila convinced her mother to allow her to study medicine in England, which she did. After six months of being a model student, Jamila put her long-awaited escape plan into action. She secretly ran away to Liverpool, where she sold the *Big Issue* homeless magazine on the streets and took a room in a shared house, almost opposite my dingy place. Her money had been stopped the moment she bailed.

Jamila loved my dreams and desires for global freedom and equality, as well as my humour. She had a wonderful laugh, which I adored, and I worked hard to make her laugh as much as possible. Jamila had not laughed much in Saudi. Jamila was without a doubt the strongest, most fearless, incredible woman that I had ever been lucky enough to meet.

I received the *New Internationalist* magazine at the time and learned that, when people were stoned to death, they were buried in the ground up to shoulder height. Then fist sized rocks were thrown at their heads, until they died. I watched a documentary that showed how on Fridays, after work, stadiums filled with crowds who watched beheadings, to start the weekend. Jamila told me several stories that ended with "They chop her head."

Jamila was a real night owl, who wrote pages every night and then burned them every morning. Every night, I feared she might be killed by the Saudi Arabian Secret Services, and every day I feared that she might get caught by the British authorities. If she had been sent back to Saudi, I was certain she would have been whisked away the moment her feet touched the ground and killed. Jamila was just twenty-one years old.

She told me about a young man she admired in Saudi Arabia, who was a revolutionary poet. Jamila wanted to do anything she could to try and help him, after the ruthless regime had locked him up in prison, for his inky patterns on paper. Shortly afterwards, one summer's evening, Jamila and a freedom-fighting feminist friend went to a nearby beach, armed with a camera. Jamila took a bikini

and a copy of the Qu'ran. They made a fire, and Jamila, dressed in her bikini, danced around the fire, while her friend filmed her ripping pages from the book and tossing them into the flames. Before I knew anything about it, they had posted the short film on YouTube.

Liverpool was her symbol of freedom, and she loved the city and its music and alternative scenes, but she felt the need to go on the run. She had become a vegan and devotee of Krishna and moved from temple to temple. But early one morning, when she was returning to Liverpool from Manchester, police raided the bus, looking for illegal immigrants. Jamila rang me from her cell. That was the only time that I ever heard her cry.

The authorities imprisoned her in Yarlswood Detention Centre. I asked my dad if I could borrow his people-carrier car to visit her in the location that was built in an extremely inaccessible position, no doubt, purposefully. My dad replied seriously, "Are you going to bust her out?" I wished.

Yarlswood was essentially a prison, and they fucked with prisoners, and visitors, in similar ways. Having restricted two-hour visiting allocations, they took one hour to fetch her. We were elated to see each other. Jamila told me about her friend in the all-female block who had been raped by a guard and became pregnant. Jamila had then asked all the other women for any unwanted apples for her friend. She put them in a bucket next to her radiator and made cider. The two of them had little parties for a few nights.

As Jamila had never experienced love in Saudi, how could I be judgemental or jealous when she had also fallen in love with a Krishna friend of mine, whom I respected greatly. He had accompanied her when she went on the run. I could only empathise, and any useless pangs of jealousy soon flew away, her continued existence being so much more important.

My friend and I, with absolute respect to Jamila and each other, completely non-competitively, both wanted to marry Jamila, and we both asked her. Jamila had escaped an arranged marriage to an old man in Saudi Arabia, who had been chosen due to his suitably regal blood line. Jamila and my friend were married, and I sincerely wished them both all the luck in the world.

Chapter 19 A Living Bereavement

I cannot easily describe the incredible pain I felt over the ever-increasing distance from my daughter. A state-sanctioned daily torture. The promise that I would have easy access to her whenever I wanted went straight out of the window. As did the promise of them visiting Liverpool. Although I was receiving seventy pounds per week for unemployment after deductions, I had closer to fifty pounds a week to live on. I was paying ten pounds per week to my daughter, when her mother demanded more, threatening to go to the child support agency. She got mad and went to the agency, but saw her arse as they told her that, on my income, I should be giving her five pounds each week. I always visited London immediately after pay day and then had no money left for the rest of the fortnight until my next pay day. But as long as I saw my angel, nothing else mattered.

The Museum of Childhood was a saviour, for my little girl and I. We spent so much time in there and playing in the grounds, as it was free entry and she did not tire of the place for several years. Choking now as I write, we made some nice little videos in there.

I was always at the top of my game in London, with my girl. For the capital together with her company saw me make as much fun as possible, as often as possible. She wanted shoulder rides until I nearly collapsed for as many years as I could carry her. When we went to kids' playgrounds, we often had the other kids wanting to play with us, as all the other parents were utterly restrained seeming unwilling and unable to have any fun with their kids. I pitied these children and their

inhuman parents. At times, I felt like the Pied Piper. But I had to be careful, learning quickly when a young boy, running, fell flat on his face right in front of me. I instinctively went to console him and may even have helped him up until I saw his dad's angry face as he approached. It said, in no uncertain terms, do not even think about touching my child.

Young children are still wild and connected to nature, fascinated by everything. If Aela wanted to take two hours walking a short distance whilst she experienced every small flower, I was happy to watch her. One day we were at the foot of the newly erected London Eye. There was a small brick building that we paid no attention to whilst Aela experienced the flowers and I made daisy chains. From nowhere, four burly men in black suits and sunglasses surrounded us menacingly. The brick building was connected to the big wheel, so they came and intimidated us. Horrified, I whisked Aela away, glaring at the state's bullies.

Another time in a large park, a young man with a bandana concealing his face approached Aela and I. I knew immediately that he was considering trying to intimidate and steal from me whilst I was 'vulnerable', in his perception. I transformed into a parental giant and he felt my protective energy towards my angel. Luckily for us all, he realised that, far from being vulnerable, I would have torn him apart. I felt sick after the brief encounter and would have been devastated for my little girl to ever witness violence. I experienced for the only time how, when parents face threats to their children, they can lift cars up, if necessary.

After three years, I was allowed to care for my little girl overnight for the first time. My heart nearly exploded in Gloria's, as I put her to bed, for the very first time. Liz had always simply said no, and she had always had absolute control of our child, backed up by the state and law. On our first night together, I slept on the floor beside her bed. Just one more insult and humiliation that had been recommended to me by more experienced members of F4J.

We played airport and swearing hangman for years, and she never tired of it. I think it was our very first game of hangman when she threw me completely by choosing 'red panda shit bag'! Perhaps I should not have been horrified. After she started school, within no time, Aela knew every swear word that I was aware of, whispering them all to me. The 'C' word being the only one that she would not actually say. I did not swear around her ever, but she soon changed, and, if I ever said 'shit', she would chastise me.

I used to write a new poem every year for my daughter, based on the previous year, for my own personal therapy, and in the hope that one day she would want to read them. I also must have told her many times about my encounter with the wild robin, as one day she said to me, "Please don't tell me about the robin landing on your head again."

Liz constantly made excuses to reduce the frequency and length of time I could spend with Aela. After five years of her excruciating behaviour, and me absolutely powerless in the situation, I was travelling hundreds of miles every few months to spend only a few hours of one day with my girl. When Aela was just seven years old, one Saturday just after lunch she started crying and said she wanted to go home. I was close to tears myself and exhausted by it all, so I took her back to her Liz. That night, I received the most devastating email of my life, supposedly from my seven-year-old daughter. Three paragraphs long, with perfect spelling, grammar and punctuation. It said that she did not want to see me again!

The email was blatantly from my Liz, and just when I had thought that the situation could not possibly get any worse, it did. We were prevented any access or contact for the next six months and no more overnight stays. I was lucky to see Aela for just a few short hours each year. It very nearly broke me.

I had become almost petrified of women, and any idea of a loving relationship had long gone, until I met a scouse woman called Angie. She had a ten-year-old son whose dad had since come out as gay and was in a happy relationship with another local guy. I had never considered taking on somebody else's child before, but we fell head over heels and I tried, but it was difficult. Her son wanted his dad and not me, and one Sunday morning, early while we slept upstairs, he set fire to my backpack and could have started a house fire in seconds with the old flammable furniture we had, possibly choking us all.

Our relationship lasted three years, but Angie was drinking vodka from water bottles to hide the extent of her alcoholism from me. Angie realised that I was considering ending our relationship. Fully aware of my anarchist beliefs and dreams, for freedom and against ownership, she had researched open relationships. Angie surprised me when she suggested that we could try non-monogamy. I was going an environmental 'direct action' the very next day, so I said we could talk about it when I returned.

Drax power station near Leeds was the largest coal-fired power station in Europe. Two thousand people camped in an adjacent field, prior to an attempt to close it down for one day. Armed with my 'free thinkers are dangerous' poetry, I wandered amongst the protesters, selling zines, the day we arrived. I saw a woman juggling, whom I was admittedly attracted to, and went over. Don Don bought a copy, and we got chatting.

Don Don was also an anarchist, a powerful, working-class heroine, and she fostered abused young children. Don Don blew my mind. We could not stop talking and slept together that night. We went to some workshops together and separately. One workshop was about dealing with the police dogs, once we breached the security fence and the police set them loose on us. Don Don and I spent a lot of time together during that week of protest. Drax was closed down for the day in one of the best direct actions I participated in. Don Don became the most impressive woman that I had ever met. She was much more sexually liberated than me, and so began our unspoken open relationship, that lasted for several years afterwards.

We understood that love was free and knew no boundaries, that love was indeed blind. Fans of Emma Goldman and Chumbawamba, we believed that everyone could be free to love who they wanted, how they wanted, when they wanted, consensually, of course.

When I returned to Angie and apprehensively told her about Don Don, she was very upset. I realized that I was no longer in love with her and having a non-monogamous relationship would have been futile and unfair. Sadly, when I ended the relationship, she went ballistic and told me her ex-army uncles would beat me up.

My dad had not exactly run off with a younger woman, they made it happen painfully slowly. She was just three years older than me, at twenty-one when he was forty. One Christmas Day, as our exploding nuclear family had sat down to eat, she decided to park right outside our window just a few metres away, revving her car's engine. I came close to putting a brick through her windscreen. I was so angry for my mum. They had treated her so badly. I cannot remember if my dad left with her – he may have – but I doubt my mum would ever forget that horrible Christmas Day.

Around the same time, my sister had had a baby with a guy of Puerto Rican descent. My dad had regurgitated some racist bullshit, and this was enough for my mother, brother and sister not to ever speak with him again.

I spoke to him again and met him weekly until he died, but not until twenty years later. An old school friend told me that he had seen my dad in his old local pub. I had a strong urge to see him again, after he had disappeared for years with his new partner. We made arrangements to meet, and of course he insisted on us meeting in a pub. It was very strange to meet him after twenty years' separation. He did not look or behave much differently. He was the joker leader of his little gang. I did find it quite easy to neck a few pints (he paid) and listen to him mostly chat shit. He remained a gambling addict and alcoholic until his dying day.

The first time I saw my dad after twenty years, I asked him the story behind him walking out of school one year early and never returning. The reason why I had attended the horrendous boys' senior school due to him claiming to be remembered one generation after he had left his mixed senior school. He simply replied, "I stole all the lead off the school roof!" I was impressed, as his parting blow to the school would have not only turned the school roof into a sieve and let rain water pour in, but also made him some money.

Luckily, I saw him once a week for the last two years of his life. I enjoyed one thing with him, which I otherwise never did, getting daytime drunk. He always insisted on paying, which was fine by me. It was perhaps the first time that we had been drinking all afternoon, when drunk and drowsy on the train home I put one leg up on the seat in front. I never normally did this, and my foot was absolutely not on the seat but several inches above when two policemen appeared from behind me. One of them was literally fondling his pride and joy, a small camera fixed onto the side of his head! He said to me gleefully, "I have just filmed your foot on the seat."

Even though drunk, I quickly figured out how to deal with this camera-masturbating cop and have fun. I decided I must not swear, but I could say anything else I wanted. When he asked for my details, I replied, "You've got no soul!" He blew a fuse, and his partner looked like he was hating every second. I decided to give him the same reply to every question and must have told him a dozen times "You've got no soul." Knowing there are always police at Central Station, I knew I would give my details there no problem and walk away.

I did not expect to step off the train with my escorts to see my dear friend Kysha, anti-fascist fearless fighter, who had received death threats and been fighting fascists since childhood, run straight in for a fight with the police before I managed to tell her everything was OK. The police gave me what looked like a little business card, which I did not bother to look at until the next day. It said I was looking at three months in jail and a one thousand pound fine!

I told my dad, and he laughed raucously, convinced they would take no further action. The next week, I received a court summons and was panicking like crazy. Then one week before my court date, I received a letter saying pay fifty pounds before the court date and everything would be OK. My elation was short lived, as I realised I had barely a penny to my name. But I had an anarchist, vegan, Buddhist friend, who was about to move in to a local temple. He told me he wanted to pay my fine saying it would make him a better Buddhist. How could I argue? I avoided prison for my heinous crime.

Rick sometimes talked seriously and remained anti-authority, until his dying day. When he lost the police in his second chase, months before death, he had to run into his house, and, as they were that close behind him as he closed the door, they slammed into the other side, and he threw himself to the ground crying and moaning in pain. He insisted they had injured him and he needed hospital attention. He went to hospital and heard no more from the police. Remarkably, he had sustained no injuries in the shenanigans.

It was a pity that he died before meeting any of his grandchildren. One of the first things he asked me after twenty years was how his grandson was and said that he would like to meet him and that he was not racist. After two years of seeing his mates weekly, some of whom would drop racist comments, knowing my anarchist beliefs and practice, I told him I did not want to hear any racist shit and would stop seeing him again if it did not stop, just before he died suddenly.

Each January after the excesses of Christmas, Rick would abstain from drinking for one month. He had never done this when he had lived with us, and for sure it would have been a shock to his ageing system. The previous January, he had told me that he had been bleeding from his anus, and this had come as no surprise to me, for he had given his body so much abuse over his entire adult life, drinking and being a joiner. I like to think that he died in the pub with his mates, quick and painless. This had happened to a good friend's dad the year before; he drank his last earthly pint and went up to the big pub in the sky.

They got my dad to a hospital, and most of the family rushed there to watch him die. I received a phone call from an irate uncle, incredulous that I did not want to join the gloating mass that was gathering around my dad's death bed. I knew he would actually hate that and definitely prefer to go alone.

Whilst my dad and I had never discussed his passing away, I have since witnessed documentary movies about people who have planned for their deaths with their loved ones in a sensitive and moving way, preparing beforehand who would be there and how, all being well. Rick would have scoffed had I attempted to address the issue with him. He was well aware that different, uncivilised, tribal cultures had very different attitudes to death and dying to us in our oh-so-civilised Western culture. He had often said he hoped he would come back as a duck so that someone could enjoy eating him. He was not joking.

All this developed into an even worse situation when I came to the conclusion that I could not attend my own father's funeral. My girlfriend, Jamila, was happy to go with me. But I decided against attending the ceremony, which, for one, Rick would not have cared about, and, for two, would contain a bunch of racists. I am indebted to a friend who did not attend her dad's funeral. That gave me the strength to do likewise, when previously I had thought it would be impossible for me not to attend a family funeral.

The day before my dad's funeral, Gino, an Italian friend, arrived to stay at my place as planned. That night, I received a drunken phone call from my dad's ex-partner, a woman I had only met two or three times briefly in pubs. She decided to tell me it was typical behaviour for me not to attend the funeral. Like I am always not attending my dad's funeral. I told her she did not know me and stupidly said that they were all a bunch of racists, before turning my phone off for the night. Next morning, when I turned my phone on nervously, I did not expect the text message signal to bleep relentlessly, informing me of the thirty-odd hate texts I received. I did not look at any of them but knew that the town of my birth had become dangerous for me. The next time I went to see my mother, I tried for the last time to make peace. She told me that she was busy and, if I was even seen on the streets of my home town, I would be beaten by a mob.

I could see the pain on Gino's face as the texts came through. He had not expected his holiday to be like that. When he had arrived in London a few days previously, riots had started in Tottenham. A few days later in Liverpool, several areas exploded into five nights of full-blown rioting, with hundreds of disaffected people venting their anger on the streets. Gino headed for Manchester and messaged me shortly after his arrival. Gino could see flames from his window, as Manchester quickly joined the growing number of cities and towns on fire.

Chapter 20 Riot On

When I had moved to Toxteth, Liverpool, in my early twenties, I was a hot-headed anarchist with a Mohican of dread locks, which I shaved every day with a razor blade for seven years. I had believed in armed revolution and desperately wanted more riots. I wanted insurrection and a new world. A nihilist wanting to kick everything, in my paratrooper boots, until it broke. Twenty years later, in the hot summer of 2011, I was pleased to hear about riots breaking out in north London. I saw footage on the TV news and actually thought I saw my ex-partner and daughter looking horrified, as a furniture shop nearby blazed high into the sky.

Some areas were always quick to riot: London, Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham and Bristol. Toxteth, Wavertree and a few north Liverpool areas were quick to follow London's lead in 2011. But that time, reports were coming in that towns and even villages were boiling over into riot situations. When riots erupted on my doorstep, I took a conscious decision to stay in my flat. It was a strange time for me. Whilst I had spent twenty years dedicated to prepare for riots and revolution in my home city, I knew that the explosion on the streets outside had nothing, and everything, to do with me. In a strange way, I felt like my work in Liverpool had been completed. I was then free to go.

Just like the rioters from the previous generation in 1981, the guys were often oppressed, frustrated, angry, young men. But differently in 2011, media reports stated that people of all ages and even middle-class people had been arrested, one for stealing a small bottle of water.

On my doorstep in Toxteth, about three hundred people had gathered to attack the much-hated Admiral Street police station, threatening to burn it to the ground. They wanted to burn the furniture and carpet shop across the street, but I was told that an extremely heated debate had ensued. The family-owned business had its owners begging the rioters to leave their nice business alone. The rioters knew, if the furniture shop blazed, then the police station would have had to evacuate and probably burnt to the ground as well. The shops and their insurance companies survived, unlike one police station in Nottingham that was attacked. I am tired of these petty capitalists.

Hundreds of people from the north and south of Liverpool tried to take control of the city centre, but the forces of law and order would not give up their precious city centres easily. Several spontaneous, unorganised mobs took to the streets for five days, whilst the country panicked. After three days of rioting in London, the BBC made an announcement that I never expected to hear in my life. Every police cell in London was full. Tingles ran down my spine as I comprehended the full extent of this organic out-pouring spreading like wild-fire all over Britain.

I had received one or two messages from friends in other parts of the country asking if I was OK. I told them I was fine, excited even. Why would I have been scared? The rioters and I were on the same side, essentially. Even though some of these kids might have given me shit on the streets for my different appearance, I felt a pride for them as they raised a huge middle finger to the establishment and reminded them that, although they had the guns, we had the numbers. The uncontrollable and ungovernable forces do not always look like punks. They wore all black, but expensive North Face.

It did not take long for the media to become obsessed with printing images of people they wanted to arrest. And then two separate naive northern teenagers felt the full weight of the law. They both put short messages on Facebook. One said simply, "Let's bring the riots to Chester. Meet at McDonald's at eight." They each received a two-year jail sentence. Two years in prison, for two sentences online. The powers that be were very scared that they were losing their strangle-hold on our lives.

Chapter 21 Wild Wales

Peter Reason, the wilderness writer, begins his book *In Search of Grace, An Ecological Pilgrimage* as follows: “To recover from ecological disaster, we humans must transform our sense of who we are, so we experience ourselves as part of, rather than apart from, the community of life on Earth.

“Moments of grace occur when a crack opens in our taken-for-granted world, and for a tiny moment we experience a different world that is nevertheless the same world. It is a world that is not fixed in form, but forever changing; no longer divided into separate things, but one dancing whole.

“A pilgrimage is a journey of moral or spiritual significance, undertaken in response to deep questions and a yearning for answers from a realm beyond the everyday. A religious pilgrimage can be described as a search for a holy realm and a direct encounter with that which is sacred. An ecological pilgrimage can be seen as a search for an experience of deep participation with the Earth and her creatures.”

Early in 2011, my friend Shane had suggested that I should join him on his annual holiday in September. Each year, he would go off on camping adventures, looking for the wildest parts of England and Wales, so I gave him enough money to cover my bus fare to south west Wales, in the knowledge that the cash would be safer with him.

After the riots, we went on a twelve-hour bus and train journey to Saint David’s in Pembrokeshire, the smallest city in Britain, that boasts not one but two cathedrals. Quite a journey from Liverpool, to Shrewsbury and Aberyswyth, then all the way down the beautiful west Wales coast-line and into the glorious coastal national park. By the time we got off our last bus, I was barely able to walk up the long track to our mystery campsite. We pitched our tents in the dark of night, and later I needed to take a shit, so went outside without any paper. I blame exhaustion, but managed to wipe my arse with nettle leaves to my friend’s great amusement. Second wipe, I chose non-stinging leaves. When I managed to squash a slug into my ass hole, Shane cracked up.

After three nights at our hidden gem of a campsite, we still had not seen the owner, Greybeard. But worse, a stronger-than-usual storm in from the Atlantic had almost shredded my little tent. Angrily, I asked Shane, who had brought us to the site, why anyone would ever want to camp at the ridiculously exposed camp on top of the cliffs. I knew the answer was because of its pristine and wild location, as beautiful as anywhere I had encountered in Britain.

We moved to another equally windy campsite and started exploring the one-hundred-and-eighty-mile coast path, starting at St Justinian’s. My first day on the coast path, a gannet dived, missile like, right past me on the cliff top down to pierce the sea below. I nearly fell off the narrow path, ecstatic and breathless, as I had never seen a gannet before, never mind seeing one diving right next to me. I honestly had to sit down as I knew I might be in danger of having a fatal gannet-related accident and falling off the one-hundred-metre-high cliff. Shane had known me well over many years but had not realised the extent of effect a bird can have on me. He captured the moment perfectly with a photo as I sat joyfully.

The many seals in the area had their pups in September, and we saw porpoises and an array of birds. Shane and I went for a walk separately, and I spoke to a man who had a large telescope. He was studying the effect on the porpoises of an experimental tidal tube between Ramsey Island and the mainland. As we spoke, I witnessed a large, floppy fin in the sea and asked him if it was a dolphin. He informed me that it was a sunfish and described the strange and rare creature to me.

Shane and I went on a boat trip to Ramsey Island. As we approached, I saw a greater black-backed gull pecking the eyes out of a dead seal pup. I was excited by the trip and shouted to the guide to check out the macabre but natural scene. As the other boat trippers turned their attention to the gull and pup, the guide completely changed the subject to the huge protruding rocks to the east of the island. He wanted the day-trippers to have a nice, sanitised day out.

We used the little vegetable-oil-powered bus service to get around. The puffin shuttle only cost one pound wherever you went. We became friendly with one of the drivers, a lovely Welsh guy named Morris. After riding with him a few times, it came as a surprise that he lived at the first camp site where we had stayed, hidden away.

I did not have as much money as my pal and so had to leave, alone, after one week. When I got off the puffin bus and told Morris that I was skint and had to leave that day, he extended his arm to shake hands and say goodbye. He put a ten-pound note into my hand. I had to fight back public tears. Little did I know that this guy would save my life.

I had spent the last day of my holiday on Whitesands beach, where we had found a half-built stone shelter hidden away at the end. As soon as I saw it, I desperately wanted to finish it and had to tear myself away. Perhaps intuitively, I knew that my life was about to change dramatically. I was only back in Liverpool for twenty-four hours before I realised that I had to sell or give everything away and move to Pembrokeshire. In just two weeks, I got rid of fifteen years' worth of hoarded stuff. The feeling of liberation was intense. My only plan was to have no plan. The ultimate plan, that could never fail.

Chapter 22 Low-Impact Living

I had a taxi booked for five thirty am. Having reduced my personal library from three hundred books to thirty, at five am I was desperately trying to work out which five or six books I could justify taking, or which would be the best combination for my new life. For I was of the mindset that I would have to become a wild survivalist, a feral, forager, freegan.

I believed that in four million years of human existence, hurtling through the universe on Mother Earth, we have never been so distant from, and desensitised to, nature, both inner and outer. Worse, I believed that the greatest war ever waged in human herstory, was being fought, and that was the human war against nature.

The war against nature occurred because of the economic system and the direction technology was coerced into. The Occupy movement said, "We are the 99%," and that a 1% elite controlled everything. Chomsky said only 0.1% of the earth's population had absolute control. Either way, a minute elite absolutely control the direction of technology, food, medicine, media and, consequently, people. When six or so giant corporations have absolute ownership of television channels, radio stations and the music and movie industries, they control everything the people see, hear and, ultimately, think. And the best slaves think they are free. That is a fascist dream come true.

They are continually merging governments and corporations, because they are fascists, and they hate nature and ordinary people. They want bigger and fewer governments and corporations and will do almost anything to further pursue that fascist agenda, which had been creeping in for two decades.

I went straight to the camp-site that we had stayed at originally on our holiday, even after saying who would ever stay there. I had never even seen the owner, let alone spoken to him. Shane had found out that he was profoundly deaf. I knocked very loudly on his door smiling from ear to ear.

When he answered I blurted out that I had got rid of everything, and I was coming to live at his camp-site. He could have easily told me to fuck right off but, instead, with an equally cheeky smile, he showed his wonderful spirit and just replied that these things happen like this.

On the first morning of my new low-impact life that I had so longed to live, I lay next to my tent, filling my lungs with fresh air, blissed and at peace in the early morning sun. I became aware that the jackdaws which lived in Greybeard's chimney stack were behaving strangely whilst flying towards me. I opened my eyes and gently raised my head a little to check out what all the commotion was about. My heart nearly burst out of my rib cage as a peregrine falcon flew directly above me, only two metres from my face. We looked directly into each other's eyes.

The peregrine falcon was my favourite bird. It can fly at speeds of up to perhaps two hundred kilometres per hour before it kills another bird in the sky. One of our smallest birds of prey, it can even more remarkably kill all but six of the birds we have in Britain. Nothing could have felt like a surer sign that I was on the right path, for that was truly a profound moment in my little life. When I told Morris about it, the first thing he said was, "Did you eye-ball each other?" I have never met a human being so connected to nature as that man.

I ended up living on that campsite for a year with Greybeard – crazy, old, vegan mountain man – and Morris – equally crazy – both absolute salt-of-the-earth human beings. Greybeard just asked me to do one day a week's work for him to live there, which was great. Some weeks there was no work, other weeks I worked hard with him.

Greybeard owned a tipi, which I had hoped to live in until my birthday, but the vicious winds broke a pole, and I stayed in a tent initially until the wind destroyed that. Then Greybeard lent me his four-metre bell tent as the holiday season was over. I was a one-man festival, without the sex, drugs or rock and roll. Glamping without the glam. Glamping was new at the time and disgusted me, before I heard that some people would pay five hundred pounds per week to live in a yurt.

I spent each evening of that autumn sitting in the large, open doorway of my palatial tent, watching the unpolluted sky and stars in bliss. Low-impact living, at last. I immediately felt the benefit of living in a round space, which I had never done before. I had no heat and few possessions, but I felt seriously alive and so pleased to finally put Liverpool behind me. The unpolluted sky and shooting stars galore, together with only the sounds of nature. It only took a little while before I started to want to kill the neighbouring farmers, for numerous reasons.

I felt lucky to meet several incredible characters on or within a few miles of our secret camp-site. A woman caught my attention one morning when I saw her on our long track, looking closely at wild flowers. Then I noticed her on our local beach, looking at rocks, so I spoke to her. She told me that her name was Corrie and that she was a gardener and land artist. I had never heard of land art. Corrie turned out to be my closest neighbour in the nearby village. We became dear friends and I spent a lot of that winter with Corrie and her partner Hans. They were both inspiring anarchist artists and I became fond of them both.

Corrie was Dutch and petite. She had been born with a mystery heart condition, which had not held her back from living a most incredible life. In 1981, she had been a teenage, punk squatter, in central Amsterdam, until her squat had been evicted in a military-type process. She told me that she had been beaten to a pulp by the police. Corrie had then decided to move to the Australian outback and live with aboriginal people, as you do.

It was hard not to think of Greybeard as a crazy, old mountain man. He always wore his ancient, blue-checked, padded lumberjack shirt, and had a wispy beard, with a whimsical ponytail for hair

hidden below his eccentric collection of hats. He had an unusual facial twitch, which seemed to worsen if you chatted with him after smoking a cigarette.

It came as a surprise when he told me that he had been a vegan for more than thirty years. He never mentioned it, unlike some vegans that I have met, and I think he appreciated my long-term vegetarianism and that my daughter had never eaten meat in her life. It did not surprise me when he told me that the extensive house he lived in had been purchased as a low-perimeter wall and no more. He had dedicated twenty years to building his substantial house with little help. Greybeard did not really like people and had few friends in the village, though he was very nosy, as was the norm.

I soon made other friends in the village. Carwyn and Seren ran the youth hostel and were into permaculture. They told me that a straw-bale house was being built only one mile away, that an extremely interesting planning application had been made under the new 'One World' policy, only two miles away, and that six miles along the coast path a farmer had started a 'community supported agriculture' scheme (CSA). Carwyn and Seren distributed the local diy community zine, which gave me all the details I needed to check out the like-minded folk and their projects.

I went to meet Geraint, the visionary farmer, first. We immediately got on like a house on fire. His energy was magnetic, and he had a fantastic sense of humour. Three generations of his family had lived and worked on their cliff-top farm. He had known much poverty in his life, yet always kept laughing. I felt immensely humbled by this man who proudly had three generations of his family living with him, all Welsh speakers. I grew very fond of his family and felt honoured by their acceptance of me, as I became as involved as I could with helping them out voluntarily, on their farm, and working with the CSA.

I had not fully understood CSAs before discovering Geraint's. There was no standard pattern for CSAs, and at Geraint's people paid an annual membership of twelve pounds and a weekly full- or half-share of fifteen or seven pounds a week. Geraint had given four acres of his land over to the CSA. Volunteers had planted many seeds, done much weeding, and harvested whatever was ripe, every Friday afternoon.

I volunteered immediately and loved working with Geraint and a few other volunteers. About six of us worked hard. In one three-day binge in early springtime, my friend Alex and I planted eighteen thousand seeds! Our crew grew a lot of the local, organic, low-cost food for the one hundred members of the CSA, and we had a lot of fun doing it. We also had as many parties and social events as possible, which can be life-saving for some isolated, rural people.

On Geraint's one hundred and twenty acres, they kept thirty-six cows, twelve pigs with piglets, and six dogs. Geraint loved rugby and did a lot for children's rugby. He was also involved with the Welsh hemp grower's co-operative. He was experimenting, growing four acres of hemp himself, but struggling. He grew a few other crops as well. The family squeezed into the smallest space they could in the farmhouse, so that they could rent out as much space as possible for bed and breakfast. One day, I asked Geraint of all the things that they did at their one-hundred-and-twenty-acre farm what made the most money. It pained us both when he informed me that the few bed-and-breakfast rooms were more profitable than all the land and animals.

The largest global corporations have atrocious histories. Monsanto, for example, invented agent orange, roundup fertiliser and genetically modified foods, and a few people who challenged them had fatal 'accidents'. They were bought by Bayer, and their tarnished name disappeared. The World Health Organisation says that there is enough food produced globally to feed ten billion people;

however, we waste one third. We have six and a half billion people on Earth and millions suffer and starve.

Nestlé, as well as hating breast-feeding mothers and their babies, say that nobody has an inherent right to water, that we should all buy our water from them. The first person has been imprisoned in Oregon, USA, for collecting his own rainwater without a licence.

The plastic industry has created a plastic planet, where you can study the filthy substance on three-year degree courses. We have thrown away enough plastic into the world's oceans to create island-sized masses of it, devastating many species on land and sea. The movie 'Plastic Planet' was perhaps the most depressing film I ever watched.

Cannabis must be the most interesting and most important plant on the planet. I spent five years asking as many people as possible what they considered to be nature's most interesting and/or important plant. Ninety-nine percent replied cannabis, immediately. The movie 'The Hemp Revolution' says there are two thousand uses for it. It can certainly replace everything we make from plastic, organically. The phenomenal medicinal potential of cannabis THC and CBD has finally been legalised. After watching three-year-old children suffering epileptic seizures all day long, seeing the take one drop of CBD and become well was heart-warming.

Chapter 23 Suicidal

I had arrived in Wales early in September. Three months later in early December, I had the most difficult realisation of my life: that I might never be able to see my daughter again. I finally broke. After so much, I could not take it anymore. As the stormy Welsh winter raged outside, all I could think of was throwing myself off the one-hundred-metre cliffs into the freezing water below and ending all of my problems. When Aela had been taken from me, I had contemplated self-immolation, setting myself on fire, like some Buddhist monks had done, but I contemplated doing it in the middle of Liverpool's busiest shopping street. Throwing myself off a cliff seemed so much easier and with the desired result guaranteed. The cliffs were only minutes away, and I decided which would be the best spot.

But I loved life and had always considered suicide to be, in a warped way, doing your enemy's work for them! The storm raged against my bell tent, and then I realised that Morris would be awake at six am to prepare for work. I only had to wait another hour. By the time I called at his place, I could barely breathe. Morris had been suicidal himself and immediately recognised the seriousness of the situation. He calmly invited me in and put the kettle on, whilst producing his long skins.

Morris was a very spiritual man, who understood many things, including the breath and the importance of breathing. I mainly remember him trying to help me calm down and being able to breathe normally and deeply. We drank tea and smoked before he had to rush off for work, telling me to just relax in his space all day and watch TV. I breathed normally again, relaxed and chilled out to mundane daytime TV. Morris had saved my life. And I had accepted and surrendered to my situation, as Eckhart Tolle's books had suggested, as I desperately wanted to end my suffering.

Within a day or two, the weather was threatening to savage my bell tent, and I was trying to make a repair when I nearly sliced off a finger with my sharp new knife. This scared me, as it was so close to being a hospital job that I went to speak with Greybeard about my accident and also told him about my near suicide.

Greybeard, true to form, told me that I could move into his little touring caravan, which was not being used. The caravan was actually the most luxurious I had ever been inside, even though it was

twenty years old. My family had had a big static caravan in Conway, where we had gas lights and needed to connect our black-and-white, portable TV via leads through a window to the car's battery outside. No electricity, toilet or shower in our old caravan. My new van had double glazing and was well insulated, together with a full cooker and fridge.

My bell tent had the most incredible views out to sea, but my caravan was behind the house with no views. I was half-way between two eccentric characters who loved each other but rarely spoke. I became a bit of a middle-man. Greybeard paid the electricity bills and, as I had an old laptop, courtesy of a mansion we were going to squat, I was able to go on-line via Greybeard's internet. With my dwindling finances, I purchased my first computer speakers, and my living standards improved considerably from the wind-up torch and radio I had in the tent.

I knew that I needed to focus on all things positive and leave negative thoughts and actions behind, if I was to rebuild and get strong. My confidence had been shattered when my daughter was first taken away from me. I went to the nearby home of Jeremiah, an out-of-work actor, where a straw-bale house was being built by Delith and Meirion. They were expecting a baby and hoped to give birth in the straw-bale house upon completion.

It was December, and Meirion wanted to build the house alone. He had managed to get the first post into the ground. At the time, I did not know so much about natural building, but I did know that it made sense to start in early spring and finish in late autumn or before. Starting in the vicious Pembrokeshire winter seemed ludicrous, but Meirion's determination impressed me. I offered to help him the first time we met but received an adamant no.

The local library had lots of books on natural building and design. I studied them and discovered Hunderwasser, Christopher Day, Lanto Evans and co, amongst others. Online, I found 'Garbage Warrior', Sun Ray Kelly and more. All were incredibly inspiring and experimental. Dreamers. Chris Day detailed how modern housing usually contained thirty toxic substances and created 'sick building syndrome'. He had designed and helped build a Steiner school nearby, without permission. Garbage Warrior was the name of a movie about Mike Reynolds, renegade experimental architect who lost his licence for building communities of self-sufficient homes. Lanto Evans and co wrote the most inspiring book I found on natural building and creative possibilities; the first time I discovered that an ecological home could be built for free. Hunderwasser was a visionary whose projects looked good enough to eat. The book *Shelter*, by anonymous authors, based on creating homes and shelters inspired by nature, was also an eye-opener.

I kept popping in to see the house's progression and chat with Meirion, and eventually he said I could help. Their baby's birth was getting closer, and they wanted the house finished. Delith and Meirion were raw food chefs, and it was a joy to share a meal with them. They introduced me to the delights of raw grated beetroot, which I got from Geraint's CSA in abundance and subsequently ate with every meal.

The expectant couple had negotiated a creative agreement with Jeremiah, the land-owner, whereby they would build the straw-bale house, and Jeremiah would pay for the materials. Delith and Meirion would then have their baby in the house and live there rent-free for three years, after which time the house would be Jeremiah's.

I really enjoyed helping to build this delightful little house, which had a tree growing inside in the middle of the living room! I especially enjoyed the working party assembling the reciprocal roof, where the round wood timbers rested on each other as if by magic. Building the walls was like Lego for adults, pushing the straw bales down onto the wooden spikes we had hand carved. And when Geraint turned up with his tractor to help us put one hundred and fifty millimetres of soil all over

the roof, we saved a week's hard graft and, as always with Geraint, had great fun doing it. Some other CSA members helped with the roof, including Tirion. Tirion had submitted a visionary planning application under the 'One World' policy.

Whilst Geraint lived for organic farming, and fighting genetically modified food, Tirion was an advocate of biodynamics and called permaculture 'common sense'. I was aware of biodynamics but had written it off prematurely before understanding it, just like many people had done with permaculture. I had heard much about Tirion before finally meeting him. It is rare that someone receives nothing but praise before you meet them and rarer that they live up to all of the accolades. The first time I met Tirion at Geraint's farm, his lovely energy was unmissable: a handsome man with cheeky eyes and endearing smile. He gave me a lift back home, six miles along the glorious coast road, in the raised bucket of his tractor.

Tirion told me that he had been in a straight-edge punk band, inspired by Fugazi and Minor Threat. He had a lovely French wife, and they had two adorable kids, who had met and inspired Ian Mackay (Fugazi and Minor Threat's singer) to have kids after years of him and his partner being completely against the idea.

Tirion had submitted the most inspiring planning application I had ever come across under the forward-thinking Welsh planning policy guidelines. The most ecologically friendly planning policy in Britain allowed applications even in national parks, if they satisfied the policy's demanding criteria. Obviously, that was not going to come easily, and Tirion's application reflected that, containing eighty-two pages.

If Tirion had gained permission, it would have been ground breaking and only the sixth approval under what was new legislation at that time. But none of us had expected the second-home owners from London etc., to come together in a concerted effort, which spread across the whole county and beyond. Five hundred people signed a petition against Tirion's proposal for natural buildings and biodynamic farming on nine acres of land. Once word got out that Tirion wanted to try to help rehabilitate young offenders from the city, panic spread. When I had first arrived in the area, a local had informed me that their friend had left his car door unlocked, and a young man from the city had stolen it. When I asked Greybeard about it, he told me that the incident had occurred six years previously, but the sleepy old folk still talked about it, as if it had just happened, as not much else happened there.

We all went to the open meeting to discuss the application, and I witnessed some of what Tirion and his lovely family were up against. It was not long before these nimbies were saying that it would turn into a hippy commune. The area already had 'hippy communes'. Tirion's wife found the whole situation so upsetting, after trying to please people for a whole year, that they decided to relocate and start all over again in France.

After so many memorable experiences with Geraint at his organic farm, one week particularly stands out. Friends of the Earth loved him after realizing that if they paid all his expenses Geraint would happily drive his tractor all the way to Brussels and dump manure on the European Parliament.

After several media interviews where he informed them that he believed it was necessary to pull genetically modified crops out of the ground and destroy them, Geraint's life was turned upside down.

The poor farmer with nothing but the best intentions for the world was declared the leader of the anti-gm movement and subjected to a frenzied media assault. Geraint took the barrage of requests for radio and tv interviews in his stride and performed brilliantly in the face of adversity.

But when the Daily Mail newspaper put a large picture of an emaciated African child on their front page and declared that Geraint and his followers were responsible for world hunger, that broke him.

Geraint had no previous experience of activism or the media. When I had warned him about the implications of being known as the leader, he showed me a book he had just purchased from America including details about anti-gm activists who had died in mysterious circumstances. This demanding period was the only time I ever witnessed Geraint sad.

After working alone in the fields one morning, I went to the farm house for lunch. Geraint greeted me and asked me to guess who had just been there. He said two anti-terrorist officers and burst out laughing. When I enquired what had happened Geraint casually replied "I just invited them in for tea, informed them about GM and told them a few jokes!"

I wanted to be on Geraint's farm as often as possible. To be with such a gigantic force of nature was always replenishing. Even during the most difficult and arduous tasks, Geraint would be hilarious. How could I ever forget planting four acres with potatoes on his ancient tractor and lethal-looking rear attachment, whilst sat next to his fifteen-stone son?

The field was on a north-facing slope, steepest at the bottom. Geraint could raise and lower the ancient contraption that we were sitting on, to our endless amusement. He threw us up and down as the tractor went faster and slower, and as he threw it round at the bottom of the field it was like a wild fairground ride. And as his show-piece for special occasions, he would pop a wheelie on his tractor whilst we clung on for dear life at the rear. If he had planted the rows of spuds at ninety degrees, across instead of down the field, there would have not been nearly as much fun. He may have been the only farmer in Wales who planted crops with the fun potential in mind.

Geraint enjoyed joking with me, fresh from Toxteth. I used to grow my fingernails really long and paint them orange, after my daughter had done so to me once in London. During one of my first days volunteering, he gave me a trowel and asked me to clean the forks on the forklift truck. They were caked and, when I finally forced it off, I got a face full of cow shit. Geraint roared with laughter and said, "You're fine. It's organic!"

Another day, he handed me a large wooden board and asked me if I had ever wrestled pigs before. When I replied no, he told me that I was about to learn but not to worry because it was easy. We managed not to lose any pigs, and I had another skill under my belt: pig wrestler. Later, I found out his pigs were always escaping to neighbouring farms, and I often helped him retrieve them in his new Land Rover. The problem was he could not afford a Land Rover that went backwards. We had no reverse gear, which made chasing pigs even funnier.

One day, Geraint's wife asked me in all seriousness if I could go and check if all the cows were in the field. The cows also frequently escaped the farm's decrepit boundaries or jumped over hedges, and once they got onto the tourist beach below. I managed not to laugh but knew all of the thirty-six cows were completely black. These guys probably all knew the cows individually. For me, it took some time before I felt sure there were thirty-six cows in the field. They kept moving.

As spring arrived and the weather improved, I was offered a free lift to Germany and back, the only condition being that I kept Hans, the driver, awake. I thought I could do that and, when he told me he would drop me off at a campsite and pick me up five days later, how could I say no? I had never

been to Germany and I liked Hans' company. When we drove, he seemed incapable of taking a break, and I fell asleep, for which I received an immediate punch in the arm. I did not fall asleep again, but my heart started having palpitations with the almost non-stop driving. That was my first international road trip.

Hans dropped me off in north western Germany at a nice campsite on the edge of what was to me a huge forest, where I spent most of the next five days exploring and getting lost. I have since asked German friends about this forest, and none of them knew it, saying it must be small by German standards.

I did not speak to anyone for five days, except when buying some quality German beers each night. One day, I was sure that I had seen a beaver and knew that there were some in the wild in two rivers in Europe. I followed the beaver from the riverbank to a secluded old house in the woods which appeared to be abandoned and, in my excitement, I went into the garden, following my beaver. Next minute, everything went horror film when I sensed someone's presence behind me. I turned around to see a rugged young man who looked like he had not seen or spoken to another human being in years. He had a shotgun pointed straight at me. I tried to say, "Beaver," but struggled to make words. My obvious innocence saved me, and I walked away safely.

When I got back to Wales, I was shocked to discover that Delith had given birth to their baby in the completed straw-bale house and that she and Meirion had shortly afterwards left Wales. They had received a letter from the local planning department, dated on the day that their babe had been born. It said that they had built the house in the national park without permission. That normally meant that you had to destroy your building or else the authorities would do it for you and then forward you the bill for the demolition works. I was sure Jeremiah would ask me to destroy the beautiful building that we had put our heart and souls into. The house was completely hidden from public view on Jeremiah's extensive estate. Somebody must have trespassed on the land to discover the house and then grassed us up. Jeremiah appealed, and after battling for a year he won retrospective planning permission. The straw-bale house still stands.

My first summer of low-impact living in Wales was gloriously long and hot. Wales at its best. One afternoon at the camp, I received a most unexpected phone call. The phone signal at my caravan was mostly non-existent, but, if a call came through and I ran to the highest point in the top field, I could usually speak for a little while at least. I ran to the top field when I saw that Jamila, my asylum-seeking girlfriend from Saudi Arabia, was trying to get through to me. Her first words blew my mind right out of my skull. "I'm free!" she exclaimed joyously.

After three long years on the run and me expecting Jamila to be killed for certain, she had against all the odds finally won asylum. I could have spontaneously combusted. For Jamila was undoubtedly the bravest human being that I had ever had the good fortune to meet. But the hideous irony of fleeing your own country to escape many things, particularly its oppressive religion and an arranged marriage, and then having to convert to another religion and get married, to win asylum, killed me.

Chapter 24 Paid for Laughing

Through connections at Geraint's CSA, I had heard about two days' paid weeding work at a 'celebrity' garden in the next county. I said I was definitely interested; having done so much work for the love of it, some money sounded good. A few days later, I stood aghast in a stunningly beautiful garden, worthy of its reputation, TV appearances and international visitors.

The owner of those grounds had purchased several acres of brambles some years before and single-handedly transformed them into a natural paradise. But she had admitted finally that she needed some help to maintain her wonderful sanctuary. Therefore, she had put the word out about two days' paid weeding and received about twelve responses.

I met Amy and Elly and loved them both immediately. We absolutely laughed our arses off the day we met, whilst weeding, and were surprised to meet several other weeders, who mostly seemed to kiss the boss's arse as if a 'proper' job was available. We did not give a fuck but worked hard, whilst laughing hard. We did not really care if we were asked back for a second, last days' work, but we were asked to return early the next morning, so we did.

We kept getting asked to return for the whole week and met several creeps, usually just once. They were not asked back. Elly, Amy and I made a great team of hard-laughing, hard workers. Amy had a wonderfully dirty, raucous laugh and she quickly said I was the funniest person that she had ever met. So, I really worked hard on my comedy.

I learned that Amy could pop. I could make her laugh so much that she would take it to another dimension, a kind of uber-laugh, for want of a better description, which I called 'popping'. I tried to make Amy pop as often as possible and may have achieved ten or twelve in one day as our personal record. Then the boss told the three of us that we had got the job, and I quote, "because of our bellows of laughter from the garden." Sadly, she followed that up by saying that there had never been any laughter around there before. This made me work even harder at humour.

Amy told me that she wanted us all to get on a busy bus one day, whilst she wore a purple top hat. During the bus ride, she wanted to stand up and shout, "All change places now!" At that point, she wanted Emmy and I to jump up and run around the bus looking for another seat and see if anybody else would join in. I told Amy I had also wanted a top hat for a long time, so I could cut a few holes in the top, pull my long dread locks through, fix metal coat hangers or pipe cleaners to the hat and my dreads, and shape them like long, coiled antennas.

Amy and Elly seemed to use the word 'whimsical' frequently. I had never previously heard anybody say 'whimsical', so it stuck in my mind. Inspired by Archaos, the crazy, theatrical, French, travelling circus, I came up with the name 'The Whimsical Atrocity Theatre', which coincidentally spelled one of my favourite words. TWAT was born. When Amy asked me in all seriousness what TWAT would do, I replied spontaneously, "Whatever it wants." Amy popped.

Amy and Elly casually told me one day about their previous evening, when they had been bored. They had invented a game that they called 'bogle', pronounced 'bohglay'. Using the letter shaker from the game boggle, they had to invent new words with new meanings. I was blown away by their casual creativity and also felt that bogle had enormous potential. I felt strongly that we needed a revolutionary 'new language', after reading a book called *Horizontalism* from a Brazilian writer who had impressed upon me the difficulties associated with creating a new, fair, equal world based on horizontal organisation to transcend the dead weight of hierarchical patriarchy and capitalism.

Our gardens were open to the public in the afternoons so we would try and tone things down a bit, sometimes, but even the boss's husband really liked us. At mid-morning, lunch time and mid-afternoon, our posh boss would bring us tea and biscuits, and we quickly learned that she loved to chat so encouraged her, genuinely interested in her life, extending our breaks as long as possible.

We did not see any of the creeps again and became close to our boss, who genuinely liked the three of us as unique and individual freaks. When Amy found rabbit traps around the gardens, she

sprayed perfume on them so that the rabbits would not go inside the traps, without telling the boss, who called herself a Buddhist.

We became a rock-solid team. On the odd occasion when I could not get to the gardens, due to public transport problems, my pals informed the boss that they could not work that day because I could not get to work and we were a team. Those young women had more natural potential for solidarity and strike action than most of the old hacks I had met previously.

Elly and Amy were already used to recycling food from their local Co-op store; they had even obtained the special key for the lock on their bins. When I suggested we could squat a building together, they were keen. I had seen an enormous empty mansion with a walled vegetable garden, in a stunning location, minutes from the sea, on the edge of St David's. We went to investigate one evening. I found an open sash window on the ground floor, and we were inside swiftly.

The mansion had central-heating radiators resting against the walls ready to be plumbed in and an almost completed, beautiful, bespoke kitchen. I panicked and suggested that we should leave as the building was obviously being worked on, with coffee cups and sandwich packets lying around. Then Amy burst out laughing and handed me a sandwich pack saying check out the date. It was twelve years old. We roared with laughter.

There was no for-sale or to-let sign on the mansion or in the grounds, and no evidence of recent activity inside as we explored our new playground. There were too many full boxes to investigate what was in them all. Some contained carefully wrapped, antique-looking, china plates and cups. We found many very old vinyl records and then bingo. Amy found an old working laptop, with no password. My first laptop.

Just when we were seriously considering squatting the mansion, the government changed the ancient squatting laws and made it illegal to squat in residential properties. But on my daily bus journey to work, I passed an incredible-looking farm in Wolfscastle on the edge of some old woodland. As I stared at the farm one morning, an elderly Welsh man said to me, "Disgraceful, isn't it? Empty for twenty-five years!" Target number two.

Amy, Elly and I went to investigate. The main farmhouse had a hole in the roof which had allowed the incoming rainwater to cause some damage to the stairs, but structurally the building was fine. We actually picked a building each but then discovered that the neighbouring farmer used some of the courtyard and felt that he would scupper any attempted squatters. Some farmers worried us more than the police did.

Then, we found a small abandoned farm further down the beautiful coast path, minutes from the beach. When we went in, we found evidence that it had been empty for five years. However, it only took minutes before all three of us decided we felt uncomfortable about the farm's energy, so we left. I asked Morris about the building, and he told me that the previous owner had been busted for sexually abusing his daughter in there.

Chapter 25 Surrogate Snake Mums

After several weeks, weeding became a bit tedious, and then the boss informed us with a big smile that we then needed to mulch the beds with bark chippings. We were taken to a substantial mulch pile, about eight metres long by three metres wide by nearly two metres high, covered by one big black tarpaulin. We were given wheelbarrows and shovels and told to crack on.

The boss left us to it, as usual, and I rolled a cigarette to smoke before we started. As we peeled back the tarpaulin, about twenty adult snakes darted away from us, deeper into the mulch pile. I nearly swallowed my tongue. Never having seen a wild snake before, seeing twenty up close and personal was a monumental experience for me, and the girls were pretty impressed as well. We stared at each other disbelievingly, chins on the floor. We possibly all said together, and certainly all knew, that we could not tell the boss as she would probably end our jobs and maybe even close the gardens to the ever-fearful public.

That night we all did our snake homework and became knowledgeable about grass snakes and adders, the two snakes you get in Britain. Importantly, grass snakes are not venomous, and adders have proved fatal only on a few occasions, killing a few elderly people and young kids. But, like so many animals, snakes have learned that humans are the most dangerous animals on earth and so they try to avoid them at all costs, able to sense humans approaching from the vibrations in the ground.

We saw no snakes the second day that we peeled back the tarpaulin and got on with our mulching. We felt that obviously they had been scared away from their hot sanctuary underneath the black tarp, where the temperature stayed hot on the long mulch pile's south-facing side.

Then, one day shortly after, we had begun our mulching work and, as Amy, Elly and I scraped bark mulch to the ground with spades to fill our wheelbarrows, Amy gave a gentle cry of surprise. She had exposed a sizable, sticky white mass. It was a clutch of grass snake eggs and, remarkably, she had not damaged a single one of the twenty-odd eggs.

We had learned from our research that grass snakes lay clutches of up to twenty eggs, up to five times a year. Whilst adders give live birth. Both snakes liked warmth, and grass snakes needed temperatures of about thirty degrees for their eggs to hatch. Unsurprisingly, the natural habitats of the snakes in Britain have been drastically reduced, so they had been forced to move into people's mulch and compost piles, if they were big and warm enough. From that moment, we really could not tell the boss or even let her near the mulch pile.

We found another clutch of eggs and then another before Elly and Amy decided to make a super clutch. I was too scared to even touch the snake eggs with my big clumsy hands, but the girls, with the greatest, delicate care, chose the best place and put all the clutches together. Then we were able to work well away from that area and leave the eggs well alone. We found six or seven clutches, and miraculously not a single egg was damaged.

Then, as I filled my wheelbarrow with mulch, alone, I had one of my greatest privileges. As I went to quickly check that the super clutch was OK, an egg cracked and a bubble slowly appeared and filled from the crack. I witnessed in awe the beginnings of a wild grass snake hatching from its egg. It was too far to run and get my pals, and I tore myself away from the baby snake hatching as quickly as possible, not wanting to have any adverse effect.

Before long we had approximately one hundred tiny baby grass snakes, with bright blue eyes and full of attitude, living on top of the mulch pile and not wanting to leave. We adored them as they rose up like miniature cobras warning us not to mess with them. Occasionally one would fall off or slide down the mulch pile, and Elly or Amy would lift them ever so carefully by their tails and gently place them back with the rest. We had become surrogate snake mums. And, as if all things snake could have got any better, once when I lifted the mulch pile tarpaulin, I saw an adult adder, injured, or so I thought, as it tried to escape from me. Its slowness and what I thought was something like a stick stuck into the snake made me look a little closer. It was giving live birth, and, as soon as I realised, I put the tarp back to leave her to give birth in peace.

Although I had been deeply involved with EF for years, Elly and Amy were young and fairly new to protest, though eager to become involved, so we went to the EF gathering that summer, at Crabapple, RR housing co-op, near Shrewsbury. The girls loved it, but I was shocked at how few people attended. I had been used to much more than just a couple of hundred folk at EF gatherings. But we had entered the terrorist millennium, and political activism had been heavily affected. One friend told me that he felt almost every activist burned out after ten years.

As always, I was impressed by the breadth and depth of the workshops and their hosts and by the passion and intellect of some of the attendees. But I felt a little out of place, as it felt like there were hardly any working-class participants, as was the norm in environmental direct-action groups and gatherings. One workshop title caught my eye.

‘Privilege and trauma’ attracted about thirty people. We were all given blindfolds to wear and asked to stand along a straight line. About twenty questions were asked and we were asked to take one step forward if the answer was yes and one step backwards if the answer was no for us. The only question I remember was ‘have you ever had ten or more working men in your home’! All of my answers were no, so I took about twenty steps back. At the end of the questions we were asked to remove our blindfolds. There were three or four of us close together, at the back, and twenty-plus metres in front of us were the rest of the group. The workshop holder announced towards the twenty-six folk way in front of us that the questions may have raised issues for people, so they were giving five minutes to recuperate, completely ignoring our tiny group, obviously at the wrong end of the field.

The woman next to me burst into tears and literally ran away. The workshop host was oblivious to her, and I considered running after her to see if I could help. To my shame I did not. I wanted to see what could possibly happen next. What happened next was that all attention was focused on the privileged folk and it seemed that no one had considered that any ‘oiks’ might have attended the workshop.

So, we sat down at the back and got the baccy out for roll ups. I suggested to my fellow peasants that if the traumatised, privileged people wanted to learn about trauma, they could have just asked us ordinary folk, jokingly. Of course, joking is often how the traumatised working-class deal with the daily horrors of our existence. Joking aside, the workshop reinforced first hand what I already knew. That no one escaped the brutalities of capitalism and patriarchy.

The Crabapple folk had just hosted the peace news summer gathering, and for that reason we had the pleasure of meeting Si Bi, a tall, skinny, vegan Scotsman who was cycling home from Australia. It was June, and he had started the previous November, overland – no planes, only boats – on a meagre budget, eating mostly from bins.

The day we met, he spent the entire evening telling me side-splitting stories about his entire adventures. My response was to tell Si Bi that I felt he could do a stand-up comedy routine at the EF gathering, which was always game for diy entertainment, and that he could write a book. He refused both graciously, saying that he could not tell or write a lot of his stories because they might stop other people from being able to have similar adventures in countries like China.

Si had camped up in the grounds of a police station in Cambodia, received their approval, and then hacked their internet. He had put an extra ten thousand miles on his epic journey to avoid a few war zones, hence cycling through China, where he had had the good fortune to meet some English-speaking Chinese cyclists who took him way off the ‘normal’ Chinese tourist trail.

Around the same time, I had read about a cyclist's adventures circumnavigating the globe. He had cycled through several war zones without any problems, experiencing nothing but warmth and hospitality from some desperate people. Only when he had ridden through the United States of America had he been knocked off his bicycle by a car on one occasion and robbed on another.

Si impressed the three of us, especially with his primary advice in life: start at the beginning. Start with 'A'. 'A' is for adventure. Always press the 'A' button for adventure. Forget 'J' for job or 'W' for work. Those were way too far down the alphabet.

Stanarchist the Harper came to visit me in late summer. He had introduced me to Eckhart Tolle's book *Stillness Speaks*, which had played a major part in my spiritual development and in preventing my suicide. He gave me Eckhart's book, *A New Earth*. I loved the part about humanity needing a 'transcendence', as we had from the sea to the land and from the land to the skies. I offered Stan my caravan to sleep in each night, but he refused, saying he had come to camp. He was eighty-two and could barely get into my tent. When I told him I had nearly killed myself, he replied, "You have to break down, to break through."

I had a brief fling with a married artist, that summer and into autumn. She had kids, and I knew it was going nowhere long term, but we really enjoyed each other's company, and, as the weather turned bleak that autumn, she was frequently a saviour, taking us out in her car to different places to walk and explore. Her husband worked far away, and her kids were great. She lived the life of an artist, with her own studio and gallery, and we both loved to walk.

That artist was from a different planet to all my struggling artist friends in Liverpool. She was middle class, but cool. She explained to me first-hand what money, death and family politics can do to people. I do not judge individual middle-class people for the privilege of their birth. After hearing her stories, I was almost glad to have been born into poverty, with no hope of ever inheriting a bean. I absolutely do not blame bourgeois people. I blame the system. Always.

By the start of winter, the endless grey skies and dreary wet weather were really getting to me. Geraint had given me a bicycle, and I had full waterproofs, but the distances between my friends were big. I had ended my fling with the artist and missed being able to drive around in a car sometimes. It was nearly one year since I had nearly killed myself, and I became worried that I may slip back down to such a dark place again.

My isolated situation was taking its toll on my mental health, and I struggled to assess my options. I came to the conclusion that I had to go back to Liverpool, just to ride out the winter. But I had to stop trying to put a brave face on everything and tell my closest friends that I had very nearly ended it all. I knew I had to be as open and honest as possible. I was too frail and fragile to pretend that everything was OK, like I had always done in the past. At least I had made one big step forwards. I knew that, even if I never saw my daughter again, I would survive. I respected and loved myself, no longer considering such thoughts and actions selfish, as had been long conditioned into me. I released myself from my unwinnable ten-year struggle for equal parenting.

When I got back to Liverpool, I was delighted to find out that Rose Howey (RH), a vegan, anarchist, housing co-operative had finally opened, after two years of meetings which I had initially been fully involved with. I had lost faith in that group's abilities to jump through all the necessary hoops, never mind to actually find the cash required to purchase the seventy-room mansion that they had bought. It did not have much of a roof at that time and had previously been used as a last-stop bail hostel, so it was full of needles that heroin users had used and then stashed in every nook and cranny of the vast, decrepit, mansion. But the guys had excelled themselves, managed to get together a fairly cohesive group and occupied one of the most impressive buildings and gardens I had

ever seen in the city. After the alcoholics and junkies that had lived there previously, the neighbours were happy for a bunch of lunatic home-educators to move in.

I had been on friendly terms with Derek and Michelle, the driving force behind the project, for years, and so, when I bumped into Michelle and she asked me if I wanted to move in, I said yes immediately. I enjoy living with vegans as far as food goes because it is usually their main focus. Not drugs. Food is their drug. We took food very seriously, ordering from Suma as well as growing at the community allotments and in the garden. We had a well-stocked kitchen and some excellent cooks. Without rotas, people took turns cooking and washing dishes. The dishes took two hours nightly, for twenty adults and ten kids, but they were never a chore. We organised spontaneously, and I do not remember any arguments about completing the daily chores.

I had the grandest bedroom I had ever slept in, with an enormous bay window looking out over the huge mature gardens, with a park behind. All down an unadopted track in Toxteth. I carried out a survey of the crumbling mansion, which led me up onto the roof. To my horror, I saw huge pieces of stonework looking ready to fall out and possibly kill someone. I also found about fifty heroin needles up there, were the bail hostel guys had climbed up to shoot up, with the best views of Wales across the two rivers.

The co-op had chosen the name 'Rose Howey' as she had been an influential suffragette who had planted one of the large trees in the garden. The house and group were significant on Liverpool's alternative scene. And it was especially important on a national level, because it was a Radical Routes house.

Radical Routes (RR) was described by its founder, Roger Hallam, as an anti-capitalist bank. Roger had written a book called *Anarchist Economics*, which I read. I considered the RR network to be an achievement in Britain.

Initially, an inspired bunch of activists had started a legal co-operative and then begged, borrowed and did everything possible to purchase a big old house in Birmingham which was cheap due to its poor condition. Slowly, they paid the mortgage and were able to begin lending money to other like-minded groups, subject to the RR criteria. Once up and running, they asked aspiring members to come to three quarterly gatherings to put their proposals forward for their houses.

To start or move into an RR house, each person was supposed to carry out twenty hours work each week 'towards social change'. Social change was not defined or policed. It was loosely monitored. When the banking and housing markets collapsed in 2008, RR decided it was too risky to lend out any more money for the following ten years. RH were incredibly lucky to convince the RR network to lend them a substantial amount of money in that period to purchase their double mansion with ballroom.

At the RR quarterly gathering that I attended with others to represent RH, the finance group decided that after RH's loan, they would not lend any more money out for the next fifteen years. So, RH was a one-in-twenty-five-year opportunity. I think they deserved this privilege, and I very much respected their ethics and focus on deschooling and libertarian, autonomous education. Whilst not easily comparable, the school system, for me and some others, was as disgusting as the meat and dairy industries.

Whilst we had once experienced a right-wing infiltrator in MAG, I naively had not expected RH to be a target for any infiltration. Even though the house was advertised publicly on-line as vegan and anarchist, we were mostly just concerned parents, with dreams. Thankfully, three of us kept our wits regarding security. We believed that three potential infiltrators had been sent at once, to try to ensure

that at least one was able to move into our home. I had been chosen to meet and greet aspiring new members. We had between one and three each week, as many rooms were vacant. Two of us devoured the activist's security handbook, and I am glad to say, as far as we knew, no infiltrators managed to get in. With hindsight, the secret state possibly monitored every single RR house.

It saddens me to describe how I had to leave that community. My neighbours in the house went on a mission to get me kicked out. They succeeded in getting me to leave, but I jumped before I was pushed. They came up with the ludicrous belief that the smell of cannabis smoke from my room would result in all of the ten kids in the house being taken into care by the authorities.

The allegation was deeply upsetting to me, so I immediately discussed it with various friends, two of whom had worked in the social services department, the government department who in their wisdom decided which children needed to be taken away from their parents to be raised by the state. Other friends had been at the sharp end of dealing with the social services and had fought tooth and nail to keep their kids.

In reality, many residents in RH smoked herb, as did many friends and guests. The enormous building was extremely drafty and well ventilated, and it was rare that any smells lingered. After the accusation had been made, I had always smoked hanging out of my bay windows, whichever one the wind was not blowing into.

And I frequently found dirty nappies lying around our hallway and shared toilets. My friends in the know told me that a little cannabis smoke was not going to attract the attention of the inundated social services, but filthy toilets and dirty nappies everywhere might. At our weekly meetings, my neighbours slowly convinced other members that we might lose all of our kids.

As if this was not enough for me, my two closest friends in the house returned from Spain after an ayahuasca ritual. They had not ended up taking the sacred plant in Spain, but in the spiritual hot bed that was Norwich, England. When they returned to RH, they locked themselves in their room for four days until the weekly meeting. They emerged at the start of the meeting to announce that they were leaving the house and that I was full of darkness.

I nearly died as they told me, in all honesty, how they had come to the conclusion that I was full of darkness, but that they could help me. People were absolutely shocked. Some started crying, some begged them to stay, and I remained even more boggled. Combined with me bailing from long-term dole money security, because they were about to sanction me for subjective reasons, it all became too much. I left RH with Amy, and we headed for Scotland to press the A button for adventure and go and stay with Si Bi.

Just before I left, I saw a cool seven-piece, ska punk band, busking in the middle of Church Street. As the saxophone player skipped his way through the shopping masses, my faith in the rebellious youth of Liverpool was replenished. I spoke with the band members a few times and asked them all to move into RH, saying the vast basement would make a perfect practice room. After I left, some of the band moved in, with a few friends. RH became full and financial pressures eased.

Amy had been stuck in another oppressive job in Wales, and one night, when we spoke on the phone, I convinced her to come stay at RH for the craic. She did, and I valued her company immensely in those last tough few weeks. We decided to really press the A button, by our standards, and head for adventure in Ireland. But first, a brief jolly in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Si Bi was a professional skip diver, amongst other things. And Edinburgh was the opposite to Glasgow, i.e. filthy rich. Si introduced Amy and I to the world of upmarket food recycling via

Edinburgh's fancy health food shops. Si ate like a vegan king, baked his own daily bread and only spent two or three pounds each week, a non-smoking, tee-total revolutionary. He collected abandoned bicycles from all over the city to fix up and had five hanging from the ceiling of his little apartment.

The city had an abundance of charity shops, which received so many goods each week that they could not fit them all into their shops. Therefore, to drive Si crazy, each shop paid forty pounds every week for a skip at their rear, to fill with all kinds of stuff, often in perfect condition. When Si was not cycling around the coast of Scotland, he would recycle brand new kids' cuddly toys. To our delight, he made little gift cards with a brief message about the recycled toys and poverty, then he went and tied the toys in trees in parks and playgrounds around the city for poor kids to find and give a good home to.

Chapter 26 Volunteering

Amy and I did some research and decided to go and volunteer in Ireland, via the Workaway website. I had been a woofer (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) at Geraint's farm. We found really cheap tickets on buses, trains and the ferry boat all the way to Cork City, County Cork. We made arrangements to work voluntarily for an Australian woman called Colleen who agreed to pick us up in Cork at eleven am on the day we arrived.

The journey was long, with a few breakdowns and replacement buses and taxis. When we got to Hollyhead to get the ferry, we were tense as Amy had no passport, and we really did not know if we would get checked. An extremely drunk guy, who had just thrown up everywhere in the queue in front of us, said that we need not worry and that we would get on board no problem. The speakers then announced that the weather was so bad the crossing would be cancelled or else take eight hours instead of four. The captain decided to go for it, saying we were in for a long and rough journey. The drunk guys in front of us were not allowed onto the boat.

The sun was rising as Ireland became visible, land of my relatives and ancestors. Full of excitement, we got the bus from Dublin to Cork. We found a very interesting, alternative-looking pub and bought a drink, before our new host was due to collect us. Colleen turned up ten hours later, by which time we were fuming but had drunk enough to act like it did not matter. We had discovered my favourite pub in the city, not that I could ever again afford the expensive cost of a pint.

Colleen was a surfer, whose father had bought her a bungalow with land. To our horror, she was planning to turn the land into a glamping site. I had thought that glamping would be a little phase for rich kids at festivals, paying a fortune to stay in 1950s luxury, converted caravans at Glastonbury, the festival that had lost all of its soul in the 1990s when they banned travellers. How wrong I was.

I had underestimated the number of people with money wishing to spend a week or two in a Mongolian ger, or yurt, as long as it had a luxurious bed and expensive wood-burner inside. Colleen wanted her little piece of the earth to house five yurts on platforms, for which she would receive two thousand five hundred euros a week. She just needed to clear several thousand thistles first. That was our job.

The work was hard and monotonous and soon became tiresome in a cold Irish February. When I had left work and swore that I would never have a boss again, I had not figured on volunteering in the future. Colleen felt like a boss. She never helped us with the work, but she did cook tasty vegan food every day, and our accommodation was OK. We met an Israeli carpenter named Adi, who was working for cash at Colleen's. Adi was inspirational with his natural building skills, and we became

friends. He had been thrown out of army conscription after appearing on parade with no shoes on, as the regulation boots were not vegan.

Adi and Colleen were very interested in ecological or natural building, and they both recommended that Amy and I should visit a nearby sustainability centre called 'The Hollies'. Adi had built and lived in a tree house with his partner and child there. We checked out The Hollies on-line and went to meet the guys as soon as we could. Colleen drove us there. Whilst we were told initially that they did not need any volunteers until the spring, when we got back to Colleen's that night, we had a message saying that there was plenty of work for volunteers at that time. We said goodbye to Colleen and moved to The Hollies, full of hope.

Chapter 27 Building with Nature

The Hollies was one of only a handful of sustainability centres spread across Britain and Ireland. They had some incredible cob buildings and organic vegetable gardens and practised permaculture, inspiring volunteers from around the world to go and help them out. One family there had built what must have been the biggest cob mansion in Ireland. When I asked if it was, they replied seriously that they did not know. They did not care and, after the three-year build was completed, they fell in love with the tiny-house movement and recommended all visitors against creating big buildings. Their eldest son had built the most impressive tiny cob house I had ever seen. He did it alone in just six months.

Amy and I had to do one hell of a lot of weeding before we got to do some natural building. We were so pleased to get our shoes and socks off and trample soil, clay, straw and water together, making a cob mix. Cob is the most common building material on the planet, with approximately two thirds of the earth's homes made from it. Some civilised folk ridicule such homes as merely mud huts. Cob buildings can last for thousands of years, and in Yemen buildings nine stories high have been constructed from cob.

The Hollies was a co-operative, with several full-time residents and many summer volunteers, some of whom could actually use a spade, pick axe or wheelbarrow. The residents often considered the young bourgeois volunteers more hindrance than help, usually there primarily to improve their spoken English.

The full-time residents at The Hollies consisted of both Irish nationals and international folk. One of the Irish guys explained to me how an English family had been some of the founding members, but they had decided in their wisdom to visit their Irish neighbours and tell them how they should be living their lives. This had not gone down well with some of the good people of Cork, after eight hundred years fighting the English, and, as a result, their wooden family home was burned to the ground. The English family left.

Just before my dad died, he told me that our family's roots lay in County Cork, the only county that the English had never defeated. He informed me in a slightly embarrassed way that our family had all been Irish travellers. I was pleased to have such a pedigree. Rebellion was in my genes.

My new Irish friends at The Hollies explained to me how Cork had been the most rebellious county in modern Irish history, and I asked if they could recommend the best book to read up on the subject. They all agreed that I should read Tom Barry's book *Guerrilla Days in Ireland* but could not find their copies, so I borrowed a book about Tom. This man was a teenager when his gang swelled to around thirty at full strength. I read about skirmishes and battles all around the immediate area that we were living in.

Every time we hitchhiked, the locals would talk proudly about the county's history. And from the book I learned that Barry's flying column had driven the English insane to the point that they sent one hundred thousand troops to try and crush the rebels in Cork, particularly Tom and his ragtag rabble, but they did not succeed. Tom lived to a grand old age, and a play was touring Ireland's theatres at the time, called 'Guerrilla Days in Ireland'. I had never wanted to go to the theatre before then but could not now get the money together to see the play.

We had many great laughs working at The Hollies and met some wonderful people, but slowly cracks started appearing. We did not appreciate water running down the electrics in our showers or a red-hot wood-burner flue falling off a wall onto me or the scaffolding we were expected to work on looking like it was made only of rust. We worked very hard every day for months, and it seemed grossly disrespectful to endanger volunteers in any way.

We were then asked to go on an outside job at a primary school in Cork City. Alarm bells rang, but we went as we had decided that we would like to stay at The Hollies for the whole summer. Numerous residents did outside work for an income, and I had no problem with that but, if they made capital off the backs of volunteers, then I was absolutely against such things. The guy who took us was also employed for conflict resolution and mediation. By the end of that day, I had realised how unsuitable he was for such work.

We got to the playground during the school holidays and prepared to mix cob. Shortly into the process, I discovered a sizeable piece of glass in the cob that we were mixing by trampling with our bare feet. This came as a shock to me, and Amy and I could not stop myself holding it up to our boss and spontaneously asking him how much they were insured for, should anyone lose a digit.

I could see him explode inside. How dare I challenge his authority? One French volunteer announced in solidarity that he had no problem going to hospital. He took the glass from my hand and threw it into a small bush on the ground. Amy suggested to him that the glass would be better placed in a bin, rather than on the ground, in an infant's playground.

Our boss tried to justify the glass, saying that the material we were mixing had come from the house that had been burned to the ground, as if that made everything OK. I was stunned, near speechless. He then told me that we could wear gloves. Again, I could not help myself, and asked if he had glass-proof gloves? He was so unimpressed with my insubordination that he really threw me with his slightly cryptic response. The conflict-resolving mediator actually said to me, 'I could set you free now!'

He was not referring to some magical ability to bring real freedom to my life. On the contrary, he knew that we had absolutely no money and wanted to stay for the entire summer, and that we had worked very hard for months, for free, yet what I slowly realised he meant was that he could get us thrown out of The Hollies and thus made homeless and penniless.

Amy saved the situation and said that we could mix cob with our work boots on and not throw the cobs along the line. This slowed the work down somewhat but calmed a dodgy situation. A few days later, we were told we would have to leave because there was not enough space for the volunteers. At that time there were fewer than ten volunteers, and we had been told initially that they took a maximum each year of twenty volunteers.

Before we left the sustainability centre, one resident was busted for building his cob home bigger than the planning permission that he had received. This seemed like a stupid thing to do, but it was his house. He told me of his belief that the Irish authorities wanted to stop people from building their own homes. As if they did not have enough problems, one member who had rebuilt the burned

house was refusing to talk to any other members and this had become so bad that they had felt no other option than to start a court action against him.

Chapter 28 Learning How to Squat in Ireland

Amy and I had seen many empty houses in good condition in the area. We had come very close to squatting a mansion in Wales, before the squatting laws were changed, making squatting residential properties illegal in Britain. We decided we wanted to do anything rather than return to England or Wales. Two French women were driving to Bantry on the southern coast for the day, so I got a lift and went looking for possible houses for us to squat in.

Wild County Cork is rugged and scenic, Ireland at its best, and Bantry on the border of County Kerry had its own magic. I explored every inch of the town, finding many empty buildings but no real options. After some hours, aware that my lift back was looming, I went large and got into the huge mature gardens of a grand old hotel. With no for-sale sign, it had obviously been empty for some years. I climbed inside through an open ground-floor window, as I had done at the mansion in Wales.

The hotel had been luxurious in its heyday and remained still in excellent condition. With dark, oak wood panelling everywhere and wonderful views from every room, across to the Kerry mountains and out to sea. I rushed around with only minutes to spare and realised that it was the place for us. We could move into this hotel and choose which luxurious bedroom with en suite we each preferred. It tickled me that we could see the police station from the main reception room.

I rushed back to meet the French women, so excited that they insisted on looking inside the hotel themselves. Then we went back to The Hollies. I told Amy that we had a target. We left The Hollies the next day and hitchhiked to Bantry. We moved into our new home, our first squat, and tested all the beds. They were all gorgeous, and the bedding seemed fresh.

Amy had worked a lot since her first job when she was aged just twelve, mainly in the horribly exploitative service industries. She quickly decided to try and find work in Bantry and went directly to the local pubs and restaurants to make inquiries. Amy left early one morning on her quest, and I stayed in bed, reading. Shortly afterwards I heard the huge front door close and the clicking of high-heeled shoes on the tiled floor below. I had not had the time to watch the property before we occupied it, which I would always recommend, if at all possible.

We did not have any plan for such an occasion, and I decided that the best course of action that I could take was to simply stay in bed. Some people were scared merely by my appearance and I guessed that this well-heeled person below had probably never met a squatter, never mind had one in her property.

The heels clicked around downstairs for a long time. But no shouting or coming upstairs. I felt certain that the woman was the building's owner or possibly an agent, but an agent would have probably come upstairs. I felt it was the owner and that she knew somebody was upstairs but was too scared to come up and face a dirty squatter who would undoubtedly have stabbed her in the neck with a dirty syringe. My idea of the property-owning public's assumptions about all squatters.

I nearly started reading my book again, but I could not concentrate with the clatter downstairs. Then I remembered that Amy had been a while and might walk right into the owner. I turned the volume off my phone and messaged her. She was about to come back in and stopped just in time to get my message and actually hide in the garden, watching as the woman left. I believe I had been spotted

by a neighbour the day before, when I was a bit slack creeping into the grounds. We decided to leave the next morning at sunrise.

When Amy and I had met she told me she had fibromyalgia. But it was not until we needed to share the same room to sleep in that I discovered the fuller extent of her personal struggles.

She had informed me that she had problems sleeping. But even she was unaware of the brutal reality of another condition she endured. So she was completely unaware that on our first night sharing the same room I was about to experience one of the most harrowing nights of my life. Of course my experience was nothing compared to hers.

On our first night in our new squat Amy fell asleep before me. As I lay preparing to sleep her nightly troubles surfaced. Normally she had a gentle sweet voice but it sounded petrified as she began her nightly routine of repeating the word sorry, over and over again. Occasionally she included 'I'm stupid' or 'I won't do it again'.

I lay near to her and cried softly, not wanting to awaken her yet agonizing over whether that might help. Wondering what could have caused her monumental suffering. Feeling intuitively that her trauma was not a brief one-off experience. Hoping that she experienced a normal calm night's sleep occasionally. She did not. Amy had post-traumatic stress disorder.

We had been on a day trip from The Hollies to Klonakilty, when, bizarrely, we unknowingly met one of the top female models on the planet. We had almost snubbed her as our driver had to pick her son up. The model had attended a natural building course at the sustainability centre. We were told she earned millions of euros every year, due to the luck of her looks.

Klonakilty was pretty with a good vibe, so Amy and I looked around for squatting opportunities. I found a stunning bungalow overlooking the river. Approaching SAS style, I crawled slowly through the garden, to discover a sizeable, empty swimming pool. The garden had been neglected for some time, and there were no-for sale signs to be seen. I got to the building and peered inside. It was empty. I tried my luck with the front door. It was unlocked. Amy and I stayed there a few nights before returning one evening and finding evidence of builders.

I recalled an old house on the coast path from Kinsale that looked perfect for our next attempt at squatting. Kinsale had a permaculture college where one of the guys from The Hollies lectured, so early one morning, with everything we owned in our ruck sacks, we got a lift and trudged the three kilometres down the magnificent coast path to our next home.

Our first squat had been short lived, and I had learned to be more careful. Amy had researched Kinsale, to discover that it apparently had the highest concentration of millionaires in Europe. Madonna owned a property there. Geographically, it was a large, natural, calm bay, perfect for the yachting classes, where new yachts cost three hundred thousand pounds, but you could pick up a second-hand one for half that price. Our water-side home was old and deteriorating. We walked straight into the semi-concealed two-roomed building through the huge rotting timber doors.

The brick-built building with a slate roof mostly intact was probably two hundred years old and may have been used to store boats. Just one metre from the high-tide line, it was mostly hidden in the woods and had the most glorious ivy and vegetation growing all over, appearing to swallow the place. Wonderful natural camouflage from the coastal path only metres away. The brambles crawled in and vegetation grew through the concrete floor in places. In the back room, there were old sun loungers that we used as beds, and there was even one working electricity outlet.

Our new home was very different to our short-lived luxury hotel and bungalow experiences. Little did we know that the little gem would be our home for the entire spring, living right under the noses of millionaires who could not pay to live in such a stunning location. But neither of us had any money, and so we became freegan by necessity. Recycling food and clothes and whatever we could, I was the first to crack from my vegetarianism when I ate some luxury tuna that Amy found. I was very hungry, and she knew it, and we both accepted and surrendered to our situation.

We had gone from eating like kings and queens at The Hollies to eating from the bins. We had both eaten from bins before. Sadly, most of the fine foods thrown away by the millionaires of Kinsale went into bins locked away from would-be raiders. The permaculture students had raided many bins before, perhaps to the point of them being locked away, not even visible.

I recycled tobacco from the floor and ash trays, behaviour which can attract looks of derision even from homeless people. I did not care. Once a scum dog, always a scum dog. But I cracked over alcohol and cannabis, which were almost impossible to recycle. So, I concocted a cunning plan. I would write a spoof poetry zine and sell it to the masses of American tourists who tried to claim an Irish heritage. I decided I would become Wolfe Tones' great-great-grandson, and the American idiots would swallow it whole.

My reinventing Irish history idea did not last long, and Amy got a job in an expensive restaurant so we would have some money. Feeling a little breathing space, I began to write my second poetry collection. I called it 'curly living. rhymes for the times.' Every day for three weeks, I frantically wrote new material on the coast path, delighted when inquisitive seals raised their heads from the water right beside me and the masses of gannets dived all around. Amy bought herself a second-hand flute and played, alone, further down the path. The spring weather brought the area to life, and we had a wonderful three weeks.

Amy and I had struggled through many tough times and, in some ways, Kinsale nearly broke us both, but we stepped up a gear and began getting into our new way of life. Necessity bred ingenuity. I knew I needed a printer, or at least access to one, to print up my new zine to sell on the streets. Amy ingeniously created her own hand-made business cards and began to approach shops, questioning them about their recycling policies and asking them for their out-of-date food.

Adi came to the rescue and allowed us to print zines at his home. We printed, collated and stapled twenty copies each time, and then I sold them on the streets of Cork City. Amy had some interesting conversations with whole-food shop owners, some of whom asked her for a contract if she wanted their outdated food. Amy being Amy, duly informed them that she could happily prepare a suitable contract if necessary. Soon afterwards she was receiving texts almost daily to go and collect free food. One day, two American tourists asked us in all seriousness which restaurant we would recommend in Kinsale. I replied that we only ate from the bins.

Amy had never been to school. Perhaps that is why she was one of the most intelligent, creative people I had ever met. She had worked since twelve years of age, through necessity, cared for her ill mother, and helped raise her younger sister. Amy was truly a force of nature. As impressive a woman as I had ever met. It upset me terribly when, one night after her shift at the posh restaurant, her alcoholic boss was drunk, broke a beer bottle and held it close in front of her face, threateningly, whilst reprimanding her for not fetching his wife quickly enough. His wife had been talking to customers. I wanted to burn the place down, or at least smash the windows, but Amy hated conflict and asked me not to.

I had been hitchhiking to Cork City as often as possible to print and sell my zines, but it became tiresome. Then, one night when we got home, we were greeted by an A4 piece of typed paper,

sellotaped firmly to our door. It said, "Leave in twenty-four hours or we will destroy all your belongings." I laughed at the idea of them destroying all our belongings, as we had none. But Amy looked worried. We left the next morning at daybreak and hitched to the city, to try our luck there.

We got a lift from a guy, who asked about our plans. When I told him we planned to squat a building to live in, he said one of the strangest things I had ever heard. He told me that someone would cut off and steal my dreadlocks while I slept! What could I say to that? I found it hilarious, but it also left me a little scared. Could Cork City have been that crazy?

We arrived in the city at eight thirty am. I left Amy with our bags in a park and went searching for our next home. By nine thirty, I was back in the park, having found an interesting-looking building nearby. That night around midnight, we pulled off a loose board over a broken double-glazed window and climbed in. The building was a long, two-storey house set in large grounds with only one neighbour nearby. The neighbour's garden suggested he was eccentric, with all kinds of stuff lying around. He turned out to be an ex-squatter and helped us out.

It was a little tricky climbing in and out through a broken double-glazed window that still had sharp shards of glass protruding. I could not get them out. As we tip-toed into our new home, I felt glad that I had been in thousands of properties as a surveyor and seen many odd things. This place was trapped in a 1960s orange time-warp. I believed someone had died in there decades before and nothing had been touched since. It was eerie, with slippers and hair-brushes and all the things of daily life left just as they had been, waiting to be used.

Neither of us slept a wink that night, for all we knew some crazy person might have climbed in and stabbed us in the neck with a syringe. Slowly, we tidied up and made ourselves a nice living space in the least weird room. All the windows had been boarded up but not right up to the top, and the windows had been left open so the place was remarkably fresh.

The first few days of occupying a building that you have not been able to watch, or possibly ask around about, can be pretty scary. You have no idea who might turn up or what might happen. I am not sure if such thoughts passed through Amy's mind; I certainly wanted to try and help her feel as comfortable as possible, but each night I went to sleep thinking we might not wake up the next morning. Or, more likely, we might have been woken in the early hours and had to fight for our lives.

Cork turned out to be not as dangerous or mad as our lift had suggested. I sold more and more poetry, and we managed to get hold of a free printer through freecycle so we could print zines without having to ask other people. And we began making friends with some wonderful Irish folk. There was a free party scene and an alternative community with a social centre, where I sold more zines. The social centre was very active, specialising in diy printing and recording on vinyl records. They put weekly vegan food on for donations and had zine and record fairs. Amy started the best free shop I ever saw in the social centre, and it became our second-favourite hangout, after a crazy shared house on the river where we were friendly with all the nutty residents and their pals. They often gave us shelter and coffee in the rain.

We slowly discovered that there were squats, with one centrally located. They grew a lot of vegetables in their back garden and started another free shop, this time for fruit and veg. These handy gardeners also donated a lot of the food to the social centre's weekly vegan meet up, which attracted a diverse bunch from straight-edge punks to ravers, DJs and dealers. The vibe always felt to me like it was the coolest night in Cork.

Most of the time, I enjoyed selling my little, orange, poetry zine. My 'street office' was at the end of a little bridge over the river Liffey, by a big whole-food co-operative, shop, cafe and restaurant. It was a perfect location to sell zines and meet interesting people, including many of the street artists, homeless, and general crazies who lived in Cork city.

My first experiences of meeting religious folk who walked the streets offering a sandwich and cup of tea to the homeless occurred in Cork city. As did my first humbling experiences of eating at soup kitchens, also usually offered by god-fearing folk. As I sat on a bench resting from selling for a while, I saw a busker friend pointing a small group of people in my direction, as he raised his hot cup of tea towards me.

They came straight over, mostly sixty-plus, and asked if I wanted a cup of tea. Before I could say no sugar, they had put two big spoonfuls into my drink and then, before I could say I was vegetarian, which I was again, they had shoved a ham sandwich under my nose. Sensing my disappointment, they proceeded to introduce me to Dave. They said, "Dave used to be a drug addict, too." But the church had saved him, and I was welcome to sort my life out, starting on the following Sunday. They took pains to tell me where their church was.

The soup kitchens were a completely different affair. 'Penny Dinners' had apparently existed for hundreds of years in Cork. Mostly filled with broken men and a few women, with addictions and not much hope. But the guys were always kind and generous, and I only ever witnessed raised voices on one occasion. It was upsetting and humiliating for us to eat in those places, so we avoided them, if at all possible.

I had only ever met one street poet before, the delightfully named Tony Chestnut, in Liverpool. He used to stalk people on trendy Lark Lane and ask for one pound to write a spontaneous poem about the punter. I also met another street poet on the streets of Cork, as he glided along with his unusual sales technique. His A6 zines were beautifully produced, and he sold them for two euros each. I asked if he would be interested in swapping with my A5 zine, which I was selling for three euros a copy. I hoped he would swap me both of his tiny books for one of mine, but he opted for just one. I read it eagerly and thought it was nicely written but essentially copying the writing of Eckhart Tolle.

The next day, I bumped into the street poet again. He could not tell me quickly enough that my zine was terribly unprofessional because I refrained from using capital letters. I had been against capital letters for years and had been delighted to discover Belle Hook's work, also without the use of any capital letters. His following comment was one of the funniest I have ever been lucky enough to receive. He told me that I really could not call the Dalai Lama a twat. I had a poem which described how a friend of mine, who was about to give up his conventional life to become a Buddhist teacher, had called the Dalai Lama a twat, in a thick scouse accent.

The Irish poet told me that he owned fifty acres of land in the next county and that he travelled to India each year to print his books there really cheaply. He finished by telling me that when he travelled in India, he did great charity work with poor kids in hospitals. I did not believe him and left him to float around in his unique way. It seemed to work for him.

Then I met a crazy harmonica player, who was one of the worst buskers I had ever witnessed. He came over to chat, and we discovered we had mutual friends who lived nearby. This guy described how he was a kind of live-in caretaker for a German woman's hidden paradise. The woman had returned to Germany and left this guy in a big static caravan, looking after a few acres of wild valley with river and forest. It had been an alternative community that had hosted festivals for a few thousand people. He invited us to go and live with him in what was the most beautiful spot I had seen in Ireland up to that point.

Amy and I could not believe our luck, initially. We picked wild herbs for tea and lazed around in our new piece of paradise, which was a one-hour hitchhike away from the city. Time flew by with our new luxuries, but then, as if from nowhere, our host flipped out one day and, when we returned in the pouring rain from the city, all of our stuff had been placed on the ground at the front gate, getting soaked. There was a brief note telling us that we had to leave immediately.

We were both upset and confused by our eviction, so Amy went to try and speak with the guy in her diplomatic way. He would not even open his door and shouted incoherently in response to Amy's pleas to talk. We knew our hidden valley paradise days were numbered so, we gathered our wet belongings and exhaustedly travelled back to our squat in the city, hoping that it would still be OK, just as we had left it some weeks before.

Our squat was fine, and we got back into our city life-styles, selling zines and recycling food, tobacco and clothes. We were hanging out almost daily at the shared house on the river with 'H', Roisin and co, and our expanding group of friends, who all liked to hang out there. It was often difficult to get a seat, and there was always someone sleeping on both of the living-room couches each night. Those guys informed me about the classified 'Haarp' centre in America and introduced us to some great music, DJs and bands, including Limerick's 'Rubber Bandits', who stretched plastic bags tight over their faces for every hilarious video – the only guys I knew who I considered to be nearly on a par with Liverpool's best-kept secret, Jegsy Dodd.

Our friends from Limerick told me it was known locally as 'stab city'. But in the previous twelve months, there had been only a handful of stabbings. It reminded me that I had been told that, in London, there was a stabbing every fifteen minutes. But the world's financial epicentre avoided any stabbing-related nick-name.

Chapter 29 The Only Way to Get a Manager

H was a psychedelic-trance DJ and dealer of assorted soft drugs, filling a community role for parties and festivals. H and co were heavily into the underground but thriving Irish psy-trance scene. It was not long before we were planning to attend our first Irish festivals.

Amy and I went to several lovely little festivals, attended by three hundred people or so, in some great locations, from protected moorland to the grounds of a castle. Usually lasting three or four days, we bunked into them all. My favourite security breach was when we had to step over a leprechaun-proof wall. I got thrown out of that party when I walked too close to the main entrance and was spotted without an official wrist-band, but I had no problem stepping over the tiny wall to get back in.

Amy had heard me sing the praises of liberty caps or magic mushrooms for six months, and I had just about given up on her ever trying them. She surprised the life out of me at one festival when she produced a large plastic cup full of mushrooms that could not have been fresher. They had been picked locally, that day, by a lovely Irish guy named Paul. We both ate some of the big, sticky fungus. It had been ten years since I had seen fresh mushrooms, my favourite gift from nature.

I did not need to ask if Amy was going to take any, as it was glaringly obvious. She just wanted my opinion as to the most suitable dose for her to take. We talked it through and both took small doses, Amy maybe ten, and myself maybe twenty, fresh liberty caps. We were the last to leave the festival, two days after it finished. I remember just wanting to live constantly in festivals.

Amy had told me that she had suffered with depression for most of her life. One year after taking the mushrooms, she informed me that she had barely noticed any depression for the whole year. Since then, I have met a guy who micro dosed, taking only one liberty cap mushroom every day. He also gained substantial relief from deep depression!

At one festival we met Vili Vom, the self-described 'only Bulgarian'. He recommended that he was the only Bulgarian worth talking to. As he was the only Bulgarian that I had ever met, the issue had not raised its head. I was walking around selling my zine, when I noticed an interesting-looking couple and was attracted to their energy. I had eleven or twelve zines left to sell when Vili Vom and Kath asked if they could look at one. Almost immediately, Vili said excitedly, "How many do you have? I want them all. But we need to go into the woods to sort this out!" How could I have possibly refused such an intriguing offer?

Occasionally people had bought two or even three poetry zines off me as gifts for their friends. No-one had ever reacted like Vili Vom. The three of us walked into the nearby woods to do business. Vili may have paid full price for all of the zines. As he paid me, he produced three or four little baggies with assorted drugs inside and insisted that we had to take some. So, we did. I took a little MDMA, although usually I would not touch synthetics. I had refused free cocaine previously, every time that I had been offered it. Then Vili Vom insisted that I sign every copy. I did, but with a slight reluctance, as I have never appreciated being told what to do, whatever the circumstances.

Vili started telling me that from that moment he had become my manager and he owned me, calling me his bitch, in jest. He wanted me to write a poem there and then for him so, due to the whole unexpected comedy of the situation, I agreed. If Vili ever thought he could own me, the spontaneous poem I wrote for him made things clear. On an inside back cover, I wrote as a title 'for Vili' and underlined it. For the poem I wrote just two words, 'fuck you.' The deal was done. I had a manager!

Vili became a great friend, crazy raver, computer programmer, and he even acted like my manager when I later had everything I owned stolen in Barcelona, paying one hundred euros for my emergency passport. Rather than making my manager any money, to date, I have only cost him money. However, I have always optimistically maintained that my zines will be worth ten euros each, after my death. Assuming the only Bulgarian outlives me, he should end up slightly in profit, or at least break even.

As that summer drew to a close, Amy and I decided to try our luck in Galway. The opposite corner of Eire to Cork. We had a little money, so we checked the times and costs of bus tickets, but, as usual, we decided to hitch a lift. We were aiming for a little festival deep in the protected Connemara region, which was not going to be easy to find. But how we laughed when our last lift of the afternoon, a silver sparkling Mercedes, told us that they had seen an odd sight, earlier that day. Portalooos being erected in a wild field. Delighted, we asked if we could be dropped off there. The driver said, "No problem, we're passing that way." We arrived at the festival site two hours earlier than the bus would have got us there.

At this gathering, I met and fell briefly in love with a fiery Latino woman called Francesca. She lived near Galway city and agreed to pick me up to go looking for possible buildings to squat. I was still believing in my sixth squat sense – finding potential squats quickly under pressure – and it seemed to work again, as we intuitively felt drawn down a little track near Salthill. As we drove down to the sea, I caught the briefest glimpse of a large static caravan, mostly concealed by trees and the surrounding woodlands. It looked perfect.

When Amy and I went to try to open it, I thought a caravan would be simple and we would be able to enter quickly. How wrong I was. I completely lost patience and got frustrated, before Amy

stepped up to the mark. She calmly opened a big window without causing any damage, in seconds. I was so pleased that she had cracked her first squat. This delightful abandoned caravan became our Galway home, just one hour's walk from the city centre.

Inside, there were signs that perhaps a low-level security guard had either lived there or, more likely, had just checked it occasionally. However, it seemed that nobody had been inside the caravan for a year or two. There were leaks in the roof in the middle and back bedrooms, so we just lived in the large living room at the front.

We loved our caravan in the woods, minutes from the beach, where our neighbours were six or so tiny horses, which we adored. I discovered that I enjoyed most living in nature but to also be only one hour's walk from a city centre, so we could easily recycle and sell. We would walk into Galway early each morning and not return until nightfall to our sanctuary in nature.

Galway has its main High Street dedicated to street artists and buskers. In my limited travels, I had never seen a street like it. We saw some wonderful acts and artists from around the globe. I sold zines and Amy recycled plenty of food. We even discovered the magic bin, where it was possible to recycle beer. I became very excited the first time I saw beer lifted out from a skip. I have since heard of creative recyclers opening indivisible crates of beer in shops and then waiting for their ale to appear in the bins that night.

We had one of the hottest summers on record in Ireland that year. But once the autumn really kicked in and the tourists dwindled, we decided to head back south to Cork. We had been involved with Cork city's Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) and, through contacts there, were offered work, painting an entire three-storey house in Cobh and living in to finish the decorating as quickly as possible.

Amy befriended an Irish guy named Owain, who I also really liked. He informed us that County Cork was the cancer capital of Ireland. I forget the figures, but perhaps County Cork had four times higher cancer rates than any other county. And then Cobh had perhaps ten times higher cancer rates than the rest of County Cork!

In front of our house there was Cobh harbour, stretching out to the seas beyond. There was a huge dock right near our house, where the biggest cruise liners in the world queued up and docked for a brief visit. These ships had up to twenty floors, with hospitals on board and a cinema screen on the top deck, which was that big we could watch their movies from our living room. I seriously wanted to go and ask them to turn the volume up so we could hear properly.

All of those monster ships, which cost thousands of pounds to travel on for just one week, passed close to and docked metres away from an enormous pile of what I thought was stone or maybe scrap metal, on an island in the harbour's middle. Owain informed us that the enormous pile was in fact asbestos, and that the European government had been pressurising the Irish government, for over thirty years, to sort out the cancerous mess. I pondered the situation as I painted the house, thinking that the millionaires who lived on those ships could have been unknowingly breathing lungfuls of poison into their bodies, just like us. They were probably ignorant about Cobh's cancerous mountain.

Amy fell in love with another Irish friend, and, as the painting was nearly finished, I decided that I would return once more, reluctantly, to Liverpool. I had heard of an inspiring group of anarchists, calling themselves the 'Love Activists' (LAs), who had squatted the Bank of England's Liverpool branch. But I had not factored in my anti-capitalist paymasters wanting to pay me for fewer hours than were on my detailed time-sheets. I desperately needed all of the money that they owed me, just

to cover travel costs. I finally received every penny they owed me and returned, alone, to the hell-hole I had called home for so long.

Chapter 30 The Love Activists

I do not recall my last night in Ireland, at all. I was extremely upset to leave Amy and all of our new friends behind. They got me very drunk to deal with the situation. When I arrived back in Liverpool, the LAs had achieved support and notoriety in the city, after squatting six different high-profile places in a few months. The LAs had started out in London, declaring themselves to be anarchists driven, by love, to help house and feed the homeless and bring down the evil bankers and their corrupt system.

One LA known as 'Grandad' described the LAs eviction from the Bank of England to me. He said that they had been kept on lock-down, a prison term for everyone being locked up in their cells, for two long weeks by the police. The police had erected a tall steel fence which completely surrounded the bank and a cordon of cops then stood completely surrounding the fence all day and night. Upon witnessing this action local people spontaneously formed their own human chain surrounding the police and also maintained a 24/7 presence. Supporters cheekily threw many crucial supplies right over the police's heads to grateful activists who caught them on window balconies!

He said, "Almost everybody who entered the bank respected the building. Only a few made some graffiti on walls, and that could have easily been painted over. But the police did not respect the building cutting through those amazing doors." Grandad also told me, with great pride, "The fire bobbies were called to the eviction. When they arrived, they talked and quickly decided that they were employed to save lives, not evict homeless people. They fucked off, to cheers from the crowd of hundreds surrounding the police. Ha Ha!"

Having been unceremoniously evicted from the Bank of England on Castle Street in the spring, the LAs had blazed a trail of six squats from the city centre, south, ending up on Sefton Park meadows. They had set up camp "right outside fat Joe's new offices", fat Joe being the name many of our people in the city used to describe the deeply unpopular mayor of Liverpool. The LAs had squatted a Georgian terraced block of houses in the city centre, and they did a sit-down protest on the road at the entrance to the Mersey car tunnel, closing the tunnel down completely. They had stormed the city, which had not seen any squatting in the previous twenty years, and received the support and admiration of thousands of ordinary people across the region.

As I approached the LAs camp on Sefton Meadows for the first time, it warmed my heart to see the anarchist flag that had hung from the Bank of England flying high, together with a Bob Marley flag. As I got closer, I saw a big banner at the side of the kitchen, next to the camp's entrance, which read in large letters, 'Uprising of the Homeless'. I never expected to read such an audacious banner and was utterly intrigued.

The LAs and Uprising of the Homeless (UOTH) camp was right on my old doorstep. Situated just across Princes Park to Sefton Park on the meadows beyond. A lovely, open site that had been left to the people of Liverpool, two hundred years previously, in perpetuity, i.e. forever, as a green haven in an industrial city. Sefton Park was one of Liverpool's biggest and best parks, just a short walk from the city centre and the River Mersey. There were huge, magnificent, old trees surrounding the meadows, and about twenty-five raggle-taggle tents had been erected in the middle, surrounded by a rope border.

On a beautiful early summer's afternoon, with everything I owned in my backpack, I slowly walked across the meadows towards the camp, full of anticipation. There was a group of mostly men sitting

around a small fire. I saw Jed and Grandad first. They both gave me a huge smile as I got closer. Then I saw Lisa Love, looking like a futuristic steam punk. She also gave me a huge smile and had a very powerful energy. She seemed to have all of the men's respect. Then I saw Biggy, and he gave me possibly the cheekiest smile I had ever seen. I knew immediately that I would be fine with the LAs and UOTH. I was definitely in the right place.

Most of the guys that I met at the camp considered themselves to be both LAs and UOTH. I asked about the Bank of England occupation and quickly got all the gory details from several of the people who had been inside for the whole occupation, including the last few weeks, which they all referred to as the lock-down. They told me proudly how they had cooked approximately two thousand meals for any homeless or poor people who had wanted to eat them. Prior to the lock-down, between one and two hundred homeless or poor hungry people per day had entered the Bank of England for food and shelter.

After a few months of such insubordination, the city's mayor, Joe Anderson, had sent in the heavies. I liked Grandad's version of the story best. Having given his heart and soul to the LA's action, permanently in the bank, one afternoon he left briefly to buy tobacco from a shop only minutes away. When he returned, the entire bank had been surrounded by a high steel fence. He had been locked out, and he was perhaps the person who had wanted to be inside more than anybody else there.

As a result, he returned every day for the entire lock-down, to shout at the police and buzz off the ruckus. The police made a human wall around the steel fence and kept it manned twenty-four seven. So, the good folk of Liverpool had made a human ring around the police and also maintained a twenty-four seven presence, throwing supplies of food, drink and cannabis (several ounces, apparently), straight over the heads of the statue-like police.

At the camp, most of the people were homeless. Some had hostel spaces, but most had been sleeping on the streets prior to the bank being occupied. I split my sides when told that they had actually climbed into the palatial Bank of England through an open ground-floor window. Better, they were hidden by the two for-sale signs in a 'V' shape, completely concealing their entrance.

The camp residents had a great vibe going. Many had squatted for the first time and they had all been through a lot together. Most of the men and women were twenty-odd years old, and most of them had already been in jail six times. This was nothing to them, or at least they put a brave face on it. But in the bank, the LAs had started nightly meetings for everyone to have their say and feel equal, whether homeless, squatter or whatever.

There was a wonderful sympathetic local photographer, who always had the trust of the activists and homeless, and he took an incredible set of images from the actions. The empowerment felt by those mostly young men and women was tangible in so many of the photos. After having so much trouble and trauma in their short lives, they had learned how to use their anger and frustration positively. They began to gain the confidence to run their own lives, and they had grown from strength to strength. Most of the young men had got the same tattoo on their necks: the LA's symbol, which was an anarchy 'a' in a heart, instead of a circle.

But those guys' stories often broke my heart. Incarcerated, some as children; like Jed, who had witnessed his dad being murdered by his uncle, right in front of his eyes. Was it any surprise Jed ended up in jail, before he was old enough to vote? He played the hard man, because that was all he had ever known. The horror stories of the working class never get any easier to hear, but those guys' stories were more extreme than many I had previously heard.

I warmed to all the guys quickly, and they did to me. I was perhaps a small father figure for some, and perhaps they were a small replacement for my estranged daughter. Grandad was everyone's grandad and had no problem with the title. Sid was an older, long-time homeless man, who had initiated UOTH in the Mello Mello squat. In a lovely, messy way, we were all one big dysfunctional family. We loved each other, and we stood solid together. We were the homeless, the oppressed and exploited, but we were 'famous'. We were prepared to fight and die for each other, on a daily basis. And we laughed, a lot.

Daily life was equally hilarious and tragic, camping and surviving with those guys. Although the camp was predominantly male, there were a few very strong women, both living at or regularly visiting the camp. One woman called Marianne lived near to the camp. She brought food supplies to the camp, several times a day. Although she was a member of the Green Party and quite posh, she took all the nonsense that was thrown at her daily, and never lost her sense of humour or compassion. And how can I forget Lisa Love shouting at the men in general one morning, "Can you stop leaving your cum socks all over the camp?!"

Perhaps the most notorious of all the young men and women at the camp was a young man called Tez. I did not meet him for a while, as he was a night owl. Several of the guys 'grafted' at night and slept in the day, unless they had to go for regular sign-ins with the forces of law and order, who put electronic tags on their ankles and other restrictions on their movements. I was worried about meeting Tez, from the descriptions I had received. I was expecting a monster.

When I actually met a small guy with a smile almost as cheeky as Biggy's, I did not think it could be Tez. He was a little apprehensive at first, but soon told me with his eyes lit up that he was a rapper, and he asked if I wanted to hear some of his lyrics. I did, and I was moved to the point of choking back tears. Tez could only write from the heart and was certainly a natural-born rebel with no respect for authority, in any shape or form. I took a huge liking to Tez, who was more like a child when I showed a genuine interest in him spittin' his lyrics than the monster that he had been described as. He was also extremely funny. Tez had been in prison six times, by the time he was twenty-one years old.

I usually awoke first each morning, followed by Biggy. Just seeing Biggy's face and smile made me laugh. Sometimes he woke first, and one morning when I looked out and saw him alone, lying on a massage table as if he was paddling out to sea on a surfboard, it nearly killed me. He was hilarious just in his own company. But I need to explain how and why that happened.

The camp was usually kept clean, and the two biggest issues were stolen goods and spice. The most serious issue for me was the constant attempts by two of the group, Juliette and Connor, to control and dominate the camp, dis-empowering the empowered, attempting to govern the gloriously ungovernable. Juliette and Connor were not homeless. I had suspected that they were members of the Socialist Workers Party, whilst some other people suspected them to be infiltrators. They came to stay at the camp for weekends and insisted on calling meetings upon their arrival. They wanted no stolen goods or spice on camp.

Stolen goods and spice were, for some, the daily bread and butter of life. I quickly came to hate spice when I saw what it did to Grandad and others. After research, I discovered that spice was more addictive, harder to get off, than heroin and crack cocaine. I had read Terence Mackenna, the Noam Chomsky of natural highs, about the African root Iboga. There was no miracle-cure Iboga available for the homeless.

The guys were out stealing from rich cars every night, and after several meetings where people screamed for no more stolen goods on site, I woke to see Biggy, paddling on the massage table. The

massage table was brand new. With a heavy wooden frame and covered in bright pink leather, it had been placed right in the middle of the camp, visible from the meadows all around. The guys had excelled themselves the previous night. I never asked how they achieved that heist. I did not need to. It was just great to see Biggy dreamily lying on it. I think the spice use got worse and, although Grandad said that he had wanted to stop smoking it, it was everywhere and half the price of cannabis.

I remember a comical moment one night as many of us were all in our tents ready to sleep. Someone shouted, "I am getting my tent carpeted," and someone else replied, "I'm gettin' underfloor heatin'," then someone else replied "I'm gettin' a conservatory," followed by "I'm gettin' a front lawn," then "I'm gettin' a first floor," and so on, as we joked ourselves to sleep.

Chapter 31 Anti-Fascist Always

Fascism was defined by the Italian dictator, Mussolini, as the merging of governments and corporations. When prime ministers like Tony Blair and politicians started also working in top positions at big companies, creeping fascism began.

In the height of a glorious summer, we started receiving fascist threats, directly against the entire camp, but also, astonishingly, a national extreme right-wing organization began threatening the entire city of Liverpool. Liverpool has always traditionally been left wing and anti-fascist. For example, Ken Loach had chosen a scouse (a slang term meaning anyone from Liverpool) girl to read her grandfather's letters from Spain, written whilst he had been fighting fascists in the Spanish Civil War, in his film 'Land and Freedom'. Approximately two thousand brave souls from Liverpool went to Barcelona and beyond to fight with the anarchists and socialists against Franco and the fascists in 1936. Those men and women were called the 'international brigades', which George Orwell also joined and wrote about in his book *Homage to Catalonia*.

The threats directed at the camp initially came from a local idiot, not shy about his shallow beliefs or violent threats. He had several German shepherd dogs which he sometimes walked around the camp with, but he began threatening to drive his car over our tents whilst we slept. I doubt I was the only one who lost a lot of sleep at that time. Thankfully, none of his threats ever materialised.

The threats against the entire city were something altogether different. They were still made by idiots, but those idiots were more organised and committed, and they were a group, not an individual. I forget the name of the group, possibly the 'English Defence League' (EDL) who had some support at that time. The *Liverpool Echo* newspaper informed the people of Liverpool that a right-wing group had told them they were coming to the city to burn it down and only bullets would stop them! Many of us could not believe either the balls, or the stupidity, of those people.

At our camp, the atmosphere became electrified. Most of our guys were not activists, far from it. Politics was meaningless bullshit for them, irrelevant to their direct lives. They could sound sexist, racist, homophobic or ageist; they could sound right-wing themselves just regurgitating sound bites from the right-wing mainstream media. But for me, that situation catalysed their real, unadulterated feelings and beliefs. They were spoiling for a fight for sure, and they were right at the front of the queue waiting in Lime Street train station for the representatives of the master race to greet them.

In what must surely be one of the great moments in Liverpool's history, fifty racist nut cases pulled up in a train to discover that about one thousand five hundred people had brought the city centre and train station to a grinding halt, waiting to say hello, antifa style. Quite fabulously, the police decided that the only solution to prevent carnage was to lock the fascists in the train station's left-luggage room, for their own safety!

After a few hours of being locked in with the luggage, the fascist leader actually convinced the police to let him out and give a little speech. He was immediately subjected to flying bottles, and Jed managed to punch him. Media were everywhere, and this could have easily resulted in two of our guys going straight back to Walton prison. Thankfully, it did not.

All of the guys from the camp had been so eager to meet the fascists that no-one kept to our agreed plan, that we needed at least six people to stay on site at the LA/UOTH camp. I was concerned that our local fascist might see an opportunity to do us harm, combined with the fact that the national fascist group had found out about our camp and said that they would attack it, so I remained alone at the camp. Marianne checked in on me, as did another wonderful female supporter. I was pleased to see all of our guys return home safely. I pretended I had not been scared. They were jubilant.

That day, together with the daily organising of our own lives, voluntarily and co-operatively, was enormously politicising and empowering for all the young homeless girls and guys. Some were just teenagers when their parents had thrown them out of their homes. Val was just sixteen when she came to the camp in solidarity with her slightly older brother, Jeff. They were from a 'good' family, but Jeff, loved by everyone, had been thrown onto the streets by his parents.

One Friday night, our self-declared leaders, Connor and Juliette, arrived, and immediately called a meeting. They had sheets of paper with some rules that they had decided they wished to impose upon us. No stolen goods, no spice, no sexist language... Most people were out, so they went around and stuck their papers onto every tent. When the guys came back to the camp, they immediately ripped the rules off every tent and burned them, to my amusement. We discussed the situation, and all decided in consensus that we did not want any rules and we certainly did not want anyone trying to impose their rules upon us. Tez, of all people, broke my heart when he suggested that we could all discuss the matter and write our own guidelines, not rules, if it was agreed to be necessary.

Seeing so many of these damaged young women and men on spice was crippling for me. I had watched a documentary as research that had been so disturbing that it was difficult to watch to the end. I hated spice and would have loved nobody to use it from the camp, but I knew that was asking for a miracle. At a mere one third of the cost of cannabis, that synthetic nightmare became the most common drug amongst the homeless and the most common drug in the prisons. It was criminal to call this 'synthetic cannabis', as it was harder to get off than heroin or crack cocaine.

The LAs and UOTH had built their own diy kitchen from recycled pallets and plastic on the camp before my arrival. But as autumn loomed, we began preparing for a long, cold winter. We planned and started building diy structures that would be capable of sustaining and sheltering us throughout the cold months, inspired by a protest camp (against the building of a new, huge, super max prison) in Wrexham, Wales, which we were in contact with and had visited.

The tale of how the LA/UOTH camp ended, which dealt a heavy blow to the LAs as a national 'organisation', is painful to tell.

After months of almost unanimous support across Liverpool, things went very sour, very quickly. The *Liverpool Echo* had done a hatchet job when it ran a story claiming that the LAs had stormed a benefit dinner for Jamie Bulger's family. Jamie Bulger was a mere baby when he was abducted and killed in Walton, Liverpool, by two boys who were aged just nine and ten years old. The murder shook the city to its core and stayed in people's memories for many years after the event. Nobody in their right mind would storm such an event. The newspaper could not have made a more slanderous

accusation. Overnight, the LAs went from being the rebel darlings of the city to becoming absolute scum in the eyes of the gullible public.

Several people who were at the event described to me what had actually happened. Crucially, the event was not a benefit gig for the Bulger family. I was told Jamie's parents were apparently at an event which was more of a night for Mayor Joe Anderson. That was why the LAs had given their energy to attempting to interrupt his party. For some reason, several taxi drivers took a dislike to a few of our crowd, which resulted in one woman being dragged around by her hair by a taxi driver. Ex-army Grandad managed to punch him, and a scuffle broke out, outside the venue. That was the long and short of it. But the damage was done. Mud sticks. We became the scourge of the city, and I became scared to call myself an activist of love.

A young man named Joe had been visiting the camp. He had become known to the LAs and UOTH as a supporter since the occupation of the Bank of England. Joe was quite striking in his looks, with bright blond hair, and he always wore a Palestinian scarf around his neck. He always brought cakes and variety of tasty food. He was known by everyone, as he was very vocal in his hatred for the police and he constantly ranted against Israel. He made music and had set up his own recording studio in his flat, which was not far from the camp. He had cerebral palsy and had been instantly accepted by the LAs. Joe seemed harmless.

When I met him, I thought he had one hell of an ego but, like the others, considered him to be harmless. He told me that he wanted to expose undercover cops on Merseyside. When I first went to his flat, I realised that, as he did not drink or take drugs, he had plenty of his government sick pay to buy any books that he wanted. Joe had some extremely interesting books, and he introduced me to several alternative media channels on-line. He spent a lot of time on-line and was interested in the 'false flag' news programmes. He said he was a Muslim. He did not seem to have any friends.

I began spending time with Joe at his apartment and was interested in his work trying to expose any undercover cops at the camp. Two obvious suspects were the two people trying to control everything. Please, do not get me wrong, for I have come across so many authoritarians and dominating control freaks over the years, even amongst self-described anarchists and anti-authoritarians, that it beggars belief. So, there was no evidence of any kind against those two people. I made a big point of telling Joe that he needed to back up his claims before making such serious accusations against anybody.

The next night I went to his place, to find him jubilant. He told me that he had a list of twelve undercover cops! I replied, "What the fuck happened last night?" He did not answer. As if by magic, in twenty-four hours, he had gone from the flimsiest suspicions about two people to having a list of twelve people who, in his mind, were guaranteed undercover cops! I was utterly dumbfounded. He told me that he would publish his work with the undercover cops' identities as soon as his website was complete. Again, I strongly recommended to him that he needed some real evidence to back up to his claims.

Next thing I knew, I was top of his list of people we all knew, published on-line as cops for all the civilised world to see! I blew, exploded inside – that little rat. What a fucking scum bag. I so wanted to kill him. No one would particularly know or care. I hated myself for thinking like that. Only when my daughter's mother had been raped by a guy we knew, had I wanted to kill before.

Never had I been challenged in such a way before. It took all my energy not to seriously harm Joe. Thankfully, all the LAs and UOTH had been through so much together that they had become really tight. They all knew and trusted each other and also had long backgrounds, family and friends locally. Unlike the accuser. Many simply laughed off Joe's accusation.

So, the camp was still receiving threats from fascists, both locally and nationally. The national fascists proved their intelligence by returning to Liverpool twice, after being locked in the left-luggage department. Our guys greeted them every time. A few of our crew, including Lisa Love, got stuck back in prison. The public hated us. All we needed then was to be followed by drones!

Joe and I had previously made a freedom-of-information request to Merseyside police about drones: whether they had any and several related questions, which we wrote and he sent. We found information, in the *Liverpool Echo*, stating that the force had trained with them five years previously. They took a long time replying, then denied all knowledge of having or using drones.

All the pressure led to some folk leaving the camp, and numbers had become low when my tent was burgled. I was upset because it was some homeless guys, but I tried to empathise and did. Our self-declared leaders, Connor and Juliette, declared that the LA's and UOTH's camp was officially over. Those of us remaining were fuming. Then, one morning, a group of us were followed from the Sefton Meadows camp by a large drone, to Sefton Park, where we panicked and took cover in the bushes. When we jumped into the bushes to hide and escape, we all witnessed the drone go straight up really quickly, so high that we could no longer see it.

We all saw a very big drone, absolutely not a ten-pound toy from a Chinese factory. The drones the police trialled were one metre across, with audio and visual capabilities of up to three kilometres. Essentially military grade, highest-quality technology. We were all freaked out by the experience. It felt to me like the world had become a much darker place for squatting and feeding the homeless.

Then it happened again. This time, Joe and I had been walking along a main road in Toxteth. We were followed and both clearly witnessed a large drone. Liverpool's summer of love had turned into a cold winter of discontent. I believed the LAs and UOTH's actions had been the most significant events in the city since the riots that had exploded both in 1981 and 2011.

The local authority cleared our last few tents from the camp when everyone was out one day. All of our homes, our red and black tents that had been donated to us by a sympathetic local group, disappeared. I moved into my friend's polytunnel on nearby allotments, where we had shared two plots a few years before. Living in a polytunnel in winter would have been OK if I could have kept the doors shut. But I ate organic yellow tomatoes from my bed and organic grapes and peaches from the tunnel. Nobody bothered me, but it was a bit tricky at times, with some of the nosy, old allotment holders wanting to know everybody's business.

When I described the organic fruit and vegetables that I was eating in the polytunnel to one friend, he replied, "You're livin' the dream!" to which we guffawed. Life was hard, and I was needing to spend twelve hours per day in bed, just to be able to function. Recycling tobacco from the floor and ashtrays in the winter in Liverpool takes dedication and commitment. I often experienced homeless people and *Big Issue* sellers looking at me in absolute bewilderment. You can imagine how the tax-paying public responded. But I did not care.

One night, I walked right into Joe on a very narrow pathway. I could not stop myself putting my face right up against his. I had not planned for such an occurrence. I said calmly, "I should fuckin' bury you alive right now!" He looked petrified. He could not limp away from the situation. Luckily for him, the area is a lazy dog-walkers' spot, and one appeared metres away from us as I threatened him. I saw Joe look at them and knew at that moment I could do nothing without it being witnessed. Joe survived, and I stayed out of prison for murder.

I am not a violent person. I hate violence. I knew that I could never hurt someone who was weaker than me. Imagine if I had beaten someone up who had cerebral palsy. That would stick for life. A few of my friends felt that I was an idiot not to beat him. But I have never in my life instigated violence. On the contrary, I have been attacked several times, often from behind, and have only ever fought in self-defence, as a child and adult.

This was around the time that a young boy, a child of approximately ten years old, ‘offered me out’! A kid in Toxteth seriously wanted to fight with me. I felt so sick. He thought he could honestly beat me, at little more than half my size and weight. That kind of delusion made me think of Jamie Bulger’s boy murderers. They were fairly ordinary working-class kids, with heads full of violent computer games and TV murders. I also watched a young boy on a TV documentary describing how he could jump up high into the air, spin around and then kick a person’s head off. Then I read a very interesting book about the Jamie Bulger murder, which analysed the supposedly evil boys’ behaviour, and came to conclusions that were extremely challenging for mainstream society.

After so much full-on stress, I was glad to work at a stall with Shane for free entry into a weekend punk rock festival. Friends were there, and a woman from Next to Nowhere asked if I wanted to stay in the social centre, as the weather was so cold and wet. I replied no, stating that I had been involved at the centre’s beginning when it had been agreed by consensus that nobody should be allowed to sleep there. And I was well aware that the landlords had not wanted anyone sleeping in their city-centre basement space.

After only a few more freezing nights in the polytunnel, I was almost begging for a key to the social centre. The social centre collective and co-op landlords agreed that I could sleep there for a short while, as long as I made no fuss. They had all known me for many years and knew that I would try to be on my best behaviour. I really appreciated their kind gesture.

It was lovely to have a better shelter, more sleep and less time in bed. I believe our landladies knew that I had to let Grandad sleep in the space on a few bleak nights. He always insisted on leaving by seven am, even though the shop did not open until nine. He respected the risk I was taking, for, although I got on well with the co-op, I think one of them would have thrown me out, had she known Grandad was staying. Grandad was sixty-four years of age. He had raised his three daughters alone and spent fourteen years fighting for queen and country in the army, before becoming homeless.

Prior to Joe’s accusation, Grandad and I had made a video with him. I had rewritten the lyrics to ‘Walking in a Winter Wonderland’, the old classic, and changed it to ‘Walking in a Homeless Wanderland’. We had gone to the city centre and bought cheap costumes for the video, which Joe filmed and edited. Grandad and I had so much fun making that video.

Joe had sent ‘Walking in a Homeless Wanderland’ to ‘The Devil’, Liverpool’s second most notorious gangster after Curtis Warren. The Devil was on a public relations mission, trying to improve his image for the legal system and the British public. Fearing another long jail sentence, The Devil announced that he would give one of his empty buildings over to the homeless to stay in over the Christmas period. He wanted to arrange a great Christmas dinner for us all, and he would even spend his Christmas Day having dinner with the homeless.

Joe believed that Merseyside police, via Curtis Warren and his underworld connections, were the biggest drug dealers in Europe. Curtis had claimed that he would not get out of bed for less than one million pounds. When Joe started communications with The Devil, and I witnessed him for the first time, ranting on-line, I decided I wanted nothing to do with him.

But after watching a documentary about The Devil, I discovered that he was actually an interesting man who had won major martial arts championships. He and his pals began their unofficial careers fighting against racism and drug dealing, but not through the accepted channels. The Devil and his three martial arts champion friends used to go to The Grafton, a night club that was racist. They would take over the place, when black people were not welcome, climbing over the bar and helping themselves to free champagne and behaving completely contrary to the club's racist policies. I am not sure if black people were even allowed into the club around the time of the 1981 riots.

Joe had arranged a meeting with The Devil to discuss getting his building for the homeless over Christmas. None of the other guys would have done this. Before I knew it, we had a key and were looking inside an old pub that had been refurbished for residential use but was unfinished. The central heating and hot water systems were not working. But hey, we were homeless. We could not believe our luck and, for some of the homeless men and women, The Devil was a legend. They could not believe that they would be having Christmas dinner with him.

It was actually on Christmas Day, when I went for dinner, that a man I had known for years, called Andy, refused to let me in, saying he needed to get Joe. When Joe came to the door, he began shouting that I could not go in because I was a cop and they shut the door in my face. I could have just cried myself to death.

Chapter 32 Little Miracles

I was not feeling so high on life, and never had I felt so upset in Liverpool. All kinds of accusations started flying around the social centre, from Andy, the guy who helped stop my Christmas dinner. Andy had decided that he was going on a crusade to expose paedophiles. He started off by claiming that a paedophile ring was being run out of Next to Nowhere. All of this combined nearly broke the entire Liverpool activist scene and left me distraught and desperate for a break.

Then, a butterfly flapped its wings and a little miracle happened. I met a guy called Mat. He had been a top male model but had given up his celebrity life-style to become a vegan peace warrior. Mat had a baby with a scouse girl, so visited the city often. He met me and took me for a meal in a restaurant. Apparently, he was the reason Katy Price and Peter Andre had split up. We got on well immediately and chatted feverishly. Mat was a part-owner of a raw vegan yoga community in Portugal, and the community desperately wanted an experienced organic gardener.

A few days later, he took me for a second fancy restaurant meal. I seemed to be what they were looking for. And then Mat asked me if I had ever done yoga before. To which I replied, nervously, no. His response was priceless. He said, "No problem, you just do what you want. We are into free-form yoga." I imagined myself turning up in a leotard and doing whatever I wanted.

As if my 'job interview' could have got any funnier, Mat then told me that their community grew cannabis and some residents and guests liked to smoke pipes before, during and after daily morning yoga. I was told that my days would consist of an amazing breakfast, when I turned up at nine or ten am. I would then be able to smoke a pipe, do some 'meditation and yoga' until midday or so and then would work alone in the garden in the afternoons. For this, I would receive a nice bedroom and amazing food. We could not believe that we had met each other and seven days later I was being flown to Portugal.

It was embarrassing for me to be told that I needed to speak on the telephone with Mat's mother as she would be paying for my flight to Lisbon. I was baffled by the situation. Mat's mother was lovely on the phone. She was a real salt-of-the-earth Geordie, and I liked her instantly when we chatted. What really nagged me was why would a celebrity model who, until a short time before,

had earned fifteen thousand pounds per photo shoot, ask his mother to pay for a homeless guy's thirty-two pound flight?

The biggest issue between Mat and I was, I thought, obviously going to be smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol. Two things that he made blatantly clear he hated. I confessed at my job interview to my heinous addictions, and he had informed me that I would just need to go off the community's land to do so. No problem. I actually had some trump cards, as I had a lot of organic growing experience, whereas the two previous gardeners did not. Mat also blatantly liked the idea that he had 'rescued' a homeless guy from the streets and, in his mind, he would be able to help me 'see the light'.

I landed in Lisbon on the birthday of my daughter. It was an early flight, and then I had to catch a train for a three-hour journey to the foot of the Estrella mountains in central Portugal. I had only sixteen euros. The exact cost of the train ticket. I was close to bursting with excitement, and the sun shone brightly on a winter's day as I boarded my train. In a short time, we had left the urban jungle and hit the countryside.

To my astonishment, as our train began to travel alongside a river, I saw an otter running alongside my carriage, like a dog might do with a car. The train was going slowly, and the otter, fast. I had never seen an otter before and desperately wanted to draw her to the attention of the other travellers, but I was too shy. She ran alongside me for some time. I was mesmerised by that beautiful creature that I had so wanted to see in real life since reading the book *Tarka the Otter* as a child.

When I arrived at my departure station, in a small town, a taxi driver with a huge grin came straight over to me and ushered me quickly to his car. We drove for almost an hour, through magnificent mountains and forest, before he stopped suddenly at what appeared to be a dirt track, leading to a stony field. The taxi driver made a brief phone call, and then we waited, and we waited.

We waited for what seemed like an eternity, before Mat sauntered casually down into sight. He was quite a sight with his huge, muscular form – heavily suntanned with incredible tattoos visible – wearing a white trilby hat. He was not remotely concerned about keeping anybody waiting. Au contraire, he was used to being treated like a mortal god, with three or four girls throwing themselves at him on a nightly basis when he had been a celebrity model.

Chapter 33 Rainbow City

I was told that only four-by-four vehicles could drive up the track all the way to what was then called Rainbow City. Mat and I carried my bags up the track for some way and then I had the oxygen sucked right out of my lungs as I set eyes on Rainbow City's land and buildings. The place that I was about to call home. As we passed one of the most beautiful, overgrown fields I had ever seen, Mat asked me if I liked my garden.

The nine acres of land that comprised Rainbow City were on a south-facing mountain slope, with an outrageous one-hundred-and-eighty-degree panoramic view across a stunning valley to distant mountains beyond. There was a large, old building being renovated and two large, white domes. I had never seen such domes before. At two stories high, with the south elevations totally transparent, they were unforgettable. At fifteen thousand pounds each, they had to be.

One dome was for yoga and guests. On the ground floor, there was a beautiful kitchen that was heavily stocked with luxurious vegan food, as the community was raw vegan. And there was a wonderful sound system. The guys had an eye for design and beauty, and I felt very lucky to be sleeping in one of the two bedrooms in that space, in that incredible location. The yoga dome had

more of a night club feeling than a yoga space. Mat, who announced that he wanted to be called Warrior, was also a DJ.

The other dome was accommodation for some residents and paying guests. On the ground floor there was lounge accommodation with a large, flat-screen TV and an adjacent kitchen. The showers and heating system were a farce, and you had to book in almost a day in advance to get a ropey shower. I was boggled that paying guests were charged four hundred and forty-four pounds per week to stay there. The single wood-burner was seriously insufficient to heat such a large space.

The evening that I arrived, I borrowed the laptop of Ned, the main land-owner, to send a happy birthday message to my little girl. Then I retired early to bed, feeling near overwhelmed by my new living situation. The next day, I met all of the residents, and Wally arrived. As soon as I set eyes on him, I knew that I had never met anyone quite like him. With his big curly hair, the best posture I had ever witnessed and a cheeky glint in his eye, he was glowing. Wally absolutely radiated good vibes and positive energy.

Wally was magnetic, and I was immediately drawn to speak with him. Then he told me that, until shortly before that time, he had been employed for ten years at *The Sun* newspaper. I nearly died. How could he have worked for The Scum? The most hated, boycotted, newspaper in Liverpool. After a terrible football disaster where ninety-six Liverpool fans had died, *The Sun* had printed horrendous lies about Liverpool FC's fans. It was twenty-five painful years for friends and families of the dead before the newspaper was proven to have lied on all counts.

I could not have imagined anything more unexpected. The timing of Wally's and my arrival meant that we shared the party dome and became friends quickly. I did my best to forget his past, and his radiance and beauty made it a bit easier. Wally, like Warrior, and even myself, had given up promising careers to fight the good fight, as we each saw it. As Wally and I were the only people living in the yoga dome, it was good for us both to get along. I was extremely aware that I was at the bottom of the ladder at Rainbow City, and the more people I could get along with, the better.

Wally quickly became one of the most inspiring human beings that I had ever met. And he was certainly one of the most popular people that I had ever met. Everybody sang his praises, and Warrior had spent an entire year trying to convince him that he should give up his dodgy career and become a 'light worker' at Rainbow City. Wally's entrance to the community could not have been more different to mine.

Wally was part politician, part stand-up comedian, and the best dancer that I had ever seen. Praise indeed. He had been involved with setting up The Peace Party in England and had very nearly become a full-time politician. But he was absolutely hilarious, and, after trying out his stand-up comedy at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, he had landed one of the biggest agents in comedy. He had had to make a serious life choice between politics and comedy, which just split my sides. When we met, Wally was still considering becoming a professional comedian.

As for being the best dancer, Wally blended his love of tai chi and yoga with his passion for street dance, and anything else that he felt like casually throwing into the mix. He liked to dance as often as possible and was always mesmerising. Sometimes, he would dance for hours outside in the rain. As if all of this was not enough, he was passionate about colour therapy and healing and a big advocate for raw vegan lifestyles. He made us all shots at breakfast consisting of a slice of ginger, apple cider vinegar and lemon. They were invigorating.

On my second day at Rainbow City, Ned – the guy who had the initial vision and actually bought the land – and I had a major unexpected discovery. We shared a famous cousin. Well, Ned

considered him a brother. My uncle had actually raised Ned from late teenage. But at that time, my dad had left us and I had wanted nothing to do with that side of my family. I did not tell Ned, but I considered them all to be racists.

Ned, upon this discovery, was talking like we were lost brothers who had miraculously found each other. I knew that Ned was essentially bourgeois, and therefore we came from different planets. He had a one-hundred-thousand-pound Aston Martin locked up in an English garage, becoming more expensive the longer it sat there. He claimed to be spiritual.

On my third day at Rainbow City, an interesting English guy came to visit. He turned out to be the cannabis supplier. Although I had been told that the community grew their own cannabis, when I saw their three or four plants that were three inches high after two months' growth, I realised I had been lied to by Warrior. The community did not have a clue about growing anything. They were buying from someone else, who was a good grower.

We started talking excitedly about magic mushrooms, and he told me that he had just bought one hundred euros' worth from the dark web. Warrior overheard this and asked if he could buy the entire bag, to which the guy agreed, saying it would be no problem for him to get more. Angel Dan, another resident, exclaimed in delight, when the mushrooms were delivered shortly afterwards, "I've waited all my life for mushroom yoga!"

The next day I was put under so much pressure by my new bosses, Warrior and Ned, to help them work on the building site that was going to be their huge houses, that I crumbled and went labouring, helping them get the enormous roof joists into place. Warrior came to help, dressed in only expensive y-front underpants, vest and flip flops. The best-dressed labourer I ever saw. Unfortunately for us all, I bust my thumb so badly that I could not even hold a pen properly. So, I could not work in the garden, and, as I could barely hold a plate, I was not really able to wash the dishes. I spent the next few days writing a terribly messy letter to my dear friend Morty, explaining the situation that I had found myself in. Warrior thought that I was skiving and kept me under relentless pressure to wash dishes.

The mushrooms were from south America and most delightful. Angel Dan's dream came true the day after we bought the mushrooms. Mushroom yoga. Free form indeed. We all decided to take a small dose and ingested three grams on the supplier's recommendation. Several paying guests joined us, and, over the next week, about twenty people took some mushrooms, some for the very first time. The location was perfect, and everybody loved them. I promised myself that I would take mushrooms once a month for the rest of my life.

On the first evening mushroom trip that we took, when everybody had returned to the other dome, Wally and I knew that we would not be getting any sleep, so he unveiled his indoor golf game that he had previously used in his office. He rolled out his artificial-turf putting green across the party dome's floor and carefully positioned the putting hole and flag. He did so theatrically, and then, exaggerating every movement, he extended his right hand's finger and thumb, silent movie like, and carefully picked up his golf club between only finger and thumb.

He slowly positioned his golf club behind his back, and then he struck the ball, straight into the hole. He got a hole in one, and we exploded with laughter. Then he did it all again and, hey presto, another hole in one. And then, for good measure, he did it all again with the same result. We both knew that it was the mushrooms, and Wally said as much.

Breakfast at Rainbow City could only be described as spectacular. Every meal at the raw vegan community was spectacular due to the incredible food supplies and the outrageously creative and

co-operative chefs. Every evening meal saw a collaboration, often between a resident and a guest. So many of these guests, after paying over four hundred euros, then helped cook meals for up to twenty people. No restaurant could have ever created such delicious delights.

People used to rock up for breakfast between eight and nine am. After eating breakfast, we began preparing for the morning yoga session. For some, that was an extensive ritual. There was a communal cannabis basket and one very long wooden pipe, which most of the residents would smoke before meditating and yoga. Every resident had their own yoga mat and favourite position in the yoga dome. Initially, I felt so horribly self-conscious that I had to be right at the back, alone and out of sight.

I had arrived with no suitable yoga clothes, so Warrior and Angel Dan took great pleasure in showing me the party or costume box. A big wooden treasure chest full of outrageous theatrical clothes. Those guys loved to dress up and play. I found an outrageous pair of leggings and a hippy tie-dye vest. I had never previously worn leggings or tie-dye but managed to hide my embarrassment. When I first walked down the wooden spiral staircase from my bedroom to the yoga space below in my new attire, I was greeted with roars of laughter.

Although I had been told I would be given yoga lessons by someone with experience, I soon realised that my lessons were never going to materialise. I was just encouraged to do whatever I felt like doing and call it free-form yoga. I reverted back to my standard conditioning and thought I would try to copy some of the people in front of me. A ridiculous idea, which I luckily stopped before I injured myself. Those guys were pros with years of experience, and they were very fit.

Not only the residents but also many of the guests were incredible for me to watch each morning. I had never even witnessed a yoga class, but I would have imagined that most of our guys were quite exceptional in the field. Nobody could match Wally or even come close, as he spontaneously morphed through his daily yogic dance. I immediately discovered that the yogic people were the beautiful people. Beautiful in their outer forms and striving for inner beauty.

I loved the garden, the field that I had to transform into an edible paradise. Out of sight, lower down the mountain, I could not be seen from the domes, which helped me settle in and begin my arduous task. That field had not been touched in twenty years, except for some tiny beds which I happened upon. I was told that two other gardeners had tried and failed in the seriously established couch grass. Alarm bells rang in the distance, but I was in heaven. I ate oranges fresh from the trees in the adjoining field. It felt like I had never eaten an orange before I ate those delicious fresh fruits. I devoured about eight every day.

My first task in the garden was to release a twenty-metre-long grapevine, which was being overwhelmed by brambles that had reached three metres in height and about three metres in width, before pruning it. It was a horrible job that took almost three weeks to complete but I managed to save the grape vine from extinction. I was very satisfied with the completed job, but started hearing disgruntled whispers from Warrior about the amount of time it had taken me.

The weather in early February in central Portugal was similar to England's. Not great for starting a food forest in a large, overgrown field alone. Once I was informed of Ned's and Warrior's ridiculous expectations of me and the field, I tried to bring them both down to earth and explain the situation. They both asked me what was the fastest time that any fruit or vegetable could be grown? Could anything grow in two weeks?

I desperately tried to explain to my meditative bosses about nature, the seasons and harvests. I tried explaining that I was not superhuman, that couch grass is ruthless and, most importantly, that if the

field was to have even a few beds full of food that autumn, then I would need as much help as possible in February, March and April to prepare the beds. Once the beds were prepared, that work would never need to be done again. But, to create the garden, a lot of work was required. I informed them that a simple diy greenhouse would have been priceless, enabling a head start for the year's seedlings. I was told no problem. Nothing materialised.

Only one kilometre away down the mountain lay a tiny rural village, bizarrely named 'The Village of Little Clowns'. I forget the Portuguese translation. A couple named Conchita and Rui lived in Conchita's grandmother's house there, where they cared for her. One day, whilst I was smoking a shady spliff amongst the boulders, I saw what looked like a human fairy hopping amongst the rocks of Rainbow City. There were no boundary walls or fences, and I later learned that many of the local villagers would creep between the boulders to try and see what happened at the strange hippy community.

The fairy amongst the boulders turned out to be Conchita. When we first spoke, she told me that she had always felt as though the mountain was hers. She had known every inch of it since her childhood, when she had grown up on her grandad's farm nearby. Conchita had an immense strength and energy. And when she described how she had helped her grandad on his farm since she had been just five years old, I could not believe my luck.

Although I had been concerned about smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol, I was equally concerned about successfully growing food in a climate very different to England, reaching forty degrees plus through June and July and receiving no rain in the height of summer. When I later discussed my situation with Conchita and Rui, they could not have been more co-operative and supportive. They were keen to help and teach me in the garden, and they were very interested to get into yoga.

I really liked Conchita and Rui, my first Portugese pals. Rui's first love was psychedelic trance. He created his own music, and they both DJ'd for an international psy-trance radio station. Within forty-eight hours of meeting me, Rui had composed an ambient piece of music that was thirty minutes long. He dedicated it to Rainbow City and brought a copy when they came to join us for yoga the first time, the very next day.

Conchita and Rui arrived early and eager for their first yoga session. Conchita had a little experience, Rui none, but they were both very fit, having had to work physically hard all their lives to survive. They were from poor families. I had confirmed with my bosses that we would have two local guests for yoga and told them that Conchita and Rui would also be priceless helping me in the garden. When my new friends arrived, I was flabbergasted at their treatment. To my horror, the bourgeois residents and guests at Rainbow City had no time or interest in a poor Portuguese couple. Talk about shooting yourself in the foot.

I was so embarrassed and offended by my friends' bad treatment that I could not apologise enough to them. Conchita and Rui were rightly confused and upset by their off-hand treatment, and they told me that, even if they were welcome to come back, they would not want to do so.

Unlike my bosses, Conchita, Rui and their grandmother always welcomed me in their home and treated me like family, from the moment we met. I felt incredibly privileged to be welcomed into their grandmother's simple but beautiful home, where I began hanging out most evenings. I had to beg my potential gardening saviours to sneak into the garden to instruct and help me with my mammoth tasks. Luckily, they did, and we enjoyed each other's company a lot.

I had a brain wave which went down well with all at Rainbow City. In front of the two domes, there was a huge heart-shaped area bordered by stones. I had ordered an organic seed catalogue, and for two euros we could buy two thousand red poppy seeds. So, obviously, I thought, why not fill the huge heart with red poppies? Everybody at the community loved my idea. I told Rui and Conchita that night, and they both burst out laughing and then said seriously that I really could not do that. Did I want the police to come to our opium plantation?

I made a huge list and we ordered six hundred euros' worth of seeds. That was by far the biggest seed order that I had ever been involved with. It was exciting, and I was given free rein to buy as many varieties of flower as I thought necessary to plant around the land.

I had begun growing cannabis properly for the community since my arrival and had no problem taking herb from the communal basket, which was usually full. Warrior had lied to me about the community growing their own cannabis, and it seemed fair for me to do so. Though I never discussed my pilfering with anybody. And I actually had no problem stopping drinking completely, which was necessary as I had no money or financial income.

Every day, several times, I would sneak off and smoke a spliff or cigarette, hidden amongst the numerous boulders. I tried to think that nobody knew, but they did. Most people did not care, but Warrior was so passionately against it and so dominant in his behaviour that I had to be careful. Ned, on the other hand, was deeply in love with his girlfriend, who liked to smoke and drink. I often saw them in the bar in the Village of Little Clowns as I went to my pal's house, where I could smoke in peace. Three months later in the bar, Ned bought me a glass of wine without asking me. I could not drink it after three months dry – the longest period of time that I ever went without drinking alcohol.

I became as healthy as I had ever been in my adult life. Eating an excellent raw vegan diet, meditating and doing yoga for two or three hours a day, and gardening all afternoon from Monday to Friday. All of which was very helpful to my battered and bruised body and psyche. For I had been told years earlier that I had bronchitis and, for the first time in my life, I gave some consideration to all the abuse that I had done to myself, on top of all the abuse that I had received from society.

Several interesting guests visited Rainbow City, including one woman who, with her secret crew, managed to obtain enough doses of Iboga each year to offer it to two hundred people. Iboga, an African root, could cure alcoholism, spice, heroin and crack addiction. It had been made illegal. Ayahuasca also had similar potential. She told me that there were perhaps two hundred ayahuasca rituals or ceremonies across London, every month!

Warrior kept ridiculing me for not having my own yoga mat, then somebody gave me a training mat, which showed twenty-five yoga positions with the suggested number of repetitions. I loved my new yoga mat, even though some of the positions looked impossible to me. I did not understand all of the images at first, but I was soon helped out, often by guests. I found meditation difficult initially, but enjoyed the yogic balancing positions, realising that they were easier for me to do if I did not smoke a pipe beforehand.

The garden was going slowly. I received no help whatsoever, apart from clandestine visits from Rui and Conchita. Not even any token gestures. I did receive constant pressure, and Warrior's treatment towards me started badly and got progressively worse. He was a bully, and I realised he was bullying other residents and even some of the paying guests. When I discovered that he had frequently thrown the guests' toiletries into the rubbish, because they were tested on animals, I cracked up laughing.

It did not take long before I realised that the residents and many guests were whackier than I had thought. In a nutshell, they were seriously into both aliens and angels. Ned asked me if I would help build a ten-metre copper pyramid so the aliens would come faster, and I was pressured to read their 'best' book on the subject, which I mostly found naive and hilarious in parts, although I agree with our 'vibrations' and the potential for them to diminish or be raised. Reggae artists got there long before the 'light workers', who were, unsurprisingly, all middle class.

One evening, Warrior informed me that everybody was doing a silent water fast the next day. I said nothing but thought fuck that, I'm the gardener. Next morning, as I prepared my breakfast in a bullet blender, Warrior stormed in. Glaring at me, he forced words through his clenched teeth, as quietly as he could, saying, "It's a silent water fast!" Desperately trying not to laugh I replied, "Not for me. I'm the gardener."

I worked hard on the garden, but most of the work that I had done was below the earth's surface, i.e. weeding, the bane of organic gardeners. Warrior suspected that I was not working hard enough, even though I had created pyramid-sized mounds of couch grass roots. If any of them had just helped me for one hour, they would have understood first-hand how difficult preparing vegetable beds can be.

I was able to prepare only three large beds by the springtime. As I had no greenhouse, I had filled my large tent that I had been moved into, using it as a makeshift shed or greenhouse. It had become absolutely full of seed trays, and at the last count I had over five hundred seedlings sprouting.

It had been three long years since I had lost all contact with my daughter, Aela, and, although I had come to terms with the fact that we might never see each other again, I knew that I could not stop trying. I had an intuitive urge to search through Facebook to see if I could find her on there. It came as a shocking surprise to discover an account in her name without any photos, information or friends. I sent a message to an unknown person who may have just shared her name and asked if she was my daughter.

To my elation I received a reply. It was from my estranged little girl, who had become a teenager. After we had become friends, I was able to see that the account was unused and had been set up in the year that Aela had been born. That convinced me that her Mother had set up the account in the knowledge that she would separate Aela and me against my wishes. The joy and relief I felt is indescribable.

Sadly, Aela was incredibly angry with me, but I had to rise above and continued, as I always had done, to take everything she threw at me and never mention her mother, never mind say anything negative about her. I had not even seen a photo of my little girl or heard her voice for several years. I asked for a picture and, when she sent one, could barely recognize her. The eleven-year-old little girl whom I had last cared for had grown into a sixteen-year-old whose energy from the picture felt like she was as strong as a hurricane. I was walking around two feet above the ground, as though I had been born again, and dreamed of seeing Aela again, however long it might take.

With my angel back in my life, I could take anything that Rainbow City could throw at me. One memorably demanding, yet also partly hilarious, day occurred when we were preparing for a royal visit from Warrior's ex-partner and their baby son. Warrior spent the entire week building up to this, harassing everyone, particularly me, to prepare for the best week ever at the community. His child was the most important on the planet, and everything had to be splendid for the visit that would last for one long painful week.

Then the sewage system broke and liquid shit started spewing up from the ground, just below the huge heart. I could hardly control myself, for everything at that community was ‘jarred’, done cheaply and badly. But shit spewing up from the floor. I could not have wished for more fun. I was gardening when the faecal volcano began erupting. Close enough to hear exactly what was happening.

Warrior shouted for everyone to come and help, screaming, “We have a huge emergency.” I stayed in the garden until he sent someone to get me. When I got to the centre of the shit storm, I could not have wished for more hilarity. To see six bourgeois yogic hippies wearing lycra and flip-flops, each armed with spades, almost standing on each other’s toes, trying to shovel fast-flowing shit. They were so stupidly close together that they were essentially splattering each other with liquefied poo!

Warrior wanted me to join in the shit fest that he was controlling. That was the only time I laughed. I asked him where he would like me to stand. Patently, to anyone with half a brain, there were already too many people way too close together. It was a job for two people with brains, but we had seven without. He blew a gasket and shouted at me to go back to the garden, which I did happily. Knowing he was occupied, I smoked a sweet spliff and laughed my ass off.

The bosses showed their true colours when I told them that Rui could fix their sewage pipe. I knew that Rui had worked for years in construction and could easily fix the relatively simple problem. I don’t recall if I had ever told them that I had surveying experience. Rather, I let them think that I was just an unfortunate, homeless no-mark. So, Rui was called by Ned and, because Rui is a man of real substance he came immediately and fixed the problem. It took him some time and energy, and he got covered in shit, but I doubt that he was even thanked, never mind paid.

The scorching Portuguese summer sun had baked the forest above and surrounding Rainbow City. Rui had literally just completed repairing the sewage pipe when a huge forest fire started just a little further up the mountain, and a strong wind was blowing it straight in our direction. I heard screams and ran up the hill, to see Rui running at full speed straight up the mountain towards the huge fire. Seconds later, I heard Warrior shout, “It’s not worth it. Grab your valuables and leave!”

Salt of the earth and scum of the earth in action. Rui was well aware that two elderly people were living further up the mountain. They lived separately, and one was a traditional goat herder. Rui ensured that the old folk and their goats escaped the fire and possible death. An emergency fire helicopter then arrived and began to put out the flames, which could be seen from miles around.

I had developed a growing list of instances where Warrior had essentially bullied me. Not petty stuff, and I knew he was also bullying two other residents frequently. One was young and just accepted it without question. The other was elderly, and, although she would discuss his behaviour with me, she felt she just had to accept it because she wanted to carry on living at Rainbow City.

I had spent two decades analysing dominance, authoritarianism, power plays, and controlling behaviour. One evening, I decided that I would expose Warrior publicly the next day. He tried to bully me again that same evening, and I simply said no to him. I felt a huge and intense anger from him. I know he realised at that moment that all was not well. He left the dome, and I went to my garden to sleep.

The next morning, as I walked up the hill from my tent, I got one hell of a surprise. Warrior’s four-by-four jeep was packed full with all of his belongings. Wally was talking to him intensely, and as I got closer, I could hear that Tom was pleading with him to stay at Rainbow City. Overnight, Warrior had decided to leave. I hoped for good. My wish came true.

I walked up to the yoga dome for breakfast and strolled into a feverish discussion about Warrior's sudden decision to depart. Laughing so hard inside, I tried not to show it. I had my list describing the numerous situations when Warrior had bullied me and decided to show it to Ned in private. Unfortunately, I did not receive much support at first, but later Ned told me that, since I had told people about the bullying, others – both residents and guests – confessed that they had also suffered from his bullying behaviour.

Ned tried to get Warrior to stay at Rainbow City, but Warrior had other plans. His ego was big enough to think that he alone was Rainbow City. The Rainbow Gathering people did not like him, and it is easy to understand why. When Ned realised that their partnership was over, he asked Warrior to sell his share of the land. Warrior refused, and the Rainbow City community in Portugal virtually collapsed.

Around that time, Wally came to speak with me. I knew it was serious, but at least he was a good guy and diplomat. He said that some people, meaning my boss, were concerned that I had been stealing cannabis from the basket. I was annoyed and explained how I had been lied to by Warrior about the community growing their own cannabis and implying that I would be able to smoke it. I told him I had been shocked to discover that the community were buying it. Tom told me that other people had also been lied to. Wally informed me that Warrior had also told other people what they wanted to hear, essentially lying in order to convince them to move to Rainbow City.

At least I had grown twenty plants that were at the time flowering and almost ready to harvest. And then, two weeks of non-stop rain. Just when I needed to plant hundreds of seedlings out in my new beds, the heavens opened and did not stop. That freak weather really messed my plans up. The garden became a lake. And then, whilst the rain poured, Ned, my 'brother', came to the garden. He had never visited before, and I knew it meant trouble. He asked if we could have 'a heart to heart'.

We entered my bell tent, and he asked me why the garden was not full of food and told me that he thought that I had not been working hard enough. I actually nearly burst into tears but managed to hold them back and simply told him to fuck right off. I left Rainbow City that night.

I had seen several derelict farm buildings on the mountain, so that night I slept in one. On the first floor, there was a trapdoor which bats flew through, right next to me. I did not sleep well but felt a huge relief to be away from that dominator community. The next day, Conchita asked her grandmother if I could stay in her spare room. Grandmother said yes, and I moved in with my Portuguese pals.

Rui, Conchita and her grandmother were extremely kind to me, and I ended up staying with them for two months. They were both very creative and industrious people, always busy, so it was a perfect place for me to write in. I had come to the conclusion that I had a huge amount of writing material from my stay at Rainbow City. I had contemplated writing comedy for TV, with the potential for big money if it was accepted. I wrote for up to six hours a day. Rui and Conchita shared their food and hash with me, and grandma's house was a productive hive of activity.

The writing just poured out of me, as it does when I need to write. For the first time in my life, I dreamed of having money and not having to struggle each day to survive. Having read *The Writers' Yearbook*, I knew that, if anybody had an hour's worth of writing accepted for TV, then the reward was thirty thousand pounds. I felt like I was writing for my life.

After living for three months in a supposedly therapeutic healing community, I desperately needed some therapy and healing. I believed we all needed healing and therapy, as long as we were trapped in a patriarchal, capitalist, society. Rui had worked on construction sites in the height of summer,

really hard work, for the Portuguese minimum wage of three euros twenty-five per hour. He had previously been apprehended and arrested by the police for having more than five grams of hashish. Portugal had decriminalised all drugs. If you were caught with more than five grams of hash you were sent to counselling.

Rui and I became very close. He called me his brother, and I was flattered. He had no family left apart from his mother, who still lived in Lisbon, where he had been born. Rui's English was excellent, and he was a deep and spiritual guy. We had many great conversations. He was from the ghetto and he could look after himself, but he could also cry and felt no shame in doing so.

Conchita and I also became close, but she was often tied up with family chores. She told me that Portugal had had their own little Hitler not so long before. For there had been an almost bloodless revolution in Portugal as recently as 1974. It was known as the Flower Revolution, because only six people had to die before their society changed for the better. Women had put flowers down the gun barrels of the soldiers as they had stood on the streets.

I imagine that, in reality, many people had died in the build-up to the Flower Revolution. It was usually the way. Rui broke my heart when he described to me how his father had been a committed revolutionary. His dad had then become homeless and had been living on the streets of Lisbon. Rui had searched the streets hoping to find his dad. But he had walked straight past him without recognising him. His dad died on the streets, homeless and penniless. Rui struggled to hold back tears as he told me the story.

Whilst I was living with Rui and Conchita, her dad died. She had to stop cooking us delicious local meals and headed off to France, where he had been living. This brought a lot of tension to the house and sent Rui almost suicidal. I was asked if I could leave, so I did.

Chapter 34 The Whimsical Atrocity Theatre

After hitchhiking to the nearest bus station, I was relieved to have just enough money to buy a ticket to Lisbon. I hopped onto a bus and set off for new adventures in the big city, Portugal's sprawling capital. Quite a change from life in the mountains. The bus pulled up into Lisbon's central bus station at four pm, and I hoped my squatter's sixth sense would help me find somewhere to stay, as I was penniless. I had no contacts in the city except Cleo, who lived on the outskirts. Cleo and I had met at Rainbow City, where we had shared her first beautiful mushroom experience, which had been an honour.

After intuitively following my nose for two hours, I came across a large four-storey building with lovely artwork covering the entire gable end. I walked to the rear of the building into a public park. At the rear of the building, there was a small boundary wall which dropped down three metres into the garden below. The ground level of the park was at the first-floor level of the building. Two long planks of wood stretched from the top of the wall in the park to a veranda and an open door into the back of the house. The planks of wood looked like a drawbridge across a dry moat below.

I knew that the building either was or had been squatted. As I had another two hours before nightfall and darkness, I decided to search for any other possibilities. I had been told horror stories about sleeping rough on the streets of Lisbon, but I could find no other possibilities so returned to the first house to chance my luck.

In the darkness, more tired than scared, I climbed onto the rear wall and cautiously stepped onto the drawbridge, not even knowing if it would support my weight. Holding my breath as I slowly

stepped across, the planks bent and wobbled much more than I had expected them to, but they held me, and I stepped off the bridge into the veranda and the dark building.

By the faint light of my cheap phone's torch, I entered the vast space. There were two apartments on each of the five floors. The ground floor and basement were full of trash and appeared vacant. I passed an empty kitchen and two small empty rooms, before heading up the central flight of stairs. All the doors on the upper floors were closed, and the place was silent. On an upper floor, I found evidence that electricity had been connected to those spaces.

As I reached the top floor, my heart sank. From the floor below, I heard two sets of heavy footsteps approaching. I looked over the balcony and, to my horror, saw two big guys with their hoods up, each one carrying a baseball bat. The perfect time to speak absolutely no Portuguese!

They approached me slowly, without speaking. Petrified, I started blubbering in English. If those guys had spoken no English, I might have been beaten to a pulp and never heard from again. But one did. I told them my situation, and, to my joy, he said that I could sleep there for that night and all the people in the house would discuss the situation the following day.

I slept in the first empty room after the kitchen, at the guy's request. Fair enough. I was security. If any intruders came into our open building uninvited, they would meet me first. On my first night, the guys shared their cheap carton wine with me, which I appreciated immensely. They told me not to expect it again.

The next day, I met the baseball bat guys, Nelson and Ruben, in the light. They were lovely, as was Roni, a young guy from Cape Verde. An equally lovely, crazy, older, alcoholic couple also occupied the house, and they ensured that I had all the bedding that I needed on my first official night. All the guys decided that, as long as I caused no trouble, I could stay for up to three months, when the glorious, structurally sound building was due for demolition. With great views out to the green belt surrounding Lisbon, the area was being gentrified.

Roni and I became friends. He was in his early twenties and had left his two children behind in Cape Verde, a Portuguese colony, to try to make enough money to improve their lives. Ultimately, his lifelong dream had been to get to England, the land of milk and honey. I spent the next three months telling him the realities about 'Grate' Britain. Roni was a motorcycle delivery boy for a pizza chain and got knocked off his motorbike the first week that I was there. He was gutted, only because he was then unable to work for a while. Roni's corporate employers stopped his paltry wages and gave him no assistance whatsoever for the duration of his incapacitation.

Nelson and Ruben were in their early thirties. They were tough guys, because they had to be after growing up in Lisbon's ghettos and spending numerous spells in prison. They were also very sweet and caring guys. Nelson, Ruben and Roni played computer games a lot and hustled a daily existence selling soft drugs. The older couple in their fifties drank cheap carton wine all the time. They shoplifted to make cash.

None of those guys got any unemployment benefits. And they were all squatting through necessity. They were absolutely not interested in politics, seeing it as utterly irrelevant. I discovered that Portugal had no squatting laws or protection for squatters.

The last room on my floor at the end of a long hallway had been a bathroom. I discovered human shit on the floor and realised it worked its way towards my room. My fellow squatters were all very clean and would never have defecated on the floor. I checked daily, to discover new shits were appearing. So, on a hunch very early one morning, I went up to the disused attic space and found a

guy asleep. I did not wake him, feeling sorry for him and admiring his gall, squatting underneath the noses of squatters. Shortly afterwards, I heard him creep out before anyone woke up. I cleaned his shit up, and we never heard or saw him again. There was a massive, dirty squat close by, and I suspected he went there.

Roni and I became close friends whilst he was unable to work. He smoked hash and introduced me to the funniest scoring situation that I had ever come across. At the opposite end of our small park, there was an enormous police station surrounded by a very high wall, all of which were painted completely pink! (I suggested to Roni that all the police stations in the world should be painted pink, and the world would become a better place. He thought I was mad.) At the corner of the big pink police station, from eleven am until the evening, in a cute little flower garden, some guys sat drinking beer and selling hashish. Not the greatest quality but nice enough. Best of all, those guys sold their weed for one, two, three, four or five euros. Three euros' worth would last me for twenty-four hours.

Every morning, Roni would come to my room to share a spliff and ask if I was going to see the guys at the park. Most days, I went with him, but when he went back to work, I had to go alone. The guys spoke no English but were always cheerful and friendly with me.

Roni took great pleasure in the fact that, although I was English and he was Portuguese, he was undoubtedly richer than me. We both loved that fact, or at least I loved that it made him laugh so much. Occasionally, he would take us for a coffee, or we would find ourselves in a shop. Every time this happened, Roni would almost demand that the staff spoke English because I was English. Then he would tell them with pride that he had more money than me. That always cracked me up.

Roni, Nelson and Ruben wanted to be gangsters really. Instead, they hustled small amounts of soft drugs and worked when they could. Nelson and Ruben killed themselves on construction sites when short contracts occurred in Lisbon. They were horrified when I told them about dumpster diving, recycling food and even eating straight out of public bins. They were equally horrified that I picked up cigarette butts off the streets and took them from ash trays to split open and mix together as what I called squatters' choice or street blend. Sadly, it was not long before Nelson and Ruben were back in jail. I missed them so much, and we never got to say goodbye.

At first, it was difficult for me to recycle food in Lisbon. I ate a lot of food directly from the public bins and got a bit desperate at times, which resulted in me eating some dodgy stuff and getting quite ill. I was shitting green watery liquid and got terrible stomach cramps for a few days. I was worried that I would need medical attention and promised myself to be more careful with food from the bins, especially in the hot weather. Summer was starting. I did not tell the guys in the house, as they would not have been impressed. No-one was in any position to carry anyone else, for we were all struggling to survive on a daily basis.

Recycling tobacco in Lisbon is good if you don't mind taking half-smoked cigarettes from the floor. Many dirty smokers drop their large, left-over cigarettes on the wealthy streets of central Lisbon. But the pedestrian traffic was thick and fast in the tobacco-rich zone, so it was fortunate that I had just done three months' worth of daily yoga. I had never been so fit so I could walk very fast, bending and picking up ciggy butts so quickly that I hardly altered my stride. Within two weeks, I found it hilarious that I had accidentally developed what I called my 'homeless six-pack'.

Libraries were often a sanctuary for homeless and street people. Lisbon's central library staff should not have let me use their computers to go on-line, but they did, happily. I went there daily to research any interesting groups and places and discovered that there was an anarchist vegan social

centre across the city from our squat. They cooked food on Monday and Friday evenings for donations.

I went to the impressive social centre at my first opportunity. It was a long walk and, when I arrived, I discovered what looked more like an apartment block. With four huge floors, it was by far the largest social centre that I had ever seen. When I went inside, I asked a friendly-looking woman if it would be possible for me to help prepare the food for a free meal, as I had no money. She looked a little nervously at a punk guy, who I immediately knew was the 'leader' of the centre, which claimed to be organised on a horizontal basis. He looked me up and down slowly, very seriously, but said OK, unenthusiastically.

A lot of people were preparing food and busying themselves around the vast space. Only two or three women acknowledged my presence. The guys, all dressed in all black, reminded me why I did not normally get on so well with vegan punks. The woman I spoke to first was obviously in a relationship with the leader, and he did not seem impressed with us speaking to each other and having a laugh. I felt sorry for her.

The entrance hall had some great-looking diy zines, patches and t-shirts, and an older guy began talking to me. He was part of the small library collective and asked me if I would like to see their library, to which I replied yes. It took up one entire floor and had thousands of radical and revolutionary books. I was impressed and asked the guy how they had such a huge space. He told me that they had a legal tenancy and paid a very low rent. But repairs were needed, and they could not afford them. He showed me around the basement, which had recently been completed. It was like a cool nightclub, where bands played gigs and artists could record in the recording studio.

The social centre guys did actually say that I could sleep for that night in their centre when I told them that I had a one-and-a-half-hour walk to get back home to our squat. I declined their offer, though, as I felt a little uncomfortable and so walked home, happy that I had a place to go on Mondays and Fridays. No matter that some of them were unfriendly.

I did not need much, but I needed some money if I wanted to smoke hash and drink one of Portugal's two not-so-great beers, Superboc or Estrella. One day, I was in the city centre, hungry, when I noticed a homeless guy devouring a packet of cheap biscuits. He was clutching the packet closely to his chest as though it was a prized kill. I wanted to ask him for a biscuit but felt certain that he would growl at me and refuse. I also noticed that he had not one, but three, homeless signs to ask for money. That stuck with me, and I wondered whether, if I had more signs, would I also be able to gorge on cheap biscuits?

For reasons unknown, my room in our squat had about fifty out-of-date condoms spread around the floor. I had an intuitive idea that I would be able to use these as a prop on the streets. I had amassed a lot of cardboard, which I used as carpet and a bed area in my room. And then my first theatrical brainwave. TWAT would finally go public, in Lisbon.

So, I came up with my first sign. Having written poetry, my signs seemed like shorter, more concentrated poems, kind of. My very first sign, inspired by what I had, read, "free condoms for the over 60's. I.D. required." I could not stop laughing inside at my joke for the following two days. I was ready for the streets of Lisbon, but were the streets of Lisbon ready for me?

I knew I had to go large. I wanted to do some spontaneous 'street theatre', preferably at the biggest tourist attraction in the city. I quickly identified my target, the prominent flight of steps at the foot of Lisbon's tallest viewing tower. It was like Lisbon's Eiffel Tower, where approximately one hundred people queued up across the foot of the steps, all day long. The steps were big and wide, and the

queue often waited an hour to travel up to the top in a lift, when they could have just walked up to the top in ten minutes. I saw the steps as my theatre and the queuing tourists my involuntary audience.

I prepared for my opening performance by making a few signs from my cardboard bed and carpet. As I had only one recycled red biro pen, I used that. After my free condoms sign, I made one that simply said, “this sign was my bed”. Some of my other first signs read, “I am you”, “butterflies cause chaos”, “energy is everything”, “you are a universe”, “the best slaves think they are free”, “nature is good”, “high standards for low living” and “Bob Marley had fourteen kids, ‘no woman no cry’”.

I had watched the Bob Marley movie and then read about The Wailers’ bass player, ‘Family Man Barret’. Family Man Barret made Bob look like he was not even trying, having fifty-two children of his own! One for every week of the year. Imagine that. He was in a dispute with the Bob Marley estate, claiming that they owed him money. I guess he needed it for all the birthday presents that he had to buy.

Psyched up and ready for my audience, I headed for my stage on a beautiful early summer’s day. TWAT had been fermenting inside me since Wales, and it had reached ‘maturity’. I had a good feeling, and every day I had been filling my little note book with ideas for more signs. I had about seventy potentials. So, armed only with a few prepared signs, supplies of blank cardboard, a red biro pen and six outdated condoms, I set off for TWAT’s debut performance.

I got to the large flight of wide public steps and casually sat down, about eight to ten steps up from ground level, facing my audience. I placed the free condoms sign carefully on the ground in front of me, resting it on a step so it was clearly visible to the hundred tourists queuing up in front of me. I put six condoms on the ground in front of the sign. I glanced across the bored-looking crowd in front of me. Many had noticed my actions, and some absolutely burst out laughing, loud and hard. Some giggled and smirked, and many looked very confused. A few people looked ready to kill me. Perfect. An excellent start to my new career.

Some people immediately left the queue to come and give me money. Others waited until they slowly got closer to the lift’s entrance, at my left hand side. They passed money through the fence to me. Then I placed the other signs out, resting on the steps around me. For the following three hours, I painstakingly made more signs with my red biro pen. One read, “the whimsical atrocity theatre” and another, “some artists pay others to do their work. Discuss”, and my favourite was “only one stupid animal on earth and it claims intelligence”. I realised my theatre would work best in silence, as I was very shy on my first public outing.

Afterwards, I had enough money to splash out on a big, black permanent marker. I stole red, yellow and green pens at the same time. I needed them for the Bob Marley sign. With my brand-new pens, I could make nice new signs. And I recycled only the finest cardboard from the richest Portuguese shops. I became confident with my two-hour performances and was often able to include small amounts of slapstick into the mix. In no time, I was earning twenty euros per show, and had women flirting with me almost daily. I was like a pig in shit.

Chapter 35 Never Accidentally Offer Luxury Recycled Cream Cakes to Portuguese Vegan Punks!

I had enjoyed going for food at the social centre twice weekly. But it became tiresome for me to recognise blatant hierarchies and leaders when their on-line blurb claimed that they were anarchists against leaders, organised along horizontal lines, not vertical, top-down power structures. But my

relationship with the social centre was completely destroyed one afternoon, after I had just recycled some expensive, fancy cream cakes.

In front of our house, a fiesta had been happening all weekend, so lots of drunken revellers engulfed our usually quiet home. Our squat had been under siege for the three days, being attacked by young adults who threw stones and came into our building looking for trouble. I had not been sleeping well and was very tired one day as I ate some luxury recycled cream cakes in the city centre. Then the social centre's leader passed me and stopped to speak. We had only ever seen each other previously at the centre, never in public. I offered yer man a fancy cake, without thinking that they were patently not vegan.

He refused and asked me exactly where our squat was. I innocently told him directions to our home. Then he left to go on a demonstration against workers' exploitation. That night as I walked home, I was stopped dead in my tracks by fresh graffiti on the bridge just before our squat. In big white letters it simply stated, "vegan limit!!!" I had no doubt that the vegan punk anarchist leader had just sprayed the graffiti as some kind of attempted bullshit intimidation directed at me. Because I had offered to share my hard-earned cakes with him.

I never went back to the social centre after that. I was so angry that I knew if I had returned then I would have certainly made trouble and probably have given the leader an excuse to ban me anyway. I hate egos and authoritarians. However, as always, I tried to turn a negative into a positive. That incident inspired one of my most popular signs for TWAT: "I only eat vegans".

The next day, TWAT proudly unveiled its new message to the world. It worked immediately. The show was good. I was a little bit worried that one or more of the social centre vegan punks would pass by, see the sign and beat me up. I was probably safe in my theatre, as I usually had a police escort at one side, looking out for the tourists' safety. But they knew where I lived.

Some brave souls came and spoke to me during or after my cardboard shenanigans. But things reached dizzying heights for TWAT when an American woman came up to me and asked me how much my signs were. I was absolutely flabbergasted. Someone wanted to buy my recycled carton signs. I replied to her spontaneously that, if she wanted to buy a sign, then she had to tell me how much it was. She put four euros into my hat for "You are a universe". Black permanent marker pen on quality recycled cardboard.

Women were flirting with me almost every day when I performed, but I was caught completely off guard when an extremely attractive, well-dressed young French woman came up to me with her friends, picked up the condoms and said, "OK, let's go!" She was absolutely serious and in a pathetic response, I replied, "You're wearing a wedding ring." She countered with, "It's only an engagement ring. This is my last chance. Are you coming?" Her friends' looks assured me that she was absolutely serious. I did not go. One of her friends looked at me as though I must have been insane. One of several potentially delicious sexual opportunities that I missed in life.

As the summer really heated up, it felt as though all of Portugal's crazy folk were coming out of the woodwork and heading for fun in Lisbon. As I worked one day, a sun-drenched, handsome, young man swaggered up the steps towards me. He wore rags as clothes, had matted, unkempt hair flopping all over his face and had a long stick over his shoulder, with a cloth bundle tied up at the other end. He asked if he could write something on one of my signs. I told him he could, so he picked up "this sign was my bed" and wrote on it, "but I washed it in my jacuzzi first", which killed me and the audience. Then he shouted for all to hear, "We are homeless because we choose to be."

Before his departure, he asked me if he could take a condom because he might meet a girl on the way up the steps. Again, his question cracked me up. I said yes, admiring his confidence and forgetting to tell him that they were out of date. As he walked up the steps, I witnessed him stop half-way and start talking to a young woman. Immediately, they were lost in each other's eyes. He slept in his hammock, which he tied to two trees right in the middle of the busy poetry district of the city, for the following two weeks.

I rarely had sad stories gleaned from TWAT's daily performances. But when a young girl of six or so years of age saw my unoriginal sign, "free hugs", she asked her parent or guardian, a man, "What are hugs?" He responded by extending his arms wide, whilst still standing, towering over her. I was gob-smacked and heartbroken at the same time. They were English speaking. I believe they were English. The only thing I could do was to try to describe the situation in a long sign, which I did. My only sad sign.

It did not take me long before I had created twenty-five signs, saying things like, "the only constant is change", "smile please you are on holiday, or get a divorce", "footballers v dung beetles. Who are more talented?", "there is no authority but yourself" (inspired by the punk band Crass), "clamp the homeless" (inspired by the comedian Chris Morris) and "all this was forest and everything was free" (inspired by Crimethinc.)

The wind, which I called my boss, had been an occasional issue in my theatre. A few times, my condoms blew down the busy main street and helpful young children would run after them and gleefully give me back a handful of condoms, sometimes thinking that they were recovering sweets. Their parents were rarely impressed.

After a few weeks, I think some tourists complained about me. I enjoyed incorporating any possible slapstick into my silent theatre. But perhaps making a sign that read "Do not step on signs. Fine ten euros", and then sliding it underneath the feet of unsuspecting tourists as they walked up the steps past me, was not my greatest idea. I had not endangered anybody, but many average people live in constant fear of everything. People may have complained merely due to the content of some of my signs. Every day, some people looked at me like they might attack me. I had always felt, whilst working the streets, that if people did not look at me like they wanted to kill me, then I was not doing good work.

As the glorious Lisbon summer really heated up and the tourists flooded the city, the police, for whatever reason, finally decided that they had had enough of my cardboard shenanigans. They closed TWAT's theatre down. I simply moved around to the back of the elevator shaft. This meant that I lost my main captive audience, the hundred or so people shuffling along slowly. At the back of the lift, my audience was the tail-end of the queue and passing punters. Some would stop to read all of my signs and chat with me. Some bought me new sets of pens with many colours so I could make my signs really colourful.

My takings were drastically reduced in my new theatre, which became more of a gallery on an entirely flat surface. However, the wind was much more of an issue, and sometimes my whole performance would consist of playfully trying, against the wind's desires, just to get all of my thirty signs standing up at the same time and not blowing away completely.

I was deeply touched when a Portuguese mother and her two daughters, aged about ten and twelve, asked if they could buy two signs, one for each little girl. I told them they had to name their price, and then the girls took ages choosing very carefully which sign they each preferred. The youngest chose "Bob Marley...", and the older chose "the only constant is change". I felt flattered. They were obviously very poor, and they were so pleased with their signs. It did not matter how much money

they gave me. It never did. Money is not in the same dimension as being rendered speechless by children.

Another day, a young man gently asked me if he could make a sign. I had recently been bought a big set of pens and always had spare cardboard, so replied sure. He went to work, and I left him to it. After some time, I was intrigued as to what he would write. What he wrote touched me deeply and made me belly laugh at the same time. In many colours he had written, "I am the only elevator around here". I thanked him and used his sign often, propped up against the enormous elevator shaft.

My last story about signs in Portugal happened when a young Swiss woman stepped up to me and asked how much my signs were. I told her that, if she wanted to buy one, then she had to tell me how much it was. For "You are a universe" she paid me twenty euros! The most I ever received for a sign.

In the summer, two young street kids moved into our squat in the room next to me. That meant that I was not the only person on the floor that any intruders could walk straight into. Zwal and his girlfriend had a big dog, which also helped us all feel safer. There were no other dogs in the house. Zwal spoke the most English in the house, and we got on well. The guys were very poor and very generous. They shared the end of their weed with me frequently, always living for the day.

The new guys were punky streetwise squatters, and I had no doubt about their class background. They were survivors, and we enjoyed hanging out together at home and out on the streets. They came to life on the streets, where they turned into a two-person spontaneous circus, winging it all the way. It was when hanging out with Zwal and co that I witnessed my first beggar 'fishing' for money.

A man was sitting on a busy city-centre street, with a woven basket hanging off the end of his wooden walking stick. He was extending it out into the passing shoppers and calling them all angel, whilst asking for money in a strong Mancunian accent. Under his bright blond, floppy hair, he had piercing blue eyes, and in his own way he had angelic qualities. His energy really caught my attention, and when he heard me speak to Zwal he shouted with delight "Scouser! Can you help me open these bottles of wine? I've been trying for three days!" I knew that he was serious. Steve really had been trying to open three bottles of wine for three long days.

He told me that he had been invited to a wedding in the countryside, outside Lisbon, that had happened five days previously. He had gotten utterly wasted at the wedding, which had lasted for two days, and then he had spent three days trying to get back to Lisbon. Three days to cover not such a large distance had not bothered Steve at all. But three days of not being able to open any of his wine had left him absolutely desperate.

I wanted to help him and felt sure that I could, then a waiter from a nearby restaurant stepped outside to smoke a cigarette. "Get him to do it for me! Please, scouse!" Steve begged. I got the waiter to open all three bottles of wine, and Steve and I started drinking together on the street close to the train station. We would not stop for the next two weeks.

Sintra is only thirty minutes' train ride from central Lisbon. I had heard that it was a stunningly beautiful place and that there were permaculture projects located there. We got enough money for two train tickets, and Steve took me off to show me where he lived. I was drunk by the time we arrived in Sintra, and it was dark. Steve took me straight to the best bar in town, where we met his wild crew, Dougie and his young Portuguese girlfriend named Marney. Dougie was a crazy Glaswegian alcoholic, and Marney was very sweet. I wondered how she had ended up with two

middle-aged chaos merchants. I never found out, but she obviously loved Dougie and was very patient with him. We all got on like a house on fire.

After a few beers in the sleazy little bar, we all stumbled back to their farm. Situated on the outskirts of the small town of Sintra, there was an abandoned-looking, old farmhouse with extremely overgrown land surrounding it. I could not appreciate its full beauty in the dark. The guys took me inside, lit a big open fire and cooked us all food.

Next morning in glorious sunlight, I saw the derelict paradise that my new pals called home. The buildings and land were spectacular. Some of the trees looked old enough to have had dinosaurs urinate on them. There were the biggest palm trees that I had ever had the good fortune to witness and laze under. When I asked the guys how they came to live, there they smiled cunningly.

Dougie explained the situation. The owner was in jail a long way away, for shooting a guy in the neck. He told me that he was a nice guy as long as you did not get on the wrong side of him. The owner, in his wisdom, had recognised that Dougie, Steve and Marney were the wildest folk in Sintra, and he had offered the property to them to look after in the knowledge that nobody else would be mad enough to go there, whilst they occupied the place. They explained that the only crucial condition had been not to dig anywhere in the surrounding grounds. Then they said I could stay for as long as I wanted. Much as I loved gardening, I was not going to risk being shot in the neck. But it was hard not to wonder just what was buried there. Treasure, or bodies?

I came to love all of those guys and recognised that Steve struggled a bit with schizophrenia and that Dougie also seemed to have it in a milder form. Like some of my other schizophrenic friends, they had no interest in the medication on offer from the men in white. They self-medicated with heavy alcohol consumption instead. Every day that they survived was another little victory.

Dougie told me a little about his childhood on some of Glasgow's meanest streets. He had been surrounded by heroin from a young age and had started using the gear early. He described how, by seventeen years of age, he and his pals had used to shoot up in stereo. That meant using a needle in each arm at the same time.

We ate breakfast in the farm, drank some wine and headed out onto the streets of touristic Sintra, to earn more money and buy more cheap wine. I explored Sintra's beautiful mountain and forest, and the guys showed me their favourite places to drink, smoke and 'work'. We were rarely troubled by the police or anyone else. Sleepy little Sintra had its own lawless wild bunch. Completely out of control, but ultimately darlings of the streets. In our own individual crazy ways, we loved the street life; Dougie and Steve played guitar, whilst Marney and I made percussion, and she sometimes sang. We met some interesting folk who were brave enough to speak to us, and life was good. Nothing else mattered.

One day as we played on the High Street, we found ourselves faced by a large group of Korean tourists, maybe thirty-plus in total. They stared at us from across the street, looking absolutely amazed. Appearing more like bland conformists than rebels in their average tourist clothing, we all sensed immediately that they loved us.

One of them crossed the High Street to speak with us. He asked if it would be OK for them to take photos of us all doing our thing. We agreed no problem. They smiled huge smiles in return and took some pictures. Then the original guy asked if he could get a picture with me, to which I agreed. We put our arms around each other's shoulders, and he seemed immensely proud to get that photograph. I imagined that they were all rebels at heart, and they respected our absolute rejection of all authority and norms. And they loved us for it.

Dougie could play guitar and sing really well when he wanted to. As we sat inebriated on our favourite High Street pitch one afternoon, with the street bustling with tourists and locals, he launched into my favourite song by John Lennon, 'Working Class Hero'. Dougie played and sang the spine-tingling song better than anyone else I had ever heard try. It is a song that takes no prisoners, and when Dougie gave his heart and soul to his performance it seemed perfect. The perfect song in the perfect moment. Sintra froze in time. The hairs all over my body stood on end. It felt as though the whole of Sintra knew what was being sung, and why. My heart nearly burst out of my chest.

Steve was an avid recycler unable, to pass a bin without exploring inside. He did not walk very easily, after an incident that had resulted in him having his leg run over by a small truck. On purpose. He had upset some local wanna-be gangstas and, as a result, they had driven over his leg! Anyway, he was a very quirky character, always dressing up in unusual clothes that he had recycled. Although he had the energy of an angel, which turned out to be how he addressed everybody that he spoke to, he could certainly become difficult after too much alcohol. So, he did not live at the farm full-time after many fights with Dougie, but actually had his own secret hideaway.

One night after I had earned his complete trust, he took me to his home in the woods. In an overgrown field on the edge of town, he had set up camp, with the owner's reluctant agreement. He had been told that he was the only person allowed to live there, and he took a risk taking me to stay for a while. He had made a nice bedroom, with a lovely open but covered kitchen area. I only stayed one night in the end, because I would have been gutted had my presence brought him any difficulties with the land-owner.

Sintra had a nice little cafe where they actually gave free food to the homeless and destitute on a daily basis. I had never heard of such generosity before and was eager to go. One afternoon, I went and found all the staff to be punky-looking, with many tattoos and piercings. I could not believe my luck. I was alone the first time, and I enjoyed the soup and coffee.

The next time I went, I was treated like shit. I was with my crazy gang, and it was obvious that they were not welcome at the café, which was mostly filled with tourists. Every time I went subsequently, I purposefully went alone. But it was too late. I was associated with the wild bunch, and it felt like some of the staff hated us. After terrorising the town for a while, I felt like the cafe could possibly lose all its custom and close, just because our gang lived in Sintra in our own ungovernable way.

Two weeks flew by, and then the shit hit the fan. We were doing our thing on the streets when four American women stopped and asked us where they could buy some marijuana. Dougie told them that he could sell them some, and at that moment a Portuguese guy stopped, after hearing the girls' request. As Dougie went into his backpack for herbs, the Portuguese guy tried to muscle in and sell his weed to the Americans. Within seconds, the Portuguese guy was waving a knife at Dougie, and Dougie was shouting that he was getting his knife out from his bag.

The girls decided that there were safer ways of buying weed and ran away screaming. We heard distant police sirens, and the guy with the knife also ran away. Another Portuguese guy who had witnessed the incident came over to inform us that the guy with the knife had only just been released from prison after a long time inside, for killing a cop. We decided it was time to leave the high street for the day. I decided it was time to leave Sintra for good.

It was so hard saying goodbye to my dysfunctional Sintra family. I felt for Marney, so much. Dougie could be difficult for her at times, but she could not leave him. And Steve really was an

angel. Just before I left, we met some people fresh from the Rainbow Gathering. Steve took us all to a lovely garden to smoke a few spliffs. Within minutes, the rainbow people were discussing how Steve and I were actually angels, but they informed us, in their wisdom, we were dark angels. Steve and I could live with that.

I left Sintra absolutely penniless and had to beg for three euros outside the train station to pay for the ticket fare home. When I got back to the Lisbon squat, all was as before. The last three weeks in our squat were strange because our building was on its count-down to a grossly premature ending. One Monday morning at eleven am, several contractors broke the front door lock, which none of us had a key to, and entered the building with the police. The police were actually OK, but the contractors looked scared, yet ready to kill us if necessary.

We were told to leave, so we gathered our belongings and left through the front door. The contractors put a new lock on the door that was never used and left with the police. We all stored our few belongings in the bushes in the park at the back of the house, near to our drawbridge entrance, which had been left intact. In their wisdom, the authorities had left our entrance way just as normal, so we could still get in and out without any problem.

Sometimes, differences between countries, not necessarily far apart, can be glaringly obvious. If the eviction I just described in Portugal had have happened in England. the contractors and police would have been racing each other to destroy our means of entry into the building. They would have, at the very least, thrown our drawbridge down, out of reach. More likely, they would have taken it away and sealed the open doorway into the squat. In Portugal, one policeman seemed very concerned that I had forgotten a pair of shoes. It took a while to explain to him that I had not forgotten them, but that they were in fact broken.

Every night for the following week, seven of us got our stuff out of the bushes in the park and re-entered the squat, to sleep inside. Each morning, we put all of our belongings back into the bushes in the park. Then, exactly one week later, again at eleven am on Monday, police and contractors entered the building through the front door, using their new key. The second time we were evicted, the police were a little aggressive, and the contractors looked scared of us.

Exactly the same thing happened on our next eviction. It seemed like an exercise in futility, but the contractors put another new lock on the unused front door and left our rear entrance untouched. My first Portuguese eviction became surreal on week two. Would you believe that the same thing happened again the following week? It did.

But when our eviction had stretched to three long weeks, something more sinister happened. Two huge demolition vehicles appeared and were parked at either side of our beautiful old home. Then, we really felt threatened. Most of the residents moved out, to sleep in the park. It was summer and warm enough. But Roni and I decided that we would stay until the bitter end.

Perhaps stupidly, Roni and I slept in the building for another two nights. It certainly went through my mind that I was in Portugal and not England, and that I might have woken up being buried alive in rubble, and no one would have ever known how or where I had died. But Roni and I lived to tell the tale, after sleeping in the squat on those Monday and Tuesday nights.

On the Wednesday, I was relaxing in central Lisbon's main park after work, when I sensed that someone was very close to me. I sat up and opened my eyes, to see a beautiful, young woman sat on her blanket, which was almost on my feet. She patted the blanket next to her, motioning me to join her, so I did. Her energy was extremely magnetic.

In her slow, sultry, Spanish accent, she told me that her name was Carmen. I found her very attractive, and she was fascinated by my alternative beliefs and lifestyle. We chatted easily, for hours. She was into photography and took photos of my signs. As I had never taken a single photo of one squat that I had lived in, I asked Carmen if she would be interested in taking any shots of the house. She was, so we agreed to meet that evening, after she finished work.

Upon arrival at our squat, as the sun was slowly setting in the background, we were greeted by a pile of rubble that was in excess of two stories high! Carmen almost burst into tears. Although I had fully explained our predicament to her, I guess neither of us were really prepared for what we saw. I did my best to reassure her that at least our three weeks in limbo were over and we then knew where we all stood. Homeless.

That did not do much to reassure her, and then the alcoholic couple from the house appeared, very drunk. They burst into tears, and I really struggled not to cry, for a magnificent, old building in perfectly fine structural and cosmetic order had been prematurely destroyed. We had had some of the best views in Lisbon, from the edge of the city out to the green mountains beyond. The area was being gentrified. It was far too valuable to allow poor people to live there, rent free.

The mountain of rubble that had been home to seven desperate people stood to the ceiling height of the second floor. By a bizarre twist of demolition fate, my double glass doors were stood exactly in their usual position. The only thing in the entire building that had not moved. The rubble backed up behind the doors had supported them perfectly in place, leaving them looking like they still worked.

I joked with Carmen, saying that we could have opened my doors and all of the rubble would have just poured out, comedy style. She could not laugh, but we got photos of my doors and what was our house. Attempting to lighten the mood, we crossed the street to a field full of sunflowers, which were in full bloom. We frolicked in the field and got some nice pictures.

I enjoyed hanging out with Carmen whenever possible. She was splitting up with her boyfriend, and I felt as though I was falling in love, when I received some devastating news from Liverpool. One of my dearest friends, lovingly known as Stanarchist, had passed away. I knew I had to go to his funeral, and, after sleeping rough in the park, Carmen kindly let me spend my last night in Lisbon at her place.

After cooking us some good food, we drank some wine, and I found it difficult to keep my hands off her. The next morning, I needed to leave early for one last TWAT performance. I had to earn the money for the bus fare to the airport. Under pressure, I made twice what I needed in the time that I had, bought some nice hashish, smoked a phat last spliff and rode the bus to the airport.

Stan had reached the ripe old age of eighty-six. He had told me many stories of his war-time experiences as a child. Most importantly, Stan had been a vocal anarchist for decades and was an anti-hero celebrity on Liverpool's underground. He was also the longest-running BBC Radio Merseyside DJ, who had created and broadcast his show 'Folk Scene' for more than forty years. I had hoped that he would outlive me and had agonising anxieties about not being there for him at the end. But, he knew, as well as I did, that Liverpool had been killing me, and my international life had been a life-saver for me.

The previous funeral that I had not attended, my dad's, had gone horribly wrong, even though I was not there. I had no suspicions that anything could go wrong at the funeral of Stanarchist. How wrong I was. Flying into Liverpool had never excited me, but I would see everyone I knew at the funeral of the much-loved man. Or so I thought.

A mutual friend Anna, in Liverpool, had been communicating with me about the ceremony. Anna and I had been Stan's closest friends, over many years. I was the only person who had ever been in Stan's home, to my knowledge. And I know I had the only spare key to Stan's house, where I slept occasionally. I wanted to recycle his many years' worth of hoarded stuff and clean up, but he would never let me and got angry at such suggestions. Three of the large rooms in his big house were completely unusable, crammed to the ceilings full of things.

For some reason there was a delay before the funeral. I sent several messages requesting the actual details for the ceremony. Stan had previously said to me, "If they ever try and put me in a nursing home, I will get a gun!" He had also told me that he wanted nothing to do with the church when he died. He said that he just wanted to fall into the vegetation in Otterspool woods, before transcending to nature. He had also told me that he wanted his house to go to the two people that he loved. Anna and me. Not his sister or nephew, who he said did not need it. He had, on the rare occasions that he mentioned his two relatives, told me that you choose your friends not your relatives. They were straight, conformists, and he did not like them. Sadly, none of his wishes were kept.

I kept waiting for responses to my requests for details, but to my astonishment none came. Not wanting to push such sensitive matters, I waited, and waited, and waited. I heard of other ceremonies that had been planned for the Sunday and during the week. The funeral was on Saturday, but on Saturday morning I still had no idea where the venue was to be. Saturday came and went. I was terribly upset.

I messaged Anna early on Sunday, and she finally replied. Her message dumbfounded me. She informed me that the funeral had been a small private affair arranged by Stan's nephew, held in a church outside the city. Crushing, she informed me that only Stan's friends who had been in the city before he had died were invited. I was not invited to my dear friend's funeral, because I had been out of the country when he died.

On the Sunday, I went to the celebration of Stan's life that was held in his beloved Palm House in Sefton Park. I cannot describe how difficult it was for me to face Anna, and Stan's nephew. It took all of my strength not to crack in the circumstances. For Stan had made a special trip to visit me when I lived in Wales, twelve hours of public transport, to tell me something that he said he had never told anybody, but he had to tell me. Which he did. A secret that had chewed away at him inside for over sixty years. Then he told me he wanted to give his house to me and Anna, with no fuss.

I had never told Anna that information. I never wanted to think of Stan dying and actually thought that I would die before him. And the opportunity had never arisen. I thought that he would probably have made a will, but certainly would never have asked. That was early September 2012. By that December, he told me that he was beginning to get dementia.

At the Sunday ceremony, when I met Stan's nephew, introduced by Anna, she said something that was entirely unexpected. She steamed right in and told the nephew that Stan had paid for my book to be published. Several years before, I had written a small book called *Man Cry*, which Stan loved, and he had offered to contribute towards the printing cost. He gave me three hundred pounds, because he wanted my book to be 'out there'. Immediately, I realised that the sentence was all Stan's nephew needed to hear. I became absolutely irrelevant at the moment Anna spoke. They all just walked away from me. Anna and I both lost half a house, perhaps one hundred thousand pounds' worth, each!

I had to focus on being positive and strong, knowing that Stan would want me to laugh in the face of other people's bullshit. Luckily, I had a plan for TWAT to play the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

And my life-time mission was unbreakable. As long as there was a world to change, I had a lot of work to try to do, in my own little way.

Chapter 36 The Edinburgh Fringe Festival

Si Bi, vegan cyclist extraordinaire, allowed me to stay at his little studio flat in central Edinburgh, situated near Granny's Green Steps, which became TWAT's theatre for the three-week festival. If it rained, I could pack up and be indoors in a matter of minutes. That August was glorious in Edinburgh. The sunny weather made the thousands of visitors happy and generous. I took to the world-famous festival like a duck to water. The flight of maybe one hundred steps made a great gallery for me, and I actually made two policemen laugh. Granny's Green, adjacent to the steps, was the coolest place in town for the many assorted freaks to picnic, drink, get high and generally hang out.

There were perhaps four hundred events or shows across the city's venues and on the streets. Some were expensive to watch, and some were free of charge. An Alternative Fringe Festival happened concurrently, and some weirdos like me just turned up and did our thing. Fringe of the fringe of the fringe. The punters liked my signs. I made a lot of people laugh, a lot. It was a most enjoyable experience and a pleasure to work. I had lots of 'deep' conversations and also made decent money. One of my signs read, "Let's all get naked and dance." People kept saying to me, "Let's do it." As the weather was so hot and people kept wanting to, I began arranging for a big, naked dance on the steps on the last Friday of the festival. It felt as though the whole city was on a better frequency because the fringe had effectively taken over. As I said, even the police laughed at my shit. I really thought we could do it. But, of course, the weather turned bad, and rain poured for the last weekend.

Wally from Rainbow City was also performing at the Fringe. He was my favourite performer by far. His act was something else. I watched his daily show three times and split my sides laughing every time. Wally was in a league of his own, except perhaps for me, if I say so myself. Although it would be hard to make comparisons, he was way ahead of the game. It showed, and I was sure to tell him so. While he explained to the small crowds why they were all miracles, in a hilarious and fascinating way, they struggled to laugh, whilst I tried to contain my roars.

It was Wally's third Edinburgh Fringe Festival. He had connections and so managed to get us both tickets to what was billed as the top show of the whole three weeks. A collaboration by several artists. We arrived full of anticipation, and I was slightly inebriated. Perfect. I was deeply disappointed by the various artists and actually struggled to laugh. It was an enormous disappointment and I actually felt embarrassed by some of the comedians. What would the late, great, comedian Bill Hicks have thought of it all? "Art must be dangerous! Play from the heart!"

My personal high point came when one guy approached me at work and chatted for a while. He told me that he had paid to see many of the diverse shows that were on offer. He had seen some of the most expensive shows, he said, but he told me I was the funniest thing at the Fringe! I was touched that he said that and felt extremely flattered.

During the festival, I missed an Oi Polloi gig, unfortunately, but I saw John Lydon, the Sex Pistols' singer. And I am certain that he was checking out my signs and looking for me to talk to. But I was hidden deep in Granny's Green bushes, smoking a spliff and taking a pee.

And to add a bizarre twist to the Fringe festival, The Edinburgh Tattoo, a big, military show of strength, happened at the same time. That only affected me for one brief instance. But in one brief instance, I can get into some shit, any place, any time. I know. I have had a lot of practice. So, as I sat on the green having some food one lunch time, a battalion of child-aged-looking, American

soldiers arrived and sat down on the green immediately next to me. Next minute, their large chief was taking a photo of them all. the camera ultimately pointing straight across them all, directly at me. I instantly raised a large middle finger. A nice backdrop, I thought. Immediately, I imagined being dragged off by the armed kids and dumped in a military, secret torture centre, for my public insubordination to the country that wants world domination. I managed to run away from the US military.

I had a wonderful time at the Fringe. The weeks flew by, and I managed to save some money. I decided what to do next. I would head to Barcelona and press the A button for adventure. I had heard amazing stories about the squatting scene in one of the squatting capitals of Europe.

Chapter 37 Barcelona

After landing in the scorching, early September sun in Barcelona, I stood in front of the airport, bewildered. Twenty miles from the city centre and I did not even have a map, never mind speak Catalan. But I was at last in the most famous city of anarchists. I asked the first man who passed if he knew which direction the city centre was in and if I could walk it. He was an unimpressed Scouser, who just scoffed at my questions.

I got the bus and then stood in Placa Catalunya, again, bewildered. I recycled a tourist map from a public bin, bought a cheap carton of wine and headed off in the vague direction of Parque de la Ciutadella, Barcelona's biggest park. It took me some time. It was late at night, and I was pretty drunk when I got there. I found a place to sleep for the night, hidden deep amongst some bushes.

In the early hours of the morning, a young man and his girlfriend came to piss where I was sleeping. He decided to try and rob me but quickly felt sorry for me, as I slept in the pissy mud. They told me that I had chosen the worst place to sleep. It was the homeless toilet, where many went to pee and shit. They shared a spliff with me before leaving.

After a few short hours sleeping, the sun rose and woke me. I saw three children, approximately aged only twelve, ten and eight years old, scouring the floor vigorously. I wondered what they had lost, thinking that it must have been something important. Why else would they be in the park at six am? They saw me watching them, and, as I smoked, they approached me.

The oldest reminded me of the street-wise kids of Toxteth. He simply looked at my roll-up and asked, "Marijuana?" I was uncomfortable sharing my last tokes with such young kids, but they would not have spoken to me otherwise. The boys were friendly with me and told me that they were homeless and slept in the park every night. They were Algerian and alone, without parents or guardians, in Barcelona. My heart broke for them. Three nights later, they stole everything I owned.

I had a little money but had to work the streets immediately. As I had a full set of nice signs from Edinburgh, I just needed to find a suitable theatre. A set of tourist-drenched steps. Tired from sleeping rough, I decided not to go straight for Barcelona's jugular, as I had in Lisbon. I opted for a side street off The Rambla, unable to find any steps that I liked. From day one, I received hassle from the police. Barcelona proved not to be the street-theatre-friendly place that I had expected it to be.

On my fourth night sleeping on the mean streets of Barcelona, I had my backpack stolen, with everything I owned inside. Wallet, passport, phone etc. I had been slack, sleeping on a highly visible public bench, with my bag, unsecured, on the ground below. I awoke about four am, feeling that my bag had been taken. I went into a massive panic about my stolen passport. Then I saw the three boys from the park, sitting on a bench nearby, gorging on large bags of sweets.

I immediately felt that the boys had stolen my bag and taken it probably to a teenage middle-man, who had paid them perhaps five euros and then sold it to an adult for as much as he could get. Those thoughts calmed me down, and I thought about all the bullshit in the world because of borders and passports. I hated borders and passports. And I felt empathy for the kids.

I would have liked to have seen the adult's face, who purchased my belongings. Perhaps the unhappiest thief in town. My backpack contained about thirty cardboard signs, lots of coloured pens, four hours' worth of writing for TV that I had drafted in Portugal, three stand-up comedy routines and my hand-written contacts book that I had compiled over twenty years.

Losing my writing and contacts book was a heavy blow. I went optimistically to the nearby park, hoping that all of my signs and possibly writing had been thrown away there. No such luck. When I spoke to people about my lost passport and possessions, they told me that I had to report it to the local police or else I would get into trouble. I did not believe that I could get problems for not immediately reporting another bag stolen in Barcelona. Later, I discovered that most new homeless folk in the city had everything stolen in their first week.

It only took a few days before I became friends with a guy called Max, from Hungary. He was a giant of a man, homeless, with the biggest, baddest, black eye I had ever witnessed. His energy was chaotic but sweet. His heart was definitely in the right place, and he wanted to squat an old cinema with me. He said that we could watch movies on the big screens in there. He had been inside and checked that the cinema worked. I imagined just the two of us in a full-size cinema watching films.

We entered the cinema, but squatting it was not feasible for Max and I alone. Then Max just disappeared for a few days. I suspected that he was using heroin. I found him horizontal, lying on his enormous backpack home, wasted and asleep, blocking one of the busiest stretches of The Rambla.

I was so pleased to find him but could not wake him when he looked so deep asleep. I sat on the central island nearby, waiting for him to wake up. Then a woman stopped next to Max and placed a bag for life, full of food and drinks next to him. I burst out laughing. And then she started slapping his face to wake him and show him her kind deed. His face was a picture. I had a perfect view.

Max was surprised to see me. When we looked in the bag of goodies, as well as bread and cheese and crisps and sweets there were also several cans of beer. As we sat drinking the beers, Max informed me that he had met an Irish lad named Mark. Mark had been living in a squat in Santa Coloma but had since left and offered his room to Max. We just needed to jump the train on line one, second-to-last stop, Santa Coloma.

I had never bunked a train in Barcelona, but Max said it was easy and everyone did it, even lots of Catalan folk. One afternoon, on a packed line one, I nervously jumped the train. Thirty minutes later, we walked up and out onto the streets of Santa Coloma. Max knew the name of the street we were looking for and asked the first people we saw if they knew where the nearest squat was. They did, informing us that it was only minutes away around the corner.

Max knew it was the right house because it had a painting on the wall the same as Irish Mark's tattoo. There was no response to our knocks on the front door and our shouts found no response except from the neighbours, some of whom stared at us in disbelief as if to say, "Please, not more of them." We were exhausted, and Max fell asleep on a bed he made on the pavement outside the house. I fell asleep on the adjacent bench.

We were both sound asleep when a big black bear of a dog started barking right beside us. I woke to see a mad-looking, older, punk guy with a Mohican and a black leather jacket covered in anarcho punk patches and badges grinning at me. He was Sherpa the dog's owner, and his name was Sven. His pal was barely twenty but looked very serious and like he had already experienced much in life. His name was Dima. They obviously lived in the squat.

Max slowly came to life and tried to explain that Mark had offered his room to him. Dima calmly said we could talk upstairs, and we entered the terraced house which was situated in an average Spanish suburban street. He simply pushed the front door, which had been left open all along. Not that I would have entered. You could see partially into the ground floor, as it had a door which did not fully close, behind metal bars. The ground floor was also part of the squat.

Upstairs, the house had a living room, which had a small south-facing balcony, a kitchen and two bedrooms. Sven was warm and welcoming. Dima was reserved. Sven told me that he was forty-five years old, and he had been a punk since fifteen. He had had his mohawk, which he called cresta, since eighteen years of age, when he had worked with 'special needs' people. He said that they were special people.

I recognised several big attributes in Sven. He obviously had a heart of gold, combined with an absolute disrespect for authority. He was passionately anti-fascist and anti-sexist and would reprimand anyone in in our squat which we called Casa Manana or beyond if they were in any way disrespectful to women or people 'less fortunate' than themselves. By normal civilised standards, Sven was mad as fuck. We got on well instantly.

Sven's English was fluent, and he told me proudly that he had lived in Barca for the previous twelve years without any documents. Followed by a great sentence. He explained to me how having my passport stolen was an advantage in Barcelona. Basically, get out of jail free if you ever got stopped by the police on the streets. Whenever the police checked you and found out you had no documents, they simply told you to go away!

Dima said, "Cause no shit and you can both move in." He looked like he might tear one's head off in an instant if they did cause any shit in his home. Even at his young age, he had already lost friends to war and death. He did not want to be forced to fight, and possibly die, so he had run away from army conscription in his home country.

There was a couch and some space in the living room, where Max and I slept for our first night. The next morning, we met Alex who was at that time the only other resident and good pals with Dima. They worked together making bubbles on the streets, and it was so nice to see Dima not only laugh a lot, once he trusted you, but also give a real hearty belly laugh. And in Casa Manana we all laughed a lot.

When we asked about Irish Mark, Sven frowned and recited a tale of an unbelievable quantity of piss-filled plastic bottles filling Mark's bedroom in that early summer when they had moved in. Sven had concocted a cunning plan. He bought several bags of speed, to both bribe and fuel Dima and Alex's bottle clean-up operation!

I had never liked the idea of labels or wearing uniforms or clothes to suit any kind of standardized dress code or belief system so, when Sven said to me one day that I needed to dress more punk, I could not help bursting out with laughter. He was old enough to know better. I had to remind him that, as far as I was aware, the first wave of punk, and subsequent waves – indeed punk – itself was supposed to be about individuality and not conforming. I accidentally out-punked the punks and continued wearing whatever I felt like.

Max got itchy feet and left after only a few days. Sven and I spent all day, every day, together for my two-week introduction to squat life, Barcelona style. He was my perfect guide, and I could not believe my luck meeting and hanging out with him. His attitude towards Casa Manana was that, if we met anyone new in Barca sleeping rough, then as long as we had a little space and they seemed OK, it was pretty much an open house.

Dima was as playful as a child, and when we met young Svenson, an Estonian mini-me version of German Sven, we all had such a great time together. The energy in Casa Manana was always positive and happy. We co-operated well with money and beer and recycled an abundance of food. Dima was strong and happy to carry large bags of food home from the city centre. We all bunked the train to the city centre daily, often hooking up with other punk squatters from Santa Coloma's numerous squats.

We had many visitors, daily, to Casa Manana. People who lived in neighbouring squats, squatters from further afield in Barcelona, and friends of all of those folks. Some people liked to hang out at our place because we had no wanna-be leaders and therefore no power games. Sven and I were against macho behaviour for sure. We almost had a healing and therapeutic environment compared with some of the squats that were plagued by hierarchies and bullies.

There seemed to be a constant influx of mostly German punks, who went to Barcelona to open and live in new squats. They were impressive. Sadly, for me, without speaking Catalan, I was not getting into the Catalan squats. Some of them were huge and had been okupas, the Catalan and Spanish word for squats, for twenty and even thirty years. But that was not to say it was easy to open new buildings. Douglas, an American guy, described his eight attempts before finding their long-term home. Another French guy described getting into a place with large grounds. When his crew had walked in the gardens, they were greeted and chased by ten gypsies with machetes!

Before I had moved into Santa Coloma, there had been twelve squats all within minutes of each other. But a spate of evictions had left only eight okupas remaining. Each housed from six to maybe twenty occupants. After two hard weeks on the streets, I was elated after discovering and being wholeheartedly accepted into the Barcelona squat scene. It took some time to believe that all of our travel was free, on both the metro and over-ground trains. Every cell in my body felt alive.

Barcelona's numerous forces of law and order were unimpressed with my attempts to set up TWAT. I was reduced to using just a few signs. I realised that I could sit all day long, until my back hurt like hell, and not make much money, and possibly get moved six times by the police. Or, I could work just two or three hours at night and sometimes make good money. For five euros, I could get a gram of Cannabis Club quality herbs from our local squat dealer. One fifty bought a six-pack of Día beer.

I decided I had to focus my work at Temple Bar, the busiest Irish pub in Barcelona, near the busiest corner of The Rambla, where two junk food outlets brought many tourists. My many hours spent at Temple Bar, often at weekends, provided some hilarious memories but also blatant discrimination from a giant bouncer, which took me back to the bad old days of my childhood, when pubs could put signs on their doors stating, "No Irish. No blacks. No dogs."

On a daily basis, Sven and I would potentially meet someone who had just fallen into Barcelona. It is apparently a cheap place to get to from all over Europe. And of course, if you had no money, you could hitch. A Russian punk friend, Philthy Phil, had hitchhiked five thousand kilometres. I did not ask how long it took him. Some people looked for newly arrived junkies so that they could show

them the way to the appropriate dealers and get a share. Tourists were preferred because, they were usually wealthy enough to happily pay tourist rates for their drugs.

Sven did not want anyone using needles in Casa Manana, but some people smoked heroin. One night he brought a Canadian heroin user back to our house. Sven and I had our bedrooms downstairs at the time and had our own living room. I heard them using needles and looked down on them both. The next morning, I chatted with the Canadian guy. He discussed patriarchy with me for some time and seemed like a lovely guy. I felt like a bit of a drug snob. And the guy was the only person I ever met aside from Sven to consider, discuss and address patriarchy.

Sven introduced us all to Vito, his Catalan, anarcho punk pal of similar age. Sven had met Vito twelve years before, when he had spoken no Catalan or Spanish. They had lived with three hundred other assorted loonies on a large city-centre land squat. Vito was short and stocky and, proudly, a lifelong anarchist. He showed me a TV show about the Spanish Civil War, which covered the part played by the millions of anarchists. I was very touched. Vito knew that I understood, and hugely respected, Spain's brave struggle for liberty and dignity, for anarchism.

Vito moved into our house. He had some mental health problems, which Sven had known all about since living with him previously. We tried to deal with them and help him out as much as we could. Vito fitted right in with the crazy-but-caring vibe of our house. Vito and Sven decided to take me to visit their other friend, Sergio, who had also lived with them at the land squat.

Before we went to Sergio's, I had been eager to visit the area of Barcelona called Gracia. Gracia was renowned for being alternative, artistic and a squat stronghold. I stepped out of the metro there and looked into the first bin that I saw. Boom. A large, almost full, very expensive-looking bottle of gin. Gracia, Gracia, I thought. Armed with the perfect gift to spend an afternoon with three crazy old punks.

The moment I met and looked into Sergio's eyes, I felt the deep soul of a true rebel. Sergio was the same age as Sven and Vito and also a lifelong anarchist punk. The guys told me how their land squat had been opposite a huge, fancy, city-centre development, where every morning Sergio would cross the street and blatantly take a shit, for all the shoppers, construction staff, squatters and locals to see. After we finished the gin, he told me I should learn Catalan.

I only have one bad, awful, memory from Casa Manana. I witnessed the detailed build-up to Sven being assaulted inside our home. I was downstairs at the time he was attacked. Too scared to go up and try to help him, I cowered alone as my dear friend was beaten. He told me later that the guy had been hitting him relentlessly with a one-litre glass beer bottle. The bottle would not smash. Sven had been sat in a chair, defending his head with one arm and holding Sherpa back with the other. The attacker threatened to kill Sherpa if Sven let him loose.

It had felt as though Casa Manana could never end. Then Svenson moved in and cleaned his room, to discover a long-buried piece of paper that changed everything. It bore the devastating news that we had only a few short days before the house was to be legally evicted. Mark had buried the news and not told anyone. Perhaps not able to face such news.

At the same time, Vito managed to fix up our electrical system, which had never worked during the squat's lifetime. Up until that point, some neighbours had been very friendly, and some had just tolerated us. Of course, there are often people not too far away who would prefer all squatters dead. For four long days, our last in Casa Manana, the guys had played music so loud that all of the neighbours turned against us and were happy to see us booted out.

We had played Rock FM non-stop for four days. I never wanted to hear that cheesy station ever again. As we were thrown out, the neighbours stood in the street, arms folded, staring at us all. As I experienced my first Catalan eviction, I came to terms with the fact that none of us had any back-up plan. We were all back on the streets. At least Sven had a lot of experience. We had to rely on it.

It was a different world entirely to sleep on the streets with a bunch of wild friends and their dogs. It felt safe and like the city was ours. We could sleep wherever we fell. Sven knew many places, and we all continued to laugh our arses off in the face of adversity. We did 'luxury' rough sleeping. At that time, we became friends with a homeless Polish crew. I came to know and love those guys, too.

There are several homeless hot spots for hanging out and recycling food, in Barcelona. Like the biblioteque (library), the homeless noodle restaurant, the market, the luxury doughnut shop, and Parque Ciutadella, to name a few. At two pm daily, we could pick and mix enough delicious hot noodles to feed up to ten people, on The Rambla. We used to just show our faces at the door of the fanciest doughnut shop at ten to nine each night, and ten minutes later, at closing time, they brought out one or two bags full of outrageously expensive doughnuts for us.

I can never sleep well on the streets and felt a little jealous when Sven was offered a tree house at his friend's squat in Floresta, in the mountains. Sven's friend had actually built the tree house for Sven ten years previously, when he had originally squatted his adjacent house. The house had been a ruin, but Sven's pal had done an incredible job and made his home spectacularly beautiful. His girlfriend was a refugee lawyer.

Svenson moved into Casa Cuerva, which had many Estonians and Lithuanians residing there at the time. I decided that I wanted to try and be near nature, as much as was possible in that huge city. Barca had nine miles of river which passed through Santa Coloma, and I found a perfect spot to live, on the river bank. Sharing with one large rat was OK. She was there first.

My first job was to amass quantities of cardboard in as large sheets as possible. Easily collectible from the huge quantities put into the recycling containers nearby. I laid it all out like carpet, three or four layers deep, under the strange illusion that the rat would not walk on my carpet.

One day I felt an intuitive urge to jump the train on line one all the way across Barcelona to its west-side terminal. Because I could. Stepping out onto the unknown streets, I felt a little uncomfortable. I paused to try to feel intuitively which direction felt best to walk in. One felt good, so I walked around a corner, and, twenty metres in front of me, there was a clothes recycling skip. Jammed into the front but too big to fit in, there was a brand-new-looking double duvet. The smell test confirmed laundry fresh. Just what I needed for my new home. I got back onto the metro, seriously happy as the nights were becoming winter cold and I only had a flimsy summer sleeping bag.

I had a large road bridge above, sheltering me from the rain, and I was tucked into a space concealed from the wind. Occasionally at nights, teenagers would hang out in the space, smoking weed, drinking cerveca and making out. They had no idea that I lived there, as I had a good place to stash my cardboard and duvet behind the bridge. Usually they would leave by ten pm, but sometimes I just had to wait and enjoy watching the many resident pipistrelle bats acrobatically feasting.

Sven had introduced me to some of Santa Coloma's other squats, and we were all friends with the good folks at Casa Cuerva, Casa Piano and a few others that I forget the names of. Just across the river, heading towards the beach, was a big squat named Pula Vida (Dick Life), which had a reputation for great free parties which I was eager to go experience.

Outside the front door of Pula Vida, there was a big, military vehicle parked up. Like a modern hybrid between a jeep and a tank. Exodus in Luton had a similar vehicle in the 1990s. When I finally walked in, my chin hit the floor. We were eager and early, and only a few people had arrived, so I could see the full size of the place. You could, and they often did, squeeze in three hundred revellers. The sound system was better than many clubs and gig venues that I had previously experienced, and a 'chilling' area was kitted out with many huge and comfortable-looking couches.

The squat filled up quickly, and if people could they paid donations upon entry. Live punk bands played, and it became difficult to move. Luckily, I had claimed a comfy chair and ended up falling asleep in it until the next morning. All my pals were asleep on chairs around me, and the space was empty when we woke up. I could see that the sun had risen outside and started hearing and seeing some of the sixty-odd people who lived upstairs. They were used to finding people in their home the day after parties.

The rat had been sharing her riverbank with me. I did not really want to share at that time but had no choice. I lamely continued to expand my cardboard-carpeted area, in the hope that she would not want to walk on it. For several nights, I jumped awake as she scuttled and slid and scratched her claws on my carpet. But I really jumped awake the night that I felt the base of one of my dreadlocks being mildly tugged upon. The rat was nibbling on my dread! You know you have achieved success in life when a rat is eating your fucking hair.

After living on the riverbank for one month, I was awoken one morning by two cops standing over me. They simply asked me one question: did I live there? I replied yes, without getting out of bed. They shook their heads in disbelief and then walked away. I went to the centre to do my thing and returned at around seven pm. It was raining a lot, which was unusual for Barcelona.

I decided to go and hang out at one of the nearby squats for an hour or two. When I returned to my riverbank bed, it was under seventy centimetres of water and rising rapidly. The weather was the worst I had seen, probably the worst storm of that year. I could not help thinking that the two cops earlier that day must have known a big storm was coming, but they did not tell me. I remembered Amy explaining how just a few lungfuls of smoky air in a fire can kill you. I pondered whether a few lungfuls of water could have killed me, had I been drunk and deeply asleep.

My home was flooded. I had not lost any of my bedding as, thankfully, I had not laid it out early. I went to Casa Piano. I really liked the people who lived and hung out there, and I loved their south-facing garden. A luxury for squats in central Barcelona. Luckily for me, my Spanish friend Karen was at Casa Piano when I arrived that night. I also met Nata for the first time. Nata, like Karen, was an extremely strong and respected woman. Both were anarcho punks, highly intelligent and artistic.

There was a small room empty at Casa Piano, which none of the men had mentioned to me. It had been occupied by an English guy, who was supposed to be returning, at some point. Nata and Karen held the utmost respect from all of the men that knew them. Nata basically told the guys that I was moving into the small empty room, at least whilst it remained otherwise vacant. Karen agreed and told the guys so. Job done. I was in my second Barcelona squat, thanks to two of the most impressive women that I had ever met.

Casa Piano was home to Justus, Horsti, Max, Philthy Phil and Claudio, German and Russian punks, an Italian one-man circus, and me. It was a nice, big, old house with a huge and well-stocked kitchen. The kitchen ceiling was collapsing and supported by acro props, but it was nothing major. The guys were mostly in their twenties and liked to play non-stop, dirty, punk rock music, on the house stereo. Phil played his bass guitar, practising the same stuff over and over. He was a very

funny guy. I might have been driven crazy by the relentless punk music, had Claudio not played a variety of interesting tunes.

Justus and Horsti were heavy drinkers, and heavy doers. Everyone in Casa Piano drank a lot and recycled a lot of food. Justus and Horsti loved to cook, so I washed a lot of dishes. We had two tall fridge-freezers that were always bursting with food. When Max left, another German punk named Lucky moved in. He was an incredible food recycler and could provide ninety percent of the food needed for six people alone. He simply said that he was anti-capitalist and loved recycling. He would go out on missions three or four times a day, including at one and three am for pizza, fried chicken and burgers.

Nat, Karen, Justus and Horsti were phenomenal human beings. As impressive as any I was ever lucky enough to meet. Their individual intelligence and dedication blew my mind. I would have died for each of them, or with them, in an instant, without a thought, with a smile on my face, knowing that I had died with dreamers, anarchist warriors.

I had entered Barcelona full of hope that all of the squatters would be practising anti-hierarchical behaviour. I hoped to see equality in action and not be subjected to violent words or actions. Sven's assault had opened my eyes to the realities of the international squatting scene in Barcelona. I hoped that the Catalan squatting scene had learned from the civil war. Before I had arrived in Barcelona, I had heard one story of a Catalan squat where all of the women had decided to throw out all of the men, for not pulling their weight!

As I became disheartened with more tyrants and sycophants, I decided on one drunken night to voice some of my feelings. I was alone in the house, and I wrote some messages on the wall, like "has anyone seen an anarchist?" On the front door in big letters, I wrote "boring". The next morning, Sam, the bourgeois English guy whose room I was in, came around from his new squat with his English side-kick. I knew word had spread quickly about my actions and I was being scrutinised for possible insubordination amongst the punks, which I found hilarious.

After a while, Justus and Horsti said to me that I was liked in the house and I could become a permanent resident if I wanted. I thanked them and said yes please. It was nice to feel a little more security. Two days later, I had the bad fortune to meet a Hungarian woman, whose name I forget. She was a punk with some tyrannical attitude. When we met, she walked into my home and asked immediately who I was. Then she said casually, "You need to leave in one week!" I was shocked and looked to the men for support. I got none. She had been amongst the small crew that had opened Casa Piano eighteen months previously. Nobody had seen or heard from her for the preceding six months. I left that night.

I spent a lot of time on the streets of central Barcelona, usually around The Rambla, and hung out a lot with the homeless Polish crew. Chris was ten years older than his pals, who were all early twenties. He spoke excellent English after living in Leeds for ten years. They drank a lot of vodka. One lunch time, after the homeless noodle restaurant, I went to the market. Chris, the sanest of the crew, shocked the life out of me. Whilst surrounded by tourists eating their lunch, Chris had a diy fishing rod, a length of bamboo with a long string on the end. On the end of the string, was tied a pigeon. I asked him why he had a pigeon on a rope? He replied that Matteo had been bored that morning and so he had been catching pigeons. He caught five so they put one on a rope. I told Chris that he had to release the bird immediately, so he did.

We all spent a lot of time hanging out in the gardens at the biblioteque. I became very friendly with Tony, a guy from Gambia, and his second polygamous wife, although she was not allowed more than one husband, who was from Gabon. When I told them about my estranged daughter, Tony told

me that, in some African countries, if a couple were unable to have children, then another mother would often happily give them one of her babies.

Martin and Dima told me that they had opened an amazing squat on the river-side near to Santa Coloma. The Windmill had been a venue for weddings and celebrations, with a large restaurant and huge, fully equipped kitchen. Outside, the entrance yard, containing some great artistic graffiti, led into a larger courtyard, half of which was roofed. Perfect for gigs etc. The police had been and registered The Windmill as a squat. Lucky and I moved in with them and got stuck into cleaning up a huge amount of rubble and trash. It was not long before we held our first 'cafeta', or benefit gig night.

We had live bands, and members of a vegan squat prepared lots of food. The night was a success, apart from several people being scared to even try the vegan food, which many thought was delicious. One guy turned up and punched Lucky. When I asked Lucky about the incident, he said that the guy always punched him. As I looked baffled, Lucky justified it saying that was punk rock. Sven had said something similar when he had been assaulted in Casa Manana. I despaired. With a seriously loud sound system, the guys played non-stop music that I found unbearable. I had to leave.

One guy who I had been told liked to open squats, but preferred to sleep on the streets, was called Raoul. Everyone knew him. He was a real tough guy, a street fighter, who had been in many battles and in and out of prison all his life. Raoul had been telling me that he had been watching a city-centre building and wanted to squat it. We both knew the myth that only Catalans got away with squatting in Barcelona's centre. He told me the building was huge but potentially dangerous structurally and asked me to inspect it, knowing my construction experience. He said I was welcome to live with them if they cracked it. I could not wait to see it.

Raoul, his girlfriend Julia, and a Czech guy named Sam moved into the building one drunken night before I saw it. I followed them shortly afterwards. It was a vast, old, commercial building, minutes from the Cathedral and Rambla. On the frontage, there was a huge and impressive art work, which Raoul told me had been painted by the last occupants, Greek anarchists, four years previously. Each floor could have housed ten people. There were eight floors, so we had one each. The building's structural condition worsened as you went up each floor. On the top storey, the floor had moved more than any other I had witnessed. But there were a substantial number of steel acro props supporting the floor where necessary. My professional opinion was the building was OK, just. We were not in any danger.

Sam was in his first squat. He was gung-ho and had a blind faith that he could switch the electricity on for us. He talked me into helping him in his quest. Perhaps when he started wrapping his hands entirely in Sellotape, I should have called off the debacle. But he was so keen and so sure he could do it. Even though he had absolutely no previous experience or knowledge of such things.

We got up onto the roof of our unnamed squat, and he pointed excitedly at the huge air conditioning machinery on the neighbouring roof. He told me that he just needed to connect to that. I told him that I felt the venture could possibly kill him, to no avail. He climbed onto the neighbouring roof. Whilst he had his head buried deep inside the large air conditioning mechanics, sparks started flying all around his head. Momentarily, I thought he had died and wondered why I had not made a contingency plan. Then he leaned back, grinning at me. He jumped across back onto our roof and we ran inside. There was a light switch for the entire stair-well nearby the door. He flicked it. Never has light looked so magnificent, as we watched it come on throughout the entire building. Sam was elated.

Around that time, I discovered that, in Barcelona, you can go on all kinds of alternative tours. One day, I saw a group of people all crouching to look at some stickers on the street. They were on a stickers tour. But best of all, we discovered that our home was actually on one of those alternative tours. As we all went down to leave our squat one day, from behind our huge sliding doors we heard a guide talking to a bunch of people outside. We could see through a little gap, as we heard the guide explain to twenty people that the building had been squatted by Greek anarchists four years before but had been empty ever since. We all covered our laughter inside.

Sascha was one of the craziest and most popular guys sleeping on Barcelona's streets. We invited him to move in with us, and Dima and Alex also moved in. Sascha was a tall, skinny, German biker who loved to drink and have fun. He claimed he could name the manufacturer of any motorcycle, just by hearing its engine. I believed him. He told me some of his insane biker stories, and I believed them all. He was fresh on the streets, but he was wild and feared no one.

Sascha did not look homeless in his black leather bikers' jacket and relatively smart clothes. He used to walk home to his old bus station bed on a different route each night, searching for recycling treasures. One night, he found a brand-new boxing head guard. The next day, Sascha and all of the Polish crew, except sweet Ariel, had black eyes. I burst out laughing when I met them all together and asked what had happened. Chris just replied that Sascha had drank too much and been an asshole.

Sascha introduced me to his Dutch friend Joey. Joey was one of my favourite characters on the streets. Very tall and skinny, he was actually a trained doctor and opera singer. He had had problems with access to his child, and that had completely broken him. So, he was sleeping in the doorway to one of the biggest opera houses in Barcelona, which seemed both tragically and, in a twisted way, hilariously appropriate.

Joey was permanently sozzled on cheap carton wine and would randomly burst into operatic song. It felt as though he could be heard half-way across the city. He would occasionally do requests, like singing Bob Marley's 'I Shot the Sheriff', in an operatic style. We all adored Joey. And he was fondly regarded by all of The Rambla's prostitutes. When Joey sang, he would often gather crowds, and apparently the prostitutes would glean business from Joey's audience. One day, Joey approached me, looking like a child who had been naughty. He told me that at about four am that day, while he was sleeping in the opera doorway, one of the prostitutes had come to him and basically given him a good time for free. Joey was very happy. He had not touched a woman in a long time.

As Christmas approached, Sven told me dreamy stories of the tourists being super generous. He said that the previous Christmas, on one day whilst sitting on the street drinking, with Sherpa, he had made two hundred euros. I found it hard to believe, but he was adamant. Shortly afterwards, I made the most money that I had ever made, in less than three hours.

As well as my Temple Bar 'office', I had a second 'office' on The Rambla, outside another Irish bar called Hogan's. I did not like the fact that in Barcelona I was spending so much time sitting outside Irish bars. Thankfully, people from all around the world went inside them to drink. Often English speakers. If I spoke to the punters, I tended to make more money. The boss at Hogan's, like the bouncer at Temple Bar, hated me.

Sometimes people asked me very politely if they could sit next to me on the street. I always said yes. At Hogan's one night, a guy stood in front of the bar smoking a cigarette, while I sat behind my 'free condoms' sign, which had become a four-signs-in-one multi-tool. I had folded it to make it stand alone. On the back it said, "I only eat vegans". On the stand it read, "You are a universe" and

on the other side “Cannabis cures”. As he finished his pint, he read my sign and laughed. Then asked if he could join me for a while. I agreed, and so began my most rewarding night financially. It was actually a cool night all round.

He was from Iceland, and I noticed the tattoos on his hands. He informed me that he had been a coke dealer but had for some years since worked for the oil industry, in eighty different countries. I was shocked as he was only thirty-odd years old, but he was obviously intelligent. He did not like the oil industry and was planning to leave work and live and work more harmoniously with nature.

After we chatted for a while on the street, he gave me a fifty-euro note and asked if I could show him where my mates and I hung out, adding that he would buy me beer for my time lost earning. We walked up the street and bumped into Sven, who was having a bad day. The guy chatted with Sven and gave him ten euros. Sven was elated.

The three of us proceeded past the homeless noodle restaurant, which I pointed out in my capacity as homeless tour guide, onto our favourite hangout, the biblioteque and its gardens. We bought six packs of beer on the way. The biblioteque often had crazy drunk people there, so it often attracted the attention of the police. That night, we were lucky. All our good friends were there and one or two rebellious Catalan kids that we had befriended.

With hindsight, I believe we created some collective magic that night. We drank and smoked and had some wonderful and deep conversation. Our new friend from Iceland said he could not believe how intelligent and funny we all were and how much we all laughed. I assured him it was not all roses in the squats and on the streets. A few days later on Christmas morning, one of our Polish friends did not wake up, ever again.

The guy from Iceland wanted to take me and Sascha to a restaurant and pub for some food and drinks, so off we went. On the way, he insisted on buying me a hand-rolled Cuban cigar for fourteen euros, asking that I smoked it on Christmas Day and thought of him. We ate in a little side-street Chinese that felt more like it was someone’s home. The food was great. Then Sascha directed us to what he assured us was the best alternative rock/punk pub in Barcelona. The pub was full of colourful people and played music that we all liked. Mr Iceland gave me a fifty note to pay for a round and told me to keep the change.

After a few pints, our new friend told us that he had to go to prepare for leaving the city the next day. As we said our goodbyes outside the pub, he told me that he had spent his favourite night in Barcelona with us. He slipped me another fifty-euro note and said he might have a job for me if I was interested, looking after his crops in Iceland. I thought he meant food and I wanted to be in the sun, so gave no further consideration to the possibility. Then a friend told me that he probably meant cannabis. Whatever. Not many people would immerse themselves in the world of the homeless and squatting, and love it!

On Christmas Day, full of hope for big money, I worked all day, for a mere six euros. Someone gave me a bottle of fake champagne, and I had my fat Cuban cigar, so I sat on the freezing streets with my condoms sign, asking people if they had a light and swigging champagne. At least I made people laugh and had a laugh doing so.

One night just before New Year, many assorted squatters coincided at a recycling baguette hot spot. We collected large quantities of good baguettes and ate to our hearts’ content. That night, it felt like we ruled the streets. Together, we felt strong, one big messed-up family, from many different countries. We had all been to hell and back but continued to fight in our own unique ways for a free and equal world. Some of us had been suicidal, but that night, as with many others, we made magic.

Late night shoppers looked at our colourful rabble, some full of fear, some full of admiration, for our collective rejection of conformity.

On New Year's night, we all went to a free squat party in another big, well-established squat named 'Chemical Bunker'. It had been a petrol station and had associated out-buildings but could never be described as pretty from the outside. Smaller than Pula Vida, it was nearly as impressive inside. The sound system was excellent, and it was a half punk, half techno party. The techno music attracted a lot of the local disaffected Catalan kids, which was great.

Winter in Barcelona is not so bad. The best winter weather in mainland Europe, according to Sven. The tourists never really stop, so one could keep working the streets, although it did get harder as they slowed down. Feeling frustrated one night, I concocted my most 'dangerous' sign. It said, "Do not feed the homeless. Fuck them". I only ever used it on rare occasions.

One night, four guys, who had literally just arrived in Barcaloco and dressed up for a night on the town, stopped to chat after seeing my sign. It was a busy Saturday night, and the streets were packed. From nowhere, two police ran through the crowd and slammed me and the four guys into the wall behind us. One stamped purposefully on my "do not feed the homeless" sign. As quickly as they had appeared, they ran away, without actually speaking a word! The new guys in town were shocked and shaken. My response was to say, "Sorry. That doesn't normally happen."

At home in our big squat, I had discovered that two of the occupants were heavy heroin users as well as very heavy drinkers. Raoul told me one day that he had met a cool guy who was a meth cook. He also told me that he had been offered two hundred euros a week to turn our home into a crack house. Shortly afterwards, I was told the meth cook was moving in with us, into my room.

When I met him, my heart sank. He was a big, muscular guy, who told me that he had been in the army for six years before they threw him out. He was obviously a speed freak and struck me as potentially dangerous. He moved into my room and was eager for us to hang out. He also wanted me to sell weed for him.

So, I avoided him as much as was possible, but it was not easy, especially as we all spent so much time on The Rambla. He used to sit on the street with a sign asking for money for his passport, so he could return home to the Czech Republic. He had a passport and had no intention of leaving Barcelona. Sven told me of one guy who had sat on Barcelona's streets with the same sign, asking for money for his stolen passport, for four years.

The Czech guy pushed me so hard to take some of his weed to sell that I was not strong enough to resist. I sold no weed and smoked some. One afternoon, we found ourselves alone in our vast squat. He demanded money off me and exploded when I explained that I had smoked his weed but not been able to sell any and make money. In one of the scariest moments of my life, he said to me, and I quote, "I could split your skull wide open right now and no one would ever know!"

How I escaped that nightmare moment, I do not really know. I managed to show no fear and calmly got us out of the building. He was leaving the squat, and we had put his stuff by the front door. He left Barcelona and my skull survived.

One day, Sam found a bag of unidentified white powder. As there were maybe five grams inside, people got excited. I do not take powders or synthesised drugs, only natural drugs. Dima dived in as volunteer identifier. He took a dab and yelled, "MDMA!" There was a frenzy as everyone took dabs.

The MDMA turned out to be crystal meth. One Estonian guy completely lost the plot, and his actions resulted in his squat being closed down. Sam also had a very difficult time and inadvertently brought the police around to our home. Until that time, we had received no problems from the police or authorities.

Raoul and Julia lived on the floor directly above me. I heard them love and I heard them fight. They fought verbally, a lot, as alcoholics tend to, and they fought physically sometimes. Raoul was broad, solid, scarred from many fights on the streets and in jails. He was considered to be as hard as any man on the mean streets of Barcelona. Julia was petite and pretty, an ex-stripper.

Raoul lived like a bum king, drinking strong beer all day, taking four or five bags of heroin, recycling and introducing new people to crack and heroin dealers. Julia sat on the street all day with their dog, earning the money for all of their drugs. I felt extremely sorry for Julia, who seemed trapped in an abusive situation. She could see no way out, if she wanted to escape.

One night, Sascha and I heard horrendous screaming from upstairs, as if somebody was being killed. Sascha, fearless as ever, immediately ran up to Raul and Julia's floor above. Sascha was also a hard man with many fights under his belt. I felt sick at the sound of Julia's screams and hoped that Sascha and Raul would not end up fighting. The screaming stopped and I fell into a troubled sleep.

Early in the morning, Sascha came to my room looking gravely concerned. He told me that when he had gotten into Raoul and Julia's room, Raoul had virtually strangled Julia. Sascha swore she was blue, and her eyes were bulging out of their sockets. He was convinced that he had saved her life, with only seconds to spare. When I asked about Raoul's response, Sascha said that Raoul had started crying, once he had been dragged off his girlfriend's throat.

A few days later, we were rudely awoken by a large group of assorted people breaking into our home. Several fire engines were parked right outside, and, together with police and bailiffs, they told us that we were being evicted for our own safety, because the building was dangerous. It was difficult for me not to ask those authorities if they were actually qualified in engineering, architecture or surveying. I wished I had spoken Catalan, but knew that, even if I had, we had no leg to stand on. Penniless squatters.

Shortly afterwards, I saw one of my best friends. Lenny was the first American I ever really liked. He was the most committed vegan I ever met. Eating from the bins only strictly vegan food, he looked skinny and weak at times. I told Lenny about Julia being strangled. As soon as the words had passed out of my mouth, I felt that they would come back and bite me on the ass. The next time I saw Raoul on the street, he flicked open a big flick-knife and looked like he would kill me if the opportunity arose.

Chapter 38 Would You Like My Squat in the Mountains?

A Romanian friend, who was an anarchist and permaculturist, was looking after his friends' truck and living in it, outside Chemical Bunker. He invited Dima and I to live with him, which we did. But then my Romanian friend had to return home for an emergency. Before he left, he took me and Dima to see several potentially interesting squatting opportunities, before taking us to see his amazing squat in the mountains.

The mountain squat blew me away. Its location was spectacular. Looking south across Barcelona, you could just about see the ocean. It was a small, one-storey house, with beautiful overgrown gardens and a small swimming pool. The house had a decent living room with a big, open fireplace, a good kitchen and three other small rooms. Structurally, it was fine. Its only negative aspect for us,

who relied on the city for money, food, clothes and social contact, was its distance from the centre. We had to bunk metro and overland trains before walking through a town and up the steep mountain, which could take two hours, each way.

My Romanian friend had explained how he got quite a surprise there one morning as he took the trash out. Although he had met a few walkers and joggers whilst there, he had not expected to be greeted by a police car and two police. At that time, he gave them his details and explained that he was squatting the property and that it was his permanent home. He spoke Catalan and understood his squatting rights, which always helped. The police had registered the house as a squat then. He then asked me one of the best questions that I had ever been asked. He liked me a lot and trusted me completely, so he asked me if I would like his squat in the mountains.

After we had been evicted from the squat that did not exist in the centre and Raul threateningly flicked his knife open at me, it was hard to believe that I had been given a squat, never mind a stunning squat in the mountains. But in the height of summer, it was difficult and extremely energy consuming, travelling and walking so much. Although I enjoyed my two separate lives, of peaceful mountain man and street-wise rebel.

A few days after moving to the mountain, I met a sterling young English man by the name of James, the New York-shire man, on the day he arrived in the city. He was Yorkshire through and through and an extremely funny guy. We got on fabulously. He had gone to Barcelona, primarily to skateboard, but had snapped his board in half during his first days' skating. He played guitar in a quite unique way and had hoped to busk his way around Europe. He asked if I knew anywhere that he could stay that night. I said he could stay with me, in my squat in the mountains. He glowed underneath his mass of wild, sun-bleached, blond dread locks.

James was a self-described fruit cake. Every time that he said 'Wensleydale' in his Yorkshire accent, I laughed, and he said 'Wensleydale' a lot. I felt like I was living with Wallace and Gromit. He loved my signs and also had a knack for ideas to make funny signs. We had so much fun playing on the street. He made a sign that said "Tourist Information" and stuck it to the wall above our heads as we sat.

James amended the Barcelona four cups technique. For the previous four years, people had made money using four plastic cups with a small sign in front of each one. The signs usually read, "LSD", "Porro" (weed), "Cerveca" (beer) and "Comida" (food). James made one big sign saying, "Which tea is the best?" The small signs in front of each cup read, "PG", "Tetley", "Earl Grey" and, in by far the biggest letters, "Yorkshire". James made a lot of people laugh. I learned about Yorkshire and Yorkshire people. They stick together on their rare ventures outside the promised land.

We would get back to our mountain home late each night and then chat for hours, having deep and hilarious conversations. We would leave for the city early each morning, before the relentless summer sun frazzled our brains. James wanted to skate but could not afford another board, so we worked the streets. The last signs that we made together read, "Please adopt my son", with an arrow pointing right, and "Please adopt my dad", with an arrow pointing left. James was half my age and we both had big, organic dreads and great sun tans.

We used to play farcical auctions with the adoption signs. I would ask for three euros for James, and he would ask for one euro fifty, or offers, for me. One day, an absolutely besotted grandmother fell instantly in love with James, who was very handsome and fit. She was almost salivating when she assured me that he was worth two million. I roared with laughter, whilst James did not know where to look. I wondered if I could talk him into one nights' prostitution, to solve our money worries.

Chapter 39 Did You Ever Meet an International Confidence Trickster?

A few days later, when we were trying to get each other adopted, an aboriginal Australian guy stood in front of us with a huge smile. He laughed at us and asked if we liked mushrooms. I replied yes, and he decided to sit in between us, making our adoption signs somewhat surreal. After rummaging through his backpack, he produced some magic mushrooms and gave them to us. Then he made a spliff to share.

Curt had a lot to say for himself. With short spiky dreads, he had a likable goofiness, oozed self-confidence and had a sharp, dry wit. We all got on well immediately, and, after chatting for a while, he asked where we lived. He then told us that we were welcome to go and live on the camp-site where he was staying and that he would pay for us. Then he told us that he had a business selling crocodile meat in Australia, which paid him handsomely. He was planning on going to a festival and showed us the line-up, asking if we wanted to go with him. We could not believe our luck and moved onto the camp-site at Morro, near Badalona.

It was a nice change from our long commute and gruelling mountain walk. It also temporarily took my mind off Raoul, whom I had been constantly scared of bumping into alone and possibly getting stabbed. The camp-site was a forty-minute train ride along the coast. A pleasant seaside journey compared with the often packed line one journey to Santa Coloma.

The camp-site was as sterile as I had ever seen, although they had a 'backpackers' field, with no sign of any backpackers. We camped there. Curt had a tent, but James and I preferred sleeping outside in the blistering summer heat. One night, Curt took us for a meal in a Sudanese restaurant and flirted horribly with a young mother who had a baby. She enjoyed the attention and Curt did not come back to the camp-site that night.

Working at our expensive camp-site was a lovely Catalan guy, doing maintenance and mowing the extensive lawns. Curt had lived at the camp for two months and had befriended the guy. The Catalan guy was an anarcho punk at heart and had played in bands and made records when he had been younger. He described in detail how speaking the Catalan language had been outlawed for many years. When the law finally changed, his band had played a gig on that first day that they were allowed to speak their native language. I was deeply moved, as he described his emotions singing anarchist punk songs in Catalan, at a gig for the first time in his life.

Curt surprised me, as he was knowledgeable and liked several of the same anarcho punk bands as I did. Sometimes, he would painfully go on, and on, and on about racism. Other times, he could be bitingly hilarious with his political analysis. We had some good conversation and laughed a lot.

There were not many people in the backpacker's field, and, when a long wheel-base converted Mercedes truck parked in front of our tent and three attractive young women got out, we could not believe our luck. Ariadne, dressed in a swimming costume, came over to us to introduce herself. Confident and beautiful, she informed us that she was driving her friends to Ibiza.

She had a good sense of humour and was looking forward to a short rest from driving. The girls were Dutch students, and Ariadne also ran her own design business working from her computer. The next day, Ariadne surprised the life out of me. At ten am she told me that they would be leaving in two hours. She said that they had space for one more person and that, if I wanted to go with them to Ibiza, I was welcome.

The next two hours tortured me. I had an enormous urge to go with them, but I also felt that it would not be great for me to leave James. I was also concerned that I literally had no money. It

could have been an incredible journey, and my mind certainly got carried away as to just what might have been possible with the three sexy young women who paraded around in front of me in skimpy underwear.

Even as they were leaving, I was still torturing myself, I could not make a decision. I could not even tell James what was going through my mind. The students were going to pass through central Barcelona on their way, so James and I jumped in with them. Only when we hit central Barcelona did I finally decide that I was not going on a sexy road trip.

The next morning, Curt told us that his wallet had been stolen from his tent. He said that he should not have left it out but it would only be a small problem, until he could get another bank card. Knowing I had zero access to any possible funds, he asked James if he could borrow two hundred euros as a short-term loan. James had never got on well with his father and they had hardly spoken in the previous two years, but James got the money from his dad and lent it to Curt.

Curt made our day when he told us that he wanted to pay for James and me to become paid-up members of a Cannabis Association in the city centre. It was so exciting for me to finally step inside one of Barcelona's two hundred Cannabis Clubs. Curt paid twenty euros for each of us to become members for one year. I joined the fourth membership club in my life. We got very high, and I completely forgot what it was called. Upon membership, you could introduce new members and receive ten euros for each. Hence, all the guys on The Rambla, whispering "coffee shop, coffee shop" in every passer-by ear.

A few days later, Curt informed us that there had been a problem with his bank card so his mother would forward twelve thousand euros into his account. He said that she lived in Alice Springs and had to drive thousands of miles to the bank, so it would take two days. Then we could buy our festival tickets. Neither James nor I had ever had any friends who ran successful businesses or transferred thousands of euros.

When we awoke the next morning, Curt told us that he had been bleeding from his anus during the night and so he needed to go and get checked out at the hospital. We never saw Curt again. Whilst I showered, the camp-site owners dragged James into their office for interrogation, thinking that he and I were in on Curt's scams. They quickly realised that James had also been scammed and that we could not pay our bill.

Curt had apparently arrived at the site and paid for a few weeks in advance, pleasing the owners. But, after living there for two months, he had amassed a debt of six hundred euros. He had also borrowed personal money from the receptionist and stolen two hundred and fifty euros from two French guys after copying their credit card details.

The receptionist had done some research and uncovered Curt's dirty past. He had been travelling the world for twelve years, conning many people in youth hostels and camp-sites along the way. Curt had told me that he was thirty-three years old and that he had studied forensic anthropology in Belgium. I believed that to be true, and it looked like after finishing his degree he had decided to become an international con artist. He also informed me that he had travelled in ninety different countries.

The camp-site had called the police, and they had arrived before Curt had left for his supposed trip to the hospital. The owner had decided not to press charges, when he remembered that his business had lent money to a client when it should not have legally done so. Apparently, Curt had come close to being convicted on a few occasions but managed to escape every time. Research also revealed

that he liked to prey on women and had conned three thousand euros out of the last woman who had fallen for his fake charm.

I was really scared of bumping into Raoul and being stabbed every day that I had been in the city centre, and the mountain squat was so demanding that James and I decided to call an end to our Barcelona adventures. He was eager to go to his first Rainbow Gathering, which was happening in France, and I was game after hearing good and bad stories about the gatherings for years.

Chapter 40 Train Hoppers of the World Unite!

I still had no passport but did not care. I had heard many epic train-hopping stories. Martin, a German friend, had made patches, with a graphic of a person jumping over a turnstile, that said, “train hoppers of the world unite”. Lucky had told me that in France you could get caught without a ticket nine times with no problems. On the tenth time you got put in prison. Lucky had been caught nine times.

So, as beginner international train-hoppers, we began our journey up the Spanish coast, towards the French border. Neither of us would have even considered attempting such a trip alone, but together we felt stronger and capable. Everything felt right. The station before the border left us both feeling nervous, with police wandering around on the platform. But we had no problem. We arrived in France that evening.

We travelled as far as we could and then found somewhere secluded and hidden to pitch our tent. We made a fire and ate spaghetti without sauce. Usually, we were too tired to try to recycle food or felt that small places held no recycling opportunities. The early part of the journey found us departing from the trains in rural towns and villages.

After a few days we saw our first ticket inspector. She was friendly and just threw us off the train at the next station. No problem. We simply waited for the next train to come along. We got thrown off a few more trains before we arrived at Marseille. France was under a state of emergency. Marseille train station had become a militarised zone, with soldiers and big guns everywhere.

I had wanted to find a squatted mansion located within the old city walls. Home to some French anarcho punks that Amy and I had met at an international squatter’s convergence in Ireland. They had invited us all to visit and even live with them. Their mansion had many rooms vacant and twenty occupants. But their contact details had been stolen in Barcelona. All the soldiers made James and I want to leave Marseille as soon as we could. We sniggered as we jumped the train, underneath their noses.

We passed some incredible-looking places along the southern French coast. I would have loved to have spent time exploring, but we felt like time was against us. Although the Rainbow Gathering lasted for one month, it was nearing its ending in France, so we travelled as far, and as fast, as we could.

One evening on the train, we started chatting to a French student. She was impressed by our mission and insisted on emptying her bank account to buy us train tickets, the next time we got caught. She drew out her last fifty euros and gave them to us. Then when we got off the train, she asked her mother to drive us to a secluded spot on the beach where we could camp safely that night.

When we awoke, the sea was almost at the foot of our tents. James was first to leave the tent and immediately told me to join him. We were both freaked out to see a military submarine as close to us as it could get without beaching. It was huge, and this was the closest either of us had ever been

to a tooled-up army sub. We did not hang around. We were in a military base town and stood out like sore thumbs.

That night, we travelled as far as Nice. Nice was nice, as cities go. We were both very tired and got a little irritable when we struggled to find somewhere to sleep. Then I saw a direction sign for a museum dedicated to an artist that I knew my friend Peter loved. Intuitively, I suggested that it would provide a suitable place to sleep. The summer nights were still warm enough to sleep outside in just a sleeping bag. The museum grounds were pretty, and we slept amongst some big trees. The next morning, we hopped over the fence, unnoticed, as the staff arrived for work.

Even though we had both given our all to attending at least some of the French Rainbow, we admitted defeat. The gathering would have probably finished before we got there. It had taken us six days to jump trains from Barcelona almost all the way along the French coast. James did some research, and we discovered that the next Rainbow Gathering was in north eastern Italy, seven hundred kilometres away from where we were. We decided to go. Fearless or foolish, probably both, as I had heard that skipping trains and hitchhiking were dodgy and difficult in Italy.

Our last free train ride was spectacularly beautiful, up into the French Alps. We stayed for two nights at the end of our free French train journeys due to the spectacular pristine beauty of the place. Next to a river, amongst wild nature, I read George Orwell's *Animal Farm* for the first time. We explored a village that looked like it should have been in the Swiss Alps and made a fire at our secret camp.

We hitched a short ride to the French–Italian border, replenished by splendid nature. Then disaster struck. After such natural beauty, we were dropped off at a monstrous vast concrete construction that looked like a motorway complex with a tunnel eating into the lush green mountain. The border control point smelt like a disaster, especially for me, document-less.

Chapter 41 No-One Is Illegal! No Borders!

There was a large number of stationery vehicles waiting to cross the border into Italy. We walked amongst the vehicles and decided to speak to the occupants of a VW camper van, who looked like hippies and, reassuringly, had Irish number plates. They could only offer us one space, and, as James and I had agreed to stick together, we gratefully declined. Worryingly, they described their journey from Italy across that border point as riddled with police and border control guards. My heart sank and James felt my pain.

Then a horrible storm came from nowhere, and the comforting mountains became scary and desolate as night fell. We had delayed any attempt to cross and decided to camp for the night, before going for it early the next morning. Our tent got flooded quickly under a concrete bridge, and we had to take refuge inside the massive concrete construction. When we thought we had found a suitable space to sleep, and I sat to finally retire for the night, James shouted, “No fuckin way! Bear shit!” from nearby.

After a short and rough sleep, we decided to cross the border. Luckily, a nice elderly French hippy couple, in a modern VW camper van, agreed to take us over the border. They were perfect for us, as we honestly looked like a perfect bourgeois, hippy family on holiday. They were even going to a gypsy punk music festival. We wanted to go with them.

As we slowly edged into the tunnel through the mountain, which holds the invisible line that is called a border, my heart was absolutely pounding in my rib cage. I could scarcely breathe as we

tried to chat casually with our new parents. Then, to my astonishment, I realised as we entered the sunlight at the end of the tunnel, that there were no police or border control anywhere to be seen.

We were in Italy, the first time for both of us, extremely relieved that I had made it without any documents. The Italian Alps were spectacular. A woman gave us our first Italian lift and explained that she had only picked us up because James reminded her of her son, and she had felt sorry for us. She told us that Italians did not pick up hitchhikers normally. The majestic scenery turned horribly urban as we were dropped off by James' mum. Then we started getting looks that could kill, from almost every single person who saw us.

Our next short ride informed us that Italy had nine different types of cop! We kept bumping into the police every time we tried to catch a lift in north western Italy. They were always deeply unimpressed with my lack of any documentation. Some of them scared the shit out of us, furious that we spoke no Italian and giving the impression that they were going to lock me up. When this happened with cops who were both considerably overweight, dressed in uniforms that made me think of pink cowboys, it was hard not to laugh. Their guns prevented me.

Having made slow progress, still facing six hundred kilometres, exhausted and skint, we called it a day. We researched eco-villages through the Global Environment Network, and our interest was attracted to a place called Damanhur. The Damanhur community contained six hundred occupants, who were into a mixture of spiritualities, and had incredible-looking land and buildings. In the back of my mind I wondered whether it was the community that I had heard of in Rainbow City, the place that was heavily into aliens.

Italy was very hot, and I was feeling utterly depleted, physically, emotionally and spiritually, as we walked along a busy highway heading for Damanhur. Then a car pulled up in front of us and two young Italians jumped out, smiling at us. As I dripped with sweat, almost at breaking point, the musicians asked us if they could help.

They got Damanhur's precise location up on their phones and said they would be happy to drive us there. As we drove, they were helpful and called the community contact phone and announced our arrival. We were dropped off in the car park and greeted warmly by a woman, who told us that we needed to go to the reception. When we entered the reception, we were immediately asked if we were there for the one-hundred-euro course or just the sixty-euro tour.

We had not emailed the community or had the time or inclination to contact them before our arrival. We had thought that there would be no problem with us working for our food and bed. How wrong we were. James tried desperately to explain our situation, but they were not interested. I could not believe that such an attitude could prevail in a community that claimed to be all about spirituality and nature. They seemed interested in only one thing, filthy lucre. We were told that we could go across the road and camp in the woods on the other side, opposite Damanhur.

In the woods, James immediately set up Damanhur 2. Consisting of a hammock and a tent and a cardboard sign fixed to a tree. As usual, we laughed. I noticed some black squirrels nearby, not grey or red, but black all over. I felt as though they were checking us out, new animals in their forest. And I had a feeling that we were invading their space.

That first night at Damanhur 2, James' hammock and my tent were heavily bombed with acorns! The angry black squirrels scored one hundred percent direct hits from above us in the trees. James and I were surprised, but it seemed obvious that humans were not welcomed by the squirrels. We respected the black bombers, and both James and I quietly asked them in our own ways if we could just stay in their forest for a little while. The bombing stopped.

Feeling depleted of all energy, I could have just curled up under a rock and given up on everything. We were north of Torino, just south from the Swiss Alps, and down to our last seventy cents. I knew that we could afford a packet of pasta and that the closest village was five kilometres away, so off I went. Along the route, I was elated to find a hazel tree with ripe nuts, so I filled my pockets with them and ate as many as I could on the spot.

A blue Audi estate car, which had caught my attention as it flew around the country lanes, passed me just before I reached the village. I spent our last seventy cents on one small packet of spaghetti and began walking back. The Audi drove past me again, but this time it stopped. A large, chubby man with an American accent asked me in a bemused tone if I had just walked from Damanhur for one packet of pasta. When I replied yes, he roared with laughter and asked me if I wanted a lift.

Maarten was chuffed, unfathomably to me, that I had thought he was American. He was in fact Dutch. But like other people I have met, he had watched so many American movies whilst learning English that he sounded American. He told me that when he had driven past me the first time, he thought that I looked like I was about to give up on life altogether. I told him he was correct.

Maarten could not believe that I had been on a ten-kilometre walk for a small packet of pasta. He walked nowhere and was very comfortable financially. He had worked in war zones for thousands of euros a day. When I told him our basic story, his beautiful side shone through. He asked if he could see where we were staying.

When I showed him Damanhur 2, he roared with his wonderfully raucous laughter. Maarten was a member of the six-hundred-strong Damanhur community village, although he was not their biggest fan. James and I made him laugh, and, within minutes of meeting Maarten, he told us we could live at his place for a while to get cleaned up and rest. That was music to our ears.

Maarten's home was just minutes further down the country lane. He stayed on one floor of his two-storey apartment, and we had everything we needed in the basement. He told us to make ourselves at home and help ourselves to anything we wanted. Later, he drove us to a supermarket and bought a lot of food and beer. He was extremely hospitable and a saviour in many ways.

Our evenings were great. James was a trained chef and enjoyed cooking for us. Maarten loved food and enjoyed having good company. He was single, and I suspect that he was lonely at the time, even though he was part of a six-hundred-strong community. He loved his beer, and I loved drinking his beer, which he was very happy to share. For James and I made him laugh his ass off every day and night.

It was an enormous relief for me to be able to rest for a while. As I relaxed, Maarten squeezed out the story behind my lack of documents. After having to lie to so many police, I had developed an automatic lying response if anyone asked about my passport. When I explained the situation fully to Maarten, he looked at me a bit like I had been a naughty child but replied brilliantly that we needed to go to his office the next morning and sort my problems out.

From his office, Maarten phoned the closest British Embassy, in Milan. He had lived and worked for years in Italy and was a very confident and capable man. I was so pleased to have his help. Hearing the way he spoke to the James Bond-type snobs at the Embassy cracked me up. As he was talking on speaker phone, I heard the whole conversation in English. He was informed that we did not need to make an appointment, we just needed to take one hundred euros and a police report or denuncia regarding my stolen passport.

When I explained to Maarten that my police report from Barcelona had also been stolen in another bag, many months before, in another country, he sighed deeply. Quickly composing himself he said calmly that we had to go to the Italian police to get a denuncia from them. He said it might be tricky, so we had to get our story together.

I was worried, as the Spanish police had been bad enough, but I thought the Italian cops would be worse. Maarten and I strolled confidently into the nearest Italian cop shop. The police knew and respected him as a successful local businessman, and as my representative he dealt with the hassle competently and speedily. I was subjected to little more than a few suspicious looks. We walked out with the crucial piece of inky paper, in less than one hour, beaming.

The following day we got into Maarten's plush car and travelled at the speed of light to Milan, one hundred kilometres from our natural wilderness. I saw Vivienne Westwood's shop. Milan did not appear as flashy as I had expected. I did not see much of the city before we skirted the Embassy and parked the car. On the ninth floor of a lavish building, I had not expected to be greeted by fully tooled-up soldiers at the door.

Inside the Embassy, a much younger version of Miss Money Penny informed us that we could not just turn up, that we had actually needed an appointment. Maarten calmly explained that he had spoken to the Embassy on the phone and asked exactly what we had needed to do. We had not been told that we needed to make an appointment and we had driven one hundred kilometres to be there.

Money Penny was unimpressed. Maarten told her what he thought of their system and we booked the next available appointment. Returning several days later, astonishingly, bureaucracy foiled us again. The second time, we were told that we needed to provide them with the precise details of how and when we would be travelling. James and I had not given any thought to how or when we would be travelling. We could not answer the question. At that time, we did not even have any travel money. Maarten looked like a human volcano, ready to erupt. He glared at me but knew that it was not my fault. The Embassy had been utterly incompetent. We made our third appointment.

We tried blah blah car but decided that we would catch the bus from Torino to exotic Newcastle. We went one last time to the Embassy, and, finally, after more than a year, I had a flimsy piece of cardboard with the ropiest photocopied picture of me, which cost one hundred euros. It cost Maarten six hundred kilometres' worth of petrol.

But Maarten's hospitality never ceased. We ate well every night and drank quality craft beers. As we struggled to get more funds together to travel, he reassured us both by saying if we could not make the required amount, then he would cover the short fall. Time flew by, and our day to leave found us all sad. We said our goodbyes at the bus stop, and I felt teary.

Our journey required a few changes in France, at Lyon and Paris. We only had one hour between buses, which left me a little uncomfortable. As I looked at my first Italian international bus, I could not believe how different it would have been in England. In Torino, the bus parked with the luggage bays on the traffic side of a main city-centre road.

Impatient travellers flooded out into the main road's oncoming traffic to get their luggage in. Like good English men, James and I waited until last to put our luggage on board. The driver went nuts at James' ridiculous amount of stuff – guitar, skateboard etc. – and for a few horrible minutes, I thought he was not going to let James on with overweight baggage. We almost begged and he reluctantly let us on.

We departed forty minutes late, which left me feeling extremely anxious about missing our connections. Once we had left the metropolis of Milan behind, we soon entered stunning scenery, and I tried to relax a bit. But it was not long before we came to another invisible border. It was a different Italian–French border and provided another bullshit human division.

Heavily armed border control guards boarded our bus. My heart sank as they slowly began controlling every person on our packed-to-capacity bus. Every minute of delay was killing me, and when the control guards came to two guys with the wrong-coloured skin they ground to a halt. Eventually, the armed bullies dragged the guys off the bus. James tried to lighten the mood, making a joke that I could travel across borders without documents, but we were both feeling terrible for the guys.

I had imagined that Lyon would be pretty, as far as urban conurbations go. It looked ugly, perhaps more so because we lost more time and I was really panicking that we would miss our Paris connection, and then we would be fucked. Homeless and penniless in Paris.

We arrived in Paris around midnight, almost one hour late. Looking for a queue for the next London bus, it struck us that the entire bus station was almost empty, except for the homeless men and women who had bedded down for the night. After making inquiries, we were happy to find out that our London bus was running one hour late. We sat freezing in the vast, open station, wearing clothes suitable for the thirty-degree heat that we had left behind. I wore a vest, shorts and sandals and had no warm clothes to my name. I had hardly any clothes at that point.

As we left Paris behind, the weather worsened and turned into a storm. When we arrived in Calais at five am, I was seriously sleep deprived and felt barely able to function. A storm raged, and we were all ushered off the bus for the British border control. I ran through the biting cold wind and rain into what looked like a portacabin.

Stepping inside, I sank as my droopy eyes fell on what looked like riot cops, behind desks. Tooled-up pen pushers. Double whammy. When it was my turn to approach the riot-proof bureaucrats, they took one look at my cherished, emergency piece of coloured cardboard and said, “Hold him!”

It was so completely unexpected that I could have just died on the spot. I remember struggling to make words happen but feeling that there was no way they could hold me. That would have left me homeless and penniless in Calais, like so many other desperate folks. I managed to make some words. They eventually told me that I could carry on with my journey, but that they were keeping my priceless passport. I wanted to spit in his eye.

The Embassy had told me that my emergency passport was valid for one year. They had said that I needed to return it in England before getting a ‘proper’ passport. They did not say hand it over in Calais if the border control cops don’t like your hair.

I carried on protesting, aware that all the delays were jeopardizing our London connection. They reluctantly gave me a blurry photocopy of my emergency passport. I was allowed back onto our bus, and we were able to carry on with the journey to Grate Britain.

London Victoria Station was a shell shock after the wondrous Alps. We went to see the Queen’s main house, eating food from public bins along the way. James had never seen the Buckingham Palace. We boarded our bus for the long journey north to Newcastle to stay with Jack, James’ friend, who had kindly agreed to let us stay for a few weeks, until the end of his tenancy.

Jack was a vegan skateboarder with a good sense of humour. Although he was middle class, he had also been homeless and had recently been forced to sleep on the tough Newcastle streets. His parents were angry with him, as they had explained to him that, by twenty-one years of age, he should have been earning thirty-six thousand pounds a year.

Jack loved skateboarding and busking. He showed us the horrible place where he had slept rough. But he had managed to get a room in a shared house, with students. He told us that James could squeeze into his bedroom to sleep on the floor and that I could sleep on the couch in the shared living room. James and I agreed that we would alternate, and Jack assured us everything would be OK.

James went out busking, and I opened TWAT up in Geordie land, somewhat apprehensively, conscious that I needed to readjust and put my Liverpool head back on, for potential spontaneous hilarity, or violence, depending on which way the wind blew. I found a nice big set of steps and got all of my signs out. Within minutes, an angry homeless guy stood in front of me, hands on hips, and shouted, "Clamp the fuckin' homeless?!"

I also set up smaller galleries at the central monument's steps, where a bunch of us liked to hang out. I quickly met the homeless and crazies, artists and normal-looking folk. We attracted police attention, but they mostly left us alone. One day, a homeless scouse guy told me that he had never been so homelessly happy, before he had been homeless in Newcastle.

We met a lot of good people and soon became good friends with Jim, a wonderfully talented improvising guitarist, who busked hard, for hours on end, and loved it. He was always smiling. I could listen to him for hours, as he played and beamed positivity out to the world.

One night, as an assorted bunch of us reprobates sat on the monument steps, a guy minced over carrying a can of Special Brew, a drink that I had not seen for a long time. A notorious drink, not to be scoffed at. Mikey sat down and confidently told us all that he had just returned from dying at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, but, he informed us, he had filmed it and asked if anyone wanted to watch him dying on stage. James immediately replied yes. Mikey passed James his phone and James began watching Mikey die live on stage. Seconds later, Mikey grabbed the phone from James' hands and said, "I'm not letting anyone watch me die on stage."

Mikey told me that he was a dedicated activist, squatter, street performer and comedian. He described how he had been in Barcelona's Placa Catalunya, in 2011, with several thousand other activists all shouting, "No violence," as hundreds of police surrounded them on four sides, pointing guns at them.

In Newcastle, Mikey liked playing with fire, literally and metaphorically. I went out to watch him at work one night. Mikey had a unique hit-and-run style. But first, we had to drink ginger wine. A brew that I came to enjoy drinking with him. We hit several fancy bars along the Tyne river. Bars where punters sat outside, safely enclosed by rope barriers.

Mikey went into showman mood. He approached the rope barrier and started his performance with some spiel. Within seconds, he was making people laugh. Just his mincing walk cracked James and me up. He told jokes and did some fire breathing and tricks, and, in less than ten minutes, he had made a few pounds and reminded some people how to laugh.

We hit more bars, drank ginger wine and Special Brew, and at the end Mikey said that it had been an average night. I asked how he ever managed to pay full rent. He replied that his landlord was on

the verge of throwing him out. Mikey immediately became one of my favourite people. We talked about opening a squat, and several of us were game.

A few nights later, we bumped into Mikey, who was walking fast instead of his usual, strolling mince. He excitedly told about six of us that we had to go with him as he was about to do a comedy routine at the best open mic night in Newcastle. We all went with him to the best open mic venue I had ever seen or heard.

The space was nice, and the sound system was loud and of excellent quality. We watched one or two indifferent guitarists, and then came Mikey's turn. The place was full of suitably lubricated punters, and comedians were a rare treat. Mikey made a few quick jokes and then said, "Do you know the bouncer on the door? He's gay, but he's not one of those nice gay guys who likes to get dressed up in glittery clothes and go dancing at the weekend. He's one of those horrible ones that like to take a shit in your mouth!"

The entire place roared with laughter, as both the bouncer and the pub's boss, leapt onto the stage and tried to drag Mikey away. Mikey rose gloriously to the occasion and stood strong, shouting to the crowd, "Do you want more?" to cheers of "yes", as the boss fumbled to try to turn the microphone and speaker off. Our lot were on the floor howling, as the boss had second thoughts and obviously pondered whether they were stopping the best comedian that had ever graced their open mic night. Tragically, the bouncer's determination won out, and they just about managed to get the funny man off stage.

In Newcastle each evening, I chanced upon some of the good folk who prepared and distributed food and clothes to the homeless and needy. At the monument, an Asian community group dished out hefty portions of the best homeless food I had ever tasted. Coincidentally, followed by an Asian community group who had regularly brought food to the LAs camp in Liverpool. It tasted like I could only imagine top-quality restaurant food might taste.

Another night, Mikey convinced Jack and myself to try to crack a new squat, as Mikey's landlord was about to finally throw him out due to rent arrears. Jim had no previous experience and had purchased a liquorice-like, mini crowbar from the pound shop, for the occasion. We had all agreed upon a building, which was huge but in a good location. Mikey and I were slightly inebriated and somewhat gung-ho, as we yanked unsuccessfully at the front doors with the bendy crowbar. At only ten thirty pm, many folks were still out and about.

Just as we decided to have a break and crossed the main street, one police van appeared and then another. About twelve cops jumped out, and Mikey immediately started shouting at them. He hated the police and was well known to them. Jack managed to shape-shift away, and all the cops surrounded Mikey, so he shouted louder. I was convinced he was going to be put into the van and beaten to a pulp.

Thankfully, that did not quite happen, and, when the police turned their attention to me, they were pleased to discover the crowbar in my backpack. As I had remained completely calm and silent during Mikey's enclosure, they were calm with me. I told them that I was an artist who created furniture from recycled pallets. They believed me and we walked away.

Mikey asked Jack if he could stay with us for that night, as he did not want to walk the long distance back to his flat. Jack said yes, so James and I crammed into Jack's small room, and Mikey slept in the living room. The other guys in the house were all straight and had already become pissed off with two extra people living in the small space.

Next morning while we were sleeping the other tenants had wanted to get into the fridge, but Mikey had been asleep against it. They had tried unsuccessfully to wake him, and then called the landlord. The landlord arrived, threw Mikey out and told Jack that he had breached his contract and so it was being terminated two weeks early. We all had to leave that day, and all became homeless again.

Jack was able to stay with a friend, and James and I moved into our tents in a big public park. The park was freezing at night, and it felt like the kind of place where any real crazy shit could have happened. It was not long before James decided that he wanted to go back to Darlington, where he had lived previously, and rent a room. He invited me to join him, so we took the short train ride to what the locals called 'Darlo' in Yorkshire.

I went to Darlington because we wanted our adventure to carry on but also because I would have gone anywhere, done anything, to avoid returning to Liverpool. I never wanted to go to there, ever again. Yorkshire sounded OK, and I had her biggest fan as a tour guide. Darlo was nice enough, as backwater, red-neck, little towns go.

Everywhere was walkable and the river was gorgeous. There were soup kitchens and food banks that I could go to almost every day. The food bank filled my large ruck sack three times a week and kept James and me well stocked up. In Darlo, homeless and poor people could go to a food bank, three times a week, and get a lot of food. In Liverpool, you could only go to a food bank three times a year, and if you wanted a food package for your starving family on Christmas Day, you needed to book six weeks in advance!

We went to look at a room. James' only question was how good the wi-fi was. He signed up for the first room he saw and then launched into mammoth binges on computer games. I knew people played computer games for four-, six-, even eight-hour binges, but seeing it before my eyes sent me a little deranged. Especially when I was attempting to sleep in the same room.

We both knew it would not be wise for me to sleep there every night, at the commencement of a tenancy. So, one or two nights each week, I would erect my tent in South Park, amongst the cover of some big old trees. Mostly, I evaded any attention, but was surprised to discover twenty-odd men playing American football, in full regalia, every Sunday morning outside my tent.

The park was a nice enough place to live. As well as having a mixed orchard of fruit trees, where the ripe fruits were available for the public to pick, there were two Giant Redwood trees! Mere baby Sequoia trees, according to the blurb by the council, and apparently the only Giant Redwoods in Britain. When I chanced upon them, their sight sucked all of the breath out of my lungs. It felt like an incredible privilege to be able to commune with Giant Redwoods every day.

I liked to make local signs whenever I opened TWAT in a new place. For Darlington, it simply said, "Giant Redwoods in Darlo!" In the middle of the town centre, there was an extremely wide set of public steps that were perfect for my spontaneous theatre. I had not expected to receive so much attention, so quickly. But nowt much 'appens in Darlo. That is not true at all. Darlo's bonkers.

The number of homeless people surprised me, and I quickly made friends. Those guys showed me where to eat, and I tiptoed into Darlo's underbelly. I met nice people, I met interesting people, and I met crazy people, and just one potentially axe-murdering, survivalist, arsonist, gay guy in denial, who fancied me and wanted to get me into the woods with him and his axe. For real. I went!

My second performance in Darlo attracted the attention of an intense young man, who desperately wanted my montane ruck sack. Because he said he loved the brand. His coat was by the same company. He told me he loved my signs and said he knew the best place in Darlo that I could camp,

by the river. He said he was an outdoor pursuits teacher, and he was eager to show me his favourite local spot. He told me three times in our first conversation that he would bring his axe when we went to the river. James was shocked that I had agreed to meet the guy and go into the woods alone with him.

The potential axe-murderer and I had a lovely Sunday walk into the woods and along the river. We passed some great potential squats. It was very beautiful and felt like we were a million miles from a town. By the time we got to the possible camping spot, I was a little worried about the guy but felt secure in the number of walkers who were out for a Sunday stroll. Then, just when I thought the site could be a goer and it was certainly infinitely better than a popular public park, he started a huge fire.

I ran away from the fire that was bound to attract attention in seconds. He ran after me with an insane look on his face, and I avoided him like the plague thereafter. He continued to bother me when I worked in the town centre, but I became friends with a really good guy named Paul, who had known the axe-man and his violently abusive father for many years. Paul had words with him.

As well as James and the skate shop crew and a few skaters, Paul also became a good pal. He was a fine figure of a man, who had known a hard life but come through and carried himself with a muscular grace. He had a big heart and a good sense of humour. Although he was skint, he always gave me money whenever he saw me.

After chatting several times, always deeply, he told me about being adopted and put into care as a child. He had been force-fed a pillar of salt as a young child and taken what I considered to be the brave decision to fight for justice decades after his childhood abuse. He knew that the legal procedure would take many years and that, even if he won, he would not receive much money, but said he just had to do it. He said that if he got any money, he would give it to his daughters.

The good folk of Yorkshire liked a laugh, and Darlo had lots of comedians, especially some of the working-class kids. My TWAT condoms attracted a lot of young boys, all asking for them. At least they wanted to practise safe sex, it seemed.

But perhaps my favourite ever TWAT moment occurred when a cheeky boy with all his mates slowly read my signs. After he read my sign "I only eat vegans", he shouted for all the shoppers to hear, "He only eats virgins!" Things got funnier as, unknown to me, two older punks were approaching my theatre from behind me. As they passed, the kid shouted at them in disgust, "He only eats virgins!", followed beautifully with him saying to the punk guy, "You can get free condoms here, mate. It says free condoms for the over-sixties." The look of absolute confusion on the punks' faces was priceless. I managed to keep a straight face and added, "Do you have ID?" They missed the joke and walked on a little nervously to the pub. I burst out laughing. The kid, also a little confused, asked if I really ate virgins, and if he could have a condom. Life, became art, became work, became play. Success.

It rained every day for one month, and it got frustrating working with cardboard. Some days, I packed all of my twenty-odd signs up and then started again, three or four times. My signs got rain damaged quickly, and I sat for hours sometimes just watching the rain and waiting for it to stop. Mindful of the wind having been my previous boss in Lisbon. In Darlo the rain became my boss.

I decided to bite the bullet and try to sign onto the dole and get housing benefit. As I faced my first bureaucrat in years, I was told straight away, "You are not from Darlington. We only have money for people from Darlington." I also learned that it was a big mistake to admit that I had been out of

Grate Britain for more than six weeks. No entitlement to any social security or housing benefit for the following three months.

James then found love, and I slept in the park more often, as winter kicked in. After a while, I took the painful decision to return to Liverpool. I saw no other option at the time. However, I returned to receive my first Christmas dinner invitation in a few years, which was heartwarming. I had a lovely time with my dear pal Carl and his partner Maggie. They surprised the life out of me by informing me that Santa had left enough cash for me to pay for a passport.

After twenty years without any squats in Liverpool, I was elated to hear that a church had been squatted on the edge of the city centre by some of the young punks from the band that I had previously invited to move into Rose Howey. I went along and asked if I could move in. I quickly realised that some of the teenage guys were pretending to be working class, when they were undoubtedly bourgeois. A strange phenomenon that I had come across previously at Rose Howey and elsewhere in Liverpool's alternative scene.

Although I had expected the young punks to welcome me in immediately, they told me, "Just keep calling round for a cuppa and get to know us." Gutted, I asked Next to Nowhere social centre if I could sleep there again, just for a few weeks as it was winter, and I was on the verge of sleeping in the cemetery at the Anglican Cathedral. When Griff, who had moved into RH after I invited the whole band, got wind from the social centre, which they used to practise in, that I was sleeping there, he said I could move into their squat. The squatted church was called 'Pigeon Palace'. I moved in reluctantly, but it was not long before eviction papers were served.

Chapter 42 Amsterdam

With the help of a friend, I bought a ticket for Amsterdam in springtime. We had both known England and Liverpool were killing me slowly, so I pressed the A button for the dam. We knew that the famously open-minded, creative stronghold might see me flourish. The day that I left Pigeon Palace, the guys were playing scrabble in the front yard, waiting for the bailiffs.

I had a stroke of luck when I contacted Ariadne, the woman who had offered me a lift to Ibiza from Barcelona the year before. Nearly one year later, after little contact, I found myself staying in the same Mercedes truck that was then parked outside a semi-squatted, crazy student residence, surrounded by three incredible-looking land squats and water. Mature trees made it feel like we were on the edge of a forest. Five flat kilometres from the centre of Amsterdam.

Ariadne surprised me when she told me that her parents were a judge and a lawyer. And that they were both supportive of squatting and had previously squatted themselves. They had even written books on the subject. Amsterdam truly was the European capital of squatting. A world apart from sour England.

Ariadne offered me a free lift to the famous Boom Festival in Portugal. I could not believe my luck, after missing the lift to Ibiza the previous year. She had a lot of power over my living situation and could decide whether I slept rough on the streets or, alternatively, whether I lived in relative luxury in her truck, hooked up to electricity, with access to a kitchen and showers. I wanted to stay in the van, and unsurprisingly Ariadne was also well connected to several squats, including ADM, where she had lived the previous summer. She told me that she would take me to ADM, and I emailed them to ask if I might be able to move in.

ADM was the most incredible-looking squat that I had ever come across. More than one hundred people had occupied the waterside building, and they had held regular small festivals for more than

twenty years. However, it was under threat and being dragged through the courts, facing possible eviction.

TWAT immediately targeted the king's palace in Amsterdam's Dam Square. I did not know the Dutch still had a royal family, and one day I think I saw the king in a wheelchair. His little pad is the focus of the tourist hot spot Dam Square. It seemed like the obvious place for me to go to work. However, there were nearly always police there, as the pick-pockets enjoyed the packed crowds. The king's front steps are only three steps high at the front and often covered with tourists, so I opted for the quieter side door, figuring the king would not use it as it had no wheelchair access.

The side steps were about ten high and just big enough for me to get my signs out. There was quite a lot of foot trade, but a tram line running in front of me was not ideal. My first day went well, and I met two generous Welsh folks. The second day went fantastically, when I bowled an American guy over. As he stopped and read my signs, he took a huge theatrical step backwards and exclaimed loudly, "Man, you blow my mind!" I do not think he was used to giving money to people on the street. I would have happily accepted one hundred euros for his reaction. He gave me five, which I was pleased to receive.

So, things began well in the Netherlands for TWAT. I recycled mostly junk food direct from the public bins, and I recycled cannabis. Twenty to thirty butts per day. When I found a special pre-rolled spliff in its bag, on top of the garbage in a public bin, I felt like I had won the lottery. They cost from six to twelve euros each, depending on the mix. I also recycled alcohol from the decadent tourists.

I was instantly and horribly attracted to one of the crazy art students who lived in our block. We only spoke once, and I think she felt the same. We both acted horribly awkwardly. She was in a relationship, and they made street theatre together. I loved that we shared the same desire to burst, and gained pleasure from bursting, the public's normality bubble.

The students in our crazy block were well educated and supremely confident. No doubt the children of the privileged and elite. They loved to throw parties every month and knew how to take and make drugs.

I had done my homework and read a book in England called *Why the Dutch are Different*. The Dutch have long had a different attitude to property ownership, particularly speculation, which they hated, and squatting. After living there and speaking to many wonderful people, I believed the Dutch were different. However, tragically, they closed down the free space haven that was ADM. And I remember my old Dutch friend Corrie telling me that the Dutch had invented apartheid. And the great tulip market collapse. But, essentially, good ol' USA is colonising the collective subconscious of most of the civilised world. The American dominator death machine rules all, including outer space.

From all of the students that I was living with, I became greatest friends with a guy named Pieter. Out of a very bright bunch, he shone brightly and easily. And out of the mad bunch, he seemed to be the maddest. He was extremely funny and compassionate and was the first to really make me feel at home in a slightly unusual situation.

Pieter invited me for coffee in the communal kitchen space every morning and usually made an outrageous hash joint to complement our breakfast. Pieter also opened my eyes to the reality of the streets of Amsterdam. He fell asleep in the city centre one night and did not wake up until the next morning, as the police issued him with a one-hundred-and-forty-euro fine. Pieter could pay it, no problem, but the homeless obviously could not.

Pieter was a keen cyclist and offered to fix me up a bicycle for my daily journey into Amsterdam's city centre. The cyclists and cycle routes were so impressive. But I preferred to walk the ten-kilometre round-trip, as it was infinitely more practical for the recycling that I was constantly doing. The daily walk was tiring but pleasant along a canal and with some big parks on route. The nicest, wildest park I saw in Amsterdam was on our doorstep. One evening, after recycling twenty-five spliff butts in the centre, I passed through the wild park on the way home. I found another fifteen spliff butts in the park. My biggest haul in one day.

My daily walk to the centre took me past a large anarchist book shop, which had a huge banner in front saying, "Support ADM". The shop stocked lots of interesting-looking books. They had a great-looking free paper that said it was a collaboration between many artists and cafes, anarchists and squatters and assorted liberated spaces. It listed many alternative nights and events and had some wonderful articles. I checked some out, but distance prevented me attending many things that I would have liked to have gone to.

TWAT did its thing at the king's palace every day for two sunny weeks, before I met the same policewoman twice in three days. She took a huge, instant dislike to me. She did not like what I was doing or my attitude. She told me in no uncertain terms that TWAT could not perform anywhere in the city. When she caught me again at the king's pad, two days later, she went ballistic. I thought that she was definitely going to arrest me and fine me, for my cardboard rebellion. I escaped by the skin of my teeth, but it looked like the show was over.

It was gutting to have had such high expectations dashed for my blending of life, art, work and play, in the supposedly open and free Amsterdam. I wrestled terribly with whether I should chance getting arrested and fined. If I received a fine, I would not pay any of it, and the system would do its thing. Essentially, I would be a small step closer to getting jailed in the city of tolerance for cardboard-related tomfoolery.

I opted for the Barcelona four cups. I recycled four junk-food plastic cups and cut four small cardboard signs to the same size. On one sign I wrote, "weed", on another "beer", on another "LSD" and the last said "food". Busy fast-food venues tended to work well. so I sat down near one of the busiest, put the cups out in a line in front of me and neatly placed a sign in front of each cup.

Within minutes, plenty of people had laughed at the joke. Two people had put cannabis into the weed cup. One person had put money into the LSD cup. And a couple, after asking if I was hungry, gave me their lunch. Within thirty minutes, two or three people had taken photos, some without asking, and I had made ten euros. At that rate, I was making more than my pals in Barcelona. Then, through the crowds of tourists, I saw my favourite policewoman on the other side of the street. I packed up rapidly and ran.

I carried my TWAT signs and the four cups around every day for two weeks, before I finally admitted defeat to Amsterdam's authoritarian streets. I became freegan, by necessity, again. Normally, for freegan smokers, cigarette papers can be almost impossible to recycle. However, Amsterdam's cannabis culture is world famous, and, when I started asking people if they could spare a few papers, I soon had a wonderfully assorted collection of every kind of long-rolling paper that you could imagine, even pink. The only ones missing were the outrageous thirty-centimetre-long papers that Raw had started producing. I saw a sixty-year-old guy, with shopping bags, smoking a thirty-centimetre long spliff, casually. A passing skateboarder saw him and nearly fell off his board laughing.

Being freegan took all of my energy. I was less able to socialise with the students, as I was exhausted and needed to rest and sleep when I was not recycling. But when the students threw their first party, I had to be there. The decor they created was spectacular, and everyone was invited. Unfortunately, this attracted one or two nasty people from the surrounding neighbourhoods in the past, who had stolen Pieter's laptop from one party and raped a girl during another.

As the spring turned to summer, the students started preparing for their annual diy, unauthorised, three-day festival, which they held in their grounds. Although all the students from the three other blocks were welcome at our block, only two ever came. One of them seemed to work harder than anyone to make their festival happen, including building some nice wooden stages, bars and chill-out spaces from recycled pallets. They organised DJs, as well as staging their own, and some of their bands played, including my friend Dirk's. Hundreds of people came and enjoyed the three-day diy festival without any security or police required, and there were no complaints or aggressive incidents. It was an extremely inspiring, voluntary collaboration. Those guys put British students to shame.

But Amsterdam was wearing me down, just surviving. It was the promise of the free road trip to the Boom festival that kept me going. I was ignoring the fact that I did not have a ticket, feeling certain that, whether I got in or not, it would provide a well-earned break. I was keeping well out of Ariadne's way, as all of the students had exams looming and Princess Ariadne had shown me her diva side since I had arrived. I struggled for four weeks, waiting until finally Ariadne sat her last exams and shows for the grand finale of her years of study.

Ariadne was respected and impressive in so many ways. She already had her own design company and won an important contract with Ikea whilst I was staying with them. The contract was important to her, but the timing could not have been worse, clashing with her final studies. She was in a state about what to do and eventually did the Ikea work, rather than final week's studies.

The day Ariadne's results came, I knew immediately all was not well. She was fuming. Less than one hour after she received her unsatisfactory grades, she came to me and asked if I could pay one third of the fuel costs for her huge Mercedes truck, from Holland to Portugal! She knew that I had lived without money, freegan, for the previous six weeks. I could have died on the spot.

That was the straw that broke the camel's back. I was exhausted, fragile and nearly broken. I was in crisis. I had to admit defeat in Amsterdam and contact a dear friend to tell him that all was not well and that I needed rescuing if at all possible. He got me a flight to Liverpool to try and rest a little. It was August and I realised that in just three months' time I would be half a century old. How the hell had I made it to fifty? I decided that I would try to draft my life story in three months in Liverpool. One hundred pages each month. A tall order, but I felt I could do it, and such a project would make Liverpool more bearable.

Chapter 43 Fifteen Minutes of Fame

I had messaged the guys from Pigeon Palace several times from Amsterdam but received no reply, which had been hugely frustrating. The night I got back to Liverpool, I was very surprised to find that the squat I had left facing imminent eviction two months previously had still not been evicted.

When I banged on the door, a confused Rob answered. He was pleased to see me, saying that he had been living in the church alone for weeks and had started talking to the pigeons. The other guys had opened another squat in an old pub that was in excellent condition, compared with the pigeon-shit-filthy church. Rob had been told that he was not welcome at the new squat for reasons on top of his

UKIP support. One of the squatters was planning to open an s & m dungeon, in the pub's basement, and was convinced that Rob would not understand and become problematic.

When Pigeon Palace had been full, all of the guys lived on the first floor except for Rob and I who lived on the ground floor. My room was the sizeable space before the toilets. Everybody walked through my room to use the loo. I was never worried or inconvenienced and trusted everyone entirely, even at gigs, when total strangers walked through my space. I never had any problem. The signs in the toilet disturbed me greatly, but I will get to them.

Rob was a very stocky, strong guy who had served six years fighting for queen and country in the army. He had been asked if he wanted to move into the squat because he was sleeping on the streets, and everyone knew him as the friendliest *Big Issue* seller in town. I also believe the other guys saw him as security due to his size, when they were all fairly small and scrawny. But when UKIP lost thirteen of their fifteen seats, and he was watching from his room shouting, I was concerned. Before I knew what I had said, he was on the verge of punching me into the next month.

My first night back in Liverpool, I found myself in the surprising situation of squatting alone with Rob in a vast, eerie church. I went early to bed, shattered, glad that my room was just as I had left it. Except for the mice and rats, who had all apparently left after the other guys had departed. I slept deeply that night, until seven thirty the next morning.

Rudely awoken by a thunderous boom, boom, boom, as the bailiffs tried to smash down our solid oak wooden door, I jumped out of bed, instantly knowing that it was the bailiffs. As we met in the main church area, one of them shouted at me, "You have got thirty minutes." Unphased, I turned back to go to my room, knowing that my bag was still packed from Holland.

I sat on my mattress and started to roll a cigarette in the near dark. My main lights had broken the night before, so I only had a little light coming from the adjacent toilets. Next second, the bailiffs piled into my room en masse, and I heard my light switch being flicked on and off, from behind a privacy screen at the foot of my bed. I said, "The lights don't work."

Then, boom, boom from the end of my bed and two blinding flashes erupted in front of my eyes as two full-size TV cameras began filming me. Realising with horror that there was a fucking TV crew at the end of my bed, I grabbed a plastic bag that I had recycled from Amsterdam and lifted it in front of my face to hide my identity from my unwelcome guests and their cameras. The bag was black, with large white letters proclaiming, "Yes. I bought shoes. Again."

I felt disgusted by them and their absolute lack of respect. Choosing to no-comment the TV crew's rapid-fire questions initially, I quickly concluded that I was probably experiencing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have a voice for dispossessed squatters on TV. So, I decided to go for it. I had thirty minutes and counting to tell the mass of bailiffs, police and Channel 5 scum bags just what I thought.

I had long disrespected all forms of mainstream media and had a deep understanding of their devious workings. The bailiffs gave Channel 5 carte blanche. They were seemingly in charge. So, when they realised I was willing to speak, I was mockingly asked, "Have you ever had a job?" I told them I was pretty much a qualified surveyor, to their obvious surprise. Flummoxed, they followed pathetically with, "So, what happened?" I replied, "I left the rat race twenty years ago to try and help raise the consciousness of the human family." I surprised myself, but credit to professor Griff who had put the phrase into my sub-conscience. It popped out at the perfect time.

Rob was OK, for a UKIP supporter. When he had first explained his political beliefs, I had heard it all before. I explained to him why I was an anarchist, and he was genuinely interested in the subject and its history. He was from Cambridge and had won the award for Cambridge's most loved *Big Issue* seller. His room in our squat was always spotlessly clean and tidy, unlike those of some of the guys and girls and those without pronouns.

So, the TV crew found only Rob and I, two fifty-year-old gentle men, both devastated by the separation from our daughters. His room was immaculate, and he was exceptionally polite given the circumstances. Rob really had nowhere else to go after they closed down our squat. For such a big guy he was very gentle and explained to Channel 5 how the church had been a sanctuary for him for the previous twelve months.

Whilst the TV crew interrogated Rob, I had time to go through my old dirty laundry and rescue my Italian designer underpants that Warrior had purchased for me in Portugal. Those were special pants. As I squeezed them into my backpack with everything else I owned inside, the TV crew came back and I carried on ranting. I tried to quote the homeless figures across Europe, together with the number of empty houses but, guttingly, I quoted the figures the wrong way around.

I said that there were officially approximately eleven or twelve million homeless people and three or four million empty houses in Europe. There were approximately three or four million homeless human beings and eleven or twelve million empty houses. Every homeless person could have three or four houses. I did say that any system that leaves people sleeping on the streets, while buildings lay empty, was a disgrace.

Channel 5 aired those statements and, to my joy, showed the bizarre drawing on one of the toilet cubicle doors, threatening men not to piss on the floor. Fantastically, they blurred out the huge penis on the grotesque hand-drawn beast. They did not choose to show the notice that consisted of four sides of A4 paper inside the cubicle, also threatening people not to piss on the floor, as someone was standing behind them with a knife! They wanted to portray us as careless and dirty.

And just when I thought things could not get any weirder, another crew decided to join in with the party. Two guys appeared as if from nowhere, with crosses on their jackets. They were representatives of the church's owner, Gilbert Deya. We had done our homework on the good minister. He was awaiting trial for child trafficking in Africa! Those men of god wanted to turn the church into a community centre, because every good child trafficker needs a community centre!

Gilbert had started his own church and was a very powerful man with access to all the top politicians in his home country, Kenya. He had also been welcomed by the Queen of England and her husband. The good minister had an office in our squat with books, tapes, dvds and magazines that they sold. His merchandise had titles like 'I am not a child trafficker'. He had a two-million-pound private jet and other churches in Manchester (which had also been squatted by friends) and London.

When the two child-trafficking accomplices walked in, it just became too much for me. I was utterly speechless at their gall. They immediately laid into me and actually said that I should go to their church. My braver, deeper, self took over. I spontaneously did a little dance at them. No words could suffice.

Our thirty minutes was soon up, so Rob and I left our sanctuary for the last time. I could not believe that I had been in Amsterdam the day before. It was raining outside, and as Rob struggled away with all of his worldly possessions the TV crew shouted, "Where will you go?" He shrugged his

shoulders, knowing only that he would be sleeping on the cold hard streets again that cold winter's night.

Before I left, they asked me the same question. I told my only lie, saying that I did not know. In reality, I knew I would go to the pub that the guys had squatted. I walked into the city centre and was first in line for a homeless free breakfast, before walking across the centre to the squatted pub in Toxteth. When I shouted at the upper windows from outside, a face appeared that I had never seen. Then another. Then Chelsea from Pigeon Palace appeared. She let me inside and we hugged, pleased to see each other.

When I told them about Pigeon Palace's eviction, they burst out laughing, informing me that they had received legal papers for the pub's eviction and the bailiffs could turn up on that very same day. We joked about Channel 5 filming me in two evictions on one day. Surely that would have been a record.

I met a few people new to squatting in our new pub. They seemed born for it, loving recycling food from bins and restaurants and anywhere possible. One had quite a talent for shop-lifting. We all got on well, and there was a nice energy in the large space. When one of the new guys called Boots told me that he had bought a very cheap shed in Pembrokeshire, we could not believe our luck.

Boots was a tough guy. A fighter on the streets, in rings and sometimes in cages. He had trained since childhood and won many fights. But he had also taken some heavy beatings, notably from some night-club bouncers, which, he said himself, had probably left him a bit brain damaged. However, he had held down some serious jobs, and, after watching the shed's price fall over twelve months, he made a very cheeky offer and had become an unexpected property owner.

Boots was eager to live in his shed and work on it. He had no contacts in south Wales, and when I told him about the area and some of my friends, he asked me to go with him, to sleep in the shed and help him work on it. The new pub squat was under threat before it had even earned a name. When the owner discovered dirty squatters had legally occupied his property, he came around and nearly gave himself a heart attack.

It was not long before we left for a new adventure in Wales. I felt extremely happy to be going back to see some dear friends whom I had missed over the years, since I had left Greybeard's camp-site. Boots could not believe his luck, having no idea that south west Wales hosted several eco villages and communities and had a world-class coastline with magical coves and beaches.

We arrived at the shed at ten pm in the dark and were almost immediately greeted by the nosiest neighbours, who told us that we were basically causing uproar, arriving in their sleepy village at ten pm on a Saturday night. Boots was incredibly patient with their barrage of personal questions and, after thirty minutes, managed to assure them that there was no need to call the police and all was well.

Boots called himself a petrol-head and drove us around in his car like a deranged rally driver, loving the dangerous little lanes. I swear he nearly killed us six times, and I only got into his car every day to avoid getting depressed in a dark shed in bad weather, surrounded by nosy, old folk. But it was great to be able to get around the area as, when I had lived there previously, I had only ever travelled by bus to sign on fortnightly, and that had felt like an adventure.

The shed was very old and leaked quite badly, and as autumn kicked in it was certainly a very cold place to sleep. It was also filthy. When Boots realised that its structural integrity was unsound, he

went ape-shit. We both felt that the roof might seriously blow off in the strong Welsh winds. I started finding some beautiful walks and places to hang out and write.

The weeks flew by, and my TV stardom loomed. When we had been evicted from Pigeon Palace, my last questions to the TV crew had been what the show was called and when it would be aired on the nation's televisions. I was told that their show had a title that I had heard of and seen small snippets from. It was called 'Bad Tenants and Rogue Landlords', and they said it would be shown three weeks after the eviction. I had discussed the show and its timing with a wise, old friend in Liverpool, and, having researched the show's listings, he found out that it was to be shown six weeks after we were kicked out of the church. I believe they purposefully misinformed me so that I would miss my fifteen minutes of fame.

Boots and I were good recyclers, taking huge hauls from some fancy service station restaurants, but financially we were both broke. No income between us. As the night for my new life as a TV celebrity neared, he realised that our only chance of seeing the show was in a pub if we could get them to put it on. I liked the sound of being in a pub to watch the programme, so we both messaged mates to try to send us a little cash so we would be able to buy beer. It was a big effort, and we only managed to get enough for one pint each. That really upset me.

The big night arrived, and we decided to go to a nearby village that had six pubs with TV screens. Everyone liked the sound of watching me get evicted from a church, and all six pubs agreed to show it on their screens that evening. Only in the last pub that we asked did I feel comfortable enough to sit and watch myself on TV, on a huge screen, surrounded by semi-drunk strangers.

We bought our beers and sat down next to the pool table, close to the biggest screen I had ever witnessed in a pub, and waited. The show began. My heart had been firmly lodged in my mouth all day long. I could hardly breathe. Would they have made me look like a massive scum bag? Could they possibly be fair towards squatters or even just manage neutrality?

As the adverts finished and the opening titles began, somebody selected a bunch of songs on the juke box and inserted a load of cash. Music blasted. We could not hear a thing, as a life-sized me appeared in the opening shots, doing what appeared to be a special little dance, that I had no recollection of! I died on the spot, as Boots nearly fell off his chair, laughing. "The jaybo jiggle!" he shouted. I received a mixture of looks, as some people in the pub realised that the guy on the TV was me.

Chapter 44 King of the Squatters!

The programme was one hour long and featured four stories. They chose to make ours the longest. As they only had Rob and I to question, they showed several things that I had said which really surprised me. Especially my line about trying to help raise the consciousness of the human family. But it was my dance of defiance in the face of the child-trafficking owners that the producers enjoyed enough to show three times. At the end, Boots looked at me proudly and exclaimed loudly, "You are the King of the Squatters!" We laughed so hard at the ridiculousness of it all before leaving, unable to afford a second drink.

The following day, six of us huddled around a friend's mobile phone to watch my first moments of TV stardom, with audio. The picture was obviously small, and I found my voice and appearance disturbing. I had only heard my recorded voice once before and was shocked that I sound like Barry White, the love walrus. In my head, my voice is slightly high pitched and normal, not all deep and nasal.

We all watched in silence, hanging on every word that was spoken. My friend's kids were impressed that I was actually on TV. The show obviously portrayed us as dirty squatters. As there were ten or more leaks in the main roof and many smashed windows for all the pigeons to come and go, the main area was a mess. The building had been vacant for ten years. Rob had actually tried to clean all the guano up, but it had been a mammoth task.

Channel 5 and the bailiffs had been expecting masses of us all up for a fight and were even scared that the surrounding neighbours would come and support us, brawling with the bailiffs. When the young squatters had occupied the semi-derelict church, they had knocked on many neighbouring houses' doors to explain themselves. The neighbours had all been supportive, and several had given furniture. The show said that we had not cared about the neighbours. Channel 5 and their presenter, a lawyer, had made a point of saying that we were preventing the good religious folk from providing the local youth with a community centre.

At the end, Boots looked at me grinning and said, "Well done, mate. You need to sue the arse off Channel 5 now!" He launched into why I should sue them with such conviction that I was immediately swept along into believing that I could and should. I, king of the squatters, scumdog of the universe, could sue a multi-million-pound TV company, then I would have a pension and I could help start the anarchist retirement home, before I needed to move in.

We all agreed that I had said some good things, unexpectedly and under pressure. Channel 5 had spent thirty minutes firing multiple questions at me, and I had remained calm and rolled three slightly shaky cigarettes in the process. My pals and I began discussing the realities of suing a major TV company and their independent lawyer. The lawyer had presented the programme and presumably done the research, or overseen his team of lawyers. He said some silly things, like squatters had no rights, then they showed us winning in court because they could not even get Pigeon Palace's address right on the court summons.

I had studied aspects of the law, including negligence and misrepresentation, many years before as a trainee surveyor. My memories were dusty, but I so wanted to sue Channel 5 that I soon convinced myself that it could be done. If the revolution did not happen, I would have some money for the last years of my life and have a few years without having to struggle desperately just to survive. Better still, I would find partners and we could buy one hundred acres of land near Barcelona and start building eco homes for old anarchists. Of course, as Sven had pointed out to me, anarchists would not need to become old before they 'retired'.

Just before my dad had died, he wanted to tell me two things that really stuck in my mind. Firstly, he told me that just before his dad had died that he had also wanted to tell him a story from his youth. My grandad had watched a full-blown sword fight between two men near his home. My grandad, Silver Sid, had lived in a static caravan near the beach, which flooded. He had told me that sometimes they had to go to school in a rowing boat across the flooded field. He was from Irish traveller background; our home town had a long history of being a hotbed for wreckers and travellers, smugglers and thieves.

My dad's second story was more of a shock. After being brought up all my life to always tell the truth and never lie, my dad revealed that my parents had in fact lied to me all my life. I discovered that day that I had a brother, who was just one year older than me. When my dad said that he thought my brother had become a barrister in London, I nearly died. It got better. Not only was my new brother a barrister, but he was also a superhero, with the delightful name of Peter Penny.

My first mixed feelings about that bombshell left me thinking that I would search for him, but those feelings quickly changed to I would not. I finally rested upon the conclusion that, if I ever needed a

barrister, then I would find my superhero. I would have loved to see his face when I met him to explain that I was his long-lost brother, king of the squatters, and I needed him to represent me to sue Channel 5 for my pension. Maybe he had already watched the programme. Two million people had.

A few days later we were heading to Boots' office, a McDonald's in a nearby town, when I asked if we could take a small detour to buy beer. The town was actually having a flooding crisis, and as the river's burst banks caused havoc he just exploded. He had been edgy for days, was being treated terribly at work and was struggling for the cash and energy to work on his shed. But my request for a small detour to Tesco broke him. He sped the car up to a ridiculous speed then slammed on the breaks by the side of the river and screamed at me psychotically, "I should smash your skull in right here!"

Rarely have I been so scared as this second time that someone screamed at me, threatening to smash my skull in. I honestly thought that he was going to do it. He was both willing and able, and he had the perfect opportunity to dump my body into the flooding river so my death looked like an accident. And so, after only a few days of becoming the king of the squatters, my lethal one-man army had mutinied and threatened to kill me!

I was not feeling like any kind of king. Not even a prince. More like a scumdog in the filthy shed that had turned into a filthier building site. Boots was sleeping in his car, and, when I explained his threat to a friend, she kindly let me move into her luxurious shed nearby. However, I had long considered moving into one of the region's alternative communities, so I sent a few messages to some.

Frances was someone whom I had heard of. She replied to me and so we met at her place. We got along OK. Well, she spoke, and I mostly listened. She gave me the impression that she was a dedicated anti-capitalist. We came to an agreement, which was the best I had arranged with anyone, apart from Greybeard and Rainbow City.

I moved in and quickly found out that Frances was despotic, in her own little empire. My room was ice-cold above an open garage. I realised I was living with a monster. The way she treated people was as bad as I had ever experienced. She treated me like dirt, and I soon heard all kinds of horror stories.

Her partner was a Cinderella-type character. I liked her and tried to make her laugh often, after she told me that she had never experienced one happy relationship. I heard Frances scream at her and openly treat her appallingly. Francis also had a third-in-command, who licked her arse ruthlessly. Tyrants and sycophants, yet again.

Luckily for me, some nice people lived at the house and some visited, otherwise I would have lost the plot. Frances was openly tyrannical. My heart wept as I realised that I was in a terrible situation, far from the ideal that I had been promised. It was difficult to work, but I kept my side of our agreement, working as hard as I could to try and pass the time quickly.

It took four weeks before Frances made a positive comment to me. Her behaviour really was appalling, most of the time. And especially to me. Another resident quickly commented to me about my exceptionally poor treatment. My highest hopes had morphed into my worst nightmare. I started running away to hide whenever I heard her voice approaching the communal areas.

I was tortured about whether or not I could stay at that mad house. Could I possibly help Frances change? Would she even keep our agreement? It seemed unlikely. My situation seemed entirely

futile. Frances had owned the buildings and land for years, attempting to start a community. Many people had come to try to live in the idyllic setting, but all had left, except for a few desperate people.

I imagined that, if I had just walked out, she would scream at me all the way to the bus stop. I hatched an escape plan. I would bail out of the hell-hole early one morning, walk to the next village and catch the first bus to a neighbouring county, where some old friends lived. The only problem was that my old mates, Ally and Sharon, and I had not seen or spoken to each other in fourteen years! When I arrived at Ally's workplace, he was obviously surprised to see me. We hugged, and he instantly asked me if I had anywhere to stay. He spoke to his partner, and she said I could stay for two weeks. Which I appreciated enormously, because it was two days before Christmas.

I had not spent a Christmas with my family for so long that I could not remember the last time. When I found out that they had been getting together for Christmas every year without telling or inviting me, I had felt so hurt. And the separation from my daughter always felt more pronounced at Christmas, the family time. It was an absolute privilege for my friends and their lovely family to let me share that Christmas with them. I even got socks, made from bamboo.

After working myself into the ground for an ungrateful tyrant for the preceding two months, taking two-hour baths and relaxing was really good for me. My friends treated me to healthy, delicious meals, and we caught up on fourteen years' worth of life. But, looming in the background, I had a two-week clock, rapidly counting down.

In Barcelona, many people had told me about the magic of Granada in Andalusia. Everyone used the word 'magic', and it had finally come to the top of my list of places to try to live, followed by Greek squats. In fact, that was my list. I had internet access and launched into researching the troglodytes of Spain. I could not believe what I saw and learned. Images of stunningly beautiful caves, with running water and electricity. In Guadix, the entire town consisted of cave buildings – two thousand caves – including hostels, restaurants and churches.

I was utterly fascinated and decided that I would go and live in a cave in Granada, without having a clue about the actual practicalities of moving into a cave. James had lived there and told me that I just needed to go and ask the African guys which caves were empty and not likely to collapse. I booked a cheap ticket as my fortnight's break drew to an end.

The night before I left Wales, Ally told me that his sister had just arrived in Granada. Great, I thought, and asked if we could hook up. He told me that she was on a skiing holiday, as Granada was covered in snow. Then I got a message from James telling me to be careful of ice thawing out, as caves are more likely to collapse then. He told me that I did not need to worry because I was a surveyor. I replied that, surprisingly, we had not studied caves.

I could barely sleep on my last night in Wales before I pressed the A button once again. I was so very scared and so excited by the possibilities. It would be an adventure, whatever. Finally, I would see, smell and touch the magic of Granada. I would live in a cave. I was king of the squatters. What could possibly go wrong?

The End

Postscript

As I neared completion of writing this book, by another little miracle, I was rescued from Spain hours before the corona virus broke out. I wish I would have kept a daily diary. After my friends and I self-isolated for two weeks, Britain went into 'lock-down'. Two early headlines struck me: 'Common decency is our only hope' followed by '£350 billion bailout for businesses'. The next day, it jumped another £20 billion. Prince Charles contracted the virus, followed by Bojo The Clown, whilst Trump tried to buy all the ventilators in the world, for America.

My friends in the Spanish caves are in a hellish situation. Normally, they get money from tourists and recycle food from the bins. Now the tourists have disappeared, and the Spanish bins are empty, unlike some British bins into which people are now throwing away the large quantities of food they stockpiled so quickly. It was not long before British people started behaving badly in the supermarkets. Unlike the hard-hit Italians, who behaved respectfully to each other as they were being hit hardest in Europe. Last night, the Queen gave only her sixth special message in sixty years. She said how we had behaved so well, as we always do, and how we shone in Europe.

Few people seem aware of the situation in Yemen, the worst humanitarian crisis on the planet according to the World Health Organisation, or in Syria, nine years into its horrendous war yet providing incredibly inspiring examples of new ways of horizontal organising respectfully promoting feminism and ecology and anarchistic dreams, inspired by Murray Bookchin and deep ecology. The 'leader' of the movement in Rojava was imprisoned alone in a jail on an island, adding a new concept to the idea of isolation.

People have time on their hands and speculate about the virus being manmade or caused by 5G. Some people believe it was essentially caused, like others before and more to follow, by humans' rampant destruction of the natural world, devastating new habitats, like shaking a feather duster, spreading hitherto unknown diseases, spreading from animals to humans.

I was lucky enough to bury my head in the caves and avoid Trump, but now he is rammed down my throat. Trump said he was the greatest president in human history. Chomsky calls him a sociopathic buffoon. In a Twitter conversation with an American politician, the Californian representative suggested it would be better to lose two point five percent of their population than the money it would take to keep them alive. As America's death toll passes China's and becomes the highest on the planet, Trump announced he expects to see everyone back in church on Sunday. Whilst everyone talks of a virus affecting the entire world, one hundred out of two hundred are affected. News channels are refusing to air Trump, after some of his 'misinformation' has verged on lies.

The poorest, most densely populated areas, like the slums of India, south Africa and South America, are just starting to be affected. In Johannesburg, army soldiers lie on the ground aiming their guns at the horrifically overcrowded townships to enforce lockdown on people who have no access to clean water or hand sanitisers.

In southern Italy, poor people have been forced to steal food, but that has been quickly followed by voluntary groups distributing food to those in desperate need. In prisons, riots have broken out, after visits have been stopped and people have died. In Britain, sales of compost and seeds have increased by 250%, as necessity breeds ingenuity and people rediscover where their food comes from and regain the confidence to grow healthy, local, seasonal food. In Nigeria, five million people are trying to stop the introduction of genetically modified cotton and corn by the giant corporation Monsanto/Bayer.

The celebrities are taking the virus badly, struggling now the cameras and news are off them. So, they are showing their true colours in times of crisis. Millionaire chefs are laying all their staff off. One made a crowdfunding application to try to help keep his staff on. One, from self-isolation on

his multi-million-dollar yacht, reminded the ordinary people of the world that we are all in this together. And another reminded us plebs of the importance of washing our hands. Giving a helpful close-up, she revealed her thirty-dollar soap.

As America has military bases on three quarters of the countries on mother Earth, these are scary times. Some people speculate that they will close down the internet and the media, with only Trump broadcasting to the world. Emergency police measures may be the most dangerous ever known, as fascist tyrannies head for one world government, 'the internet of things', one cashless economy and everybody micro-chipped, after we have sleep-walked into a fascist dream of centralised, absolute, global control.

At the same time, it did not take long before people began showing the best of humanity, with caring and co-operative mutual aid groups. What happens next is anyone's guess. Will the world's poor and impoverished be left to die in the millions? Will all the radicals and revolutionaries be rounded up and disposed of?

Chomsky, the most important intellectual alive, says the most important question facing humanity is whether or not we will survive the twenty-first century. The 'neoliberal plague' is much more threatening to humanity than this current virus. Chomsky says that, if we don't eliminate fossil fuels very quickly, the hope for human society is very dim, as Trump races to open new oil fields with no discussion. Chomsky says it is an absolute miracle we haven't wiped ourselves out already with nuclear war. We have come so close, several times. And now, the only predictable thing about Trump is that he is a completely unpredictable showman.

The doomsday clock, which shows how close we are to absolute nuclear catastrophe, has continually edged closer to midnight under Trump. From two minutes to midnight, we are now into seconds, for the first time ever. Due to two factors, nuclear war and global warming. India and Pakistan are neighbouring enemies with nuclear weapons, and Rajasthan has hit fifty degrees, a temperature at which life becomes unlive able and access to water can start wars.

However, a third factor is increasing: the loss of democracy. Members of the USA Republican party all deny climate catastrophe. Neo-nazis have chanted "Heil Trump" outside the White House, and every neo-nazi in Europe is excited by the buffoon. Chomsky has witnessed sixteen presidents in his ninety-one years and says Trump is off the spectrum (25/11/16 YouTube interview on Al Jazeera). Proto-fascism and powerful state violence protect sound economics. The main enemy to state power is not terrorism, the main enemy to state power is the domestic population.

Aged 91, Chomsky, astute as ever, said the corona virus could have been prevented. It was known about in October 2019 in China. The USA did a simulation, but nothing was done. The corona virus crisis was made worse by the treachery of the political systems. On October 31st 2019, China told the WHO and one week later sequenced it. WHO knew how to deal with it. South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan did something about it. Other countries did not. Britain and America were the worst. (Interview 28/3/20).

The future might equally be bright. Do we follow the path of fear or the path of love? We need more dreamers. Perhaps we are at the point in human evolution where all the good people of the Earth, the ninety-nine point nine percent, transcend to a whole new way of being, humans being. Domestic populations – ordinary people – could become organised and engaged in creating new societies, avoiding nuclear or environmental catastrophe, or there will be no recovery from this critical stage in human society. Communing, respecting nature, the most powerful and profound energy in the nature. Whatever the case, it does seem to be the case that humanity is in an absolutely defining moment, right now.

References

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Tedtalk Ruari author Hitching for hope WHO says depression is one of the biggest illnesses on the planet

Youtube Surviving the twenty first century Noam Chomsky introduction at Durham University talk More than thirty eight honorary degrees and a species of bee named after him

Postscript Noam Chomsky interview on Al Jazeera Youtube 25/11/16

Postscript Noam Chomsky interview on DiEM25 TV Youtube Corona virus-what is at stake 28/3/20 Wrote first essay on Spanish civil war after fall of Barcelona aged ten after discovering anarchist bookshop (in new york) opened by survivors who got to USA

Postscript Ecowatch.com Five million Nigerians oppose GMO's

Recommended Viewing

Baraka

Samsara

Food Inc movie

Plastic Planet movie

The Gods Must Be Crazy movie

Bandit Queen movie Phoolan Devi

Reclaim The Streets The Movie

True Hallucinations Terence McKenna Youtube we plants are happy plants

Youtube TedxO' Porto-Mark Boyle- The Moneyless Man 11/7/2011

Barricading The Ice Caps The laboratory For Insurrectionary Imagination John Jordan Vimeo

Back Cover

I struggle with authority and first rebelled at age 8. It felt good. After accidentally becoming a surveyor, I left a promising career to try to change the world. A heavy burden for a skinny guy. After creating life, my baby was stolen. A poetic joker, I enjoy making inky patterns on paper. Burning books is bad, but beheading is worse.

I have been subjected to horrors and miracles. I have lived without money yet never felt richer, slept on the streets yet never felt saner. Nature only creates beauty, and butterflies cause chaos.

Bad people are a product of bad systems. I have been rescued by a super model and lived with yogis waiting for angels and aliens. I have jumped trains across borders, without documents, squatted outrageous properties, and sold signs made of cardboard.

My life has been a series of happy accidents and blind intuition. My only plan, to have no plan. When Pigeon Palace was evicted, I became king of the squatters. Laughing in the face of adversity, blending life, art, work and play, in a revolutionary way. This is my story.

Or

From child rebel to professional surveyor to scumdog squatter. Sleeping on the streets, I never felt saner. Living without money, I never felt richer. A poetic joker and revolutionary raver, natural builder and life creator, fighting the war against people, and nature.

From jumping trains across borders without documents to squatting outrageous properties to selling diy cardboard signs. My only plan, to have no plan. I explain why I only eat vegans, why I give free condoms to the over-60s, why I make inky patterns, why burning books is bad but beheading is much worse, and how I became king of the squatters.

From horror story to miracle, an anarchic pilgrimage, laughing in the face of adversity. This is my story.