

NOT GOING HOME

A True Account of Surviving
Life in a Homeless Shelter
in Belfast



Della B.

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in a Homeless Shelter in Belfast

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All the names in this book have been changed to protect the identity of the Hostel's residents.

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For the Lewis family
My saviours

SYNOPSIS

NOT GOING HOME

I am a 47 year old respectable, ordinary woman. I sold my home in Belfast at the height of the ‘Housing Market Boom’ and after taking advice from someone whom I thought to be financially astute, invested most of the proceeds from the sale. This move, however, resulted in me being almost broke and homeless to boot. Consequently, I found myself moving into a Hostel in Belfast. My story, in journal form, gives an insight into how this affects me. I fall into depression very quickly, am prescribed anti depressants, drink to excess on an almost daily basis but eventually, slowly, begin the fight to get out. I lose my fight, appeal and finally win. The three months spent inside the hostel are a total revelation; a culture shock to say the least and I impart a bit of the life within, with detailed accounts of the horrors that the outside world is probably unaware of. I live amongst a varied cross section of Belfast’s undesirables, learn how best to survive, fight the system and unexpectedly, make a friend along the way.

I confide in only a handful of people and do my damndest to hide it from the rest. I can accept help from no-one on the outside, for fear of jeopardising my fight to be re housed.

My story is as accurate an account of life in a Hostel (whose identity is not divulged) as it is possible to be, bearing in mind that it is based on first hand experience. Mine. Nothing is left out. It occurred in 2009.

Some of my discoveries are shocking, my language sometimes bad and my determination fierce.

But, I eventually do go home.

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GOING IN

I just woke up. What day is it? Wednesday, Thursday? Does it matter? Won't make any difference anyway. My eyes focus after a few seconds and I know exactly where I am. The barely hanging, single curtain is drawn fully back showing my room in all its dull depressing glory. How the Hell did I end up here? Another day in Hotel Paradiso. A wet, boring, miserable day, full of nothing. I'm 47 for Christ's sake. I shouldn't be here. I *need* to get a grip. It'll be over soon, I hope. Am I as strong as I tell myself and everyone I know?

"I'm hard enough to get through this, I'm strong, and I'll be fine."

Am I? Will I? I hate it here but I really don't have a choice. I have to see this through. I know I'll leave here soon. But what will I take with me? Hepatitis B, food poisoning, galloping gumpies* caught from one of the communal toilet bowls, or something not yet identified by science or technology? *None of the above*. I'm becoming a master of self preservation and gliding through this time in my life without touching the sides is becoming second nature.

MONDAY 19 JANUARY

I was going to an Advice centre, a local one recommended by a friend.

"Go and tell them everything" she said. "They'll sort you out."

I'm generally a strong character, can face anything life throws at me and deal with it in a practical way. Knee in the

*diarrhoea

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groin approach. That's me. Face it, analyse it, deal with it. Done and dusted. I got to the door. My lower regions were cramping. My bowels were bubbling. I couldn't deal with this. I was ashamed. Didn't really know why, just was. Bubble bubble. Stay outside, don't go in yet. Have a cigarette. Okay. Bubble bubble. Big deep breath. I went in. The girl I spoke with was so calm and seemed genuinely compassionate. I explained my predicament. She listened intently and then left to make phone calls from another office. Bubble bubble. I waited, but I knew what the answer would be. She returned and confirmed my assumptions. I wasn't entitled to any Social Benefits or Housing Benefit, and I wasn't entitled to government housing, but if I was homeless the local Housing Associations *may* consider me for housing. Bubble bubble. But I'd have to prove my homeless status. Bubble. WHOOSH! My damn bowels let me down big style. How the Hell was I going to get up and walk out with this poultice tied to my arse? Not like I could disguise it, or the smell. So I did what nature made us girls good at. I cried. It wasn't hard to start and I just couldn't stop. I was incontinent! Sweet Jesus, could it get any worse?

Oh yes.

I'm going to live in a Hostel.

TUESDAY 20 JANUARY

I'd been processed into the system. I was all documented and had been assigned a Link worker, who would extract all my thoughts and put them down on paper. What were my thoughts right now? Help me someone, get me outta here. I'm homeless, not a bleedin' criminal. The Hostel was full of young people who surely *must* be criminals, because they were all younger, dirtier and different looking to me. It was dirty, smelly and covered in notice boards with rules and regulations on them and.... and.... and...

"Wanna cuppa tea love?"

My inward panic was interrupted when I realised that it was me who'd been addressed about the tea.

“What? Eh, no, thanks.”

I couldn't drink in here. I'd get cold sores from the cups. They'd probably never been washed. The guy looking at me was smiling. He was about 30, tall, thin and seemed to have two eyes in the front of his face and a mouth and nose just like non criminal normal people. Like me. Non criminal. Normal. But he couldn't be. He was in here. He was either a car thief, burglar, paedophile, rapist or ex mental patient from some institution, that couldn't afford to keep him on as a resident, because their funding had been cut. He was still smiling and he spoke very fast now to the other people sitting about in this communal TV room. He was the latter. Must be. Ex-mental patient. Too smiley to be normal. I had to wait in here while a member of staff looked for more papers in the main office and then he'd come to get me and take me back into the interview room at the back of the building from where we'd just come. Said he'd only be ten minutes. Someone else was talking to me. I could see her lips moving and she was looking right at me, but I couldn't hear anything. The smell in here was overpowering. There were people sitting all over the place and they were all looking at me. What *was* that smell? Dirty bodies. What else could it be?

“Are ye movin' in here love? Ask for room 9, it's quieter up there.”

I heard a voice and realised it was mine.

“No, I don't think so; I'm just waiting for that man to come back with some information for me.”

But I knew I would be moving in here. I'd nowhere else to go. The man I was waiting for came back in half an hour, not the ten minutes he initially suggested, but it felt like I'd waited half a day. He knocked the glass panel on the door. I got up and followed him into the back office.

“We have a room available for you, but it's upstairs. Will you be able to manage the stairs?”

I looked at my metal walking stick.

“Yes. I've no choice. Thanks. What happens now?”

“I'll show you up and you can get settled in. Have you any stuff?”

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“Stuff?”

“Clothes or any personal effects.”

Jesus, if only he knew.

“Yes I’ve a few bits with me.”

My car was outside, full to the brim with clothes and *stuff*. The room was ninety three pounds a week and included heat and light. It was warm in this building at least. Ninety three pounds a week. More expensive than a rented room, in a nice house, in a clean, green environment. But that would class me as *accommodated*, not homeless, and whip me off the homeless list and shoot my application for housing through the proper channels to pieces. I took it. I signed a million papers and was told by this young man, Pat, my newly assigned Link worker, that I would need to see him tomorrow to begin the process of assessment, a requirement whilst living here. I agreed a time to meet him and began the public indignity of moving in.

BEING IN

Last night was just the norm for a weekday night. Whoever gets the dole money shares it out with the rest of the crew in here and they all buy the necessities of life. Buckfast wine, beer, whatever. Survival works on a loop. Tomorrow someone else will get their dole money and pay back today's guy and lend out the rest. And so it goes. Generally speaking, they're all spent out by the weekend and things quieten down slightly. And sometimes not. I was still looking at the clock on my bedside locker at 03.26 this morning. I knew my eyes were swollen before I even looked in the mirror. My immediate neighbour, Charlotte, in room 6, was entertaining last night and being that the walls are paper thin, I was being entertained too, so to speak. It's not allowed of course. Residents are permitted to visit with each other in their respective rooms but must vacate said rooms by 10pm. Yeah, right! The staff quickly learn how to be magicians working this job. They're downstairs in the main office one minute and banging the doors of after hours offenders the next. How do they know who's doing what and in what room? How do they magic themselves from one floor to the next in the blink of an eye? They're good, I'll give them that. They're also patience personified, overworked and extremely tolerant. But Charlotte still got her end away before the staff were any the wiser. This time.

WEDNESDAY 21 JANUARY

My friend Margaret lives close to the Hostel. Thank God. She gave me a bottle of antibacterial spray and a bagful of cloths and tea towels. I stripped the bed right down to the fitted plastic mattress cover. Did someone tell the staff here about my little incontinent slip before I came here? Why do

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they think I need a plastic cover? I'm *not* incontinent. Not today anyway. Can't a person shit themselves through stress once in a lifetime without every bugger getting to know about it? I tried to rationalise. It wasn't easy in the midst of deep set paranoia. Perhaps no-one knew and the plastic cover was standard issue. I'd find out. I'd ask the other residents in here if they had plastic covers on their beds too. But if they said no, then they'd know that I had one and my secret would surely be common knowledge. I looked around the room. The bedding from the last resident was still on the bed when I came here two days ago. I trailed it off the bed and flung it into the corner. She was a Heroin junkie according to the youngsters in here. Her long black hairs were still on the duvet cover and sheets. I lifted them and threw them on the landing floor just outside my room door. I sprayed the entire bed with antibacterial liquid and watched it run down the plastic cover. I'd got latex gloves on. I wiped it all over the bed and headboard and metal frame then rubbed it all off with a clean cloth. Then I binned the cloth. I itched, I think. I'd washed all my own bedding in the washing machine downstairs in the utility room and then tumble dried it. I put my memory foam mattress onto the bed, then my clean bedding on top. Everything was clean now. I vacuumed the carpet, washed down the skirting boards and window sill, washed out the inside of the two bedside lockers and the wardrobe and binned all the cloths and gloves that I'd used. I didn't wash the blood drops off the walls. There were too many of them and I didn't want to wash the whole room. I'd be here all day. There was no hanging rail in the wardrobe. Fuck. My car was full of clothes. I went down and told the staff. For ninety three pounds a week, I think I'm entitled to a hanging rail. They'd see what they could do.

THURSDAY 22 JANUARY

The Housing Officer came here to the Hostel every fortnight. I met with her today. She wasn't the friendliest of people but she was civil. At first. I told her my circumstances and she wrote it

all down. I knew by the look on her face that I didn't really have much chance of being re housed via the Housing Association she represented. She was obviously of the opinion that I made myself homeless intentionally. *HELLO!* Get a look at this place. Who in their right mind would sign on the dotted friggin' line to come in here voluntarily? At one point I felt the nails on my left hand jabbing into my palm. I was so close to telling her to kiss my ass and walking out, but in the millisecond that followed, I knew that if I walked out now, I would be totally and utterly crippled from shooting myself in both feet. Instead of losing my temper, I interrupted her rantings and accusations and told her that I was not happy with the way this interview was going. I said that I felt she was butting into every sentence I uttered and that I was not being given the opportunity to state my case and therefore assumptions were being made to the contrary of my actual circumstances. She graciously apologised and invited me to speak freely. So I did. She listened and had a look at the application form she had been filling out during our meeting. She also looked at her nails and her mobile phone and her handbag contents. Hummed and ha'd a bit and said she may be able to juggle things about to help me accumulate as many points as possible. Housing here is allocated on a point's basis. The more points you amass, the further up the housing list you climb. I was right at the bottom of the greasy list, sliding about in a puddle of dog shit and wearing banana skins for shoes. However, being homeless, one can expect to be credited with seventy points and sharing accommodation will result in the award of a further twenty. Having a disability produces a further few. At this point I had no idea as to how many points I actually had, nor was I aware of how many I needed. Her attitude didn't exactly encourage me to ask. I had now to get on with life in here and wait to hear from the Housing people as to whether they would consider re-housing me or not.



Anorexia would be preferable to eating in the Hostel's kitchen. Well, not just eating, cooking too. The kitchen is pro-

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vided for the use of the residents, who have totally abused and spoiled it for the rest of us. It's all beech units, black worktop and brushed chrome fittings. Two sinks, two hobs and ovens. All very good quality and fully equipped with dishes and cutlery, pots and pans and all the things you'd imagine in a kitchen. But the hobs are filthy, the ovens are caked in everything that was ever cooked in them and don't even start me about the microwave. C. difficile, Salmonella, Botulism and whatever else comes from old food remains being nuked again and again in an un-cleaned (ever) microwave. But the most unbelievable fact of the matter is... they all still use it! Yuk! It's disgusting beyond belief but no-one seems frightened by the possibilities of dying a slow gut destroying death. I lost my appetite when I first saw the inside. Never ate for a week and so far have survived on soup from tins, (ring pull openers, so I don't have to use a dirty tin opener) heated up in the saucepan my friend gave me and which is kept under lock and key in my allocated cupboard in the store-room. Everything comes from tins or packets. Pasta, couscous, noodles. Anything that can be cooked in one saucepan. New residents use the kitchen. At first. When they're blind drunk or stoned and get the inevitable munchies. They don't care then, and either can't see or forget about the dirt. They pile whatever they have into the oven or microwave, heat it up and gulp it down. I've heard every one of them complain about stomach cramps at some time whilst living here. Did I say living? I meant existing. There are notices up everywhere in the Hostel. NO FOOD TO BE CONSUMED IN THE BEDROOMS, AS STAFF HAVE DISCOVERED DURING THE SUNDAY ROOM INSPECTIONS, THAT RESIDENTS HAVE BEEN LEAVING DIRTY DISHES IN THEIR ROOMS AND UNDER BEDS, THEREBY DEPRIVING OTHER RESIDENTS OF THESE DISHES. Who the Hell would want to use the dishes now anyway, knowing that some dirty git has been growing fucking mushrooms in the soup bowls under his bed or pissing in the pint glasses 'cos he's a lazy, dirty, drunken bastard and can't be bothered going to the filthy dirty toilet three landings down?

FRIDAY 23 JANUARY

There was a young guy in here, about 18 or 19. Darren. He smiled at me every time I saw him. Just another soul in here going through the motions, but he seemed very chirpy. He approached me on Tuesday when it was agreed that I was moving in and asked me if I needed a hand getting my stuff out of the car. I couldn't lift anything heavy much less carry it up a flight of stairs so I accepted his offer. Within seconds, he had a chain of four or five men and boys handing my belongings from the car to my room on the first floor. Everything I had carried about in the car had now been lying on the bedroom floor for three days. I began to put it all away into the cleaned out furniture and hung as much as possible on the outside of the wardrobe. Still no rail. The room looked like the beginnings of a jumble sale, or 'Maggie Moore's' with all the clothes hanging on the outside of the wardrobe. Everyone in Belfast knew of Maggie Moore's, right? A second hand clothes shop way back in the fifties and sixties in the Donegal Road area. When you wanted something to wear or something for your kids, you just went to Maggie's and ploughed through the piles and piles of clothes lying all over the counter space and hanging on the doors until you found something. Nowadays, even 40 odd years later, local people are still heard to say of an untidy house, 'It's like Maggie Moore's inside.' I had my laptop and printer, a big basket of toiletries, free view box but no TV, hard silver briefcase with all my personal papers inside and CD's and chargers and shed loads of stuff I didn't know what to do with. Everyone else in here seemed to arrive or leave with a single black bin bag. Why had I got so much? I started to cry. How did I get to this? One room in a Hostel. All my worldly goods around me. But they weren't all my worldly goods. These were only some of them. The rest were in a big storage container waiting for a nice place to live in. Just like me. Ninety three pounds a week in here and thirty pounds a week for the storage container. Jesus.

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SATURDAY 24 JANUARY

Young Darren was a little shit. His big incoherent voice woke me up last night after midnight. He was drunk beyond belief and was having a row with Charlotte, my next door neighbour. As far as I could grasp, they were having a major domestic over a DVD. I'd hate to hear them argue over something really important, like a snowflake or a dead cat. Unbelievable! They were screaming at each other, totally unaware or unconcerned that they'd woken the whole house up. Charlotte was just as drunk and possessed possibly the loudest voice in the entire female population. I woke up with a real start, realised where I was, got twice as mad and opened the door and let rip at the two of them.

“Shut the fuck up! Gimme a break! Show a bit of respect! I'm not paying money to live here and listen to this shit!”

And on and on I ranted. When I finally calmed enough to see who was standing there on the landing, I realised there were about five or six faces gawping open mouthed at me. I'd made my mark. I came in here like a nervous nun and quickly morphed into a fishwife.



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