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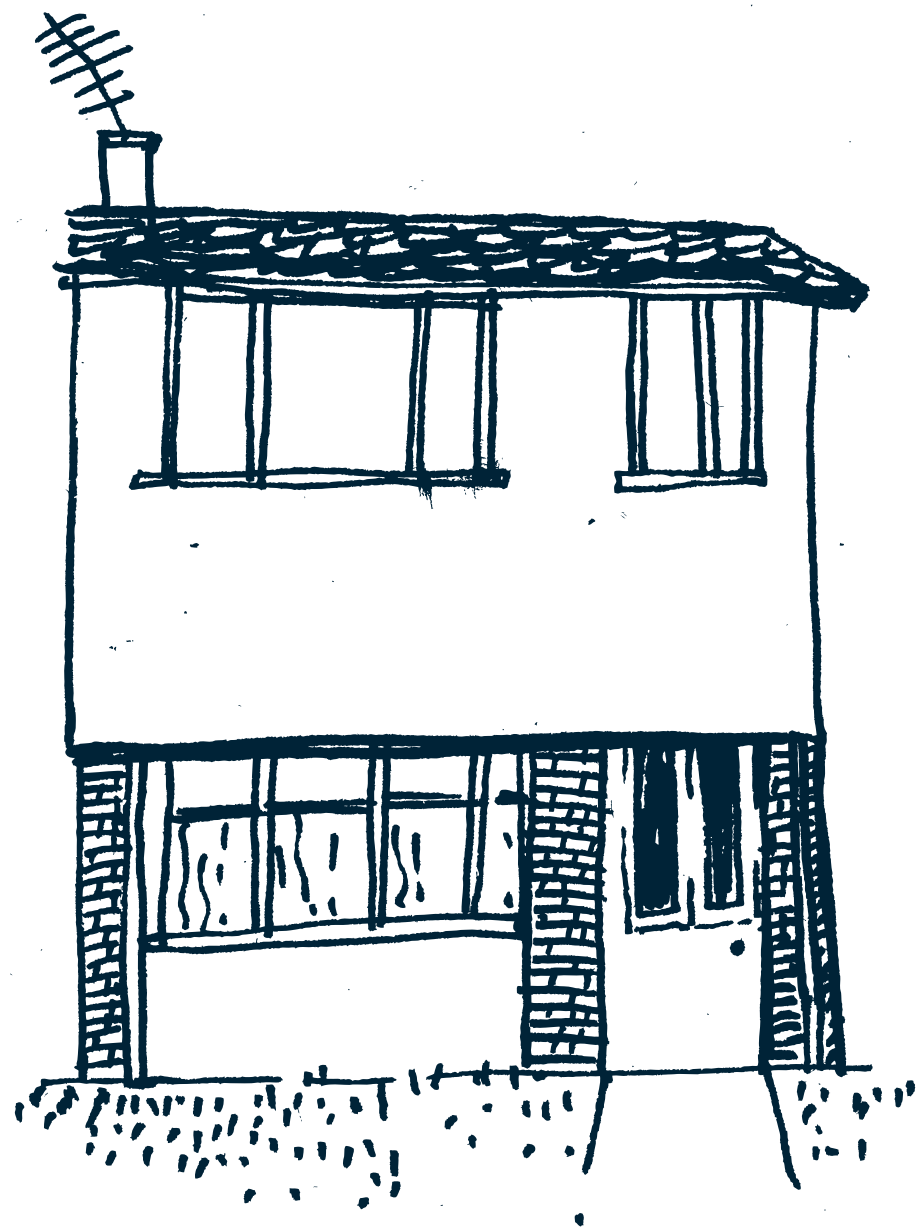
“I was actually born in Cyprus. We lived there until I was one year old. Then we moved back to England.

...

To me, my childhood felt kind of... normal. I assumed everything was good and happy. I do remember mum drinking and arguing with me dad sometimes, but they didn't do it in front of us, so it felt okay, you know... I thought it at least they were together, it wasn't like some of the other kids whose parents were separated...”

“I don't know if there is anywhere I can call home”

“As kids, we were always moving up and down the country, because of my dad's job. He was a chef.”



The incident

“We were living in Oxford. I must have been 10 or 11 at the time.”

10

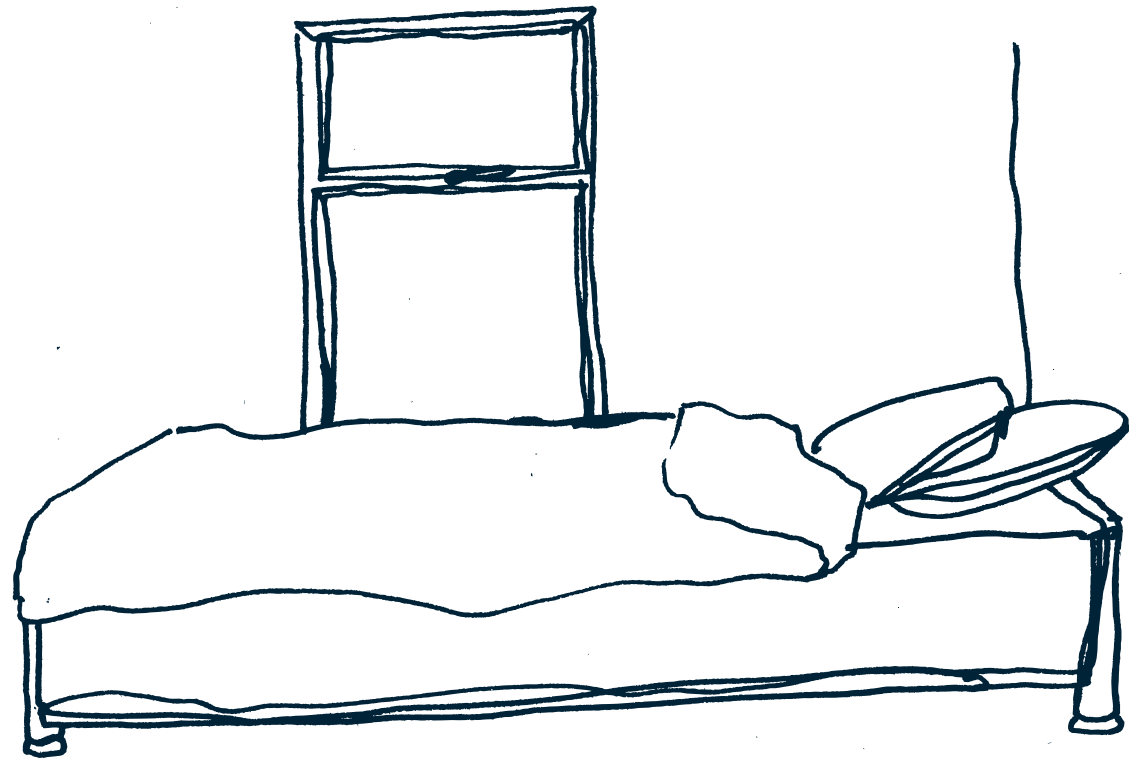
“My dad had an affair with one of the girls at the café where he was working. She wasn’t a very nice person. She was quite young, and she was jealous of the way our dad was with us. We didn’t understand what it meant at the time.

And then there was this incident between mum and dad. Mum was in Southampton at the time. She found out. She drove all the way up to Oxford... She was drunk.

She came in and they argued. I got sent upstairs, but my sister and I, we sat on the stairs. We saw everything.

Mum pulled a knife from the drawer and tried to stab him in the neck...

He left, mum came upstairs to hug us... Then she drove down to Southampton.”



The care home

“Being in care was hard. I was upset. We didn’t really understand what was happening.”

“After that, I was in a care home for 3 and a half weeks. And after a while, I kind of like... Understood that mum and dad were getting divorced.

That’s when my life changed.

I started being disruptive. I was blaming it all on myself...”

“We went back to live with my mum, but I remember going back to Oxford at 12 or 13. I would stay with friends, or sometimes in a hostel. My dad used to say he’d come and see us, then wouldn’t show up.

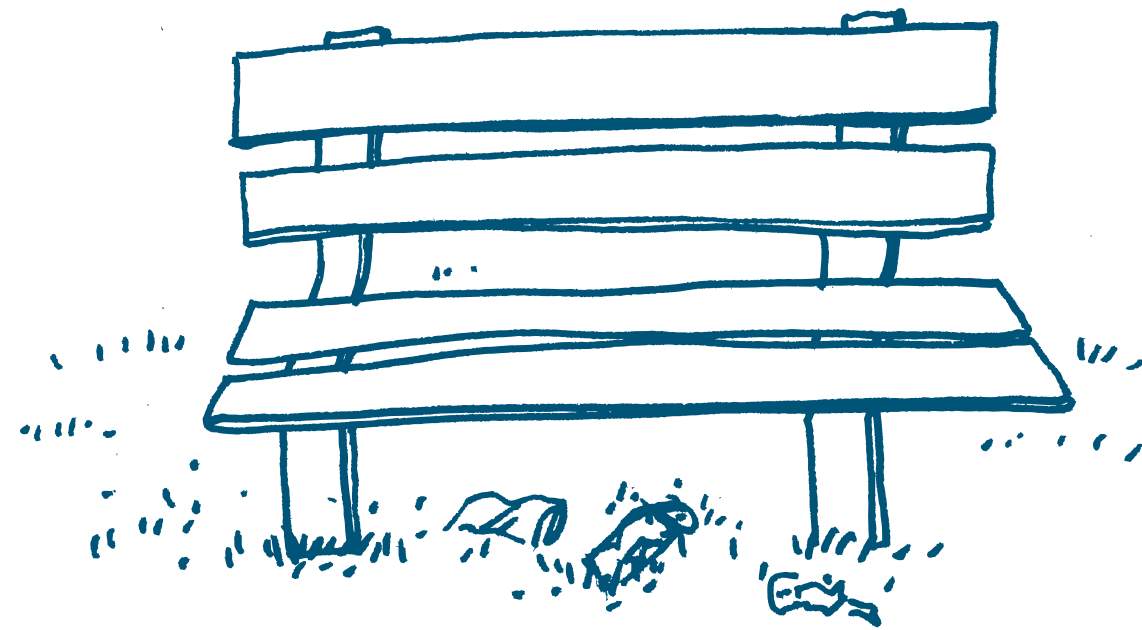
I took an overdose around that time. But I think it was more an attention seeking thing at that time. All I wanted was to live with me dad.

Eventually I was put back into care until I was 16 or 17. I was in a care home for most of it, then with foster parents.”

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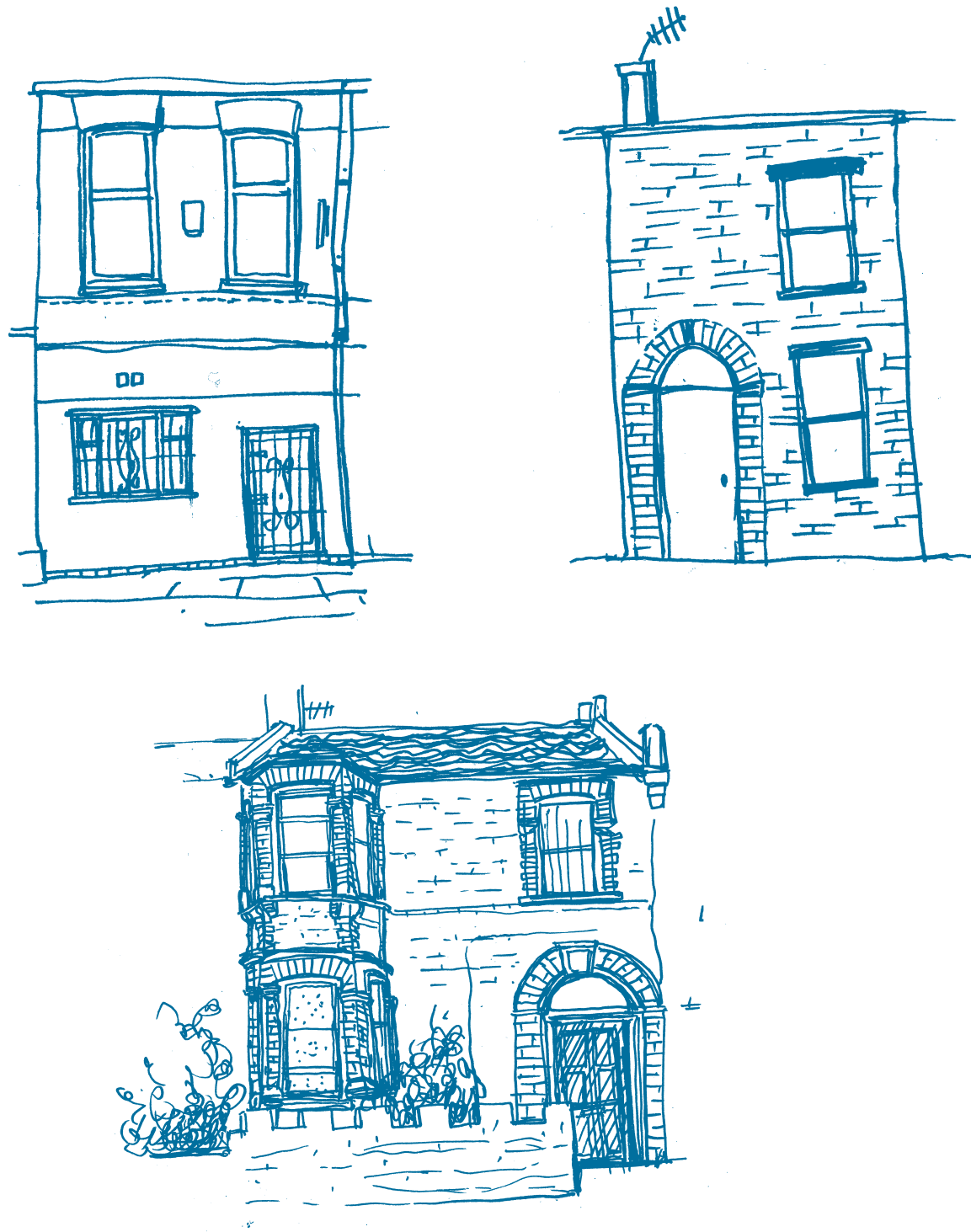
“When I was 16, my mum went to jail for a year... Something to do with credit card fraud. When she got out of jail, I was told I could go home to live with her after Christmas. She had decided to move to Liverpool, and I was going to go with her.

Mum picked me up. But I wanted my dad.”



My first drink

“I had my first drink age 14. It wasn’t heavy drinking back then. I was just, you know, hanging around with mates in the park.”



Being a mum

“We moved house almost each time we had a new baby.”

17 to 35

“At 17, I moved in with my older sister.

That’s when I met my first boyfriend. I was with him for 2 years before I had my first son. At 22, I had my second baby, then two years later the third, and two years after that, my youngest daughter was born.

Having my kids, that’s my happy time. I liked being a mum, I did the best I can. But I wasn’t shown how to be a mum. My mum, she didn’t really show me. I just did the best I could... Making sure they were changed, fed... I did OK, I thought I was a good mum. I still think I was being a good mum.

Their dad... He was cheating on me all 16 years we were together. I knew he was. But to me, he was my family, and I wanted to keep us together.”



The house where it all went wrong

“It was his house. He was into properties, that was his business. So when it started to go wrong, he threw me out.”

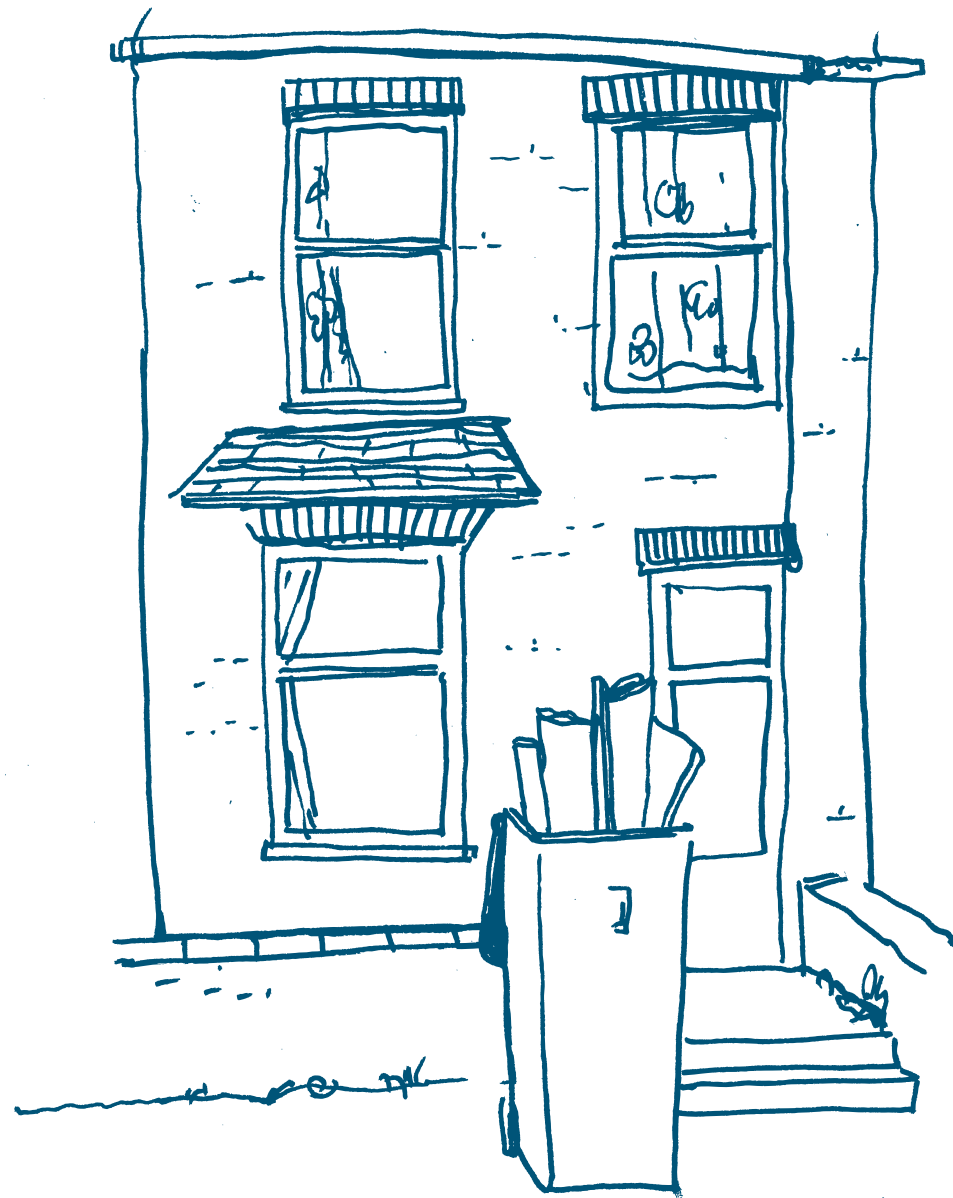
33

“Then we moved into the big house. That’s when he went off with another woman.

I couldn’t cope. I took to drink. I was feeling I couldn’t handle it. The kids started to get to school late. That’s when social services got involved.

My sister, she helped with the kids for a while. My mum too. She lived around the corner... When my kids eventually got taken away, she took them...

I was 32. I feel I should have been a stronger woman. I had no confidence no self-esteem. My drinking... It just took the pain away. I didn’t know how to handle the situation. If I could go back to that time, I would tell myself: ‘get it together girl! You are better than that!’”



“My kids ended up in care. Social services were threatening to get my youngest adopted... So eventually I asked their dad to take the kids.

I packed up, moved to London, met people, went abroad... I wasn't drinking or smoking at that time.

When I came back, I moved back with my mum. Then I found out that dad beat my youngest one with a belt, so mum took them back.

Around that time, I also found a job in Chester. Things were looking better. Then my mum and I had a big fallout. She threw me out of the house, and called my work. She told them I was drinking. I lost my job...”



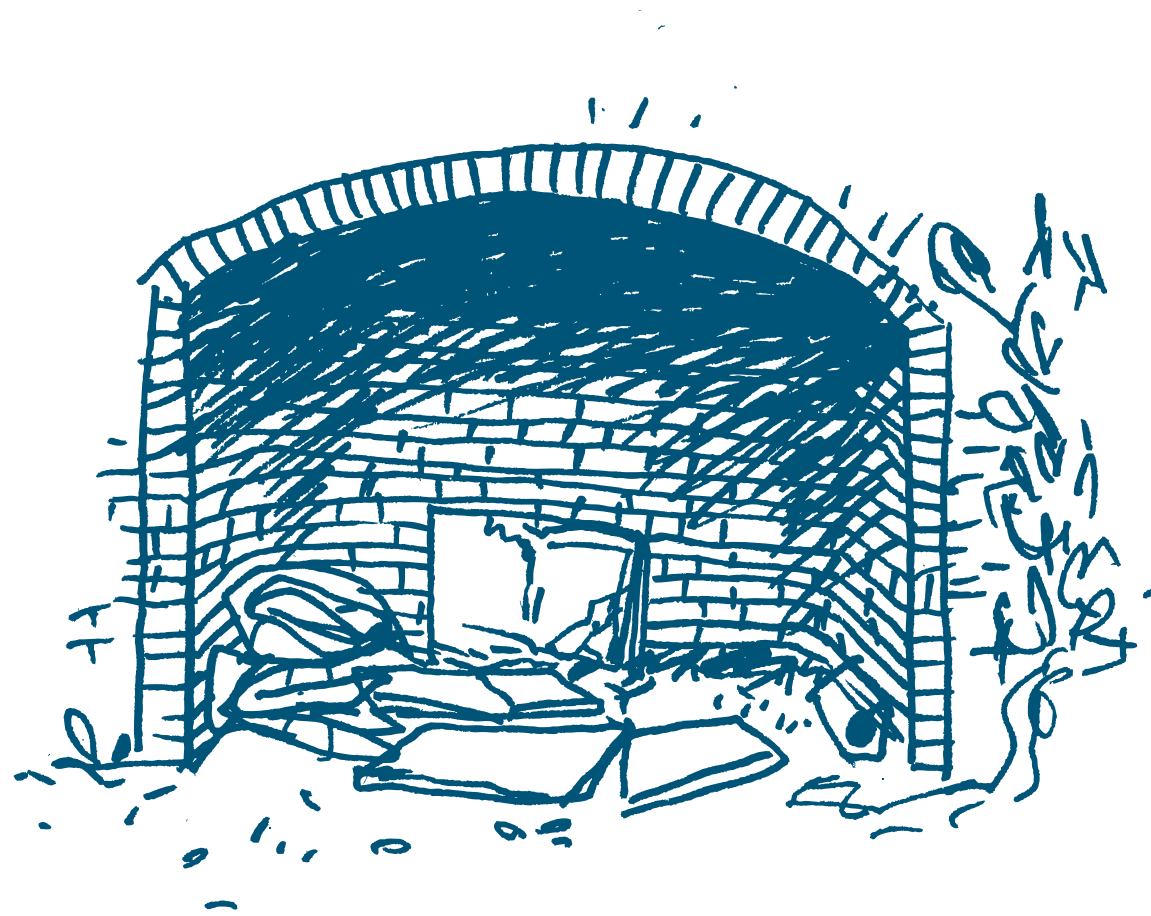
My off-license

“You know that sherry that you drink in little glasses? I was drinking bottles... But it’s gone up in price now!”

36

“That’s when I went to Liverpool. At the beginning, I stayed in a hostel. I was still drinking... Then, one night, because they found vodka in the room, they kicked me out in the streets.

It was 10.30pm at night. It was my first night in the streets. I was scared. I was attacked by a Russian guy... I tried to get myself to stay in cell.”



“Our little flat”

“This is where you’d find all the rats... That’s the place where we used to sleep... I used to put a curtain up there. And when the police used to come and move us on, they’d say: ‘it’s really nice and tidy in here!’”

“The following day, I went to YMCA. That’s where I met my partner.

It wasn’t bad at the beginning. But one day, we fought in front of YMCA. We got booted out, ended up on the streets.

But I felt safe with him... He was well-known, I got to know people through him. I felt safe. Then he got more violent...

He changed my personality... He was jealous, He would tell me to stop wearing what I usually wear. I was dressing like a boy...”



St Luke's church, Liverpool

"The bombed out church... This is where we used to hang around and drink."

"Street life was quite OK at the start, because people were nice ... You do become friends with them, don't you?"

It changed when the younger ones came, it became more violent. People were slashing each other with bottles, and knives and things... It wasn't safe.

But you see, if you're new to town then, you're vulnerable... So you're gonna go along with them. You start mixing, and that's it game over then..."

...

"Some nights I wouldn't go to sleep because if I'd have an argument with me ex... you know, when he'd come to a certain stage of being drunk, jealousy kicked in for him... so I'd walk around all night... it wasn't safe to go to sleep."



Offices of Big Issue North

“I still remember... there was an old woman, she came into the big issue office. She climbed all them stairs... and she gave that blanket to the manager and she said ‘I’ve made it, and I want to give it to someone who needs it...’ And he gave it to me! I still have that blanket...”

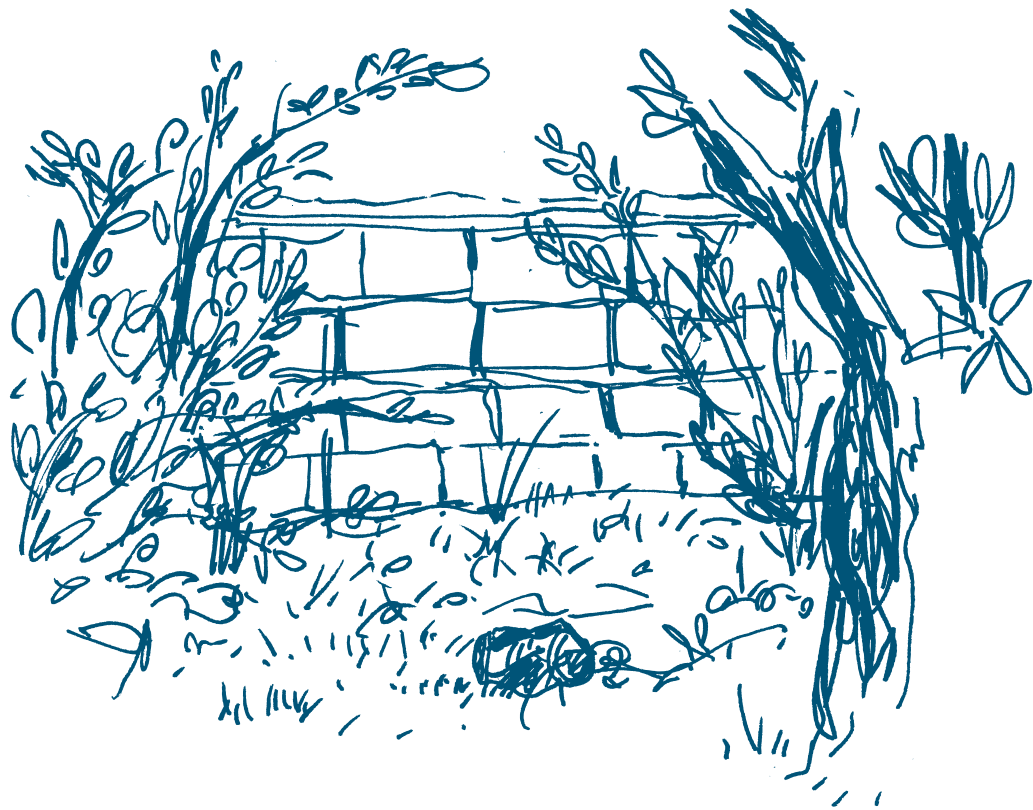
“A day in the streets was like... I’d get up and have a drink... That was the first thing we used to do, get up and have a drink... Stop the shakes.

There used to be that place called The Mission, where we used to go and have a butty and a coffee in the mornings, which was free to the homeless...”

...

“And then I’d go to Bold street and start selling the issue. Do that all day, just so you have enough money for your drink and your tobacco...”

My ex-partner, he was doing it first, and he got me involved in it. I remember the first time, I earned 35 quids just the first morning... And, he kind of like wasn’t happy... He went off his head because I earned more than him... You know, he wasn’t very nice, he was fairly handy with his hands...”



The church courtyard

“This is where I used to sleep when he was in the probation hostel... Eventually they found out, and he got evicted for keeping me here”

“When you’re drunk and you need somewhere to sleep, I think you find a way.”

...

“Nothing mattered to me. I was full of low self-esteem. I’d beat myself up. I thought I deserved it because I had lost my children.”

...

“I don’t look on living on the streets as a bad thing. I needed to go through that to be the person I am now. It thought me a lesson. Cos I was quite judgemental, because I had houses and money and stuff like that... but after living in the streets, you learn to appreciate life. I needed to hit that rock bottom, I really did.”



The police

“They were fairly hands on with street people...”

“When my ex was found out with a gun in his hostel place, that’s when I ended up having trouble with the police. The gun wasn’t his by the way...

I was trying to help him and I got arrested... I was kicking the car door... as you do, and a police tried to hold me down so I kicked him in the balls... they dragged me out of the car, and threw me on the floor... and it was about 4 and 5 of them, and they threw themselves on me...”



The flat

“We did get a flat in the end, through his sister. But the violence got worse...”

“I couldn’t take it anymore, because of my kids... Me oldest ones were still coming to see me and... He was always going for me head... I always had black eyes, bruises and all...”

It was going to the point where... I would have ended up going to jail, he would have ended up going to jail, or one of us would have ended up dead. I got to the point when I just wanted to die in the end... I didn’t want to live anymore... but until my children started talking to me and said “we just want our mum back, that’s when something switched on in my head...”

So I ended up going back to probation to ask for help. And he got evicted from the house then.

He did come back for me. One day he came to the flat, and waited behind that bush. When I came out, he forced himself in and hit me with a bottle... After that he was sent to jail.”



Isis Centre Turnaround women project

“I took all the courses at Turnaround, they taught me about confidence, about loving meself... About believing that it wasn't all my fault.”

39

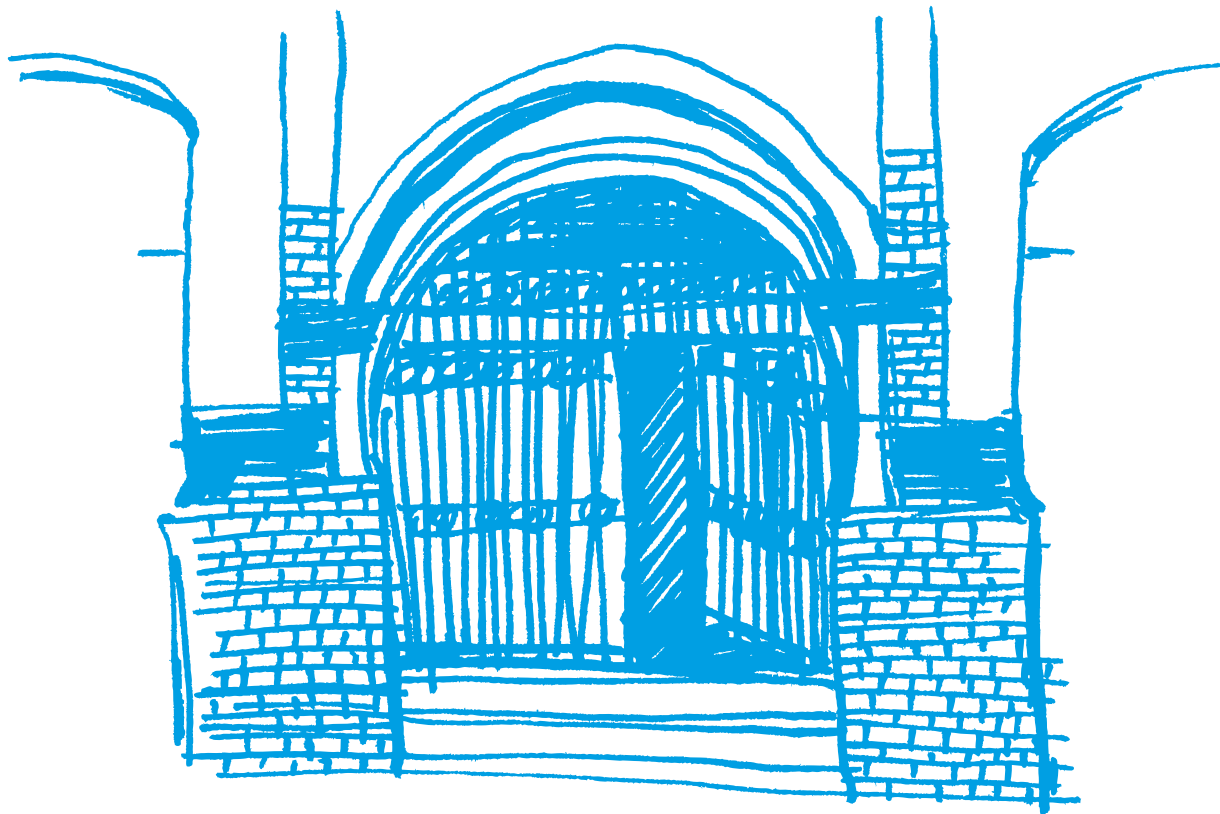
“That's when probation sent me to Turnaround. I did a week detox.

But I also went through a period of still going into town... It took me a while before I was able to let that lifestyle go.

Putting someone in their own place too quick... They need to learn how to be... And how to live really... I mean if you've been living in the streets for so long, then... You got to be used to being indoors again... I even used to be scared to go shopping. I'd get panicky, because I thought people were still looking at me, because of the way I used to be in the streets, you know...

I didn't know about help and support until I ended up being homeless. If I knew about the support when I first lost my kids that would probably would have saved them...”

“I’m good with people... I’m good at helping people.
I’ve got a lot to give, I’m here for a reason.”



User Voice, Liverpool

“I want to help other women now. There are a lot of women in my situation. They shouldn’t have to commit a crime to get support.”

“The only thing I’d change in all of that would have been spending the time with my children. That’s the only thing I regret... Not being able to bring my children up. Because I lost my whole self of being a mum. They took away my right of being a mum and they kept that away from me. Even though I tried hard to get my kids back, they couldn’t see past the drinking side. There loads of people who are on heroin or crack cocaine and all that, but they still have their kids... Alcohol... That’s the worst drugs they have going and social services they don’t allow that.

I spent 2 weeks at social services crying for my kids to come home. And they say I was too emotionally unstable... Cos of crying for me kids... I shouldn’t be crying for me kids...

I could never get that back.”

“It’s them that are going to suffer in the end... And they are, they are still suffering. I haven’t got that close relationship that I should have with them...

It’s still there though. You know, when they come and see me, it’s still “Mum” but to me, I don’t feel a mum.

When I had my youngest little girl, she’d come to stay with me, and I was just laying there and she said: “Mum, why don’t you cuddle me no more?”

And I never noticed, do you know what I mean, I didn’t notice that. And I don’t know if it’s because they haven’t been around, or if it’s because of the domestic violence relationship that’s held me back...

It took her to tell me you know, and that was quite hard.”

“I wanted to keep my kids together and not split them up, you know. Because when they were kids, they’d never sleep in their own room, it’d all me in the one room.

It’s like they just ripped my family apart. They separated them in the end, and it was wrong, I don’t think they should have done that.

They’re OK, though, they are good kids. Tom is going to university in Leeds. Sean he still lives with a foster carer. He is going to college in September, doing logistics. Molly, she’s 19, she’s got her own place now. Alicia... She’s 15, but she thinks she’s 25... Boys and all... Scary.

I see it though in them. I can see they’re hurting. Especially with the youngest. Because she’s been in care longer than she ever been with me. She was 6 when she went into care. “