

## #2 Seeking a home, a place to belong



The need for a place that feels like home was a strong, even urgent, issue for many of the storytellers. For some, the feeling that they did not belong or fit in at home was a poignant theme running through their stories. Some storytellers experienced this feeling as an inability to feel at home within a different country or culture to the one they were born into. Others spoke of being or feeling physically unsafe at home, or of losing their homes and becoming homeless.

The journey of one of our storytellers embodies many of these aspects within a single story. This storyteller was born in a South American country and was left at birth with his grandmother. He describes his early life with her as a time of mutual support, where she cooked for him and he helped her, but also as a time of poverty and hunger. He lived with his grandmother until her death when he was still a child.

*Yes, I was going to primary school and, obviously, she couldn't fend for herself at the time [because of a broken hip], so, there were some food banks that were giving us what we needed to survive and get by and that. So, yes, we were supported by that and she was old and, sometimes, in the winter, the weather wasn't good and she got this sickness, like bronchitis. Then, from there, she got worse because we didn't have enough funds for her to get checked at the hospital. So, it was left and it was the wrong thing to do because it got worse and then she caught some pneumonia, some pulmonary disease or whatever and she passed away from that. [Storyteller 4]*

*So, I was left on my own to fend for myself, and, I was very young, until my father got informed of it because he wasn't around at the time, so, he didn't know what was happening. Yes, so that was what happened in my childhood and I was forced to grow up quite fast.*

This storyteller told us of being with his grandmother when she died, and of being left alone to deal with the immediate aftermath of her death. This early event seems to have been a turning point, and for much of the rest of his story there is a sense of him being left alone to deal with difficult things.

*So, it took a while because he didn't know she had passed away, so, it took about two weeks. Most of the community chipped in to give her a nice burial, so, it was a community thing to say thank you to her because she was a community person. So, when they all chipped in, it was a very good thing and that included the people from the market who chipped a bit in, so, that showed a bit of respect for her. [...] So, if you can imagine, the whole community carrying this coffin and blocking off the road and no-one is beeping because they know what is happening, so, it wouldn't set off a riot.*

*So, all this was happening and I had to handle it and at the time I took it hard because I knew that I wouldn't see her again or speak to her but because I was young, I wasn't really focusing on things at the time even though I felt hurt. It wasn't phasing me, though, and since then it seems that she was the only person there who would show me support and stuff. It was just that little bit difficult to deal with, you know? [...] I felt like the people that really needed to come, weren't there and I didn't realise that until years after.*

He spoke about trying to take responsibility for their home after her death, and how this was difficult for him to do. Eventually he moved to live with a

local family while he waited for his father to return from England to look after him. This was the first of many experiences of having to leave a home and start again.

He waited for some time to be reunited with his father, with whom he had had little contact since he was very young. Our storyteller then travelled to England with his father.

*I had met my Dad before that, but, he was in the military, he was a military man, so, sometimes, he wasn't able to be there and left me and Nan to deal with things. [...] Eventually, after I was living with these people, this family, yes, I was able to go and meet my parents, or, meet my Dad. It was kind of like, you can't really hit a reset button on a human being and say, "Let's reset it or reboot it."*

*You can't do that, so, it was difficult for me to come to another place, let alone, another language, another people, another culture; how the food is, how the weather is. So, it was like a big reset for me, innit? So, I come and I had to fly by myself, and, that, in itself, was a journey, innit? The most I'd ever been in was a van, or a car, like a taxi, so, to get on a plane, for how many hours, on your own when you're only twelve or thirteen. So, it was a big journey, for that alone, innit?*

On moving to England there were many aspects of the culture that he found very different from his home country, and these differences were exacerbated by a language barrier. At times this led to frustrations at school as he was unable to keep up with some of the lessons.

*Storyteller: So, from me knowing things a little bit in advance, I would say that education is better here because in [name of South American country,] it's tough. I was already learning algebra and I hadn't even left primary. So, when I was in Year 9 [in the UK], they were just touching algebra and I was like, "Oh, I just remember this." So, in my head, I'm thinking, "What's happening? Am I in front or am I behind?" [...] I was way ahead in a way but my language barrier set me back a little bit and I was falling behind a bit in the stages of life and stuff.*

*Interviewer: So, you said you got a little bit of extra help; was that help actually helping?*

*Storyteller: [...] I remember [name of teacher,] oh my days, he was my first support teacher, after the [language] tutor, and I had to miss some lessons because I didn't know the language and things like geography and history. So, things that would involve a lot more language, I would miss and I would go into the library to see [name of teacher] and we'd do our own things and learn from other things and stuff.*

*So, I remember [name of teacher] as well, he was a cool guy. So, in between that, I was always in some sort of support stuff and I felt that that, kind of, helped, as well, with my progress and stuff.*

The transition to a new home with his father, who had a new family, was also difficult for him. At this point in his story, like in the stories of other storytellers, we picked up on a strong sense of him feeling like he did not 'fit in' at home, or at school.

*[...] I felt like a lodger at the time, not because my Dad didn't like me or don't want me, but because of the rest of the things. He already had his family and he was already married to someone else and I didn't know this person. Like, coming from where I come from, my experience of things, it was difficult for me to get on with things around that area, innit? It seemed difficult for someone who is not my Mum, to tell me things and to tell me what to do and stuff and it was a more equality thing because they already had a kid.*

*So, everything that the kid did, and you know there are going to be fights, normal things, but it was more of a thing to me, like, "What are you doing?" Like, I was always wrong even though it wasn't me. Or things over my personal things, "Don't touch them." You know, things like that? [...] So, obviously, when my Dad came back from work, he would get the lowdown off his wife and it would make me feel bad and it was every time and I was like, "Oh, my days!" And I was like, "You always think it's going to be me."*

*So, it caused a friction between me and my Dad, whether it was a jealousy thing, I don't know but to me it felt like I wasn't fitting in. I'll always not fit in, I'll always be an outsider. So, yes, that's probably what kicked off that rebellious stage and it showed in the school, innit? Now, I know what ticked me off but at the time, it was just like one of those kids, innit? Yes, and they say the older you get the wiser you get, so, it's learning those things but I did get to a point where I'd just had enough and I was coming to school and was starving through the meal periods and that's maybe why the kids used to bully me. Kids can sometimes be evil and I was just kind of wasting away through the*

*pain because kids used to stare if I was eating a little bit faster.*

Disagreements with his father escalated into physical fights and he found himself leaving a home again, this time to stay with a friend.

*Yes, and there was traffic, and somebody got out of their car and saw little old me being chased and they see how my Dad is behaving and they came and said, "Are you alright?" And there was a family member and they took me upstairs and they gave me that option of, "Do you want to go and stay somewhere for the moment?" And I said, "Alright." And there was a period between finishing school and starting college and this is when it was happening, so, I went there and I stayed there for a bit like a month, a couple of months. So, then it got back to me and Dad trying to deal with things but I had a new mate from college, who I stayed with, who lived with his mum and dad and we were doing the same course.*

*After that I couldn't get a job and couldn't keep up with things, so, I had to sign on and stuff. But there's something in between all that and I still feel like it's not where I should be, it's not where I'm meant to be, you know and I suppose that feeling kind of dragged me down a little bit more, every day, to the point where I just snapped somewhere down the line.*

He attributes this feeling of not having a place to be, of not fitting in, as leading directly to his psychosis. He shares this aspect of his story, of feeling dislocated, of not being where he should be, with some of the other storytellers. When reading these narratives, we, the research team, got a sense of a kind of

spiritual restlessness or homelessness, which in this narrative eventually led to real homelessness.

*I fell out with my friend over a girl. So, I left home and my friends and I literally became rough sleeping, homeless.*

At this point in his story, he finds himself moving from place to place, living between hostels and staying with friends. He describes having little control over where he lives or how he is able to live in those places. He was eloquent about the emotional response he has to this situation, describing deep feelings of fear, anger, and pain.

*I was kind of falling into that system where I was just going into a loop and they were moving me from one hostel to another hostel, the same part of the thing, innit? It just felt it was building up, the frustration, the anger, the sadness, the fear, everything was building up inside of me and me trying to project it a certain way wasn't helping me at the time. I couldn't project it and lay it all out, so, it just sounded like I was an angry man and they had no time for things like that. So, it was like I was a dog, barking at a wall, and people couldn't see where it was coming from.*

*They were using people, not just me, other people that were already institutionalised because that felt like prison to me. Like, the prison, the cells, and where I was at the time, some were changing but they were still communal and the people that lived there, the people they were bringing. Things like that and eventually, you just fall down and they don't help you, so, it's like quicksand you just deal with that kind of lifestyle. I was probably living in them for ten years plus.*

The situation made it difficult for him to gain employment or to hold down a job.

***Somehow, I found myself an interview at Sainsbury's and Sainsbury's gave me the job. So, I was working at Sainsbury's for a little bit, mainly a month, two at the most but I literally became homeless because I fell out with my friend. So, the manager saw what was happening, he didn't know but he was suspicious because my clothes weren't clean. What can I do? I'm homeless, I can't wash them and I was trying to go into bookies and wash myself, places like that, trying to survive, innit? Yes, the fella said, "Is there something wrong?"***

***And that's when I laid it all out to him and he said, "You know what, I'm not going to fire you but if you want, you can resign and then that gives you the option to always come back." So, that just means you write something and then I resigned and I gave it to him. I suppose that left it open if I wanted to go back but at the time, there wasn't much for me, like stacking shelves and stuff.***

While he spoke of feeling grateful for the help and support he received in the hostels, he described a life that felt more and more difficult to sustain. He lived alongside people who were heavy drug users and this created situations in which he was exposed to more difficult experiences.

***The only downfall that I would probably say is that they were dealing mostly with people who used to take hard drugs and drink, alcoholics and stuff like that. I made friends with a couple of them and I even witnessed a couple of them dying in front of me because they had too much or whatever and probably, the cold.***

He talked about seeking help from different people and finding many doors closed. At times he described feeling overwhelmed: "I just thought it was like a big monster that I was fighting, and once you take out one, there's another one and then there's another one down here, you know what I mean?" Like other storytellers we spoke to, he describes turning to drugs to cope with his difficulties.

***Yes, that's why I got into the drugs, I started smoking weed and it was like a vicious circle and I was being sucked into all these things that were happening, innit? So, it just felt like there was nothing else for me to do apart from that, so, I'm doing things like that.***

He describes how living in hostel accommodation placed him in close proximity with people who were involved in criminal activities. These people would allow other people involved in crime into the hostel. Through this close contact, the storyteller found himself associating with people who were violent. During this part of his story he describes a life that feels increasingly violent and dangerous, from which he finds it very difficult to remove himself.

***It came down to the thing of opportunity because people like me probably don't have enough opportunity and support around it to follow it through, you know? People are different, you know what I mean? Some people bloom late, so, I was kind of left in that predicament.***

Through these associations, he himself became involved in violent events and came to the attention of the police, and on occasion was arrested. At

the same time, he describes being a victim of crime and of having his room repeatedly burgled, possibly by other residents of the hostel.

*His girlfriend's upstairs on the top floor, my girlfriend's friend is down there just having it all out. His dog has come downstairs and my girl had a little baby in her arms. This is why I switched, yeh? The main issue that I had was he lobbed an iron that was in the laundry room. He picked up the iron and he lobbed it beneath the frame and he hit the baby that she was holding. So, that's what made me see red and that's why I did what I did. The dog's come downstairs trying to bark off and my girl's already afraid of dogs as it is, yeh? Now, he's using the dog, the girlfriend's upstairs using the dog against me.*

*So, I gave the dog a good kick and the guy's like, "What are you doing to my dog?" And I'm like, "Take your dog away." At that precise moment I felt like I was going to do something with the dog. So, within minutes, and it was like it was all planned, it was all rehearsed. It felt like that because within minutes the police were there and they usually take an hour to 45 minutes to get from [name of police station] to here but they were there within two minutes. And they were there and they were taking me away and it was, "Right, okay. I'm the bad guy, innit?" So, I just said to them, "Just, please, just get on with it." Because there was nothing else to say, there was a little bit of bants and that.*

During this part of his story it is extremely hard to describe the places he was living in as home; they were often physically insecure and accommodated people who are involved in drug use or violent activities.

*After I left that place, as people would say, "from the frying pan into the fire", into that place where I was getting burgled left, right and centre. There's nothing to say and I was going to simple places, like the shop and I'm waiting in the shop and I come back and somebody's broken in and taken this and taken that. It started with small things. I got myself a PS3 after that and finding out that that's gone and all the games and that's the first time. The first, second time, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh. It just got to a point where, third time, I said, "It's someone who lives here." So, I started knocking on everyone's door, I started doing the police's job because they wouldn't want to know, they wouldn't even do that. They would have a laugh about it and they would have the plastic police.*

He spoke of feeling a constant sense of struggle and described finding it difficult to manage the difficult emotions that came with that. Hearing and reading this story, we found it difficult to understand how someone living in such conditions could begin to manage difficult emotions, or indeed, stay mentally well.

He was eventually moved from this environment into new accommodation in a safer area. But moving to this area brought a new aspect of dislocation to his story. His new accommodation was a long way from the places that he had previously been employed or volunteering. Around this time he discovered an interest in photography, which he began to see as a way out of the cycles of violence and rootlessness that he had been caught in. At the time of interview, he was trying to pursue this interest through applying to courses. However, being so far from the centre

of London initially made pursuing this interest difficult.

*So, nothing works but then I saw as my salvation, this thing, that was kind of ongoing but they didn't tell me, "Yes." But they didn't tell me, "No." But I felt that that was another step for me to get out of [name of county] because I was left in the middle of nowhere and even though there were people around and the area was nice and they were trying to help me with things, I felt like I wasn't meant to be there, you know? So, I said to them this is what's happened; I've got family, I've got friends that live in London. Not only that, hopefully, I'm going to follow through this journalism thing and follow through photography because that was the main thing, to get through the journalism.*

*So, I said, "That's my side of the bargain; could you please put me back in London." And it took two years and this is what I'm saying, the woman that was assigned to see me. Every time she came in, she saw it and the last time she saw it she was like, and I could overhear it because it's so quiet up in the country, that when she went outside, you could hear the woman saying, "Bless him, he literally has nothing. Move him back."*

This storyteller was eventually moved back into London, where he was placed in a flat that he felt was secure, and where he was able to feel comfortable. However, by this time, years of moving from place to place and living in unsafe housing had taken its toll. He began hearing voices and had what he described as a breakdown, during which he was hospitalised. He described feeling like he was still carrying these

difficult experiences with him when he began using Early Intervention in Psychosis services.

*So, I came to [Early Intervention in Psychosis service], with all these things in my head, so, I knew that something was being done on these things that were happening to me. So, it wasn't just all happening because of my fault, I mean, I made it happen. It wasn't just me, it was a whole team of people that was left in front, on the way, to make it carry on and carry on. So, even up 'til now, I still think it's a carrying on because things, like, if I want to follow a certain path, it will eventually just mess up for me. Not because of my own fault but because of certain people.*

*I suppose I would like to be independent. So many people don't even own their own house. I think I would like to somewhere down the line be able to afford a home. A house is a house but a home is a home. I would like to try to be more settled and try to help my family, the ones who are in a worse situation. It's difficult because you know there are people who are worse off. You tend to feel a bit bad but that's life. It's the roll of the dice. Some people are born into it and others are successful at things and then there are people who are born into the dark side of things. I think I would like to have a place to call my own and not worry about bills and stuff. I would like a little business. It doesn't have to be here. It could be abroad. It's easier and more manageable here. I suppose that is what I would like to be. I would like to be that person who doesn't worry about certain things like, "Where is my food coming from? Or, "What do I have to do to have a decent living?" That's what I would like to be.*

# THE IMPORTANCE OF A SAFE HOME BASE

## Dolly

“ When I was young, school was my sanctuary away from a difficult home life. But then I was bullied at school. I could not relax at home and I could not relax at school. I had nowhere to rest. Without a safe place to call home, your mind cannot rest.

Insecure housing had plagued my mental health for at least two decades. When I lived in an abusive family home, my then psychiatrist said it was not his job to help me find a safe place to live, despite it affecting my mental health fundamentally. It is only when I had my own place that I could call home, I found my mind and emotions could settle too. ”

## Gary

“ When I was in a large psychiatric hostel due to homelessness some of the other residents were using heroin and regularly offering to get some for me. I was insecure and depressed at the time and was afraid that one day I would accept their offer in order to feel better.

I managed to get an interview at a smaller hostel run by Mind and they offered me a room, which put me out of the danger zone. I was one of the lucky ones to get away in time. ”