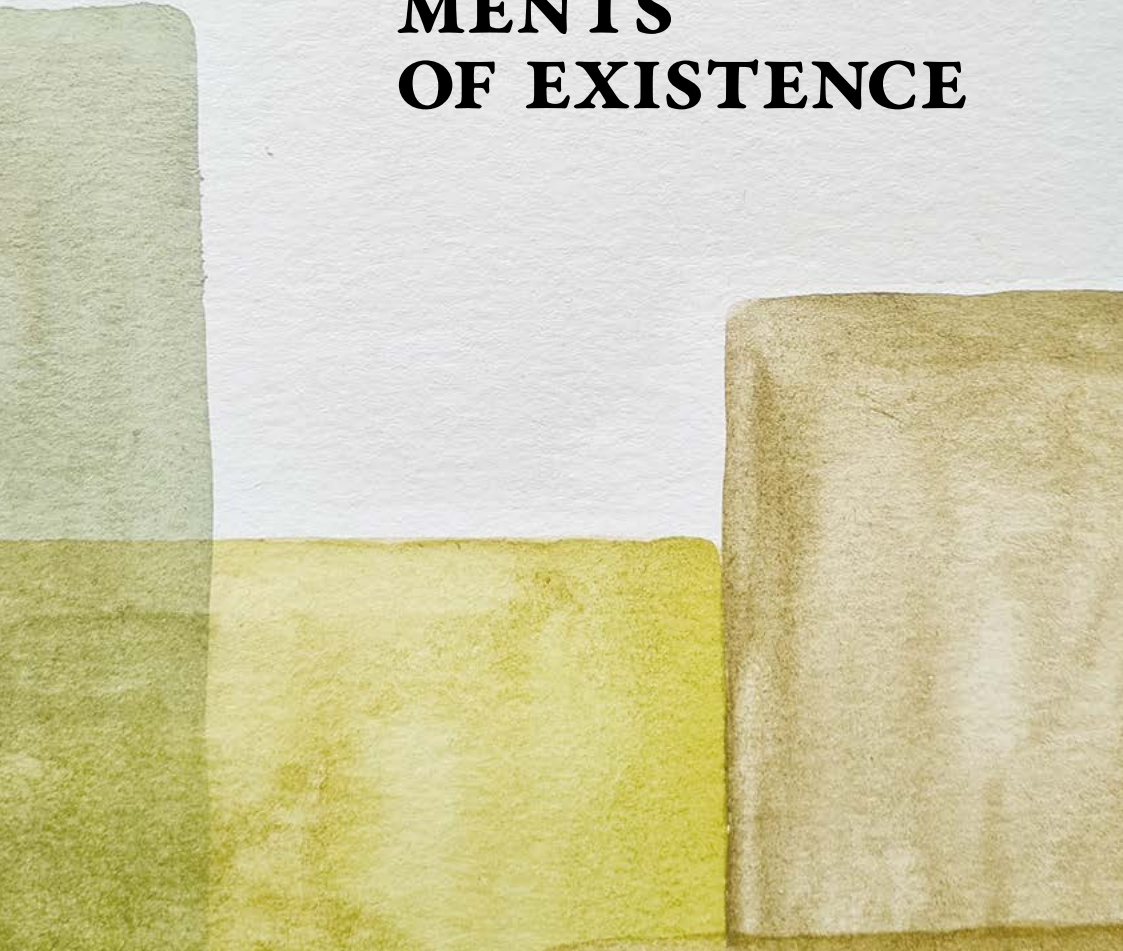




**FRAGMENTS  
OF EXISTENCE**



# **Fragments of Existence**

**Testimonies of Life with NRPF**

Fragments of Existence: Testimonies of Life with NRPF

[nrpfintheshadows.com](http://nrpfintheshadows.com)

© The Shadows research project

With special thanks to our partner organisations:

Displaced Collective

KRAN (Kent Refugee Action Network) – [kran.org.uk](http://kran.org.uk)

Project 17 – [project17.org.uk](http://project17.org.uk)

SLRA (South London Refugee Association) – [slr-a.org.uk](http://slr-a.org.uk)

Cover: Meera Shakti Osborne

Images: Meera Shakti Osborne

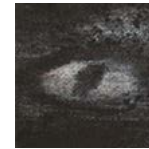
Design: Britt Permien Design

[doi.org/10.5522/04/31332433](https://doi.org/10.5522/04/31332433)

# Contents

*Glossary* i

*Foreword* iv



My Life got lost here in England 1

*Without a name*

Life without recourse to public funds as a single parent 8

*Comfort*

Being Human 15

*A young person who wants to remain anonymous*

Shadows of Silence 24

*Anonymous*



Uncommon voices 37

*Toyin Akeju*

I smile when I need to, but on the inside I am falling apart. 39

*Mahmood*

Life 45

*Nameless*

When it starts raining... 64

*Zabeed*

Working to Survive 69

*Sameer*



Growing up without access to my right 75

*Joel J*

My testimony 77

*No Name*

Passing through hell 86

*Lillian*

Disadvantages of no recourse to public funds 93

*Temitayo*

Wave 94

*O.O.*



I remember 97

*Maxine*

The Road I Never Chose: A Story of Escape and Survival 105

*DTK*

SPIDER 110

*D.O.*

My early experience in the UK 111

*Sade*

Icho and the Backpack 122

*Icho*

*Afterword: Dancing with you in the rain* 130

# Glossary

## ■ No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

NRPF is an immigration rule prohibiting access to most welfare benefits, social housing, and other support (e.g., extended childcare services) for those 'subject to immigration control' in the UK. This includes undocumented migrants and most migrants with time-limited leave to remain, such as students, people with work visas, and those on family visas. The 'no recourse to public funds' rule was first introduced in 1971 and has changed over time but is currently set out in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. In recent decades, the rule has been expanded to further groups of migrants, such as migrant families who are on pathways to permanent residence in the UK and migrants from the European Economic Area. More recently, the UK government has suggested extending the rule to those with permanent residence. For the purposes of the immigration rules, education, health, and social care do not constitute 'public funds'. The Shadows research project has focused on the impacts of the 'no recourse to public funds' rule on families and unaccompanied young people over time.

## ■ Akwaaba

A social drop-in centre providing friendship, support and solidarity to migrants in London.

## ■ Appeals Rights Exhausted

When someone's asylum application has been refused by the Home Office, and they have no further bureaucratic or legal options to appeal the refusal,

this is referred to as being 'Appeals Rights Exhausted' (ARE). Being ARE significantly limits available support and usually leads to prolonged periods of NRPF, as well as increased risks of detention and deportation.

### ■ **Social Services told me: 'you're out'**

Some testimonies mention social services support being 'stopped' or 'withdrawn' or being told: 'You're out'. This is a reference to having their 'care leavers' support terminated after a period of being in local authority care. Under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, local authorities continue to have obligations to 'care leavers' – under certain circumstances until their 25th birthday. Our research shows that, in many cases, support is terminated early for care leavers if they have no immigration permission (e.g., see 'Appeals Rights Exhausted'), leaving them subject to NRPF.

### ■ **Migrant Centre**

Charity organisations providing advice, advocacy, and support to migrants.

### ■ **NELMA**

North East London Migrant Action (NELMA) was an activist group that campaigned to defend the rights of all migrants and ran an accompanying scheme for people with NRPF.

### ■ **Section 17**

Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 imposes a general duty on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children 'in need' in their area. Under this legislation, local authorities can provide accommodation and financial support to some families with NRPF.

### ■ **Signing**

References to 'signing' or 'signing on' refer to the UK government's requirement for some migrants to regularly report to an Immigration Reporting Centre (e.g., every two weeks or once a month). This includes most people who have sought asylum and some people who do not have legal status in the UK. Some people are detained when they report and are sent to Immigration Removal Centres. The London Bridge location referred to in some testimonies in this book is 'Becket House' in London, which is now closed.

Find out more



# Foreword

This book is a kind of mosaic – a collection of fragments of existence. These fragments have been spoken, written, and made by people whose lives have been curtailed, erased, and splintered by the borders of and within nation states. People who have been told that they ‘do not exist’ or are unworthy of the means to make meaningful lives. And who yet, as Icho puts it in the pages of this book, are still people. The testimonies here emanate from that spirit, offering us portraits of lives lived in the shadows. As the narrators in this book remind us, to speak from the position of one who is bordered from the means of life is not an easy task. ‘My tongue feels heavy and it’s difficult to say some words, because of these twelve years’ (Without a name). Language often fails in the face of the violence of borders. The possibilities and impossibilities of telling are threaded throughout this text. We find ourselves ‘all over the place’, as Nameless says, hovering over ‘things you don’t even want to think about’ (Sade) or perhaps can never be said. These fragments of existence read differently from the stories we find in the media, court hearings, or the writings of social scientists, including ourselves. They are messages from ‘fogs that won’t lift’ (Mahmood), where ‘everything is on top of each other’ (No name), people are ‘just breathing’ (a young person who wants to remain anonymous), and cannot speak with names. They are attempts to communicate something from those who ‘refuse the silence a little longer’ (Anonymous).

These testimonies are not exhaustive. As Lillian reminds us, ‘It’s a very very long story, but we had to start and we had to stop you know.’ Instead, the words and images in this book offer glimpses into worlds usually unseen by others, authored by people who are rarely invited to speak beyond the

invasive confines of the bureaucratic asylum or social services’ interview. Rather than ‘speaking for’ others, as research so often does, in this book, our interlocutors have been invited to testify in any language, style, and form of their own choosing, sometimes in collaboration with us or the artist Meera Shakti Osborne. Each in their own way, they tell us something of the brutalities of the United Kingdom’s ‘no recourse to public funds’ immigration policy, which prohibits many migrants from accessing the vital support and services needed to live. Bringing together the testimonies of those involved in our research\*, we must say, and say again: it is time for an end to NRPF.

Shadows team

*\* The Shadows research project furthers understandings of the ways destitute migrant families and unaccompanied young people with insecure migration status – both those who are undocumented and those with time-limited visas – make and sustain their lives in the absence of mainstream welfare support in England.*

*For more information, please visit: [nrpfintheshadows.com](http://nrpfintheshadows.com)*



^



^

# My Life got lost here in England

Without a name

I would like people to know it's very hard to live without accommodation without benefits to be honest I want people to know that if you don't have nothing and I mean nothing, no money to buy what you like or even food, when you have to walk because you don't have money to travel, when you have no money to go to the gym you can't achieve your dreams. They destroyed my life to be honest, since I came to this country, I had a lot of dreams and hopes. First, I wanted to study, I did study but then I got a lot of anxiety and mental problems thinking about the future.


I believe you should not ask what you want to be after 5 years because you do not have a residency and you are not allowed to study because I applied to college in 2022, 2023 but they rejected me so I could not go back to study again. I feel that my life is dark and I am not able to see the light or see any of my dreams because of course any person has a dream and a goal but you are not allowed to live like a normal person and achieve your dreams and be successful. This is not good.

There is nothing I dreamed of that came true and life without a dream is a life without meaning. You know when you set yourself a goal but then it burns all the way back? The most devastating feeling for me is the feeling of losing passion and hope. I am a mentally and emotionally broken person. I will do what I can to not lose passion and hope. I have felt in my 12 years here that you have a dream that you wish to achieve and suddenly you find yourself in problems and at the same point where you started and you didn't achieve what you wished for, disappointed and lacking passion and desire.

I want to say the Home Office they care for some people and for other people they destroy their lives. There are people sitting in front of a computer somewhere, playing with other people's lives. But they don't know how their decisions impact people's lives. Some people live here for 10 years I have lived here for 12 years, and I have nothing. I see people coming and they give them everything which is not fair. I came at the age of 17, now I am 29 and I am still in the same position, the only change is that I got more stress and thoughts about ending my life. I feel that dogs have a better life than me. At least they have people that feed them and they can travel, but not me.

And I feel like I got impacted by the problems and the stress that they gave me. I feel like they turned my life into nasty weather and took away the fresh air. For example, I don't sleep at night, thinking about living here or ending my life or what I should do, and my brain never stops thinking about this, always thinking about this. I even cannot pronounce certain things, my tongue feels heavy and it's difficult to say some words, because of these 12 years.

Coming from a bad country and living in a 'good' country but still for me it's difficult, I would like to have a future. I've spent almost as much of my



life here as I did in my country and I have been patient a lot, and I am still patient and I still don't know when I will reach my goal and dreams. I walk down the street and see people, each one going about their own business and going about their day. No one will come to you and ask, "Do you need

money?" I can lend you money or help you with something, pay your rent, or bring you food. So be strong on your own or with excellent people.

I feel like I live between life and death. I have depression and I am unable to feel happy or even the pleasure of anything. I feel like there is nothing left that makes me happy in this world, and I do not care about eating. I don't feel the taste of food.

When I came to this country, I met a girl, but she was in another country, and I became attached to her. We used to wake each other up in the morning, go to school together, and talk to each other all the time. I had hopes of marrying her because she is a dream for me. We knew each other for years, and I loved her with a love no human has ever loved. I adored her to the point of madness, to the point that I would sacrifice my soul for her. My whole life is for her. I dreamed about her more than a million times, and her picture is always in my eyes. I have never forgotten her. She always used to tell me, "Be patient, be patient, and they will give you Residence and you will come to me, and we will get married and live our lives together." Then one day, she left me alone, and now she is not with me, but I know that she loves me, and I hope to meet her one day. I hope that she is well and happy in

her life because she is life to me. I hope that one of my dreams will come true. I will try to do the impossible for her, and my dream will come true because she always brings me goodness and wishes that I will live a happy life and have...

My life and my goal are achieved and I am striving and striving to achieve it, but I am mentally ill and my psyche is tired and I have psychological pressure and I do not love myself and I hate my life and my life is full of darkness and I do not see any light from it, but I am striving and striving.

I know that sometimes life does not give us what we wished for. I will try to reach our goal in life and achieve our dream and live a happy life. I will never forget her. She is my soul, a member of my family. She's part of my life even when she's not with me she's always in my mind.

Attachment is not a joke! When you lose your favourite person, your mentality becomes destroyed. I feel sick of this life. Sometimes I say to myself, "Why am I living a life full of problems, stress and mental exhaustion? Why am I even alive? Why am I living?" No movie, no book, no success, no family, no relationships. Even my body has started to give me a signal that I'm tired of life and upset about myself. I feel disappointed and my heart is hurting me.

My life got lost here in England. Here, survival is for the strong, not for the weak. I lost myself when I started following it, so may God reward me greatly for what I lost.

I am from the generation that died before it was born.



To stay without accommodation, you will go crazy 100 percent, because where are you going to get the money from to feed yourself. You become homeless and your brain is going crazy because of this. And what do they want me to do? To rob other people or how do they want me to make money? At the moment, I am not allowed to make money or study or work, so what should I do? Everything in life has a certain value. For example, if you are not gonna use the money, it will never have any value. You are the one who gives value to things. I don't want to be a millionaire, I just want to be a human being.

I started to change myself, doing boxing, because I have a lot of anger and it's better for me to let it out like this. But to stay without accommodation, it feels like I'm dying but slowly....slowly. You know when your whole life is dark and you feel like a ray of light is starting to appear?

And I am ambitious and I would like to be famous but.... All I can say is 'never give up and 'be strong' and life will change one day if you still focus on your dream. I will rise after each fall, and I will continue to try. I have been doing therapy for one year now every Tuesday. I have to be there at 11.30 and we finish at 1 o'clock, it takes me two hours to get there, but I still go every time. And there are other people around me that support me.

I get a feeling for the moment of a breath that tells me I'm the happiest person in the world, once or twice a year or it never comes. But for the rest of the year, I feel frustrated.

## Life without recourse to public funds as a single parent

Comfort

**L**ife without recourse to public funds is very difficult. It happened in ... 2008, when I gave birth to my son ... I was living in a boxroom. So, when I gave birth to him, after 40 days ... I was giving him a wash in the morning, I was bathing him, that is when he choked from the water and I called the ambulance. He was okay at the end of the day, but I had a call from my midwife at a nearby clinic where I would go to weigh him. And then the lady told me that, oh I need to ... they said what happened was that I had a small room, that was why the child choked, that I needed to get a bigger place for the child. Because when he starts growing up, he won't be able to crawl round, you know to play well, because that place is very small for him. And the lady now advised me to go to the council and ask for help from there. But I didn't tell the lady what my status was, I just said okay thank you, and I left. The lady kept calling me, asking, oh have you got a place ... because she's the one in charge of my son...

She's a midwife ... and I told her that, oh I will get a house when I start working and then I will make sure I get a bigger room. And she asked me, oh why can't I go to the council ... and I said, oh no, I'm not entitled to get a house. Then she said, okay you need to go and get a bigger place anyway. I said, yes, thank you. So ... I quickly run and look for the advert. I saw one advert... I called the person, and the person is not that far from where we live. And then she came ... the lady came to check the room where we were living, and then she said oh she's going to offer that room to us. This is the month that we need to pay: we pay £280. And then we move into that place. After 5 weeks, the lady said, oh her husband doesn't like too many things, I've got too many things. I say, you came to my room to check how it is, and you say, oh this is not bad. She said, oh because the way I arrange things ... you know making everything tidy... So, to cut the story short, she said oh no my husband doesn't want too many things in the house and told me that I need to look for a new place. I started throwing my things away. I started, you know, throwing... my clothes, everything ... oh my God, I wasted all of my things, because I need to ...

The baby is still young, it's like the fifth month then, how can I be, you know, looking for a house with him, or maybe it's going to be too much. So, I have to look for a place because she's not taking it anymore. I found another place, I had to carry my son, bring the things ... and the lady threw my things away out of the window, she was throwing it, I need to move ... I didn't do anything wrong. But because she knew that I didn't have status, that is how she imagined it, that if I had a status, I should have gone to the council – because of that she took advantage of us and she maltreated me and my son. So we don't have anything ... anywhere ... anybody ...

I look for another place ... because I was still on maternity leave, and I'm about to start work, to resume work. So I had to find ... making everything in the place ... you know sort things out, sort the childminder and a good place, you know. So that is what I did, I ran out and I got a place, I got the childminder, and life continued. The place where we move to is not conducive, it's such a horrible mattress, all kind of ... that is part of what ... when you do have no recourse to public funds, that is the life you face. Even though then we still hid under the carpet, we are not supposed to... but we just manage it ourselves.

So I got the ... how much am I getting paid ... I get £740 per month – I pay the house rent, pay the childminder £250, I buy the food, all the food that he's going to eat, the Pampers everything, I bought it. I buy my bus pass, and I would be left with £20 for the whole month. So it's just that I manage myself, but everything for the child is complete, all the food everything. I'm very happy. I carry on with life. We do that until 2017 when I have no job again ... because they were asking me to produce my paper, which I'm not able to produce – so that is where the problems start. I couldn't go to work. I still worked till the end of the year, so 2017 I'm not able to work again because of the status.

So ... and that is where the life now starts ... we are now facing a difficult time, paying the rent and then the food, all that. And then someone now introduce the migrant centre to us ... and the lady who take me there ... because I don't know how to get there ... so we explain our situation to the people that we met there. They're asking us for one or two things, and they were asking us to produce certain things, like paperwork.

And then they now refer us back to our borough where we were living for a long time. So ... and that is where ... that is how we end up in social services ... and then those people they didn't treat us well in the first place, they were really harsh, they were really, really harsh with me. And then they were like 'Oh where is the father?' and where is ... They said I should produce the father's identity, everything about me, about the father ... I told them that the father is... please, you have to skip it because he rejected the pregnancy, so ... and I don't want to talk about it, I don't want to be, you know, thinking back ... remember what I've been through – it's gone, it's gone, and I've forgotten about it ... I've suffered and I've you know taken my cross ... so ... I don't want to be going there again. They were like oh no, you have to get this for us, because we don't know where you lived ... where did the man come to sleep with you ... it was just horrible. They were like jumping up and down in the place ... I was really scared, I don't even know my code, my code ... I don't even know where I am. So ... and then after when we finished the meeting and we called the migrant centre because they told me that I should give them the feedback.

So the second day, we had a call from the migrant centre to ask us where we slept. So that is when the manager said no she can't take this, they need to take the council to court for letting the child that was born here stay in the hospital without him being sick, all just because he's homeless.

And the second day we still went back to the social services, they say oh they can't do anything, I was crying, wailing ... you know ... they said no, we have to ... if we know that... go to the police station and explain to them. So ... and I can't go to the police station because I'm really, really scared. So anyway ... so we went back again to the social worker the second day, and at 12am, that is when we receive a call that the cab is waiting for us to take us to the hostel. So we arrive in that hostel in the morning. So we were there

for one year 8 months. In that time we were... you know they help us to filing a petition, so to ... you know to process it for us.

And then we got appeal, because I've already put in the application, which they refuse, and they did the appeal, then went for the hearing, and it was really really difficult that day. Thank God for the people that go with us. So it went well, and in 2018 we got our papers. The life is so difficult, I just cut those stories short, because so many things, people humiliate us.

The social services, even the people outside, when they know that we don't have paper, for example, the landlady ... yeah the landlady that gave us a room for 6 weeks ... 6 weeks, and she ask us to move out, knowing that I've got a baby ... but she took advantage of us because she knew that if we have ... that we can't shout, and we won't be able to report her because she knew that we would be scared. She has been in that situation before she met her British husband that you know ... that she settled down with.

So ... so many things, so many things, so many places, it's so difficult. At work ... but we have to keep quiet you know, we have to keep quiet, we can't talk ... even when they were doing something that is not right ... even where I was working, when my child was ill that I couldn't be able to sleep, I have to take him to the A&E in the night, and we were there in the middle of the night, so I have to take a cab to come home. And when I called them up and I said ... they would be angry, like how can I call in sick, and it's not that maybe I'm going to get paid ... so anything, I don't call in sick, I have to go and do the work so that I can be able to put food ... I can be able to feed my son, and then you know to pay the rent. You know it's really really difficult.

We went through a lot, a lot, a lot of, you know, humiliation from people, because they know that oh these people they haven't got... like they won't be

you know ... and the place where we eventually went when that lady throw us out, that place we spend a year, exactly a year, and the lady say oh she's having another job in the city, that we need to you know vacate because she need to hand the house back to the owner, so we have to look for another place again.

So that place that we stay, we stay there for 4 years, and that is the longest place ... so we stayed there for long ... yes, so the lady say oh her daughter is coming from Russia, she has finished her education so she needs to come home and settle down and start working, we need to look for another place ... and we start looking for another place.

We get another place again ... so after 6 months we have to move out from that place because it's so horrible. So, and then we move to another place. After a year the lady said oh they want a bigger house because she got her children with her, so we have to move from that place again and then move to another place. So that is the last place where we moved to in 2016, we spend a year there before we now ... before I don't have a job, and then you have to move to a hostel ... after that incident or that kind of ... and there are a lot of things in social services that we face – it's a lot.

Because the people that they allocate, they were looking everywhere, checking on us you know, finding ... maybe we were working and we say we are not working. I say how can I work, even the one that I was doing I know what I've been through there ... how can I be going to work ... when we've already submitted everything. But even when we were in the hostel, they still come to check oh what are you eating, what have you got, where did you get the money to get this ... we have to explain oh this is from charity – charity gave us this one ... all sorts of things. They were still monitoring – they were monitoring me everywhere, you know - they put camera in the hostel.

I'm not against the camera because they need to protect people in this place, but one thing that is really horrible – they came to our room to check what we had. They think maybe we have money that we stay with ... I don't know. They will ask us to open our fridge, and they will ask us to check our cupboard, you know checking our cupboard – what have we got. We don't have anything ... there is nothing that we have ... so when they allocated that hostel for us – after they finished our assessment, so they've given us £70 every week with which we buy the travel card, 20-something pounds, so to go and get my son from school, and then I pay, what's it called, I pay for the charges for these things ... so life is very very difficult anyway.

Anyway ... yeah that's what ... not to have recourse to public funds, it's a difficult time, and we really appreciate people that come on our way to help in one way or the other – we really appreciate them. There is nowhere we will go that we will not remember them ... they will be in our remembrance, because they did a lot for us. So we come across Akwaaba as well, so where we go on Sunday, we cook, we meet new people, we wave away the depression in our life, you know it's a good place that we do go that time, you know. It does a lot, because we're looking for ... oh Sunday, ah we're going to Akwaaba on Sunday ... so we are really really looking forward to get to Akwaaba, because that time the Akwaaba is really needed and they were really you know supportive to everyone. So ... and then including us, so we really appreciate for that Akwaaba. So the children play there, they ride a bike ... some of them they don't even know how to ride a bike, they learnt from that Akwaaba and they got a bike ... they got a bike. They got a bike ... we thank God, we thank those people that you know being a support for us.

# Being Human

A young person who wants to remain anonymous

**B**eing in this situation I feel like not human. It's like I see every single person that I know they got all the facilities that they can use. And I just want the basic in my life, for example to work. If I can't work, I can't apply for benefits, I can't study ... I just want a basic life, just to be a human being. What the Home Office is telling me, it's not fair. If someone asks me how I've been living since the past 7, 8 months, I mean not many people would survive in this time, 7, 8 months. There would be two things – either they end up in prison or killing themselves.

Because the reason that I'm strong mentally and physically is that I know I'm going to win one day against all this, against all the odds, and show it to the world what it is, that the Home Office is doing to people that they don't even know. I know people, some of them homeless ... and I am homeless since a long time ... and what I can see is, they are allowed to work, allowed to benefits, allowed to study, allowed for housing ... and I don't even have one of them. I'm not allowed for benefits, not allowed for housing, not allowed to study, not allowed to work. And thanks to the charities that



Image: Meera Shakti Osborne

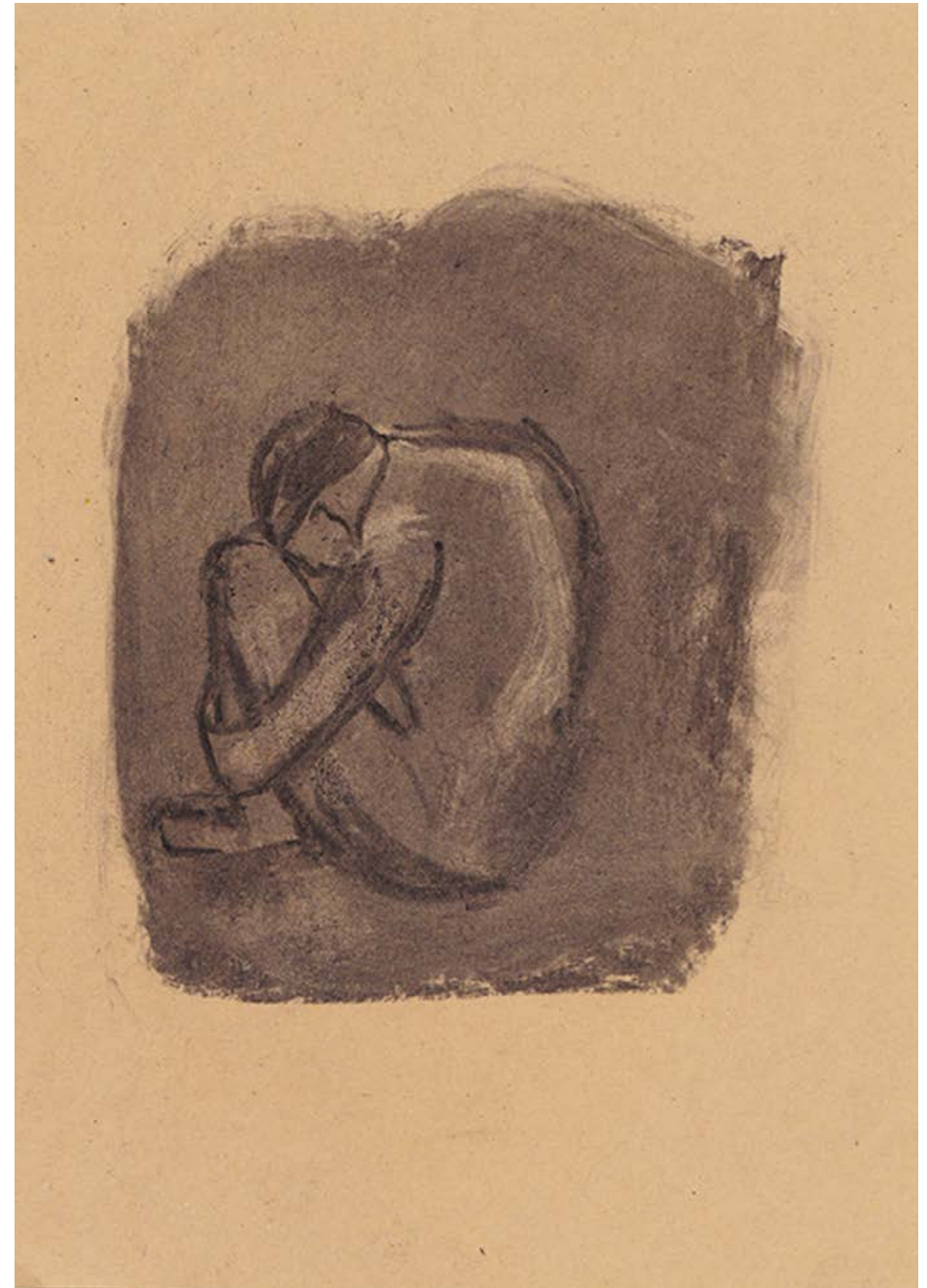


support me a little bit ... they can't support me fully, because they don't have enough money to provide for people like me.

So basically I'm just existing, I'm not living a life, I am just surviving, I'm just breathing – I don't have nowhere to go. The connections I have made since the past 15 years – everyone has let me down since they knew that I'm homeless and I would be a burden on them, so they just cut me off. All I'm left with is the streets, with no housing, no benefits. And the little support that I get from charities, which is not even half ... but some of the homeless people they get everything, and they're allowed to it ... I'm not allowed for even one of the options.

I wish ... I just wish I had the basic life that any human being is allowed for. One of them is just basically being a human ... and they took all my rights from me that I'm not even human anymore. Because being a human you should be allowed to study, work, for housing and everything else ... but I'm not. And all of this time I've survived my life with just living on the streets with no money, no facilities – nothing at all. I will just feel like not being a human – I'm not a human in their eyes. But a few people from the charities, they know that I deserve better, and I know myself that I deserve better.

And I find it really really hard to explain to someone how to live, how to survive. And nowadays you can see the living costs and everything is super expensive. This is inhumane – nobody should be in the position. I'm just glad that I've got charities that are helping me. If the charities wouldn't exist, I would starve to death or be in prison or killed myself – those are the options that I would have if the charities wouldn't be there for me. And unfortunately, these charities, they don't get enough donations to provide the facilities for people like me to have a better life and housing and have



*Image: Meera Shakti Osborne*



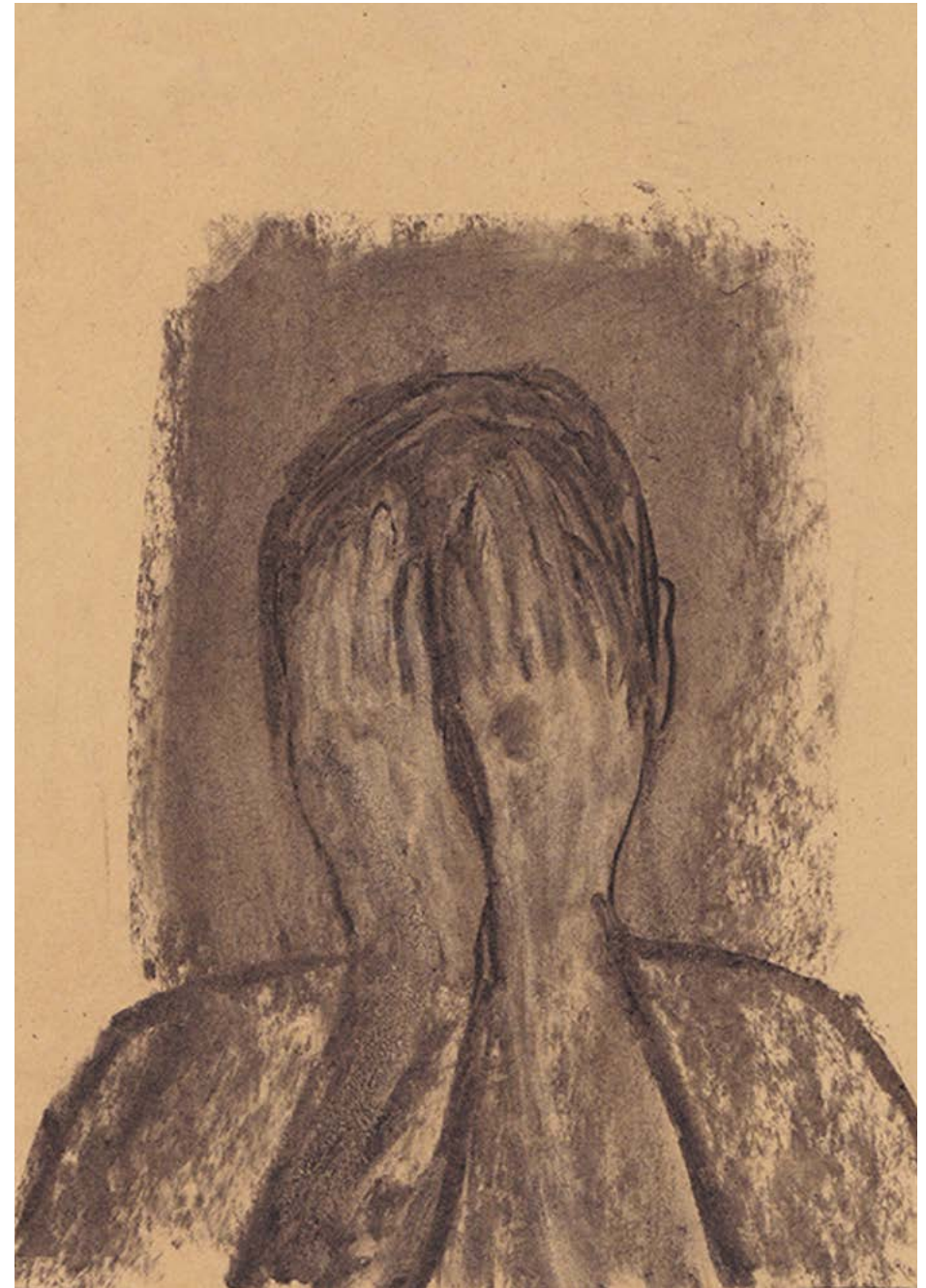


their status and everything back. So all I'm saying is there is not much help around ... there is some help around, but you have to go and get up and get it.

Right now, I'm in a hotel for a week, and it's only for a week and being paid by a charity. And I don't know what's going to happen on Monday – if I am going to be back on the streets, or be in a tent somewhere, this is how I've been managing.

And even in the past if I describe what it's like being on the streets, I can't imagine how it would be for someone who hasn't experienced it. Like nobody can imagine and some people are strong enough to do it ... but in my situation I have been surviving. You're just sleeping somewhere in the street with no safety, no food, no money, no shower, no laundry – nothing at all. And during the day I can go to another charity for some of these things, but at 2 o'clock they shut. So after 2 o'clock I don't have nowhere to go. With no money in my pocket, no housing, not allowed to work, not allowed to study, not allowed for anything. So that is a long time after 2 o'clock that you just have to be in the streets and hanging around. And you're worried, you're stressed, you're thinking what's going to happen to me ... you're just basically surviving until 9 in the morning when they open so you can go and have some food over there, and do your laundry and shower. I can't thank enough all the charities that have supported me so far. But the charities, they don't have enough donations. So if I asked them certain questions they will just go and say we don't have enough donations, we don't have enough money to provide for the things you need.

Well to be honest I was in the night shelter ... the night shelter was for 3 months, and I started to join it because I'm a rough sleeper. The night shelter did provide for me with a bed and some food that I could have and



*Image: Meera Shakti Osborne*

sleep. But the only reason is that I've done that for 3 months ... exactly 3 months ... I never missed a night because I desperately need somewhere to sleep. But when it finished the answer was 'sorry, we can't house you – you have to sleep rough on the streets, or in a tent'. So I've been going to every single place to get help. First of all to the council, but the council won't house me, the council won't help me because of my status, and I haven't got the paperwork for them which the Home Office are delaying. I've been to the Jobcentre, they can't give me benefits because of the Home Office won't give me my status and my visa. I've been to all the charities and the connections I have with people who are talking to the MP on behalf of me to do something about my situation. And every single day I'm just thinking that okay when is the surprise going to happen, something is going to happen. Maybe the Home Office is going to send me my visa and my passport so I can be a human again, and I can be allowed for everything. But it's just that hope that keeps me going every single day that I wake up with a hope that okay tomorrow I might have some news, or the day after tomorrow.

And it's been like this for almost 8 months that I've been sleeping rough, and I just don't know how I feel about it, it's like I can't express it in words. If someone tried my situation for a month, he only would have two options – to do something silly to end up in prison, or kill himself. Because it's super hard what I've been through and how I've been tortured, and I haven't done nothing wrong. And then they took all my rights from me, which is the situation I am in right now, I'm not responsible for it. But who is responsible for my situation right now is the Home Office – torturing me ... since almost 4 years, with no rights. Before that it was okay, but right now since the past 8 months I can't express it, I can't put it in words how I feel. It's just inhumane. All I need is just my rights back and to be human and to be in the community.



*Image: Meera Shakti Osborne*

Right now I am invisible – I am invisible because I can't work, I'm not allowed for work, I'm not allowed for study, I'm not allowed for housing, I'm not allowed for benefits. So what do they want from me? What do they want from me when they leave me on the streets with nothing? All I got left with me is just the clothes I'm wearing and that's all I have... It's not like I'm not getting help – I'm going to every single place to get help ... but I can't get no help.

I wouldn't think that the UK is going to be a place where I will end up in this kind of situation and they will put me in this kind of situation – never ever. Some of the countries back home, some of the foreign countries where people are fleeing from war, from violation, to come here to have a better life and to be safe – they are the people who come here as refugees. Look at the people like me how I have been surviving.

I'm not a person who goes and drinks alcohol or uses some kind of drugs to run away from my problems – I am facing my problems, I am hugging my problems ... I'm not using any drugs, I'm not drinking any alcohol to deal with my problems ... because I have hope - and I'm strong enough to deal with it. I can't just ... I can't say no more, because it's going to make me feel worse.

# Shadows of Silence

Anonymous

## Preface

**H**ow many problems can a single human life hold? How many can one confront? And truly, how many does one have the capacity to face?

I'm writing our story now. I'll try to craft it in a way that whoever reads it won't be plunged into trauma by these words. I'll revisit those pages of memory myself, handling them with care to keep my own balance. But even so, I request—approach this story at your own responsibility, with ample caution. There are events described here that might unsettle or disturb the reader.

## Chapter One

I was born into a respectable Muslim family in Bangladesh. The elder of two brothers, I grew up under the watchful eyes of parents who poured their world into me. My father spent his entire career with an airline company, a steady job that demanded his loyalty. My mother was a housewife, fiercely

meticulous and remarkably educated, yet she never dreamed of building a career for herself. Even if the desire flickered in her, my father would say that from the moment I was born, she entered a different realm. It was just me—and no one else in her life mattered. Not my father, not her own parents, not her siblings or friends. This shift in her terrified and astonished him. In other words, you can imagine the impossible attention I received from my mother. And as for my father? I won't dwell on it much. He knew nothing beyond me. If he could slip away from the office early, even if it meant forgoing a quick grocery run, he'd rush straight home.

Let me jump to the present for a moment, only to slip back into the past again. I sit in astonishment, watching my wife's current role with our son—a perfect carbon copy of my mother's devotion. And me? I'm the spitting image of my father in this echo. I realize now that my DNA carries the imprint of my father and grandfather: family-centred men to their core. But the striking similarity between my mother and my wife leaves me equally stunned.

I studied in English-medium schools while living in Bangladesh. We had some experiences living abroad—natural enough for a family tied to the airline world. Those relocations were hardest on the children, which is perhaps why my parents encouraged the English-medium path for my education. I was a decent student, never one to stray into wrongdoing. The constant moves abroad meant my circle of friends was never that solid, never deeply rooted. And maybe that's what saved me in a peculiar way. I never went astray. Especially not with the reckless attractions of adolescence toward women—they never took hold in me. Above all, my true teacher was my mother, who never once fretted over my school grades or classes. She focused on something deeper: how much I respected women. That's the

pride I carry most in my life, which is why I find myself blushing with self-praise right from the start, setting everything else aside.

My wife is my cousin. I fell for her back in school days. It felt then—and still does—that without her, life on this earth would be impossible if my parents weren't by my side. Even now, in this very moment, every breath echoes that same thought. When my PTSD and anxiety drown me in worries, I spiral into fears that terrify me: losing her. And through that terror, I know her unbreakable pull on me lives on, fierce as ever.

## Chapter Two

I launched my career in marketing. Within a few short years, hopping between companies, I landed as Head of Marketing at one of the country's top local firms. Then, a sudden shift in the political landscape stripped me of that position, thrusting me unexpectedly into the role of CEO. In a way, I was forced to uncover myself during an anti-corruption drive event. Reluctantly, under duress, I had to feed sensitive information to the security agencies—details about matters far beyond my authority, probing into our clients' affairs without breaching personal privacy. I never hoarded a single scrap for myself, never twisted it for gain. Interest in such things? It never crossed my mind then, nor does it now.

I'm a profoundly unambitious man, one who prefers a very ordinary life. When my father passed, my parents were living in rented quarters—a rented home, unimaginable for his contemporaries, superiors, or juniors. They owned not one property, while others flaunted countless homes and assets as if it were the norm. My situation mirrors that exactly. We're scraping by on government allowances now, a reality none of my peers share.

Sorry—I've leaped to the present again, right in the middle of the tale. I suspect the pressure from those days keeps urging these jumps in me.

As I was saying, the information I provided ultimately bred a terrifying enmity with the newly sworn-in government. Threats came my way from time to time. And at one point, it escalated to an attempt on my life.

### Chapter Three

My wife remains, to this day, the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on. Seeing her still catches me off guard, though I rarely say it aloud anymore. I used to tell her often. Now, truth be told, we hardly speak at all. I barely speak to anyone. Beyond necessity, I utter no second word. It doesn't mean I'm entangled elsewhere—no, nothing like that. I don't even know myself how I've arrived at this place.

My wife was always the first-class first in her studies—a true standout in our country's system. Women like her become teachers or, in her case, as a science student, scientists. But before she became my bride, she left for England to pursue higher education, aiming for a solid career. Her deepest wish, though, was to settle abroad. Truly, that was our plan too—to make a life in another country. Our marriage? We never announced it to our families. Behind that secrecy lay the rigid social and familial orthodoxies, our own constraints woven tight. She earned her master's in science with first-class honours, then pivoted to accounting management studies abroad. A small odd job kept things afloat alongside her studies—everything seemed steady enough. Until the attack on my life upended it all.

### Chapter four

My stand against corruption has always been unyielding. I've carried that fierce attitude through my entire life. Back in my childhood, television meant just one channel for us in the '90s. Satellite TV hadn't caught on yet. Shows like *The A-Team* or *Knight Rider*—heroes who roared against criminals—shaped me early. I never learned to think of myself as anything but a fighter against injustice. I watched my father, trapped in a corrupt system, struggle just to survive. As a middle-class family, we scraped by in constant tension, yet we stayed happy and content amid it all.

It was that same defiance against corruption that got me attacked—as revenge. It was brutal. On the same day, while I lay wounded in a government hospital, they tried to take my life again. For my safety, they had no choice but to hide me away. With barely any treatment, I spent three agonizing months in secrecy. It was the selfless sacrifices and tireless efforts of so many people that finally got me to Britain, to my wife's side. That journey was pure drama, full of risks. I came face-to-face with another major disaster along the way, nearly falling right into my enemies' hands. Here, I ended up in the hospital. They treated me, but some misunderstandings delayed the care. Because of that, my life took a sharp turn. In truth, it left me with permanent physical complications.

### Chapter five

We started our life there on just odd jobs and the little savings my wife had scraped together. Our visas began to expire. For nearly a year, I was stuck in bed, slowly recovering and taking my time to heal. This was back in 2011, when my wife—a first-class, top-student type—was earning just 20 pounds a day at her job. She worked only two days a week at first, because classes filled the rest of her schedule. On those off days, her pay dropped to half.

Walking these memory paths again brings so much pain. It's easy to tell someone else to share their story—we say it without a second thought.

I landed a small job. Our visas got renewed. But at that job, I faced endless racial discrimination and bullying. Still, I try to see the positive more than the negative sometimes. If I hadn't endured it, I might never have become a chef. I might still be enduring that slavery and those insults. Even today, modern-day slavery runs rampant in this country!

Visa renewal time came around again. We needed a letter from the college, but they wouldn't give it unless we enrolled in a new course. With our hard-earned money, my wife signed up. Then the government shut down the college—despite it being on their approved list. Our visas fell through. Desperate, we ran to an immigration solicitor. Instead of showing us a simple path, he pushed us into a maze of complications. Every month, as soon as we got paid, we'd have to hand over the cash to him. Immigration didn't sort itself out. Returning home wasn't an option. I'd heard stories of others in the same spot fleeing to nearby European countries. But we didn't have that luxury. Right in the middle of it all, we suddenly learned our work permits had been revoked—for both of us. We started surviving on debt. Thousands live and work illegally here, but my issue was refusing to compromise with injustice. So many told us—especially me—why didn't we have a child right after reuniting with my wife? A baby here becomes leverage for immigration support. I always said we'd stick to our principles: if we could achieve something on our own merits, we would. But we wouldn't use a child as a tool.


## Chapter six

News of COVID started trickling in. We had no idea how massive it would become. Right then, our lives were already at their biggest turning point. In my life, two things stand out as truly vital and the best: the first was gaining my wife as my partner. The second was the experience of becoming a father. Around that time, I heard from my old workplace—they needed hands because, as a charity, they were feeding homeless people. I went to help. In the midst of it, I lost my father. A few days later, I caught COVID, just as my wife was eight months pregnant. We became parents. It was this unbelievable new chapter. I couldn't wrap my head around it: no income, no hope of staying in this country, no safety if we returned home—and now, the responsibility of a fresh little life. I completely broke down.

New mothers go through postpartum haze. In our case, I was the trauma jukebox, replaying every wound. My wife was probably struggling just to hold me and our baby together, so she couldn't even tend to her own pain first.

This story is my attempt to talk about myself. I know it might read like one of those “me, me, me” tales. But the truth is, this “me” might not even exist today without my life companion by my side—or my little brother, my mother, or my late father.

As I weave the threads of my life into this story, I find myself pausing at the silences—the quiet complicity that echoes through so many of our shared human struggles. Why, I wonder, do we witness injustices unfolding in plain sight, yet rarely raise our voices? Why do we hesitate to seek help when the weight of it crushes us, or to demand investigations that could illuminate the shadows? These questions have haunted me, not as abstract philosophy, but as scars etched into my own journey.





Take, for instance, a small act of grace that unfolded just days ago. The two children of a family—classmates to my own—were entangled in a desperate scramble over their accommodation, a crisis that threatened to uproot their fragile stability. For several evenings, I sat with their parent, mapping out paths forward: resources they never knew existed, doors cracked open by persistence and a bit of local wisdom. Relief washed over their face when the storm finally broke, but mingled with it was a flicker of bewilderment. “I thought you couldn’t help,” they confessed, gratitude laced with confusion. And in that moment, a deeper ache surfaced. Why hadn’t the well-meaning friends and acquaintances already circling this family pointed them toward these options? Why, in a web of support, did the simplest lifelines go unspoken? It fell to me—a wanderer still lost in my own jungle of uncertainties—to illuminate what should have been obvious. In our interconnected lives, why do we withhold the maps that could guide others home?

These silences trace back further for me, to the raw edges of childhood. I was in Year Five, old enough to sense wrongness but young enough to believe justice was a straight line. Our landlord, the man who held the keys to our rented flat, was peddling fake medicines—potions of false hope that preyed on the vulnerable. Outraged and unafraid, I marched to the police, handing him over with the fierce certainty of a child. What followed was not triumph, but an unravelling. They dragged me into a case that twisted like smoke, only to demand I apologize to the criminal before a crowd of onlookers, my small voice cracking under the weight of their authority. The police loomed like shadows, enforcing a script I hadn’t written. My father, ever the quiet anchor, pulled me aside later. “Sometimes,” he said, his eyes heavy with the world’s weary lessons, “we compromise with the wicked not out of weakness, but for the fragile safety of our lives.” I nodded then, but my heart rebelled. In that forced bow, I hadn’t compromised; I’d been bent

until I broke. It was my first lesson in the system’s selective blindness—how it shields the powerful and silences the small.

The echoes grew louder in adulthood, when the ground beneath my marriage shifted without warning. My wife’s college, a pillar we’d built our dreams upon, shuttered its doors amid whispers of scandal. Overnight, the system branded us illegal, stripping away our visas like leaves in a gale. We were adrift—two lives, two families—tethered only by confusion and quiet despair. At the heart of it was a solicitor, a gatekeeper who twisted truths into knots, unravelling futures with calculated indifference. Why were we the ones declared outcasts? Why did no one summon that architect of ruin to account? Our pleas for investigation dissolved into bureaucratic fog, leaving us to navigate a wrong turn we never chose. In the suffocating aftermath, thoughts turned dark; incitement to suicide, they say, is a crime etched into lawbooks. Yet here was a man whose actions upended worlds, driving souls to the brink—mine included—and no charges came. No reckoning. Just the hollow ring of accountability’s absence.

Physically, I am now profoundly unwell. I suffer from sleep apnoea, hypertension, elevated cholesterol levels, and an enlarged heart that weighs heavily upon me. My dental afflictions are a labyrinth of complications, ensnaring me in an unrelenting vortex of mental anguish. Each night, I rely on a breathing apparatus to stave off the peril of perishing in my slumber. I linger awake until the wee hours, often glimpsing the distant horizon aglow with the sun’s nascent rays before I finally surrender to rest. Yet, true repose eludes me, for my child refuses to attend school without my presence. As I calibrate that machine daily, a torrent of questions surges through my mind, igniting an abyss of terror: What if I never awaken? My wife might endure the grief with tears and resignation, but my child? I cannot fathom a single



night unplugged by this haunting pursuit. Long ago, I heard whispers of an immigration provision for those in our precarious circumstances—if an untimely demise befalls a family member, it grants permanent sanctuary in this land for the survivors. Lately, this notion invades my thoughts with relentless frequency. On one hand, I ponder whether my offspring could ever reconcile with a natural departure; on the other, I obsess over securing their unassailable, enduring haven, even contemplating the ultimate sacrifice of myself. Such musings may reek of immature folly. I yearn to banish them entirely. My aspirations are vast and vivid: I dream of traversing the entire globe, of imparting the intricacies of my profession gratis to all who seek knowledge, of standing resolute beside multitudes in their hours of dire need. How ironic that, though unemployed at present, I am barred from volunteering—deemed capable of earning, and thus ineligible.

As I reflect on these fragments now, they form a mosaic of muted outrage, a testament to the quiet wars we wage alone. Perhaps the answer lies in fear's long shadow, or in the exhaustion of fighting unseen battles. But in sharing this, I refuse the silence a little longer. For in questioning the why, we begin to redraw the maps—not just for ourselves, but for those still lost in the sands.



^



^

# Uncommon voices

Toyin Akeju

We set sail, in faith we proceed

We will miss our friends the little girl cry,

Hugging her close, with a shaky voice responding, while nudging with care “not to worry, a new life awaits you my darling”.

The wide grin and sparks in her eyes gives a subtle reassurance that we might be on the right path after all.

In pain we bid farewell to a place we’ve always called home, to a fresh start, and new beginnings, yes we are hopeful.

Alas, it strikes!

Unfriendly realities cuts desired expectations.

We shudder in fear, not what we hoped for Life has thrown its heap on us, unbearably heavy it is!

Help us! we wail, as we grow pale.

Vulnerable with our burdens, our hands stretched.

We try to reach for hope and reassurance where we perceived was sanctuary

There are rules of engagement and you do not fit into the pool.

We are bluntly refused.

It shields only those it considers its own, we realise rudely

Home is not here? we ask as we are cold

We were made to believe the grass springs for every!

In despair we question where we belong, less human then are we?

You knew the rules they insist,

it was braced on the palm of your hands.

Trembling, we look back

Grief in our hearts as no help is in sight

No, we can't go back.

Our young stare at us, confused indeed they are.

Don't they love us? they query

How do we rest at night as

we tell the tale of pain and fear in their eyes?

Not this life promised, we mutter.

As tears fill our eyes, we look away, hoping one day we will be valued for who we truly are,

not by race, colour, status, or how far long we travelled to get here

But as humans, true and in dire need of kindness in a strange land as this is the home we now know.

# I smile when I need to, but on the inside I am falling apart.

Mahmood

**M**y name is Mahmood and I am reaching out to you in the hope that you might be able to assist me in resolving my current predicament. My journey to the United Kingdom began under dire circumstances. As an unaccompanied minor fleeing the conflict in Syria, I arrived here at the tender age of 16 in late 2014. Now, at 26, I find myself trapped in a state of uncertainty, unable to secure a stable future in the country I have come to see as my home.

My initial years in the UK were spent under the care of Kent Social Services, both as a child and later as a volunteer. However, the support that was once a lifeline was abruptly withdrawn, leaving me adrift and unsure if proper procedures were followed in this decision. Deprived of this crucial support, I faced the harsh realities of homelessness, living on the streets for nearly two years, until the Home Office provided temporary hotel accommodation.

In 2023, I submitted a new claim to regularize my status, only to face rejection in January 2024. I promptly appealed this decision, yet, despite a year having passed, I am still waiting for a hearing date. The prolonged uncertainty has taken a severe toll on my mental health. I am battling severe depression, compounded by persistent suicidal thoughts, and I have previously attempted to end my life. The mental health support and medication I receive offer little solace in the face of this overwhelming despair.

A significant part of my struggle stems from the Home Office's belief that I am a citizen of a different country. However, I was born and raised in Syria, a fact I am striving to substantiate with documentation made scarce by years of conflict and chaos. Isolated from family and unable to work, study, or even rent a home, I have spent over a decade in the UK, a country that feels like home yet denies me the chance to truly belong.

The indefinite wait and the monthly reporting to the Home Office exacerbate my mental anguish. The limbo I am trapped in is unbearable, and I am desperate for a resolution so that I can begin to rebuild my life with a sense of security and purpose.

I humbly ask for your assistance in navigating this labyrinthine process. Your support in expediting my court hearing could be the beacon of hope I need to emerge from this darkness. Any help you can offer in liaising with the Home Office

The worst part? No one seems to notice. I smile when I need to. I pretend I'm okay. But inside, it feels like I'm falling apart. The loneliness is suffocating, and the darkness in my mind feels endless.

I've thought about giving up. I've stood on the edge of everything, wondering if anyone would care if I disappeared. But somehow, I'm still here. And maybe, just maybe, that means something.

I don't know how to heal, but I know I don't want to feel this way forever. Maybe this is my first step; writing it down, letting it out, hoping that someone out there understands.

I know that pain doesn't last forever. And as much as my mind tries to convince me otherwise, I believe there's still a reason to hold on.

I don't know when it started, or maybe I do, but I've buried it so deep that I can't find the beginning anymore. All I know is that every day feels heavier than the last. Like I'm trapped in a fog that won't lift, like I'm screaming for help in a room full of people, but no one even looks up.

I've been fighting this battle for so long that I don't even remember what it's like to feel okay. Happiness feels like something other people get to have. Not me. I wake up exhausted, even after sleeping for hours. I force myself to get through the day, pretending everything is fine, but inside, I'm breaking.

And the loneliness—it's the worst part. Even when I'm around people, I feel alone. Like I'm separate from everyone else, living in a world where I don't belong. I see people laughing, making plans, moving forward. And I'm just... stuck. Stuck in my head, stuck in this sadness, stuck in a place where hope feels like a distant memory.

I've thought about giving up more times than I can count. The pain is so overwhelming that sometimes I wonder if it would be easier to just disappear. I've stood on that edge, staring into the void, wondering if anyone would even notice if I was gone.



*Image: Meera Shakti Osborne*

I don't know how to fix this. I don't know how to make the sadness go away. But writing this is my way of saying: I'm struggling. I'm hurting. And I don't want to feel this way forever.

Every morning, I wake up and feel the same heaviness settle over me. It's as if my body is weighed down by something invisible—something no one else can see, but I feel it in every breath I take. The world moves on around me, people laugh, make plans, chase their dreams. And I'm just here, barely holding on, stuck in a cycle I can't break.

when this darkness first took over. Maybe it was slow, creeping in like a fog until one day I couldn't see through it. Or maybe it hit all at once, leaving me gasping for air. Either way, it's here now, and it won't let go.

I feel alone, even when I'm surrounded by people. I try to talk, but the words feel empty. No one really understands—not because they don't care, but because how do you explain something that doesn't make sense even to yourself? How do you tell someone that you wake up every day hoping it will get better, only to feel that same crushing sadness wrap around you like a suffocating blanket.

But I'm still here. I don't know why. Maybe because some tiny part of me still hopes that one day, this feeling will lift. That one day, I won't have to pretend anymore—that I'll smile and actually mean it. Maybe I hold on because even though my mind tells me I don't matter, I desperately want to believe that I do.

I wish I could turn off the thoughts, the self-doubt, the endless feeling of not being enough. I wish I could sleep without nightmares or go a day without feeling like I'm failing at life. I wish I could reach out, but every time I try, I convince myself no one wants to hear about my problems.



*Image: Meera Shakti Osborne*


# Life

Nameless

**I**t's when I'm speaking about it I wouldn't really know where to start, but I'm just talking about my life story basically, know what I mean.


Akwaaba, that was 2014/13 ... 15 ... so I was living in Tottenham. In 2015 it was more like ... I was living in Tottenham ... yeah I was living in Tottenham 2015. Yeah, I remember we met in the church ... piano yeah, and then I was there, and the table tennis. Yeah, so I was living in Tottenham. Just thinking ... mind's all over the place ... yeah. I was just younger and it's like ... I started off going around ... I knew what was going around – all the court times. I'll start around the court time ... because that's when they were talking about deportation and stuff like that. I remember just before that, that's when I started speaking to my dad actually, 2015. Okay now I know ... around like Akwaaba time that's when I was like Year 5 ... Year 4, Year 5 ... I was living in Tottenham. I remember I was in like a one bedroom apartment in Tottenham. And at the time ... that's when there was more talk of deportation, I was with like social services, we had Chelsea, then there were others that came over as well. That time was a bit of a weird time for me to be honest. Because like ... going to school and then

managing what's going on around. And at Year 5 it was so weird what was going on at those ages, I was still aware, so I knew what was happening. Just that like ... I don't know, it was a bit scary as well. But at the same time it was for my deportation, and it's like ... my dad wasn't really trying to help, he was trying to like ... yeah, it was a bit weird. I came in that time ... I remember like ... I remember this part a bit vaguely though ... but when they was talking about deportation... the Home Office I remember they somehow got in contact with my dad, or asked me stuff about my dad and all that stuff. And then ... yeah they got in contact with him and he just started saying that oh ... what did he say? ... he said oh ... he basically said to him can you help with him, take his mum out of the country ... all those things ... no at first he said he was going to bring me and my mum outside of ... for them to take my mum, kick us out of the country. Then he changed his mind saying for them to just kick my mum out and leave me in the country, I would be with him. It was a bit of a ... very like weird time as well. And both times I knew like ... I was a bit scared, it was at the back of my mind when I would go to school and stuff. But I don't know I somehow managed to just to manage with it, it didn't really affect me too much. But it was in the back of my mind, I even remember like ... I don't know why he was saying that, I don't know what the reason was for it. But ... something came into my head when I was speaking and I forgot ... something came into my head. Or even the time my mum was signing on as well ... I remember the morning we used to go ... like around 6, 7 ... 6 or 7 in the morning before school she would take me to the place, sign on and start ... around London Bridge yeah. It was somewhere past the Shard we used to sign on ... and the line was so long. And it was pretty much you had to do it. I can't remember ... she had to be there ... it was like a very important thing basically. And the Home Office people, they had a lot of kids there... the line was just long. Then she'd take me to school



after. I remember one of her friends used to be driving across around that time, and then he would drop me to school and stuff like that. But yeah around that time when I started going to Akwaaba with my mum, she was like ... yeah, I can't remember how it was really, but we started going Akwaaba, so I'd meet other people that been in a similar situation with no recourse to public funds and a lot of stuff. It was just good, because we all came from similar backgrounds, and yeah we just got to mix, talk to each other about it. Especially our parents as well, because we were kids ... we knew what was going on, but ... yeah we knew what was going on, but for us it was kind of normal ... even though we know it's not, but we're just used to it. But for our parents it made them more happier, more ... they got to be like themselves, they got to talk to people about things for once, didn't have to keep things a secret ... and it was like a little community... I remember like another person ... it was Joyce, she had a daughter. She used to work in a hair salon and stuff. We used to meet up with them sometimes, even when I lived in Tottenham, forgot their names ... but they had a family ... yeah, their mum and then two sons and one daughter ... I was living in Tottenham. Forgotten their names. Like even then I used to meet up with them and stuff, used to meet them. And even then ... yeah because it just comes - the more I talk, the more I remember things. It was like a community really, it was like a community. I was happy to go there. Sometimes we need to walk to Akwaaba because we didn't have much money to take a bus and stuff, I remember we used to walk here. Makes me so happy to go there. I used to play table tennis. Someone there was teaching me the piano, they had drumming classes at one point as well. Yeah, drumming classes. I even learnt how to fix bikes as well. Like to this day I know somehow how to fix a bike. I remember... yeah I think you got me the things to fix my bike ... forgot what it's called. But yeah like ... at that time for me it was very difficult to be honest. It wasn't like how it is

now. Now like it's kind of comfortable ... back then was difficult, yeah ... like stuff like clothes, food, it was very difficult ... I always ate, my mum never really used to eat. Like she would eat, but she would go without to give me ... a lot of the time. It was just always me and her ... yeah it was just always me and her. But she would make sure I had something, she always used to do like little jobs and stuff and to make sure I ate, I had something ... so I cannot really say I went hungry. For her it was a bit different, she went like a couple ... not a couple of days, but she would go without eating sometimes ... for a lot of the time ... and then yeah. And it's like we were getting that support from Akwaaba ... people she knew ... but from family and stuff, there wasn't really much help I would say. More people like Akwaaba ... yes like people in the church, they helped a lot more. They were like my family at that time. But a lot of things were kind of kept ... wasn't kept secret because they knew what was going on, but they wouldn't see it, if that makes sense, yeah. And then that time period as well I was speaking to my ... I don't even know how I got in contact with my dad actually, couldn't even say how ... but that time period I started speaking to him more. I can't remember the reason, it might have been because of social services. I think they called him. I don't know to be honest. That time period, I don't even remember that at all. That same year, 2015. It was a bit weird because I was speaking to my dad more, and it was a bit awkward. I didn't really know him, if that makes sense ... I didn't really like speak to him much as well, that's the thing. He would try and call me though sometimes, but sometimes ... I didn't want to speak to him. But in the time period of the court stuff it was a bit weird. He was very weird about it at the start, like he didn't want anything to do with it ... he even said himself, that's why he didn't like get closer to me as well. He didn't want anything to do with my mum, me. People were making things up as well. There was something pretty weird which I wasn't really



sure about. My mum... people were talking behind her back, doesn't matter about her, they'll say things about me ... and then say it to my dad, my dad believed them, but he never really spoke to us about it.

Even then, like at primary school, they were saying ... at one point they were saying I couldn't get free school meals. And just little things like that. I couldn't get free school meals, so my mum had to make me packed lunch. But I don't know if we had money for packed lunch, so we had to like ... it was hard so she had to make ... whatever that was there she would give it me, like bread and stuff, sandwiches ... so I just used to go with packed lunch. I remember towards the end of primary school I was just going with packed lunch around that time period. Because they stopped my free school meals because they realised ... I can't remember the reason, but yeah. For that reason – no recourse to public funds – not allowed to have free school meals or something like that, yeah. So yeah there wasn't really much help to be honest ... it was very weird. The help was more from things like Akwaaba, that was more the help we got than like the government helping ... even the social worker ... even though my social worker at that time period, she was very weird, she was very like dismissive, she didn't really care much. She didn't care, she was just like yeah it's just another family, let me just do whatever. It was a bit ... yeah.

At the time it was just my life, I'm used to it ... it's not anything really new, I'm just growing up. You know what I mean? It's not like beforehand I was like way better off, and now this just happen suddenly then I would realise something was off ... but for me it was just normal, it was just more normal to be honest. And then now when I'm looking I'm thinking that's a bit crazy. Actually looking back at it now it's like 'I went through all of that'... sometimes, it's crazy, I don't really feel it ... well I feel it, but I don't feel really – it feels like it was a dream. It's like a story to be told.

I even remember every day it was like ... even every day ... I always had a fear that they were going to like remove me and my mum from the country, I always had a fear of that. Because that's what I was hearing. She was saying that, she was worried about that as well. And even at one point ... this is a bit later on actually, yeah later on there was ... no this was 2015 ... when we moved to Forest Gate, it was the Home Office used to knock on people's doors and speak to you, they would say you're getting deported and stuff ... there was always a fear of that as well. There was always a fear of that, or they're going to kick us out of the house and ... just little things like that was on my mind at the time constantly. But like even with the court thing as well, that was very weird to be honest, it was very weird. It was just a bit like ... I don't know. Trying to do all of that. I was like 8, 9 years old. Especially for my mum as well ... it was like an experience for my mum yeah. But I was scared ... that was my first time ever being in airport as well. I even remember as well, around that time period someone told Home Office, they were lying and they said I left the country in 2008 or 9 or something like that. He lied and said I left the country when I've never had a passport. So I mean ... Home Office, for some reason, were saying whatever they were saying. But yeah people were lying to them, they were believing it. That's part of the reason we went to the court as well. They were trying to say how am I leaving the country, I left the country and stuff – it was very weird.

Even then I was so young then. Like I knew what was going on but I didn't, but I did ... like I knew ... I knew what was going on, but I didn't emotionally know what was going on. Like I knew you could get kicked out whatever ... they were even trying to say I was going to ██████ – I've never been to ██████ ... they were saying that, it was crazy. Even the years before that as well like ... there was always talk of like them trying to say I'm not British and all this stuff. They were just saying ... they just wanted me in ██████ for some

reason ... I even remember the social worker saying it ... they were saying that yeah like ... about me just being in [REDACTED] on the time period, yeah. Even like about the court thing, when ... even leading up to it now ... because we knew they were going to... I was just scared they were going to kick my mum out of the country, I was like no I don't want that. It was very weird like, yeah. And then I had my family, but they weren't really helping at that time period to be honest. My whole life I've been with my mum really. And there's people ... like friends and stuff helping out ... I even don't want to say some of the things you know. I'll say it ... no I'll say it ... even with like ... there's a certain family member, I was living with them when I was younger ... because from like when I was younger we didn't really have our own place... no we didn't have our own place, but I was with like someone else ... I mean either we got evicted or they got evicted ... the place was on their name, but they had like their room, we had our room. Yeah we had our little room and stuff, and the police knocked on the door ... this time I was like 4 years old ... 3 or 4 years old ... and then ... I just remember one day we got kicked out. I mean I had to go to that family member's house ... I don't know, they was all right I guess but ... well it wasn't all right, but ... I don't even know how to explain it ... that family member didn't really care. And it was a close family member as well ... like family-wise ... when you talk about family, they were close ... not relationship-wise but as a family ... they were a close family member. Me and my mum was living with them, and then they kicked us out for literally no ... the reason wasn't even making any sense, but they said ... I remember the reason ... but it didn't make any sense what they were saying ... you wouldn't kick your own family member out for that reason ... telling my mum to do better or achieve better, give them a chance. They didn't really give them a chance, they didn't help them out ... or didn't help my mum out ... they didn't do much for my mum in saying you want her to have a chance and all that stuff - didn't make any sense to me. Even at

that time period my mum didn't have any ... I don't remember her having any papers or anything ... I didn't have any. I only had my birth certificate, I didn't have a passport, nothing like that ... so knowing that your daughter has no recourse to public funds, you wouldn't really kick them out, if that makes sense. You wouldn't really kick them out and stuff ... wouldn't really kick them out and ... yeah it's just weird when you do that. Even leading up to it, we were all in the house ... like my mum was cooking, and she was cooking, other family members were cooking, it was like a normal house with a family ... but I don't know what was going on behind the scenes as much, but I remember they were mistreating my mum as well a lot, mum was getting mistreated a lot. They're the ones with papers and stuff, saying she has nothing, no papers. And it's just crazy because they helped everyone out but my mum and she had no ... so if my mum did stuff, she did it by herself ... she had help from people, but it wasn't really family members that were helping as much. But yeah like even my dad was a bit crazy because he kicked us out knowing my mum had a child of only ... I was about 5 around these times ... I was about 4, 5 years old, he kicked her out ... and we didn't have anywhere to stay. Where did we even go from there? When we got kicked out where did we even go? We went to... we went to my godmother's ... I can't remember ... I can't remember directly, but my mum went to her friend's house, we were staying at a couple of people's houses for a bit as well within that timeframe. We were at a couple of people's houses just sleeping and stuff, and then her friend ... yeah just like a couple of people's houses. And then after ... we went to a friend's house, like my mum's friend's house ... and then something happened there. Just like ... something happened, a disagreement happened, and then me and my mum we just like ... yeah we just had to leave that place. And then we were going to sleep on a bench in a park, and then ... yeah even at that age I was even asking my mum 'Mum, what are we doing here?' Not 'What are we doing?' but 'What's going on?' I

was like 'Mum, are we going to sleep on the bench?' and then she was like ... 'Yeah, we're going to have to sleep on a bench' As a kid I'm like ... like I knew it was deep, but ... I knew it was deep, but it was just crazy because ... even then I was thinking ... I was happy to sleep on the bench, like I didn't mind. But now I think well that's sort of crazy if you don't mind that ... but I didn't mind to sleep on a bench. Like I had my little jacket, whatever, on me, I was warm. And then someone found out that the family member my mum and I was living with kicked us out, someone found out my family member kicked us out ... and then he took us in basically. He took us in ... he was in like an old ... I don't know if it's allowed even ... if you live in an old people, are they allowed to like ... if someone's living in an old people home are they allowed to let you stay at theirs? But basically he just took us in. He helped us out a lot, I remember that. And then it's just crazy because it's like ... because even then I was thinking like why would that family member do this to us like. Why would they ... I don't get ... it didn't make sense to me. It just don't make sense ... they don't have nothing in the country – just leave them out ... just leave them in the streets basically, nowhere to go ... didn't really make sense to me. But even then like that whole time period when we got kicked out was crazy because ... we were at someone's house, like we were at someone else's house ... and they're like not too far ... it was 2012/13 ... we were at someone's house, mum was renting ... I don't know if she was renting out a room or something, I can't even remember, but we were in a little room there. We had multiple people there, but they were like their own family... I just had a couple of things, I only had a couple of things. Because when my mum ... like when we did get kicked out, a lot of my stuff ... my stuff, my mum's stuff ... we just got like ... I think they even took it, or they threw it in the bin or something ... like a lot of important documents and stuff that my mum had got lost, a lot of things got lost. And even then we were there so I didn't really have much, I only

had a couple of clothes, a couple of things. I mean I was still going to school these times as well, I was still going to school ... it is what it is ... but yeah, it is what it is at the time, but ... I had a couple of things there ... we were in that little room. And then it was very weird because when we were there it was like ... we were sharing like a kitchen again ... not even sharing, we were sharing a kitchen ... and one of the people there was really nice ... but the person that owned it was very rude. They just didn't do the privacy aspect. And it was like ... yeah no privacy, and they mistreated my mum basically, not really sure ... they mistreated her. They were very like ... I remember them being manipulative, they used to say yeah she's like a sister to them, and all these things ... but one day they just kicked us out, they put all our stuff out. One day they put all our stuff outside the flat, they went to another country ... all my clothes, all my Christmas presents I got that year, and all my mum's stuff – that got like ... they took that with them and they ... they gave it to people in their own country basically. They went to another country, visited their family and stuff. Yeah, like my clothes everything, my mum's stuff ... I had a little beyblade as well, they even took that. That one hurt me a lot, I was like ... even a TV we got as well at the time. But yeah a lot of my stuff and my mum's stuff got taken. We had friends that was around helping, and they used to come ... one of my uncles used to come with us ... mum had like close friends and they were like with us in those moments. I mean I was only a kid, so I used to play around with my friends as well at the time. But yeah it was crazy, they just took our stuff, went to that country and they just like ... but they didn't tell my mum, we just came back and the door was locked, everything was locked, and our stuff was outside there, and we were thinking where are we going to go. And then yeah ... this was like around 2013 ... 2013 we moved to like a house in Homerton ... yeah we moved to a house in like Homerton. I think that's when ... 2013 that's the time. But yeah, 2013 we just moved to a house in

Homerton ... well not a house, we ... they had someone renting the house, they were renting a flat. Yeah then more of the same thing happened – they just kicked us out. They just kicked us out and then ... and then another person ... I remember that time period... they gave me my first tablet actually, they gave me my first tablet ... I remember that. They got me shoes and stuff. Yeah that time period ... all that stuff was leading up towards Akwaaba. So when we did go Akwaaba and we had these people were similar situation ... many with their parents, because their parents would know more what was going on behind like ... in that time ... what's going on. We were seeing our parents happy and all that...it was just fun really and truly ... it was just fun for me being in Akwaaba, just being around people you could speak to.

I remember my dad tried to like... I need to think because my mind is going all over the place - my story's like all over the place. Yeah like ... and all that stuff happening in the span of like about 2 years, from me being kicked out ... by being kicked out by my family member to going ... renting a flat from that person ... that was in the span of like a year, two years-ish, yeah. And then there was a family member talking... saying bad things about mum. Which was very weird, and it's like ... for me that's a close family member, it was very scary and weird. Now it's fine, even with my parents ... it's like my mum ... what's going on with my dad, mum's showing me pictures of him, whatever ... but he never ... well I do know the reason ... but he never really like ... like he said it himself, he didn't want anything ... like at that point. And the reason why he didn't was because people were saying things about me, about my mum too, and he believed it. And then yeah ... in 2013 now ... but in 2013 then we moved to ... I don't remember the flat we were renting there ... I can't remember what even happened, but around that time was when we started ... I think we started going to Akwaaba ... discovered Akwaaba or

something like that. And then when it was just more like ... yeah we just ... it helped with all that stuff, it was good, it was fun. It was fun ... even when we like ... because we were going there from living in Homerton ... yeah it just like helped my mum as well ... I don't know how to even describe it. But I've just seen how they're helping my mum ... my mum was like ... because I don't know what's going on, but it's like ... just seeing someone help my mum. When I was younger I could say more because I was there ... but now it's been so much years ... but they were helping my mum ... like behind the scenes with like her papers, with things, social workers. And then yeah. What even happened? Then yeah ... I'm trying to think, my mind's all over the place. There's stuff I haven't talked about in years as well ... I haven't really spoke about this in years, so ... there might even be things I'm forgetting.

Forgetting things. Yeah because I know I forgot like a good amount, but when I'm speaking more it's just coming through I just forgot it ... I'm trying to think you know. I just remember at the time it was struggling and stuff ... all those times was hard to be honest like. I'd say it was one of the most hardest times of my life to be honest, yeah ... like we didn't have much. Like even travelling, going on the bus sometimes was hard. Didn't have much money for the bus and all these things. It's like you're seeing ... it's like you're seeing the parents as well, you're seeing them suffer ... like you're seeing them suffer, you know like they're going through it as well, they're going through it a lot more, but they're still trying to keep strong. Because even with all these things, like even a couple of years after all those things happened, like even then like my mum didn't have a relationship with that family member even when like ... I get emotional.

Even the time ... all that's crazy. I can't explain how much I thought it was crazy I got kicked out. But I remember living... I don't think it was that

person's flat, but we had a little room there. I think the police evicted, or someone evicted like us ... or they evicted that person, and then we were just confused – we seen the key lock changes and stuff and we were just confused. And then we were just walking and then we end up at the family member's house and stuff. Yeah. You see like a point of time from Tottenham to like when I was living in Forest Gate ... I remember it but ... it's hard to explain ...

Because when I explain things I go all over the place.

Yeah that was very hard yeah, Forest Gate. Yeah, that was tough, Forest Gate was tough. That's the time the whole court thing happened as well, Forest Gate time, when we lived in Forest Gate. But even that time, that was a crazy time, I even remember they moved us into like a ... like a flat and stuff ... that was like a one-bedroom apartment, a one-bedroom flat, and I was living with my mum. Yeah. That's when I was like ... yeah late primary school, going into secondary school, so I'm hitting puberty and stuff ... I need my own space like. We even had to share a bed and stuff, so it's just like ... not embarrassing, but it's like ... I've never really told anyone that actually in primary school ... I mean in secondary ... never even told anyone, like no one knew that. But Forest Gate was hard, all those things were still going on through Forest Gate ... all that stuff I already said was still going on. Like Forest Gate ... yeah because even going on through Forest Gate ... that's when like ... my mum... she had like a ... she was getting anxiety at that time, she's getting like a mental breakdown and stuff. I remember that summer of 2017 ... that whole summer like - wasn't really in the house, like she used to get anxiety, we used to call the ambulance and stuff. One of her friends used to come and help her like, just be by her side. There's only so much I could do - I was helping, but there's only so much I could actually really do at that

time. So that's at the start of when we moved to Forest Gate ... the whole time she was getting anxiety, but she was at her lowest and stuff. I remember we went back to that same family member's house, and my mum, she like she had a panic attack, she went back to the family member's place ... and my mum just like opened up to them, she opened up to them and stuff. And then ... yeah she just opened up to them, and it was just like very weird, because ... because I was even there... my mum opened up to them... and then that family member just like went and just told that ... she went back and told that behind my mum's back again ... it was very like ... yeah, started saying things. She started doing the stuff she was doing again back before ... I didn't really speak on what she doing like before ... but yeah, it's just like very ... just petty things and little things and stuff. But even that same family member, they even said at one point that ... well I heard them say anyway ... if I say this part... I'm not really going to say it ... but basically... it's only one person that they ... this is very vague ... but it's only one person that they truly ... well it's only one of them that they like actually ... like the rest of them they regretted ... the rest of them just regretted basically. They didn't really like ... my mum... they regretted it basically ... it was like they don't really have love for the rest. And even before all of that, like even before that same family member ... back in [REDACTED], it was just like ... there, that that same family member left ... left them in [REDACTED] ... came to England to start a whole new life. They start a whole new life without my mum. They left another family member behind, that family member never knew that person, my mum basically raised them and their siblings ... and then yeah like ... my mum's family comes here now, comes to UK ... but they still ... my mum comes to the UK, it's like they're just like mistreating her and stuff. And then they started mistreating her ... and then yeah. Favourites and stuff, and there's one you like and then there's one you don't like. And even with them it was hard because like there were a lot of them in a specific ...

in a flat and stuff, and there's a lot of my family members, and they have to share rooms and stuff. And they were like ... yeah ... they were all like 19, 20, 21 ... they were older.

Yeah so ... it was very weird like that they would do that. My mum's at her lowest and a couple of years have passed. Because even like from when I was living in Homerton ... when I was living in Homerton and I moved to Tottenham ... yeah from when I was living in Homerton and moved to Tottenham I was like ... it was just really like ... we never told them, because that was like around the time they kicked us out ... so we never told them, we just leave it to them, just cut them off completely. And then they were calling worried for my mum, but like they never really cared, they were just saying that, they never really ... if my mum was in the position with them today... If they'd helped us back then, like I'd have been better off ... I'd have had certain things I don't really have now ... I'm still having to go through now that ... if back then wouldn't have really happened to me ... if that makes sense. You know when you have to go through a whole long process, you have to go through ... it would have been much simpler. And it's shown that repeatedly ... from when I was born he could have helped us out. When I was born ... like he did us wrong from when we got kicked out, from when mum like opened up herself to him and then just like ... talking about her behind her back, it was very weird. I'm going off track you know.

If I'm being honest, what I want other people to know... don't put yourself down, always try and see opportunities. I've done a lot of things. Even though I was like behind, I done various education when I was outside of education, I done a lot of things like, I had a lot of opportunities in my life, I've done a lot of things. So it gets better, there's a lot you can do, so don't bring yourself down, it's about finding opportunities. And it's finding like a

group of people that will be by you. And it may not be your family members, sometimes you have to cut them off, but new friends and stuff. Don't be afraid to open up, but ... don't open to everyone, but don't be afraid to open up ... just talk your story, say how it is. But yeah it always gets better, because I can never say I never had opportunities – I had a lot of opportunities. Like I was playing the piano, I was playing basketball ... I was playing basketball, I was in a band, I was drumming – drumming at the church, I was doing athletics. I was doing a lot outside of education. I was doing acting from a drama thing as well. Like I even acted in front of people before for like a play and stuff ... like I've done a lot like. So it always gets better. Like as a child it always gets better ... I mean for the parents, for older people, it gets better ... never put yourself down over a situation, because you can't really control it. It just is what it is at the end of the day. Just like ... you have to keep going, just put your head down and do what you can do. Focus on what you can do, not what you can't do at the end of the day.

Even now I can't ... yeah even now I can't ... like I applied for a passport, they were saying ... this is like last year ... no this ... this year I applied for my passport ... yeah I applied for my passport and they were saying I can't get it because I have to go through a whole other process. Need more understanding I think more, to be honest. Yeah. Because even the court thing, that was very stressful ... even applying for a passport saying I have to get naturalised or something like that ... I didn't even understand ... even that to me don't make sense. When I called them I was asking them about it, they were saying like it's a weird situation, very weird. Yeah, just don't make sense to me to be honest.

There's another thing... the people from like the government... especially Home Office, they treated us like we were rubbish, they didn't really care,

just didn't really care. And everywhere we're getting this funny look, they were just like ... they were treating us like rubbish. I think that needs to change. To be honest, that situation is not hard to fix. If it's a process you have to go through, it's a process isn't it, but it's how you go about the process is the issue, to be honest. Like taking me to court - what was the reason for them to do that like, there was no grounds, didn't have enough grounds to do it. Because I am British, I was born here, so I am British ... but ... even the judge said I'm British so ... why did they make us go through all that just for them to say that we're ... even the judge was saying that, like I'm British. Made it clear as well they shouldn't have been doing this. I was scared you know. I remember like saying yeah I'm born here, I did nursery here, did reception then primary school ... I was scared, but I got here ... but I was scared because we were going down and we were seeing like the court - if it goes wrong what are we going to do then? And the place is right next to the airport as well, yeah that's scary... imagine your child... your mum could get deported, you're not really close to the family, so you're just going to be by yourself. It's very like ... it's a scary feeling. At that point I didn't know much of my family situation, I didn't know ... I can't really speak the language. I can speak a bit now, but back then I couldn't speak it, I'm only a little child. I'm not going to be over there, it's different to here as well, it's very different. It's not like here where you're going to school and all these things - very different over there. So yeah. For me that was a big thing of my life growing up. That felt like... it stuck to me, to be honest. Yeah, that for me was just like ... I can't explain it, it's like ... it's like it's a dream. It's more like it's a dream the whole court thing. I don't know, like a dream, yeah. I remember you came, the pastor came, Benjamin came ... who else came? - I can't even remember. But I do remember there was other people that had to go as well ... I do remember that yeah. So like we was all in it together, we went through everything, we all were like ... we were all in it together, so

we all had to go through that. It's sad though, because it made us like suffer. Mentally my mum was like ... her mental health was ... at some point it was just going down and down. It was going down basically at a certain point. We had help from like other people, friends and stuff. But what help we got from family - they won't do much ... they didn't do much.

Yeah I was scared for my mum a little bit. Like I was doing a lot of the stuff, like I was helping her with a lot of things. And I was only in like ... I was in I'd say late ... no early secondary, late primary school, around that time period, like Year 7, Year 8 ... I was helping her a lot.

Even that same family member they said they said they regret not helping ... they regret helping everyone else but not my mum. They regret it yeah, they said it ... I mean they like ... I mean they're saying they're proud of my mum and stuff ... see now they're proud of my mum ... but like ... they're saying that now, but like there's no point in even saying that.

Even within the primary school there was like families are struggling as well. My mum and them had to help each other ... money and stuff. But I can always say, I never went a day hungry, my mum always gave me food. She always worked hard and gave me food. I don't think I saw a day ... she was always hustling ... she always had a hustle, she never like ... whatever she was doing, like babysitting, cleaning toilets, she always had a hustle. All I had to do was literally school, that's all I had to really do like.

It's like a little ... it's like a story, you can always make something from something ... you can always make something from nothing. Just go through like ... times are hard, but just go through it. Whatever you can't change don't stress yourself over it. If you can't change something, you know what I mean like ... some process you can't, you can never really change. Like me moving

around - I couldn't really change that. That's out of my control. Yeah. Only focus on what you can actually do and change about ... there's certain things you actually can't change, you just have to go through it. It's that spirit. If you're religious – pray. If you're not religious just speak to someone about it. I think that really helps a lot as well. Just having someone to speak to, and then yeah.

## When it starts raining...

Zaheed

**W**hat I want people to know about how life is without papers, permissions, or benefits is that you get stuck and your life is on hold. It's only been two years since I got out of that situation and I have already been able to do more, had more opportunities and have been allowed to do more stuff than during the 15 years before. Since I came to the UK, I have seen 7 different Prime Ministers in charge of this country but for most of my time here I was struggling to survive.

When I first came here, I was promised that they would look after me but a year later I was by myself with no support and trying to survive. For the next 15 years I was trying to get by. I was patient, I stayed away from problems as much as I could because I knew it would affect my situation. But I couldn't get any support and moved all around the country looking for hope.

It got so bad that I don't even know how to say it – you know when it's raining and you're walking outside and you have no umbrella nothing. It starts raining. And you just start to dance, and you don't care. That's what happened. I just didn't care what's going on around me. I just didn't care what was happening. I just wanted to be there alone fishing, swimming, eating fish I don't know, fire.

This stuff it doesn't happen to all of us, these things happen to people who come here running away from something. It took me five years to understand what the word 'asylum seeker' actually means but it's just words – they don't matter.

Eventually after 15 years I got some late hope and for a moment I was allowed to do more legally. But my dreams were gone, like when you're a child you have dreams and they change when you're teenager and they change again when you're an adult – that's just life – but in my case I had to let go of all of them and focus on the future, and it's killing me. Until today I'm still thinking about what I want to do. There is nothing that makes me happy, I mean that sucks. This experience changed me, and I cannot say if it's better or worse. It's like it is - I'm still trying to figure out what makes me happy. I'm trying to find what makes me happy.

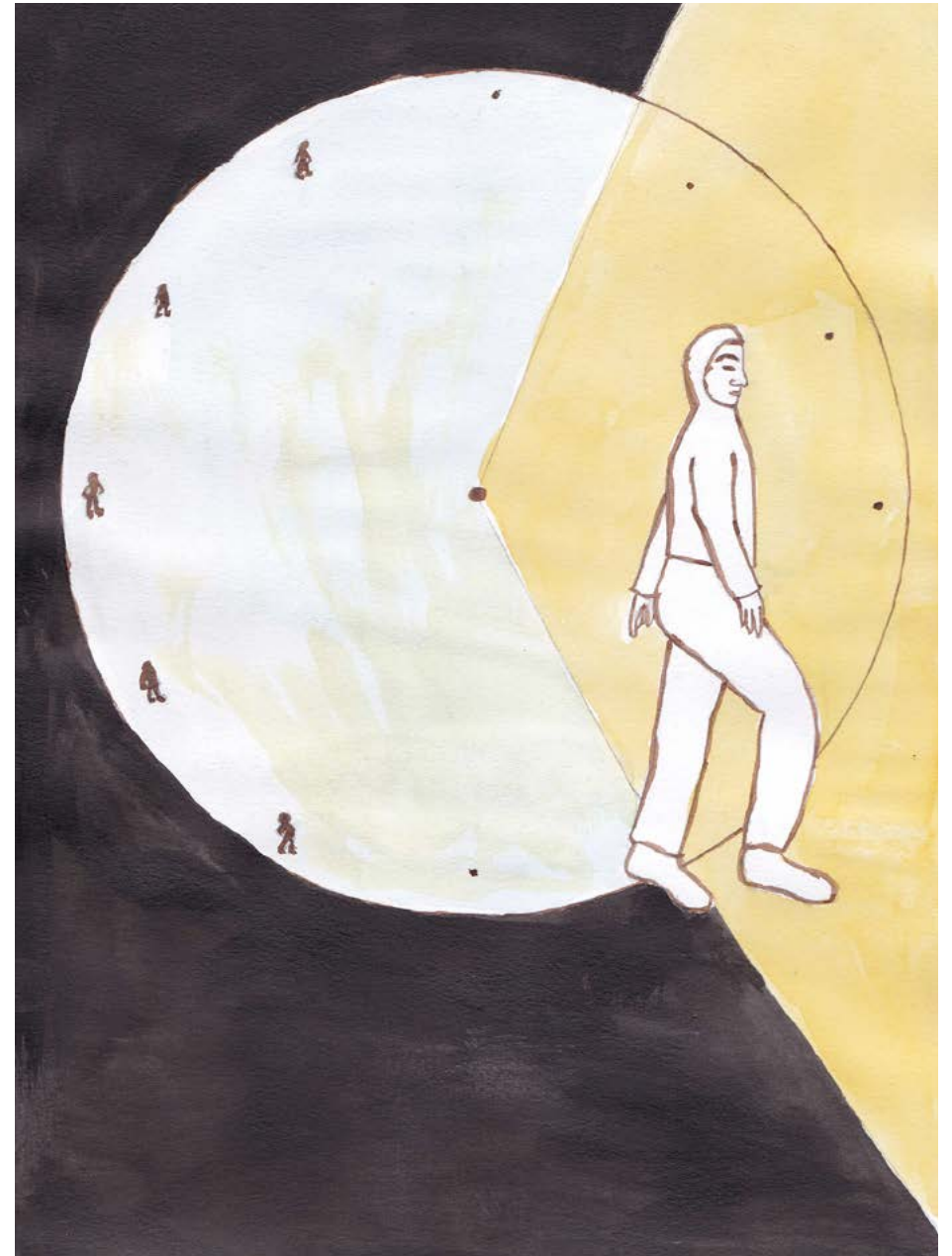
What I can say is that I have learned a lot. I learned how important it is to never give up on your dreams, even if it seems impossible. Even if you're in a bad situation you have to learn how to enjoy it, that's what I mean by dancing in the rain. As my cousin told me once 'If you don't love what you do, you will never love what you've done.'



*Image: Meera Shakti Osborne*

And don't waste your time on the wrong people. Don't spend time with people who don't have the same vision, just because they are in the same situation. Surround yourself with people who encourage you and people who inspire you, not people who drag you down with their negativity. What I learned is that in this life sometimes you don't need support from no one because if you wait for others to support you, you might wait forever.

I'm the driver of my own train and whoever is in, is in, and whoever isn't – well too bad.



*Image: Meera Shakti Osborne*

# Working to Survive

Sameer

I mean it's going to be difficult in any country but here in the UK there are so many rules and regulations, just to rent a place for example you need to show that you are allowed. And if you don't have any support, it's really hard compared to the other people. Let's say if someone has access to support or benefits from the government he is like at least 5 or 10 years ahead of those who don't have any support.

So if you can't get a legal job, then you're likely to do a low-paid job with really long hours, literally 7 days a week and you don't have time for yourself. If you get support, you can choose and say 'oh I don't like this job', but if you don't have any of this support then this is your only option – a job like that with long hours and little pay. And it's literally what you're surviving on, you need this job to survive, and you're just kind of stuck and you have to work in the same place for who knows, as long as you can, or until maybe God saves you.

And it's not just me, there are many people like that, who have been in this situation for longer, sometimes for 9 years. One guy I knew he was working

at a kebab shop and living upstairs; imagine you sleep at the top of kebab shop, and you just walk down there, so all you have are the stairs for those 9 years. And maybe one day a week you're off and you just go out, or you just sleep the whole day and that's literally your life, just work and sleep above the shop for 9 years. Can you imagine how frustrating this is, and the time must be just flying for him.

When I was in the same situation, at least I had some hope that one day it might change, because I might get a positive answer and everything's going to change. I was really positive but even for people like me who have this hope it was still really difficult to go through it. Now imagine for those who have no hope, and who are literally stuck in the system, for years and years and years, like how depressing their life is. Like there's literally no hope for them, they might be stuck in this forever and it's kind of a nightmare to be honest.

And then Covid lockdowns happened and it was difficult for everyone but it was much harder for people in my situation. In my head I was thinking all the time 'what if the kebab shop closes, what am I going to do?'. Because literally without that job I wouldn't be able to pay the rent or buy food, so you depend on that. Everything was closed for a really long time and there were no jobs and not a lot of support.

Then when the covid restrictions were getting a bit easier, I had to take a second job because the landlord raised the rent. So I was working 2 jobs, one that finished at 11 pm and then by 11.30 pm I had to be at the next one, cleaning until 2 or 3 am. So there was no time to do anything else. And your world becomes really small when you don't have any rights, and when you have to work like this. The only people I knew were my solicitor, the

interpreter and people at the kebab shop – maybe 5 people in total and no social life at all.

I didn't have much time to focus on other things. It was really just work, and apart from that nothing. And it's physical work so when I was coming home, I was just sleeping because my body was really tired. And then waking up, you have to go again and do the same thing – that was literally the routine for 7 days or 6 days a week, to do the same thing again and again and again. And to be honest it went on for 3 or 3 ½ years until my situation changed. And to me the time just flies, like you don't even notice that 3 years have passed. Because even the guy I mentioned earlier, it's been like 9 or 10 years – and he was always telling me that it feels like he came to the UK yesterday – the time just passed that quick for him. 10 years of his life, he was trapped working in the same place, doing like the same thing again and again and again. Yeah, that's hard.

When I look back, I see that even in these difficult circumstances there were opportunities for me to learn something new, a new skill and become an expert at something even if it's cleaning or cooking or whatever. It can really open up new opportunities and new skills that teach you how to get out of it and not get stuck forever.

This experience has completely changed my life upside down, it literally built a new person. The stuff I learnt, the people I met – my whole perspective on life has changed. It gave me the understanding of this situation, if I hadn't lived through it, I wouldn't understand what others go through. Now if I see someone, I understand a bit better what they are going through. I can just feel what it feels like for them to have a difficult time. I think I now have a better view of the world and think more about how to help people as

much as I can. And I think that's because of what I experienced and it made me this person because I can put myself in their position, so it's hard for me to say no if someone needs help.



^



^

# Growing up without access to my right

Joel J

**G**rowing up without access to public funds was very difficult for me, but it was even more difficult for my mum as she had to work day and night to even scrape enough to provide for me, despite all of that she still managed to do that, no one to support her, no one to run to, the same government that promised to protect its people couldn't even give a helping hand.

When I think back to the time when we were homeless, I tend to tear up. I can still remember my mum's face when social services told her that they could not do anything to help, I can remember the sorrowful wail that she let out as we sat on our bags of clothes outside social services. During the period that we were homeless my mum had to worry about what I was

going to eat for dinner so we went to McDonald's. I loved it, I was thinking that it was a reward for something good I did but then I noticed that it was every night. Mum would use the McDonalds coupons that used to come in the newspaper to get a Big Mac meal while she only asked for a cup of hot water, I would ask her when she was going to get her own dinner but she would just tell me that she is not hungry.

Going from building to building was frustrating each one having its own problem, at one of the places Mum threw up at how dirty the bathroom and kettle was, at another my bike which I held dear to me was stolen.

At school having school meals was seen as cool in my eyes because the food always looked so good, I went and picked up a tray to get some food, not knowing about the consequences that would come after. They charged my mum. They charged my mum because I wanted to eat. I felt bad for being hungry. I felt bad for wanting to eat.

During the years I learned not to ask for anything as I knew mum had far more important things to worry about, I understood that she had to take care of my siblings abroad and pay for their school fees. I choose not to tell my friends about everything I went through, I feel like they would call me an attention seeker or say I'm lying. Even now I feel ashamed when I can't buy food and my friends have to buy it for me, I feel like they leave me out of gatherings and outings as they know I won't be able to afford things.

# My Testimony

No Name

## Trapped in my room

**I** have to stay at home 24 hours, I can't go anywhere. I don't have any support, like every day it's the same; sitting at home, I don't do nothing, I don't have no one. I just stay in my room and think about self-harming and all that stuff ... because I don't know what to do.

Basically, everything was hard, not to be able to do anything. I used to stay at home and look at the wall, just looking at the four walls and I used to think, 'Why is this?' 'Why is the council doing that?' 'Why is the Home Office doing that?'

## Everything stopped - No way out

After my case with the Home Office became 'Appeals Rights Exhausted', they basically said: 'Oh we're not going to be able to help you at all'. I didn't know what to do. They stopped everything at one go. The minute my case became 'Appeals Rights Exhausted' with the Home Office, they stopped everything. It's like I'm not even existing, I'm not even existing in their system, like everything just completely stopped.

I used to go to a lot of places, I used to go to college and then I stopped going to college because of my mental health. Basically, they stopped everything for me and every day I used to think about why that is, why they stopped everything, without anything, without any reason. In my case they were blind - they can see everything in front of them, but they didn't see nothing.

And everything was falling apart, even myself I was falling apart ... self harming, seizures after seizures - all of this stuff it used to make me feel like I don't want to live anymore. What am I living for?

But it started even before. I used to have someone living with me and he used to get everything from the council and the Home Office. The minute he orders something from them they give it to him. But with me, I don't know what it is, I think they didn't treat me very well ... they didn't even want me to be here. But I came here to ask for help because of what happened back home. And basically for me now I'm literally just starting to move on with my life, and it still hurts to know that there's nothing in place for me - that there's nothing being done for me. Even my education or my application with the Home Office, all of this stuff. In my case everything is tied together - I have no documents no nothing and it's all tied together.

Like I don't even exist, and every day I go through the same stress, the same things. I don't have anyone to help. And nothing has been done, not even the age assessment – they didn't even resolve that. I didn't really understand how old I was; 15, 16, 17, 18? All of that stuff, they didn't even help me with. And now I've been here for over how many years? – 10 years – and all of the people I know, they've been here for over 10 years, 15 years ... and the council and the Home Office they say thank you very much and bye, without even giving them a paper to work in this country, without even nothing.

No choice - I am literally left without no choice, they didn't give me any choice. Okay, then if you can't help me just say that from day one, not after such a long period of time, and then they say you don't exist anymore. It's taking all of my energy. It's taking everything to get help like a human being. They don't treat me like a human being. No they don't, the minute your case becomes 'Appeals Rights Exhausted' they say goodbye. Goodbye and see you later, we're not here no more.

### **Everything is on top of each other**

No one can have this awful experience, especially when everything is on top of each other. I couldn't even move, I couldn't. I used to see a police car, and get scared. I used to get scared the minute I see anything, and even until now I still get scared. The minute I see police I get nervous, I get like ... I don't know what to do, I get very scared. It's still the same, the minute I see police, I'm scared since day one, because I don't know what will happen. The minute I see anyone in the front of me I get scared, I get a panic ... like literally I start shaking ... nervous and all of that stuff. And basically everything gets on top of each other, and I couldn't go anywhere. I can't live like a

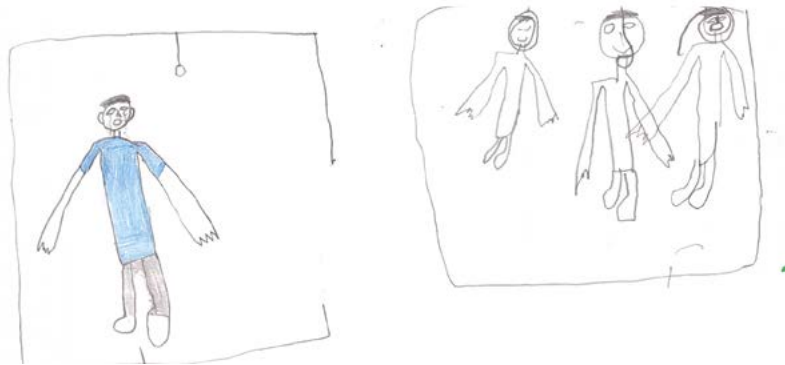
human being, even until now. I just go from home to college, from college to home – that's my life. From meeting to meeting about my case - that's my life. I don't have a social life because of the seizures and because everything is on top of each other – I don't know what to do. And basically I'm just sitting down trying to figure out what I can do about my seizures, what I can do about my mental health, but I can't figure anything out. Because of what happened to me, I can't keep friends, it was a bit different before because I used to have people around me all day, living with them, and they used to take me out with them. I used to be with them all the time and I used to communicate with everyone but with the seizures..

I used to think everyone's my friend when I was young, I used to think every single one is my friend. But basically my foster mum she said you can't trust everyone like they're your friends, because that will get you in trouble. Because I used to think everyone I see is my friend and now they're not that friendly to me anymore because of what happened to me. And I think in my situation people will just use me and abandon me, that's it. Yeah without any support, it made me feel like I'm basically nothing – so what am I going to have a friend for? I'm literally nothing ... Even imagine to the people from social services that were supposed to look after me when I first came, I was nothing to them ... imagine if I have a friend ... of course I'm not going to be anything to them, and they would just use me and that's it. But I can do nothing now ... I can do nothing now ... I don't know how to say, but everything is on top of each other, because I was left without support

### **Why am I here? - Voices**

When I got rejected, and I became 'Appeals Rights Exhausted', it affected me. Refusal after refusal – and I thought 'they don't want me here, so why am I

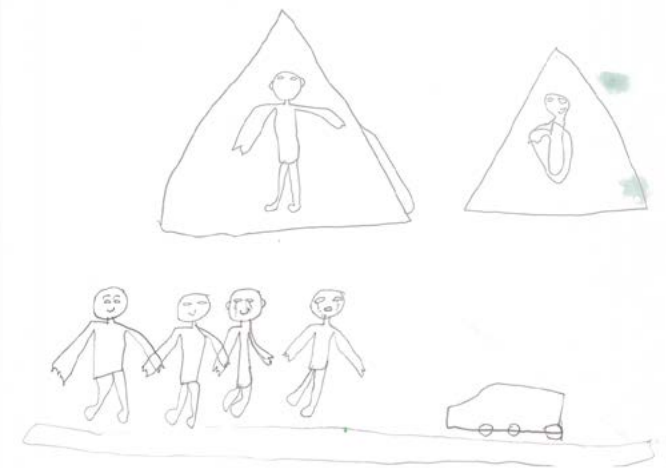
here?' Let me end my life, it's better for me. That's when I started hearing voices. I started hearing voices, that told me to come with them. And these voices are still in my life. And they actually have control over me – they actually got control over me. Then I see a police car and they tell me: 'Oh they're going to come and take you, come over to us.' That's what they're telling me. That's literally what they're telling me. The minute I see anything they're saying the same thing, they keep saying the same thing – 'don't go there they're not going to help you'. Even when I have appointments, they tell me: 'Don't go to the solicitor, they're not going to help you. Don't go there, they're not going to help you'. That started when I was left without help. And every single time the voices are telling me: 'hang yourself, kill yourself, they're not going to be able to help you - come with us, we'll help you'. And what do you want me to do? If the people don't even help, at that point the voices are actually right, everything they're saying is the truth...everything they're saying is the truth. Imagine if someone else would get what I have, hearing the voices and all of that, how would they get out of it? They wouldn't be able to cope, they would just lock themselves at the house, and wouldn't leave, they wouldn't do nothing ... wouldn't eat, wouldn't do nothing, you just lock yourself at the house ... you wouldn't even



go out. But someone who's strong, yeah, he would be able to do it, but it's still ... It's changed everything - for me the voices have changed my whole life.

I don't know even know how to read and write now ... until now, I can't even read and write and they're just saying to me you're not even existing ... literally that's what they said, you don't even exist anymore, because they stopped everything.

And also, with lots of other young people they just throw their life away, they came to ask for help, but nothing has been done for them. They end up in the street, they end up homeless ... what do you want them to do? Do you want them to just go? All of that keeps on building up. Some of the people I know they are in a different situation, some of them are still in the same ..., but I don't talk to people a lot. But when I was talking to some of them it's the same, their life is gone ... their life is gone. For me personally, I can say I know a lot of people, whose life has basically gone ... they're in the street every single day. They didn't give them nothing except to be in the street and with what? If you can't help someone, they're going to be in the street. Especially those who don't have any type of document, the minute your case becomes



'Appeals Rights Exhausted' they say 'thank you very much, have a lovely day', and they leave you without a solicitor, they leave you without anything.

Literally my life is gone. And every day I think about it. I sit down and think about it, everything is the same, everything is worse. Every day I live in that kind of stuff and it's putting me down – down. Everyone I see they've moved on, they've got their paper, they've got other things – and me I'm still in the same situation. I have been here for over 10 years, 15 years – I have nothing. So how do they want us to communicate? How do they want us to do that? People who are literally in and out, in and out ... because they have no other choice - in and out of prison there's nothing they can do. If I didn't have my foster mum, God knows what would have happened to me. I might be dead if I didn't have my foster mum at home. And I've been with her for a long long time.

## Hope?

To me personally my life is gone because – before I used to have hope to do something better with my life. But now my hope has dropped to zero, from 100 it's dropped to zero. I used to think 'Oh yeah I'm going to start to do something, I'm going to be able to read, I'm going to be able to write, going to be able to have my documents, I'm going to be able to do something with my life'. Because back home I don't have no one and all of that has basically brought me down and down. And every time they refused my case, any refusal I received it's basically brought me down even more, it's made me lose hope, it's made me just wanting to end my life. I just think: 'Ah why do they do that with me?' Even the voices are telling me that no one is going to help you. And every time they say that, it actually happens, it happens that nobody is helping me, they didn't help me. Like I don't know what to do in the future, if I want to do something in the future - I can't do it, I won't be able to do it. How am I

going to be able to do something when I don't have nothing? How am I going to be able to at least go out? I get scared the minute I leave the house. One time I decided to go to a restaurant and all of a sudden 50 people walked in, I froze, I couldn't do anything, I just saw people running around me, I was literally panicking, and I couldn't do nothing. Imagine people who actually do stuff, but I don't do nothing. I'm just a human being ... I want to be treated like a human being, I don't want to be treated like shit. And that's how they treat to me ... they treat me like I'm nothing. Every single step I'm taking forward, it goes back and everything stays the same ... it's still the same. I can't even do stuff with my life, I can't. Because I don't have nothing – my case is 'Appeals Rights Exhausted'. I was thinking that's it, I'm done, what am I here for?

Since I came everything is going left and left and left and left ... nothing is going forward. I don't know why ... it is what it is to me ... but I can't continue being treated like shit. I can't continue being frightened, scared ... like I can't cope. I'm trying to do something, I'm trying to go to my meetings to get better, but I still get scared. I still get scared even if I go out, now what will happen to me? What if I have a seizure when I'm in the middle of the road, what will happen to me? And still the seizures are there, and these types of seizures are ... imagine if I'm walking in the road and I have a seizure. People will actually laugh, they will take their phones out and take a video. They laugh at you, they wouldn't even help me.



I think I'm strong, because I've been coping with this for a long time, but still at some point I'm not that strong. At some point I'm not even that strong, I'm thinking that's it – I'm done, self-harming, boom ... hanging myself. Yeah I can do that, I can jump off a bridge. This is the life I'm living now ... and literally everything that's happened to me I start thinking about it. Every day I stay in my room thinking: 'What am I going to do? How am I going to live the rest of my life?' I don't even want to live anymore, because everything has gone left, left, left, left, left.

Somehow I keep on going, but until when ... until when?

I think I got through it because I have my foster mum. Imagine if I didn't have her, I don't think I would. To be honest with you I don't think I would even be here right now. She helped me so much, she literally is there every day telling me 'you know what, just continue believing, everything will be fine', she used to give me hope. But still I got refused by the Home Office and I still I got the feeling that they don't want me here, like literally they don't want me here.

## Passing Through Hell

Lillian

**L**et me start with my name. My name is Lillian. My experience with no recourse to public funds is a very bad, sad one ... a sad one. I don't even know where to start, it's quite a long story. My opinion: I would say that no recourse to public funds, it should be abolished. You know because people like me pass through a lot of pain, stress because of this... I don't know if I should call it impact or whatever - this no recourse to public funds. There have been many cases where we don't have food in the house, we have no money to eat, and I have a little child, you know. And sometimes I go to bed without even eating ... it's the same with my partner ... only to make sure I can just go to the chicken and chip shop to get Jeremiah just £1 chips to eat, you know. Sometimes I will just go there and buy on credit; 'please lend me just £1 I can give you later'. Sometimes they will accept, sometimes they will say no we are sorry ... because of this thing, no recourse to public funds you know.

I remember several occasions where to take my son to school is very difficult because the council moved us from where we are living before, which was closer to the school than here. We have to trek for up to 40 minutes to school – it's quite far. We have to trek in the morning with my son and take him again the next day. Because the money is not even enough – sometimes it doesn't even last ... the money they pay, it doesn't even last up to 2 weeks. Sometimes 3, 4 days it's gone ... you know when you have a child with extra needs and stuff like that. When I contacted the council, I said please, you know how much you're paying us, look at the situation, can you please assist us with the school transport fare so I can take my son to school. They say they are sorry, they can't do anything, that I have to manage it. Even ... two occasions I have called them to ask them about the aid, if they can help us with anything, such as transport for me to take my son to school ... I tell them I haven't got any money left, they say no they are sorry. That time was during the winter, so I have to take my son ... we walk like 40 minutes from here to school, it was winter. At times when I get to the bus I said 'Bus driver, please I don't have a pass' – they say, okay it's fine, you can go in. Sometimes they say we are sorry, you have to walk. So it's been very bitter, bitter ... and to be honest it's traumatic ... sometimes when you remember things you have passed through because of this. I don't know, it's too much, I don't even know where to start. It's a very very long story, but we had to start and we had to stop, you know.

Before the council, it was still a very tough lifestyle. We slept on the bus, we slept just in people's compounds under the stairs ... that one is a different story. But when I was on no recourse, it doesn't even make like much better, apart from maybe the accommodation ... you understand? – apart from the accommodation, but the poverty is still there, the poverty level is still very very high. Yes, I remember when my son was about 2

years, he was showing the signs of autism. So when I took him to the children's centre for the stay and play session, and some of them they notice the signs ... some of the staff, then they said, oh you need to get him this, you need to get him that, if he's got needs ... he likely has needs ... they can see the behaviour ... you need to get him this. But I can't afford to buy all those things, because I am thinking about this money... it's not going to last for us even to eat. I need to buy Pampers, I need to buy milk, I need to buy his jacket. Sometimes he will just wear two jackets for like a very long time, because you're thinking if you go and get the jacket ... even though you're going to buy it from the charity shop – how much is left for food before the next two weeks. So they keep telling me buy this, take him to this place, take him there, take him there ... buy this, buy that. But I didn't do any of that, because I haven't got money, you know. I think that really affected his development as well, because they kept telling me, all the children centres we went to ... when they see him, they keep telling me, take him to this, buy this ... buy this stuff for him, get him this ... they are saying that he may have sensory needs. They notice this earlier at the start, but I can't afford to buy all those things, I'm thinking from this little money if I'm buying this – transport money, three of us ... sometimes the money doesn't last 4 to 5 days ... so where am I going to get money to buy all these things? You know when you have a child you still buy Pampers, you buy milk, you buy everything from all this money. For me, I would say that no recourse to public funds actually have some impact on my son's development, because I haven't got much money to buy what he needs. When he needed some things, sensory some things for his development, like toys ... you know stuff like that ... I couldn't afford it, you know. It's really ... I don't know ... it's not easy.

Even when I was pregnant, I was sleeping in people's house. Oh it's too much. You're using the heater too much, you're opening the window when it's hot, you're closing it when it's cold ... it's like no no, we are sorry, we are done. You're sleeping ... on the stairs, you can just get from the house and just sleep on the stairs. I was pregnant with Jeremiah that time, it was really tough. And at that time, I haven't got idea that I can go to the children's centre to maybe ask for something so I was struggling.

And just having like three ... I've got this ... you know pack, it's like four pack of ... what do you call it? ... That's only what I went to hospital with, I haven't got much ... because I have no ID, I have no benefits, I have no phone, no help ... nothing, even no advice. I was moving around without any idea, no information, you know. Life was very tough for me then. So ... it wasn't easy. I had an accommodation problem, food problems, I wasn't able to get baby things, you know. I was just managing, managing. Like someone said, oh you can go to the children's centre, they can help you. I said, 'Oh really?' – I have no idea before coming into the children's centre, they help me with some baby clothes. That time I had a newborn, I was breastfeeding, but I wasn't eating enough. You know, when you are breastfeeding and you eat no food. At night you would be like ... how do you say ... I would be ... how do you just say that? ... you know when you're dizzy, you're breastfeeding, and you're not eating much food and you're breastfeeding – stuff like that. Feeling dizzy. I experienced it all the time, I experienced that all the time when I was breastfeeding. It was really ... it wasn't easy. Oh, I wish I can remember everything that happened at that time ... not only remember, I just ... I don't know ... it was a very sad experience. I wish that this no recourse can be just abolished, so people can just ... because a lot of parents like me ... so many parents they are in poverty, children are suffering, it's too much. Because I remember my friend that was

living upstairs, my neighbour, she passed through the same thing. She was like 'Oh my God, my experience is ... I think is worse than yours' - she told me. There's another one in Jeremiah's school, another parent, said 'Oh me, I passed through hell, my one is even worse' ... I said 'No you don't know what it's like' ... most parents, it's ... it's really tough. Especially when you have children like this who are autistic and the council they are not doing much to help. It's not an easy one, it's really tough.

For me living with nothing... it affects the children as well. It's really not good for even the children, because when you are just not giving the child what he needs or the support when it comes to ... how do I put it?... because it affects not only the parents, but also children – it affects the children even more.

Oh ... you can see the last time you came here was terrible. Ah ... for almost two years we were living in a damp house. I can even look for the videos, you saw it ... It was ... my God ... the mould, the damp, for years ... it was like that for 2 years. They would just come and paint and the next week it would come back again – it was horrible. The condition of the house is so so bad. There was a day the agency, they were just moving upstairs, and they saw 'My God, what is smelling so bad here? Where is that coming from?' ... I don't know if I have told you ... it's from here ... and they just entered here, they were like 'Do the council know that this house is like this?' So the council told us not to contact them, only speak to the agent. And we kept telling the agent about the condition of the house, kept sending videos ... and they kept promising they were going to fix it. The housing is ... the condition is very very bad, to be honest with you. And when the lady came in, she was like 'No, I'm going to contact the local authority, nobody should live here' ... and I have a little boy. I didn't hear from them either, you know.

The house... all two years we were living here, for two years. Even that ... you know that place they move us to, there is mould there too. Inside the room, inside the toilets, everywhere – all the floor is wet. There is no hot water, so we left that house. They kept us there for almost 3 months – there was no hot water in the house. There was mould, there was a leakage there as well, you know.

I have to boil the water with a kettle to give Jeremiah a bath – that's what I do. I do that in the morning before he goes to school, I do that at night before ... to shower him before he sleeps. So ... without hot water for like 3 months in that house. And it wasn't summer time, it was winter. I remember when we came to that place, so ... it's a very bad experience to be honest with you, yes. If you were sleeping ... even your pillow ... you know the mould, even my pillow – it changed colour ... you were just breathing the mould. When you were sleeping, all you could smell in that room, just mould – everywhere was wet, all the houses. Even some clothes in the house ... under the bed they were all wet. So even the housing is not ... I don't know what they usually ... okay the tap ... some of the tap – one closes, one doesn't close. So they never give us a perfect house where you might say, 'Oh there is no fault'. There is always a fault in the house, yeah there is always fault.

My son, he is autistic ... he's on the high side, it's very very difficult for me to raise him with no recourse to public funds. When you don't have access to public funds, to raise an autistic child is very very tough, you know. So many things have gone wrong, you know, from my side with my son... it's a very tough journey. It has not been easy for me, it's very tough.

Oh ... my hopes and my dreams? Oh ... I keep dreaming and I keep hoping. I want to be a mental health nurse. Because ... first off I want to go for general nursing, then from there I can just move to mental health nurse ... because ... I wish I can do more than that. I don't want other parents to experience what I did. I wish I can just use half of my time while studying, and then advocate for that, you know ... for people with no recourse, parents like are suffering, that has children and with no recourse to public funds, to just speak for them, you know – that would be great you know as well. I hope and I wish to do that in future anyway. But to be a nurse, that's my dream, to help people, especially disabled people, yeah ... because I know what it means to be a mum with a disabled child. So I would like to see every disabled person smile – it would give me joy. Yeah. That's what I'm looking forward to seeing.

# Disadvantages of no recourse to public funds

Temitayo

I and my family live here in London and we were under no recourse to public fund for years with a lot of bitter experiences. We live in a society where the standard of living is very high. The citizens who have recourse to public fund have some relief in shouldering the needs of the family whereas we faced the music of terrible hardship and difficulties. We couldn't get loans and grants to sponsor our dreams in education unlike other citizens. We have an autistic child and handling him needs a lot like sensory materials but we don't have access to that. Taking him to school entails a lot because he is super hyper and at times his actions on public transport are a threat to other vulnerable kids in the bus. At times, we trek to school because of no transport fare. We get some help from the food bank but it's insufficient for us a family of three. I have some medical conditions which restricts me to work. So no source of income for my family unlike others who have the same health conditions with me, they get some benefits to shoulder their responsibilities but am not entitled to that because I am under no recourse to public funds. These are some of the bitter experiences we had, so we advocate to get this scrapped. Let all the kids enjoy all that is available for them with equal right and equal opportunities because we all face the hardship of survival.

## Wave

0.0.





^



^

# I remember

Maxine

**T**his is Maxine. I was just about to give you my nickname, my childhood name... a Creole word. Oh I don't have anything but ... I do have one picture, I think my mother sent me one. You know in the hurricane we lost a lot of our pictures. This is me with my dirty shoes. Because I used to play football in my shoes... look, everybody's shoes are clean ... and look at my feet.

Okay so let's see—living with no recourse to public funds. It was difficult. Yeah, it affected me not being able to look after my son properly. Especially because his dad was British, and you know to prove that he was British ... so like not getting his benefit and stuff like that, and also not being able to be housed, like getting a house and stuff ... so we had to move to different houses. Not being able to pay the rent and people kicking us out. Also, you

know family and friends, they didn't want to help, because they thought it was my fault, that you know I choose that route, you know with no papers and stuff like that. Yeah, so it was very difficult, especially in terms of feeding my son, because sometimes we had to go to different charities to get food and stuff like that and we had to manage. School also, we couldn't get school dinners. And even when the other women found out that I was getting school dinners, they got upset and they went to the school and said, 'Well I am in the same situation as them, why ... why is it that they are getting it and we are not.' And then the school discovered they had at least 50 people with no recourse to public funds, and they all used to come. So the headteacher, she made the decision. She said to me that the governors said that they have to stop it for me and my son. So that's when a friend of mine ... one of the workers at an organisation I went to, her daughter was my friend and she liked my son, and she said she would pay for the remainder of the 3 years. So she arranged with the teacher, and she paid for 3 years upfront for school dinners for my son, yes. And what else? Yeah, we were just moving from home to home and to home. Another thing we weren't able to do was take the bus, because we had to choose between the bus or food. So sometimes I'd have to put him on my back and carry him ... which he was a light child. Or he had a scooter, and then the church gave him a bike and we were riding to school, so we had to get up early to get there for 8 o'clock, yeah. What else? There was so much.

Oh ... when we had to approach social services, they didn't want to help, and the first thing they said to me is that they can take my son and give my son to the dad because of my status. And when they called the dad, the dad said well yes, he will happily take my son, I can go back home ... because my father has a house, or send me back home with my son and then he will give me more money—back home the money will last longer. And that's when

the new social worker realised that what he's doing is kind of like emotional and financial abuse, so she said no. That's when she decided to do a section 17 assessment and house us immediately. Before the assessment, it wasn't easy because we went there for a few days, and a lot of people wrote letters and stuff. And instead they used those letters against us to say that, oh I have a good circle of friends around me, I can move in with them. And the personal questions, like they didn't want to believe that we've just been moving around, because number 1, my son always presented himself clean, and he was always clean and stuff. But they didn't realise it came at a cost, my son always being clean – that means I had to sacrifice myself to ensure that my son had that capability. Which I always did, I always ensured that my son was a priority, yeah. What else? Well what else ... I think my mental health suffered a bit, yeah. I think I started having anxiety, and very unsettled people ... very very unsettled people ... yeah trust ... I lost trust in social services and like just the ... how would you call them? ... it went out of my head ... statutory bodies ... yeah, the council and all of that, I lost trust in them ... yes. Oh and even when I had no recourse to public funds I couldn't register myself to a doctor. Luckily my son was premature and the GP surgery, they put my son on, and that's how I was able to register with a doctor. And I went to Doctors of the World, and different dentists and stuff like that.

I just don't trust the council. Because they had the authority to step in and protect us, and the first time I approached them, they're like ... I had tried to approach them many times and it was like 'get out of the building' 'no – no status' ... threaten, threaten, threaten. And even the whole way they went about it, like you know they were just ... just made me feel like I was begging and I was less than. The emotional impact wasn't good.

My son did understand that. With him I was able to protect him in the sense that I was bringing him to the library, I was providing him with activities. The lady in the library ... because I didn't have an address ... they still opened an account for me with the library because of my son. She said to me she's not allowed to, but she still did it. So I was able to go in the library and use the computer and search around for stuff. And also the computer, we could use that, so I was able to do stuff, because I knew that if my son was under stress then that would potentially affect his mental health. So I was trying to do stuff to kind of like get his mind away from that. But he wasn't too happy when the social worker asked him about the dad. Because he only saw the dad once or twice, and he forgot all about the dad, but the social worker came and asked him about the dad, and that kind of triggered him. He was worried. He thought that his dad would just come and take him away. And then when the dad came, the dad realised oh you know he can get my son, so he tried getting my son from me, so that's when I backed off and I said I don't want social services help. But you know me, I'm a little survivor.

The vulnerability with me also increased. Men saw me as a target. I got offered money to sleep with them. I remember one day, an elderly gentleman asked me to help him. I said okay. I cooked for him. However, he said that if I wanted to help him, I know what I should do. I said no. He said I had to sleep with him. I said, no I will not do that. He said I will remain at the back of the line. The following week, I went to clean for him and he said he did not need me. Instead he had a young lady who I knew had no papers in bed with him. Then he said he no longer needed me. My only means of finances was taken away from me. I thought maybe I should. However, I thought of my son. I couldn't allow him around people like that. If they are a risk to me. There was no way I could trust them near my child.

Even when I met someone who showed interest and they found out my situation after dating, they would try to control or show signs of abuse. I remember one particular time that I started to see someone. However, when he found out that I had no papers, he started verbally abusing me and calling me names. One day he came to see me and I said 'no, my son is here, you cannot come in'. When I was going back inside, he held my bag and grabbed it. It burst. If I was someone totally different, then maybe I would have allowed him. But with that type of aggression, there was no way I would allow myself to be in a relationship like that.

Not having access to benefits, and even with recourse to public funds, it is impossible to support yourself, save for papers and pay bills because you are working full time and having to pay everything as a single mum. The fees for the Home Office increase. Sometimes you think maybe you should just take the advice of these men and sleep with them for that. To keep afloat. So I can understand when people get themselves in that position to get a better life for themselves and children. It is not easy! Also I can see why children go astray. You have to always be working to pay that Home Office fee and the next bill, solicitors fee etc. Like in my situation, I had people trying to use my vulnerability as a way to physically, mentally and financially abuse me.

Having to think where we would sleep...What's the next move. The people that should be protecting us, they are not helping. We are desperate, at our lowest and yet still they look for an excuse to turn us away. Even not having recourse to public funds. We are being treated like we are not human beings.

Even when I rented a room at one time, I was really struggling. My flatmate said that she could get me a job. I was all excited. She said you have to dress sexy and she worked at a bar. I was like, 'that's fine'. Only to find out that

she worked at a gentlemen's club. I never took the job. She said that I would have to do more.

With my mum, she never wanted us. Because when she brought me up here, I don't know, she didn't bring me to study, she actually brought me up here to babysit her child for her. And that's how I met my son's dad ... My son's dad came up. So I said okay you're coming up, and I was going to come up. So my mum at the time, she didn't write to any of the children of my dad, so I didn't realise that was her way of tricking me to come up here. So that's how I end up overstaying. And I wanted to go back but she was like ... you know, she went and told the family so many things about me, yeah. I think I was 17. And my older cousins came, and even they were in the army, but they had such a close relationship with my mother, so they were believing what she was saying, but they didn't realise that she was actually ill treating me in the house. I could not get a job, I had to babysit her child and stuff like that. Her child is now the bad breed of the family, he went to prison. He's born here. He's been in prison many times the last 8 years. She liked him because he was fairer than us.

None of my family were there for us. And they're paying it for now, because they all want to be my friend and I don't want to be their friend. Because they're now feeling sorry and apologetic, and they want me to come to their family dinners and stuff like that. But I don't ... I even pay for a hotel ... I pay for a hotel to go and sleep in a hotel for me not to have to go ... because I know they will just come and ring my bell, so I book myself and my son in a hotel just so that I can have enough space for us not to go to the family things. Because when we needed food they all weren't there, so why should they all come now and ... you know that's the same thing of ... like because now I'm working in abuse, I realise a lot of their behaviour, it was abusive towards me and my son. Oh and another thing again is that they have that

thing of they're better than you, because they have a job, they're better than you. I remember his cousin used to do stuff, and my son was getting the blame. So this is one of the reasons also I was like ... you all don't invite me so it's fine, you know. So when they started inviting me, I'm going to Akwaaba, I'm going to different places to eat with my child. That's it, goodbye.

At the time it was building myself to who I am now. At least I can warn other people. You know like a lot of people they say oh I'm coming because my friends are coming and stuff like that. Or I'm coming because somebody asked me to come up to do care work and stuff. And I'm like, look, people in this country, they want you for a long time, it's not easy. And a lot of people have to work... through my work, they come—and they find themselves in the same situation as me. People promising them all sorts—come up and help me, or come and meet their boyfriends and stuff, and afterwards ... yeah, so the cycle continues. So I'm in a position to kind of help people and tell them, look, you know ... yeah, you came, that happened to you, but at least you can move on ... there is help out there.

I think other people could be more sympathetic, empathetic, and stop judging people. Like help out, just help ... There's nothing wrong with helping, or listening to somebody. Don't just assume that somebody came into this country to use their resources, find out why people come. And also people come for a better life ... you understand ... just know their story, we are individuals, not all stories are true. And I think that's very very important. And help ... you know open your hands. Like just cook a plate of food and give it to somebody, it doesn't cost a lot. Yeah, but for me it would cost.

I'm very proud of myself. For me, we've got a roof over our head and stuff, but it's very difficult ... because I would love to travel, I would love to do certain stuff, but financially if I do this, I don't know what Home Office

is planning. So because of my life before, and me not having recourse to public funds ... and having recourse to public funds ... and the struggle ... so I plan ahead. So I know okay my renewal is coming, my stuff is going in—be prepared. And so I have to choose between a life of luxury and like travelling or going out or stuff, and then thinking oh but if I use that money to go see my dad ... like look at what happened to me with the job ... yeah ... and they know that my status is coming up. I mean you know you're supposed to be helping women, but actually you're not because ... so if I travel then that means I wouldn't have money in Spring... I won't be working for the next few months. So I think it has made me resilient and learn to plan ahead and ... I now have a good idea of the system I guess, yeah.

It must have been 8 years ago that I got my papers. Reapplying every two and a half years... The third time they refused it, I had to come back again ... so because there was a blunder in the application. And then ... yeah so hopefully this is my last one. The fees are 5 grand or 6 grand or something. So ... I can kiss my pension goodbye. Yeah it is a lot but ... that's life.

My son, he's British by entitlement. There is a story about that, I'm not even going to tell you yet, I'm going to tell you ... it's nothing to worry about. But yes, my son – his dad gave us the documents and stuff like that. Yes, not easily, but he gave us the original copy. I do have the original copy. Yes, I do have the original copy now, he gave it to my son last year. So my son was able to go to uni and get a grant and stuff like that, yeah. Yeah but it hasn't been easy, like you know. You want to give your child a comfortable life, and you know having to ... yeah, it wasn't easy.

I mean for me I'm at the end, but I mean some of them are just starting—it's not easy, it's the most challenging thing you ever have to face.

# The Road I Never Chose: A Story of Escape and Survival

DTK

I left my country Ethiopia when I was just 15 years old, I never thought I would end up here in the UK, I had to travel through a jungle, a desert and a sea to get here to the UK. The whole journey took me almost a year, and for the most of the journey I was alone and most of the journey was on foot, and I was just following the strangers I was with in Libya, and I didn't even know where I was going.

The UK is home for me because I made many friends and lived my young hood here, and also the UK is not home because of all the hate and inhospitable environment we face nowadays just because we fled from our home countries fearing persecution. The sad thing is most of the problems in our home countries are somehow caused by the British government. For example, the UK government supported Ethiopian government armies, and those armies kill and displace their own people.

I was once a happy kid, I went to school, I used to play football for my local U15 and later on U17 teams, I also had a caring family, and I had friends whom I had a great childhood with, but I lost all of that when I was 15 years old.

I left my home and my happy life just because I had an opinion. All started when I was a kid, I was very much into politics because of what I saw and heard from my family and friends. But now I wish that didn't happen, I wish I didn't do what I've done! Not because it was wrong because it's costed me my happiness and my childhood.

Now I'm 24 however in this system I'm expected to act, think and perform as I used to when I was 15.

I saw my Dad and uncle stand against the government, and did many things to make the country better for my people. They were a member of an opposition party which was described as a terrorist by the Ethiopian government, why? Just because they fought to free our people and our land. They were passionate, and I saw that in my own eyes, so I started supporting them and involved in some activities, such as demolishing some leaflets and attended some anti-government demonstration, however I didn't think my actions would cost me many things.

My and my family activities didn't last long, the government's people knew about what my Dad and uncle did, also what I did. My dad got caught, not long after my brother and I got caught. I didn't know where they took my brother. They took me to some kind of jail, and they beat me, insulted me and threatened to kill me. I was very frightened I answered everything they asked me, however when they asked me whereabouts of my uncle I answered I didn't know, not because I was lying or hiding the truth from them to save my uncle, I genuinely didn't know where he was, but they didn't trust me so they beat me up until I got unconscious.

When I woke up, I was in the hospital. Even when I was in the hospital, there was a police man watching me. My mum has to pay a bribe for me to go out from the hospital.

After that we waited a bit until I got better, so we could leave the country.

Me my mum, my little sister and my uncle left the country my little sister was 5 years old at that time and I was 15.

Nowadays when I think about those moments, I regret many of my choices and actions. If you ask me now, I would prefer to be with my family in peace! I would say all of that didn't worth it.

When I say earlier, the system expected me to act, think and perform as a 15 years old me again, I meant I'm still expected to go out for demonstrations, and to stand and fight against my country's government just for me to prove them I went through what I went through, and this is evil for me. When I go to meetings and demonstrations, I don't feel great because all my memories and flashbacks came back, and I feel like I'm living in those moments again and this worsened my mental state.

Some people here are saying the asylum system is broken because too many of us are coming here, and I say the asylum system is indeed broken because despite what we've been through we're still expected to live the life we feared and fled from just to satisfy the system. They don't care about what we are going through even here, the depression, the anxiety and the fear we've been experiencing.

They stopped to provide any support for me on March this year. I had applied and they rehoused me on June. However, they were telling me they would stop the support since 2022. I remember I would get a call and told I may be kicked out of the house many times since 2022, finally they did it on March 2025. When they stopped the help, I would say I wasn't that sad, because every time they said they would kick me out I stressed and overthink about it a lot. So, when it finally happened I guess I was expecting it for a long time. It felt less bad but it doesn't mean I didn't struggle.

After the support stopped, I was dependent on my friends we usually contributed to our food and for any other things, but when the support stopped, I even felt less important. I usually insisted on going out before but after the support stopped I even started isolate myself because I didn't have money to contribute. I was lucky to have my friends because I didn't have to sleep outside, my friends allowed me to stay with them until I got support.

But in those few months I had no support, I felt I had no hope in the future. Also, I thought I would end up being homeless and it was very hard for me. However, thanks to my friends I survived.

When I came here, I was 16 years old, I was finally happy. I thought I was finally safe, I thought, I'd finally live and learn as any other 16 year olds here, however that wasn't what happened, now I feel like my youthood

has been stolen from me, even though I had an opportunity to study, the mental health issues I had from what I experienced from my past and what I'm going through here prevents me to concentrate, learn and achieve what I want to achieve. Even though I have access to the GP and getting some treatment for my mental health, I still live the same life that causes the issues the first place.

Some people here say, the asylum system needs change because so many of us come here illegally and are able to stay, and I say yes indeed the asylum system needs change, because many of us coming here and are forced by the system to fight everyday just to survive.

After all we're not criminals or illegal aliens as they say we are, we are just a human who's given a second chance to live, we are just a human being like everyone else here.

## SPIDER

D.O.

We moved around a lot. The black lines represent that, like spiders and they are cool (when they are tiny). It just makes all the moving look fun and special because in their own way they were.



# My early experience in the UK

Sade

**N**RPF...I think the first time I heard about it was at Akwaaba, that's when I really got to know what it meant. You know because having no status, I mean immigration status, you're kind of like hiding yourself, there were so many things I did not even know. But I would say no recourse has put a lot of limitations, you know, on people's lives. For instance, you know, children growing up, not having opportunities or access to a lot of things, so many things their peers enjoy.

For instance in schools where they organise trips and they have to go on trips. When you don't have the means to sponsor your child, it's really sad to see the child being left out because you couldn't pay for the school trip. Because there are times they need to hire buses ... if you're unable to pay, the child would stay back in school and do something else while others have gone for the trip and, you know, it's part of the curriculum. To see your child being left out, it's not something you would be happy about because they are not able to enjoy the opportunities they are supposed to. I don't know, it's sad to see such things. But still I thank God for how far we've been anyway. There are some things you don't even want to think about. Lots of things. My older son was trying to say some things about himself growing up, like he didn't have opportunities to enjoy a lot of things. So his dad tried to explain to him because initially we didn't carry them along, as they were so young. I mean, how do you explain to a 7-year-old or 9-year-old what no recourse means and the impact on people. How do you tell them you don't have what it takes to work in the UK? It's hard to explain to them. But as they're growing up, they see how we're being moved from one place to the other and how we got involved with section 17, and we got to know you all. Later we tried to explain to them about our situation. At a later time, when my older son was out of secondary school, we tried to explain some things to him because he had this memory of things that his friend enjoyed that he didn't get to experience. He spoke out his mind and told his dad how he felt. We took out time to explain more about the challenges we had, as we couldn't tell them when they were much younger. They didn't know anything until recently, when we had a meeting about the children's book and they heard me say some things we experienced. One of the experiences was about how I used to go to the Home Office to sign. My children were not aware. Having no recourse to public funds was a hard thing. There were times we wanted to buy ourselves or our children food,

the kind of food you thought they should eat but because we couldn't afford it. It's worrisome, you know.

I remember the day I went to a church at Hackney St. John's church in Hackney. Someone told me about them and I went for the foodbank thing. I even borrowed a trolley from someone. Imagine I didn't have one to myself. So I went and they gave me some groceries. I got home and my older son was like 'wow!' – he took a picture; you could see the excitement on his face. He was so happy, you know, seeing the cupboard filled with food. This was something he had never seen before. Because each time we went to Tesco was to just buy bread, milk and a few things. When he saw the cupboard filled up with food, he was so excited. I'm like 'this should be a normal thing', it's not something a child should feel like it's extraordinary. That should be the norm.

I remember there was a day we were almost running out of milk and my husband decided to just add some water to the milk to increase the volume so it would be enough to have cereal for breakfast. He didn't want the children to see because they might not eat the cereal. Things like that can make one feel bad ... and as a parent you think you have failed your children since you are not able to provide the basic needs for your children. But what could we have done? We were helpless and we didn't have any recourse to public funds. And so there's nothing we could do, we just tried to manage life and just ensured at least the children always had something to eat regardless.

Another thing I remember was when I gave birth to my younger son, because I gave birth to him here in the UK. You know how a child is supposed to start nursery early. I desired to take him to nursery so that he

could start off early, to help with his elementary education, but unfortunately I couldn't even do that. So what I did back then, once in a while, I used to take him out to play. They used to have this play bus in Hackney that goes around and kids were allowed to play on it. I don't know if it still exists. I used to take him sometimes, just at least so he can play around with other kids, just to have that bonding, you know. I so much desired for him to attend nursery, but there was nothing I could do. We were being denied so many opportunities. Even me... sometimes, they had courses in schools for adults, but because I didn't have recourse to public funds, I couldn't just go and enrol because I didn't want to get in trouble. There were so many things that I really wanted to do back then. It's so frustrating ... ah but what could one say or do. NRPF has placed a lot of limitations on us as migrants. So many things that could have been done in the past, were left undone.

Before we even got to section 17, it was really hard. At least section 17, in the end we were able to get access to some things. I remember the night that we slept somewhere in Tottenham, it was Grace that took us there, to sleep in somebody's house. And then the next day, we went to ... I think Benjamin's friend's house. He went away for the weekend, and so he gave us his place to stay – somewhere around Streatham. And the children, you know, were still attending the same school. We had to travel all the way from South to East London back and forth. It was so tiring, and then we had to involve the local councils in two boroughs. The experience was so terrible. I didn't even have an account then, it was just my husband. And the guy asked me to present my personal account and my husband's. I didn't have any account then, I presented only my husband's account. And I remember at that time we had our applications with the Home Office and were awaiting an outcome from them. The guy that interviewed us reported us to the Home and our applications were refused. Simply because we told

them a family friend helped us to stay in South London then, but we were supposed to move out soon because there's a leak in the house and repairs needed to be done. They requested access to the property. I was even willing to give them the key to gain access to the flat but was advised not to, since the owner of the flat wasn't aware they were coming to view the flat. Again I tried to explain to them, and then they were not interested. There was another Social Worker that I encountered at the council. He proved difficult. He lied about us and we were being denied accommodation. There was the night that NELMA was looking for a place for us. Prior to that we approached the Council emergency Homeless Team on phone and we were told to contact the police station for assistance. I felt disappointed that the local council couldn't help. I expected that they should at least be able to help people living in the community. NELMA eventually got us a place in Tottenham to pass the night. The sad thing the local council was not able to help us get a place. Instead they said to me there's nothing they could do, we should go to the police station. And so we went there to sleep in a place in Tottenham. Where do we go from here? This question kept coming to my mind. I didn't even know what the future holds, I didn't know how we would get out of this. No way forward – what do we do? Later the council revisited our case and we were finally assigned to a social worker, her name was Lady Gladys. So she tried to see if our case was genuine because there was a time when we stayed on Homerton High Street, somebody helped us with a place to stay. One day my youngest child went to school. It was his dad that dressed him up, so they found that there was mold on one of his sleeves and because we used to live in the basement, there was no adequate ventilation. The social worker in my son's school reported the case to the Council and someone called me on the phone and asked about our status and tried to find out about our details. I tried to avoid that. I didn't want to get in trouble. I told them not to worry that we had people assisting us. They

asked me if the case should be closed. I said they should close the case. They asked if we needed any accommodation? I'm like no, we are good. If I had gone to the council for accommodation with our immigration status ... it would be like exposing the whole family. I told them to close the case. A few years later, Gladys, a Social Worker, was assigned to us and she took over our case. She saw the file there at the council and that was why she believed our case was genuine, that we didn't go to the council to ask for accommodation for falsehood.

Another issue we had to deal with was school meals. And you know with the school, if you don't pay, they will send you an envelope that you should pay what you owe. When you see a child with an envelope, the students already know what that means. Back then, it's hard to pay for school meals for three children because each child had to pay £10 a week. It was really difficult.

When my oldest child was in secondary school, the school meals bill accrued to about £300 plus and we couldn't pay the bills. So the school kept sending letters for payment to be made. They threatened that they were going to stop my child from attending prom if we didn't pay up. And your prom is a lifetime event – why should my child miss out?

One day when I attended a NELMA meeting, we discussed this. The person that I spoke with was Grace's friend. At that time she was working in my son's school. She talked to them and they allowed him to attend prom. Imagine if there was nobody to talk to them, he would have missed the opportunity of attending prom.

NRPF puts limitations on people's lives. I mean people should be given the opportunity to live because everybody has the opportunity to live. And you know with kids, they don't really understand why they can't have what their

friends are enjoying. Why can't I have what my friends are enjoying? My friends are going on a trip, why can't I go? They want to know.

I remember there was this trip they usually do in Year 6. Year 6 students had a trip to Kench Hill but my son missed out as each student was asked to pay £90 – where do I get £90 from? £90 to me then was a huge amount. The school didn't really know about our immigration status, so I didn't tell them about us. I only told them I couldn't afford it, but they didn't ask me why.

At that time, I had just had a baby and my baby was only 6 months old. I told the school my child wasn't going and that he would stay back in school. So that year, he missed the opportunity of going to Kench Hill. As much as I would love for him to go but there was nothing I could do. £90 then would do a lot for me and my family. I would rather buy food for the children and stock up the house so that there was enough food. Since I've got a baby, I've got to buy diapers. I used to buy value diapers from Tesco. Everything I bought was Tesco value. We had to manage.

Looking back at those days, it was really hard, because there was no means. At some point my husband suggested that we should go back home. I said to him 'Go back home? Where do we get the money to fly back?' And besides, we don't even have a house of our own to return to. We would have to stay here and wait until something happens. Even though we didn't know how long it would take for us to get our status in the UK. We had it really rough then. There were times I would be looking to find a pound on the ground, just to buy food for my children. I remember Tesco used to sell £1 chicken wings. It used to be in a pack. Managing a room was tough. We are a family of five and we had other people living in the same house with a shared bathroom. Sometimes in the morning we had to wait for others to finish using

the bathroom because the kids are going to school. I remember this day we contributed money for the electricity top-up – £5. I gave my co-tenant £5, he took the electricity key and went to work. I was at home with my kids with no light, nor electricity. He went away with the key and came back at night. I couldn't do anything, I couldn't even cook. When he came back I was mad at him. I told him that was unfair. Living with people can be very difficult. Many things, so many experiences. How many can I tell?

When we used to go to Akwaaba, the children were always looking forward to Sundays, you know. They always give us free hot lunches. Sometimes people come with things to share you know. They gave us household items and we took food home. Back then it was like comfort, we had people that were in the same circumstance as us, and that gave us a kind of relief.

## ENFIELD EXPERIENCE

We got accommodation with the intervention of Section 17.

Travelling from Enfield to Hackney was quite a journey with my older son and daughter, going to school was a struggle because we had to wake up so early to take the bus. I remember the 279 goes all the way from Enfield to Manor House. They usually alight at Seven Sisters to take another bus, bus 67 or 243 goes towards Dalston and the school is not too far from Dalston. My children used to complain about the long journey. That's why when the other social worker took over from the previous one, she insisted we change my daughter's school.

We applied to a few schools in Enfield and waited for them to get back to us. Eventually she got a place in a school, even though it wasn't what we really wanted for her. She would journey from home to school by bus or

sometimes walk. As for my younger son, we had to change his school as well. We managed through until we got our papers in 2018.

Prior to getting our status we were to go to the tribunal since our applications were refused and we were told to appeal. Our papers came at a time we were not expecting. We received the Home Office letter which says our case had been reviewed and based on exceptional cases, we were granted our limited leave to remain.

It's been a long journey, looking back we can only be thankful. We've come a long way. And seeing where the children are today, I'm very thankful. I'm proud of them. Yeah proud of them, proud of myself. Even then after we got the papers and we're told we would stay in the accommodation for only 6 months but we stayed longer in temporary accommodation than expected. The accommodation was in Finchley. My children kept asking when we would be moving. I told them I had no idea as there was nothing I could do. Imagine, my older son went to uni and came out. I was thinking after he finished Uni, would he be sleeping on the floor in the living room? There was a time we requested for a review of the temporary accommodation. They said to us 'This is just temporary accommodation. You can sleep anywhere, anybody can sleep anywhere.' Honestly, I wish I had the means to rent a place, so my children could have the comfort they deserve at least for once. Since we have been in the UK, it was the first time ever that we didn't have to share apartments with other people. And when the council finally moved us back, my children said mum, finally we don't get to share with other people. Especially my daughter, she said at least I can have my room. My sons have a room to themselves. I felt so happy that finally we have a flat to ourselves. My son has been looking for a job since he left uni and it's been over a year. We

can only be thankful to God. Looking at how far we have come. We can only be thankful.

Many times I went to the Home Office signing centre at London Bridge. My first time there, I met a lady and she said to me 'Oh, when you come here, you're not sure of going back home to your family because anything can happen. I was terrified. The times I went signing, I also had to pick up my younger son from school. So I was always afraid of the times I went there to sign. Plus I didn't like how people were treated. They talked to people anyhow. The conditions were really bad. There was usually a very long queue and we had to be on a long queue outside in the cold during winter. They were not nice at all. So it was really scary. But the end justified the means. It was tough, it was tough, it was.

I mean it feels like yesterday, you know. I remember when we joined Akwaaba, my younger son was about 4 yrs old, he was still very little. And now he is 14, going to be 15 next birthday. See how time flies. Sometimes I wonder how we survived all of this? I don't know to be honest. I don't know how we survived. Like I said, we can only be thankful.

I don't even want somebody to go through that because it makes you so timid and you may even lose your courage or confidence. Sometimes you don't have the expression. You want to express it, you can't even express it – you're there, you're hiding, because you don't want people to know about you, you know. You don't want to tell them what you're going through. You want to express yourself, you want to do things – but it's hard. It isn't a good thing.

I remember the lady that gave us the place at Homerton High Street, because her daughter was in school, and her daughter was back home, and her husband was in Belgium. She went away for some time, when she returned

to London, she wanted us out of her flat by all means. She invited her sister, along with the sister's children, to a two bedroom flat. The sister came with her three grown children, they came to stay, because they wanted us to leave. She came with her adult daughter and she has three other children She referred to us as 'homeless'. That night I was so annoyed. We begged her to give us time because of the children as school was still in session and that we also told her that we were trying to talk to them at the migrant centre to help with the accommodation situation.

She went with me to the migrant centre. We moved our things with a wheelbarrow. Myself and my husband went quite some rounds, going back and forth moving our stuff to a basement in the church. Before we moved out of the ladies house, my husband, myself and my daughter slept on the lower bunk while my two sons slept on the top bunk, all packed in in a single room. When we left her place, my husband was sleeping in the church and then he would go to Hackney Baths to have his shower in the morning. I was with the children in South London. Till the council called us and gave us a place in North London.

## Icho and the Backpack

Icho

**I**t's been two years now, and this backpack is always with me. If this backpack could talk, it would tell you so many stories.



In my backpack, I always take a change of clothes with me. That's the important thing to have with you, because wherever you go, you know you need to change, take a shower and that's always the important thing, you know. In the summer it's okay because you just put some t-shirts in the backpack, some shorts ... but in winter you need a jacket and other heavy clothes. To be honest I really don't make plans, I always have my

bag with me. I put my clothes there, my change of clothes and whenever it's time I go, and that's it. If I feel I want to go to Brighton, I go to Brighton. If I want to go to Canterbury I go to Canterbury, or Ashford, Folkestone ... whatever ... wherever I go I feel like I will be happy. If you are kind to people, people will be kind to you. If you are a bad person - 100% you will see me now sleeping in some tent in the street.

## Friends

What can I say ... that's how I live in England now – it's been 10 years, and actually without nothing ... I'm not going to lie ... nothing's changed since the beginning. since I came here, nothing's changed at all. I have a lot of friends when they came here, they got papers and they have a life nowadays. Some of them got married, some of them moved away from here to London or somewhere else. Everyone is working, some of them have businesses and for me... it's the same thing, actually nothing has changed. Because you have no choice, you can't do nothing if you haven't got papers. I want to be like them, have a house and all that. But that is the life, I don't know what to do ... I don't know what to say. Of course, I want to have a good life but it's not in my hand, so why would I waste my time thinking about it?



Thanks God, for my good friends, because when I used to have a place, I always welcomed everyone. That's why now that I'm homeless, a lot of people ... wherever I go, any town – everyone invites me to their houses. They help me so I have something to eat, and that's important. Thanks God that actually I don't smoke or something, so I don't need money for that. I just need money for food, that's a very important thing, and to have a place to stay, somewhere to put your head down.

## Mental Health

To be honest, a lot of people, they don't feel you ... some people they do feel you because they've been in this situation but a lot of people actually they don't. They think it's very easy, but it's not easy at all, I don't feel easy. Actually, sometimes they don't know how to live, it's very hard for them, they're getting a depression and bad thoughts. But you always need to be strong, and something will



come, something better will be coming one day, it's not going to stay like this forever. You need to move and make something, you need a reason to get up in the morning.



Because I've been in depression as well before. And depression is like an animal inside you, it can eat you from the inside. I've been thinking too much, and been hurting myself. But in the end, I was saying 'What am



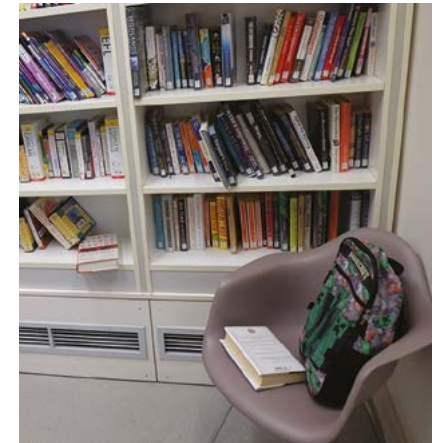
I doing? What's the point? Nothing will change'. Depression or hurting yourself won't change nothing - you need to be strong and move on, and do something that will change your life. Go here, go there, to make your life better, and that's all.

### Money and Hope

At some point social services told me 'you're out'. When you have your own place, you've got help, benefits and stuff like that, it's so different than when you're outside. When

you're outside, you've got no help, nothing. Trust me, when you have your own house, when you have your own room, you're actually free to do whatever you want. You can bring who you want but my life now is different, it's so much different.

You need to learn how to live with what you have, even with little things. Even if you have for example £10, you need to learn how to survive with £10 for three days. You don't need to buy big things or expensive things to live, little or small things will make your life easy. I am learning so much, I feel like I am learning how to get by with very little, so then when I have more I know how it is and I don't start wasting everything. You live, you learn, and if you need help then you need to listen.



Trust me, you have to know it. Some people actually they really don't know what life is. They just spend this, spend that, they don't think. I see people who have a lot more than me, but they spend their whole day on tik tok or Instagram scrolling, and it makes



them stupid. But maybe if they would have been in a situation like this, they would know what money is worth. I'm not saying I want a lot, money, but I do want a life, just a simple life: you work, you have something to do, like normal people. It's a simple life but for example my parents they didn't have much and they were happy, I never saw them complaining.

I actually hope that everything changes in the future, I hope they give me some visa, because I'm grown up now, I need to change my life, and I need to work, have a driving licence, look after my son and try to do something better. I mean just to sit here and do nothing that's not a life at all. That's all I hope for - nothing else. I don't want to be a rich person. I just want to live a normal life, a normal simple life.



Because even if you want to work now, trust me it's not like before – before you could find work in restaurants, and lots of other places. Even if they would just give you a little bit of money, but okay at least you work. But now no one will even give me those jobs. And now there is too much control as well, they never used to do this before. You have to verify your accounts now all the time and they can take it from you, they can take everything and you may get arrested as well, so they make

it difficult for more and more people. In this situation I feel like I am useless, useless actually even for the country – you're not allowed to work so you don't pay tax. Actually, you are not here, you don't exist. But you are a person.



Some people don't understand that just because you have everything it doesn't mean all people have something. There are people living in the streets, sometimes they sleep without dinner and don't eat for days. You have to feel what people are going through, that's all.

Afterword

# Dancing with you in the rain<sup>\*</sup>

Ariam, Canaan, Gersi, Malte, and Rachel

They have been through a lot... reading through their words we felt

**Rage**

**Fury**

**Fire**

**Hot red**

**Black hole**

**Volcano**

**Tornado**

**Scarlet Red**

And then imagine how they feel...

Unable to live but still alive, would rather die?

Not seeing any better days?

Just existing, not living a life.

Screaming Silently

Absence of sound

Mostly just silence, silence, and more silence of being alone

**But somehow  
their voices reach us and  
we hear, we see and we notice...**

Slow breathing, nervous tapping, skin scratching, deep sigh

Waiting

The couch sighs.

In the absence of freedom. Not having a choice, not having a voice, to do the normal things that every1 is doing, so it is scary when you don't have it.

Will anything ever change?

The weather ⚡

Entitlements 📜

Rights ⚖️👤

Social services 🏠

Borders 🚫

Money 💰

Universal credit 🏛️

Poverty 🛑

And more borders? 🚫🚫🚫

**But you are a person!**

**A flower bursting through the concrete street.**

**Winter to spring**

**hope, happiness, change of seasons and warmth.**

Nervous about writing. Not sure if they want to write at all. Who will read it? Who will listen? What will they say? But...

**Being noticed**

**Not being noticed**

**Being invisible**

**Being visible**

**Writing for family, protection, safety, and freedom**

**Writing for life**

Once you've been through all these things, you want peace, so it's simple things that make life worth living.

**What can we do to make it happen**

**No Borders! Scrap NRPF!**

*\*A poetic afterword by the Shadows co-research team dedicated to Zaheed (pages 64-68) and the other authors in this book.*



© Shadows 2026

<https://nrpfintheshadows.com/>

DOI: 10.5522/04/31332433