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About the Book

For many the daily grind can feel like a trap – work, gym, drinks, shops, home, bed, work. But what would happen if one day you just jacked it all in, to survive on next to nothing? Katharine Hibbert decided to find out.

No job, no rented flat, no shopping, no debit card and no travel pass. Katharine decided to give it all up, to walk the streets with only a backpack and spend a year living off the food, clothes, goods and accommodation that would otherwise go to waste. It would be a year of squatting, scavenging and no spending. Would she survive and if she did would she ever want to go back?

The journey takes her on a fascinating trip, from drug-dens to lavish squatted mansions. She has to learn to fend for herself and to trust the generosity of strangers and friends she makes along the way. She falls into a hidden community who teach her how to build a life using the things that others throw away, and finds that life on the margins amounts to so much more than you might think.

Free

Adventures on the Margins of a Wasteful Society

Katharine Hibbert

chapter one

I WAS SITTING in a park, feeling sick. I'd left my job, packed my possessions away and given up my rented flat; it had been three hours since I'd locked myself out of it for the last time. My plan when I set out had been to find a squat to stay at and some food dumped by a shop or a café to eat, and to see how long I could survive without spending money, living off what would otherwise go to waste. Now I just wanted to go home. But it was too late.

Earlier, I'd wavered on the doorstep in the chill of the spring morning before making myself post the key back through the letterbox and walk away. I'd trudged around for hours, searching for a place to stay. All I had with me was a couple of changes of clothes, a sleeping bag and a wash kit – less than I'd taken for weekend breaks in the past and all I had for the indefinite future. My pockets were empty. There was a £20 note buried in my bag but that was the only money I had.

I was hungry. It was only lunchtime so everywhere was still open for business – far too early for them to have thrown out anything worth eating, I reckoned. For the last few weeks I'd been looking for newspaper cuttings and web pages mentioning squats and keeping my eyes open for possible places. I'd thought I might be able to knock at a squat's front door and ask if the residents or anyone they knew had any space for a new person. I doubted that anyone would let me in when they didn't know me, had no reason to trust me and didn't owe me anything. But if that failed I'd have to start my own squat and that idea seemed even more difficult and terrifying.

I had spotted a couple of derelict buildings that looked as if people might be living there, or had once squatted there. In the backyard of one, a former nightclub, there was a sea of junk – furniture, crockery, electronics, rubbish. The squatters and all their possessions had clearly been thrown out fairly recently and all that was left was the pile of trash. At another squatted-looking building, a disused pub, there were sheets at the windows as curtains and peace flags flying from the eaves but no answer to my knock on the door. I couldn't find the guts to knock again more loudly. As I was walking towards an old warehouse, its walls covered with layers of graffiti, a girl with lank hair and bad skin, wearing clothes that looked like she'd slept in them, had opened the door to three hard-faced men. A mongrel dog trotted out. I walked towards them but they'd already turned to go inside. The girl leaned out to shout, 'Fucking get inside now, Dolly!' to the dog and the door slammed shut. I almost knocked but I couldn't do it. It felt too dangerous. Sitting on that park bench, I couldn't stop myself from crying. What had I been thinking?

But I did know what I had been thinking when, in the comfort of my safe, warm flat, I had decided to walk away from it all. I was 26, and on paper my life was pretty good. I had a decent job as a journalist and shared a flat in a pretty but slightly shabby Victorian building with my sister. Work brought me invitations to parties and paid for nights out, clothes and drinks. I had a wide circle of friends and a boyfriend who liked the things I liked and knew how to make me laugh. I had the money for music festivals, holidays and treats. But life had become faintly tedious. I was tired of dragging myself out of bed in the morning to get to the office and disappointed that I could rarely muster much excitement about going out in the evening. I had begun to take it all for granted – my clothes, my record collection, my travel pass, my gig and theatre tickets. I was falling into a cosy, domesticated rut, increasingly committed to debts,

responsibilities and possessions, and I could see a time coming when making any changes to my life would cause chaos for myself and everyone around me. I could feel myself becoming so accustomed to a steady wage and a comfortable life that I couldn't break out of it to do anything more interesting, challenging or worthwhile. Call it a quarter-life crisis or call it a failure to count my blessings, but I missed the enthusiasm and idealism I knew I'd felt more strongly in the past. I'd had one too many conversations with friends about office politics, supermarket home deliveries and the pros and cons of different makes of juicer, and I didn't want to feel faint gloom on a Sunday night at the prospect of another week.

I'd read articles and books highlighting the social and environmental problems with consumerism, and I felt guilty about my lifestyle while simultaneously being tired of green nagging. Of course I disliked huge supermarkets – disliked going shopping in their endless, brightly lit aisles as well as objecting to their stranglehold on the market. I knew perfectly well that they applied huge pressure to their suppliers to provide them with ever-cheaper stock. I knew they minimised their tax bills by any means possible. I knew that by shopping in them I was fuelling their expansion and therefore undermining the owner-run shops and the cheerfully raucous market on my local high street. But I went at least once a week to stock up on everything in one handy swoop. Although I felt guilty about flying anywhere or eating air-freighted fruit and vegetables, I liked going on holiday and I liked to be able to eat lettuce and grapes all year round. I was concerned that the disposable fashion touted on the high streets was produced in sweatshops while poisoning cotton farmers and I bought the argument that advertising and fashion magazines encourage debt, poor self-image and maybe even depression by encouraging shoppers to max out their credit cards in pursuit of an impossibly airbrushed ideal. But I owned piles of clothes

bought on a whim, worn once or twice then pushed to the back of the wardrobe.

So far, so much over-privileged whinging. But then the papers filled with stories about crunching credit, banks in crisis, crashing house prices and a coming wave of job losses. The system I'd resented while relying on seemed to be crumbling. My boss at the newspaper where I'd worked part-time as a reporter called me into his office: 'We're going to have to make some redundancies and I'm afraid it's going to be you.' The freelance work with which I'd filled the other three days of my week seemed to be drying up as the shrinking advertising market pushed many magazines and papers into the red. The landlord phoned: 'I've been forced to reassess the rents on my properties now my mortgage costs have increased – I'm afraid yours is going to have to go up.'

Perhaps I could have found another job and a cheaper flat, and relied on debt and government allowances in the meantime. But I'd had enough. A couple of years before, I'd met several people who claimed to live on next to nothing in the centre of Britain's cities. They knew where to find food that had been thrown away by shops and cafés and where to scavenge for clothes and household goods. If they wanted to go somewhere, they walked, cycled or hitch-hiked. They knew how to spot buildings that had been left empty for months or years, and how to get inside and live in them for free.

They seemed to be showing that Britain's households and businesses are wasting enough food, clothes and businesses to support a hidden army of people. I already knew that we recycle only a small proportion of the 400 million-plus tonnes of waste we produce every year, that we've already covered more than 100 square miles of our own country with landfill sites and that we pollute the developing world by shipping our waste there for them to dispose of. But they showed me that much of the stuff that goes into the

wastebins doesn’t even need to be recycled, let alone burned or buried. It can be reused or even used for the first time. Fresh food and undamaged furniture and clothes are going into dustcarts. Still-functioning electronic goods containing arsenic, lead and mercury are going into landfill. Easily habitable buildings are standing empty, falling into dereliction and dragging down neighbourhoods.

Many of the people who were living out of the bins and skips seemed to be doing all right on it – most of those I met were opinionated and eloquent, healthy and fairly happy. Theirs were not the intolerably uncomfortable, chaotic lives of the most visibly homeless people who sleep rough or stay in night shelters. But I wasn’t sure if I could do it myself. Of course I knew I could sometimes do without a cup of coffee in the morning and a couple of drinks in the evening. I knew I ought to be able to face the world without make-up and a wardrobe full of clothes. I wouldn’t die of boredom if I couldn’t buy cinema tickets. But I’d never done without those things for more than a couple of weeks and I didn’t know how I would feel if I couldn’t sleep in a proper bed, have a hot shower or hop on public transport. Would I lose touch with my friends if I couldn’t pay to join them for gigs or theatre trips? Would my boyfriend, Colin, get tired of me if I didn’t spend money on myself?

I wanted to know, though. I wanted to find out what I would really miss and what I only thought I couldn’t do without. If my relationships couldn’t survive without money, it would be better to know that now rather than later. And perhaps I would see what I really wanted and needed rather than taking my way of life for granted and letting it irk me.

After I’d boxed up my clutter and said goodbye to my friends at work I’d felt liberated. My mum had offered to help me sort my things out and to stash what I wanted to keep in her garage. ‘Thanks! It shouldn’t take too long,’ I’d said, blithely. She had raised an eyebrow very slightly. Around midnight, after two trips between my flat and her

garage, we still hadn’t finished. Three years of living in the same place had allowed me to accumulate an unbelievable amount of junk: packets of barely used make-up, books I’d half-read, disliked, but still hung on to, elaborate kitchen equipment I’d received as presents, tried out once then packed away in the back of the cupboard. Mum and I filled several bin bags with clothes and carted them round to a charity shop. After hours of walking up and down the stairs carrying boxes I couldn’t even muster much affection for the possessions I did want to hang on to.

Mum was doing her best to suppress her anxiety about what I was about to do, but I could see that she was worried and if anything that made me more determined not to admit any doubts. If I didn’t take this opportunity to cast off the moss I had gathered, I felt, it might not come again. My job had gone and my sister had found a nice new person to take my room in the flat who could afford the increased rent. I didn’t have kids or a mortgage. Even my expensive phone contract had expired.

Sitting on that bench, though, I ached to have it all back again, missing the certainty about what I’d be doing and where I’d be living tomorrow, next week and next month, which I’d found oppressive just days before. But there were always going to be withdrawal symptoms, I told myself. If this was cold turkey, I would have to get through it. I had reckoned that I’d need to give it all up for a year to find out what I could adapt to doing without. If I could find a way to get through four seasons without my possessions and without working, borrowing or signing on for benefits, I’d know I could do it indefinitely and I’d be able to decide whether or not I wanted to.

There had been no way to find out what I would be letting myself in for. I wanted to join an invisible group of people who live outside normal society and who don’t want to be found. Although homelessness charity Crisis estimates that around 10,000 people are squatting in the UK, most

squatters keep a deliberately low profile. No census data exists on them, and Crisis points out that many squatters are self-sufficient and undisruptive and therefore off their radar and that of the police, government agencies and other charities. Newspaper reports about squatting usually focus on particularly chaotic or attention-seeking cases – the crack dens and murder scenes, or the activists or artists squatting to gain publicity for their work or political agenda. Most squatters and scavengers coordinate by word of mouth or by noticeboards – an open online discussion forum is too easily read by the owners of disused properties or rubbish bins.

The only way to find out whether it was a way of life that might work for me was by doing it. I decided to stop spending, to become what some might call a scrounger, a freeloader, a bum. I wasn't going to take anything that wasn't going spare and I wasn't going to claim charity, steal or beg. I wouldn't accept favours from friends that I couldn't repay. If I wanted to see Colin, I'd have to make sure I had a safe, comfortable-enough place that he could come and stay with me. If I was going to be a parasite, I would be a benign one.

'How am I going to know if you're all right?' my mum had asked me quietly and tearfully. 'What if you get attacked, beaten up, raped, murdered in some crack den? Even if you aren't taking anything with you, you might still be worth robbing to someone even more desperate.'

I hadn't known what to say, and I hadn't known what to say when Colin wanted to talk about what this would mean for our relationship which, as well as bringing me a partner in crime for drunken nights out, hung-over Sundays of Scrabble and newspapers, and daytrips to faded English seaside resorts, had brought me deep, secure happiness in the year and a half since we had met. Sitting on that bench I couldn't help wishing one of them had tried harder to persuade me not to go, rather than accepting my reasoning

and my assurances that I'd be careful. But I'd done it now and I had to choose: I could either give up straight away or keep walking. I mopped my face on my sleeve and plodded on.

Another couple of hours of wandering and the afternoon was running out. I'd tramped a wide circle that had brought me back towards central London, having seen nowhere I could possibly stay that night along the way. I headed to Whitechapel where, down a dingy alley and up three narrow, rickety flights of stairs, I knew I'd find the office of the Advisory Service for Squatters, known as ASS.

It's a tiny attic room, rented cheaply from an anarchist group which owns the building, crammed from floor to ceiling with filing cabinets and shelves laden with papers, books and folders. One or two people volunteer there every day, offering legal advice on everything from getting the electricity and water switched on legitimately in an abandoned house to helping squatters put up a fight in court when they're being evicted.

The volunteer staffing the office seemed used to would-be squatters coming in for advice on getting started, but the small room was already crowded with people waiting for help and there wasn't very much he could do for me, he said. I waited until he was free, keeping myself to myself in the corner of the room, too overwrought to be sure I was capable of conversation. When the office quietened down, he introduced himself as Greg and gave me a cup of incredibly strong coffee and a basic outline of the laws on squatting and how to start a squat of my own. I knew some of it already because I had a copy of the *Squatters Handbook* produced by the ASS – a slim, stapled booklet in print since 1976 which costs, as I was told, 'A pound fifty if you've got it, nothing if you don't.'

Living in someone else's building without their permission is legal for two reasons. First, trespass isn't a crime under English and Welsh law – it's a civil matter, a dispute

between two parties like a debt or a breach of contract which has to be dealt with in a civil court, not by the police. Signs in England warning that ‘trespassers will be prosecuted’ are a con – being on someone else’s land is not, in itself, illegal. By contrast, squatting is outlawed in Scotland, where an act passed in 1865 after the Highland Clearances displaced farmers from their land made it an offence for them to go back. North of the border it is a crime punishable by jail or a fine to ‘lodge in any premises or encamp on any land which is private property without the consent or permission of the owner or legal occupier’.

Second, squatters rely on the protection brought by a 1381 law forbidding forcible entry to any building that is someone’s home. The rule, which was introduced after the Peasants’ Revolt to bring order into land disputes by forbidding owners from taking matters into their own hands, one of the causes of the rebellion, states that entry can be made ‘not with strong hand nor with multitude of people, but only in a peaceable and easy manner’. The upshot of the law is that an Englishman’s home really is his castle, even if it’s a squatted castle. It is illegal for anyone – even the owner – to break into a squat without a court order, as long as at least one squatter is inside and the building is not someone else’s home. Police can come in only for the same reasons as they can break into a normal house: if they suspect that a crime is under way inside, to prevent harm to property or people or if they have a search warrant. Not that owners always observe the law – less scrupulous ones sometimes send round the heavies, risking the £5,000 fine or six-month prison sentence threatened by the ‘Legal Warning’ that most squatters hang on their doors, which sets out section six of the Criminal Law Act 1977, the modern version of the 1381 law.

The most dangerous bit, at least from the point of view of trouble with the police, is actually getting into a building, Greg warned me. Trespassing may not be a crime but

breaking and entering is, and so is criminal damage and going equipped for burglary. I'd have to assemble a group of other would-be squatters then hunt for a building we could get into without causing damage, or without causing visible damage, or without getting caught causing visible damage. Perhaps we could climb through a badly secured window, skylight or coal hole. Perhaps an already-broken pane of glass would let us hook open the latch on a door. However we did it, once we were inside and locked in with our own locks we'd be on safer ground. It was imperative to squat in a group because someone would have to stay at home all the time to keep the protection of the 1381 law. But if we did that and got our utilities connected legally so that the police couldn't hassle us for stealing electricity or gas, didn't do anything criminal in the building, and as long as the building genuinely was lying unused, then we couldn't legally be evicted until the owners took us to court.

I didn't want to admit to Greg how overwhelmingly impossible that all seemed. He pointed to a noticeboard where, he said, there were occasional messages pinned up offering spaces in under-populated squats. My stomach was tense as I scanned the notices, hoping that an existing squat would need an extra person to help them keep the place occupied or to help with the DIY needed to get a derelict house working as a home.

But that day, as on most days Greg said, offers of places to stay were vastly outnumbered by notices about empty buildings others had spotted and people asking for empty rooms or hoping to form groups to open a squat together. There were a couple of spare rooms listed, but I noted them down without much optimism; the dates on the ads were all a week or more old and I was sure they'd already have gone. After all, a rent-free room in a place where the other people have already done all the work by finding and getting into an empty building sounded too good to be true. So I busied myself writing down phone numbers of people

who had put up messages seeking other people to start squats with, and a few addresses of supposedly empty places – though Greg warned me that they might not be up to date.

Greg turned his attention to the next squatters in line, a pair who had brought in court papers issued by the owner of the building to evict them. They were hoping that Greg would spot an inaccuracy or incompleteness in the owner's case so that it got adjourned in court, buying them a little more time in the building, a disused nursing home. The nursing home had closed down several years ago and the building had been empty since. They were pretty sure it was going to stay empty, as they had looked at applications for planning permission submitted to the local council and seen that it was owned by a property developer who wanted to level it and replace it with flats. Because the building was listed, planning permission had been denied so it remained disused, with smashed windows and filthy floors.

When Greg turned away to start writing them a defence, one of the squatters, a scarecrow in his early twenties with a lopsided grin, hacked-around hair and calf-length checked trousers over stripy knee-high socks, passed the time by asking me what I was up to.

'Looking for a place to stay,' I replied.

'Oh well, that's easy – there's loads of empties around.'

He started reeling off squattable places he'd seen near their own. But I'm alone, I told him, and a beginner. He and the girl he came in with looked at each other for a moment. 'Well, if you just need a place to crash for a little while to get yourself sorted out, why don't you come to ours?'

It was huge, he said, with loads of spare rooms. They wouldn't be there for much longer, but – as long as everyone else who lived there was OK with it – he saw no reason why I shouldn't sleep there for a few nights.

The relief was like exhaling after holding my breath. Pete and Marie were smiley and likeable. After a few minutes

chatting to them, I was as sure as I could be that they were harmless. Meeting them and Greg made my plan to find a way to live like this seem more realistic and less terrifying than it had all day. Pete and Marie set off to cycle home, but I had to follow them on foot. The walk took more than an hour and the sun was low in the sky when I found the lane their house was on. It was easy to spot – Pete had told me it would be, because someone had spray-painted their door number in digits a metre high on the fence nearby. The house was big, as they had said – a chunky two-storey Victorian building in red brick, sprawling in a long rectangle on the edge of acres of churned-up land, where the rest of the hospital it was once attached to had already been demolished and a ‘luxury development of one-, two- and three-bedroom contemporary apartments’ was set to spring up. Most of the ground-floor windows of the squat were boarded up. Black bin bags of rubbish were piled by the front door. Two men with spanners were working on an engine outside the front door.

‘Is Pete or Marie around?’ I asked.

‘Probably – inside somewhere, upstairs most likely,’ one replied. ‘Go and have a look if you want.’

The hallway was dim behind the boards on the windows and smelled of dogs and damp. On both floors, dozens of rooms opened off the corridors that formed the spine of the building. Although the group had only been inside the building for three weeks, they had made it fairly homely. Some rooms had been turned into bedrooms with mattresses and bedding on the floors, possessions stacked up and spray-paint or posters on the walls. Others were empty. Someone found Pete for me and he introduced me to everyone else – more than a dozen people of a mixture of European nationalities – Spanish, Italian and Portuguese as well as British – most of them pierced, dreadlocked and in their twenties. People shook my hand, told me their names, asked me a question or two about myself then shrugged

when I asked if I could stay for a few days. ‘Don’t see why not, really – plenty of space.’

‘You hungry?’ asked a small, perky-looking girl called Kelly. ‘We’re just about to cook up some dinner – want some?’

Yes! I really did want some! I’d barely eaten all day and I’d been too tense to notice how hungry I had become, but when I thought about it I realised my stomach was painfully empty. So walking into their kitchen, which was piled high with food, a jumbled selection of bread, vegetables, dips, ready-meals and cake rescued from local supermarket bins, was almost overwhelming. The big room was raucous, with some people trying to cook while others shooed out the dogs or horsed around, starting arguments and play-fights. Kelly coordinated the preparation of tomato and olive pasta and a vegetable pie, in huge, catering-size pans and dishes. It was ready just after midnight and we ate it sitting round a huge table built on trestles in the living room. It was delicious, and not only because I was famished.

After we’d all eaten, a meeting was called to discuss the court date and where the group should move to when they lost in court – as they knew they would sooner or later, because owners are always entitled to a possession order against squatters who have been in a building for less than ten years. Even if the ASS succeeds in finding a few legal inaccuracies in their claim, it only delays the inevitable eviction. Marco, a Spaniard and slightly older than the rest of the group, was elected to chair the meeting, so he wrote an agenda on the ‘whiteboard’ – the door of the fridge: ‘WHO? WHERE? HOW? WHEN? WHY?’

Marco decided to take the agenda in reverse order, easiest first. ‘Why are we squatting?’ A chorus of answers, backed up by whoops from the others. ‘Because otherwise our dogs would have to live on their own.’

‘To redress the balance between rich and poor.’

‘To prove there’s an alternative to consumerism.’

‘Cos we’ve got no money.’

‘To organise events – to have a place where we can make stuff happen.’

Where, when and how to look for a new building came next. A rota was drawn up of people to go and scout for possible ‘empties’, properties that seemed to have been uninhabited for months or years and which looked ripe for squatting. They discussed what they needed – a big place with lots of rooms and some spacious communal areas where gigs and parties could be held. And ideally not too close to any neighbours so the parties could go on unhindered. Then there was discussion about which night they should aim to actually ‘open’ one – get inside and immediately secure the doors and windows so that the owner couldn’t break in and kick them out.

Marco tried to prevent the meeting from descending into quarrelling but Tom, an Englishman in his mid-twenties who made money as a street performer, seemed to consider every issue under discussion to be deeply personal. It was clear to him that he was working harder than anyone in the group, and that the fact that they hadn’t yet found a new home and that the current one was messy and dirty was everyone’s fault except his and, possibly, his ghostly quiet girlfriend’s.

At around two in the morning, the discussion had reached ‘who’ – who should be allowed to move into the new squat, the trickiest item on the agenda. After a long row, it was put to the vote whether Ernesto, a peaceful-looking Portuguese man with a mane of dreadlocks, should move out. He didn’t make enough contribution to the household, some said, spending too much time out, not bringing in any food and only coming home to sleep. ‘This is horrible,’ said an Italian girl called Monica. ‘How come we get to decide who gets to stay or go? It’s a squat – it doesn’t belong to any of us. I thought we believed that things should be used by whoever needs them. Who are we to tell people they can’t stay when there’s room for them?’

‘But the group has to work as a group,’ said Tom. ‘People have got to be in or out, and Ernesto’s never here.’

Narrowly, it was voted that he should leave. He had managed to keep calm during the discussion but now he stopped restraining himself and his handsome face filled with hurt and anger. ‘Fuck you all,’ he muttered as he stormed out of the room. ‘I was leaving anyway – I don’t want to be in a place where you can’t put a finger down without getting filth on it, where there’s dog piss all over the floor. But I’m going because I’m going, not because you vote that I go.’

Now it was my turn to be discussed and everyone was tired and riled. Was it OK for me to stay for a few nights? I asked cautiously. Just until I sorted myself out elsewhere, not to move into the new place with them, not to join their group. Everyone seemed to think I could, except for Tom. He didn’t know me, didn’t trust me and didn’t want to live in an open house. A few people nodded. But as he wound himself up into a rant about why I shouldn’t have been invited round in the first place, people started to turn against him. A guy called Juan took my part even though I’d exchanged no more than a couple of sentences with him. ‘We’ve got the space – why on earth shouldn’t she stay a few nights? Hasn’t anyone ever done the same for you, Tom?’

I kept quiet, except to say that I’d leave without argument if it was decided that I shouldn’t be there. There was a vote. Tom raised his hand alone when Marco the chair asked for votes against my staying for a night or two. So I had a roof for tonight and maybe a little longer. It was a start.

The meeting continued with increasingly heated discussions about who should be allowed to remain with the group and who should be made to find another gang when they moved house. By three in the morning I was completely past it. The room was full of shouting and, when I stood up, my knees visibly shook with nerves, cold and exhaustion. Monica and Paula, Tom’s silent girlfriend who

had abstained from the vote on whether I could stay, showed me an empty room I could sleep in. The windows were boarded up so the only light was from an unshaded neon tube in the ceiling. It was full of junk with bits of wood and metal stacked on the gritty floor. The girls apologised that it wasn't very nice. But it was more than good enough for me – I'd barely dared to hope for a place to unroll my sleeping bag tonight. I piled the debris against the wall. Monica helped me carry in a spare mattress and lent me a quilt, a pillow and a broom to sweep the floor.

When she'd gone, I perched on the edge of the bed, too shaken to think sensibly but unable to stop my mind from racing. I was deeply grateful to have found a bed and a few people who were friendly and kind. Still, I didn't feel at home at all and it had been made abundantly clear to me by Tom that I shouldn't. I shoved two five-kilo bags of coal that were in my room up against the door. It wasn't going to stop anyone from opening it but at least I'd hear them. I zipped myself into my sleeping bag and tried to relax but my mind carried on circling, trying to work out how I could sort myself out, where I could go from here, what I ought to do tomorrow.

Eventually I must have drifted off because suddenly I found myself jolted out of sleep and sitting bolt upright in the pitch dark yelping, 'Who is it? Who is it?' before I could work out where I was, let alone what was happening and why the bags of coal were being pushed noisily across the floor as the door opened. A light shone in and a tall, skinny man with tangled hair peered at me. 'What do you want?' I asked, trying not to sound terrified.

'Sorry, sorry – I thought this room was empty. Looking for a screwdriver,' he replied as he backed out of the room.

False alarm. But the adrenalin that had flooded my bloodstream kept me awake and jumpy.

chapter two

THE NEXT FEW days passed in a haze. My boarded-up room was always dark, making it easy to sleep until mid-morning and hard to tell what time it was when I did wake. That first night, I managed to sleep for a few hours after dawn must have broken outside. When I was woken by children yelling and fighting as they walked past on their way to school, I lay in the gloom, wondering what to do with myself. There was no hot water and I didn't feel up to a cold shower. The house had the guinea-pig hutch smell of unwashed skin, hair, clothes and bedding, so I guessed I wasn't the only one to make that decision. I was sure I didn't smell yet, but I felt grimy in yesterday's clothes.

I was aware of how much I had to do – I had no means of transport other than my exhausted legs, no allies, no food to contribute and nowhere to stay beyond the next couple of days. But I couldn't leave the squat until someone else woke up because the door would have to be locked behind me. I was too agitated to sit still. I didn't feel like breakfast but knew I'd need energy and might not find any food for myself later. I'd been told to help myself to whatever I wanted in the kitchen. I took a glass of out-of-date but still fresh milk and some shop-made summer pudding and, feeling steadier, started doing the washing-up from last night's meal to keep myself occupied.

Around midday, Monica stumbled out of bed and let me out. Standing in the street, I knew I should be doing something to get myself more sorted but I couldn't think where to start. I wandered towards central London, my eyes open for empty buildings or other squats to go to. No joy. I went into a branch of Starbucks and asked for some tap

water. I sat down but suspected the mums and nannies sipping their coffees were watching me, though I never caught them looking when I glanced up. At Oxford Street, I went into Selfridges and asked for a makeover at a beauty counter. The free treat left me feeling slightly more human.

By early evening I was walking through the streets looking for something to eat. It was closing time, and the cafés and sandwich shops were putting sacks of rubbish onto the pavement. I opened bag after bag but found them filled with real rubbish – empty packaging, used paper cups, coffee grounds and floor sweepings. After a dozen or so sacks of trash I got lucky and found a black bin bag full of sandwiches. Wrapped in cardboard and plastic, they were completely untouched and, the packaging promised, they had been freshly made from the finest ingredients that very morning. Sounded good to me. There were more than I could carry, let alone eat. Triumphant, I filled my bag then sat on a bench to eat a BLT baguette ahead of the long walk back to the squat.

Dark began to fall before I was halfway home. Walking was like dragging my legs through mud and my brain had fogged up. Although I wasn't hungry, I'd eaten what felt like the wrong things at the wrong times of day. My head ached – whether from tiredness, anxiety, lack of caffeine or all three, I couldn't tell. I didn't want to go back to the squat, to the late-night arguments, the dark room, the bare mattress, the sense of being on other people's turf and the uncertainty about whether I was going to be allowed to stay for another day or, maybe, another week.

As I walked, I thought back to my old teacher, Mrs Cartwright, who had been the first person to get me interested in history and to make me wonder whether squatting could – in some circumstances at least – be morally justifiable. Decidedly eccentric and with Marxist sympathies she made no effort to hide, she had taught us about the seventeenth century 'Diggers', the first squatters

to achieve notoriety when they took over a patch of disused land near Walton-on-Thames in Surrey in 1649, when she probably should have been teaching us about Charles I's religious reforms. But it had captured my imagination and I'd taught myself more about it since.

The Diggers had aimed to cultivate the land communally in protest against the Acts of Enclosure, which allowed fields that had been commons to be fenced off and sold to private owners. The group's leader, Gerrard Winstanley, decried the system of private ownership, whereby 'Some are lifted up in the chair of tyranny, and others trod under the footstool of misery, as if the Earth was made for a few, and not for all men', and hoped to create an uprising that would force property owners to surrender their estates. But landowners began to hound the rebels within days of their occupation. The group clung on for months, despite beatings and an arson attack on their communal houses. By the beginning of 1650, almost a dozen other Digger colonies had been established across the country, from Cox Hall in Kent to Wellingborough in Northamptonshire. But by the end of 1651, after the military intervened to support the landowners, the settlements had been abandoned and the movement had collapsed.

Unlike most of the things I was taught at school, I could still remember 'The Diggers' Song', the seventeenth-century folk song Mrs Cartwright had insisted that my class learned. I hummed it as I walked, thinking of chubby little Mrs Cartwright leading a class of surly comprehensive-school teenagers through the chorus ('But the gentry must come down, and the poor shall wear the crown / Stand up now, Diggers all'), enjoying it despite themselves.

Mrs Cartwright hadn't missed the opportunity to teach us about the squatting that followed the Second World War either, although I doubt it featured on the National Curriculum. Returning soldiers had come home to an acute housing crisis. Britain had entered the war with a shortage

of decent homes, which was compounded by the impossibility of building new houses during the six years of fighting, while bombing destroyed 110,000 homes and nearly 850,000 had to be evacuated because of structural damage. Demobbed veterans got home to find themselves expected to cram their families into a single room in a squalid slum house while other buildings stood empty.

In the spring of 1945, a Brighton-based group of ex-servicemen began moving their families into holiday houses that were left unused out of season. Copycat squatting spread along the coast to other resorts and to Birmingham, Liverpool and London. Calling themselves the Vigilantes, the squatters demanded that empty property in the private sector be requisitioned for immediate use by the homeless – and although Churchill sent a memorandum to the police asking them to consider 'all means of putting an end to these pranks', he introduced powers for local authorities to requisition buildings for civilian purposes. The hopes raised by this move and by the election of a Labour government, along with increased police action, defused the Vigilante-style squatting.

But as demobilisation gathered pace, overcrowding grew, waiting lists for housing got longer, prosecutions for vagrancy became more frequent and desperation became more widespread. At the same time, army camps, depots and prisoner-of-war camps were emptying. To the homeless families looking in through the barbed wire, the solution was obvious. The first family moved into the officers' mess of an unoccupied anti-aircraft camp outside Scunthorpe on 8 May 1946. By the evening, they had been joined by several more. Word spread and the pattern was repeated at other camps as families broke in, chalked their names on the doors of their chosen hut, then set off to bring in their possessions.

The War Office issued a statement saying that the squatters were trespassers but that no immediate action

would be taken against them. By October 1946 the House of Commons was told that 46,335 people were occupying 1,181 camps. The squatters had huge popular support. Even the *Daily Mail* was on their side, applauding their ‘robust common sense’ and their ability, when the government had failed them, ‘to take matters quietly but firmly into their own hands’. It was ‘a refreshing example of what ordinary people can do when they have a mind to do it’. *The Economist* agreed, saying: ‘In a country so law-abiding as Great Britain, it is always refreshing when the people take the law into their own hands on an issue in which the spirit of justice, if not its letter, is so evidently on their side.’ Eventually the government announced that almost all the squatters would be allowed to stay where they were until better housing could be provided, and many camps remained in use for social housing until the end of the fifties.

Less sympathy was directed towards Mrs Cartwright’s favourite post-war squatters who targeted empty blocks of luxury flats and disused hotels in London. On Monday 9 September 1946, around 400 homeless families, carrying their bedding, gathered in Kensington High Street. Tubby Rosen, a councillor from Stepney, climbed into Duchess of Bedford House, an empty seven-storey block of flats, through a side window, then let the waiting families in through the tradesman’s entrance. Similar scenes occurred across the capital over the following days, with groups occupying Fountain Court in Pimlico, the 630-room Ivanhoe Hotel in Bloomsbury, and Abbey Lodge near Regent’s Park – a building which has been converted into flats that now sell for upwards of £3 million. These occupations were more carefully planned than those at the barracks, with Communist Party members, who may have targeted posh buildings to score political points rather than to provide people with long-term accommodation, playing prominent organising roles.

Police resorted to siege tactics against the squatters at Abbey Lodge and the Ivanhoe, standing in ranks outside, allowing squatters out but not letting anyone back in. Food and bedding were thrown over the rows of police to the squatters waiting inside. But when the government started civil action to evict some of those staying at Duchess of Bedford House and arrested and charged four Communist councillors with ‘conspiracy to incite and direct trespass’ (a crime although simply trespassing is not), the squatters began to leave voluntarily, and by the end of September, the buildings had been vacated.

I continued the hike back to my own, temporary, squatted home. However uplifting the history, I was still exhausted and lonely and did not want to socialise with my housemates when I got there. I took myself to my room as quickly as I could. I realised, when I woke in the early hours, that I’d fallen asleep in my clothes and my sleeping bag was full of grit from the floor of my room.

I got used to evenings in the squat over the next couple of days. It was usually warm indoors, with a lidless pot of tea on the go in the living room and everyone gathered round eating and chatting – sometimes philosophy and politics, sometimes just dirty jokes. Someone with a few quid would usually go out to buy cans of beer, and fags were cadged with the promise of payback next time the cadger had some cash. Some of the squatters were art or drama students and most busked or worked a day or two a week in a bar, café or shop to get a bit of cash, but no one had a full-time job. The idea of sleep tended not to enter anyone’s head until the early hours.

In the mornings, I still tried to go out as soon as someone else woke to lock the door behind me, returning in the evenings to hang out and share whatever food I had managed to find. When I couldn’t summon the energy to wander around looking for food or possible new homes, I