

# No Privacy

**By**  
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## **NO PRIVACY**

No Privacy grew from an interview I saw on television with a woman who had once been homeless but due to the program run by Big Issue magazine had managed to get herself back on her feet. She was a woman in her fifties who intended to obtain a Social Work qualification because she said the people working with the homeless actually had no idea of the problems and that she intended to work in a shelter or similar.

She impressed me so much I wrote a play. I have to say that the subject of how this woman became homeless was not discussed in depth so I have chosen a common social problem of today and used that. The play is designed to be performed anywhere there can be somewhere for our actress to sit. It does not have to be in a theatre. If performed in a theatre keep it simple it doesn't require complex technical trappings to make it work.

**NO PRIVACY!**

*Lights up on a stag which has a park bench, nothing else. There is an indistinguishable noise of voices from off stage and a mature woman comes on stage pushing a shopping trolley loaded with bags and clothes. The trolley is very well organized and the woman, while obviously dressed in hand me downs and very second hand clothes, seems to be clean.*

I dunno, what's the world coming to when someone can't even clean her teeth in a public toilet? (*She shouts off stage.*) It says public, not private, and I'm bloody public aren't I?

*(Pause)*

Well, no harm, at least she let me finish and pack me stuff up but I do need a proper wash. I hate these shopping center security guards; think they're God's gift sometimes. Well off to the Uni again I suppose.

*(She looks at the audience and then speaks to them in a conspiratorial tone.)*

There's a loo at the Uni. With showers in it, hot showers, down by the sports ground over the foot bridge. I suppose they've been left there for the joggers who use the old ground. They're dead quiet in the mornings after 9 o'clock. I can sometimes even get a bit of clothes washing done. The students don't mind but if security catches me they see me off. Not that they're nasty about it but they still see me off, gently. The students are nice, they'll even give me some change for a cup of tea sometimes and the ladies at the canteen will always give me the stale stuff that they're supposed to throw out when they're cleaning up at the end of the day. You know, sandwich's gone a bit dry, salad's a bit brown, that sort of thing. Even when I was well off I wouldn't have thrown salad like that away, a bit of lemon juice or some vinegar does wonders to brighten up wilted lettuce. There you go, housekeeping tips from Mrs. "I don't have a home". You're honoured you know, not everyone gets tips from me. ... They have to throw old food away they say, Health Regs or something; they say they might poison someone. So it goes to the pigs. My husband once told me that pigs have much more delicate digestive systems than humans do so if it's OK for them why isn't it OK for us?

*(Pause)*

I do like to be clean. I may not have anywhere to live but I like to be clean. I know I'm going on about it but it's important. Well, it's important to me.

*(Pause)*

Hot water's the issue. I can get a bit of a scrub in cold water in any public loo, so long as no-one sees

me off, but there are so few places with hot water. You can clean your teeth anywhere where there's a tap, cold's fine for that but I like a real good scrub with hot water, and the chance to wash out a few bits and pieces. The trouble is you can't be private with it. There's always someone about.

*(Pause)*

Underwear! You've got to have clean underwear. Otherwise you're just letting yourself go. Have a bit of pride in yourself. Don't let the bastards win.

*(Pause)*

Not that it's a competition.

*(Pause)*

There's some loos around town with hot water but they're mostly in arcades and shopping centres and I tend to get shooed away, like today. Shown the door. Sometimes politely, sometimes not. She was alright today really. She let me finish cleaning my teeth. But she did stand and watch me, like I was going to steal something, I mean what can you steal in a public loo? Toilet paper? Soap? The soap the Salvos give me is much nicer than that industrial rubbish you get in shopping centres.

*(pause)*

I can get a shower and a meal at some of the shelters but there's usually a sermon attached. Not always a religious one, it's usually one of those bloody social workers, it's still a sermon though. Slips of things they are without the sense they were born with. "Hello dear, how's it going"? They're half my age, where's the respect? That's why I don't stay, they've got no respect for me at all. They talk to me like I'm a child. Being homeless doesn't mean stupid, or sick, sometimes it's just bad luck, and yeah, some of us stay homeless because we want to ... but some of us don't. I prefer the religious workers, a bit single minded but ... well take that nice young man down at the Salvo's, he always calls me Ma'am and he never patronizes me. Those bloody social workers always so condescending with their fake concern and their "focus" on you. You can see it a mile off! I'll end up a footnote in somebody's thesis I will and that doesn't get my underwear washed or food in my stomach. Is matronizing a word because if it isn't it bloody should be!

*(Pause)*

Winters are getting harder or maybe I'm just getting older, I've got rheumatism or arthritis or something and cold mornings are a bit hard to take. That's when I really need hot water. It gets me moving when the frost has got into my joints.

*(Pause)*

The girl in the café down the road always calls me Ma'am. She went to school with my daughter. She knows what respect means and she calls me by my proper name even if I am cadging a cuppa. She remembers my Julie that's why she's nice to me. She's a lovely girl; she's engaged, going to be married soon, second time of course. I'll go and watch because she was a friend of Julie's. I'll stand outside over the road and I'll be there, it'll be like it was Julie's wedding.

That's normal nowadays isn't it, more than one marriage? It didn't used to happen when I was young unless you were widowed. Getting divorced was a bit of a scandal then. Divorced women were looked on as ... fast somehow as if it was automatically their fault. That's a bit old fashioned isn't it?

*(Pause)*

Its funny, isn't it, how things work out. I wasn't always like this. It just seemed to happen; one simple little thing led to another, then another, then another and all of a sudden I'm on the street trying to find loos with hot water. It's a good thing Julie can't see me now, she'd be horrified. I was always so well turned out. Neat as a pin. Don't hear that phrase anymore do you. ... Did my best to bring her up the same and while I didn't always like what she wore, I always made sure she was well turned out. She was very pretty, much prettier than I was when I was young.

*(Pause)*

Did I try too hard? We try and turn our children into ourselves don't we? Is that what goes wrong? Something always seems to, doesn't it? The generation gap rears its ugly head and the next thing you know you're not talking to each other, for about twenty years.

*(Pause)*

Take it from me; don't let that happen. Never let the argument grow so big you don't talk. You never know what might happen next, you may never get to heal the wound. And don't let things drift either. That's just as bad.

*(Pause)*

There's a nice young man works at Coles in the warehouse out the back. When the bread comes to be thrown away he puts a few loaves and buns aside, he keeps them for us. The pig man doesn't mind, he gets his share and we get some bread. Do you know they throw away day old bread, not allowed to sell it. We used to be able to buy it for toasting. The pig man is supposed to get it with the greens. Just between you and me we get some of the greens too when nobodies looking. The man at Woollies isn't like that he just swears at us and chases us away. It just goes to show I suppose. There's some out there that's naturally nice and some that aren't. Do you reckon an old lady with a shopping trolley scared the lad at Woollies when he was a kid? Anything's possible. I call him a lad but he's probably forty. But that's not old.

*(Pause)*

It all started when my husband left. He ran off with a young thing he met at a conference. It wasn't her fault. We had lots of money then, he drove a flash car and wore nice suits and he always was a handsome man. He was one of those who kept his figure, didn't even have to work at it and if anything he got better looking as he got older, a bit of grey at the temples, what they call distinguished. He swept her off her feet, poor lass. What do they call these girls? "Trophy wives"! Now there's an image, a wife something that you put on the mantelpiece and only get down to polish once a week or so. I feel sorry for them you know. Julie told me not to be silly, that she was a gold digger, but she made sure he looked after us. I know that because she signed our maintenance cheques from their joint account more often than he did.

*(Pause)*

He left her too, when the business went broke. Ran away and left all the debts and everything. Neither of us ended up with the debts though, he was quite greedy and he kept the business in his name only, so when it went broke we didn't have any problems, except of course the money stopped coming in. He just vanished. He must have managed to get something hidden before it all crashed though. Julie got a letter from him with a New Zealand stamp on, posted at the main post office in Wellington with no return address but nobody else has ever heard from him.

I'd like to call him a bastard but I'm actually a bit sorry for him too.

*(Pause)*

Julie said I shouldn't be.

*(Pause)*

She said I was totally insane after what he did.

*(Pause)*

At least the sun is shining today although it's a bit cold. I might go and sit in the park for a while. The gardeners leave me alone as long as I don't bother people, as if I would, and there's a nice loo there too. No hot water though, it's all cold.

I like the flowers in the summer and even in winter I get a lot out of the beautiful plants, it always smells so nice there. The conservatory's open in the daytime, 9.00am till dusk, so if it rains I can go in there and keep dry. There's the old bandstand in Elder Park too although that's really only good for shelter when there's no wind. No walls, you see, to keep the rain out, if it rains straight down you're dry; if it blows you're wet.

*(Pause)*

I generally get my clothes from the Salvo's although City Mission is pretty good. The nice young man at the Salvo's always seems to be able to find me a newish towel when I want one but the Mission is better for blankets. I'm pretty right really; you learn how many layers of clothes to wear so you don't get wet underneath and if you stay dry you don't feel the cold so much.

Talking of clothes, last winter a really strange thing happened. I was sitting on a bench near Harris Scarfes and it was a bit cold and rainy and this woman walked by and stopped. She looked at me for a long time and then went inside the shop and came back with a really nice coat. It must have cost nearly two hundred dollars. She just sort of threw it at me and almost ran away. I think she was crying. I didn't know what to think at first, "who does she think she is" I thought, "I don't beg." Eventually I realised she was just being nice. When I thought about it later I wondered if it might have been Julie ...

*(Pause)*

Of course it couldn't have been.

*(Pause)*

I've still got that coat. I can't wear it. It's too good. I might get mugged for it or the charity people might think I'm not really poor. I use it as a blanket sometimes though.

*(Pause)*

When Julie went off to University things were still more or less all right. I had a job as a waitress at the local pub and I was doing OK. I even signed up for some courses. I thought I might go to University too and become a teacher. When Julie went I stopped getting any help from Centre Link. That was all right too. I didn't have a mortgage, the house was paid for as part of my divorce from my husband. He gave up any rights to it in return for me giving up rights in his business. Clean break they called it. That was a good choice in the end because the business went broke leaving lots of debts and they weren't my problem. I still had my house. ... Home.

What's a home? It's not bricks and mortar really although the chance to close the door and be alone is good, it's memories. Home was the tree where Geoff built Julie a swing. It was the parties we held in the conservatory, well, the glassed in back porch. It was the crib that we brought Julie to from hospital when she was born. ... *(Almost a whisper.)* That's your home, not the doors and windows, it's the happiness, the memories.

*(Long pause).*

This time of year's all right actually. There are less people about and you get the chance to be quiet. I know the summer is warmer and I don't have so much trouble with me arthritis but you can be a bit private in the autumn. It's hard to be private. When you've got a house you can close the door and keep people away but when you're on the street there's no privacy. There's loneliness, but no privacy. Funny, isn't it, how you can be lonely in a crowded room. That's not just street folk is it? It can happen even if you have got an address.

*(Pause)*

That was the next thing I guess, I got lonely. Julie had gone off to Uni and most of the friends I had with my husband just drifted away. They were couples you see. I wasn't a couple any more. Mind you our old friends didn't see *him* much either because he got a new lot of friends to go with his new wife and new life style.

I wasn't included by our old friends' anymore because I would be on my own. I would have made the odd number for dinner, the extra seat at the theatre or cinema. I would have been the phantom at the feast. I was invited for a while, informal parties mostly and I even held one which most of my really old friends came to. But gradually the invites dried up and the outings ran down and I just didn't bother. They didn't seem to understand about money either, I wasn't broke but I couldn't afford to spend like we did when he was around. I stopped going to Uni too, it just didn't seem important any more and everyone was so much younger than me. I told myself that I was too old to start again with a new circle of friends and next thing you know you're a hermit who only goes out to go to work and never sees anyone. *(A touch of humor)* Then you get a lot of cats and the local kids start calling you a witch.

*(Pause)*

I might go down to the Mall later. I can usually get a cup of coffee or tea from one of the cafés down there. They take pity on us older ones, give us the occasional cake. Food isn't really the problem though, if you're not too fussy you can always eat. It's sleeping rough and keeping clean. And you can't be private, there are always people around. Wherever you go there are others sleeping rough or there are do-gooders sticking their noses in. "I'm just trying to help dear". They're as bad as Social Workers.

There are a few places I know where I can sleep pretty safe. People can be really nasty when you sleep rough, mostly young ones but not always. I've never heard of anyone being set on fire around here but it's happened in some places. People get roughed up and kicked now and again and that isn't exactly nice either so somewhere safe is important. Somewhere hidden, where you're not going to be seen by nasty drunks or kids out for kicks. There's so much violence in the world, so many people just seem to be looking for someone to pick on, to take out their upsets on.

Was it really this bad when we were young? I seem to remember the world being a nicer place than now, or is that just nostalgia? Does our memory really censor itself that much? I don't even remember being too worried about Julie going out at night and nothing nasty ever happened to her. She used to play outside a lot when she was little, in the garden or even out in the road with the other kids in the

street. Now parents seem afraid to let their children out of sight. Supervised play in cramped back yards and visits to commercial playgrounds seems to be all they get. No wonder they say Aussie kids are getting fat, they don't get any exercise.

Mind, children do get kidnapped, or worse, so we need to look after them. But are we looking after them too much?

After Geoff left I was a bit worried for a while about Julie because he made some vague threats about getting custody but I soon realised that he really didn't want her, whatever he'd told himself, because she would have cramped his new lifestyle too much.

*(Pause)*

Do they really leave us or is it the children that drive them away?

*(Pause)*

Selfishness. It's the major contribution I think.

*(Pause)*

Theirs not ours.

*(Pause)*

They can't stand not being the center of attention after the kids come along so off they go with their trophy wife so they can be the Lord of the Universe again.

*(Pause)*

My loneliness began to get me down so I started to stay at the pub where I worked between my lunchtime and evening shifts. I'd sit and have a coffee and maybe one drink and chat to the regulars until it was time to go back to work. It was actually only a couple of hours so it seemed to make sense. Saved bus fares!

I always used a bus because I never learned to drive. My Dad didn't own a car. Something rather mysterious had happened in his past and he didn't have a license, I never asked. He was a private sort of man and somehow it didn't seem right. Mum belonged to a generation where women didn't have a job. Cooking, cleaning and caring for the family, that was a woman's work. Nothing else. And the man never lifted a finger. If a woman did work she had cleaners and home helps. In those days any middle class family could afford that, only the really poor needed two incomes to survive and that's where the housekeepers came from. Anyway my Mum never had a job. That might have had more to do with Dad than I realized. He assumed that I would finish school after I turned 15, go work in a shop until I got

married and then be a housewife and mother. When I told him I intended to keep working for a while after I married he looked a bit surprised and a bit disapproving like he had expected Geoff to support me straightaway. When he realised it was so we could buy a house he approved though. That was a sacred thing to him, owning your own home.

*(Pause)*

Geoff never seemed to have time to teach me to drive and as he become more and more successful it didn't seem to matter. I even had an account with a taxi company. Can you believe that? An account with a taxi company? I haven't gone anywhere I can't walk to for years.

*(Pause)*

So I used to sit in the pub and talk to the regulars and some of them played the pokies. I never had. I'd never even gone into the gaming room. To me it was just a rather noisy room in the background in some pubs but one day I just sort of wandered in there. The machines were a bit scary but fascinating and ... I don't know, it was like they hypnotized you. Sitting there with all those flashing lights and whistles and bells.

I put a dollar in a machine pushed the button and won twenty-five dollars.

*(Pause)*

I had no idea why I'd won. And I couldn't figure out how I lost the entire twenty five dollars in the next hour and a half.

Does anyone really understand those machines and how they work? I certainly don't.

*(Pause)*

I might go up to Coles soon; it's always worth checking the bins in the early afternoon. They usually do a sweep for damaged goods late morning and some good stuff gets chucked. Then I'll go up to the park. It's not warm but it's sunny and a nice sit down out of the wind will do me good. The Salvo's want me to see a Doctor but I haven't got any money so I can't pay. They say they'll arrange it. They reckon they're worried about my arthritis. Maybe I will. It is getting a little difficult to move some of these mornings. I just can't seem to get out of bed, if I had one, that is. The hot water helps when I can get it though. Frees up my joints, helps me get moving. Oh well I should just push on.

*(Pause)*

Julie did so well at Uni. She wanted to be a sociologist to start with. I don't even understand what that is. Then she decided to do something a bit more practical and swapped to Social Work. Her minor was

Political Science and I reckon she thought she was going to change the world. Don't we all. ... Actually you know, I didn't. I was perfectly happy with the world the way it was. I didn't have anything to worry about; I had a beautiful daughter who was going to grow up really special, and a handsome husband who was going to look after me for the rest of my life. My life was simple, perfect and comfortable and I didn't want it to change, not at all, but in the end I had no choice, it changed without asking me and without my fucking permission.

*(Pause)*

There, I said it. ... You know when I was growing up, a woman didn't swear, ever. Well not a woman with any class and my family considered we had class. My parents and my husband would have all had fits if they'd heard me say something as simple as damn. My Grandma was the daughter of a miner though. She swore like a trooper, but not where Mum could hear her. She'd married above her, Grandma, the son of a shopkeeper, a pretty successful one too, but in those days the boys inherited everything so the shop stayed with my Uncle and Mum didn't get a look in. Pity really, it's one of the biggest general stores in the state now but the cousins wouldn't know who the hell I was. Julie was at Uni. with one of them and when the relationship was worked out she ended up invited to a few family things. Didn't get on though so we didn't pursue it. Completely different from us.

*(Pause)*

Is it money that makes us different or what? They had money but most of all they all grew up in the country not the city. Is there still that much difference in these days of TV, computers and mobile phones. They were though, they were different, and she stopped seeing them. They didn't mind I don't think. It meant they didn't have to worry about the poor cousins.

*(Pause)*

By her third year at Uni Julie had stopped coming home except at Christmas. All the other holidays and long weekends and stuff she always seemed to have something with her friends or a boyfriend. I never met any of them and when she did come home she always came alone. I can't say there was a rift, we never had an argument, but I guess she just felt that we had less and less in common as time went by. She just didn't seem to have time for her old Mum. She did come home for Christmas every year though. But then after she'd graduated from Uni she decided to get her Masters and went interstate. She reckoned there was nobody here good enough to teach her at that level. Funny isn't it the arrogance of the young? She really threw herself into her studies and never mentioned any boys in her letters. She was sharing a house with another girl, both getting on with their lives so I figured, no boys no problems, no unwanted pregnancies. I did wonder if she was gay but I decided it was none of my business and if she was she'd tell me when she felt like it. When I was a girl that would have been such a scandal. Mind you there was no law against women, not like men. Funny isn't it.

*(Pause)*

I just got lonelier. I spent even more time at the pub. Too much time. I began to drink a bit more, not a lot and only off duty but I began to play the pokies a bit. ... Too much maybe. ... Actually not maybe, definitely too much, much too much.

It's funny, you win just enough to keep you interested, and you don't realise how much you are actually losing until it's too late, much too late.

*(Pause)*

Julie kept on with her life and we kept writing to each other but I suddenly realized that it had been nearly three years since I had last seen her. More like four really. That is actually seen her in the flesh and the letters were getting fewer and further between. I hadn't had a photo since the one of her graduating and that was just a photographer's portrait. Not personal.

That seems to be the new disease, drifting apart. No arguments but nothing to talk about. My life didn't interest her and hers didn't interest me. Well it did of course because she was my daughter but I really didn't understand much about it and that makes it hard to be involved. She did a lot of work with victims of abuse and she worked for a while for something called the Women's Information Board? Then she just disappeared. I wrote one Christmas and the letter came back "not at this address" and I realized it had been a couple of years since her last letter.

*(Pause)*

It wasn't long that I had to move of course and that was that. Even if she came back looking for me now she'd never be able to find me. She'd never recognise me. Not now. And why should she even try. We'd had nothing in common for years.

*(Pause)*

It's hard to lose something when you don't understand why. When you can't understand what went wrong. I was all right after the divorce, I had some money in the bank, I owned the house and had a job and for years I got maintenance from Geoff. The pokies took care of all that. I ran up debts on my credit cards, overdrew all my accounts at the bank, eventually they said to me, you've got to sell your house and pay all these debts so I did. You know what the silly buggers didn't do? They didn't take my credit cards away and they even increased the limits after I'd paid them off. After I sold the house and after all the debts were paid I bought a little flat and I still had a little bit left in the bank. I got some counseling and I stopped gambling, for a while, but it got to me again and it wasn't long before all my money had gone. I honestly think it was the loneliness; I mean I was lonely then even before I became homeless. The pub where I worked barred me from the machines but there were other pubs and clubs. Eventually I got fired

for not turning up at work then I hit the credit cards again and the next thing, Bang – Bankrupt – All gone.

*(Pause)*

I sold up, had to, to try to clear my bankruptcy. It didn't, I owed more than I could sell the flat for.

*(Pause)*

It's hard to decide what to take with you when you don't know where you're going. There I stood in the middle of the clutter that was all that was left of my life trying to decide whether to take my towel or my bathrobe when I went on the street. It took a long time to make up my mind and I took the bathrobe.

*(Pause)*

Now listen to one who knows, that was a big mistake, I should have taken the towel not the robe. The robe's no good unless you've got a bathroom and a living room. One to have a shower in and the other to sit in, in your robe. I haven't even got a chair. To sit in, in my bathrobe. I don't even have the robe anymore. I swapped it for a blanket ages ago.

*(Pause)*

I took a picture of my Julie with me. It's here in my trolley. It's her graduation photo, in a nice frame. I kept that one. I haven't got one of Geoff though and I don't really remember what he looked like. I don't really care. Not any more.

*(Pause)*

It's a funny thing, I can put up with the cold, and I can put up with washing in public loos as long as I get hot water sometimes. What I can't stand is the lack of privacy. I've got no privacy none at all. You can go and shut your door and close out the world, I can't, there's no privacy for me, none. People watch me when I clean my teeth, people watch me when I wash my underwear, people watch me when I eat my food. People just look at me when I walk along the street. You feel it you know when you've got nowhere to call your own. Nowhere and nothing ... except a trolley and maybe a spot under a bridge.

*(Pause)*

There's probably bread at Coles now. I'm off. Food first then more washing.

*She leaves, pushing her trolley.*

No privacy, no where to sit quiet, no where that's mine.

**Finis**