

SKIPPING

BBC Radio Scotland – Wednesday 13th December 2017 at 1.30pm

0'08"

FX BIRDSONG

ALEX: That's the first thing – the wee birds will be starting to sing. It is a very comforting sound, because you know that the daylight's not far away. I've made it through another night, and I'm still alive.

JAMES: This is Alex. Over the next half hour, here on BBC Radio Scotland, we're going to hear from him – and from other men and women who've experienced homelessness in Scotland. They'll show us what it's really like to be homeless – and what it sounds like.

ALEX: It's a very comforting sound. And you know that, soon, the dawn's gonna break, and then you've got places to go, things to do. You know, in the daylight. No' in the darkness. Cos the darkness is the killer. Cos you don't know what's out there all the time.

1'30"

FX BUSHES (QUIET – SOME RUSTLING)

VLAD: I have to be paranoid when I sleep rough. Any sound can mean a danger. Something is walking through my bushes – could be a cat or something, you know? Could be a killer. Could be a danger. Could be a drunk person, or very angry person.

VLAD: I'm Vlad – Vladimir. I sleep rough, in the bushes. Full of insects, which is still alive! I'm wondering when they die. It's too cold now, but they're still alive.

2'25"

JAMES: This is... SKIPPING.

ALEX: I think it derives from skips... to sleep in skips. I think that's where it derives from. So, when you say you're skipping, you're finding a wee place that's quite quiet.

JAMES: No-one is really sure where the term "Skipping" actually comes from. To me, it's bouncing from place to place.

I'm James. In the past, I used to be homeless – rough sleeping in shop doorways, alleyways, under bridges, anywhere that's warm and sleep for the night... out of sight, out of mind.

3'13"

FX EARLY MORNING

ALAN: I was homeless for a while, and I couldn't get access to any services.

JAMES: That's Alan. He'd been in a situation where he felt his only option was to leave his home – and he was considered to be “intentionally homeless”. Legally, the council didn't have to provide housing for Alan.

ALAN: I was living in a tent that I used to pitch on Arthur's Seat. In the morning I'd get picked up, I'd get driven to work, I'd do my work, come back, put my tent up. And you know, for a lot of people I'd have just seemed like a normal person. People at work wouldn't have thought I was sleeping outside, friends wouldn't have thought I was doing that, just because I maintained a level of hygiene and I was doing positive things with my time.

4'00"

FX EARLY MORNING – RIVER LAPPING

ROBERT: In the morning, it was quite calm when I was sleeping under the, down at the River Clyde. The noise of the waves, lapping off the side, off the bank, y'know?

FX EARLY MORNING – TRAINS START

TAM: That was my very first night, under the bridge at the Clyde, just at the Gorbals, Sheriff Court. It's the silence. The deafening silence when you're under there for a few hours. And then, boom – first crack of the morning – BA-DUM! – the trains going over the top of you. And I dunno, I still get it, I still hear the trains and it just reminds me of where I was and where I'm definitely not going back to. No way. That silence... the first night, I can still remember, that was quite frightening that silence. It was like “wow, how did I get here? What just happened? What am I doing under a bridge? (laughs) Just, how did this happen? Where do I go, what do I do tomorrow?” I didnae know nothing.

5'15"

FX RAIN

CHERYL: When it's raining, people... a lot of people tend to give more money because they feel sorry for people sitting out in the rain.

FX RAIN GETS HEAVIER

CHERYL: I did not want to move when it was raining. Cos my pitch – where I was sitting, would get wet. Plus when you move in the rain and get dry a bit, and then you go back out in the rain, it's not nice getting soggy dry and then soggy again, so I'd rather just be soggy! Aye.

FX FOOTSTEPS ON STREET – woman asks for spare change

LIAM: A lot of people think homelessness is just somebody sitting on the floor, in a cardboard box, asking you for change, and it's not. That's just some of the cases. There's like my case, where people are in supported accommodation / hostel... people coming out of jail, people that are possibly dedicated to drink or drugs, people that have mental challenges and stuff. So that's the things people don't think of.

6'20"

MARGARET: To be honest, the majority of the time someone's sitting outside, it's because they've been refused a bed and breakfast, they've exhausted phoning the hostels, because the hostels have got no spaces left.

FX COIN "...you're a gentleman"

MARGARET: We're no' sitting there because we're drug addicts – a lot of us have got a damn good reason to be sitting there.

6'50"

JAMES: While some folks are out in the rain, others – who've got a temporary room in a hostel – are waking up.

FX KNOCKING

Or being woken up.

FX KNOCKING

PETER: Somebody goes round every door, go to do the death check.

TAM: It's a morning check. Basically they come in at 10 – they chap your door at 10 in the morning...

PETER: ...chaps every door to get a response.

TAM: Two staff members obviously, because they've gotta have somebody with them.

PETER: If they don't get a response the door gets kicked in. Automatic. There's nae waiting. Polis gets called, ambulance gets called, the door goes in.

TAM: They make sure, they shake you, make sure you're alive. They say it's just a "duty of care", but we call it a Death Check! Cos it's basically... (laughs)

JULIE: ...they call it a "welfare check", the Death Check in the morning. I think that's the only time anyone ever came to your door – to see if you're living or dead. And sometimes the lassies next to me and that WERE dead.

7'50"

CHERYL: I'm now in Dundee City Centre, outside the Steeple Church, it's a big building in the middle of the city centre, it cannae be missed! I'm going in to volunteer with the Parish Nurses, so I'll go and meet the team!

JAMES: Cheryl lived on the streets, and in hostels, for more than ten years. Today, her life's much more stable – she's volunteering with the community nurses at the soup kitchen that helped her out.

FX FOOTSTEPS GOING UPSTAIRS... Hello! Hello...

JAMES: She takes us in, to meet Barbara.

BARBARA: Good to see you... do you know what soup it is today? Chicken noodle...

CHERYL: Oh yes!

BARBARA: Have a smell...

FX KITCHEN

JAMES: Cheryl and Barbara go back a long way.

BARBARA: You remember when we first met?

CHERYL: I was sitting begging. I can remember it.

BARBARA: Whereabouts? Where were you?

CHERYL: Across there. And you came up to me and mentioned about here.

BARBARA: Yeah. That must have been in 2011. No, 2009. You were certainly one of the first folk that ever came to the drop-in...

CHERYL: It was the first Christmas meal as well...

BARBARA: Ah yeah. And we cooked turkey and all the trimmings. If you're sitting begging, and it's cold and miserable... it's attractive. So yes, you came.

CHERYL: The biggest thing that attracted us was, if I needed a chat, that's why I did come. Cos nobody ever sat down and listened. Aye.

BARBARA: I think I remember sitting on the pavement beside you, one day.

CHERYL: And used to make us sit on the bench in front of the church, the "Truth Bench", to say how I was really feeling. I used to always say I was all right – aye, I'm brand new – when really, I wasnae. I was buggered.

9'55"

FX STREET

MARGARET: When a woman's sitting on the street, they're not sitting there because they want to be. Society begins to think that everyone who's sitting on the street is faking it, when they're not. Some might be, but we're not all.

MARGARET: I've been sexually assaulted, I've been attacked physically, I've been peed on, I've had people coming out of McDonald's being nice and handing me food, and then people coming out of McDonald's and literally throwing cheeseburgers at my face. Taking it out the packet – saying here, have that – and actually throwing it at my face. It's completely and utterly humiliating, cos you've got to sit there and you've got to take it. You're made to feel like you are the dirt on somebody's shoe.

10'55"

FX BINS / BIN LORRY / BOTTLES / SEAGULLS

JAMES: Margaret was sleeping rough in Edinburgh. Vladimir still is.

VLAD: I know very good bins. I know very good bins – but I can't tell you. That's my secret! (laughs)

VLAD: I feel like a seagull, sometimes! Not literally, but in the way that they always disappear immediately when there is some kind of danger or something. I do, y'know? So if they see the food, they're immediately close to it – as I am! – that's animals, you know? ... Surviving, yeah that's surviving. That's surviving. We all know surviving, all of us. Everyone who tried to sleep rough for some time, longer, shorter time, we all know how to survive.

ALAN: If I needed something like food or whatever I just helped myself to it, from the bins. It's amazing. See the amount of food that gets wasted? I mean, there was a place that catered to all the big restaurants and hotels – we called it the posh skip. And we'd find big legs of Italian ham, quail's eggs, all sorts. The finest wheels of cheese, we ate like kings! In the back of most supermarkets, if you can get to them, you'll find untold amounts of food. Lots of bread, cakes, some salad, tins... sometimes beer and wine and all that, as well! The amount of stuff that gets thrown out is sickening. And a small amount of that goes via fair share to some of the soup kitchens. So you can get some of this food from the soup kitchens, but... you know, it's up to you what you wanna do.

12'50"

JAMES: Back in Dundee... the soup kitchen's getting busy.

BARBARA: We open the door at 2... When they come in, folk get – I hope – a very warm welcome from our team of volunteers. There's about 20 volunteers in total. So we're sitting here in the kitchen, there's a pretty good smell of chicken noodle soup and freshly made scones, made by Stefan, one of our volunteers. And today we're celebrating – Cheryl's just over a year, clean.

CHERYL: I used to be caught up in addiction, drugs and alcohol, from I was 24 – maybe 23 – about ten year. And eventually I put them down, everything down, last year. So now I'm officially over a year clean.

BARBARA: Honestly, if Cheryl hadn't started out on her recovery journey when she did, I don't know if she'd still have been here. So it's just a day to celebrate, cos you've done so well Cheryl And it's a privilege to be part of the journey with you. It's quite emotional! Can I give you a hug? I need a hug...

CHERYL: You've got me greetin'!.....

14'30"

FX Dundee hard day's night / harmonica man

JAMES: Just outside the soup kitchen, Liam is walking through the city centre.

LIAM: I think – I dunno. Not even just in Dundee, but all around, homelessness is growing quickly. And you do notice a lot of people, here in Dundee – there's two people there, we've only walked a couple of minutes, and that's two people we've seen already. I find it hard – Dundee's such a small place anyway, and you see so many people on the streets. Like, how many people are on the streets in London? In Glasgow? All these bigger places? And it's hard to think, how am I gonna help everybody? How am I gonna find help for them? Cos, somebody's got to help them.

FX Glasgow Buchanan Street

JAMES: We're at the start of Buchanan Street, city centre of Glasgow... and to my right there's a homeless person, mid 40s to 50s, I think he had serious medical problems, cos his head was shaking. You shouldn't be on the streets – you should be in a hospital somewhere, being looked after, regardless of where he comes from. There's another homeless person, cup in hand, sleeping bag round their legs. Shaking, trying to keep warm. Most people just walk by, in oblivion to it.

16'20"

FX – MAN repeats "Spare any change for something to eat please?"

CHERYL: They think, if they make eye contact, they need to stop. And you've recognised them. So if they can walk with their head down, then it's like they're not there. A lot of people do that.

ALAN: Acknowledge people for a start! You can acknowledge someone.

ALAN: I've sat there for hours, and had no acknowledgement, and for a person then to say "all right?", shake of the hand, sit down for a minute... you know, it can change the whole day.

MARGARET: Take your time and speak to us. Especially the women – because I think you’ll find that we’re actually there because we’ve run away from something. Just treat us like a human, that’s all we’re asking for. That’s all I’ve ever asked for.

17’25”

VLAD: I don’t like to be alone. Nobody does. Loneliness hurts, you know?

CHERYL: A lot of people are out, begging an’ that – yeah, for money, but also for company, instead of sitting in the house, isolating. And I know that for me was a big thing. I used to crave – I still do – I love attention, sometimes. But more so when I was using. You just wanted somebody to stop and have... a couple of minutes’ conversation means a lot more than a pound. For me, aye, it was people stopping and talking, that meant more to me than money.

18’15”

LIAM: I’ve only, sort of, recently found out that it’s good to speak to people. It’s good to get things off your chest. Because, building things in is never a good idea. Because at one point you’re gonna implode, or collapse. Erm... when I was younger, having this idea of, yeah, I’ll just keep things to myself... things will build up, can potentially cause you mental issues. Men have this, I don’t know if it’s all men, but – we’ve gotta be masculine. You can’t have something wrong with you, you’ve gotta be this absolute macho man. And... no. Everyone’s got a problem. Whether you’re a man, a woman, girl, boy, or whatever you are. Whatever you see yourself as. Everybody’s got something wrong. And yeah it’s hard if you’re in a bad situation, to say “I need help”, it’s hard, whatever age you are. But sometimes you just need to do it. And you’ll find in the long term, you’ll be more than thankful that you done it.

CHERYL: It was weird at first, having to deal with feelings without drugs, but it’s a lot better being able to sit with people and mean stuff, look them in the eye. I couldn’t even hold a conversation before, I wouldn’t be sitting doing this anyway. Or I possibly would, but it’d be all lies. (laughs) Cos it would!

19’45”

FX KEYS IN FRONT DOOR – WALKING UP STAIRS

CHERYL: I never knew who I was, I was always putting on bravados before, kidding on I was someone I wasnae. So I suppose, aye, finding out who I am. And I’m all right, actually! D’you know what? Aye, Cheryl is all right. I can sit with myself, and not feel uncomfy. Aye, I still feel guilty for things I’ve done, but that wasnae me. It was my addiction. Obviously I’ve got my house now – which I’m nervous about. See before, when I’ve got houses, I wasnae nervous. Because I knew what I was going there to do, I was using them for drug dens, they were only for a base. Whereas this one’s gonna be my home.

FX KEYS

MARGARET: Society just thinks, once you're on the street, you're on the street for good. But it isn't like that. The proof's right here.

FX CLOSE DOOR – FOOTSTEPS IN HALL

MARGARET: Nothing beats when you get that phone call, “we've got an offer for you” – you're like that, “oh yes!” I burst out crying. And I remember turning round and saying to them – what, is all of this mine? And the woman just smiled at me – she just nodded, yeah it's all yours. As soon as she went away, I just went through all the rooms, stood in each room in floods of tears. I couldn't believe I had all this space again.

FX WASHING MACHINE

MARGARET: You forget how long a washing machine cycle takes, you forget how long it takes to fill up a bath, how long electricity lasts in a meter. You forget how things go.

21'40"

LIAM: When I wanna get out the house, I'll just start going on a wee walk, put my earphones in...normally I'll just head in any direction, just hope for the best, where I end up – but if I'm in a really bad place, there's a stony beach that's not too far from where I stay. It's time to reflect by myself. I'm not there for a massive amount of time, it's just the music I get to listen to – that's what I want.

FX HEADPHONES – HOW SOON IS NOW

LIAM: I listen to a lot of The Smiths, I love The Smiths. A lot of their music and their songs, to me it feels like a story. And it's a story about – it actually sounds like it's written about me.

MUSIC – HOW SOON IS NOW – fades

22'35"

JAMES: Not everyone's listening to The Smiths. As day becomes evening, ears become essential.

FX ALLEYWAY

ALEX: Even before you go down an alleyway, you're listening before you're looking. If there's anything down there, if there's already someone in there. And then when you go down there, you use your hearing. You don't use your eyes that much. You make yourself small and quiet, so you're not noticed. It's all your hearing. You're listening all the time.

JAMES: It's like an animal thing. Your other senses adapt to it.

VLAD: Animals have good instincts. Every animal knows if it's in danger, or if someone is hurting him. That's me now – animal. Half animal, half human being! I have to be prepared, in a second. Can you imagine if you can't close your door, to lie down and sleep all night without fear? That's the only thing we don't have – I mean, people who sleep rough – is privacy. Really don't have privacy. Actually, I made door, at my bushes. It's just two pieces of wood. You know? (laughs) It's just... for me, the door. You know? No lock. (laughs) Just two pieces of wood. And also, it can wake me up if someone tries to come. You know what I mean?! Because they don't know it's there. Thank God not many people know my address! (laughs) I try to keep it secret – that's my secret.

24'30"

FX NIGHT TIME CITY CENTRE

MARGARET: You're all right until the pubs or the clubs come out. But that's when the mayhem starts, and the fear kicks in.

STEVIE: When you're in a position where you're vulnerable, that sound is automatically changed. People coming out of pubs, you probably spend an hour or two worrying that somebody's gonna gie you a doing.

PUBS COMING OUT – NOISE ENVIRONMENT CHANGING

ALAN: You become more alert, more vigilant. I just find my emotional responses to sound are different. In the past, where I might have had a happy feeling at hearing some drunk people down the street having a good time, now I feel more disgusted and like "oh no, what's going on".

MARGARET: And then you hear the lack of taxis going about, and you know that's the last dribble of them heading home. So you know it's alright, it's safe to put your head back down.

TAM: See when you're homeless? ... it's a frightening place. You don't know nothing. You don't know nobody. It's just a frightening place to sleep, in the beginning anyway. But after a wee while, it's just your life, innit. Get enough money, get a charge, get drugs, get alcohol, get mad wi' it. Try and leave enough for the morning – you never really do, but sometimes you've got a couple of quid in your pocket, and start up again.

FX BIRDSONG

26'25"

VLAD: Like an animal, I can hear the world more clearly now. Especially during the night. I can hear any danger coming to me, approaching me from any side.

You wake up six or seven times per night, it's not very safe to sleep rough. But when there is no other option, you know what I mean.

FX PIPER BUSKING IN CITY CENTRE

JAMES: 'Skippering' was recorded and told by Alan, Alex, Barbara, Cheryl, Julie, Liam, Margaret, Peter, Robert, Stevie, Tam... and Vladimir.

VLAD: Now the homeless spoke! Guy who's eating from bins. That's my experience.

JAMES: The narrator was me, James Blakeley... the researcher, Karin Goodwin... and the producer, Steve Urquhart. 'Skippering' is a White Stiletto production for BBC Radio Scotland.

FX PIPER BUSKING IN CITY CENTRE – ends – footsteps fade

28'00" ends