

## NEW LIFE IN LONDON

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*As told by a long-suffering wife . . .*

The first time I met my future husband, he told me he was a writer. Little did I realise where that would lead us. I'd lived a fairly sheltered existence, born in a small town, raised there, worked there, in one organisation. He was born in another country, worked in a different country, and had experienced multiple industries. In the midst of an argument one day, frustrated with my limited view of the world and inability to fall pregnant, my husband challenged me with four simple words:

'Let's move to London.'

So, we did. We went to broaden his writing, and to broaden my horizons.

Arriving at Heathrow, jetlagged, overfed and under-slept, we promptly got on the wrong train and had to pay extra for replacement tickets. I immediately noticed how commuters avoided eye contact like some virulent disease. At our destination, we hauled heavy suitcases up two flights of station stairs, then up three more flights into our temporary accommodation. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, my husband opened his laptop and got to work on his writing. I got to work on my horizons.

It was September. I caught a bus into the city. The driver spoke English but with the strongest, I think Welsh, accent; I couldn't understand a word. Halfway through our journey, the bus terminated for no apparent reason. Despite assurances a replacement would arrive in fifteen minutes, it took nearly an hour.

I went to a park, overgrown and lush, with thick green sludge in a pond like I'd never before seen. I sat on a bench, ate the most amazing Cornish pasty, and heard a busker sing 'Sweet Caroline', which strangely reminded me of home. I felt sad—missing my friends, family, and familiarities. Later in the day I saw groups of young and drunk men and women—hen's nights and stag parties and birthdays. They piggybacked each other and slammed into glass doors or sang at the tops of their voices. Over time, the tube home on a Friday night became the week's best entertainment, watching overly-refreshed lads in suits struggling to retain consciousness, and short-skirted girls to retain their dignity.

Recruitment agencies were soon calling me, along with high street real estate agents. They showed me rentals, basement flats with no light and even less air. A brass upstart spoke to me in a squeaky voice, leaning back in his chair with legs spread wide. Another wanted to know how much my husband earned, doubted we had the income to rent in the area. A petite young female had the firmest and most direct handshake of all the agents.

I mailed my passport to the Home Office to apply for a work visa. At the tube station, kids, high on something, argued with each other and talked about jumping on the track. I soon realised that a train line closed because of 'a person on the track' actually meant a suicide.

I saw pregnant bellies everywhere, sobbed when I got home. I considered keeping a daily tally and then seeing if I could exceed it, but that would've been the most depressing game. On the tube, women wore 'Baby on Board' badges even though they didn't look pregnant—which to me was a further slap in the face. My husband tried to keep my spirits up. We ate delicacies at the local street market all week, Venezuelan *arepa*, Caribbean curries and Sri Lankan *kottu*. I slept restlessly, dreamt of home.

It took a week to see a bank manager; they required an appointment just to open an account. He addressed my husband and barely acknowledged

my existence until—over the course of the appointment—it became clear who managed the administration of our lives. I went to a supermarket chain to buy some fruit. I left with an apple sliced into pieces on a polystyrene tray and wrapped in clear plastic film. I was given a plastic fork also wrapped in protective plastic, a paper serviette and a plastic carry bag. It was the most tasteless fruit I'd ever eaten.

In October, we moved into our new rental. It was the size of a broom cupboard and cost an absolute bomb. We met a friendly neighbourhood cat—grey and white, big paws, matted fur, dirty with London pollution. Strangely, our shower faced the street. We were forced to hang a garbage bag over the window, much to the landlord's annoyance. We bought sweatshop sheets, towels, pillows and a doona from a large multinational, along with cutlery, crockery and a clothes rack. We carried them all home on the overcrowded bus in cumbersome piles, receiving dirty looks the entire way.

At the local library, I overheard an old man wanting to see the latest version of the *Oxford Dictionary* to see if they'd corrected the definition of 'stone-bow'. He told them it was wrong because Shakespeare referred to a stone-bow that Malvolio used, and the man himself used a stone-bow in the mountains of India and Afghanistan. He also asked the librarian to search the origin of the metaphor 'to kill two birds with one stone', because he didn't think it was easy to kill even one bird with a stone. Especially if you were only throwing it with your hand. I was genuinely enthralled. And speaking of birds, I noticed none of the birds were singing. When I asked why, the librarian told me they didn't bother any more, their voices were drowned out by the noise of the city.

Our tummies were constantly upset. After a long process of elimination, we decided it was the local water. I was reminded of the birds.

In November, I had interviews for temporary positions. Leaving the city one day, waiting for my bus, I was approached by a man who asked lots of questions: whether I was visiting London or if I lived here, whether I was with someone or alone, if I liked Mexican food. His reference to

Mexican food made me recall a photo I'd taken earlier in the day, and made me realise he'd been following me. The next day, I ate lunch in the park next to an Irish man, who put out his cigarette when I pulled out my sandwich. When I said that I didn't mind, he replied: 'No, no, I'm a gentleman.' He was obviously no longer a gentleman a minute later when he lit a fresh one.

I continued to explore the area—the high street—and shared some banter with our local butcher and baker. At the bookshop cafe, I sat next to a date going badly, heard it descend into debate about killing animals, then immigration. I waited for ages for the bathroom to be free; the girl who finally emerged obviously had bulimia. The very abrupt Romanian woman at the salad shop finally smiled at me, while the shy Pakistani guy at the fruit shop and I just said hello and thank you more and more politely each time.

As the weeks passed, I learnt more about the time-honoured British art of queuing. In London, this meant positioning yourself immediately behind the person in front, right up against their back, or going straight to the counter even if other people were there. The one time when I sarcastically offered my place to the man who pushed in front of me, the prick just said thanks and showed me his back. I made a mental note to remember for next time.

A letter from the Home Office said they never received my passport, which meant it was either lost or stolen. They had no record of my Royal Mail reference number. I reported it to the police, and fell into a deep depression. My husband made me buttermilk pancakes with honey and chamomile tea.

The seasons changed, autumn became winter. Sunset was at 4.07 pm, and it was pitch black by 4.30. There were days with wild wind, then sunshine, then dark clouds, then sunshine again, then rain, then chilling wind. I bought a puffer jacket. My husband bought snow boots. I filled my days with galleries, cafés and parks. I was inspired by architecture, art and cinema. My husband wrote further and further into the night, sending out his novel to agents, rejection after rejection.

I carried immense negativity from what had happened with my passport. I dwelled on its loss and thought that if I just did this or that, the injustice would be remedied. My brain wasn't functioning, overstimulated by all the new information in my surroundings. I felt lonely, still struggling to connect. I went on long walks, made friends with more sooty cats, coughed the exhaust of a thousand cars and lorries, hung out with library weirdos.

I made one great, true friend. We bonded quickly on walks, joined a football team, shared dinners on the couch in our flat, while the friendly neighbourhood cat lay outstretched on the rug. We spent long journeys on double decker buses and the tube, and drank mocktails in the local pub.

And then, in December, I got sick. Not just a cold either; nausea and dizziness and continual vomiting.

I was rushed to hospital—the Royal Free—and found out that I was pregnant.

Three months later, my husband signed with a literary agency after receiving multiple offers. It was the same day as the 20-week ultrasound, the very first time we heard our child's fast-thrumming heartbeat.

Thank you, London. A new life had begun.