

**T**his house is loud. The walls are thin. Furniture scratches against the wall beside me. A chair, maybe. Above me, the stomping started at midnight and hasn't stopped.

It's 2.46am.

The elderly man above me is pacing. He stops every so often to yell.

"F\*\*\*. Bugger. F\*\*\* buggery!"

This is what I'll soon come to accept as his nightly ritual. He stops some time shortly before the sun comes up.

I stare at the ceiling, which is cracked and covered with cobwebs.

Less than 24 hours ago I was falling asleep in my comfortable bed in the quiet Titirangi bush. Tonight, I'm trying desperately to sleep in a house full of loud men I don't know. Sleep-deprived and anxious, my eyes fill with tears as I roll over.

I remind myself that — unlike many of those who live here — I can leave anytime I want.

The stomping gets louder. The swearing more frequent.

"F\*\*\*. Bugger. Bugger F\*\*\*ery." For the

**Amberleigh Jack managed a boarding house, mostly full of men, for nearly two years. It was also her home.**

foreseeable future, this is my home. It's a multi-storied boarding house nestled on the corner of an unremarkable West Auckland street. There's cracked paint on the window boards and weeds climbing the pale yellow walls outside. There are more than 20 rooms, furnished with desks and single beds, sourced from second-hand stores.

The owner, a middle-aged man, hired me to manage the house. I'd live onsite, collect rents and keep tenants under control.

At the time it seemed like a fun, unnerving experiment. I figured I'd stick it out for six months, taking notes as I went, and return to my middle-class life without a second thought. I'm white, female, in my mid-30s. I'd grown up in a loving family. Sure, I'd experienced tragedy and hard times — I'd lost my father and my brother quite young — but I'd always had a strong support system, was surrounded by love and enjoyed material comforts. This place was like another country. These men had nothing. Here I was, studying them through the lens of my comparative privilege. I came here because I wanted to write about the experience. They were here because they had no choice.

I moved in on a summer day in February. The manager was an older man. I met him once. In his black trackpants and oversized sweatshirt he shuffled over to me, head down.

"I'll put the kettle on," he mumbled. That was my handover.

I don't know if he put the kettle on. I never got a coffee. I never saw him again.

I was there for close to two years. I've learned more about desperation and poverty beyond my frame of reference. I've also seen loyalty and camaraderie. And the house changed me more than I ever thought possible.

The house was occupied by men, all in their 40s or 50s. We had a few women come and go but they never stayed long. The residents were shift or low-wage workers, or on a benefit and unable to work due to severe addiction or mental health issues. They wore tracksuit pants and sweatshirts. When walking through the house, you'd be hit with a waft of stale cigarette smoke and body odour.

Initially we didn't really talk. They'd grunt hello and shuffle away. They seemed as nervous as me. This was their home and I was a stranger. A stranger who was now in charge.

A note from the owner explaining my arrival had been left under every bedroom door.

"She is the boss," it said. "Show her respect."

**T**he call came when I was out with a friend one evening. The caller was a quiet man with a nervous shuffle and a tendency to overact to minor dramas.

"Amberleigh," he started, "we have a problem. I think you need to come home." Half an hour later I walked into the lounge. A hole, half the size of me, was smashed into the bedroom door off the lounge. The window was broken, likely by the chair lying on the lawn. Eggs had been smashed over the carpet and walls. Random pieces of wood were scattered across the floor.

An empty egg carton lay beside the upturned single bed. The mismatched mattress — red floral pattern — was tossed against the wall.

I called the police. A few of the tenants started cleaning out his room. Another told me not to worry. They all had my back if he came back. I felt completely protected.

A few weeks later the guy who had become "door smash guy" in my head, came to retrieve his keys. He stood over me with his tall, lanky frame, talking quickly and moving his hands rapidly. He laughed and his eyes widened.

"I just wanted to get in your panties."

I handed him the trespass order; explained he'd be arrested if he set foot on the property.

"Does that mean I can't move back?" I still don't know if he was serious.

# How BOARDING HOUSE



Drugs, I soon discovered, were the root of most of the problems at what I affectionately came to call the madhouse. The owner had a zero-tolerance policy around alcohol or drugs. At times it seemed harsh. The guys couldn't crack a beer over Christmas lunch or to bring in the New Year. But at other times the rule saved me from total chaos.

During my time there, I evicted 24 people. I was threatened. Once a punch was thrown at me (it missed). Telling someone desperate enough to be here in the first place that they had to leave was never easy. This was their last option.

Their "only option". I was lucky to have grown up with incredible family support. Years ago, when I went through a severe mental health crisis, my brother insisted on paying thousands on incredible treatment, for me to survive with time off work. When my dad died, my brother and mother supported me through my grief and to help

*For a lot of them, this place — that to me was just cracked walls and bad smells, constant noise and dramas — had saved them.*

I think about the man in his late 70s who left, unannounced, one night. He was thin and frail, his mind weakened from years of alcohol abuse. He was oblivious to the filth he lived in and that roaches were climbing over him as he slept. What little money he had he spent on the horses. He rarely won.

I've often thought about him and wondered what happened to him — if he was okay. Shortly before writing this story my own mother passed away. For a long time she and I had been the sole survivors of our immediate family. I was lucky to have been by her side at the time; to know that she didn't die alone. I doubt this ex-tenant would have survived until now. And there's no doubt his death would have been as lonely as his life. It breaks my heart.

# became my HOME

In a house filled with more than 20 people, small dramas become major.

The fights, when they happened, were intense. But, for a house of more than 20 men living in close quarters almost 24/7, they were actually pretty rare. Often it was the temporary tenants who caused disruption. The ones that would move in suddenly and disrupt the flow of the house.

One brought a saxophone with him. He didn't last long.

Yet, they were protective and loyal. There was the "Dad" of the house. The one who kept his room open for anyone who needed a break — who knew the movements of everyone in the house. Who kept spare cigarettes, coffee and food for anyone who was desperate. He was an older man, accustomed to rough living. Ex-army, he spent years on the street and often recognised new tenants from the time he was homeless.

The owner would rather a happy house than a full house. He supported me if I had to evict for alcohol or drugs and violent behaviour. He told me he'd rather miss a few weeks' rent in a room than have any dangerous or volatile situation. He was also receptive to any ideas to make the house happier and calmer for the guys, and the guys responded.

We converted an empty room into a gym room, the owner bought a barbecue for summer, we gave them Christmas dinner and gifts.

There were times I was intimidated. A guy came for an interview. He was huge. He had his head down, was hunched over, but he still towered over me. He was a truck driver, was living in his car, needed a place to stay. I took a chance and let him move in.

Shortly afterwards I went to his room. He was moving his things in. In the corner, on top of the single bed mattress yellow with faded flower patterns, was a very big sword. ⇨

me get back on my feet. Once, during a difficult break-up, Mum opened her house to me, as if not letting me in wasn't even an option. I thought back to those moments and wondered — if not for that support — what would have stopped me standing in this room, Kleensak full of my things, begging for a chance for a place to stay?

That's not to say that every person was there because they had no option. Some were capable of working and chose not to. I'd been told by one resident that he wasn't looking for work because he'd "grown kind of lazy". But for a lot of them, this place — that to me was just cracked walls and bad smells, constant noise and dramas — had saved them.

So, they came to me. They'd rent a room furnished with an old single bed that had been slept on, pissed on and occasionally vomited on by countless others; some old, faded curtains and carpets stained with years of other people's dirt. They kept their food in a fridge in the room and carried whatever they were cooking to and

from the kitchen to wait for the oven to be free, or queued for the microwave. They'd get up every morning and carry their toiletries to the large communal bathroom — because if they didn't keep everything in their rooms, whatever they left out would be stolen by someone who couldn't afford soap that week.

They met their visitors outside because none were allowed inside the house. They often took their cars to the park or wandered down to sit by themselves and have a few drinks, because alcohol in the house meant eviction. They sat on faded old couches in the communal lounge and argued over what to watch, or that someone had hid the remote or recorded over someone's show on MySky. They flocked to the kitchen when someone announced there was leftover food or free Salvation Army bread on the table.

They were allocated one plate, one fork, one knife, one spoon, one tea towel and one cup when they moved in, and had to wash these after every meal in the single sink, because they had nothing else to eat off. They cooked in faded and rusted frying pans, and chopped onions with blunt knives.

LEFT FATHER'S DAY UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE?

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It turned out “sword guy” was the best asset to the house, a genuine nice guy. He’d been through hell and back in his 30-odd years and was loyal, fiercely protective. If I came back after a bad day, he’d knock on my door with a sandwich he’d made. At one point another tenant apparently threatened me in front of the other tenants. A week later he’d disappeared from the house. I didn’t know any of this at the time, but months later was told that “sword guy” had forced him out. Not violently, I was assured, but he had told him in no uncertain terms not to return.

Another time when I was evicting a tenant who became aggressive, sword guy waited outside in case things turned sour.

“I got your back, sis,” he told me.

I have heard stories of life on the streets, of losing family members and mental health breakdowns. I’ve heard stories of addiction and recovery and the lowest possible moments in life. They’re never deep and meaningful conversations, they’re always simply spoken in passing — matter-of-factly — by people resolved to the idea that this is how life is.

One morning in the kitchen a tenant told me the story of how he found a family member who’d committed suicide. He told the story in detail and matter-of-factly. When his toast popped from the toaster, he said: “Have a good day, eh?” And he grabbed his toast and left.

When I first moved there, I had a romanticised idea of what I’d find. The house would be full of people desperately trying to better themselves. People who, for whatever reason had found themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty but were working towards something better, trying every day to get themselves out.

In a way it’s what I found. I wished I could have met them before the hardship or illness or addiction.

And then, as quickly as it began, it was over.



**A Christmas tree, a whiteboard and a smashed wall — all parts of life at the boarding house where Amberleigh Jack was manager for nearly two years.**

PHOTOS /  
AMBERLEIGH  
JACK

The owner wanted to make changes — rent more rooms and have an off-site manager. I had a month to pack up and leave. My time in the “madhouse” was up.

Before I left, they presented me with a card they had all pitched in for — despite earning very little. One tenant told me that he’d gone from thinking of the house as a place he was forced to live in, to thinking of it as his home for the first time.

And I was gone, tears in my eyes and forever changed. Changed by the people I met at the house. They taught me the difference between struggling and living below the poverty line. They taught me about true loyalty and what it means to really look out for the downtrodden. They taught me that a lunch can be made from a \$1 bottle of soda, a loaf of \$1 bread and yesterday’s leftover hot chips.

The people I was initially scared of because of their clothes and language and sheer numbers, taught me that with them, I’d feel the safest I had

in a long time.

In a way I was lucky when my mum died. I couldn’t function day-to-day, I spent my days in tears — lost without the last of my close-knit family that, growing up, I’d always assumed would be there. But I’m financially secure, I have an education and a wonderful fiancé, with an amazing family who have welcomed me in. I’m self-employed so I didn’t have a boss to answer to or a three-day bereavement period to sort my life out. I was able to take the time to get myself together while my fiancé took care of the house and animals.

I’m not without an incredible support system these days and I’m at a stage in my life where I know I’ll be okay. But it hit me, in the throes of my grief, that had this happened 10 years earlier, there’s every chance it would have been me boiling fish in the microwave of a boarding house on an unremarkable West Auckland street, rather than managing one. ●

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