

## **'Tootie and Tea'**

**Storybook by Angela Gillies**

Over the course of my time working within the community of Forfar, I had many cups of tea over a deeply meaningful conversation. The power of this warm, comforting beverage cannot be underestimated; it is welcoming, familiar and convivial.

Regardless of the setting, whether one-to-one chats or larger group workshops, women feel as if they can open up about their lives once the teapot pours its magical golden elixir into the cup. I have had to work flexibly with the people involved in my project, since many work long and exhausting shifts or struggle with childcare. I have visited them in their own homes, at a time that is convenient for them and their busy lives. People living on low incomes are incredibly time-poor, so working to their agenda has been essential. They have all welcomed me with open arms, and a lovely cup of tea. Lots of milk for me please.

We have shared stories of hardship and struggle, and ranted over social injustice and environmental policy. We've been in tears of sorrow, and hugged each other for comfort. After each conversation we have reapplied our eyeliner: our war paint, our 'tootie'. The tears have also flowed with laughter too, reminiscing about our childhoods growing up on the council estates and farms of Angus. Our days at the berries and the tatties, the long hot summers and the family get togethers are all magical for us and are something we miss dearly. Cups of tea were all pivotal to those memories as well; our mothers drank it endlessly as they chatted with friends, family and neighbours. We still remember the taste of tea from the flasks we took to work in the fields, and our mums all protested that tea was 'more refreshing than water in hot weather'. I'm not sure if that's true, but it always made us laugh. As well as copious amounts of tea, the tootie was always an important mainstay of our upbringing. There's many a funny story of us playing with mum's makeup as children, looking like clowns with thick red lipstick and bright blue eyeshadow. We remembered the tears these strong women covered with a thick layer of mascara too, and the tips we learned for covering up our own sorrows later in life. Tootie and tea are still helping us through life, and still bring us together.

This wee storybook reveals some of the insightful conversations I've had with the strong and tenacious women that I have had the privilege to work with. Some are sad, some are funny, but they all reveal the reality of life for low-income families in

Angus. These stories will be recognised by our peers, and will hopefully spark many a chat and a cuppy amongst those of you who don't have our experiences of being poorer. Once we understand the issues that people are facing, then we can come together to find the solutions. We will make you laugh, make you cry, and will absolutely give you an insight into a community of strong and inspiring women living on the breadline in Angus.

You may even find yourself reapplying your tootie too.

## **Rachel's story**

Rachel is a student nurse living in Forfar with her husband and two children. They live on an incredibly low income and often skip meals to be able to feed their kids. They rely on public transport because they cannot afford driving lessons, and they arrange their work shifts around their childcare needs which often means they don't have time for each other. They feel very isolated because they don't come from a close-knit family. The climate emergency is a concern for Rachel, but she just doesn't have time to think about it. She would love to spend more time out in the countryside to teach her kids about nature too, but getting to some of the many beautiful areas of Angus is just impossible without a car.

*"The bus is just crap, but I have no choice because I can't drive. I have to cycle to work to get to my shift on time but that's only because I have to. It's not for the environment. If I could drive I would have a car, or if the bus was better I would use that because it's cheaper. I need to think about my family. I'm doing my nurse training to make a better future for my bairns."*

*"I care about climate change but only for the sake of my bairns. I'm working all the hours God sends just to be able to make ends meet, and I just don't have time to do anything about climate change. Big businesses need to make change; too much pressure is put on people who can't afford to make changes."*

*"I grew up on a low income but I don't remember things being as bad as they are today. I loved my childhood growing up in a council estate and I'm still pals with the girls from the street today. There isn't so much of a community these days; my kids*

*spend a lot of time doing activities in the house rather than playing outside like we used to. There isn't enough safe greenspace in the town, and we can't get anywhere in the proper countryside because we can't drive. It's hopeless."*

## **Liv's Story**

Liv is a disabled woman living in a small village in Angus called Friokheim. The bus services there are infrequent and unreliable, with various 'technical issues', breakdowns and no-shows. She relies on the bus for her shopping, to spend her medical appointments and to socialise. She feels passionately about climate justice, but now has no choice but to get a car because she is becoming increasingly isolated due to the issues with public transport. She needs to be able to get to her hospital appointments safely and reliably without spending unnecessary time standing at bus stops, especially in bad weather. She has also had issues with her housing; she lives in a rented flat which is often poorly maintained by the landlord. She has often had to deal with damp and mould, and has had to ration when she can put the heating on because it was costing too much. This is the reality for a lot of low-income families in Angus.

We've had various conversations and one-to-one workshops around the issues of public transport and the environment, which has highlighted a number of problems with access to healthcare, shopping, greenspace and social activities for people who cannot drive in Angus. We compiled word clouds and collage using words, phrases and images we associate with using the bus.

'Bus wankers' 'technical issues' 'why don't you just learn to drive?' 'shoogly' 'crap service' 'reeks of BO' 'creepy bus drivers' 'never on time'

We drew maps of Angus from memory, which highlighted the main bus routes and all of the areas that we could not reach without a car. Beautiful greenspace such as Reekie Linn waterfall, Airlie Monument and the Angus Glens are all impossible to access without driving, despite being proclaimed as 'just on our doorstep' in Angus. Liv has also written some short stories to express what life is like to live on a low income in Angus. She found this process of reflection cathartic, and rather therapeutic.

### **'Twelve point nine'** by Liv

February 2022. Shivering under a quilt and thick blanket. Cold nose, red. Blue fingers. Pain, the gnawing joint pain. A relic of a heater on the wall. 1980's, forty years old. Inefficient, expensive, smelly and broken. Politicians, councillors, SSE; no one listens. Plight ignored, forgotten and insignificant. Not worthy of warmth. Illness, misery, dreading winter. Hats on, coats on, cost-of- living crisis. The crisis for me was years prior to this. The plight of millions was our pain much earlier. Silence. Cold. Blue. No hot water for five years. Twelve point nine on the metre.

### **'Peeling, spores and blame'** by Liv

This is not cracked clay, it's a ceiling in a Housing Association property in 2023. Blamed for a mould problem despite our best attempts to prevent it. Open windows, fan on plenty. Not believed. Fan installed, brand new. Much more power, but still the spores appear. Mould treated by painter, this is not art. Scam job. Paint cracks within a week. Wrong paint. Steam trapped, paint peels. We will fix it ourselves. Tradesmen paid a pretty penny to leave an ugly job. Treated badly, like an inconvenience and without humanity. Not worthy. North facing, lucky to have a window. Window not an answer. In the ceiling of cracks, tiny creatures take hold.

### **'Sewer gas'** by Liv

Three years pass; frequent episodes of pungent, putrid, rancid odours. Deathly, dreadful effluvium evil. Points of contact, multiple emails, calls, in- person visits. Plumbers, time after time. Told there's no issues, told to put pine disinfectant down the drain. They treat us like fools. Then, after three years of reporting, one tradesman decides to take a look. Inspects pipe behind the toilet, the uncapped waste pipe from the bath removed years ago. More faults left behind by tradesmen before. The bath was removed long before we moved in. Years of breathing in toxic gas from sewers. How long has this festered?

## **Jacqui's Story**

Jacqui is a woman I met through one of my workshops about public transport in Forfar and Kirriemuir. She has grown up in this area and always relied on buses to get around. She has some fantastic stories about her days at the berries, which has inspired 'Bomb in the Berry Fields'.

### **'Bomb in the Berry Fields' by Jacqui**

There was a bomb in the berry fields!

Aye there wis!

Dinnae tell me whar fae. The war or something.

Ka-boom!

We a' could hae been blawn tae fuckin' smithereens.

Naebody but the bravest o' souls would work for that fermer.

Fuck that.

### **Jenna's Story**

Jenna lives in Forfar with her partner and two young children. They work in social care which is an incredibly responsible job, with long shifts and unsociable hours. They recently moved to a new house, having lived in a damp-ridden flat before. They battled long and hard to be moved, approaching local Councillors and Angus Council officials to help them with their plight. The extent of the damp and mould was affecting their mental and physical wellbeing, and it was spreading across their clothes and furniture which they could not afford to replace. Thankfully the Council found them a warm, cosy hoose where they can now move on with their lives and flourish. Jenna was one of the lucky ones though; council hooses are in a bad state of repair across Angus, with many people living in dire conditions. Our changing climate will only exacerbate this problem, with mould thriving in the warm, wet conditions we now have.

I'm sure you will agree, the photographs that Jenna took before she left that flat speak for themselves.

### **Davina's Story**

Davina has lived in Forfar all her life, and really loves her town. She's unable to work due to mental health issues, and takes the bus to get around. She's very politically engaged and is outraged that more is not being done about climate change. She is a keen gardener and is passionate about community gardening and growing her own vegetables. She regularly makes big pots of soup with her produce to hand out to her neighbours and anyone passing by.

*“Cooncil estates should use any grass they have to plant vegetables to feed the bairns. There's lots o' land that's just wasted because the Cooncil canny be bathered letting people use it. Fruit, veg, 'floors' can be grown there. It's a bloody disgrace. People are starving. They want to do something about the climate because it's affecting a'body. Look at the winds and floods! What future are we leaving fir wir bairns?”*

*“When I grew up in a cooncil estate we all had wir ain gairdens. A'body pitched in. We need that back, it would help a'body. I miss the tattie soup my mither used to make, and the rhubarb we dipped in sugar and ate raw. Those were the good old days but there's reason why we canny bring that back. I sit oot in ma gairden and a'body is welcome, I dinnae judge naebody.”*

## **Catherine's Story**

Catherine is a woman that I regularly see on the local town service bus. She feels lonely and isolated, and enjoys a 'wee hurl on the bus' for company. We captured some of our conversations in a little poem:

**'Canny be bathered'** by Catherine

I canny be bathered wi life right noo.

Too much hardship and sad things happening. It wisnae like this in the auld days.

Bring back community spirit.

## **Ellen's Story**

Ellen grew up in Kirriemuir in a low-income household and has worked hard to buy her own home and provide for her family. Although she is comfortable financially now, she still worries about those who are not. She feels that the community spirit that we had growing up has been eroded, and that politicians are focussing on lining their own pockets rather than looking after people and the planet. She has seen the change in seasons over the years, and reminisces about the long hot summers and harsh snowy winters we used to have.

*“We used to have really harsh winters in Angus where towns and villages would be completely cut off. farmers would rally together to clear the drifts and local shops would get their vans to deliver milk to the estates. Would this happen today even if we had such bad weather again? I doubt it.”*

She still carries on some of the domestic traditions that she learned from her childhood; pennies are collected in a jar for the shopping at the end of the month, and clothes are worn until there is no life left in them. Tea towels, or ‘cloots’ as they are known colloquially, are used until they are literally threadbare. This is a sustainable practice that Ellen feels we should all adopt.

*“A threadbare dishtowel now becomes a cleaning rag; perfect for cleaning the shower! There’s no need to throw out and waste the remaining material because the shower doesn’t care if it’s cleaned by a fancy cloth or not.”*

Ellen states that ‘make do and mend’ was the motto of the day in low income families when she was growing up, and that it wouldn’t go amiss in today’s world.

## **My Own Story**

I decided to add my own story to this book after the effects of storm Babet in Angus. People’s homes have been destroyed and lives have been lost. If ever there was a reminder that climate change was happening, this is it. The streets that line the swollen rivers here are often council estates where people are already struggling. My own house was affected by the floods, and it threw my life into utter turmoil. The physical impacts of water are bad enough, but the effects on my health will take a long time to heal, if they ever do. I grew up on a low income and have had to work

very hard for the home that I now have, and I have the pressures of a disability, physical health conditions and my poor dying mum to cope with. It opened my eyes to the vulnerability of myself and my peers who also lack the resilience to deal with a situation like this. As we sweep the streets of the debris and dare to move the sandbags, I worry deeply for the future.

If it wasn't for the spirit and support of my closest neighbours and friends within the community, I doubt that we could have made it through the all-encompassing stress.

Despite it all though, the kettle was on and so was my eyeliner.

## **So what do these stories tell us about life on low incomes?**

The conversations we've had over our cuppies have revealed an overwhelming desire to bring back community, particularly within low-income families. People want to tackle issues relating to social and environmental justice, but they need the support to do so. The most meaningful and long-lasting way to accomplish this is to bring each other together, sharing our stories, memories and hopes for the future. Talking to our peers with a lived experience of living on a low income is incredibly important; no one else can understand exactly what it is like to be down to your last penny.

These women care passionately about the world that their children will inherit, and they want to open up about it all with the help of each other. A simple cup of tea can ignite this sense of kinship, helping us to reveal the desire for action that lies beneath the delicate layers of tootie that protect us from the harsh realities of life.