

BREXIT, THE VIRUS AND THE RENTAL TRAP

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AND PICTURES:
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Community is something that has always alluded me. I moved away from my home town quite early, then proceeded to move around a lot; place to place, house share to house share with the odd new country for good measure. Having a sense of community was not part of my priorities.

Now I find myself living in

Watford, of all places, and I have done that for 6 years; I have a career here, I met my wife here, we are bringing up our daughter here, yet I tend to reject the notion of this place as being where I choose to lay down my roots. Watford, of all the places that I could have moved to, is the punchline in a string of sentiment that always leaves the place bereft of soul, lacking culture and which Nick Hornby described as 'grim' in High Fidelity. However, it is the place where I have lived for the longest sustained period

since I left home.

Some believe that community is in decline and there might be some semblance of truth in that. Robert Putnam catalogued this decline in 'Bowling Alone,' which blames a number of things, one being the introduction of the television, now exacerbated by the meteoric rise of the internet and the distraction industries that now dominate our lives: why meet others, when you can stalk them online? Nostalgia is a key player in the way we view the rose-tinted past, where doors

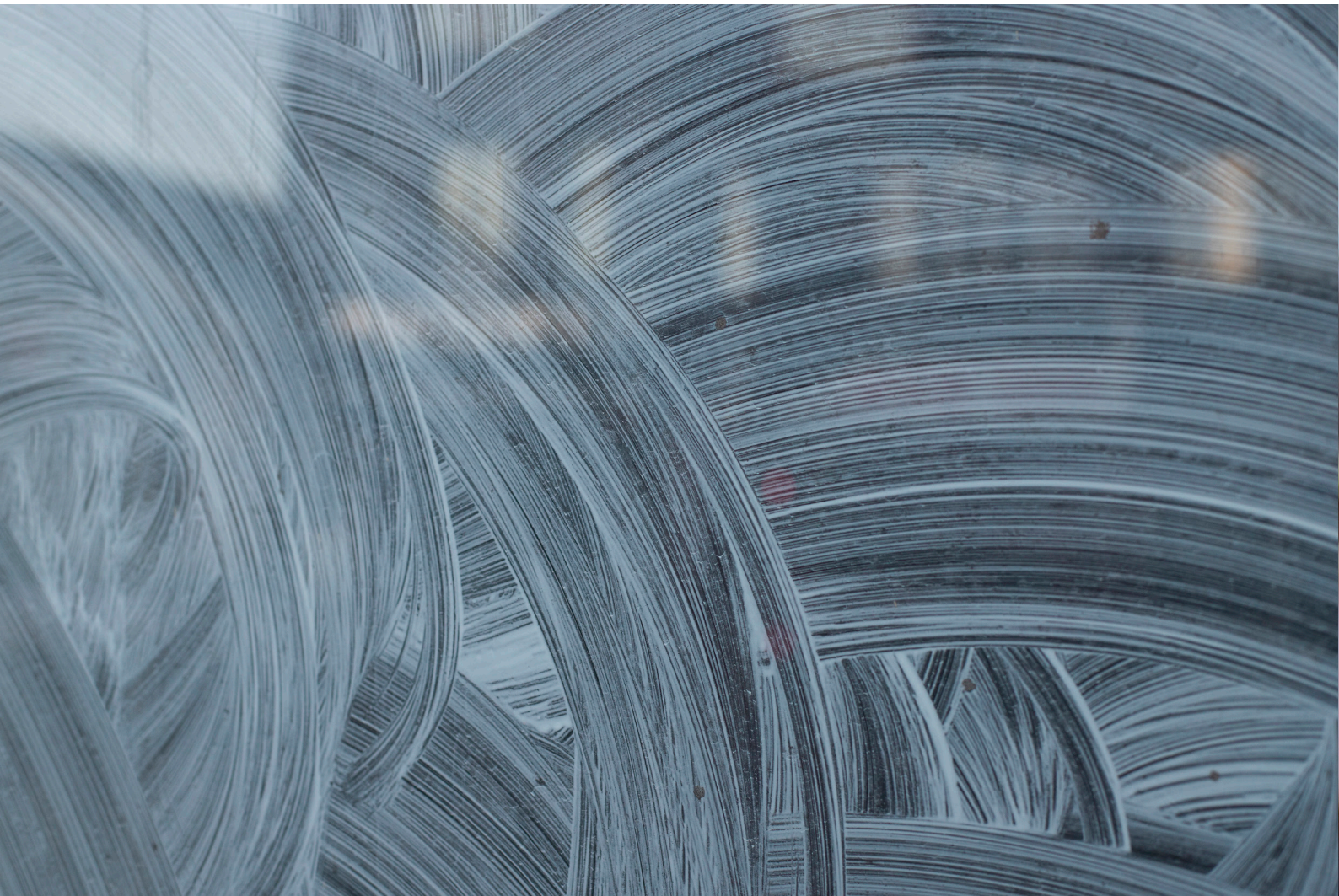


were never locked, when life was better. But when was it better? The nineties?The eighties? The seventies? Value judgments could be made all day here on the problematic issues of those decades, so it might be easier to consider that views of our own histories are a sliding scale, where your parents and your grandparents believe that they had it better.

At the start of this year, my landlord announced that she wanted to sell the house that I rent, owing to mounting repairs that she no longer wanted the responsibility – of which there are many, including but not limited to a sewer pipe leak, faulty electrics, the twin thread pozi-drive screw that keeps one of the bedroom windows closed, damp issues, and the list goes on. It was also down to the fact that Brexit was about to reach its exhaustive conclusion so she believed that this would be a peak time to capitalise on such an asset. A way of topping up her pension and maintaining an expat lifestyle down there in Spain, ironically. Putnam puts it best: “for people as for plants, frequent repotting disrupts root systems,” so I was having to move once again already having felt like an outsider.

As a Millennial, there is a generational sense of liminal impermanence born out of the last recession – minimal job security and stuck in the rental trap. I moved to the south east to gain employment. However, am continually priced out of the buying market owing to the amount of income swallowed up into the litany of value that I described earlier. Even when our landlord offered us the house at a ‘reduced’ rate (to avoid paying commission), it was based on a







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valuation, which grossly inflated the price of the home, which was also on the proviso that we wouldn't get survey carried out as we were 'already living there.' Did I mention the leak from the bathroom into the floor, causing some pretty suspect electrics? With little option, we were forced out into the open rental market again, where options are limited.

“Don't miss out on this opportunity to buy a beautiful 2 bed mid-terrace property” is how this house was described to potential buyers on Rightmove, which felt like some kind of surreal joke on us. Especially true after meeting the estate agent on viewing a new rental property, “You could easily afford a house in your area with your budget.” My wife quickly rebuked, “But you valued our house at way more than that.” Which led to some fairly typical sales bluff,

“Ah well, we have already asked her to reduce the price.” This was about three weeks after it was listed. Just inflating the price to secure the listing? Or is it some post-Brexit property speculation? Either way, the house was overpriced and hugely disruptive to any sense of 'home' that we may have once had here. Especially when you are always in this state of flux.

Just as the shock of this new normal was settling in, another new 'new normal' was starting to become very real, although it was not yet titled as such. Covid-19 seemed to be an ever growing presence from then start of 2020, but this still did not prepare me for the lock-down that fundamentally changed everything. The home, which no longer felt like a home, became a sanctuary from a more pressing crisis; in order to



safeguard the community, we must remain separate from it, as Roland Barthes' says, "What is desired is distance that won't destroy affect." Social distance is important, it reduces the threat of the virus, which has wreaked so much havoc. Yet, how should we rebuild once we are able to return to normality? Many societal imbalances have been highlighted during this

pandemic and the term 'social distance,' which we have been asked to embrace, has always existed in those abstracted from and unconcerned with the details of how others are able to function, or not function; how can you represent fairly something that you cannot see. What this virus has pointed out is the disproportional impact it is having even when the illness

does not discriminate, society does.

For the time being, the sale of the home - now my sanctuary - has been paused. Any sense of a housing bubble spurred by Brexit has well and truly been burst and I am thankful of that. The virus has also shown that community is not in decline - we have come together in a really meaningful way, even if that togetherness

means distance, which seems like an oxymoron but shows that collectively there is room to build even more once we are able to properly come back together. It will be interesting to see where society places value. I for one would like to see value placed on houses as homes instead of assets.

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