

From left to right:
Emily, Lucy, Natasha,
Tracey and Nicola
never thought they'd
end up homeless



WHERE WILL THESE WOMEN SLEEP TONIGHT?

More than 326,000 people are homeless in Britain today, sleeping rough, in hostels or living as nomads 'sofa surfing' at friends' homes. A survey by the homeless charity Crisis found that a quarter of those using winter shelters were women, but experts believe the problem is worse – and growing. We spoke to five well-educated women who found themselves without a roof over their heads. Photographs by Tim O'Sullivan

Natasha Davies, 20, lives in a hostel for the homeless in Bristol with her boyfriend

'Homelessness was something that happened to other people. At least that's what I thought when I was growing up, sharing a comfortable home with my mum, an accountant, and my older sister.

'My parents divorced when I was three, but my dad visited often. It was a normal, secure childhood, growing up in the countryside. But when I reached my teens, my close relationship with my mum began to falter after she remarried and I didn't get on with my stepfather.

'As soon as I could, I got a job and found a flat. My ambition was to train as a nurse. In 1998, I moved to Taunton and became a ward assistant. Around this time, I met my boyfriend, Wesley, who was training to become a tree surgeon. Within a few months, we'd moved in together with another friend. I felt settled and secure, like I'd finally arrived.

'I became interested in alternative therapies, like aromatherapy, and was thrilled to get a place on a holistic medicine course at a local college. Wesley said he'd support me, so last July, I left my job to prepare – there were books, equipment and a white uniform to buy.

'Then, Wesley quit his job after a row about safety equipment. Shortly afterwards, our friend moved out, leaving unpaid rent and bills. There was no note. We had no idea where he'd gone. I panicked. How would we pay the £90-a-week rent? We called the landlord to explain, saying

we'd arrange housing benefit until Wesley got another job, but he ordered us to leave.

'We knew he had no right to throw us out immediately, but he threatened to come around with his mates and we thought it was easier to leave. Naively, we believed we'd sort ourselves out quickly while staying with friends. I was too proud to contact my family and we ended up going to Bristol, where Wes had friends.

'I'll never forget how vulnerable I felt, arriving in an unfamiliar city with all my worldly possessions in a single bag. It became embarrassing relying on other people's charity, and I was determined we'd manage alone. But every hostel was full. On our first night, we rummaged through a skip to find pieces of old carpet to lie on, then joined other homeless people in a multi-storey car park. It was the worst night of my life. It was August, but it seemed bitterly cold.

'It was hard not to break down and cry. The others were friendly, but I was shocked by their stories. People our age had been sleeping rough for years and many were hooked on drugs to numb the pain of existing on the streets. I tossed and turned in my sleeping bag, feeling the strange sensation of cool air rushing over my face. For the next week, I phoned around the hostels, but the answer was always the same – no room.

'I'd never felt so tired, dirty or hungry. I longed for a bath, but had to make do with a strip wash in a public toilet. I called the college to cancel my place. That's when the enormity >

< of it all hit me. I cried as I hung up – all my hopes and dreams were gone.

'With no money for food, we started begging. That was the lowest point. It was so humiliating. Some people gave us food, but most just looked away. I felt angry that they were judging us without knowing our circumstances. I saw a different side to society – one I was ashamed to have been part of. Once we had £10 – enough for food – we packed up and went. Eventually, we did get some benefit money to live off, but it took a while to sort it out.

'When a room finally came up at one of the hostels, the relief was overwhelming. We'd only been on the streets for a week, but it felt like a lifetime. We've been there ever since, but we're too ashamed to tell our families the whole story.

'Being homeless is like a vicious circle – you get stuck in it and all you can think about is your problems. But I'm one of the lucky ones. If I hadn't kept calling the hostels, I'd still be on the streets. Instead, I'm planning to return to Taunton and try again. Maybe I'll even get on that college course this September. I had it all and lost everything. This time round, I won't take it for granted.'

Leah Maguire

Tracey White, 37, a former model, lost her home because of her cocaine problem. She now lives in a hostel in north London

'It's hard admitting that you're homeless, because everyone has pride. I was brought up in a well-to-do home in London and was privately educated.

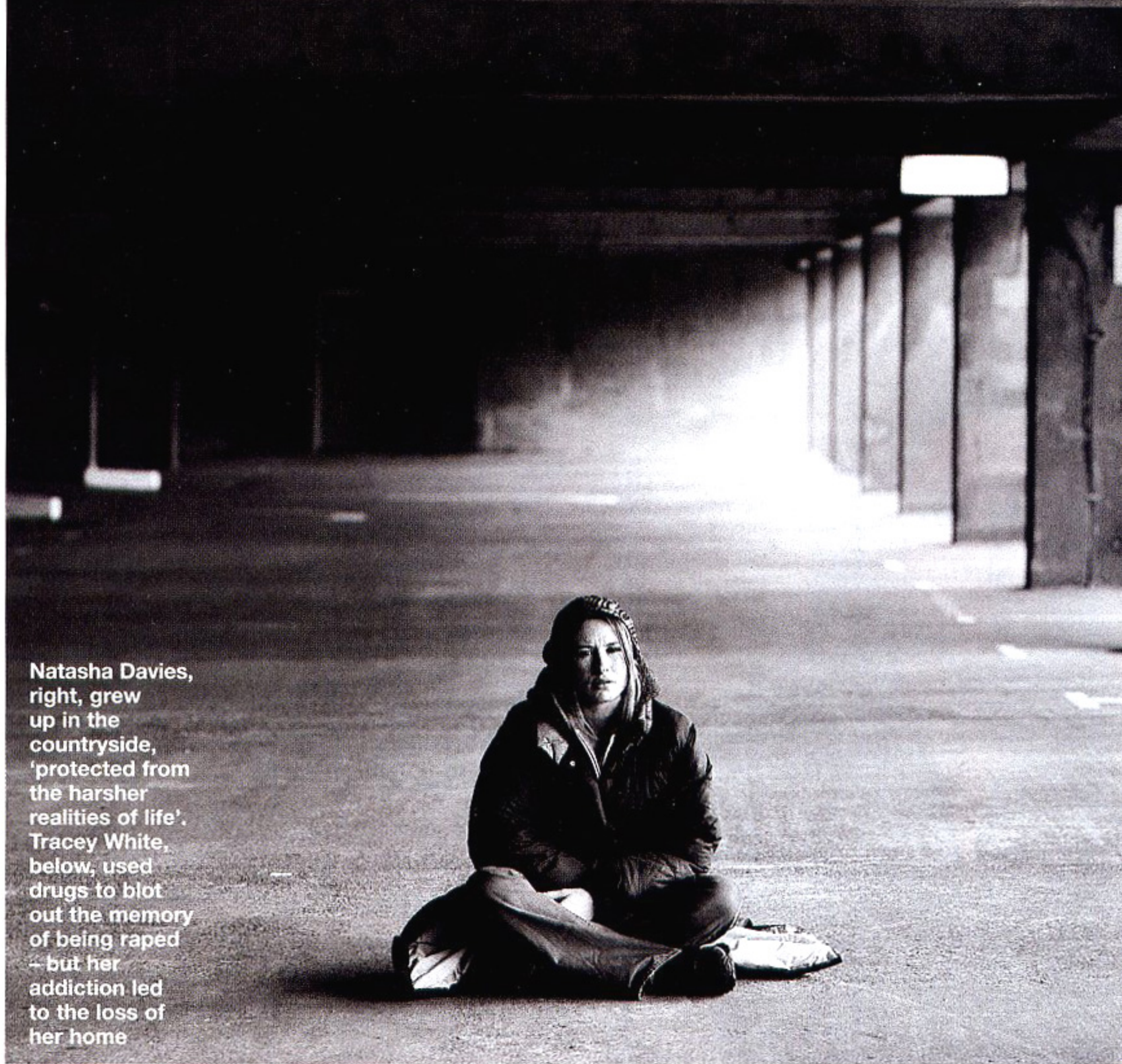
'When I was eleven, I was gang-raped by some boys, but it was so traumatic I couldn't tell anyone. I became pregnant but my baby was adopted, as I was only twelve. I grew up very fast, leaving school at sixteen to work as a model in Australia and Japan.

'It was the late 1970s and drugs were common in modelling. I thought I was having a good time and drugs helped me to forget my past. I modelled throughout my twenties and had a number of relationships, but nothing really lasted because I had a fear of intimacy.

'My last relationship was with a director of an advertising agency. We had homes in Australia and London. It all seemed respectable, but drugs were part of the lifestyle. When I was 33, I knew I had to sort out my problems by myself so I moved back to London.

'I was working as a personal stylist, but almost everything I earned went on my addiction – bills and rent went unpaid. Often, I couldn't answer the door or the telephone, or even leave the house. I felt like I wanted to die. I knew I needed help and went to my doctor, who got me admitted to a drugs dependency unit. It took me six months to be drug-free.

'Three months into recovery, my home was repossessed as I'd run up debts of over £12,000. I got a place in temporary council accommodation for nine months



Natasha Davies, right, grew up in the countryside, 'protected from the harsher realities of life'. Tracey White, below, used drugs to blot out the memory of being raped – but her addiction led to the loss of her home



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UK campaign

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Lucy Boucher spent eight years sleeping rough, first in Greece and then in Britain

and then moved into a hostel. The staff were caring and I had the space to deal with my emotions. Being homeless has given me humility and I've met some really brave women, from all walks of life. You never know what has happened in anybody's life.'

Chris Morris

Emily Breen, 23, lost her rented cottage – and then her job – after the lease unexpectedly ran out and she couldn't afford a deposit for another

'I grew up in a small town in Essex. Dad died when I was seven and Mum, a teacher, worked hard to give my sister and me a good life. I left home at seventeen to move in with my boyfriend, Alex. Mum wasn't happy, but I was determined to show her I could go it alone. I was a care assistant and he worked at the airport. It was good money and we moved to a rented cottage in a picturesque village in Hertfordshire. We had tapestries on the walls and patchwork quilts on the beds.

'At weekends, we'd hold dinner parties and Sundays were spent crashed on the sofa, reading magazines like *Marie Claire*. I would read about women whose lives had been turned upside down by some terrible tragedy and feel sorry for them. Then I'd just turn the page.

'Like so many people, we were living beyond our means. But our jobs were >

'I HEADED FOR A CITY CENTRE SUBWAY. IT WAS LIKE A SCENE FROM A HORROR FILM, FULL OF DRUNKS AND WEIRDOS'

< like that.' But over time, I drifted apart from my family and friends. Soon, the only people I knew were addicts. One day, I tried heroin and it made me violently ill, but I was instantly hooked.

'After two months, I weighed just 5½st. I was ill and out of control, just like the people I'd once looked at in revulsion. I wanted to stop, but didn't know how. When my family found out, I couldn't face anyone. Last May, Colston was arrested and taken into custody. We'd been living with his parents, so I had nowhere to go.

'Taking only a sleeping bag and change of clothes, I headed for a city centre subway. It was like a scene from a horror film, full of drunks and weirdos. I lay awake, terrified someone would attack me if I closed my eyes. I was so horrified that I managed to stop taking drugs for a while.

'By day, I roamed the streets, slowly adjusting to the cold and grime. I tried begging, but gave up after an hour. People looked at me like I was nothing. I felt worthless and humiliated. Then I suffered an asthma attack and was hospitalised for two weeks.

'Being somewhere warm and comfortable, surrounded by people who cared, gave me new hope. When I came

out, I got a room in a hostel and started planning for the future. But I was lonely and everyone there was on drugs. I took heroin again and instantly regretted it, but it was too late – I was hooked again and spending all my money on drugs.

'But I don't want to be trapped in this lifestyle. I'm waiting to start a detox programme to get off drugs for good and am about to move into my own flat. Then, I want to go to college and train to be a drugs counsellor. When I think I could have had my own home and a good job, I can't believe I've made such a mess of things.'

LM

Lucy Boucher, 40, a classically trained musician, became homeless after suffering a nervous breakdown

'I was 27 when things started to go wrong. My life had been relatively stable until then. My father was French – a surgeon – my mother was an artist, and I grew up in a wealthy area of London. My parents split up when I was a baby, but I saw them both regularly. When I was fifteen, I left school to do a foundation course in music in Leeds, along with O and A levels. Then, I trained in classical music at London's Guildhall School of

Music and Drama. I played the French horn with orchestras, at musicals in the West End and taught as a private tutor.

'I'd get very nervous if I had to perform and often took beta blockers or drank a couple of brandies to calm me down. My nerves got the better of me when I was 24 and I decided to give up music, but did a variety of other jobs. I met my boyfriend, Jack, who was handsome and popular, but I felt I wasn't good enough for him.

'By 27, I'd begun having panic attacks. Once or twice I collapsed. I didn't tell Jack because I was frightened he'd leave. Eventually, we split up anyway.

'At 29, I went to Greece to look for work. Really, it was the start of a nervous breakdown. I wanted to go somewhere where nobody knew me. I arrived in Athens with nothing. The first night I slept rough, and it stayed that way for the next eight years. I'd sleep on the roadside, in fields, or on the beach. Most of the time, I was alone. I drank myself into oblivion most days, earning money through occasional work as an olive picker. Then I'd wander around at night, drunk, until I was so tired I'd fall asleep. I was raped six times in that condition, but carried on drinking to blank it out.

'I never confronted my problems, but convinced myself that I was achieving something living by my own means. In fact, I was lost and very lonely. I came back to Britain in July 1998, because the drinking had made me ill and I needed hospital treatment. I saved up money from olive-picking to pay for a flight.

'The doctor sent me to rehab, but I couldn't stop drinking and left after five months. There's a stigma attached when you admit you're an alcoholic and are homeless. The drinking had isolated me from my family. For three months, I wandered the streets with a man I'd met at rehab. We slept in a derelict building in London. It was winter and freezing cold. Other times, I'd sleep in cars or garages. I'd spend the day looking for food in bins behind supermarkets, shops and cafés.

'In Britain, the homeless are just ignored by most people, when they really need understanding. I didn't have an address to sign on. I tried for a cleaning job, but because I was homeless, I was turned down. The hostels were always full. I found a place at St Mungo's hostel in East London last September. I dread to think what would have happened otherwise. I have counselling for alcoholism and have enrolled on a computer course. Things are improving, but I'm still a homeless statistic.'

CM

Maire Claire would like to thank Bhs for donating the clothes worn by the five women in this article.

Helplines: • Crisis, 0207-655 8300 • Shelter (hotline for people in housing need), 0808-800 4444 • Rape Crisis Centre, 0207-837 1600 • Narcotics Anonymous, 0207-730 0009 • Cocaine Anonymous, 0207-284 1123.