Chapter 17.

It Is All About George: Acts of *Homefullness*

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Abstract

This chapter, *'It Is All About George: Acts of Homefullness',* traces the life and death of a man known only as George, who made a bench his home. Through his daily rituals – opening an invisible door – George enacted what this chapter calls *Acts of Homefullness*: small, deliberate practices of belonging and care that persist within conditions of exclusion.

Using George's story as a narrative thread, the chapter situates homelessness within broader social and spatial processes. It examines hostile architecture and exclusionary urban design as instruments of moral geography, drawing on homelessness research and Teresa Gowan's framework of *sin-talk, sick-talk,* and *system-talk* to show how societies explain, pathologise, or moralise poverty.

By weaving ethnographic storytelling with critical analysis, the chapter argues for a reorientation of attention – from what the homeless lack to what they make. In the fragile, everyday architectures of care that George created, we glimpse the enduring human capacity to build home in even the most precarious spaces.

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Prologue: George's Door

George had a door.
It wasn't made of wood or glass or brass – it was made of gesture. Each night, before lying down, he would open that invisible door to the world he called home. The movement was deliberate, almost ceremonial. He would turn slightly toward a bench, lift the corner of the green tarpaulin that hung over it like a curtain, and step inside. Then, with a quiet sweep of his hand, he would close the door behind him.

The bench stood under an old chestnut tree in a park near a high school, halfway between a bus stop and a canal. To the city, it was just another piece of street furniture – weathered, scratched, occupied by

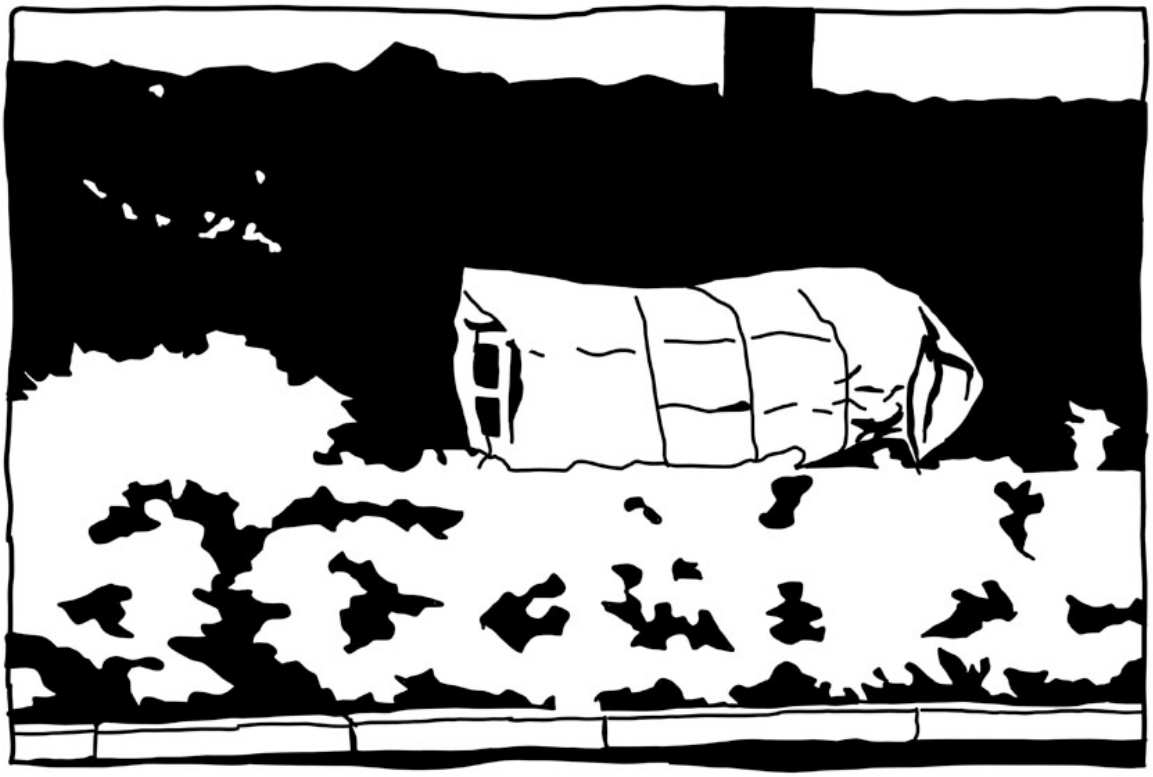
someone best avoided. But to George, it was a house with a view. The rhythm of buses, the warmth of morning sun on the wooden slats – these were the walls and windows of his home.

People passed every day. Some nodded, some looked away. A few stopped to chat, share a cigarette, or drop off a thermos of coffee. They knew him by different names – *Gorsh, Kharl, Komma, and Koma. Others have referred to him as the Alaska Man, Smiley, the Beaver, the Bag Man, or Q.* No one knew where he came from. No one knew his real name. But everyone knew his bench.

George lived within a system that called him *homeless*, but his life told another story – one of *Homefullness*, of daily acts of making and remaking a place in the world. The tarp was his roof. The cleared patch of gravel before the bench was his front step. He always wore warm winter clothes, carried deposit cans and his belongings in bags, and often sat quietly, offering a kind smile. He never asked for money, but always thanked people by placing his hand on his chest when given something. His pockets held small domestic treasures like a lighter. Each gesture – lighting a cigarette, feeding the birds – was an act of care, a quiet refusal of erasure.

There is a particular dignity in these acts, a kind of architecture built not from stone but from habit, memory, and belonging. This chapter is about George and about what it means to make home when the world insists you have none.

I (Marcus) first met George not as a subject of research, but as a quiet presence in the city. During my early days in Malmö, while writing about the interstices between buildings, I noticed how George's bench resisted the city's silent campaign of exclusion. Where others were moved along or rendered invisible by design, George's bench remained a fragile exception. When the bench suddenly disappeared, so did George, and I found myself wondering if absence had become permanent. The city's newspapers asked after the bench and people asked the officials to put it back. When he finally returned, we spoke. He told me, simply, that they had taken his home. He had paid for that bench, he said, and it was his. In that moment, I understood that home is not always a matter of walls, but of recognition, memory, and the right to remain.



<Figure 17.1. here>

Figure 17.1. George's bench in summer, a green tarpaulin stretched like a sail, his sleeping form just visible beneath. Illustration by Neal Haslem, 2025.

From George to the question of home

To speak about George is to speak about the spaces between categories – between *home* and *homeless*, *public* and *private*, *belonging* and *exclusion*. His bench was not a shelter, yet it sheltered him. It was not a home in any conventional sense, yet it was the place where his days began and ended, where he greeted the world and withdrew from it.

Homelessness research has long struggled with this tension between absence and presence and how to describe a condition defined by what is missing, without erasing the richness of what remains. The term *homelessness* itself suggests lack: lack of walls, lack of property, lack of stability. Yet ethnographic studies, oral histories, and fieldwork from cities across the world remind us that people without housing

do not live without *place*. They build relationships, routines, and territories of meaning. They create a home in fragments.

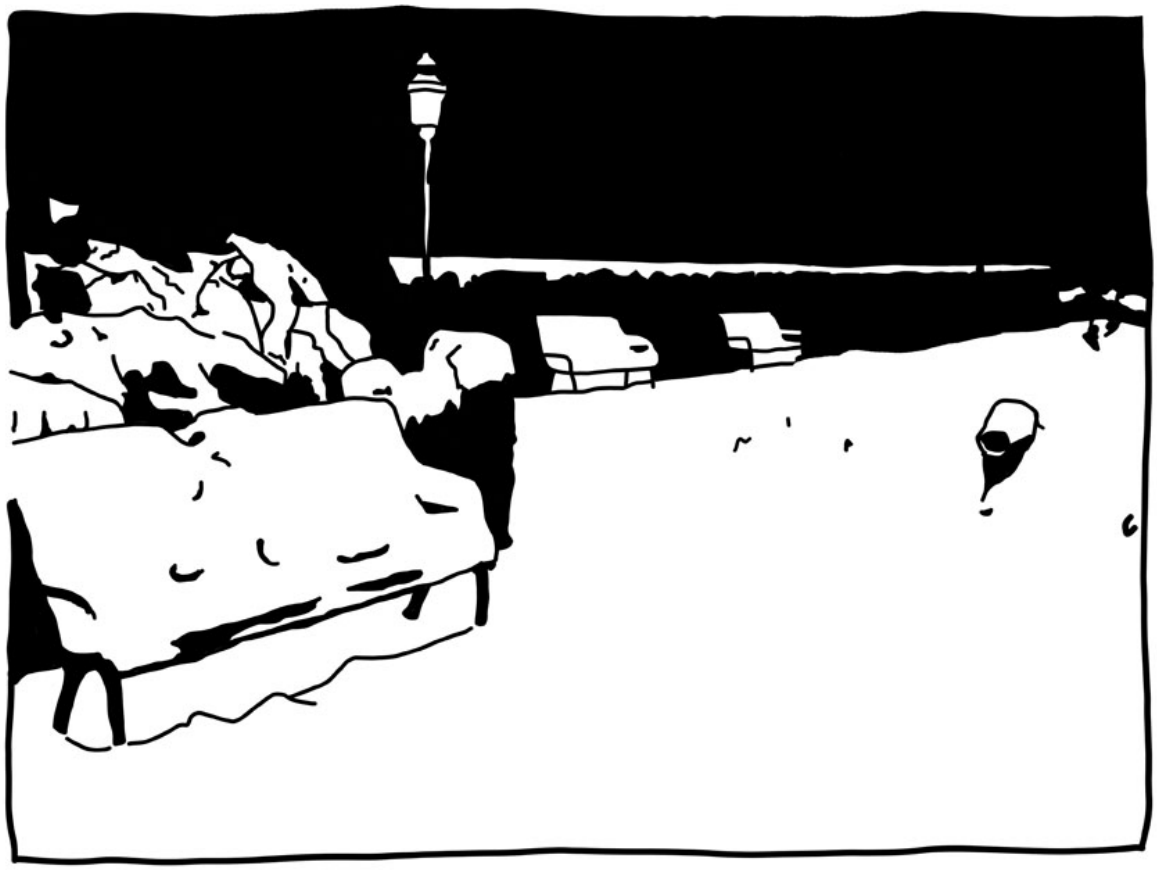
Researchers such as Kim Hopper, Deborah Padgett, and Teresa Gowan (Hopper 2003; Padgett 2007; Gowan 2010) have argued that homelessness is not merely a social or economic state but a moral and spatial one – a condition that exposes the fault lines of modern urban life. Homelessness makes visible what cities prefer to keep hidden: the consequences of inequality, the politics of visibility, and the limits of public compassion.

The question is not only why people lose their homes, but also 'how people continue to make a home' when conventional forms are denied. To understand homelessness, we must also attend to *Homefullness* – the creative, everyday acts through which people claim a place in the world, however temporary or fragile that claim may be.

It is in this light that George's bench can be seen as both geography and metaphor – a small platform on which larger social structures play out. Around him swirled the invisible architectures of policy, policing, and design which ensure that benches are made too short to lie on, spikes are set into ledges, sprinklers are timed to splash and chase bodies from sleep. These features of the urban landscape do not simply exist; they speak. They tell certain people they do not belong here.

Exclusion by Design: The hostile architecture of public space

One winter morning, the benches opposite George's were covered in snow. No one had sat there for days. The snow lay smooth and untouched, a white crust sealing the wood. Across the path, George's bench looked different. The snow in front of it had been cleared – not much, just enough to reveal a patch of gravel. The small act of sweeping had left a semicircle of bare ground, like the threshold of a doorway. It was an act of care, quietly performed. Someone, perhaps from the Street Department (Gatukontoret), had cleared the snow in front of George's bench just as one might do before the entrance to any home. In that gesture, the bench was recognized not only as a place to sit, but as a place where someone lived.



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Figure 17.2. The benches opposite George's bench, heavy with snow – silent, unwelcoming. Illustration by Neal Haslem, 2025.

This simple act of care stood in direct opposition to what urban planners call *defensive design*, although those who live beneath its influence know it by other names: *hostile architecture, exclusionary design, or urban cruelty in concrete form* (Mitchell 2020; de Fine Licht 2017; Nussbaum 2023).

It is the practice of shaping public space to control behaviour – to discourage sleeping, loitering, resting, or lingering too long. It hides beneath the aesthetics of order: divided benches, slanted surfaces, spikes embedded under bridges, or the absence of horizontal space altogether so that there are no flat, level surfaces where people can comfortably sit or lie down. The city's message is silent but clear: *you may pass through, but you may not stay.*

These features are often justified in the language of safety and cleanliness, but they participate in a deeper politics – one that defines who the city is for. The discomforts of hostile design are not randomly distributed; they target particular bodies and ways of being. They render homelessness a problem to be managed through geometry rather than care.

George's bench escaped this logic, perhaps by accident or neglect. It was old, wooden and slightly warped. It invited use, even if the city did not intend it to. In a way, it was one of the last hospitable structures in an increasingly inhospitable landscape. That is why George stayed there. He had made peace with the bench's hardness, its exposure to wind and rain.

Benches fitted with bars in the middle of outdoor seating is considered particularly intolerable. To sleep on such a bench is to be told, in the language of metal and measurement, that your body does not fit the design of the city.

Urban theorist Don Mitchell (1997) once described this process as *'the annihilation of space by law'* – the way public spaces are redefined through both physical and legal means to exclude those who most need them. A bench becomes a boundary; a park becomes a regulated corridor of movement; a shelter becomes a zone of surveillance.

Against this landscape, George's small acts of *Homefullness* – hanging his tarp, opening his invisible door – were acts of quiet defiance. They resisted not only the cold but also the moral architecture that insists some lives are better unseen.



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Figure 17.3. George's bench with the snow cleared in front – a fragile, deliberate space of belonging amid exclusion. Illustration by Neal Haslem, 2025.

Acts of *Homefullness*

In the long history of homelessness research, much attention has been given to what is missing – to the absence of walls, wages, or welfare. Less has been written about what is *made* in the spaces left behind. Yet in the margins of the city, one finds countless small acts of *Homefullness*: the arrangement of found objects in furniture, the sweeping of a patch of pavement, the care for an animal, the insistence on order where disorder is presumed.

Homefullness does not erase precarity; it reclaims meaning within it. It is not the possession of property but the practice of *belonging*.

George's bench was a textbook of such practices. He knew how to orient the tarp so that rain ran off rather than in. His gestures did not change his circumstances, but they gave shape to his days. They were acts of rhythm, dignity, and care.

Homemaking, or homeplace as the feminist scholar, bell hooks (1990) once wrote, is not only an act of comfort but an act of resistance – a claim to presence in a world that seeks to erase. In this sense, George's care for his bench was political, even if he never thought of it that way. Every time he folded his tarp, he was refusing to disappear.

The sociologist Kim Hopper (2003) has described the 'moral labour' of people experiencing homelessness – the daily work of sustaining a self in the face of public contempt. *Acts of Homefullness* are part of this labour. They blur the boundary between survival and expression. They show that 'being without a house' is not the same as 'being without a home'.

In cities increasingly defined by exclusionary design and moral judgment, such acts are fragile yet radical. They invite us to see homemaking not as the privilege of the housed but as a universal human capacity – the need to mark a place, however small, as *mine*, *ours*, *here.* George's home was a bench. It was also a declaration: *I exist. I live here.*

Sin-Talk, Sick-Talk, and System-Talk: The Stories We Tell About Homelessness

Every society explains homelessness in the language it finds most comfortable. In her ethnography *Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco*, Teresa Gowan (2010) identifies three dominant moral discourses that shape how we speak – and therefore how we act – toward people without housing: *sin-talk, sick-talk, and system-talk.* Each offers a different kind of story, and each, in its own way, tries to make sense of the lives of people like George.

Sin-talk frames homelessness as a failure of virtue.
It sees poverty through the lens of morality: laziness, addiction, irresponsibility, the absence of discipline or faith.
In this narrative, redemption is personal – one must repent, reform and be saved.

Some saw only George's life on the streets and assumed he was just another addict, imposing their story on him and others.
Yet, in truth, George never touched alcohol or drugs.
It was easier to believe that his condition came from bad choices than from a city that had no space for him.

Sick-talk shifts the register from morality to medicine.
It understands homelessness as the outcome of mental illness, trauma, or addiction – conditions to be diagnosed and treated.
This language can be compassionate, but it can also be depoliticising.
It transforms structural neglect into pathology, replacing justice with therapy.
When some social workers spoke about George, they used this vocabulary: he was 'at risk', or 'untreated'.
They were not wrong, but they were not entirely right either.

Finally, **system-talk** tells a different kind of story.
It locates homelessness within the broader machinery of inequality – unaffordable housing, precarious labour, austerity, the erosion of the welfare state.
It sees George not as an individual failure but as the symptom of a collective one.
This view brings responsibility back to the social, but it risks turning lives into data – another point in a graph of structural injustice.

Teresa Gowan's framework reminds us that none of these discourses alone can hold the complexity of a human life.
Each reveals and conceals something.
Together, they create a moral echo chamber in which homeless people are alternately pitied, punished, or pathologised – but rarely heard.

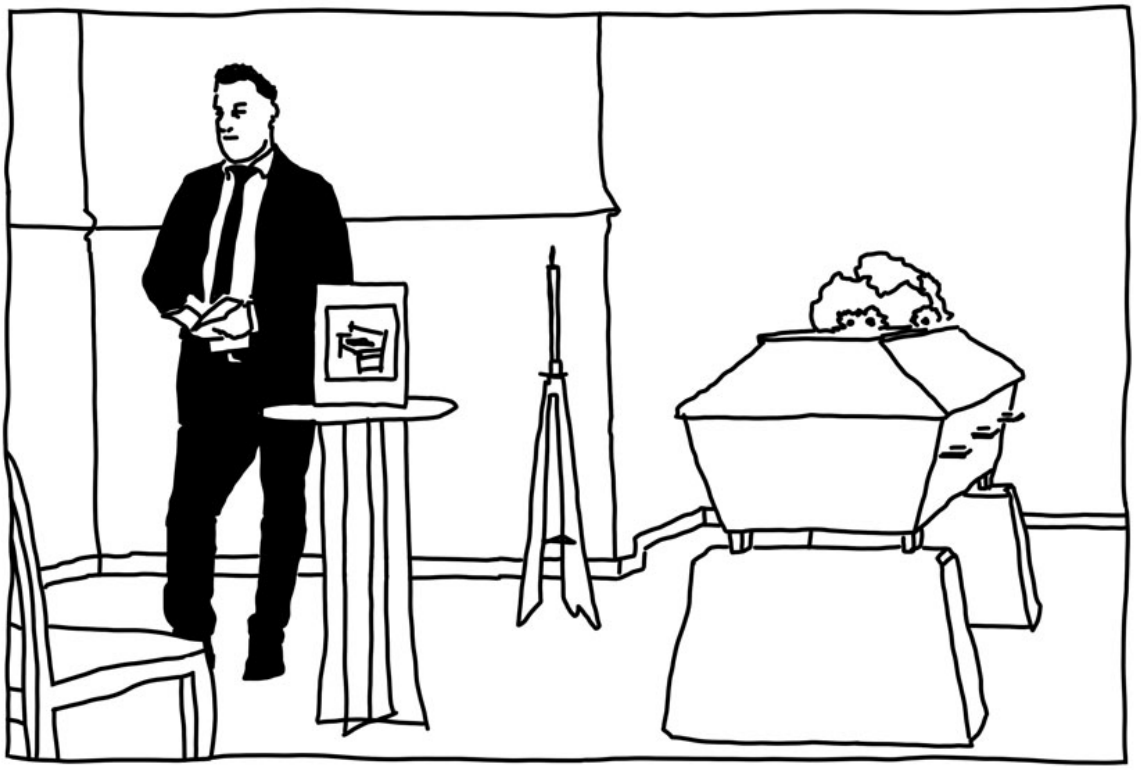
George moved silently among these categories. He was neither sinner nor patient nor symbol; he was simply George – a man who built a door out of habit. His story unsettles the frameworks. It invites a fourth kind of talk – one rooted not in deficiency but in presence; not in blame or diagnosis, but in recognition. This is the language of *Homefullness* – the language that sees how even in the harshest conditions, people create meaning, dignity, and connections.

Epilogue: The Door Closes

The day George was buried, the sky hung low and colourless, as if the city of Malmo itself had paused to listen.
His coffin was simple – pine wood, no polish, no inscription. Yet when the hearse pulled up, the small crowd of 14 people that gathered surprised even the funeral director. They came from different corners of the city: A couple who once managed various clothing stores, along with a nurse, a university lecturer, a blues musician, and a woman who sometimes brought him soup. Each had known him by a different name.

They shared fragments – stories of small kindnesses, jokes, arguments, cups of coffee offered.
In their memories, George became many people at once: a stray soul, a neighbour, a friend. No one could say who he *really* was, but everyone agreed that the city felt emptier without him.

When the coffin was lifted into the car, two dogs trotted forward from the edge of the crowd together with their owner.
They often met George in the past.
Now they raised their noses toward the wood, sniffing gently, as if to make sure he was inside. Then they sat down, side by side, and watched as the car pulled away.



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Figure 17.4. The funeral, a plain wooden coffin – a moment of farewell. Illustration by Neal Haslem, 2025.

Later that day, someone walked past the old bench in the park by the river. The tarp was gone, folded neatly by the city workers who had cleared the space. The surface was bare. Two lit candles in front of the bench and a bouquet of flowers. But if you looked closely, you could almost imagine a faint semicircle in front of it – the mark where George used to open the door. A trace of care, a doorway to nothing, or perhaps to everything.

George died without anyone knowing his real name. Yet in the end, he was not alone. He had, in his own way, made a home – not bounded by walls, but woven through relationships, gestures, and memories.

Homelessness is often measured by what is absent. But perhaps the truer measure lies in what endures: the acts of care that make a place liveable, the bonds that outlast the body, the stories that remain after the bench is empty.

George's door has closed now, quietly, the way it always did.
But each time someone passes his bench and pauses – just for a moment – it opens again.

Afterword: On *Homefullness*

George's story reminds us that *home* is not a fixed location but a practice – a continuous making and remaking of belonging. To live without walls is not to live without meaning. Acts of *Homefullness* emerge wherever care, memory, and presence intersect: in a tarp stretched against the rain, in the clearing of snow, in the companionship of dogs, in the shared act of remembrance.

George's choice of a bench was never truly a choice, but the outcome of decades in which adequate help and support were absent. For George, and for many others, the alternatives – emergency shelters where privacy is scarce and autonomy is surrendered – offered little solace. The bench became the best solution in a landscape of constrained options, a place where he could claim a measure of dignity and control. Yet, to tell this story is not to suggest that benches should become homes, or that life on the street is ever desirable. Housing is not a privilege, but a fundamental human need. George's story is a testament to resilience, but it is also an indictment of systems that leave people to improvise home where none should have to.

If hostile architecture teaches us how cities exclude, then *Homefullness* teaches us how people persist. It reveals an ethics of attention – a way of seeing those whose lives are too easily folded into categories of policy or pity. Through George, we glimpse the fragile architecture of coexistence: the possibility that home is not owned but *enacted*, not found but *made*.

In the end, it is all about George – and about all those whose names we do not know, who open their invisible doors each night and remind us that even in the most inhospitable spaces, humanity still builds, tends, and belongs.

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