



FIT FOR WORK

2016 was rough. Over the past years it has become clear that ever more people are sleeping rough. The one man who used to spend his days outside the local supermarket has been replaced by a string of vulnerable people occupying the benches. More are scattered along the High Street.

Images created by some media outlets and reality TV shows have gradually enforced the idea that people who find themselves in a bad place have brought it on themselves, are lazy and probably have drug problems. Once the stories of benefit scroungers were added to this the result was a toxic mix that seemingly justified the government's actions of slowly scraping away support for the most vulnerable people in society.

Guy's spine was damaged at an early age. The doctors suggested an operation but his mother couldn't take time off work to take care of a wheelchair-bound child, as she needed to provide for her children. Guy was told not to do sport nor lift heavy loads etc. but life had a different plan for him. At the age of 15, with no choosing of his own, he found himself working in a kitchen 500 km away from home and worked physically from that day on. Later he moved to London. Happy to get away from catering he worked in removals and later started painting and decorating, which he enjoyed and took pride in. Once a year or so he would have problems with his back. From 2015 onwards it steadily worsened until in 2016 he wasn't physically able to work anymore. The GPs gave him an arsenal of painkillers, he was scanned several times and the neurosurgeons talked about how he could become paralysed any time and about operations, and lastly there was also talk of physiotherapy. Finally the surgeon's conclusion was that Guy should stop work for 12 months and, with physiotherapy, allow his back some rest and healing time and then return to a different kind of work that suited his condition. Guy was on sick leave for a short while. Then came the Health Assessment. Ignoring the specialists' findings and advice, the assessors concluded, that as he could move his arms and head and he had walked from the bus stop to the office he surely was well fit for work. Having been self-employed Guy was not eligible to jobseekers allowance so financial pressure from here on increased. Not able to sit for fifteen minutes at the time nor walk for more than ten Guy spent his days circling the house; standing for ten minutes, sitting down for a few, walking around the house a little with his stick. Most of the day however he spent in bed exhausted from the pain, trying to find a position in which he might find relief. Strong painkillers made him sleepy and interfered with his thinking. This was the state he was in when he was forced to find work. Looking back, until today his treatment consisted of painkillers and four sessions of physiotherapy.

The painting Fit for work depicts the kind of scene found in the bedroom a lot of the time. Guy on the bed, having had fallen asleep doing his best to find work and fill in papers for the council, exhausted and loaded with medication. Bed was his desk, his living room and his dining table. His walking stick was always close and essential for moving himself as well as for moving things around the bed.

Guy is just one of many and is in comparison to many others one of the lucky guys. Having to change ones career completely and suddenly in ones fifties, without support and relevant qualifications, is difficult enough when not dealing with financial and physical issues. Luckily he wasn't alone and has great resilience. These kinds of stories are happening to many and not few of them are jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. People suffering from mental health issues, living in the streets, not being able to support their families etc. are the harshest conclusions to these tales.

The portrait Fit for work is not about one individual. It is about the many stories of those left behind, which are going on behind closed doors in the UK today. It is a tribute to those doing the best they can while suffering hardship and to their locked up potential.



Fit for work / 66cm x 106.5cm / Ölfarben auf Leinwand / Jess de Zilva/ 2017



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