

**‘As a child, you don’t care if you’re rich or poor. All that matters is feeling safe – and that’s a parental thing’**

## Pressure drop

After early years in Biafra, **Cyril Nri** found home in Shepherd’s Bush – and on a beach in Barbados

**L**ike most people, I suppose, the worst time is always after a relationship breakdown, splitting up with someone, or when you’re out of work.

Probably the worst place I lived was after arriving here from Nigeria with my mother and sisters during the Biafra war. It didn’t feel like it at the time because I was only seven and had a parent who really cared for me. It was a tiny, two-bedroom place with an outside toilet in Shepherd’s Bush, London.

The house was minute and we shared it with two other families, both Irish. I shared a bedroom with my three older sisters.

But the fact is, we had the greatest of times there. That winter I saw snow for the first time and we went to the park and played with snowballs. Not being used to it, we were freezing and when we got back mum had baked wonderful fairy cakes. The whole house was warm and smelled of fresh baking.

I don’t look back on that period of my life as tragic. Maybe after you’ve been in first class, you regret going back into economy. But as a child you don’t know the difference and you don’t care if you’re rich or poor. All that matters is comfort and feeling safe – and that’s a parental thing.

The worst home was about 10 years ago, a one-bedroom attic in Clapham, south London – not at the posh end – after splitting up from the mother of my kids.

It wasn’t just about being poor. I’d been a lot worse off at drama school and starting out as an actor. But somehow when you’re young it doesn’t seem to matter.

It was in what had been a lovely Victorian house separated into tiny flats. At first, I thought I would only stay for a while and I kept saying to myself I’m not going to do anything with it because it’s not my place.

It was tiny – just one bedroom and a kitchen and everything together. The walls were orange for some reason, which made it even more claustrophobic. There was a horrible

carpet with a burn in it – and mice. It wasn’t a happy place. My state of mind wasn’t good. Work wasn’t coming in and I was getting poorer and poorer.

I kept thinking I was going to move on. But after about two years I realised that wasn’t happening and I would have to get used to the mice and other stuff. So I started doing things like painting the walls white.

I threw out the carpet and put down a new bit over half the room – and suddenly the place seemed more spacious.

But it hurt my pride when my sons came to stay – and that, perhaps more than anything, was a big source of the misery I felt. They had to sleep on a couch in the kitchenette. I’d been through stuff like that when I was a kid, but it wasn’t a hindrance. With my own kids it made me feel as if I wasn’t up to the mark.

The best place I’ve lived is at the family home in Barbados that used to belong to my uncle. My mum is from there – she met my father, who came from Nigeria, while a student in London. They moved to Nigeria – and then the Biafra war broke out.

My mum ended up running around the country with four kids. Being Ibo and on the Biafran side, we had to get out of the country and we eventually arrived here as refugees. She worked in many jobs after we settled in Shepherd’s Bush.

The place in Barbados isn’t far from the beach. It has a huge sitting room and the joy is, there can be lots of you there and you don’t get in each others’ way.

I spent a lot of time cutting down a huge rubber tree in the garden which looked as if it was going to pull the house down because it was so big.

When my uncle was alive, I used to watch him digging on the beach in the morning and then he’d drink through the rest of day. Life there’s so simple and easy. And it’s a place where the sun is shining all year round...

**Cyril Nri is an actor and director.**