

Sold!

As we lugged our last dining chair out of the lift and into our storage unit at Safestore, we had a quick high five and snapped the padlock shut.

After five abortive sales of our riverside house, we had finally got a buyer who wanted to move in quickly. She had even paid us £10,000 extra to vacate the house within four weeks.

Almost two years of stress, deposits lost on three new build houses and, at last, we were leaving behind our high-maintenance, cold and creaky three storey home. Our new house wouldn't be ready for another three weeks, but our neighbour, further up the river path, had given us the keys to her house, as she would be away for a month.

We drove back to our now empty home to do a final clean up.

The mobile phone rang. It was our solicitor. A minor hold up we were told, the survey hadn't arrived with the mortgage lender and the funds weren't going to be released. It would be another week at least before we could complete the sale. It was fine, we were reassured, the sale wouldn't fall through, but the disappointment was huge. All our belongings were in store, apart from two suitcases of clothes and essentials we were using at our neighbour's house.

The phone rang again. This time it was Greta, our neighbour. "I'm so sorry," she said, "but my sister has had to return from Italy as her husband needs emergency surgery and she will have to stay in my house because it's near to the hospital. I hope you can find a hotel to stay in."

So there we were, not a single stick of furniture, no bedding, no kettle, just us and two suitcases. The internet router was packed away and so was the phone. All we had was my mobile phone and the dodgy signal we had in the house.

I managed to call my daughter to bring round a couple of airbeds and sleeping bags. We would be camping for the next week in our own house! She wished us good luck as she went off in her car to her cramped little cottage, packed with husband, children and dogs and no room for uninvited guests.

We sat on the floor on the top floor of our house watching the sun fade from the marshland and the winding path of the river. "I suppose we could call this romantic!" I said to my husband, Trevor. He laughed and put his arm round me. Just then, the lights went out and we we plunged into deep darkness as we realised that we had cancelled our gas and electricity and sent in our final meter readings. We checked to see how much battery we had left on our phone. Five per cent, we sighed.

There was nothing else to do, but to snuggle into our sleeping bags and try to sleep on the airbeds.

Then, the heavens opened. We did get some light, the lightening was overhead and illuminating our empty house momentarily. Thunder crashed as the garden and marshes were lit brightly. I thought I saw a dark shape, moving along our boundary fence. "Trevor, there's someone out there!" "It will just be someone walking their dog who has got caught in the storm, don't worry," he reassured me.

The wind increased. It howled round the house noisily. "I don't like this," I said. "It's always this noisy, it just seems scary because we are in the dark," my husband said.

We tried to sleep. The storm moved off towards Whitstable although we could see flashes and hear rumbles of thunder.

Finally I drifted off. Crash! I sat bolt upright. "Trevor!" I screamed, "someone is breaking in!" He just turned over and carried on sleeping. I heard the door handle rattling on the garden door. I shook Trevor, but he was so deeply asleep I couldn't wake him. Then I heard the sound of timber giving way. Someone has broken down the door. I was panicking. Muffled footsteps entered the house.

I grabbed the phone. The battery had gone. I couldn't dial the police or use it for light.

I was too afraid to scream, as I didn't want to alert the intruder that we were there. Trevor slept blissfully on.

My thoughts were rattling around in my head. Why would someone be breaking in an empty house? What could they want? There was a fitted dishwasher, fridge freezer and hob and oven we were leaving in the kitchen. They were the only things worth stealing. Were they just vandals, wanting to smash up an empty property? I crept to the window, which was floor to ceiling glass to make the most of the view. Moonlight had broken through the clouds and I realised that a boat had moored by our back gate on to the fields, which hadn't been there when the storm broke. It must be someone from the boat looking for shelter from the storm, I guessed.

Slowly the door opened.

My heart was racing, my mouth dry. I was unable to say a word. Frozen to the spot I saw what I guessed was a man, dressed in a Halloween costume, black with a skeleton pattern. He walked purposefully across the room and flashed a light in my eyes. Next, he placed a strange smelling pad over my mouth and nose. I tried to lash out and hit him, but he seemed insubstantial, ghost like. I breathed in the strange smell from the wad of fabric and drifted off into a deep sleep.

I woke to sunlight. Trevor was still fast asleep. I was alive and unharmed. I shook him awake, successfully this time, and wept and raged about the intruder. He looked at me as if I were mad. "You've had a nightmare. You were nervous about the dark and the storm."

I sobbed and told him every detail. He grabbed my hand and suggested that we look round the house. He was confident that there would be nothing to find.

The door was closed. The kitchen intact. All the fitted appliances were there. Trevor laughed. "You and your dreams, you have such vivid ones!"

I begged him to check the back door. "That's where he broke in, he smashed the glass and the wood, please, quickly."

The door hung open. Splintered wood and broken glass littered the ceramic floor tiles.

We opened the front door and ran.

