

Bright lights, big city?

Or no lights, tiny town?

Do you like living in the fast lane, or is life in a lay-by more your kind of thing?

When I first moved out of the big city to a small town, it felt rather like I had moved to a parallel universe. It had an otherworldly, almost utopian feel to it. Healthy, smiling people doing their shopping at individual shops (butcher's, bakers etc), then pausing to chat to each other before picking up their apple-cheeked children from the local school. Such was the 'town that time forgot' feel of the place, I wouldn't have batted an eyelid if the Trumpton Fire Engine had trundled down the high street on a kitten-saving mercy mission. It was... nice.

I loved living in London, but as soon as our daughter was born, my partner and I both agreed to find somewhere to live where 'the little-un' would be safer, or rather we would feel surer of her safety. We knew it would be a big change from the buzz of the city, but what we hadn't bargained on was how long the period of acclimatisation would take.

The difference was highlighted on the first evening in our new cottage. Trying to cook something among the piles of tea chests, I was suddenly aware of the security light coming on down the side of the house. Still in street-smart Londoner mode, I instantly thought 'Intruder!' and looked around quickly for something heavy. There was a knock at the back door: I opened it, ready to defend myself and my family against the crack-crazed, knife-wielding maniac. Instead, I was greeted by a pair of smiling faces proffering a bottle of wine and a small plant.

"Hello, we're from next door. We just thought we'd come and say hello."

After two years we're now good friends, but they're still unaware of how close they came to having an iron wok wrapped around their heads.

That was the first eye-opener – proper neighbours. Though the anonymity of living in a city can be nice, there's nothing like having five or six people say hello to you as you walk down the street, then the landlady of your local smiling in recognition, even though you've only been in twice. I lived for 10 years in the same street in London and was on nodding terms with one person. And I'm the outgoing, friendly type!

For the first few weeks I couldn't sleep properly as I'd grown so accustomed to the nightly symphony of car alarms, police sirens and assorted shouting and screaming from outside. Now, after dark everyone



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seems to disappear. I used to enjoy running the gauntlet of my local high street at night, adrenaline running on a drip feed 'just in case'. Now, the most I need to worry about when walking back from the station is the possibility of running into an irate badger.

One thing I didn't bargain for in Tintytown, was the military organisation required to do anything. In the past I took it for granted that at any given time I could call a cab and one of the firm's 200 drivers would be outside my door within 10 minutes or so – well, give or take. And the same thing if I wanted to come home.

We recently went for a meal a few miles away in a real country pub – you know the sort – wall-to-wall horse brasses and dusty stuffed weasels. Expecting to have several beers, I drove there, and took a couple of local cab firms' numbers with me so I could phone them when we were ready. At around 11pm I called the first, and the nice lady told me it was too late. The second one said he was sorry but the car was already out on another job. Could I phone back in an hour?!

The schools are good, there's very little crime, the traffic's minimal, and we're surrounded by breathtaking scenery. Perfect for raising a child you'd think. And you'd probably be right. Until her thirteenth birthday when she wakes up and screams from the top of the stairs, "We lived in London! And you moved here? How could you! It's so boring!"

Dave Smith is a writer and stand-up comedian enjoying his celebrity status as 'Cockney Dave' in his new town. Why he was given this moniker is a mystery