

The Living Arrangement

He turned up at the front door one weekday morning and walked in, checking the apartment out. No vacancy had been advertised, yet he seemed confident from the outset that if he liked the place, he'd be able to move in. It took Nicky and me completely by surprise: we'd been sharing the space for several months without a problem, and were used to being in control.

We made our objections known, but the intruder ignored us. We thought about physically ejecting him. But for all his arrogance, he had about him an air of self-assurance which carried with it the knowledge that whatever he decided, he would be proven right; and somehow this gave him a certain presence, the kind of authority that commands respect. I must admit that as he poked into every corner and cavity of the place, I found myself, in spite of his effrontery, quite amused.

We asked him repeatedly what he wanted, and when that failed warned him that he was invading the apartment coming in the way he had, and that we would be within our rights to take further action; but he signalled that he spoke no English and thereafter continued to ignore us, although I believe to this day that he fully understood our interrogation.

When it became clear that we weren't going to get anywhere and that he wasn't going to do any damage, we gave up in exasperation and left him to it. Eventually he came back into the lounge room and indicated that he'd like to negotiate terms: to stay, on a trial basis, provided that we'd provide all the meals: he didn't do meals, apparently.

There'd been no talking things through, no talk of money, no discussion of rights and responsibilities. It could well have implications for our tenancy agreement, a matter that would need looking into before we took on any new tenant. Voicing these objections made no impression on him; he obviously expected we'd take him on trust.

And despite all our reservations, that in the end is what we did. Nicky and I both worked, and as it was apparent that our prospective flatmate didn't, we had to decide whether to give him access to the place then and there. We had several concerns: it wasn't just a security issue – we lived in the inner city, after all, and leaving the house open invited a break-in – but also concern for trusting our belongings to a virtual stranger. We had a lot of fairly sophisticated gear lying around – cameras, computers and so on – that would take a lot of replacing.

We finally decided to take the risk. It was a nervous day for me. When it came down to it I didn't know anything about our new flatmate, except that he was Asian and had done it tough: that much you could tell just from looking at him. He seemed to be of an age that could be described as 'advanced maturity', although this impression might have owed something to the other aspects of his appearance: he looked dishevelled, as if he'd been living on the street, and bore a number of scars that looked like the result of fights, a lot of cuts and scratches. There was a tangible tension in his bearing, the kind of attitude that comes from having to be constantly on guard. I'd not

encountered these attributes in such compromising circumstances before, and harboured a deep suspicion of them: I had no guarantee that he wasn't a psycho or a thief. This vague sense of foreboding stayed with me during the day and accompanied me home that night.

I needn't have worried. When I got to the apartment the place was intact, our new flatmate comfortably ensconced on the sofa. He offered an offhand greeting, then asked about dinner. I hadn't thought of having to provide the extra meal, an oversight that clearly failed to impress him; but Nicky arrived a short time later, clearly as anxious about the state of our belongings as I'd been, and saved the day with a bagful of provisions.

Our flatmate ate rapaciously and well, retiring again to the sofa when he'd finished without any offer of assistance with chores. Nicky and I ate together, looking over at the sofa every now and again and exchanging thoughtful glances. I think both of us had already made up our minds about the newcomer, but neither of us wanted to be the first to say it. Later, when we were confident he was asleep, we came to a consensus: he could stay, at least temporarily, on the terms he'd dictated.

The rationale for this decision was our new tenant's capacity to quickly and effectively endear himself to us - a skill, we were later to learn, that he seemed to be able to employ with most of those with whom he came into contact. He was a mixed bag of affability and disdain; perhaps the extremity of the latter making the former more appealing. This appeal, along with the small moments of amusement he'd already provided, was apparent enough to us on that first night to convince us that it might be worth it.

The newcomer had offered no name, and didn't look like he was going to, so we decided to give him one of our choosing, something we could use to refer to him in conversation. An old Roy Rogers movie was playing on TV at the time, and we agreed that the hero and our flatmate had a kind of gung-ho quality in common, so we decided that 'Rogers' would be as good a descriptor as any. Nicky offered 'Mr' as an appropriate prescriptor, and we referred to the newcomer by that name thereafter. He didn't seem to mind, and in time, when it suited him, he came to respond to our salutations.

Once the decision had been made, Rogers' acceptance into the household was prompt. We found a common interest in certain things: he became more attentive to cooking, for one thing, staying close at hand when Nicky and I were in the kitchen, although he still refrained from taking any active part. And despite his paucity in English he developed an interest in the written word, appearing at our side with an insistency that could become annoying, or peering over our shoulder whenever we picked up a book or sat at the computer.

It's hard to say how the bond developed between him and me, but somehow it did. We took to having long tête-à-têtes in the evenings, together in front of the fire. This soon progressed to physical contact, stroking and petting, and one night not long after he arrived, Rogers joined me in my bed, slipping quietly over the covers to kiss me.

I must admit I got a hell of a shock – I’m not altogether comfortable with that type of blatant sensuality – but it didn’t take me long to get over it and start enjoying the intimacy. He was certainly experienced, and soon showed me all the special places he liked being touched, finding my own with uncanny intuition. I’m still not sure that it was love: Rogers always remained a bit aloof, in control, as if he was keeping his deepest feelings in reserve. For my part, I was head over heels.

Things might have stayed that way had it not been for Nicky’s unexpected announcement, a few months later, that she was taking up a new job in Perth and was surrendering the lease on the apartment.

It would be fair to say that when Nicky broke her news, I was surprised at the focus and intensity of my reaction. My first thought was for Rogers. I was acutely mindful of his age, how hard it might be for him to find new living arrangements or, worse still, to have to survive back on the street. I had a few options for relocating, maybe to Sydney, and renting a smaller place, but I doubted Rogers would have the necessary credentials to do the same. I felt overwhelmingly sorry for him.

Rogers dealt with the news of change – which he seemed to grasp immediately, despite the language issues - in the only way he knew: by withdrawing both his affection and his presence, retreating to solitary corners of the apartment and appearing only for meals. He became the same tough-minded individual he’d been when we first met him.

I must confess that his cold-shoulder treatment hurt me greatly. Above all, I felt a sharp pang of loss: I knew that if we parted I would miss him, I’d pine for him. Rogers seemed to sense the trajectory of my thinking, and began to show me a few tentative signs of affection. When I finally committed to allowing him to come with me when I moved, he became almost his former sensuous self.

Once things started being removed from the apartment, however, he started getting nervy again, a state which didn’t improve when we jumped into a taxi and headed for the airport. Mr Rogers wasn’t keen on flying, and he let everyone within earshot know it, but we got to Sydney okay and Rogers and I moved temporarily into my sister’s place, an upstairs flat in the inner West.

Rogers was put out at first, as I’d expected he would be; but notwithstanding a single brief, noisy argument with one of the neighbours, he soon started to settle down. The new arrangement had its advantages: plenty of warm, sunlit spots, plenty of chairs and sofas. We began sharing a bed again, rediscovering the intimacy of which I’d latterly felt deprived.

We’d been at my sister’s for a couple of months when I noticed that sleeping, always a significant part of his daily schedule, seemed to be taking up an increasing amount of Rogers’ time, to the point where I became quite worried about him. He’d never been particularly energetic, but now he appeared to have slowed down almost to a stop. He seemed that to age considerably in a short time. I don’t know what triggered this transition; I still lash myself with guilt, every so often, that it may have had something to do with the stress of the move. In other, more forgiving moods, I wonder if it wasn’t an after-effect of the dispute with the neighbour, which had been

brief but intense. Or maybe it was just one of those abrupt jumps people say they encounter in the process of aging.

Whatever the cause, not long after we arrived Rogers started having medical problems. These were minor at first – a rheumatic problem in a leg, a loss of appetite – but they evolved rapidly into more serious conditions: a heart murmur, radical dental surgery, a series of kidney infections and - last but not least - diabetes.

This radically changed the dynamics of our relationship. He required more of my attention. It wasn't just the wide range of medications or the special diet that, because it required lengthy preparation, became an impost; it was his 'neediness', his almost constant demand for comfort and reassurance. On top of this there were the expenses: Rogers wasn't in a health care scheme, and despite the fact that he had no money of his own, had claimed no pension, so the burden of meeting these costs fell squarely on me. Over a period of a few months, it got to the point where I was struggling to pay the rent.

That's when he disappeared, walked out of my life the same way he'd walked in. I still don't know why. I'd tried to hide my anxiety, but maybe he sensed, in his own uncanny way, that he was becoming a burden for me. I like to think so, anyway, although I know there could be other less selfless explanations.

I did my best to find him, but to no avail; a seasoned street-dweller like him can't be found if he doesn't want to be. Eventually I gave up, and after a while my life got back to some kind of manageable routine. But I still miss him. I wonder what became of him: whether he died in pain and desolation in some back alley, or whether he simply found a more suitable living arrangement with someone else. When I envisage the latter, I see him sitting on a comfortable bed or sofa somewhere, purring with contentment as he licks the day's transactions from his paws.

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