

The
House
Share

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ZAFFRE

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Hell is other people.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*

The only difference between a cult and a religion is the amount of real estate they own.

Frank Zappa

Prologue

Sunday 22 June 2008

Sam stands on the edge of the roof terrace, watching the mechanical sweeper clearing away last night's grime.

Is it time?

When you can't sleep, you're meant to get up and do something – anything – instead of tossing and turning in a bed steeped with early-hours fears. Sam's body craves rest, but his brain won't let it happen.

It's midsummer; already the hungover city pulses with heat. He considers walking to the Thames, chasing the hope of a breeze. But the streets will smell of piss and worse, and his stomach turns at the thought.

Sam, you don't belong here.

His penthouse has the best view in Bermondsey and he's got to know all his neighbours' routines. In ten minutes' time the owner of the café opposite will raise the shutters. He'll wash down his little patch of cobbles with bleach and set out his cast-iron tables. Maybe ninety minutes later, old friends will drift in from all corners of London to brunch like there's no work tomorrow. New couples will try to fill the awkward morning-after silence with coffee-shop bustle. Flat-sharers will come to escape their housemates before they kill each other.

You have nobody but me, Sam.

He ought to do it now. He doesn't want to ruin anyone else's morning.

If only he could avoid the violence and *will* his body to break down into motes, lighter than air. Better still, if he'd never even existed, because however he does this, it will hurt people.

He has written and destroyed a dozen messages, before settling on a cookie-cutter suicide note to his parents. An apology, reassurance that no one else is to blame, vague references to workload and insomnia and stress.

He hasn't written a note for his sister because she would see through his lies. As it is, she might still think it's her fault.

Sam, you should never have left us. Left me.

London – manic, anonymous, liberating London – was supposed to mean freedom from the inescapable burden of love.

But instead it brought the most shameful emotion of all: loneliness. A city crammed with millions of people, yet he has no one to 'brunch' with, and no one to notice his absence except the guys at work who'll curse him when he doesn't show up tomorrow.

Perhaps if he'd been made to rough it like a normal person, Sam would have made friends. The penthouse was a gift from his parents, but it feels more like a curse. He can hear his neighbours in the flats below, laughing and making love. And sometimes other sounds. Sam is a rational person, but this building was once a place of slaughter. When he's trying to sleep, he imagines he hears obscene animal noises bouncing off the brick walls, or smells an acrid stench seeping up from between the floorboards.

On Friday he bought more sleeping pills than usual from the dealer under the arches. That would be a gentler way to go. But in this weather, his body will rot, and his poor cleaner shouldn't have to see that.

So the chatty café owner will be his only witness. He's the closest thing Sam has to a friend, even though their conversations never go beyond the weather, Sam's accent, or the ridiculous hours they both work. The man is in his forties and has the look of someone who has seen it all before so Sam hopes he won't be too haunted.

Sam. Come home.

No!

The café's rusting metal shutter screeches as it rises. The owner shields his eyes against the sun as he emerges with a red plastic bucket and mop. The sodden strings look like a sea monster as they lash against the stones.

The bricks are warm underfoot as Sam steps onto the wall, slightly away from the centre so he won't hit the metal wall-crane as he falls. As he looks down, he's afraid for the first time.

Is this high enough to be sure?

So much planning, yet he didn't check how far you have to fall to be certain of death.

But he is nothing if not resourceful. At the bank's recruitment day, he scored the highest ever mark in 'Creativity and Flexibility'. He is good at thinking on his feet.

Sam positions himself like a diver – knees bent, neck tucked in – but now moves his hands to his sides, grinding his fists into his waist to fight against any survival instinct that might make him grasp at the air when it's already too late.

And he dives, head first, onto the cobbles of Tanner's Walk.

Incredible People Wanted for Dream House Share in Zone 1 Warehouse

Do you have what it takes to join us in *the* best house share in London, and quite possibly the world?

The kind of person who'll fit right in will be:

- Outgoing and interested in others, but not a complete party animal;
- Committed to joining a sharing, socially responsible community;
- Solvent, with great references.

In return, we can offer:

- A wonderful, spacious home from home in the heart of Bermondsey, just a few steps from London Bridge Station;
- Your own en-suite studio in a Victorian warehouse conversion packed with Instagrammable original features and designer furniture;
- Amazing communal spaces across four floors where you can work, eat, rest and play;
- A programme of 'City-zen' social activities and perks including yoga, organic veg boxes, games nights and even an honesty bar stocked with craft gins *and* low-alcohol options;
- A unique affordable-rent scheme which means you pay what you can manage, so we don't exclude those on a low income;
- The most fabulous housemates you'll ever meet.

To apply, please complete our online form.

NB1: As key workers are currently under-represented in our house, we guarantee all suitable applicants employed in the public sector will be offered an interview.

NB2: We operate an upper age limit of 35.

1

Tuesday 24 April 2018

Immi

I don't belong here. Anyone can see that.

Even my best dress screams 'cheap' compared to the sleek tailoring of the people I pass on Bermondsey Street. When I stop to check my hair in the window of a florist's shop, I look like the porcelain Pierrot on my mother's mantelpiece, a single tear rolling down its pale cheek.

Except I'm sweating, not crying. The make-up I applied in the staffroom has melted during the journey to London Bridge. I sidle into an alleyway and try to fix my eyeliner, though really I should scrub it all off and start again. But I don't have time for that.

Tanner's Walk is next on the right. The thought makes my mouth go dry and I struggle for breath. The panic attacks have started up again in the weeks since Al threw me out. I try to remember the meditation my old therapist taught me, her lisping voice in my head: *Imagine ripples flowing across a tranquil pond. Breathe with them. Everything is safe. Nobody can hurt you again . . .*

The panic ebbs away and my heart slows. Time to focus on being the ideal flatmate.

I know I am anything but: I'm antisocial and neurotic and fearful, and I have zero interest in getting to know the people I live with.

But I can *pretend*. I'm good at that.

Of course, no one should have to jump through hoops for a roof over their head, but it's a fact of London life. After everything I've done, there's no way I'm going home to Mum and her houseful of Pierrots and superstition.

I pat my hair to flatten the frizz and turn right. Tanner's Walk is a cobbled street, narrower than it looks on Google Maps, barely wide enough for a single car. There's a terrace of houses and a hipster café on one side, but they're dwarfed by the brick warehouse opposite.

The Dye Factory.

I laughed out loud when I read the address in the email. So pretentious and so typical of round here. But the building itself is a handsome beast, made of red bricks that glow in the early evening sun. The vast windows are framed by black metalwork, and the original wall-crane projects out like a gallows, with a timber platform that must once have lifted goods into the warehouse.

The photos on the ad seemed too good to be true, but the reality is even better.

Tanner's Walk is quiet, too, just far enough away from the braying drinkers and snarling vapers cluttering the pavements on Bermondsey Street.

I try to imagine myself coming home to *this* every night after school. I could actually walk it in fifty minutes. Even when I was living with Alastair, the commute from Highgate took an hour and a quarter – and since he threw me out, I've been sleeping on mates' sofas in the suburbs, and the journey is usually twice that.

I have to give this all I've got.

I walk towards the tall warehouse doors, which are painted oxblood red. There's a brass plaque with an engraved inscription: *The Dye Factory is named after the leather tanning and colouring business that existed here during Victorian times.*

Next to it, there's a note asking interviewees to push the entry-phone to be buzzed in, then take the lift to the top floor.

Before pressing the button, I take a moment to psych myself up.

From nowhere, I hear a sudden burst of laughter. High-pitched, almost hysterical. Children's laughter?

I scan the street, trying to work out where it's coming from. There's no playground that I can see, and the café opposite is closed.

I shake my head but the laughter continues, shrill and familiar. Like a new mother, I cannot ignore the cries of children. If Icelanders have a hundred words for snow, then I could invent just as many for the noises made by a classful of kids. Their Monday morning moans. The tap-tap-tap of feet on lino, counting down to home time on a sunny afternoon.

The chatter and hum I can hear now sounds like the build-up to a big fight that's been brewing all day.

It's coming from above me.

I look up and it all makes sense.

There's a terrace on the roof of the Dye Factory building, four storeys up, and the noise comes not from kids but from hyped-up adults. The competition, I suppose. To win, I'm going to have to join them up there, flirt better, pretend better. I close my eyes, try to picture the eddies of the River Thames only streets away, to calm myself.

I hear the fast whir of wheels. Open my eyes to see a cyclist in a black hoodie speeding towards me on the narrow strip of pavement.

Fast. *Too fast.*

He's heading straight for me.

My body freezes. Breath leaves my lungs.

Wake up, Immi. Don't be a victim! Act.

My hand goes to the pocket I've sewn into my dress and my fingers close around the wooden handle of the small hunting knife.

I twist out of the way, moments before he ploughs into me, but one of the heels on my smart shoes catches between the cobbles and I trip over, my ankle twisting under me and my two bags and the knife falling onto the stones.

'Shit!'

I reach for the knife first, as the bike stops millimetres from my body. Next I grab my handbag. He's welcome to the tote bag, it's got nothing in it except Year 6 exercise books.

'Get away from me!' I shout. 'Don't hurt me!'

I brace myself for a blow. But instead of trying to grab my stuff, he pulls the hoodie down to reveal his face. Not some thieving teenager, but a man my age. Handsome, too, like a young Idris Elba.

'I don't wanna hurt you!' He sounds almost as freaked out as I do.

I get to my feet, nerves shot, body still primed for fight or flight.

'Pavements are for bloody pedestrians.'

He shrugs. 'I didn't actually hit you, you fell.'

'You were going too fast. If there's CCTV, you could be fined for what you just did.'

He looks alarmed, as though I'm *actually* going to call the police for something so trivial. 'I said sorry.'

He turns away from me, lifting up his bike, and presses the entryphone button for the Dye Factory. When a female voice answers, he says, 'Hi, I'm Dex. Dex Shepherd, here for the interview?'

I cringe. He's here for the room, too. And he's a perfect candidate: good-looking, sporty, with a silly name.

My reaction seems ridiculous now. What if he saw the knife before I grabbed it back? At three inches, the blade is just short enough to be legal – that's why I bought it – but it's not something I want people knowing about.

The lock hums, and he pushes the Factory doors open, carrying that fancy bike over the threshold with just two fingers. Titanium, like the outrageously expensive one Al bought for himself, but never used.

I step towards the door.

Dex turns sharply, wariness in his eyes. 'Oh. You're here for the same reason as me, I guess?'

'Yes,' I say.

I am thinking: *But I need this more.*

2

The door closes behind us and I hear the electronic lock engage, trapping us inside. I can never relax somewhere new until I've worked out the escape route.

The lobby is dark till Dex finds a switch and the light blinds me momentarily. The wall lamps are made of vintage medicine bottles, labelled 'sulphuric acid' and 'calcium hydroxide'.

Ahead of us is a wide, brick staircase and a Victorian lift with concertinaed iron shutters. The floorboards would merit their own account on Instagram, they're so artfully scuffed and dented. To the side, there's a heavy timber door with the word 'Focus' chiselled into the wood.

'They didn't lie about this place, did they? It's sick.'

Sick? That's a word even my geekiest pupils have stopped using, but I guess super-cool Dex has been overcome with excitement. It makes me like him a little more.

But not enough to let him win.

'Yeah, it's right on-trend,' I say, becoming Immi the Perfect Millennial Flatmate. I press the call button for the lift. Next to the cage, there's a distressed steel cabinet with pigeonholes for post, labelled with the names of cities I could never afford to visit:

Buenos Aires

Lima

Kyoto

Bali
Warsaw
Paris
Marrakech
New Delhi.

The pigeonholes have sushi flyers in them, except Kyoto and Marrakech, which are empty.

‘Those must be the two rooms they want to fill,’ Dex says as he locks his bike to the bannister.

‘Two? They didn’t mention that to me.’ The emails I’ve had from Hanna, the admin person, have been blunt and brief, in contrast to the original, chatty advert on Spareroom.com.

We step into the lift together. The shutters have to be pulled all the way across, like prison bars, before it’ll move. There are four enamel buttons to choose from, marked ‘Focus’, ‘Nourish’, ‘Retreat’, ‘Play’. Dex presses Play, the top one.

As we move up, I catch tantalising glimpses of the building through the bars. First, a glass ceiling underneath us shows what lay behind the Focus door: bookshelves, reading chairs, standing desks and the biggest video-conferencing screen I’ve ever seen.

Next comes Nourish, with the kind of pro-kitchen you see on cooking shows.

Retreat has beanbags, yoga mats and soft lighting.

‘I guess the studios must be behind those doors,’ Dex says, pointing towards the front of the building.

‘Studios?’ I repeat, wondering what might be filmed here. But then I remember that’s what they call the bedrooms. The ad described them as small but well-equipped, all en suite. *We want you to love your neighbour*, the application pack said, *so it helps not to share a bathroom with them.*

The lift stops at Play. The party voices are much louder now, but there's only one person waiting for us as we slide the shutter open.

'Hi, I'm Lucas,' he says, holding his arms out like a showman. 'Welcome to the Dye Factory.'

Is he a threat? If in doubt, always assume the worst.

Lucas is my age, a little taller than me, with floppy brown hair and shrewd eyes that wrinkle at the outside corners, as though he's still laughing at a joke made before I got here. He wears suit trousers and a light-blue shirt that looks bespoke. A red rose sits in the chest pocket.

Dex steps out of the lift and reaches for Lucas's hand. 'Hey, I'm Dex.'

Lucas drops Dex's hand as though it's radioactive, and turns to face me. 'And who do we have here?'

'Immi Sutton,' I say. The handshake goes on a moment longer than I expected – it's Lucas who doesn't let go.

'A pleasure to meet you,' Lucas says with a wink. 'We had over three hundred applications for the two spaces, so you must be pretty special people to be down to the last dozen.'

Twelve people – so I have a one-in-six chance.

'Any hints on how we get selected?' Dex asks.

Lucas shrugs. 'Be yourself. Try to imagine if you'll be happy here. The Factory isn't for everyone.'

'I can't imagine anyone not digging this place; it's a hipster's dream,' Dex says.

The Play floor is stunning: a double-height vaulted ceiling above us, and a ladder to our right leading to a mezzanine suspended from the oak rafters. Over Lucas's shoulder, there's the inevitable table football game, plus an arcade-sized screen with

various consoles. Vegas-style lights spell out the word 'Play' on the brick wall, while a chandelier made of more medicine bottles hangs from the central beam.

'Some parts do look dated already, the place was made-over in 2010,' Lucas says. 'But the industrial chic fits the building's history. That light fitting is made from bottles of the poisons they used to tan and dye animal skins.'

'And the bedrooms?' I ask.

'*Studios*,' he corrects me and points at a row of doors on the right: Buenos Aires, Lima, Kyoto. 'Kyoto is up for grabs. Great space, though because it's got windows onto the roof terrace there can be noise when there's a party. The other free studio is Marrakech, on the Nourish level. You'll get a tour later, but let me take you outside, introduce you to the gang.'

He leads us towards the terrace. A woman's shape appears in the doorway, so slender that at first it looks like a trick of the light. But as she steps inside, I see her face and feel a jolt of recognition, followed by fear so powerful I want to turn and run.

Where do I know her from?

'Camille, meet our guests,' Lucas calls to her. As the woman crosses the room, her loose linen dress billows behind her like a shadow. Thick black hair skims her bare shoulders.

My handmade dress with its cheery print of Russian dolls was meant to look ironic. Next to her, I look ridiculous.

'Camille, this is . . .' Lucas seems to have forgotten already.

'Dex.' My rival reaches out to shake hands but instead, Camille brushes his wrist with her long fingers and turns to leave. He follows her outside without another word.

Lucas and I are alone. 'Shall I fix you a drink here? It's heaving on the terrace.' I follow him towards the bar, which is made of

railway sleepers and copper piping, with mint and borage plants growing up towards the ceiling. 'I work in the booze industry, so we have more kinds of gin than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'

I smile at the Shakespeare reference; perhaps he's testing me. 'Maybe Hamlet would have been chirpier if he'd had gin to see him through.'

Lucas laughs. It's a short, odd sound that bounces off the high ceiling. 'Take your pick. Though there's a lot to be said for good old Gordon's.'

'I'll have that, please.' I watch as he places two giant rocks of ice in balloon glasses then pours from the green bottle. He keeps looking at me, and I don't quite know what to do with my hands.

'A large one?'

I smile and he keeps pouring.

'Funny way to choose a flatmate, right?' He takes a lime from a bowl, and scythes off a long, flawless strip of zest with a knife at least as sharp as mine. 'But this isn't just a house share. It really is a community. We can't risk destabilising that by picking the wrong people.'

'How can you tell who the right ones are?'

'Well, we've made a few mistakes in the past. But we've learned from them. And Bernice – you'll meet her soon – she's been here from the start and she's very intuitive.'

He hands me the drink; the lime zest sits on the top of the ice in a perfect spiral.

'I'm only here as the charity chase,' I say. 'I'm a teacher.'

Lucas gives me a curious look, then pours his own drink, almost all gin, no more than a splash of tonic. 'It's not about

your job, it's about who you are. You've got the same chance as everyone else. Cheers.'

The gin feels like ice and fire as I swallow. 'Does having a giant chip on my shoulder rule me out?'

'No, but a sense of humour helps.' He sits on the arm of a weathered leather sofa, and I cradle my drink in both hands. 'Look, in a way, this whole party is all about you guys. So own it. Everyone who lives here already is wearing a red rose, to help you see who you should flirt with to win their vote.' He taps the flower poking out of his shirt pocket.

I swallow down a wave of nausea. 'Is that what it takes?'

He grimaces. 'Sorry, that wasn't very woke of me, was it? Charm, not flirtation. It'll be easier once the gin kicks in.'

'Charm comes more easily to some people. You've got buckets of it.'

Lucas laughs that cackling laugh again. 'Fine line between charm and sleaze, which I've been known to cross. But if it helps, you've got my vote. I prefer to live with women.'

'Maybe that did cross the line into sleaze,' I say. It's a risk, but he grins.

'Ha! See, you'll fit right in. Ready?' He reaches out his hand to escort me through. A friendly gesture? Or a contract: if I help you, will you do something for me?

No. As my therapist said till she was blue in the face, not all men are like that.

Lucas's skin is warm against my palm, which has been chilled by the glass.

'Two last tips, Immi, because I like you. One, think about what talents or skills you can bring to the Factory. So, I mix a

mean cocktail. One of the Dyers leads yoga, another fixes any IT problems we have.'

'Dyers?'

'It's an in-joke. We call ourselves Dyers, because we live in the Dye Factory. Better than residents, which makes us sound like we're in a mental hospital.'

'OK. I'll see if I can think of a hidden talent. And the other tip?'

'Give us a story in the interview.' He leans closer and I smell the juniper on his breath. 'Your best TED talk. Lay it on as thick as you like.'

'A *story*?'

'Tragic childhood, a brave fight against a glamorous but preferably non-contagious medical condition. To make us feel good about ourselves for picking you. The Factory loves lost souls.'

'Right. Thanks.'

As I step onto the terrace, preparing to face the opposition, I'm ready. Stories I *can* do. The truth would not help me at all.