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I Lick My Cheese

And Other Notes from the Frontline of Flatsharing

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Extract

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www.flatmatesanonymous.com



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Foreword

Most of us at some time in our life will share a flat with somebody we don't know as well as we think – perhaps as a student, leaving home for the first time, or maybe after coming out of a long relationship. It's a fact of modern life – a rite of passage even. If you have shared a flat with strangers or, more usually, friends, you will recognise the pattern: people who you think are perfectly normal can quickly turn out to be completely insane. Weird habits, idiosyncrasies and obsessions begin to emerge, such as a preoccupation with food labelling or an overzealous use of bleach. And then the notes start to appear.

These little notes range from the tedious to the ridiculous, the amusing to the downright disturbing. Each day can reveal a new issue or problem – and a new note.

As a designer, I'm fascinated by people's behaviour, particularly the way they express feelings and beliefs. A note can tell you so much about a person – from the choice of paper (the back of a fag packet or a pristine new sheet of A4), to the words underlined or put in capitals, to the drawings and doodles that illustrate their requests, demands and complaints. The notes capture everything from lunacy to genius.

Over the years a number of my own flatmates have resorted without embarrassment to the written word. One in particular seemed to communicate solely via notes. These notes became increasingly frequent and terrifying, soon escalating into a full-blown catfight – but one that was never openly discussed or even acknowledged. Small talk and general niceties were still exchanged in an apparently natural manner as we passed each other in the hall, but this was the same woman who frantically wrote on the back of a microwave-meal packet:

Please don't soak my stuff that's made out of wood – it bends and cracks them when the fibres get full of water. Cheers!

How to react to this? How to feel anything other than utterly baffled, if not unsettled?

As these silent brawls continued between us, ranging from the amount of space my food took up in the fridge to a mythological vendetta against a boyfriend of hers I had never met, I realised we were not alone in this note writing. Soon friends and acquaintances were telling me about ongoing fights involving messages such as:

Someone has eaten my pasta, I'm hungry.

and,

Out of my thirty multi-vitamins and iron tablets I have only had approximately fifteen. Unless you want to be blamed for me becoming anaemic I suggest that whoever has been taking them replace them.

Everyone seemed to be in the midst of either being accused or accusing others of thieving shampoo, squatting in cupboard space, *deliberately* clogging up toilets and other such weirdness.

As I researched further, I realised the most alarming and irritating were not the aggressive, accusing notes, but the instructive, even enthusiastic ones. I include within this category the flatmate who always left out cake and asked for comments on how to make it 'even more yummy'. If that wasn't nauseating enough, there was the friend's flatmate

who instead of writing notes just left photocopied extracts from the Bible around the house. And as for the shocking number of people who resort to *typing* their words of wisdom …

What does this all mean?

When you start to look into it, *everything* gets discussed through these notes. Love, anger, jealousy, food, hatred – they all feature. And not only is the subject matter random and strange, but so are the items that are written on: the back of a bill, in the margarine and, worst of all, on the walls in snot. But the one thing that links all the writers is the need to be heard without confrontation.

I started to collect these notes. As I did so, I realised that not only was this a way to get inside and snoop around people's flats, but it was a fascinating and intriguing way of getting inside their minds. Suddenly a book was emerging – one with secrets, fights and scandals, but all based on actual people and events. In some instances, this book champions those who just want the decent thing done, but I cannot deny that at times it is also a work of revenge. After all those years of torment and torture inflicted by the range of freaks, frumps and sometimes friends we've had to share our personal space with, here was a chance to fight back. But the note writers should not be too upset; after all, it is also a celebration of their work.

From the mundane to the ridiculous, these messages probably say more about the way we share our lives and relate to other people than a whole library of psychology studies. Behind those few words, scribbled in frustration, rage, desperation

and occasionally goodwill, lies a whole story. You could be pretentious and claim they're almost like poetry, or you could just say they're very, very funny and a little bit disturbing. Either way, I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I enjoyed collecting them. I should point out that not only did I receive the actual notes but often some (dodgy quality) photos of them in situ, so this is to forewarn you about some of the amateur photography in the book! If you feel that you have a note that is worthy of scrutiny, you can submit it to, and keep up to date with all new notes on: www.flatmatesanonymous.com

Go there and join the virtual flat.

I pay the rent. What do you do?

PARTIES, LIVING TOGETHER AND
OTHER NOTES FROM THE LIVING ROOM

The living room is a common room: a communal space full of people with nothing in common. Different creeds and cultures reluctantly come together over a soap or a TV dinner. TV is often the main hub of a living room but, unlike the edited 'reality' on TV, here all the fights are real and there is no off switch when you get sick of the puerile arguments.

My favourite notes come from situations where the living room has slowly morphed into another room – usually a bedroom – the scene of embarrassing clinches, boyfriends slowly becoming permanent fixtures on couches and other behaviour that should be reserved for rooms with locks. Talking of locks, when a living room starts being the popular venue for any type of personal grooming (see note on toenail clippings) you know that you have the potential catalyst for a flat meeting. Sadly, it is difficult to take a flat meeting at all seriously. Very rarely have I heard of this kind of organised discussion working well. In fact, the only time it seems to work is when interrogating, sorry, *interviewing* potential new flatmates; fresh meat to dissect and prod, this appears to be the one thing that can bring an otherwise fraught and disjointed flat household together.

I hang my head in shame even thinking about flatmate interviewing as I have found myself part of these character assassinations. The film *Shallow Grave* portrayed this scenario very well. It is horribly entertaining to watch your victim squirm as they attempt to sell themselves to you. There are some people you know you are not going to get on with almost immediately. It can be their smile, handshake or cheeky wink, but more often it is their hobbies that are the clinchers for straight rejection. I have personally rejected a perfectly nice

young gentleman from New Zealand. I wasn't totally impressed with his answers or aesthetics (shallow but true – if you are going to see them every day it is an added bonus if they are easy on the eye) but everything seemed to be going decently until he said that what he had really been looking for was somewhere with a huge dick. He continued through the noise of our all female household's jaws hitting the floor, telling us that there was nothing like a big dick and sunshine to make sure you slept well. It was only when he said that he could see why there weren't many big dicks in London to *lie on* that the penny dropped. Lie on? Where were these amazing creatures that you could lie on? Oh God, he means *deck*, a deck, oh, thank God, a deck, a sundeck. Our Kiwi gentleman looked baffled about why two potential flatmates had hurried out of the living room with wry smiles followed by muffled laughter. I was left to show our deck lover the door, explaining to him we would have a think and let him know once we had interviewed everyone who was interested in the room. I also pointed out that I too was disappointed that we didn't have a big dick in the flat.

Curiously, it is when the interrogators shift to being the interrogated that another flatmate-bonding moment occurs. As potential new recruits ask how much the bills are or comment that the facilities aren't very good, it is difficult not to become defensive of your humble communal areas. How dare a complete stranger turn her snooty nose up at your living space. The area you have despised and the people you have bitched about suddenly become your domain and your comrades. What is this viewer's problem with the living room? Don't they like the squatter on the couch or the toenail clippings? Don't they want to join our commune? Big decks to them.