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PERFECTION

VINCENZO LATRONICO

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Fitzcarraldo Editions

PRESENT

Sunlight floods the room from the bay window, reflects off the wide, honey-coloured floorboards and casts an emerald glow over the perforate leaves of a monstera shaped like a cloud. Its stems brush the back of a Scandinavian armchair, an open magazine left face-down on the seat. The red of that magazine cover, the plant's brilliant green, the petrol blue of the upholstery and the pale ochre floor stand out against the white walls, their chalky tone picked up again in the pale rug that just creeps into the frame.

The next picture is of the building's exterior, an Art Nouveau apartment block with acanthus leaf and citrus fruit cornices. The white render is all but invisible under layers of fluorescent graffiti, tattered posters and peeling paint. On the first floor, you can scarcely make out the stucco tympanums beneath the grime. The combination of turn-of-the-century luxury and raw modern grittiness lends a feeling of freedom and decadence, with a hint of eroticism. Some of the windows are boarded up with faded chipboard, but in others there are plants and string lights. An ivy cascades from a balcony onto the street below.

The kitchen is fitted out with glossy white subway tiles, a chunky wooden worktop, a double butler's sink. Open shelves are lined with blue and white enamel dishes and mason jars filled with rice, grains, coffee, spices. Cast-iron pans and olive wood ladles hang from a wall-mounted steel bar. Out on display on the worktop are a brushed steel kettle, a Japanese teapot and a bright red blender. The windowsill is filled with herbs growing in terracotta pots: basil, mint, chives, but also marjoram, winter savory, coriander, dill. Pushed against one wall is an antique marble-top pastry table and salvaged school

chairs. They are lit by an accordion wall-light mounted between a botanical lithograph of an araucaria and a reproduction print of a British wartime poster.

Next, the living room, where a jungle of low-maintenance, luxuriant plants shelter in the nook of the bay window: the lush monstera stretching its shiny leaves towards the outside world, a fiddle-leaf fig almost touching the ceiling from its huge faux-concrete pot, trailing ivies and hanging peperomia on display across two wall shelves, and string of pearls and Chinese money plants whose tangled foliage reaches all the way to the floor. In one corner, arranged on a collection of stools and upturned boxes, is a miniature forest of alocasias, giant euphorbias, weeping figs, downy-stemmed philodendrons, strelitzias and dieffenbachias. Through the French window you can make out a balcony with two chairs around a small table, a porcelain ashtray and some string lights.

The reverse perspective shows the rest of the room: a low sofa and Danish curved mahogany armchair upholstered in petrol-blue textured cotton; a herringbone tweed blanket; an exposed lightbulb with a twiddly filament hanging from a midnight-blue fabric cable; a black metal side table with past issues of *Monocle* and the *New Yorker* stacked beside a brass candle holder and a glass bowl filled with fruit. Next, a rolltop wooden sideboard displaying spider plant cuttings in glass jars of water, an avocado seed just starting to sprout, and a vinyl record player; two floor-standing speakers connected to an amplifier on a low wall shelf; above that, an LP collection with a few prized pieces facing outwards (a limited edition *In Rainbows*, a first edition Kraftwerk); a dracaena casting a shadow like a spindly hand; a Primavera Sound poster.

Tying it all together is a sandy-coloured Berber rug

with a fine geometric pattern. On either side of the room there are facing double doors, stripped but with the odd streak of pistachio paint still visible. The doors are closed, which gives the modest space a cosy, intimate, almost cramped feel. It is a room for low-lit, hushed conversations on winter evenings. But in the next picture, those same four doors, now wide open, offer a view of the connecting rooms, and the perspective is lengthened again by the line of the hardwood floorboards.

The room on the left is a home office set up for two. Inside it, a large, white melamine blockboard desk with hairpin legs is arranged as facing workstations: each holds a monitor, a wireless keyboard, an Anglepoise lamp and a pair of over-ear headphones in garish colours. One of the workstations has a seventies swivel chair with a moulded plywood seat, the other a wooden ergonomic kneeling chair with black upholstery. The back wall has floor-to-ceiling shelves lined with paperbacks and graphic novels, most in English, interspersed with illustrated coffee table books – monographs on Noorda and Warhol, Tufte's series on infographics, the Taschen history of typefaces, and another Taschen on the entryways of Milan. In place of bookends there are succulents in cement plant pots, a waist-level camera, a few boardgames – Scrabble, Risk, Catan. Over in one corner you can make out a router and an A3 printer.

There is only one picture of the bathroom, which has a single slit window but is nonetheless bright, thanks to all the reflective surfaces. A lush trailing ivy drapes itself across the window from the curtain pole, picking out the dazzling green of the mosaic floor tiles, which also run up the side of the inset bath. On a cylindrical cabinet with sliding doors the eye is drawn along a skyline of little bottles and vials, all by different brands but with similar

labels in white, pink or light grey, the names printed in lightweight sans-serif fonts.

On the opposite side of the living room there is a bedroom with an extra-deep double mattress resting on a tatami base. The headboard is hidden from view by four oversized pillows, and the duvet is spread with a vintage quilt, the only splash of colour among the creamy bed-linen, white walls and pale yellow tatami. There are two reading lights, one on either side of the bed – slim metal cylinders with more decorative bulbs; two symmetrical clothes stands on either side of an antique travel trunk; a yoga mat rolled up in one corner beside some dumbbells and a resistance band. All the pictures are brightly lit and in focus but one: it's of the same bedroom but now in semi-darkness, the curtains drawn, the walls streaked with that orangey light that filters into a room when you wake up late and the sun is already high, and maybe it's a Sunday, or maybe it's not.

The life promised by these images is clear and purposeful, uncomplicated.

It is a life of coffees taken out on the east-facing balcony in the spring and summer while scrolling *New York Times* headlines and social media on a tablet. The plants are watered as part of a daily routine that also includes yoga and a breakfast featuring an assortment of seeds. There is work to be done at a laptop, of course, but at a pace more befitting an artist than an office worker: between intense bursts of concentration at a desk there might be a walk, a videocall with a friend who has an idea for a new project, some jokes exchanged on social media, a quick trip to the nearby farmers' market. They are long days – altogether, the working hours probably exceed those of an office worker – and yet, unlike in an office, here no one is counting hours, because in this life work

plays an important role without being an obligation or burden. On the contrary, work is a source of growth and creative stimulation, the bassline to the tune of leisure.

But it is also a life with room for joy, which is clear from every little detail. The long days are followed by a mandatory hour offline to go out for a drink or flick through a magazine while curled up on the sofa, shielded from the cold. Beauty and pleasure seem as inextricable from daily life as particles suspended in a liquid.

And it is a happy life, or so it seems from the pictures in the post advertising the apartment for short-term rental at one hundred and eighteen euros a day, plus the fee to cover the Ukrainian cleaner, paid through a French gig economy company that files its taxes in Ireland; plus the commission for the online hosting platform, with offices in California but tax-registered in the Netherlands; plus another cut for the online payments system, which has its headquarters in Seattle but runs its European subsidiary out of Luxembourg; plus the city tax imposed by Berlin.

IMPERFECT

Reality didn't always live up to the pictures.

In the mornings it often would. Waking up, the sight of filtered light dancing on the walls would instantly put them in a good mood. Yesterday's clothes would be strewn over the clothes stands. Their phones, having charged overnight, would be glaring rectangles on the dusty covers of two open books with their spines facing up. They would check their emails and social media from bed, their faces blue from the backlit screens, looking like a young professional couple in Berlin, which is exactly what they were.

But the moment they set foot in the living room, that confidence would start to falter, like a previously clear voice on a phone losing signal.

The plants would be permanently caked in a thick layer of dust, which polish only seemed to attract more quickly. Streams of direct sunlight would fall on the floating dust motes, giving the impression the apartment had been shut up for years, but in winter it would be too cold to air it out because the windows were old and the radiators too small to keep the space heated. Only rarely did they muster the patience and resolve to clean the double-paned windows, which were covered in tiny constellations of milky smudges that would appear brighter as spring turned to summer.

Desk-sharing didn't suit them. He preferred working from the sofa, and her mugs, Post-its and pens had a habit of migrating to his side of the desk, where, to save time, they would also often eat lunch, leaving greasy stains on the white melamine. The dishwasher was too big for two people's dishes so they had bought a plastic dish rack which took up most of the worktop. An old towel had

been placed underneath it to protect the wood from even more water damage.

And then there were the things. Things absolutely everywhere: the chargers, the receipts, the bicycle pump, and the endless stream of forms and reminders that constituted German bureaucracy; the herpes cream, the tissues – fresh packs, used, or scraps that had been through the wash – the felt wool insoles, the sunglasses case, the odd glove they still hoped to match with its pair, the tangled earphones. Moving from room to room, their vision still hazy from sleep, they would take it all in at a glance, each new item on the list adding to a feeling of physical discomfort that was more than irritation – it bordered on distress.

Over the course of the day, more out-of-place objects and signs of slovenliness would enter their field of vision, breaking their concentration. They would come off a call or look up from a difficult email and see themselves from the outside, surrounded by leftover takeaways and scraps of paper, a bathrobe flung over the Danish armchair, and they would feel flawed, like impostors in a grown-up world that would have caught them out already had the webcam lens been any wider.

It wasn't order they so desperately craved, but something deeper and more essential. They lived in a country whose language they didn't speak, in a job with unclear boundaries and no fixed hours or base, and which was, to a great extent, subject to the whims of their clients and social media contacts. The environment where they slept and worked, and which they themselves had chosen and shaped, was the one tangible manifestation of who they were. That apartment and those objects weren't merely reflections of their personalities: they provided a foothold, in their eyes proof of a grounded lifestyle, which,

from another perspective (that of, say, their parents' generation) appeared loose. In itself, chaos could be joyful, creative; but in that context, it only seemed to signal impermanence.

These ideas weren't at the forefront of their minds every time they went to tidy up, but they did provide the background music when, each morning, they would painstakingly restore the apartment to its factory settings. Waiting for the coffee to brew, they would switch on the lamps in each corner of the room, plump the sofa cushions, fold the herringbone blanket, remove any mouldy fruit from the bottom of the large glass bowl and wash the mugs, or else shove them in the dishwasher. By the time they sat down for breakfast, all would be as it should be, and for ten unspoiled minutes they would sip their coffee, scrolling through their social media and newsfeeds, ready to start the day.

All that resplendent order would have begun to crumble by lunchtime under the strain of countless mundane tasks (the mail, their head cold, that urgent phone call), almost as if reality were fighting back to reassert its superiority.

Two or three times a year they would put more energy into their interventions. On those occasions – whenever they flew home to their southern European city for the holidays, or to escape the harsh northern winters – they would sublet the apartment for what was, even to them, an extortionate price. It was usually rented by tourists looking for an authentic experience of the city, many of them visiting from Anna and Tom's own country. In addition to the house keys, on arrival they would receive a note both friendly and exuding *savoir vivre*, listing farmers' markets and neighbourhood dining spots. Other times, though, it would be new arrivals to the city

needing a base while they searched for more permanent accommodation. Dealing with these guests never failed to remind them that they had made the right choice: in their email exchanges, Anna and Tom would warn the newcomers that prices in the city had risen sharply. If it was a permanent lease they wanted, they would need a decent level of German to wade through the complicated paperwork. Anna and Tom would put them in touch with online expat communities and occasionally invite them out for drinks, once they had found their own place. Some of them would end up joining their circle of friends – if they settled, if they survived the string of short-term sublets and their first winter.

Whatever the reason for their stay, it was crucial those guests got what they paid such a premium for: Anna and Tom's earning potential hinged on their satisfaction. And so, before leaving Berlin, they would devote several hours to taming reality to make it fit the images they had sold.

The bulk of these clean-up operations usually happened in the evenings because they tended to travel on the cheap, early morning flights. Having finished work for the day, they would pack their bags, then set about stuffing every last trace of reality into huge, clear storage boxes, which they then stacked one on top of the other in the attic. In would go the invoices and shoes, the beauty products, the mismatched plates they ate from (leaving the blue and white enamel ones for the guests). They would line up the glasses on the open shelves in the kitchen, clear their paperwork from the table, stock up the fruit bowl and refill the matching candleholders. Next, they would line up the barely opened magazines in the rack, stash their food in the cupboard, return the books left lying around to their shelves, and throw all their worn-but-not-dirty clothes to the back of the wardrobe. After

that they would print off the house instructions – wifi password included – and leave them and the welcome pack – lemons and fresh ginger, coffee, Club-Mate, Sekt – on the kitchen worktop. Finally, they would pre-fill the coffee maker to save time in the morning before leaving, which by that point would be in just four or five hours' time.

Waking up in the dark, they would turn on all the lights, hastily change the sheets and dump the dirty bedding and damp towels in the bathroom cabinet, then wash up their still warm espresso cups. With the boxes in the attic and their suitcases on the landing, they would do one last round of the place to make sure everything was in order before locking up. They would survey each room in silence: all those clear surfaces, all that free space, everything finally in its place in the violet light of dawn. For a few glorious seconds they would see their apartment just as they wanted it, perfectly superimposable onto the pictures.

Finally, they would dash to catch the airport bus, dark circles under their eyes and their suitcases clattering along the rutted streets of Neukölln.