

A conversation about life and standards  
between a sofa bed and an Italian coffee maker

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Stretcher

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**Alberto** is a convertible sofa bed. A typical roll-arm model covered with a loose blue fabric that falls right down to the floor. It gives him a slightly British look. He sits in a two-rooms rental flat in the old town of an mediterranean city.

**Bia** is an Italian coffee maker. She is called Bia for her resemblance to an actual Bialetti but she is in fact a brandless copy from a local store. She belongs to a large shared flat north of the Alps, where she has seen 23 housemates come and go. Despite her partially melted handle and stained aluminium, she remains the household favourite.

Alberto, who was manufactured a dozen years ago, and Bia, who has been in service for fifteen years (a mature age for any utensil or piece of furniture) have known each other for a long time. How did they meet? Online. They occasionally catch up on each other's daily lives and the passage of time. Here is their latest exchange.

Dear Alberto,

Summer is coming to an end, and for many people here the holidays are over. You can feel it in the city. People have a different energy. There's something harder. In the air. Or in those gestures which are clumsily over-weighted in the morning. The front door slams louder than when you come home in the evening. It's the resistance to starting up, before the oil of the hours soften the mechanism. I notice it a lot at home. They don't tighten me as hard (as a result I am dripping when the water starts to boil) but then they also slam me down harder on the hotplate.

It must still be warm at your place, I envy you.

Tell me about your guests!

My dear Bia,

I was just thinking about you! Yesterday, the apartment's moka pot was eventually replaced with a capsule machine. I knew the day would come. The 'kitchen' wasn't equipped for cooking anyway, so the hosts never really used it. You know, there are in total two frying pans (?), one spoon, a knife that doesn't cut, two mugs, a bowl and a glass. Now there are a few capsules in a small basket. It feels more like a hotel.

I have a lot of people coming and going, which means I go through the same clumsy motions all year long. People stay too briefly to adapt. Also, the apartment is dark, a bit cramped, and on top they must often slalom between suitcases sprawled on the floor. I, personally, am always handled with a special apprehension; my metal frame is a finger trap. You know how rusty I am; no one has ever unfolded me on the first try.

That overly energetic start you describe, I don't know if it's the same thing, but it reminds me of the clatter of cups, saucers and spoons that the waiter at the café downstairs lines up in a row, making the ceramic clack on the bar counter, then throws into the sink and replaces by others in a constant flow. I think the regular customers - whose movements are paradoxically so soft and gentle - somehow come to soak up this rhythm.

Is that what your life in a shared flat is like?

It is a lot less loud than you would imagine. They all have different rhythms but nowadays in the evening they retreat early to their respective rooms, I guess some just watch series. Here the real noise is visual, as we, the things, tend to quickly accumulate. I sometimes wonder, is white noise the true soundscape of democracy or its opposite?

My flat is the cheapest of the area on the platform, so I mainly get young people who walk a lot and sleep little. They roam the city to see as much as possible, to feel like they've made the most of their break. In the evening, slumped against my backrest, I hear them compare their step count. The only things they leave behind are the same tourist flyers, shop receipts and museum leaflets. All the rest, the furniture, me included, were just once placed there and deemed enough. I don't want to sound self-deprecating, but the Manhattan bridge framed poster was the company best effort at making it look like an actual inhabited flat... and nothing new came since then. The guests obviously don't care. For them the price and location matter, but it still annoys me to watch them accept so easily the appartement's fiction. It contrasts so starkly with the outside life.

I believe that it's the same process of letting go and compromising with yourself that allows you to do it for a weekend or for ten years, it's just that I can't decide whether it's a good or a bad thing. If I am honest with myself, I spit a decent coffee but with higher standards around I would have been gone long since.

Did I tell you I have this recurring dream of being discarded? I am thrown into this open-air dump facing the sea. It's a wasteland but... what a view! And there is a cute stray dog that huddle against me at night.

I would love to retire to this wasteland with you. Some stupid guy at a party once called our flat the city's doom box and it weirdly made me proud. The successive layers of artefacts carry the history of our place. Of course, not everything will

remain. Your best chance as an object is to find a spot that doesn't get in anyone's way. There is a sort of "survival of the fittest" logic that applies to us - the objects - but in a certain way also extend to the flatmates. Those who do not manage to leave a strong enough mark of themselves in the house through material traces or organisational decisions (nor cope with its at times frustratingly unintentional aesthetic) ... Those usually don't stay long. I am aware of my privileged housing situation; however, all this could change overnight. Some neighbours had bed bugs this winter. A relentless, nerve-breaking battle ensued for several months. They eventually got rid of them but almost everything was gone after the clean-up. I know I will be fine but my friend Josh, a cute diy untreated pine bed frame, is terrified. He's a perfect nesting substrate for the bugs. If so... he would be the first to go.

All around I just keep seeing things slowly receding, nibbled away bit by bit just like the salt eating my balcony. It is not just the salt but a larger political strategy. The temporary is the Trojan horse of the permanent. You unconsciously get used to it... and one day it was just already there. I am glad to have you to talk to. I can't have these discussions with the other things in my flat, they are so superficial.