

## **Jack's Room**

*Morgan Nunan*

You would be taking Jack's room. We still call it Jack's room since our old housemate (Jack) was the last to live in there, though as I mentioned on the phone it's been empty for some time. Obviously were you to move in, it would become your room. That goes without saying. Though from time to time we may, out of habit, unintentionally refer to the space as Jack's room. This is nothing personal — and of course we would expect such lapses to reduce as you become more entrenched in our home.

To be clear, nothing of Jack's property remains. The room has undergone a thorough clean. The carpets were twice vacuumed and shampooed. We wiped down the walls and the built-in wardrobe, and Maggie (my girlfriend) used her mum's steam cleaner on the windows. We did all this quite recently, but there was also a professional deep clean some months ago, arranged and paid for by Andy, the landlord (nice guy, easy enough to deal with). So, in terms of cleanliness of the room? Nothing to worry about there.

You asked about the emphasis on youth in our advertisement. Basically, we're looking for someone under fifty years of age. I realise that kind of range stretches notions of youthfulness and maybe I was a little defensive when you pointed this out on our call since I'm early forties myself (though Maggie is twenty-eight and I feel that sort of evens us out) — but really the emphasis on youth was there to avoid a situation we had with our last housemate (Jack), who basically catfished us in terms of age (he was a good forty years older than the birthdate on his rental application). While it mostly worked out with Jack, who, aside from the age thing, was a much better prospect than the other applicants, there were some issues we'd prefer to avoid with our next housemate.

At this point I should tell you straight up that Jack died in the available room. It was basically natural causes (to be clear, Jack was very old), and I only mention it since we (Maggie and I) feel we should be transparent. The situation with Jack dying is the main reason the room has stayed empty for so long and why we continue to associate it so closely with his memory (i.e. 'Jack's room'). So on our call, when I said our last housemate was in a better place? There was a double meaning which you can now appreciate. I also apologise for laughing at that point. That

was rude. Obviously, were you to move in, we wouldn't be the type of housemates who withhold crucial context required to be in on a joke. Were you to move in, you'd be in on all our jokes. We would insist on that. (Maggie was nodding as I read the preceding line aloud.) Although to be clear: on this occasion a joke was not really intended (we're not the type of people to laugh at the misfortune of others, certainly not at something so traumatic as Jack's ghastly demise) — this was more like nervous laughter that follows a slip of the tongue. I realise you probably didn't notice any laughing since at the time I'd held the phone to my chest, but I thought I would address it anyway in case the muffled sounds made you think we kept unusual pets or suffered from a neurological disorder (to our knowledge, we do not).

In saying that, I think I did mention our cat, Perdita. I know a pet cat is not unusual, but Perdita is a rescue and I like to forewarn people about her missing leg (a birth defect) and her obsession with leaving spiders at our bedroom door. She's also got this high-pitched squeal which you will mostly find adorable and, in any event, only hear when someone forgets to feed her (usually Maggie when I need to work late). We sometimes walk Perdita in a pram across the road and around the park and you would be welcome to do so as well (the pram folds up and is stored behind the door in the laundry). Though to be clear, there would be no obligation.

You asked about meals and I should clarify that Maggie and I have tended to do our own thing because Jack didn't really eat solids. Although occasionally Maggie would blend some leftovers for Perdita (Perdita is missing most of her teeth) and if Jack was interested, we would leave spare for him. As irregular as it was, we enjoyed eating together as a household: Maggie, Perdita and I; Jack and his pet cockatoo Ozzy, a beautiful bird Jack rescued one day from the park across the road.

We think Ozzy was an escapee from the local pet shop by the north side of the park. You might have heard about the incident. Basically, activists broke into the shop to free some illegally imported chinchillas hidden in the back and in the process a bunch of birds and animals escaped into the park. Before they could be recovered a local family of foxes, as well as some cats and dogs (many of them feral), essentially had a feeding frenzy. Mostly they went for the little ducklings and the Belgian hares, as well as the juvenile parrots (lorikeets and budgerigars, I think), and at least one turtle was taken, a fifty-year-old Mary River turtle named Willoughby. Luckily, we don't let Perdita outside without a leash as apparently a guy from the floor below had his pet cat

(Morpheus) put down by the council after they traced a string of carcasses to his front door. About a week later Jack was sitting in the park and he came across this cockatoo which must have been domesticated because it knew a lot of swear words and was incredibly affectionate. Probably he should have handed the bird to the RSPCA, but at least Ozzy was saved from the pet massacre still ongoing at the time.

I mention this only to tell you straight up that Ozzy also died in the available room. Unfortunately, there was some delay before we realised Jack had passed. By then, Ozzy couldn't be saved. It sounds bad but it wasn't unusual for us to go many days without seeing Jack or Ozzy. I work a lot (as you know, I'm the manager at the Hotel Sofia, on the opposite side of the park) and Maggie will often spend time at her parents' place or at the university library. Even the smell wasn't an immediate giveaway if we're being honest. You may not have experience with this (we definitely didn't before Jack), but at a certain age the human body (the internal organs, particularly the digestive system) begins to noticeably decay — and so we were in the habit of placing a little Vaseline in our nostrils while in the apartment. Probably this was why we didn't notice anything too unusual, even though paramedics ranked it as one of their all-time worst calls in terms of odour (the unseasonal heatwave was probably a contributing factor). Ordinarily Jack left enough food and water in Ozzy's cage to last weeks, but he'd just started the bird on a strict diet, recommended by a local vet, to combat Ozzy's morbid obesity and propensity to self-harm.

The good news is the coronial inquest is now complete and Jack's room will no longer be the subject of evidence in legal proceedings. The entire process was actually quite stressful. There were some unfortunate allegations of animal neglect and elder abuse, which were mostly cleared by the toxicology reports. As it turned out, Jack and Ozzy were long-term addicts; camel tranquilisers, mainly. (Like us, you were probably only familiar with horse tranquilisers. According to the medical expert, they are basically the same except camels — due to something with the humps, water composition, etc. etc. — require stronger sedation.)

However, it took longer to disprove accusations contained in a draft screenplay found among Jack's belongings. While we were never able to read the work in its entirety, extracts admitted into evidence suggest the basic plot centred on an elderly man trapped in an inner-suburban apartment with a younger couple who would exclude him from jokes, feed him cat food, and sometimes leave spiders at his doorstep. This was our main motivation for excluding creatives

from joining the household. Obviously, Maggie and I appreciate the autonomy of a creative work, the perils of the biographical fallacy, the necessity of art drawing from life etc. etc. — it's just that taken literally and in the context of a wrongful death investigation, this screenplay caused us a lot of problems which we never want repeated.

That hopefully explains why I was a little defensive and perhaps slightly rude when you mentioned you're a musician. I appreciate things got a little heated and both of us, I assume, would've liked to have handled ourselves differently. For example, I apologise for what I said about your mother. I'm hopeful the comment carried little weight given I never knew her, but I was still very sorry to hear she'd recently passed. I also regret some of the language I used, which I appreciate is likely to be considered offensive in certain contexts. That kind of outburst was completely out of character and Maggie and I do not condone it, not even in response to some cutting comments you made about my speech impediment.

After you ended the call and I went for a cold shower, I realised I didn't have a chance to address all your queries about the room. Hopefully, those are now straightened out. You also mentioned in your latest email (the one copied to your solicitor, Ms Selden) that you have a recording of our conversation which you plan to share with my employer (Mr Barth at the Hotel Sofia). I really don't think that's necessary. Maggie and I have been reflecting overnight and we now agree that a musician is really in a completely different category from a writer; that it was rash of us to come to such a hasty conclusion on your application; that we very much regret the various misunderstandings between us. We would like to offer you the room (Jack's room) if you are still willing to accept.

Were you to move in, Maggie and I would simply prohibit our respective names or likenesses from appearing in any musical work without our consent. Also, to the extent your musical instruments or rehearsals require greater use of common areas in the apartment, there would obviously be some necessary increases in rent. Of course, this can all be sorted out on your scheduled visit. We remain available this weekend.

**Morgan Nunan** is a writer based in Adelaide. His writing has been published by a number of Australian literary journals and arts institutions, including *Australian Book Review*, *Cordite Poetry Review* and the Art Gallery of South Australia.