



Pat stood nervously at the door, reading the names underneath the buttons until she saw the name she was looking for: Anderson. That would be Bruce Anderson, the property surveyor, the person to whom she had spoken on the telephone. He was the one who collected the rent on the flat and paid the bills. He was the one who had said that she could come and take a look at the place and see whether she wanted to live there. She really wasn't sure. 'And we'll take a look at you now,' he had added. 'If you don't mind'.

So now, she thought, she would be under inspection, assessed for suitability for a shared flat, weighed up to see whether she was likely to play music too loud or have friends who would damage the furniture. Or, she supposed, whether she would get on anyone's nerves. She pressed the bell and waited. The door was rather shabby, needing a coat of paint to cover the scratches. Well, this street was on the edge of the fashionable part of Edinburgh. With a sense of anxiety at having to do this every day, she climbed up four flights of stairs to reach the top landing where there were two flats, one with a dark green door and another painted blue. As she stepped onto the landing, the blue door opened and she found herself face-to-face with a tall young man, probably three or four years older than herself and wearing a rugby jersey. 'I'm Bruce,' he said. 'And I take it you're Pat.'

He smiled at her and gestured her to come into the flat. That was encouraging. 'I like the street,' she said. 'I like this part of town. It's central and it seems quiet.' He nodded.

She followed him into the living room, a large room with a marble fireplace on one side and a rickety bookcase against the opposite wall. She glanced with distaste at the sofa, which was covered with a faded material stained with spills of tea or coffee. It was typical of the sofas which one found in shared flats; sofas that had been battered and humiliated and which would, on cleaning, disgorge copious sums in change and ballpoint pens and other bits and pieces dropped from generations of pockets.

Bruce then showed Pat the vacant room in the flat and it brought home to him how messy and lazy Anna had been. He had asked her to clean the room before she left – he had asked at least twice – and she had assured him, twice, that it would be done. But he should have known that she did not mean it, and now, looking at the room with a visitor's eyes, he saw what she had done. The middle

of the carpet had been vacuumed and looked clean enough, but everywhere else looked dirty and neglected. The bed had large balls of dust under it as well as a collapsed stack of magazines. A glass of water, with lipstick stains on the rim, had been left on the bedside table. She had moved out a week ago and he should have checked, but he had always hated going into the room when she was there and her presence somehow lingered. So he had left the door closed and tried to forget she had ever lived there.

Pat stood still for a moment. There was a musty odour in the room. She moved over to the wardrobe and reached out to open it. Bruce drew his breath. Anna had probably left it full of her dirty washing. That was just the sort of thing she would do; like a child really, leaving clothes on the floor for an adult to pick up.

'That's a wardrobe,' he said, hoping she would not try to open it. 'I'll clean it out for you. It might have some of her stuff in it.'

Pat hesitated. 'She didn't keep the place very clean, did she?' she said.

Bruce laughed. 'You're right. We were all pleased when she moved to Glasgow. I encouraged her. I said the job she had been offered sounded just fine. A real opportunity.'

'And was it?' Pat asked. Bruce shrugged.

'She fancied herself getting into television journalism. She had been offered a job making tea for some producer. Great job. Great tea possibilities.'

It was settled. Pat agreed to move in and would pay rent from the following Monday. The room was not cheap, in spite of the musty smell and the general dinginess. 'You have got a job, haven't you?' Bruce asked tentatively. 'The rent...'

She assured him she would pay in advance, and he relaxed. He showed Pat to the door and gave her a key. 'You can bring your things over anytime.' He paused. 'I think you are going to like this place.'

Pat smiled, and she continued to smile as she made her way down the stairs. The flat was exactly what she wanted. And Bruce seemed fine. In fact he reminded her of a cousin who had also been



keen on rugby and who used to take her to pubs on international nights and sing loudly and kiss her beerily on the cheek. Men like that were very unthreatening. They tended not to be moody or make emotional demands. Not that she envisaged ever becoming involved with someone like that, no matter how good-looking he was.

He was not sure about this new girl. She was not going to be any trouble. She could pay the rent and he knew she would keep the room clean. He had seen her look of concern about the state of the room and that had been a good sign. But she was a bit young and that might be a problem. The four years that separated them were crucial ones, in Bruce's mind. It was not that he had no time for twenty-year-olds. It was just that they talked about different things and listened to different music. He had decided that Pat was not his type. She was attractive enough, he reflected, although she would not necessarily turn his head in the street. Comfortable, perhaps, was the word. Undisturbing. Average.

*Perhaps she would be worth a little attention. He was, after all, between girlfriends now that Laura had gone to London. They had agreed he would go to London every month but it had not worked out. He had been unable to find the time and she had been most unreasonable about it, he thought.*

*'If you cared anything about me, you would have made the effort,' she had said. 'But you don't and you didn't.'*

*He had been appalled by the unfairness of this attack. There had been very good reasons why he could not go to London, apart from the expense, of course. There was a rugby international that weekend and if she thought he was going to miss that just to go to London for a weekend then she was going to have to think again. Which she did.*

*Bruce turned and, as he did so, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, and smiled. 'Terrific!' he said, unbuttoning his rugby shirt. 'That looks just terrific!'*

*It was a favourite mirror of his, full length, which made it possible for him to inspect the benefits of his regular sessions at the gym. Very satisfactory, he thought.*

From '44 Scotland Street' by Alexander McCall Smith, Birlinn Limited