

The apartment from hell

Sociology



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The Apartment from Hell!

Rick, a special friend of the family, is a very humorous fun loving friend, and lives in China in a place called Wuxi. His apartment is something that none of us here in the West can envisage and befits the charge of the 'apartment from hell'. In fact, I can count a dozen ways his Chinese apartment has tried to kill him. The time the light bulb in the bathroom exploded, detonating glass directly at eye level height, was a particularly good one, as was the bubbling sewage effervesce that once poured out of his kitchen sink. Electric plugs hanging by a thread out of the wall, burning hot water pipes in the bathroom, a blazing gas stove, a permanently dark, dusty and ominously steep staircase, and light covers made of glass that slip and break unexpectedly - usually over his bed with him in it or in the middle of the night, sounding like a firework's factory has just ignited.

Fortunately, he told me once in a letter, his reflexes are fast because they were magnificently trained and developed for such contests and challenges when he was a teenager. He had a particularly psychotic friend who took pleasure in the quest of trying to stab him with compasses and throw cats at him. "Once you've ducked a whirling ball of clawing death a few times, you become finely tuned to danger", I quote him.

One advantage of living in China, however, is that you can at least get things fixed easily. An excess of cheap labor means that, unlike here in the West, "plumbers and electricians don't cost more an hour than lawyers" he once wrote. Unfortunately, cheap and capable however, do not seem to go hand in hand; he has had handymen that "don't know a hammer from a hand-saw", and plumbers who seem flummoxed by anything even slightly more difficult than "plunge, plunge, repeat". "Even I, with all the practical skills of an
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elderly university professor, was still able to suggest more options than them”, he emanates.

The toilet in his apartment fascinates me in particular, because he tells me that it is the first one he has ever had in China that he can flush toilet paper down “ without risking a blockage the size of the Three Gorges Dam”, his words not mine. Sometimes, he tells me, he just sits there, hypnotized, watching the paper spirally down.

His last apartment became home to a particularly large and active ant colony; which marched in steady formation through his front door to pillage his kitchen. He tried to divert them into his neighbor’s house by leaving a steady stream of crumbs, but they had grown used to familiar ground and were not going to be put off by his tiresome tricks. “ Some of the little BLEEPs!” have now reappeared in his new apartment; since he lives on the twenty-eighth floor, he can only assume that they stowed away and migrated to his new apartment via his luggage.

At least, he says, his apartment looks secure; it lies within a compound with its own little regiment of security guards; dressed in their surplus army coats and peaked caps, he claims they look quite frightening, from a distance at least, but when you get closer you realize they are gawky countryside boys and not in the least fearsome. He can personally testify that at the first sign of trouble they turn their heads and lurk in the back, pretending they cannot see anything. Yes, I’m sure he feels safe and loves his apartment – otherwise why would he still be there?