

Ruth Spencer

## Living alone is living the dream – but it can be a nightmare too

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Six months ago, I broke up with my boyfriend of five years. He left – packed his clothes, took the bench he made for our dining room table, and moved out of the 650-square-foot Brooklyn apartment we shared for three years. I stayed behind. I'd always wanted to live alone, and I never had.

5     Until that moment, my life had always been shared with others. I grew up with a single mother, and I spent my twenties living with various arrangements of best friends who treated my room like a giant ashtray.

10     This, I figured, was going to be my time. I had visions of returning from work to my perfect, undisturbed space, smoking the occasional cigarette (just one), drinking the occasional drink and falling asleep in crisp sheets with my book propped up beside me in place of a man. I was going to keep my apartment clean. I was going to finally hang that macrame plant and re-decorate my living room. I was going to own my time – and fill it. I looked forward to the silence of solitude, the chance to concentrate instead of entertain.

15     Well, six months later, it turns out that visions and reality are not the same thing. The macrame is still in a ball by the window, most nights I need melatonin to fall asleep no matter how much I read, and the drinks rarely stop at one. The ideal of the single life that I'd used to push me forward, I've discovered, is a myth. The reality is much more lonely, and much less graceful.

20     I should have known if living alone was ever easy, it certainly isn't now. The world just isn't set up for it: we are more connected with people than we've ever been – our days are flooded with text messages and emails and status updates. Not that it's doing us any good. We are lonelier than ever, and yet here I was choosing to live in a room of one's own. [...]

25     And the quiet I thought I would love? I can't stand it. I get home from work and jump on the phone. I log on to Skype. I turn on the TV or the radio or a podcast immediately. As for redecorating, let's just say it's taking me a while, and the process isn't exactly elegant. Recently, I tried to hang a painting and dropped a hammer on my toe.

It feels lonely. Like when I come home after a trip, my half-empty water glass still sits, exactly as it was, at the edge of the sink (shouldn't it be washed by now?). No one has borrowed my sweater without telling me, or wondered why I got home so late, but no one is there to say Hi! Welcome back! either. It's just dusty and silent and strange. [...]

30     I guess I thought that the "room of one's own" tales were true – that solitude and space were what I needed to discover who I am, to unleash some sort of perfect version of myself that I thought I needed to be happy.

35     As it turns out, that perfect version is further away than ever. I realized this last week when I tried to toss my suitcase 10 feet in the air to land on a shelf in my closet, only to miss and send it crashing into my favorite plant instead.

But later that evening, when I was cleaning up the dirt on the floor, I found myself doing something slightly surprising: eyeing my macrame plant with intent. And for the first time it

40 occurred to me that discovering I don't actually want to revel in<sup>1</sup> the sound of my silent apartment, or that I don't love every second of my solitude, wasn't a waste of time. It doesn't matter that I'm not perfect. I want to hang my macrame, and I think I'm finally going to do it. Right after I've listened to this podcast.

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<sup>1</sup> *revel in*: nyde i fulde drag