

TOM COVERDALE

Detergent

Anyone who lives in a rooming house lives in a rooming house for a reason. With Room 8 the reason was obvious and it was only a matter of time before the Office kicked him out. He was Caucasian, approximately 155cm and 75kg, early thirties, with a prominent jaw. Eye colour unknown due to the baseball cap pulled low on his brow. Under that cap there were police and magistrates, psychologists, doctors, family and fellow roomers. He would curse them all aloud, day and night, keeping people awake. To judge by the way he swore at his mother, she was the one who had the most advice for him.

Cleaning seemed to keep her quiet. He would slam his door at unpredictable times, and emerge from his room cursing. He would return with cleaning spray and Chux wipes or a bucket and sponge. On Sunday 5 July 2015, at 7.50 a.m., he left his room, slamming his door, to put on a load of washing and it was shortly after that I smelled detergent. When I came out of my room to go to the toilet at 8 a.m., I saw he had emptied a bottle of laundry detergent into a bucket and he was mopping the floor of the bathroom with a rag and no water. I had to hold my breath against the stink of detergent. Back in my room, I stuffed a sausage against my door and opened the window.

When he was finished mopping the bathroom, he shouted, “Happy now, Kaye?”

It was a Kaye who deposited him in the rooming house two months prior, on 7 May 2015. A Caucasian woman, late fifties, with a face like a slapped arse, and a way of talking through her nose— even more than most Australian women. When she rang up on Sundays it sounded as if she was speaking to you through two tin cans and a vibrating string. She would ask for Room 8 and then say, “It’s his mother.” Hence I believe Kaye to be his mother.

Evidently his mopping didn’t satisfy Kaye, because he started on the kitchen.

She did seem to stop when he had finished the kitchen. But at 11.40 a.m. she came back. Through the wall between our rooms I heard him shout, “Stop naggin’! Fuckenol bitch!”

Then his door banged again. He stomped to the laundry and rammed in coins to do the same load of washing a third time. Shortly after that I went to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. The floor was dangerously slippery with detergent.

I saw Room 8 through the kitchen window. He was on his hands and knees, mopping the concrete under the clothesline in the back yard with laundry detergent. It was too cold to

open the window, but I had to because the smell of detergent in the kitchen was overpowering.

The water from the tap was so cold it took a long time to heat. I threw camomile flowers in the saucepan and let them go soft. My brother posts them from Poland, wrapped in a few layers of newspaper, every couple of months. The news is old but you cannot get camomile flowers so fresh in Melbourne. We miss each other, my brother and I, but neither of us can afford to fly, and it is better I do not go back.

I stayed close to the stove and spread the newspaper pages to read while I waited for my tea. It annoyed me that I could not smell the camomile due to the stink of detergent. Shortly before midday, I proceeded back down the passage to my room. On the way, I passed Room 4.

Room 4 is Caucasian, approximately 170cm and 90kg, late fifties with white hair and beard and blue eyes. He has his own preoccupation with cleanliness, but I understand him better. He keeps his room, his clothes, and himself as tidy as his corner of a barracks dormitory.

He stuck his head out the back door and said, "Excuse me, when will you be finished with the washing machine? I need to do my laundry."

Room 8 shouted, "Fuck off, Santa!"

Two roads led Room 4 to a rooming house: altitude and alcohol. In the drunkalog at Footscray Methodist AA he has revealed that he became addicted to hypoxia flying without an oxygen mask as a mechanic on Neptunes and Orions. The pilot and co-pilots wore masks above 6000 metres, but the mechanics did not. He said, "After my brain was stolen by planes, the Air Force kicked me out", and so he drank to get himself back up there where he loved to be. A Polish alpinist once told me that if you want to know what it feels like to be starved of oxygen, get drunk: the effect of alcohol is to deprive the brain of oxygen.

Room 4 talks and giggles to himself behind closed doors, and his premises are sometimes paranoid, but he goes to the AA meetings more religiously than me, and when he talks to a meeting he is clear and precise. He belongs to an amateur theatre troupe.

I don't understand much of what Room 8 does, but I thought I could partly understand him telling Room 4 to fuck off. Room 4 hasn't been here long, but he's already saying things like, "Hullo, what's going on here?" when someone has made a mess in the kitchen.

At 1.10 p.m., when the washing machine had spun to a stop, Room 4 emerged. I passed the laundry on my way back from the toilet. He had a basket half-full of underpants—nothing else in it, just white Y fronts. He was taking out Room 8's wet clothes and dumping them in Room 8's basket so he could wash his underpants.

Shortly after that, Room 8 remembered his washing and came inside. At 1.20 p.m. I passed the laundry on my way to the kitchen and he was standing there with the lid up, watching Room 4's underpants rocking back and forth. When I came back from the kitchen he was still there, muttering.

I don't think he likes other people touching his washing. It's true that with some of the people in this place, you don't like to think where their hands have been. The woman in Room 8 before him used to wet the bed and lie in it all day. She would walk around in her nightie, stinking of piss and wine, touching things in the kitchen. The lady at Western Community Housing had to be called about her. You can still smell it, though not as strongly, when Room 8 opens his door.

People who live in rooming houses feel dirty one way or another. Even me. After 1990, most Warsaw Pact countries brought in "lustration" policies. The word comes from the Latin noun *lustratio*, "a cleansing" or "ritual purge". In Poland, lustration started late: the Institute for National Remembrance was put in charge of it only in 2007. If you were part of the old regime, you had to write a lustration statement. If you lied on your statement and someone dobs you in they can sack you or lock you up. But if you tell the truth or stay out of Poland they seem to leave you alone.

At 1.30 p.m., while I was still in the kitchen heating my soup, the back door slammed. Through the window I saw Room 8 take his washing out to the line. A few minutes after that the door slammed again and he stomped down the passage and banged on Room 4. The door opened.

Room 8: "Where's my fucken shirt?"

Room 4: "I didn't take your shirt. What kind of shirt is it?"

Room 8: "Green T shirt."

Room 4: "I didn't take your shirt!"

Room 8: "What are you doin' goin' through a man's clothes?"

Room 4: "I took your laundry out, if that's what you mean. I'm sorry if you're unhappy, but you've been doing the same load of laundry all day."

I stepped into the corridor, in case a witness was needed. Room 8 had adopted an aggrieved, belligerent stance: one foot in front of the other, arms spread, palms out, chest out, chin out, the brim of his cap aimed at Room 4's chest. Room 4 was staring at the floor, shaking his head.

Room 12's door opened around the corner, and room 5's floorboard creaked as she came to her peephole.

Room 8 said, "Fuck!" and punched the wall.

A plane came over, drowning out the next part of the exchange.

Room 8 hitched his shoulder and spun on one heel and went outside again.

When the plane had passed, Room 4 shook his head and said in a theatrical voice, "Why would I take his shirt? Where would I wear it?"

While I waited for the water to come to the boil, I read the Polish newspaper articles. Lately there have been a few people caught lying on their lustration statements. One of them

was my old boss. On the front page of *Rzeczpospolita* of 14 May 2015, his photo was above the headline “Lustration Liar”. The article said, “Witold Filipowski, former head of the Służba Bezpieczeństwa, the communist secret police, was dismissed from his senior position at the Institute for National Remembrance yesterday after he was caught shredding sensitive secret police files in his office at the Institute.”

It seems to me they can't be too serious about lustration if they let the former head of the secret police work for the organisation charged with ridding the government of Reds. In spite of Filipowski's shredding and my own earlier efforts, there are still 82 km of secret police files standing side-by-side in manila folders in the Institute's archive. Most of them the historians haven't even opened yet, according to the papers.

Strange to think of Filipowski still destroying files, twenty-five years later. The week before I got over the border into Czech, as the Communist government fell, it was him who ordered us to clear out the archives. We did our best, but there were literally millions of the manila folders. Between August 1989 and February 1990 we had the shredders working day and night. As the students gathered to storm the Party buildings, we shovelled files off trolleys into the basement furnace under Kochanowskiego Street. Among them the files of the seventy-six informers I'd handled: members of Solidarity, recruited by me, betraying everything that went on inside their sanctimonious fraternity; priests betraying theirs. I recruited adulterers and buggers and secret boozers. I had mistresses of my informers betraying the betrayers. Thousands of pages of transcripts, typed over thousands of hours. In '89 my whole web went up in smoke and blackened the washing on the balconies of Mokotow.

I glanced out the window. For some reason Room 8 was taking out his anger on room 12's geraniums. Through the window I saw him pulling them off the bushes and throwing them over the back fence.

After lunch I wrote in my diary, then had a sleep. I was woken at 5.12 p.m. when the front door slammed. Then Room 4 slammed the door of his room. I was angry at being woken. At my situation. People nowadays ignore the fact that if the Party hadn't been tough enough, Russia would have sent in the tanks and made Poland another half-starved Soviet province, like Belarus or the Ukraine. I did important work, and what did my service earn me? A room in a house with people who constantly slam their doors. Seven different kinds of medication. Two dozen vinyl records. Fifteen thousand kilometres from family and friends.

I put on Chopin's, “Revolutionary Etude”, that urgent summons to patriots in exile, written sometime in the middle of the 123 years when Poland did not exist. Across the years the exile Chopin saluted the patriot Room 7. I went to the kitchen craving dinner and brotherhood. Finding the kitchen deserted, I chopped the cabbage and *kielbasa* harder than I needed to.

Through the window I saw Room 8 go out to the clothesline and feel the crotch of his jeans. Still wet. The light was orange, the shadows long. He yawned and stretched. He was not muttering or twitching. He was calm. Even the deranged ones usually are in the evening.

He bent and picked up the rag he'd been mopping with earlier, held it up in both hands. It was a T shirt, full of holes now. Even in the dying light, I could see it was green. It seemed this deranged individual had found his missing T-shirt.

He flinched, as if frightened of himself. He looked for his reflection in the window of the living room, went to stand in front of it. Skinny and big-shouldered, eyes hidden under the cap, the big jaw sticking out, he gave himself the finger. He pointed a gun finger at his head, dropped the thumb hammer. Twitching and muttering, he went back and dipped the shirt in the bucket. He spotted me through the kitchen window, glanced down quickly to hide his eyes. On his hands and knees on the cold concrete, he started mopping by the back door.

I added a little *kapusta kiszona* and hunched over the frying pan to stay close to the heat. I was aching in my kidneys and bones. I'd been to Polish mass at Essendon the previous evening and got too cold waiting for the bus. I keep the heater turned all the way up in my room, but in winter the rest of the rooming house is freezing, and the aches won't go away. In Poland I was never so cold indoors. Even in the final days of communism when there was no food in the shops, the supply of warmth was steady to every man's apartment.

Room 8 was sitting by the clothesline holding his knees, rocking side to side. Thinking. When you have typed up as many lives as I have, in the most intimate detail, you begin to think that people are predictable. But people like Room 8 are only predictable in a very general way.

I diced an onion, turned away from the board to press on my burning eyes, and through tears I saw a pair of very white socks in little black kung fu slippers.

Room 4 had slipped silently into the kitchen. It was 5.40 p.m. He was staring out the window at Room 8, fiddling with his beard. His tracksuit pants were pulled up almost to his armpits over his round, tight, fifty-situps belly. In a recent drunkalog at AA he said he'd been off the grog for over a year, but now he had a half-full 750ml bottle of Johnny Walker by the neck. I shook my head. The big book says that "resentment is the number one offender" and that it is responsible for many relapses, and the big book does not lie.

Room 8's cap tilted up. Room 4 raised the bottle at him. He took a pull on it without taking his eyes off Room 8. Room 8's cap tilted down. The sun went down.

It was me who brought Room 4 to the Footscray Methodist AA. In an early lovalog he said he was feeling the pressure over there in Adelaide. Work was pressure, due to memory loss from prolonged hypoxia. He had a sick mother he was living with, and he had to come home from work and look after her. That same lovalog he said, "They use their sickness as a sword and a shield." And another time, "We had some industrial action, after which I was grounded. They confined us to the hangars. After flying from base to base all over the Pacific for years, I was stuck at Edinburgh. Stuck with mum. I started drinking more in the evenings. But as long as I had to look after her and I was still getting up for work. I had the illusion of control."

At 6.05 p.m., Room 4 went outside. He stood outside the back door with his bottle. Room 8 ignored him and kept mopping. Even though it was cold, I decided to eat my dinner at the kitchen table, knowing the situation would explode at any moment.

I saw Room 4 take out his mobile phone and dial a number. He brought the phone to his cheek.

At that, Room 8 jumped up and ran at him with his bucket. Through the window I heard him shout, “Callin’ the lady, cunt? Come on then, I’ll fight ya!”

Room 4 hauled the back door open and bolted past the kitchen, chin up, arms pumping.

Room 8 caught the door and charged after him shouting, “Alright, I’ll fight ya in the house! I’ll fight you in the fuckenouse!”

I stepped into the corridor to watch.

Room 8 bailed up Room 4 outside his room, hoisted the bucket and threw the remaining detergent over him. Blue splashed his white singlet, the yellow door behind. Room 4’s face went red. He dropped the phone into the pocket of his track pants. He lifted his whisky bottle like a club.

Room 8 held up the bucket in both hands like a shield.

Room 4 swung the bottle and knocked it loose. Room 8’s arms sprung apart.

Room 4 stepped in, swung the bottle at his head, missed.

Room 8 threw the bucket at him and ran for the back door.

I stepped into the kitchen to get out of the way.

Room 4 bellowed, “Come back here!” Theatre in his voice now. “Come here, you rabbit!”

Doors opened all along the corridor.

Room 4 ran past me and out into the dark after Room 8. The door slammed shut behind him.

It was in his third or fourth drunkalog that Room 4 shared his big mistake: “After mum died it was better for a while. But I was still grounded and still forgetting things. One day not long after she died I forgot to check a couple of fuel lines. Turned out one was cracked. We found out when an Orion caught fire on the runway and three of the crew deplaned with their clothes on fire. One of my ‘mates’ dobbed me in—another hypoxic from the old days.” He sighed and giggled at the same time, spread his hands and looked at the palms. “The court-martial had no choice: I got a dishonourable discharge. They pensioned me out. I became a full time drinkin’ man.”

I have not shared nearly so much in all my years at AA. Imagine if I shared how my intelligence caused the anti-communist preacher Father Jerzy Przybylski to be hog-tied to a stone and dropped alive into the Vistula Reservoir on 26 October 1984. In late 1989 I burned

everything I could find, but I am convinced that somewhere among the files in the archive, my name awaits the historians.

I opened the back door and peered out into the dark. I heard a groan. Room 1 pushed past me. He pointed. I stepped outside and saw a gleam of white pants and white hair on the concrete. Room 4 was lying flat on his back. He had slipped arse-up on detergent, trying to chase Room 8 round the corner of the house.

As our eyes adjusted we saw he was still gripping the jagged top of his broken bottle. Then we saw Room 8 creeping sideways around the corner, holding a tomato stake like a baseball bat, cap hiding his eyes.

Room 1 is Melanesian, approximately 185cm, 95 kg, around 60 years. He used to be a boxer. He moved fast to get between Room 8 and Room 4. His big bare legs were in a boxer's crouch.

Room 1: "Put the bloody stick down!"

Room 8 flinched, hitched his shoulder. He dropped the stake.

Room 1 squatted beside Room 4, said, "You all right?"

Room 4 was silent.

Room 1 said, "Ere, you—"

I came closer and peered down at Room 4.

Without opening his eyes, Room 4 sighed, moved his beard from side to side, said, "I'm all right."

Room 1: "You hit you head?"

Room 4: "Yes."

Hitting his head had sobered him.

Someone turned on all the lights in the lounge room. Onlookers crowded the doorway. In the extra light from the window, Room 1 helped Room 4 sit up and examined his head for blood.

He said, "You blood." He held up fingers in front of Room 4's eyes, rolled his head gently side-to-side, like the corner man in a boxing match. Room 1 pointed up at the sky, said, "You see stars?" Before Room 4 could answer, he burst out laughing: "Plenty stars, I bet!" He circled a finger round his head and whistled like tweeting birds. He got up, still laughing. "E alright. 'E alright." He held out a hand to pull Room 4 to his feet.

Room 4 said, "Just give me a minute."

Room 1 shrugged and stepped into the house. The concrete was cold and he had bare feet. In the doorway he stopped. He turned and pointed at Room 8.

Room 1: "You troublemaker, boy. Whole 'ouse stink of deterg'. Fight inside, fight outside. This a quiet 'ouse, not 'ouse for troublemakers. Better pack you bags, boy."

Room 1 turned and the onlookers followed him down the passage.

I stepped outside, asked, "Are you alright?"

Room 4 nodded.

In his theatrical voice, Room 4 called, "Terry?"

Room 1 stopped halfway down the passage, said, "What?"

Room 4: "I didn't call the lady."

Room 1: "You want me to call 'er?"

Room 4: "No. It was my fault. I goaded him."

Room 1: "Place stink."

Room 4 turned to Room 8, said, "We'll clean it up, won't we Tim?"

Room 8 flinched, hitched his shoulder, said, "Righto, Santa."

Room 1 shook his head and went to his room.

After a few minutes Room 4 held an arm up and Room 8 and I hauled him to his feet. We stood either side of Room 4 with his arms around our shoulders, making sure he had his balance. He stunk of whisky.

Room 8: "Cunts'll call the office, Santa. They'll put the lady ont a me."

Room 4: "I think they'll put her onto both of us."

We heard the screaming of a plane and soon it appeared from behind flat blocks, red lights flashing on its wings. It *is* supposed to be a quiet house. Western Community Housing preserves it as a quiet house for older roomers and inoffensive addicts, and as a halfway house for those released from psychiatric care. Destabilising elements are sent to other rooming houses. That's the system. Tomorrow I would have to call the office and report them both for fighting in the house, but I stayed in the yard with them longer than I had to, because it was a long time since I had my arm around anyone. Maybe it was the same for the other two, because we stood there longer than we needed to and watched the plane sail over, bringing its cargo of loved ones safely to Tullamarine.