

An Empty Space

The place that once seemed too small for two now is much too big for one. **By GWEN ROMAGNOLI**

I look around me and see a very large living room.

This condo I live in never used to seem so big. In fact, it once seemed much too small for two people. Seven years ago, when Franco and I decided it was time to move out of our big Victorian and leave snow shoveling and lawn mowing to someone else, we looked at many condos. My comment about every one of them was: “It’s too small.”

Now I rattle around in this place from one end to the other. There are too many choices: I can sit in that chair by the window or on the small sofa across the room or on any part of the big couch that I want to, because Franco is no longer sitting in his spot next to me. I can sit at the dining table or never sit there at all. I can keep sleeping on my side of the bed or sometimes sleep on his or even in the middle. There is no one to share this space with now.

What single person needs three bathrooms? The condo we chose is a duplex, with one bathroom downstairs, and one each for the two bedrooms upstairs. Now I feel as if I am in the VIP suite of some five-star hotel with an overload of amenities.

And then there is the kitchen, the very same that made me say to Franco when we first looked at the

condo: “How are you ever going to cook anything in this place?” We had given up his enormous well-equipped kitchen, set in a greenhouse with floor-to-ceiling windows and loads of flowering plants. This tiny excuse for a kitchen didn’t even have a gas stove, because there was only electricity in this building. Totally unacceptable for a real cook.

We both learned to cook on it anyway, because we had to. Now it sits there practically unused. Every once in a while, I get up the courage to invite friends to dinner and can’t remember which cabinet contains the pots and pans I need.

“Why not try to make this place your own?” some friends say. “Move the furniture around, or buy new things. Paint each room a different color. Put new pictures on the walls.”

“I don’t think I’m ready for that,” I reply. “Maybe later.”

And, I think, what is “my own,” anyway? Even though I was already in my 60s when I met Franco, I had just recently bought and moved into the only house I had ever owned. “His own” was the gorgeous Victorian in which he had resided for 40 years.

After we decided to live together, we each wrote down what we thought were the pros and cons of living in his house or my house. I found that piece of paper the other day, still in my desk drawer. Among the pros for me was that my house was right near a Red Line stop, and that I had just about finished fixing it up the way I wanted it to be. Franco didn’t need to write down many pros for his house; it was clearly more beautiful, with all its Victorian detail intact, and with that enormous kitchen that was used as a setting for Italian-cooking videos.

But the *piece de resistance* became evident when I stayed at his house for the weekend and he made a fire in the bedroom fireplace. It was the first time I had ever seen a house that had a

fireplace in the bedroom, let alone one that really worked. The sheet of paper with the pros and cons on it suddenly became unnecessary, and a few months later I moved in with Franco.

This condo is the only place we lived that was truly “ours.”

I like to look around and know that Franco would still find it a familiar place, to look at the paintings and photographs that we looked at together in the places they’ve always been ... watching that flat-screen television that I bought on a whim, the one he teased me about because it was so big, but soon was quite happy to watch ... the couch in the exact same place we sat on it together ... the terrace we looked out on, with the same flowers planted in the same pots that Franco first planted them in.

And no matter what part of the bed I sleep on at night, I still reach out to the other side and move my hand around the sheet, longing to find him there beside me.

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