

Welcome

by K.A. Hough

The rules are clearly spelled out in the brochure.

At first glance, the kind that most people take when they leaf through it and scan the glossy pages, there's nothing odd here, nothing unreasonable, but the rules -- and there are a *lot* of them -- seem to cover everything from toothbrushing (how often to replace a toothbrush, how much toothpaste to use, how long to brush, and how long to let the water run) to appropriate behaviour on the trains (standing vs. sitting, offering up your seat, allowing others off before you get on, volume of voice). Nothing unreasonable; all good, sensible, and unobjectionable advice.

It's just that most people are just so excited to sign up, to get started, to belong here.

I know I was.

The copy you are given at that first meeting is yours to keep, and one of the first rules (or is it the very first?) says that you must leave your copy on display in your unit, easily accessible, as a reference. This also, like so many others — at first glance — seems reasonable.

The euphoria grows after the ink dries on the contract. There's a quiet humming of your body and mind, a self-satisfied feeling of *this is it* that lasts through several weeks of good living, great food, and a well-thought-out schedule of recreational activities; a safe place to be. There's anything -- everything -- you can imagine, in abundance. Eventually, though, everyone has a spare moment between meals and activities, when they sit down in a comfortable chair, pick up their brochure from the coffee table, and start reading — *really reading* — just what it is, specifically and in detail, that they'd agreed to.

The brochure itself seems heavier on the second reading, and still heavier on the third and fourth. There's no fine print, mind you. And no fancy legalese or ambiguous turns of phrase. Just the rules. For everything.

People get quieter the longer they live here.

The staff are efficient, quiet, everywhere. You don't really notice them, or when you do, it's like a little hive of helpful bees, unobtrusively circulating the gymnasiums, making sure that everyone is satisfied and participating, or the dining rooms, checking to see that they have made healthy choices at dinner and are chewing the minimum number of times.

The couple next door were louder than most. I could hear them sometimes through the walls. She'd be crying, and he'd raise his voice over hers, begging her to quiet down. One day, she didn't show up to volleyball, and I saw him drinking a third beer after dinner. They don't live here anymore.

One chilly afternoon, the sky outside darkened with ash, I turned up the heat in my unit. Within minutes, there was a knock at my door.

If you stare at the staff, individually, you see that, under their uniforms, they're as diverse a group as anywhere else: tall, short, fat, thin, black, white. But when you look away, they all fade into one nondescript person. The man at my door was of medium height, strong-looking, with dark brown hair and heavy brows. I'd never seen him before, or maybe I'd seen him every day. "Excuse me," he said, politely. "But your heat seems to be above the allowed limit."

Each unit has its own thermostat to control the heat and air conditioning, and the air filters make sure that the air we breathe here is clean and safe. The rules, of course, encompass what room temperature is and is not.

I adjusted the thermostat back down the two degrees, and put on a sweater.

This place is truly amazing, a utopia. We are healthy, well-fed, and fit. We are lucky -- so very lucky -- to live here, inside where it is safe. The selections and choices we make are our own.

And the rules are clearly spelled out in the brochure.