

Give & TAKE

*Gigs in your living room, a Kazakh sleeping on your sofa, giving lifts to strangers... In the Sharing Economy, everything is communal. But how much connecting can we really take?
An apprehensive Christa D'Souza joins the movement*

Illustration by Natasha Law

Is sharing a natural human trait? Was it competition or co-operation which propelled evolution forward? Meaning, was it all about the struggle to survive – or the *snuggle* to survive, as someone once said? These and other questions drifted in and out of my mind when I found myself in the car with a total stranger on a drive down to the country. For last week I registered with Liftshare, Britain's biggest online car-sharing service, which pairs up drivers with those needing rides in the same direction. It's a little like Uber Pool or car-share platform Blablacar but more caring and sharing because other than petrol costs there's no money involved. Say you have a cottage somewhere off the A303 and someone else

How do you tell a stranger that there's no talking in your car during *Any Questions*?

takes that route regularly, too? Bingo, you share a ride. Fewer cars on the road, less money to the train companies and, in the bargain, I get a hit of serotonin, the brain chemical which is supposed to be released when you do something nice. What's not to like?

At the same time, being a novice to the so-called Sharing Economy, I have a few concerns on the etiquette front. For example,

how do you nicely tell a stranger that there can be no talking in your car during *Any Questions*? How to subtly convey that for the blissful three hours it takes my other half and me to get to our part of Wiltshire (the longest time we get to be alone, pretty much, without being asleep), we actually prefer no talking at all?

The Sharing Economy, The Weconomy, Collaborative Consumption, The Mesh. Call it what you want, for the next 10 days or so I am going to fully participate in it. And this I'll share with you for free: it's not going to be easy. You know how there's a certain sort of person who prefers sharing plates at restaurants? You know, the person who sometimes can't help keening for those good old backpacking days, for that 10-to-a-room hostel experience; who would far prefer to stay as a guest in someone's house and maybe

share a glass of wine with the host than sit on one's bed in a cold, impersonal hotel room watching Al Jazeera and ordering room service? Well, I am not

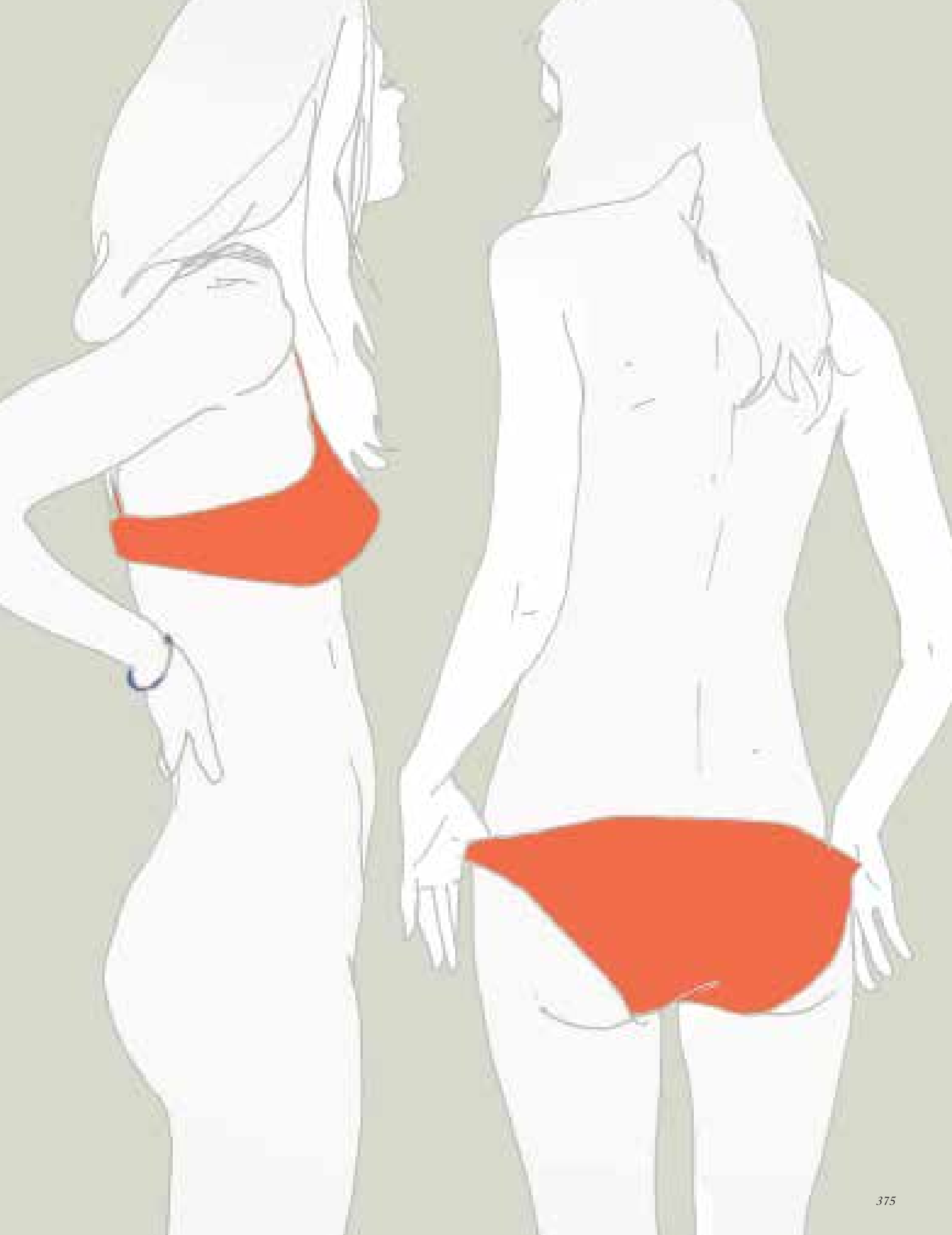
that person. Never have been, never will be. I share like mad on Instagram – too much, in fact – and as a journalist I'll go even further: nothing of mine is not yours when it comes to the nice, distancing medium of print.

When it comes to sharing my physical personal space though, making conversation when I don't want to (don't even *look* at me, let alone talk to me, before I've had my

coffee in the morning) – that's something else. It could be that God made me that way, but it's probably more to do with the fact that when my sister and I were growing up, our house was always full of my mother's liggerish friends and boyfriends, helping themselves from the fridge, clogging up the bathroom, cutting off the nose of a brie at table – treating the place, in fact, as if it were their own. Perhaps that is why, even though we've got a few spare bedrooms in our family home, there are no beds in any of them.

Wish me luck, then, on this particular journey. It may be the toughest assignment *Vogue* has given me yet. Which brings me back to our very sweet Liftshare companion, Rob, a 25-year-old brand consultant from Hoxton who is visiting his parents in Wincanton for the weekend. As a passenger, he is polite, does not smell and – big brownie points here – is much more helpful on the car-loading front than either of my teenage sons. But in the back of my mind I'm thinking, Liftshare is all about building "cycles of sharing", and I don't know if I can make this more than a one-off thing. As it happens, we find out over the weekend that we've been burgled back in London, and when poor Rob texts me on Sunday morning for a ride back, my reserve of goodwill for the human race has all but evaporated. My husband and I end up driving back to London slightly early. Alone.

This sharing of goods and services with each other, peer to peer rather than through a business or brand name, is hardly new. >



People have been carpooling, nanny sharing, B&B-ing, lending each other money and so on for yonks. (Arguably the model was invented by a company set up in the Fifties called Intervac, which still allows teachers around the world to swap homes during the holidays to gen up on foreign culture.) What's changed the game lately, and allowed sharing brands such as Airbnb and Uber to take over the world, is the online community, to which we now ineluctably belong. We're sharing on an unprecedented scale. An empty car seat, a driveway, a wedding dress, a dog – hey, even a nice clean loo (look up Looie, an app that will direct you via GPS to the most recently cleaned one in your area, though it's still only available in New York), nothing has to be a "dead" asset any more. The possibilities are endless as to the goods and services that can be shared – and curiously we're keener than ever to share them with complete strangers. One enterprising millennial I met is thinking of developing an app called Lapn, whereby you can rent out your lap to strangers during rush hour on the Tube. If that sounds nuts, just give it a few years.

"Technology has enabled new kinds of accountability and trust," says Rachel Botsman, co-author of *What's Mine Is Yours* and lecturer on the collaborative economy at Oxford University's Saïd Business School. "This hasn't just changed how we buy goods on marketplaces like Etsy or Ebay. It has changed how we travel, bank, work and even fall in love. Ideas that might have seemed weird, risky or dangerous are now

"When sharing economy projects are at their best, they're about more than saving money – they're about a sense of connection"

normal, and this is largely because of new mechanisms for building trust. By the time we get into someone else's car or house, by the time we lend them money or enlist them to accomplish a task, we have a real-time sense of who they are, which enables us to try something we otherwise wouldn't have considered." Indeed. Like Thrinder which, in case you didn't already know, is like Tinder but for threesomes. But the permutations are endless, aren't they? What about Tuber, for example (Thruuber, even?), for people who haven't got time for drinks and want to, er, connect while being driven to work?

Having the Uber driver's phone number; knowing that if you leave something in the back of the car it won't end up in some depot

in Paddington; the way we are all as good as chipped via our smartphones; the way you just wouldn't steal a bathrobe from a person's home... These are just some of the reasons the Sharing Economy works. Then there is the all important peer-to-peer review system. When I log on to Liftshare, I see that Rob has rated me five stars. Five stars! I'm only a 4.7 star passenger on Uber. Darn it. Did I remember to rate Rob back?

"When 'sharing economy' projects are at their best, they're about more than saving money. They're about a sense of connection," says Ivo Gormley, son of artist Antony Gormley, who founded Goodgym, a non-profit platform which allows runners to use their workouts to benefit the community (shifting earth for community gardens, helping old people with basic tasks). "As a provider, if you don't get amazing feedback, you have to improve. To make the system work you have to recognise the importance of the individual. That's the fundamental change from the 'old' industrial model."

So now I've been a provider of an asset (our car), it's time to be on the other side of the sharing marketplace, ie be a user, a sharee. Here I am, then, on my way to a gig held in a stranger's living room somewhere in Belsize Park. Sofar (Songs from a Room) is a global music collective started in 2009 which throws intimate gigs in people's living rooms all round the world. Robert Pattinson and Scarlett Johansson are loyal attendees. Wolf Alice, Bastille, James Bay and the National have all "secretly" performed. But you'll never know; as in the manner of Secret Cinema, no act is ever promoted in advance. The address of our "venue" is emailed to me on the

morning of the gig. Along with instructions to bring our own alcohol and blankets as, joy, we will be sitting on the floor. Shoot. Forgot the blanket. But my date for the evening, Josh, a 26-year-old filmmaker who has already been to a Sofar gig in Brighton, thought to put a bottle of Aperol in his backpack this morning. As we arrive, plaid-shirted "early adopters" are smoking on the doorstep. Lining the hallway are pretty girls in parkas with short fringes. Inside, the elegant, double-fronted living room is set up with an impromptu stage and the distinctly non-loserish crowd is building fast, especially around the kitchen table, laden with bowls of Haribo and smoked-salmon canapés. Our host tonight turns out to be Sofar's founder

Rafe Offer, 45, an American expat who used to consult for Coca-Cola and Disney. He explains how the idea was born out of his frustration with live gigs. "I thought there had to be a better way of watching music than in a packed concert hall where you can hear beer bottles clinking and everyone talks through the acts and there's zero intimacy or any real connection with the artist."

When Sofar started up six years ago, a hat was passed around to cover costs. Now people have to buy tickets online and there's often a waiting list. Offer stresses he is not doing it for the money but to "bring the magic back to the gig and tap into a subculture of people who value music above their smartphones and alcohol. Every time we've done a gig here everyone is out by 10.30pm and because they tend to leave quietly we've never had any complaints from the neighbours." When I ask if he worries about security, he looks at me a little blankly. No, he says, never. In fact, of the 3,000 gigs that have been thrown in 150 private spaces in 100 cities around the world, he is aware of nothing, not even a scarf, that has ever been reported stolen.

By the time I get home, though a little cross from having to sit on a hard wooden floor for two hours, I feel a subtle yet significant shift in my attitude to this Sharing Economy business. The first act up, a band called the Bohicas, were goosepimply good (how come I'd never heard of them?) and I feel privileged to have been introduced to them in such an intimate setting.

On the other hand, is this going to change my behaviour around how I listen to music the way Uber changed my travel habits? Probably not. But it is enough to make me feel at least slightly less murderous at the idea of having supper with a group of strangers, probably in a flat right at the other end of London, eating food that I am likely going to hate. That's the premise of supper clubs such as Grub Club: you buy your ticket (around £40) but you don't know who the other guests will be, you don't know what the food is and you don't know where the venue is until the day of. I guess I lucked out. My hosts for the evening are Jordan Bourke, the Dublin-born chef, television presenter and former model who was discovered by Skye Gyngell and has already published two successful cookbooks, and his wife, Korean designer Rejina Pyo. The other guests (because they are, at time of print, still testing the concept out) are six of the hosts' friends, all of whom are well versed in the whole notion of supper clubs. Several bottles of wine are being passed around as Bourke darts between the living room and the kitchen of their beautiful west London flat, but there's no question of getting arseholed before we eat. This is *all* about the food, and by 8.30pm

sharp we are all respectfully sitting down, ready to sample a Korean feast prepared by Bourke: delicately seasoned dry squid, tofu with fried kimchi and pork belly, marinated beef and lettuce wraps with pickled onion, charred garlic samjang sauce and sticky rice. With cinnamon- and pecan-stuffed pancakes topped with non-dairy ice cream for afters. It's delicious but not at all what I'd have ever ordered off my own bat – which, says Bourke happily, is exactly the point. “Rejina wanted to share with people what real, true Korean food was all about, because it doesn't have the greatest reputation, and it was also a nice way of doing it in London which, let's face it, can be a bit of an impersonal place when it comes to going out to dinner.” Isn't he worried about people abusing their hospitality? “I have a number of friends who've done this, Sabrina Ghayour [author of the cookbook *Persiana*] among them, and they've said it's been totally fine,” shrugs Bourke, “and by keeping it small, you get to have more control over both the cooking and the setting.”

By now my phone is literally dancing with sharing apps, all designed to tap into a world of collaboration: Airbnb, Grub Club, Blablacar, Couchsurfing and Olio (got a half-eaten pack of Quorn sausages? Guaranteed there'll be someone in your GPS radius on Olio who'll take them). Then there is Borrow My Doggy. How genius is that? And what a smorgasbord of adorable canines there are to choose from. Spoilt for choice, I eventually pick Roland, an 11-month-old retriever, who “snorts like a little piglet when he is delighted about something”, according to his owner, Grace. Though I've paid my verification fee, and uploaded a “pawticularly pawsome” profile picture of myself with our office dog, Lottie, I'm a first-timer on the app and therefore have no reviews, no rep. But hooray, Grace replies and suggests we meet the following weekend with a view to me becoming Roland's temporary friend. Already I'm fantasising about where he will sleep, which part of the sofa he'll get to sit on, how he's going to love our family so much he'll never want to leave. The one thing I couldn't be more *mi casa es su casa* about is dogs.

The one thing I couldn't be *less* share-y about is clothes, but I may have to rethink that block. That notion of access rather ownership is already extending to our wardrobes. Well, in New York, anyway. Take Heidi Julavits and Leanne Shapton, co-authors of *Women in Clothes: Why We Wear What We Wear*, who regularly hold public clothing swaps in the city for friends and strangers. They talk of a kind of natural, healthily competitive algorithm which

evolves: “women flicking through racks but also eyeballing what others were trying on, watching value fluctuate the moment an item was pulled from the hanger and held against the body.” Hmm. It's all very well borrowing for a fancy-dress party. But just to go out of an evening? Am I the only person who feels slightly fraudulent at the idea?

Time for the biggie; the granddaddy, as it were, of the Sharing Economy which is Airbnb, already so “normal”, so preferable to hotelling it, a lot of my friends can hardly

Apparently a whole bunch of travellers want to stay on our slightly grubby sofa, next to the tortoise's vivarium

believe I have never done it before. In the eight years it has been in existence, 3.1 million British residents have used Airbnb for their travels and 2.2 million guests have used it to visit Britain. Just this past year, 52,500 hosts have opened up their homes, be it a yurt, castle or even principality (yes, in 2011 Prince Hans-Adam II of Liechtenstein rented his out for £70,000, complete with street signs and temporary Swiss francs) to strangers, each host typically earning £2,000 for sharing their personal space for an average of 46 nights a year. “The Sharing Economy is creating a new category, people as businesses,” as Nathan Blecharczyk, co-founder and CTO of Airbnb, recently put it. “Our hosts are the next generation of micro-entrepreneurs.” And that's the thing. Is making money out of your driveway or your Chanel bag or your spare room really so “sharey”? Isn't what we've got here a variety of hypercapitalism rather than a nicer, kinder way of doing business? Twenty years from now, will *nothing* be free? As a *Guardian* journalist – who else – pointed out recently, look what bottled water did for the communal water fountain...

But back to Airbnb, and my night with a complete stranger in his loft in Spitalfields. Christ. Should I take my own pillows? (I'm a freak about pillows in other people's houses.) Do I order a takeaway and, if so, should I order for him, too? I *bate* sharing my food. Does he drink? Should I bring a bottle? I might not be able to get through the awkwardness without it. Up I pitch then at Brian's. I chose Brian for his super-positive reviews and also because he's from Rhode Island, where I went to college. That at least is something we have in common.

Brian, it turns out, is extremely sweet, polite and non-serial-killerish with a proper banking job in Pall Mall and a summer family

home in Martha's Vineyard. He welcomes me into his spankingly clean, exposed-brick loft space. My heart sinks slightly when it's clear there is only one bathroom, with no lock on the door, but in for a penny, in for a pound. This will be the twelfth time Brian's hosted via Airbnb. He does it, he says, a) for the extra income, and b) because, bless, he likes meeting new and interesting people. I push him for bad experiences, horror stories, like the one about the woman whose Airbnb guest had been making a porn film in her home or the guest who found out on Facebook, only days into his stay, that his host had overdosed and died. The worst that's happened, says Brian, is a couple who got a bit pissy when they found out breakfast wasn't offered. “But they were older, they didn't understand it wasn't a bed-and-breakfast situation.”

I have to hand it to Brian. I know he's making money out of it, it's not just out of the goodness of his heart, but the idea of a stranger staying in my house, of not so metaphorically sleeping in my bed and eating my porridge, will always fill me with dread. And so it is with anxiety that I check my Couchsurfing profile. This free platform connects members to a global community of travellers (in the literal rather than “bum” sense). Apparently there are a whole bunch who want to stay on our slightly grubby sofa, next to the tortoise's vivarium. Tien from Dublin, Bashir from Clermont-Ferrand, Ali from Kazakhstan... And Sabine from Cologne, whose profile reads, “I am talkative, I can be Helping Hand in household... I love to chat about Travel Experiences.” I plump for Ali who's got that reassuring green tick by his profile picture, a 94 per cent response rating, doesn't mind sleeping on floors under tin roofs and is into Buddhism. We arrange for him to stay for two nights. A close friend, Pernille, who has been renting out her Copenhagen apartment on Airbnb for years, has some advice. When you become part of this arm of the Sharing Economy, lay down the ground rules from the start. “There was one lady who stayed and it was clear she wanted to hang out with me, have dinner, have me show her around which was not what I wanted at all,” she says. “So now I say in my description that I'll leave them a list of places I like in the area, but I'm neither a travel agency nor a friend.” She's very Scandi and straightforward that way; however, when Ali and I speak on the phone, somehow I can't bring myself to say any of that. Oh well, our lovely cleaning lady, Bahyta, is Kazakh. Maybe they will bond. Our live-in > 396

nanny/housekeeper – she’s very friendly, too. Maybe if he’s too much the glommer, I could abscond with Roland the retriever to our country cottage? I send Grace a message via Borrow My Doggy. Is Roland good with sheep? Because that could work...

It’s not as if I’m not used to sharing my personal space with others. I do it at work. In fact, that’s the *only* place I prefer having others around. Right now I work in a fabulous shared space atop Dover Street, an arrangement that I and my co-workers managed to achieve through the friend of a friend, the way people have been sharing for decades. Instinctively, I prefer to do things through a friend of a friend. But now I’m actually on the lookout for a new shared workspace – unbearably, our landlord is kicking us all out – and I will likely end up at Soho Works, the shared-office concept created by Nick Jones – if and when the newest one opens in White City.

But an alternative could be a berth at Wework, the global \$10 billion office-sharing conglomerate, co-founded in New York by Adam Neumann and Miguel McKelvey in 2010. I’m met at the Wework Moorgate building by Hillary Deppeler, head of “brand experience”, a cool platinum blonde wearing a pompom hat and leather jeans who formerly worked for MTV and TED. Digital brands like Soundcloud, Skyscanner, Farfetch, they all operate out of Wework’s office. But you can go there, like me, as a freelancer (desks cost from £325 a month). As with any super-cool shared office space, there are “dedicated” desks, “commons” areas, booths, conference rooms, and little shut-to phone cubicles to do that difficult interview. The difference, maybe, to most offices is the luxe feel of the facilities – immaculate kitchen stations on every floor with free Volcano coffee, almond milk, soya milk, dairy milk with “all different gradients of fat” and on-tap beer. Keg parties, chocolate fondue parties, Square Mile coffee martini parties... They’re all very “Wework”, too. But what do you expect from a company whose core values, as the latest newsletter reads, are “Grateful and Together: two key pillars of our identity.” Neumann, 36, who is related to Gwyneth Paltrow by marriage, was brought up on a kibbutz and may be a billionaire real-estate developer on paper but is also passionate about collaboration. As I leave, I realise that the place reminds me of the fictional, all-powerful internet company in Dave Eggers’s dystopian novel *The Circle*.

Meanwhile I get a message from Grace, Roland’s owner, who says I can’t borrow her doggy. I guess I came on a bit too strong, asking if he was good with sheep. But then, I have no doggy-borrowing experience and therefore none of those precious, positive reviews on my profile. In Sharing Economy terms I’m what Rachel Botsam calls “a ghost in the system”. But when my couchsurfer, Ali from Kazakhstan, blows me out, too, saying in not so many words that he has had a better offer, I begin to wonder. Should I have worked on my profile pic a bit harder? Should I have mentioned that I was writing this piece for *Vogue*? I wonder if you can buy reviews, like you can buy Instagram or Twitter followers? That was a joke – I would never do that, but in this new world where the currency is reputation, it crosses my mind.

So has participating in the Sharing Economy shifted my everyday behaviour? Have I been missing out, up until now, by not being more involved? Maybe. I’d never have heard of the Bohicas. I’d never have realised I love Korean food. And if I’d taken a Hailo rather than Uberpool, I’d never have met Caz Coronel, a DJ/lucid-dreaming instructor, whose mother comes from Medellín (a place I’m utterly fascinated by after watching *Narcos*). Whether it’s made my life easier, though, whether I’ve made or saved any money – that’s another thing.

Meanwhile the constant hectoring to “rate my performance”, to rate the conversation about my performance; the constant, pressing need for feedback, the ensuing guilt for not providing it right there and then... I’m not sure I like being this much in demand. I’m not sure I have the stamina. At the same time, I’ve got an empty car going to the country this weekend and it seems both unfair and wasteful, not to mention lazy, not to give Rob a ride. I’ll text him now. ■