

No Dogs Allowed

by Jerry Ratch

They were an interesting young couple. Tom was a big man with rugged features, though not handsome. His face was deeply pock-marked with the scars that are sometimes left over from a terrible bout with adolescent acne. His wife — though I was never certain they were legally married, I didn't think so, for some reason — was a refined-looking girl with long straight brown hair and the high cheekbones of a classically beautiful European face. She had expressive eyebrows and caring, pretty blue eyes, leaning toward the green side. And regardless of what the weather was like it seemed like every time I saw Tom he wore a fashionable leather jacket and khaki pants, with penny-loafer shoes. So the impression I had gotten of him was that he was fifty percent yuppie and fifty percent drug dealer from Marin.

He had just begun working for a small computer software outfit right around the corner from our house. So when they applied for the flat downstairs from us, it seemed like a natural fit, sort of made to be, in spite of his appearance, because we figured he could just swing right out of bed and walk to work in under a minute, and everybody would be very homey, if not outright chummy. Truth is, I didn't notice until after they had signed the lease and given us their deposit that there might have been a noticeable bulge at her midsection. But sometimes people are inexplicably fat right there. Maybe, I don't know, maybe she had something of a sweet tooth.

My wife and I had successfully eased all four of her children out from under our roof. So, it wasn't like we hated children or anything, but we had certainly done our duty and had enough already. As the months passed it became increasingly clear that we had made an error in judgment. The wife's belly (her name was Carolyn) grew and grew as though a huge balloon were being slowly blown up inside her dress. We had figured at first that this was just another fad, her fondness for long, loose granny dresses, I mean. We

thought, almost warmly, that maybe the hippie days of our youth were coming back, in the styles of clothing, at any rate. But as I said, it then became more and more obvious that we had made an oversight.

About the time when it seemed impossible that Carolyn could grow much bigger, I was sitting at my desk one day, in the sun porch right over their front stairway, when I noticed her look up at me with that slightly embarrassed look some pregnant women can get, as though she'd been caught with her finger in the pudding. She was a beautiful girl, but was looking a little haggard around the edges, and tired, I thought. I have to say I suddenly felt a tinge of what I could only call sadness for her. That was when I thought I noticed the unmistakable tail of a large dog right behind her dress.

Then I saw it was true. A red strap of leather was wound around Carolyn's wrist and she moved to the side and there sat a dog. It was a pale mongrel. At that precise moment my own dog, Tosca, leapt up to the window and began to growl furiously, deep inside her throat. Tosca wasn't a growler ordinarily, but her entire body now became engulfed by this growling, and she pawed wildly at the panes of the window.

When my wife Elizabeth found out about it — I had to tell her because I knew she would discover it anyway — she was beside herself and demanded I do something about it. It was expressly written into the lease, she pointed out, that there would be no large pets — no dogs! Explicitly it was written into the lease, she reminded me. She was this close to my ear. This close! We didn't want large claws tearing up the beautiful, natural woodwork in the downstairs apartment. We didn't want the fleas and we didn't want the howling noises (beyond normal sex) and we didn't want the smell of dog on everything when they moved out.

Elizabeth threw a fit and yelled half way into that night. I tried running out to the liquor store around the corner and buying a splendid bottle of French champagne to ameliorate her anger. We finished off the bottle in under an hour, before I had to run out for more. Elizabeth just sat fuming in her armchair with a flute in her

hand, expecting a continual refill. She sat huffing and puffing, her face a brilliant red under her bright white hair. Our fierce battle raged into the night, and she didn't care a whit if they overheard us yelling about it. She wouldn't have this deceit under the same roof of her house, she declared. It was bad enough the slut was pregnant without telling us, and ready to burst right downstairs! I thought about Carolyn and her condition. And then there was Tom.

And what about him, the sluggard, Elizabeth railed. He's not working anymore. He never leaves the house anymore. They never come out of there except when their Marin drug friends come over to visit, and then all that noise and partying goes on all night long. "How could you have talked me into letting those people into my house? (It was always her house!) I can't stand it another minute. Give them notice! Evict them! That dog is the last straw. Get them out of here before she gives birth downstairs!"

I said I couldn't evict them because she was pregnant.

"You can evict them over the dog," Elizabeth snapped. "Do you want me to write the letter? You can't even write a fucking letter? It's right in the lease — NO DOGS!"

The battle raged on in our house until 3 a.m. when I finally pushed everything off the bed with my foot and fell asleep. Elizabeth had gone up to the attic with another bottle of wine to watch some horror program or dry British comedy on television.

Something had gone completely wrong in our house, but that was not the only problem here. But I wrote the notice about their dog, and it made both of them, Carolyn and Tom, visibly upset, but finally the dog disappeared. One day a beat-up van showed up in the driveway and their friends from Marin had the dog hop into the van and they backed out of the driveway, waving goodbye, and drove away down the street.

I was sitting upstairs at my desk when this happened. Elizabeth of course was nowhere to be found. I noticed Carolyn on the sidewalk below — she was as big as a walking tent now — glance up in my direction with a pained, weary look.

The next day two strange women showed up. They kept coming and going with bundles of things in their arms, unloading their car. Soft, pink blankets, all kinds of odd-looking things I had never seen before. For the next week they came and went out of the apartment downstairs constantly. Then it stopped all of a sudden and there was a period of quiet, as if they had disappeared. One day Elizabeth came into my study overlooking the front stairs and asked if I'd seen anything or heard anything, and I told her I wasn't sure anybody at all even lived there anymore.

Then one night in the middle of the night we heard it. The unmistakable, tiny wail of an infant! Holy crap!

"Oh my God!" yelled Elizabeth. "The slut has given birth — *right under our noses!*"

"Shush, Elizabeth, they'll hear you."

"Don't shush me!"

"Well, you can't be sure, that's all I'm saying," I said.

"Oh, I'm fucking sure! I'd know that noise anywhere. They've given a home birth right below us. Oh! Oh! Oh!" Elizabeth leapt out of bed and reappeared seconds later with an enormous glass of wine in her hand. "Get out of bed and do something!" she screamed. "Do something, or else I will!"

"Well, what can I do?" I yelled back. "You can't just toss the girl in the street because she's given birth, for God's sake."

"Check the lease! Check the fucking lease! How many people does it say can occupy the flat down there? I won't have the little slut popping out babies in my house!"

The very next day the two strange women, who had really short haircuts and looked almost like boys, packed everything they had brought with them into their old Plymouth and left. No one helped them or anything. Suddenly they drove off. I heard a baby's crying coming up through the opened window of my study. Then for most of that day the only other event in the entire neighborhood was a squirrel building a nest in the vines clinging to the house next door.

But two days later a delivery van pulled up in front of our house and Tom lumbered out into the street to meet him. Together with the driver they struggled to get huge boxes into the flat downstairs. After the van was gone for an hour, I noticed a yellow taxicab pull right into the driveway and stop. A tall older man who was really well-dressed in an expensive suit got out with a briefcase and a travel pack, reached into the cab and pulled out a top-coat, and paid off the cab driver, who then backed out of the drive and left. There was a commotion on the porch under my window and I heard the man say, "Caroline, my darling. Oh, and what is this? Oh, she's beautiful. She looks just like you, sweetie, doesn't she Tom?"

And they went inside.

I never did get them out of that flat downstairs. In fact, I left my wife before the end of their lease. So, I didn't find out what happened to them until one day at Oliveira's Café when I ran into Tom, who was holding his little daughter and sipping a cappuccino.

"Where are you living now?" I asked.

"Well, not there anymore, as you might imagine. Elizabeth became really vocal and belligerent after you left. She was sobbing night after night, and we could hear her breaking glasses upstairs and we just could not get any real sleep anymore. So when she said she would not be renewing our lease, we were relieved, to tell the truth." Tom looked me up and down. "You've changed. Have you gotten younger?"

"I certainly have," I said, and I smiled. "And I'm engaged to be married."

"Whoa!" he laughed. "Out of the frying pan and into the fire?"

"More fire, this time, less pan. Mind if I ask whatever happened to that dog you guys had for awhile there?"

"Funny story," he said. He hung his head. "He escaped my friends' house and came back to our place, but we weren't home when he got there. Turns out, Elizabeth let him in because he was thirsty and whining so much, and lo and behold, she just kept him!"

"Kept him? As in Kept him? Well, I'll be damned," I said.
"Guess you can fit two bitches under one roof." I winced. "Oh, crap, I shouldn't say something like that."

At that we both kind of forced out a laugh.

"No," Tom said. "Guess you shouldn't."

