

Intentional Households

by Marlan Warren

The ad in *The Recycler* said:

Responsible roommate wanted for intentional household.

Vegetarian optional.

My room comes already furnished with bed and lamp. The white globe of light hangs over the mattress on the floor like a fairy-tale moon. Outside my window, April flowers press themselves against the screen. In the bathroom, a pubic hair on the toilet seat awaits, but right now this room is as soothing as a promise.

I curl into fetal position on the naked mattress, still dressed and shivering in the uncertain cold. Too tired to plug in the space heater. Now I can hear doors slamming somewhere in the house and voices calling to each other, as my roommates come home.

Nobody knocks on my door.

I moved into this house in Venice a few minutes ago with what's left of my belongings. Boris helped. Then he put his arms around me and I wept. The way I'd been weeping for years. For all the times we genuinely cared.

"I vish I vas a voman," said Boris, his accent giving the words an unintentional comedic lilt. "So I could cry, too."

Then he said, "We will always be connected" and left.

Two years earlier we fled Los Angeles while the city was in flames. Now with our film careers in tatters, we've returned together to live separately. Boris can hardly repress his glee at *his* "intentional household" with new bachelor roommates.

A few days ago, I found myself in a tree swing with a Gen X twentysomething, trying not to stare at her nose ring or the clutter of her yard while she described her "political activism" which (as far as I could tell) boiled down to railing for compost and against pollution.

"You're going to have to get rid of all your shit," Rainbow said. "People are way too attached."

The fact that I've got almost twenty years on her didn't seem to be an issue. She listened without reaction while I explained how Boris and I ended up committing professional suicide by moving to Ventura right after the Rodney King riots tore L.A. apart.

Rainbow stroked her cheek with my rent check and said, "We'll have to have a meeting about House Procedures. You're not used to living with other people."

"I've been *married* for the last ten years."

"That's what I mean."

If I had money and good credit, I'd be getting a place of my own. That's all I really want. Maybe that's all I've ever wanted.

#

It's been two months. Life at Generation X reminds me of that Woody Allen line about having to be rushed to the hospital "with a case of bad vibes." Rainbow is a vegetarian with a "designated meat pan" and a live-in "fiancé" named Mack who looks like his jutting bones might stab you during a hot embrace.

One night, while filling his pipe in the kitchen, Mack peered at me through matted curls and mumbled, "Yeah, relationships are tough. Like my daughter's mother, she wanted me to stop smoking dope and get my contractor's license. That's why I like Rainbow. She accepts me for who I am."

Last night I came home to find my four roomies weeping. The always-on television was off and the stereo was emitting heavy metal that was scraping the paint off the walls.

I asked them what happened.

"Kurt Cobain's dead, man! He's dead!" Ace the Dyke sobbed.

I had to ask who that was.

Mack didn't look up from the cigar-sized J he was rolling, "A helluva musician. A helluva guy."

"How did he die?"

"He shot himself," whispered Rainbow.

"Is that his music?"

Mack nodded, passed the joint and they each took a toke, eyes closed, rocking back and forth. I wanted to say that's the worst music I ever heard and this guy was probably a loser.

As if reading my thoughts, Mack glared at me, "Yeah, well, I didn't get it either when my dad got all upset over *John Lennon*."

"John Lennon," I explained with grating patience (feeling an awful lot like *my father*), "was *killed*. This guy committed *suicide*."

The word "suicide" makes Rainbow cry harder. "Kurt Cobain spoke for a whole generation!" she sobbed. "Just like John Lennon."

"John Lennon stood for love and peace. What'd this guy stand for?"

"He stood for the *hopelessness* of it all!"

I went to bed that night feeling very old.

Two days ago Rainbow showed up in the kitchen with a black eye and a book titled *The Verbally Abusive Mate* that she read to me while I boiled an egg. I told her it sounded like Boris. She told me it sounded like Mack. We agreed such men are not worth our time.

Last night I could hear them in her bedroom a few feet away across the hall—Rainbow's husky gasp/moan/sigh a quicksand of pleasure.

Today he blacked the other one.

Weekdays I escape to my temp job at an entertainment law firm in Century City, fielding client calls from Tom Cruise and Holly Hunter. At night, I chug vodka from a bottle and eat Trader Joe caviar out of a jar and write bad poetry in my room. I write my first *Caviar Poem*.

Smiles and tender sighs...

Imaginations of the newly single

Not yet divorced woman.

Mid-Life Crisis means nothing to my ears.

Not until it becomes a crisis.

Not until it becomes midlife.

Meanwhile, there is Passion.

At least I pin my hopes...

my wet dreams...

all that is left...

*On Passion
and You
inside me.*

Whoever you are.

April 1994, Dead Drunk

#

The ad in the *Recycler* promises:

Country living in the city. Call Mira.

I find Mira lounging in her back yard in a red bikini. An anorexic blond in desperate need of a facelift who tells me she got her house in a divorce settlement thirty years ago. Waving at the Culver City crabgrass under her lawn chair, Mira quips, "This is why I call it country living in the city. Oh, and if Bradley bothers you, just tell him to leave you alone."

Later when I tell this story, people will ask: "Didn't you see that as a red flag? And that? And *that?* "

Bradley turns out to be a walking red flag. He approaches as I unload the U-Haul and says, "Hi, I'm Bradley. I'm not very modest so you might see me from time to time in various stages of undress." Bradley is the last man on Earth I wish to see undressed.

Too exhausted to even think in a straight line, I think, *Fine...I'll just lock my door.* Red flags begin to multiply like a field of poppies.

As soon as the last of my stuff is moved into the little room, Mira takes me into her bedroom/office and hands me a contract that states:

Overnight guests will be charged twenty-five dollars per night.

When I return to my room, I check the lock. There isn't one. I lie on the swayback mattress and wait for the dawn.

At First Light, I leave a note for Mira saying that I need to move out. Then I hurry to the Hungry Cow Café in Marina del Rey where I order butterscotch coffee and sit in a booth crying. Five hundred dollars left to my name. After a few minutes, my hand, as if moving by itself, opens my notebook and I find myself writing over and over, like a kid kept after school:

O.K. you win, I surrender

O.K. you win, I surrender

O.K. you win, I surrender..

What am I doing? I've prayed from time to time, but I never talked to God like this before. Almost out the door when I spot a community paper on a table. The ad in *The Daily Breeze* says:

Quiet, mature person wanted to share home in Topanga Canyon.

\$400/mo.

An hour outside of L.A. and way way off the Pacific Coast Highway. Wilderness, artsy rustic homes, old hippies, rednecks, Earth Mothers, Charles Manson.

When you're in Topanga, L.A. is a tale told by an idiot.

Eva answers on the first ring when I call from the café pay phone. She has an English-as-a-foreign-language accent. "You don't have a little girl, do you?"

"No."

"Good, because that doesn't work out. And no cats. Because I do a lot of yoga and I don't want to get cat hairs in my mouth."

#

When I return to Country Living in the City, Mira shakes my crumpled note in my face: "What's this all about?"

"Last night..."

"I don't want to hear it," she turns away, heading for her room. "That's not my problem."

"I stopped payment on the rent check."

"Get out! Get the hell out right now!"

#

I sit on the bed, staring at the unlockable closed door and think, "I'm homeless." My mother was homeless once. Washing up in restrooms, sleeping in her car. That's how people disappear. Now she's in a nice condo on Orlando that my lawyer brother pays for, bless his heart.

The phone rings. It's Boris. "I've got the IRS check for you to sign over to me." He explains that the whole refund is his because I owe

him money. Yes, I know he's an ass. But at that moment his familiar Russkie voice is comforting. Sure, I say. Come on over.

Boris arrives, IRS check in hand. He takes one look at my tears and holds me. "I have a good feeling about this Topanga," he says. Watching Boris pack our cars, I catch a glimpse of the man I loved. The man I'd wanted to marry. The once-gushing fountain. He offers to go with me "So you do not look like fuck-up."

I sign the check over to him. Sometimes a Knight in Shining Armor is just what the doctor ordered. Even if it is the turd of a husband you just left.

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