

## Part 1: The Kindness of Strangers

Nathan had learned that Charity could be a troublesome thing. As a person, she had slept with him for a month before running off with his savings, his TV, and his luxury cherry-red convertible. The Charity of his auto insurance only covered the book price of the car, which turned out to be a fraction of the price he'd gone into debt to buy it for. Without a car and with an empty bank account, he had no way to get to that high-paying job he held across town, which he needed in order to make the money to keep paying off the debt for the car he didn't have, and the mortgage for the house he soon wasn't going to own. For a little while he was able to rely on the Charity of his friends to give him rides to and from work. This worked for about two weeks, before his friends decided he'd used up all his favors. As a last ditch effort to keep the lights on and his roof over his head while he regrouped, Nathan opened up an ad for roommates online in a gambit relying on the Charity of complete strangers.

After doing the math, he found that if he opened up both the spare bedrooms he had available for renters, he could cover the mortgage on his house. By charging them both about \$400.00 a month he could scrape by. This would hopefully be enough to keep him afloat while he negotiated with his bank to prove the theft of his savings, and worked out a transportation solution. The only problem was that he had no way of knowing what kind of people he was gonna get answering his ad, and he was as desperate as he'd ever been for money. The day was coming came where he would finally open the doors of his two story suburban home to a series of scheduled interviews. And all he could do was hope that at least two of them weren't sociopathic serial killers or worse: messy, negligent college students.

When Saturday, August 27th came along, he waited in his living room with clipboard and a notepad for each prospective roommate to come by. He'd ask them questions about their religious and philosophical views, their hobbies and interests, and whether they could pay a deposit up front (Saying no merited an instant disqualification). Unfortunately, he soon discovered that when you shake a chestnut tree, all the rotting nuts shake loose first. His first applicant was a bright eyed pagan woman who described lovingly her last blood sacrifice made on a full moon (And on someone's end table, no less!) The second was a registered sex offender who made a number of comments about the lovely shade of color of his lips and how they compared to the color of a vagina. The third applicant was a nice young college girl who was also a furry enthusiast. Nathan would have been ok with that except for the constant cat puns she worked into casual conversation got old quickly. The fourth potential roommate smelled like old cheese and decaying meat and was unable to string together a coherent sentence longer than five words. The fifth asked if he could pay his first month's rent a month after moving in, once "that big score" came through. And then, when it seemed like all hope was lost, his door rang, and when he answered it a pair of men asked him if it was ok to do a last-minute impromptu interview.

"And that's when he lit the cake on fire!" A brown-eyed man about five foot six in height finished his story, and Nathan found himself laughing. He reached up and brushed some of his russet hair out of his eyes as his chuckles stopped. The brown-eyed man, who had introduced

himself as Horatio, folded his arms in his laugh. Of the two, he seemed more talkative. "But we got a bit off-topic there, didn't we? In response to your last question, I'd say cooking and baking are my primary interests."

"And cleaning up after yourself, right?" Nathan had a wide plastic smile on his face. He liked Horatio and his friend already, but food-related interests were a red flag in his book. On one hand they could lead to delicious benefits, but on the other: icky, grody dishes left in the sink for days on end.

"Of course." The taller of the two men replied, brushing some dust off of his khaki pants. "We're both total neat freaks. At our old place, we had a rule: If you make a mess in the kitchen, you clean it up right away." This other man, who had introduced himself as Marcus, patted Horatio's left shoulder.

Nathan thanked the merciful deity that he believed might have finally started to smile on him. He scribbled a few notes on his clipboard. He was pretty sold on these two. They seemed the most normal people he'd seen all day. "Well, I think that settles it for my questions. Do you have any questions for me?"

The pair exchanged a glance with each other. Marcus folded his arms against the crimson of his fuzzy sweater vest, his brow furrowed in thought. Horatio, meanwhile, rubbed his chin and spoke first. "Well, to begin with, we may as well put all our cards on the table. Marcus and I are gay, and presently dating. Is that going to be a problem with us living here?"

Nathan closed his eyes. So that was it. They'd led in with the sweet stuff in hopes of making the sour stuff easier to swallow later. "I have no problem with it from any ethical or emotional stance, if that's what you're asking. I'm actually Bi myself. Heck, I don't even mind if you guys have any fetishes or kinks or anything as long as it's nothing violent or illegal. But I will admit it dashes my hopes a little bit. I'd have hoped that you two would rent both rooms, and-"

"Oh, that's what we intended." Marcus interrupted. "We share the same bed, sure. Often. But we both are pretty active individuals and we like to have our own rooms sometimes. So we have space for a myriad of different interests, some shared, some separate." He saw Nathan heave a sigh of relief, and smile. "But with that out of the way, I was wondering if you could clarify something for me. It's been bothering me ever since I saw the price in the online ad."

Nathan nodded. "Ask me anything. I've got nothing to hide."

Marcus folded his arms. "Well, four hundred dollars every month, including utilities, is remarkably cheap compared to some of the other places we've seen around here. Granted, that's the price for just a single room, but still... the cost of living is way cheaper than what seems to be average. Why set the price so low? It's setting off my "too good to be true" alarms."

Nathan crossed his eyes. "Well, I'm not really proud to say it, but... I'm a bit tight up for money right now." He bit his lower lip, looking down at the floor. "I lost my car and my savings to a cheat of a girlfriend because I was a fool, the bank's stonewalling progress on helping me recover my bank account, and I don't have a lot of money left to me right now. Without a car, I'm living off my sick and vacation days at work and praying that I can at least get a month-to-month or a lease renter before I lose my job entirely. I need money fast and this was the only thing I could think of that didn't get me into deeper debt."

As he looked up, he became aware that Horatio was whispering something to Marcus. The shorter of the two stood up. "That's horrible! I'm terribly sorry to hear you've had such a rough time lately." He started walking towards the door. "With that in mind, I need a word with my boyfriend alone, please." He grabbed Marcus' hand and half-pulled, half-led him out through the front door.

Nathan buried his face in his arms and smacked his forehead against his kitchen table. That was it then. He'd probably scared them both off. He hadn't had any other real viable options on the roommate front, and his mortgage was due in a week. Without the eight hundred he'd have gotten from both of them, he only had a third of the money he needed. He didn't know what'd happen if he didn't pay that money. And he might not have time to find other roommates before his landlord kicked him out into the street. He despaired, waiting for the moment he heard the engine of the truck they had outside start. He'd watch them drive off, and with them, what was probably his last chance to escape being a homeless hobo. He let out a wounded snuffle. He didn't know what to do.

"Excuse me, Mr. Gurshwielz?" Nathan heard Horatio calling his last name. He looked up as the pair of them walked back in, Horatio's black jacket rustling as he walked. "We have a proposal for you." He looked back up as the two of them walked back in. Marcus was carrying a blue cloth bag in it.

He tried to look professional and calm. He wiped the beginnings of a tear from his right eye. "A-alright. What is it?"

"We'll each pay you six hundred a month, with a deposit of an equal amount coming to you today. In return, the lease we're signing will be amended with two changes." Horatio's face was inscrutable. Marcus was doing his best to keep a straight face and failing. Nathan saw his upper lip struggling to not curl into a smile.

Nathan blinked. "Wait, really?" His eyes lit up. With an extra four hundred a month, he could afford groceries that weren't ramen. He could look into a new car with the money from that deposit. "That is... a bit enticing..." He said, trying to sound impartial.

"What's more, since Marcus works from home, we can make arrangements to let you ride to work and back in our truck, as long as you're willing to trust us with that. At least until you

can afford a reasonable replacement vehicle of your own." Horatio folded his arms, locking eyes with Nathan.

Now the young man's instincts were telling him this was too good to be true. He met Horatio's gaze and adopted his plastic, unflappable smile again. His pearly white teeth shone. "I'm willing to entertain this prospect, but of course I want to know what I'll be agreeing to beforehand. It's not often a renter offers to pay MORE."

"Call it Charity. You see, we had a talk, and, well... we both find you rather adorable, and-" Marcus spoke first, before Horatio glared at him. Nathan got the impression the shorter of the two was used to being the one to speak.

Marcus cleared his throat. "The first clause is that while we are living with you, at home you will agree to wear clothing of our choosing at all times as long as guests or public company are not present. This includes over and underwear." He took the cloth bag from Marcus and reached both hands into it. "In the interests of full disclosure and honesty, at least at the moment what we are intending on making you wear are things such as this." What he pulled out of the bag with one hand was what appeared to be an oversized onsie, the sort that covered the chest and wrapped around the crotch, buttoning underneath it. It was bright pastel pink and had frilly ruffles around the shoulders. A white circle was sewn onto the chest with alphabet block letters stitched into it, the letters reading "Daddy's Little Princess" in red, white, and pink block print letters. The other hand withdrew from the bag with what appeared to be an oversized infant's diaper, a pure white in color, but with what looked like little brown teddy bears printed on a patch on the front, each stuffed bear adorned in colorful ribbons.

Nathan face curled into a weak frown and he folded his arms. "I... see. And what's the second clause?"

He could tell Horatio was wearing his best poker face to match Nathan's. "You aren't allowed to use the bathroom at home without one of us giving permission."

"What." Nathan felt his face getting hot, and wondered what the hell he was getting himself into.