

AMAZON TRAIL

The housesitter blues

Gone are the days when there were plenty of reliable, unfettered folks glad for a change of scene

by Lee Lynch

When I was a kid living in New York, hiring someone to take care of our apartment was never an issue. Every summer my parents packed the cat into a carrier and off we went to Grand Central Station to catch a train for the annual two-week visit to all the relatives. My family couldn't afford a car back then, much less a home. Even in the biggest baddest city in the world, a locked door was protection enough.

Decades later, owning a home is one of the few ways a queer family has to define itself, to set down roots, and to take advantage of the few privileges—mortgage write-offs, insurance discounts—not yet denied us by the radical right's rude campaign to refuse us legitimacy and stability. With these privileges, though, come responsibilities.

Cleaning the gutters is OK, especially since Lover does it. Keeping the gravel driveway from becoming a swamp in the rainy winters is kind of fun, like playing in the mud. Over the years the chimney sweep and the electrician have practically become family friends. Home ownership definitely beats noisy apartment building neighbors and control-freak landlords. But I hate hiring housesitters.

My first housesitter spoiled me. She was the most reliable person in the universe. A secretary who lived with her parents, Joyce would arrive in her classic black 'Vette with her case of Gatorade, pound of bologna and loaf of Wonder Bread. In those days, I lived in a condo easily converted to a closet, so although over the years we always left her our number in Provincetown, we never came out to her. I suspect it wouldn't have mattered. All she seemed to want was her Gatorade and a place to be a couch potato in peace.

Those were the good old days. Housesitters were more like overnight guests. Dykes glad for running water and a shower, kids wide-eyed to get the run of a house all their own for a weekend, a city person glad to spend a week in the country. Living in a counterculture, there always seemed to be someone at loose ends, unfettered and available.

But at some point all that changed. Finding a housesitter has become an agonizing—albeit privileged and middle class— ordeal. Maybe when I was younger I knew a lot more unfettered people. Or maybe, instead of distrusting everyone over 30, I now distrust everyone under 30 and mature housesitters don't exactly grow on trees. I've seen a new industry evolve: insured and bonded professionals equipped with prepared contracts who want to be paid by check for tax reporting purposes. Personally, I'd rather stay home than interview someone in a job market so slim that playing house in our house constitutes employment.

What can we do? Here in rural Oregon a month doesn't go by without a hate crime. As I write, a local Jewish family is enduring daily vandalism to their home. Housesitter, nothing—we need to invite the local SWAT team to use our place as a dormitory if we have to be away overnight.

So I interview housesitters. And since this is not the most sought-after type of employment, high turnover is about the only stable factor among these

rare and valued workers.

We've had some lively experiences. Ethel looked good. She lived with her gay daughter and talked a lot about her HIV-positive grandson. She seemed pretty perfect for us: tolerant, experienced, mature.

We went off to Seattle with confidence. We arrived at our friend's home to a hysterical message from Ethel that she had immediately lost the dog. Ethel was full of scratches and burrs from beating the bushes for her. The dog did come home when she was ready, no worse for the wear. But Ethel was a wreck, and by that time, so were we.

After Ethel, we found Darlene listed in the paper. Far from being uncomfortable with our lifestyle, Darlene may have envied us a bit. She had developed a housesitting business to supplement her income, but also to get away from her husband and sons. She was insured and bonded, had a manner that inspired trust, and never lost the dog. But we lost Darlene when her husband took a job far away and she chose him over us. Damn.

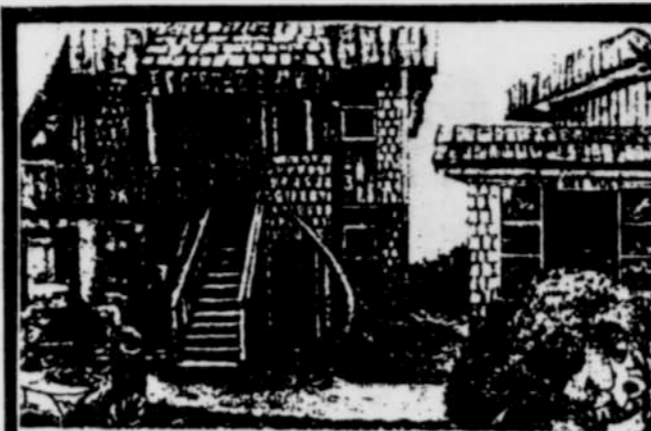
Darlene was so good that she didn't leave us in



the lurch. She referred us to Helena Housesitter. If Darlene was a professional, Helena was an executive. She was so devoted she brought all her furry customers holiday treats. But Helena had 22 dogs of her own and started a kennel business. Double damn.

Then came the woman who was so lonely it was hard to get her to leave. And the woman who, when I called the first night we were away to see if she had any questions, told us there'd been an unexpected problem and she had her infant and toddler grandchildren staying at our home. And a friend who was great—until she fell in love and set up a household of her own. And the highly recommended young woman who made a commitment months ahead, then never called to cancel. And the lesbian who volunteered, then couldn't bear to be parted from her lover.

Not that I blame her. That's the same thing we wanted. To go off on our own and pay someone to be a responsible homeowner for 10 days while we played. Sometimes I wonder if I destroyed my housesitter karma by moving across the country, abandoning Joyce to her parents' house. Eventually, though, she married and moved away too, with her 'Vette and her Gatorade and Wonder Bread. But we still keep in touch. And if she ever divorces...



The See Vue

Lodging—where mountain meets the sea

95590 Highway 101
6.2 miles south of
Yachats, Oregon 97498
(541) 547-3227

The Center for Lesbian Therapy Presents:

WORKSHOPS

Sat. Mar. 23 *The requirements for healthy relationships*
Sat. Apr. 6 *Single: Is there a healthy relationship for me?*

An innovative program of workshops, groups & couples therapy designed

to assist lesbians in creating satisfying & enduring relationships

Presenters:
Kao Rhiannon, Ph.D.,
20 years experience specializing in lesbian therapy.

Nelly Kaufer, MA, co-author of
A Woman's Guide to Spiritual Renewal

Couple groups forming soon!

For information phone Nelly at 248-0759 or Kao at 248-0018

Put Your Business in the Pink!



What Are You Waiting For?
Become a Part of the Most Comprehensive Guide to
Gay-Owned and Gay-Friendly Businesses in the Northwest.

CALL 206-328-5850 TODAY!

Summer/Fall Publication Date: June, 1996 • Circulation: 30,000 copies

Portland Center Stage

IN THE INTERMEDIATE
THEATRE OF THE
PORTLAND CENTER
FOR THE
PERFORMING ARTS

BOX OFFICE:
(503) 274-6588
TICKETS:
\$11.00 - \$33.00

TICKETS ALSO AVAILABLE AT
FASTIXX 224-TIXX

JUST OUT

WilliametteWeek

PRODUCTION UNDERWRITERS

HEWLETT PACKARD

generously sponsored in part by a gift from

The Road to Mecca

by Athol Fugard

FEBRUARY 17 - MARCH 16