Couch Surfer

A Short Story from an Idea by Erin

By Maryanne Peters

Carl liked the freedom of being jobless, but he could never be one of the homeless. His simple rule was to engage with people and he was good at that. He told stories that were believed – things like “I had all my stuff stolen – I just need somewhere to stay for a few days until the insurance comes through”.

The answer is to keep moving. Lies unravel by force of time. The more you talk beyond the first lie, the more chance you will forget what you said and say something different. Take the welcome when you can, but never outstay it.

He had never crashed in an apartment with all girls before, but he had met Beth, Diane and Gina at a coffee shop and sold them on his story.

“We actually have a spare room in our flat,” said Beth. “We just use it for storage, but there is a mattress in there.”

“It’s sounds perfect,” said Carl. “Just for a few days. That would be so cool. I don’t know how to thank you guys.”

The problem was that Carl was running low on cash. He did some busking no and again and played the tin whistle and the mouth organ outside railway stations in rush hour traffic, but he was ready for some casual work during the day, if he could find something short term and for cash.

He needed some new clothes. His stuff was looking threadbare, and the “I had all my stuff stolen” story wears thin with the fabric of his clothes. As it was he was borrowing one of the girl’s robes while his stuff was in the wash.

Diane suggested that he might like to do some work around the apartment, or maybe even the apartment block.

“The problem is the building manager,” she said. “He is actually quite nice although he is old fashioned. If he knew you were staying with us, he would hit the roof, being a guy in a place with all girls. But he desperately needs help with rents and paperwork, as well as general cleaning of shared space.”

“If you were Carmen instead of Carl he would hire you in a flash,” joked Gina. But then she suddenly seemed to have an idea looking at Carl in that robe, his long hair still wet from the shower. “Or perhaps you could be?”

It seemed that the other girls understood well before he did. They were all looking at him and nodding.

“What?” he said.

“Carmen,” said Beth, as if it was supposed to mean something. “We love a challenge, don’t we ladies?”

“Hair up, I think,” said Gina. “With some curls on top too. The whiskers will have to go. And most of the eyebrows. A little padding here and there and he will be my size I am guessing.”

“No! You’re kidding,” said Carl.

“You could stay here with us if you stay as Carmen,” said Diane. “We could charge a nominal rent for the room if we can get you the job with Mr. Natoli. You could make a little money while you wait for insurance payout.”

The idea of money stopped him from continuing to protest, but the thought of a place to stay for longer than a week or two appealed to him as well. But could he pass as a woman? Maybe – but she would be a troll – he was sure of it.

“Only if I can get away with looking like a woman,” Carl said. “I don’t want to look like some drag queen.”

“Don’t worry. Mr. Natoli hates gays,” said Beth, as if that was meant to reassure him. “If we can’t pass you off as female you can forget it, but you are slim and lack heavy features. I think that we can do this.” She was receiving back the nods of her friends.

“You will need to get back in the shower and do an all over body shave,” said Gina. “But as for the face, we will need to do some plucking.

Carl winced, but the pain he imagined was nothing like what he endured when he was finished in the bathroom and seated under the gaze of his three tormentors.

“Is it too late to change my mind,” he said.

“Take a look at those eyebrows and you tell me,” said Gina.

He saw his face in the mirror. It seemed incredible that he should look so different, even without the makeup that would follow. His hair was in curlers and his eyebrows were shaped. There was no man to be seen anywhere. For a moment a panic swept over him. This was all to much … too real.

“I think that you look beautiful even before we have done your face,” said Beth. “You almost put us to shame. Now let’s get a bit of makeup on you and then get those curlers out.”

He watched it all in the mirror. The man was already gone, but now the woman appeared. Despite his shock he liked what he saw. He could not help but turn his head this way and that, admiring the transformation.

“This is incredible,” he said. “Who would have thought?”

“It is just the voice that needs to fit,” said Diane. “That needs some work, but we have time.”

I will call Mr. Natoli and tell him that we might have an answer to his problems,” said Beth.

They just needed to make sure that Carmen could speak like the woman she was by the time he knocked on their door.

Tony Natoli was I his late forties, and did his best to look after himself. He was not totally successful but he was fit and not bad looking. He had been divorced for five years and married for 20 before that. She got the nice house in the suburbs and he got the building and all the mortgages, but the rents ad given a good return and he had turned a corner. He could afford to pay for support.

“This is our friend Carmen,” said Beth. “She is staying with us for a while and looking for work.”

He looked at the girl and liked what he saw. She looked strong. She did not look like a woman who would giggle one minute, cry the next and then start with the shouting. She looked like the opposite of his ex-wife. And she was young and pretty.

“Do you clean?” he asked.

“I can do that,” said Carmen, in her newly acquired slightly husky but wholly feminine voice. “But I prefer to manage cleaners. I know residential property. I have wide experience – maybe a hundred homes. I can help you with administration, but I can clean if needed.”

“I like that,” said Tony. “I clean too, if needed. But sure, I am not good at records and collecting rent. I always think that because I am the owner people think they can give me reasons not to pay. I think a woman – a woman like you – might do better.”

“We could try for a couple of weeks and then you could decide?” In her mind or his, that was all it might be. In the normal course Carl would be on his way by then, but if it paid well and with cheap rent in a windowless room, maybe she could save a bit?

“That sounds like a deal,” said Tony. He thrust out his hand. “You’re hired Carmen.”

Her smile seemed to open a crack in Tony’s shell. Marriage had crushed him, then divorce had blown him to pieces. He had only just come to terms with it. He had only just re-established a relationship with his four kids, only one still living with his ex-wife. Recovering from that ordeal had left him with no thoughts of women other than a relatively inexpensive call girl once a month. Now he felt her hand in his – strong and indendent – not needy and grasping.

“Thanks for the opportunity, Tony,” said Carmen. “You don’t mind if I call you Tony, do you?”

“No”. Somehow on her lips it sounded different. His wife had a way of saying it that made him hate his own name – a whining and demanding “Tony” that had rung in his ears for years. When Carmen said it, it was like a woman he was fucking whispering it to urge him to do more.

He gulped at the thought and the minor disturbance in his pants. “Can you start tomorrow?” he asked.

It was not soon enough. He thought about her all night.

In the morning he gave her the rent book and by the evening she had it back to him with notes as to who was due an increase and how much.

“I should write some letters. Keep it properly documented. Refer to payment history and the local rental market and stuff like that. Her hair was still up as the day before. It would take a month before Carmen’s hair was long enough to properly tie it back, but for now he liked that style. It showed off her strong face and neck. She had added pierced ears and drop earrings with cheap stones. Tony thought that she deserved better

“Sure,” he said. “I have had a busy day. Can we discuss this over dinner tonight? I will pay. Like a business dinner. My cousin has a restaurant around the block. Do you like Italian?”

“My favorite food,” said Carmen. Free food was her favorite.

They went out then and there. He held the door for her. It was her first time. It felt right somehow.

The book stayed unopened on the table all might. They had so much to talk about, or at least Tony did. What amazed him so much was that Carmen understood his viewpoint and took his side. She was the first woman who had. A whole group of friends had shunned him, led by the wives. Women back women, but Carmen was different.

“You need to tell me about yourself,” he said. It had been hours before he suddenly realized that he had not stopped to listen, a failing that he had been accused of for decades.

“I think I have had a bit of wasted life,” said Carmen. “I am sure that you would not approve. My roomies tell me that you have some old-fashioned ideas and don’t approve of alternative lifestyles.”

“I think I have wasted some of my life too,” he said. “Perhaps we should agree not to look back and to start to look forward.” He paused for a minute with a look of concern. “You’re not gay are you?” he asked cautiously.

“I have chased women,” said Carmen. “But my conclusion is that they are more trouble than they are worth.” She smiled at him, and he grinned back.

“Once again I find myself in total agreement with you,” said Tony. It’s an old line, but he said it because he felt it – “Here have you been all of my life?”

“Just waiting for the right person to come along, I suppose.” He had was resting on the table and he took it and held it. Carmen felt the energy through his firm grasp. His eyes were on hers, almost wet but not quite. There was emotion hanging heavily in the air, so thick that it smelt of something stronger – passion.

“I think that I have arrived,” he said.

“I think that I am going to have to make some drastic changes,” she said.

“Anything you need, and it is yours. My business is finally on track and now I feel that my life is on track too … at last. Whatever changes you need I will help you to realize them. I just want you to be mine,” he said.

She found herself wondering how big his bed was. It was sure to be comfortable.

The End

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