

Male Senior Citizen Seeks Roommate(s).

No Smokers. No Pets. No Sickos.

There were three of us. Then two. Now it's just me. I'm all alone, too old to regroup. I just don't have the energy. In their places there are things now. Activities. I've had to keep myself busy. If you don't stay busy, you die.

I go on walks. Two a day. In the morning I walk down the street to the museum and stare at all the other old things. I do that for about an hour. I know the place by heart. I know all the paintings as well as I know the things on my own walls. I know all the faces of the people who work there as well as I know my own. Then, in the late afternoon, before dinner, I walk to the park and watch the children play. When you're old, like me, you can do that. You can watch children without anyone thinking you're some kind of creep.

Herald went first. It wasn't exactly a surprise. He ate like a pig. Plus he smoked a pack a day and liked to nip scotch in the evenings. He was seventy-five years old to the day. He didn't wake up. His heart gave up sometime between midnight and 3 am. It was kind of sad. But mostly I was bothered because he left me with Virgil.

After my afternoon walk, I go home and throw something in the microwave, something healthy. Usually it's one of those tv dinners made for dieting women. Chicken ala something-or-another and steamed vegetables with a little square of something mushy with crust around the edges for dessert. A real culinary treat.

I always go to bed at eight. Eight on the nose every night. Herald and I used to stay up until nine or ten playing poker—five card draw, stud, and other games—while he

sipped scotch and I slowly drank a glass of prune juice. Now I go to bed at eight on the dot every night.

After Herald passed, it was just me and Virgil. I was worried that I wouldn't have the time or the energy to care for Virgil the way he deserved. When Herald was alive, we shared the responsibility. He fed Virgil in the morning and I fed him at night, and Herald always cleaned his water once a month. How was I going to do all that myself? I'm a busy man for my age. Besides, Virgil wasn't even technically mine. He came with Herald. They were a package deal. When Herald moved in, he brought Virgil with him.

In between my walks, the bulk of the day, I try to do small, productive things. It's important to have something to show someone when the day is done. Even if there is no one to show it to. It's important to be productive. If you're not productive, if you're stagnant, you die.

So I do little things because I don't have the energy for big things. On the way back from my morning walk I get the newspaper so that when I get home I can do the crossword and read the classifieds. I read only the classifieds because it is the only thing worth reading for fifty cents. It's the only place in the whole paper where everyday you can find real people communicating with each other.

When Herald called, I asked him, do you smoke? and he said no. I asked him, do you have any pets? and he said no. So I said fine, you can move in. I wasn't getting any other calls about the ad, and he sounded decent enough over the phone. You don't really have to worry about old folks being murderers or sickos, so I wasn't that concerned. When he showed up he was holding in one hand a bowl with tiny blue rocks on the bottom and a single purple fish rocking in the water above them. In the other hand he was holding a lit cigarette.

Katherine, my wife, had been gone for five years, and I was tired of being alone. I still missed her, but it was time

to move on. A person has to move on. You can't live in the past. A person who lives in the past is not living. And if you're not living, there's only one thing you're doing. So one day when I was reading the classifieds, I did it. I bought an ad: male senior citizen seeking roommate(s). no smokers. no pets. no sickos. Call Bill: ###-####.

About a month after Herald passed, Virgil started acting strange. He wasn't himself. His swimming patterns became erratic, and one morning I came down to the living room to find Virgil flapping around in a puddle on the floor. I dropped him back in, and he floated motionless for a few seconds and then slowly started wiggling around in his aquarium.

After reading the classifieds, I eat one egg over medium and a piece of dry toast. It's about all I can stomach so early.

I've always been good with my hands. I can fix anything. One time, trying to keep me busy on a day off, Katherine handed me a blender she said had been broken for years. "Do you think you can fix it?" she said. "Of course!" I said. I took it back to my work shed and took the whole thing apart and then put it back together. When I plugged it in, it worked. To this day I don't know what I did to fix it, but I did. I guess I just have a knack with broken things.

I spend about two hours a day in my shed, making noise and banging around. I try to find something that needs fixing, something small and manageable, something not too heavy that I can get my hands around. If there is nothing, I create something. I always clean up after myself when I am done, and I always have something to show for my time there, even if it is just an escutcheon refastened to a couch cushion.

A week went by and I found Virgil on the floor again. This time he barely recovered. He was looking bad, and I got the feeling, absurd as it may sound, that he was doing it on purpose. Suicide or something. I didn't know what to do

because I had never had a fish before, and Herald was not around to consult with. Three days later I found Virgil belly up floating on top of the water. I think he had quit eating. It was so strange. I was inordinately sad. Though I cannot say that Virgil's death was a surprise, it filled me with grief more than anything had in a very long time.

After I'm done cleaning up in the shed, I eat lunch and do various things—clean up around the house, take out the garbage, watch a small amount of television, listen to talk radio—until it is time for my late afternoon walk.

It's hard being the only one left. It's hard being here when everyone else is gone. I've outlived everyone in this house. But one day I'll die, and there'll be no one left to keep things going. To fix things when they break. I shouldn't think about such morbid things. But I do from time to time.

When it is time for me to leave, I do a thorough walk through the house. I start upstairs and work my way down. I check all the bedrooms and bathrooms to make sure everything is clean and where it should be. I make sure there are no dirty dishes in the kitchen sink, and as I walk to the front door, through the living room, I feel the silence of the house and am acutely aware of myself in it. Outside, I lock the door.