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A Guest Encounters Happiness, and a Bit of Babyland

THE FIVE OF US A loft owner's generosity created an impromptu family in his home while he was away. There were a happy couple and their baby, and the author and her cat, Boo.



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

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I 'D met the happily married man several times, always at one of the parties Doug gave in his loft in TriBeCa, but we never got to know each other very well. He was alarmingly kind, and of course married, but for some reason, his happily married wife and I didn't remember each other. Could be because Doug's loft seems to be the size of a football field, and when you are in a space the size of a football field, you usually don't get to know the people on the other side unless you have a pair of binoculars.

Doug knew that for a variety of reasons, mostly having to do with lack of funds, my living situation had once again become unmanageable. I was moving out of the room where I was living in the West Village, which I could no longer pay for — the unromantic aspect of being a writer — and I had no idea where I was going. So, in September, when Doug went on location to direct a hundred-million-dollar movie, he offered me the keys to his loft for a few months.

By the time he got back, the idea was, my life would be sorted out. And in fact, I didn't feel too bad about moving. I figured that I could check his mail, water his plants and generally manage things, even though he has a staff of people

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taking care of him even when he's not there.

The weekend that my cat, Boo, and I were to move in, I discovered that Doug had also given loft keys to the happily married man and the happily married woman, who, as it turned out, had a happy baby. It's inappropriate to be furious with somebody who's doing you a favor. But since I work at home, I worried that I'd never be able to get any work done, not to mention that the thought of a screaming baby, happy or not, terrified me.

In the scrambling for options, seven friends offered alternatives that involved couches, beds and futons. But Doug's two-story loft, with the vast open space below and gorgeous bedrooms above, seemed to be my safest bet, as I would have my own room and the happy family would have theirs.

Still, the first weekend was overwhelming. Forbes magazine had already listed TriBeCa as the 12th most expensive neighborhood in the country, which, as a friend pointed out, meant that TriBeCa had become the most expensive square mile in the city. Boutiques, designer shops and strollers were everywhere.

Yet more noticeable than the outside, I could see inside that the happily married man and the happily married woman were excessively kind to each other. Everyone in the happy family, which now included me, was treated with total respect and fairness, something I don't see a lot of. Even more unnerving was to discover they were equally kind to each other even when they thought I wasn't there.

The happy baby was 15 months old at the point we all moved in together, an enchanting and joyful child except when she screamed. The first time I heard her cry, the crying lasted 45 minutes. It didn't really last that long, but it seemed to. I was afraid that something might be wrong with her, but the next morning the happily married woman explained what was going on. "You're not supposed to pick them up for the first 10 minutes," she explained. "It's not good for them."

Friends explained to me that this kind of child rearing is called the Ferber method, which thankfully didn't exist when I was growing up. The approach struck me as a bit harsh, both for the child and for me, but I accepted this as my fate. I knew what I was getting into.

After a while, you get used to the sound of a baby wailing, especially if you don't have to do anything about it. You go back to sleep, or you leave the house. Or you lie on your bed and simply absorb the sound. There were times I connected with her pain. Other times I felt a tinge of jealousy that she was allowed to express her emotions so openly while we adults are encouraged to suppress ours altogether.

No matter, the loft was filled with a peacefulness. I considered inviting friends over just so they could see the couple in action: opening the refrigerator with love, taking out the trash with love; good mornings and good nights with love. But I didn't want to exploit their happiness.

One afternoon, I noticed that the happily married woman's expression was not as vibrant as usual. When I asked her why she was down, she told me that the happily married man had found them a great apartment in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, but when she had gone to look at the place, the landlord wouldn't let her in. I couldn't imagine why until she went on to explain, "Because of the color of my skin."

"In Brooklyn?" I demanded.

"Yes, in Brooklyn," she replied.

What I haven't mentioned is that the happily married man is an attractive white male and the happily married woman is a stunning black female. She told me that this sort of thing happens about once a month. I was devastated for them.

Every once in a while, I gave Doug updates about how things are going in the loft, usually when he dropped by between trips from Toronto, Paris or Rome. On the last visit, I urged him to observe the happy couple closely. I told him that maybe we could learn from them, because one thing Doug and I have in common is that we believe in true love without actually having ever committed to it. Or at least our commitments thus far have been sporadic. We also discussed the Ferber method and concluded that maybe our problem is that we were picked up too much when we were babies.

Not too long ago, the happily married man and the happily married woman pulled me aside and told me that they had just had a fight. I replied that I didn't believe them because they were smiling. "It's true," one of them insisted. "We were in a fight, and in fact, we're still having it." As they continued to tell me about their minor skirmish, I knew they were just trying to make me feel better about my life, which of course didn't work.

The fear of moving in with the happy family turned out to be more frightening than the reality. They didn't stand in the way of getting my work done, and I didn't lose that much sleep. And if it weren't for the happy baby, I wouldn't know, for example, that there are 15 1/2 steps between the floors of Doug's loft.

One recent weekend, I packed my bags and left. Another friend who watches over me had helped me find a place to live above an Italian restaurant in the Village. Even though the landlord warned me about the ghost who lives in the building, I moved in anyway. I've never been afraid of ghosts, and after staying in Doug's loft, I'm not afraid of happiness anymore.

Johanna Baldwin is a writer and producer who is currently working on a collection of short stories.