



JOHN PRICE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TRISH CARNEY

High Maintenance

In which the hero faces destitution or a life of petty crime

I ENCOUNTERED THE FIRST ILLEGAL PET during a routine visit to fix a dripping faucet. Of course, being my first plumbing job as maintenance man for OK Apartments, it was anything but routine. The owners of the animal, college students like myself, had called that morning to report the leak, and I'd spent the entire day studying my five recently acquired fix-it books. When the fluffy blond tabby sauntered into their bathroom and rubbed against my ankle, I'd been

working on the sink without success for over two hours, its grimy black parts scattered on the linoleum. To make matters worse, to disassemble this one faucet I'd had to cut off the water supply to half the complex. Unable to take a shower for their Friday dates or even flush their toilets, tenants had been angrily calling my wife, Stephanie, who kept coming over to ask when I would be finished. On her fourth visit I was seriously tempted (for the first and only time in our marriage) to tell her to shut up and get me a beer.

After another half hour of futility, I stomped into the tenants' living room and called the previous maintenance man, Ted, on his cell phone. He said he'd be there in an hour. I broke the news to the tenants about the delay—two huge, football-player types wearing soaked muscle shirts, one gray and the other gold. They'd just returned from the gym, sweat trickling off their prominent biceps and foreheads, and were probably desperate for a shower. I expected to get punched. Instead, they offered me the much

beast, still rubbing against my ankle. I wasn't a fan of cats—I'd been bitten by one as a child—but at the moment, Ditka was probably the only resident of the complex that didn't want to kill me.

"No, I won't tell the landlord. Just keep him out of sight."

"Oh," they exclaimed, massive shoulders slumping. "*Thank you.*"

Actually, the hulks in apartment 12 weren't the only tenants harboring illegal pets. We had an eastern box turtle named

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desired beer. As I took a long swig, they looked at each other, then lowered their heads.

"Are you going to tell the landlord about Ditka?" Gold finally asked, pointing at the cat (some names, including Ditka's, have been changed to protect the innocent). He appeared to be on the verge of tears. "We don't have anywhere else to take him, except back to the shelter."

I should have seen it coming. During my interview for this job, Jerry, the co-owner of the apartment complex, had explained that my responsibilities included keeping an eye out for pets, which were a violation of the lease agreement. I was an unlikely candidate for any job that required fixing things—I had only recently learned that cars require regular oil changes—but I was desperate. Steph and I were about to be married, and we'd spent months trying to find an affordable apartment. Luckily, Jerry—an attractive man in his fifties, very white teeth—didn't test my mechanical knowledge. Instead, he inquired about my parents (he knew people in my hometown) and about our family dog, a Brittany spaniel. Jerry said he had a couple of Brittany's himself. At the end of our conversation, to my surprise, he handed me the contract. For half off our rent, I would handle all maintenance duties for the twenty-four units in the complex. He added that if I needed any help, I could call Ted, my predecessor. Ted had taken a new job, but would still be living in the complex with his wife, Janet, the rent manager. Jerry emphasized, however, that I was to report all major maintenance issues, as well as any illegal pets, directly to him. We shook hands on it.

And now, newly married and three hours into my first plumbing job, I was waiting for Ted to come to the rescue and being asked to decide the fate of someone's cat. I looked at the yellow

Methuselah, whom we refused to give away when we moved to OK Apartments after our wedding. We would miss his pulsating throat, his affectionate hiss, his ancient soul. We adored him. Plus, his behavior wasn't likely to betray us to the authorities. Inside the apartment, he'd disappear for days and then, like a good fugitive, sneak out from beneath the couch or refrigerator to be hand-fed smoked turkey, meal worms, and grapes.

Methuselah might have been my role model during my early weeks as maintenance man, as I tried to hide from the other tenants. I lived in fear of the next knock on the door, the next invitation to fail to fix something, the next chance to provoke the wrath of the community. Sometimes, when the phone rang in the early morning, I'd pull the covers over my head and stay there for hours.

DURING THOSE RETREATS, I began to recall the less stressful time I'd spent at Deluca Dwellings, a dumpy foursquare where I'd rented a room for most of my undergraduate years. It was owned and operated by Clarence Deluca, a bald, elderly man who always dressed in the same olive coveralls, zipped too tight at the crotch. During my initial week there, I received the first of many hand-typed newsletters Clarence would deliver to me and the other twelve people living in the house. "To the New Lessee," it began, "I say: Welcome to your New Home-Away-From-Home."

YOU, and each of you, are a select person in the strictest meaning of the word. The Landlord is very proud of you and have literally set you upon a pedestal! Therefore, the landlord expects you to be exemplary as tenant in compliance with Agreements, including a Clean Dwelling, AND the maintenance

of your Good Reputation. Enjoy Your Home-Away-From-Home To The Maximum; However, In This Pursuit, Remember That Your Liberty Extends To The Point Of Non-Infringement Upon The Rights Of Others.

QUOTES OF THE MONTH: Douglas Jerrold: The character that needs law to mend it, is hardly worth the tinkering. Samuel Smiles: To be worth anything, character must be capable of standing firm upon its feet in the world of daily work, temptation, and trial; and able to bear the wear and tear of actual life. Cloistered virtues do not count for much. Clarence Deluca: Be mindful of other people; and the purity of ones character will manifest itself generously, if one is truly well-meaning.

At first, I had a lot of time to dedicate to maintaining my dwelling and my good reputation. I didn't know anybody in the house, but soon discovered they were the kind of people who, like me, had moved there out of a hard-earned desire for privacy—mostly humanities majors, foreign students, and ex-cons. Then I got a pet mouse. I can't recall why I purchased him—pets were strictly forbidden at Deluca's. Perhaps it was because my girlfriend had just dumped me, or the way he appeared at the pet store, the only black mouse crowded in with hundreds of whites and browns, waiting to serve as lunch for someone's boa constrictor. Whatever the reasons, I brought him home and named him Ernest T. Bass after the mischievous hill-billy on *The Andy Griffith Show*.

During the first week, Ernest repeatedly escaped from his plastic cage and, like his TV namesake, thwarted all efforts to contain him. I finally bought him one of those plastic free-rolling hamster spheres, but then, one evening, he rolled out my door and bounced down two flights of stairs. I caught up in time to see him roll into Kurt Moody's room. I stood in the doorway, panicked that this stranger would report my pet to Clarence. Kurt picked the sphere off the floor and grinned at Ernest, who stared back, apparently unfazed by the strange face or the two flights of stairs. During the ensuing conversation, I learned that Kurt was a graduate student in the creative writing program. He was the first serious writer I'd ever met, and the close friendship that developed was one of the reasons I'd become a writer myself. All because of a wayward mouse.

Ernest soon became the house mascot, roaming the halls in his ball, entering other rooms, and introducing me to more people than I would ever have approached on my own. As a vibrant, sometimes rowdy social life blossomed at Deluca Dwellings, we had less time for maintaining the bathroom on our floor, and its condition rapidly declined. We weren't the only ones who noticed. The Deluca Dwellings Newsletter, April 1987, proclaimed:

EXPOSE!

Landlord Denounces And Labels Four Residents As Bad Tenants: Namely: JANE PILLHOUSE JOHN PRICE TRAVIS KING AND LING-YEOK CHONG

By definition, bad means: failing to reach an acceptable standard. FACT: The Bad Tenants named above failed to meet the Clean Bathroom standard during the "Mandatory Clean Bathroom Days" of March 15th and 29th, 1987.

The Landlord hopes that this "public" revelation has done its intended job well; that a wise attitude of course of action subsequently will reflect intelligence commensurate with their chronological age and apparent educational status.

QUOTE OF THE MONTH: Colton: No man can purchase his virtue too dear, for it is the only thing whose value must ever increase with the price it has cost us.

In addition to being distributed to every resident of the house, the letter was sent to parents and to those who'd written recommendations, among them our bosses, professors, and spiritual mentors.

"He sent this to Reverend Cole, for godssakes!" my mother shouted into the phone. "He makes it sound like you all crap in the bathtub—*what's going on over there?*"

In response to this humiliation, my floormates and I cranked our favorite Smiths song—"Sweet and Tender Hooligan"—and spent the afternoon scrubbing porcelain, pausing only to drink more beer or pay homage to Ernest, who directed us from his cage on the back of the toilet. In a generous spirit, we even cleaned the bathrooms on the other floors. A month later, to my mother's relief, we were publicly exonerated in the Deluca Dwellings Newsletter:

YES, a single happening! And that's all it takes sometimes to make or break one for life: remember Wallace?, Agnue?, Nixon? And Hart? This single accomplishment (Bathroom Cleaning) may be construed "virtuous" (demonstrating "a commendable quality" and "conformity to a standard of what is right and good"). For anyone who may be struggling and are now vindicated, your Landlord suggests that you "exercise" your integrity (however small and weak). Consequently, if you are truly one of goodwill (predisposed to conform to sanctioned codes or accepted notions of right and wrong,) your Character shall "grow" and become "strong."

My floormates and I celebrated by filling the bathtub with ice, purchasing a pony keg, and throwing a house party. All night, amid the revelry and dancing legs, the guest of honor rolled in his plastic sphere.

Ernest lived another year or so before dying peacefully in his sleep. When I told my neighbors, there was general sadness—we'd lost one of our own. At a sunset funeral in the front yard, Kurt read a poem while others tossed violets and small bundles of seeds into the grave. I remained close with several of them, including Kurt, who took off for Los Angeles to become a screenplay writer. A few years later, he was murdered in an attempt to steal his car. The last time I saw him, during one of his brief visits from California, we sat in our favorite bar reminiscing about Deluca Dwellings and about Ernest. We lifted our glasses to the memory of a lost friend.

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE FELLOWSHIP enjoyed at Deluca Dwellings amplified my misery at OK Apartments. I tried to convince myself that our social isolation was due to the layout of the buildings—each unit looked out on the dirty concrete of the parking lot. This place lacked the character and intimacy of Mr. Deluca's old house. A more likely reason, which I'm sure Steph suspected, was my dismal performance as a handyman. After several more half-days without water, tenants had become openly hostile toward me—sour looks, prank calls, screaming. One person scraped the feces out of his unflushable toilet and dumped them on our doorstep.

The only friend I really had there was Ted. He was always pleasant, even when I called him after midnight to help with another plumbing disaster, but his wife Janet was a hard knot of repressed anger, lashing out at tenants (and me) for the smallest infractions. In December, Jerry called to announce they'd experienced the biggest midyear flight of tenants in memory, and asked if I knew why. I expressed surprise, but suspected it might

He drove his fist into his palm, probably to demonstrate what he was about to do to my damage deposit. But what I pictured was the jellied body of Ernest running through his fingers.

have something to do with the combination of my poor plumbing skills and Janet's poor attitude. A week later, Jerry called to tell me they were flooded with new applications. Once again, he asked if I knew why. I didn't, but eventually discovered that the tenants in 12—Ditka's boys—had spread word around our college town that OK Apartments was pet friendly. I was soon introduced to Paula the parakeet and Fernando the ferret and Satan the albino boa constrictor, as well as a number of other new tenants who had rushed to our complex as if it were the ark.

At first, the dramatic increase in illegal pets made me feel even more anxious, but those feelings soon got lost in the newly elevated spirit at OK. Suddenly, it was a much friendlier place—



people dropped by to say hello or to invite us to dinner or keg parties. Some even volunteered to help with small fix-it jobs. Over the next few months many of us became friends. And as our affection grew for each other, so did our affection for each other's pets. The patchouli-wearing women in 18 made a weekly habit of dropping

off organic greens from the co-op for Methuselah, while I became especially attached to a pair of mice—AC and DC—owned by the heavy metal guys in 21, even giving them Ernest's old traveling sphere. All this without any noticeable change in my skills as a handyman. What had changed was the community itself—now largely composed of people willing to occasionally go without water for a few hours if it meant they wouldn't have to go without the animals they loved.

For a while, we were able to keep our little ecosystem secret. Janet, unlike me, had to give twenty-four-hour notice before entering an apartment, so tenants had plenty of time to hide their pets with neighbors. But then one morning Janet spotted



Ditka grooming himself in the window and immediately alerted Kenneth, Jerry's usually silent business partner. Kenneth gave the tenants the opportunity to give up their cat, but they refused. He promptly evicted them, minus their damage deposit. I watched in sadness as they loaded up their rusted Escort and drove away, Ditka perched in the rear window. I had to admire them: instead of giving Ditka to the shelter, they had given up their own shelter—no easy thing in winter, in the middle of a semester.

A few minutes later, Janet knocked on our door.

"I just talked to Jerry," she said. "He's very upset that Kenneth had to deal with this mess. Very upset. He said you had strict instructions to report any animal activity to him. And by the way, how exactly did you miss seeing that cat? You've been over there a thousand times fixing your mistakes."

I offered some lame excuse, but she was clearly suspicious.

"You'd better be careful," she warned, "or else you'll lose your job."

Janet's threat hit the mark. If I lost this job, we wouldn't be able to pay the rent. Like Ditka's owners, we'd be cast out into the dismal winter where finding an affordable place would be nearly impossible. I could already hear Steph's father: *First year of marriage and he has them living in the streets!*

Later that week, I got a call from the women in 19, who said their toilet had been running all night. I grudgingly gathered my tools and after knocking repeatedly on their door, let myself in. Inside the bathroom, I spotted Chowder, their rabbit. Chowder was brown and huge—the biggest rabbit I'd ever seen—and his flabby bulk was stretched out between the base of the toilet and the wall. "Hi guy," I said in an overly friendly tone that, in retrospect, I probably hadn't earned. When I reached down near his belly for the water shutoff valve, Chowder let out a horrible screech and attacked my forearm with his sharp claws and teeth. I fell backward onto the floor, kicking at my surprisingly animated assailant until he retreated, still screeching, into the bedroom.

Washing my wounds in the sink, I resolved to tell Jerry about Chowder. There were several good reasons. First, the fat freak had attacked me. Second, I didn't like his owners, the kind of women—tall, beautiful, and aloof—who tapped into several residual teenage resentments. Most importantly, by betraying this bad animal, I might not only save my job, but also protect the other, good animals in the complex. Jerry's trust would be restored, so he wouldn't go snooping around the apartments. The individual would be sacrificed, but, as Aldo Leopold directed, the general health of the biotic community would be maintained.

When I announced my plan to Steph, I became the target of another unexpected attack. She wondered, loudly, how I could ever think of doing such a thing. She recalled some of the animals I'd cared about in my life, including Ernest. "Imagine what Mr. Deluca would've done to that mouse!" she said. "It's an evil plan, John. Even if you do get caught, we'll find another place. We'll live."

"Yeah," I said, "but where?" I stomped out of the apartment.

In the dim cave of the laundry room, I paced a row of yawning dryers and tried to convince myself that Steph had no right to say those things to me. Conjuring up old Clarence had been a particularly low blow—I did know what he would've done had he caught Ernest. I recalled a conversation we had during my last week at Deluca Dwellings. Clarence sat in my red corduroy recliner, having just finished the final bathroom inspection, scolding me for another poor score (things had gone downhill after Ernest passed away).

"You're a student of the Bible, aren't you, John?" he asked, though he'd recently congratulated me for being named the religion department's "outstanding student of Judaica." He'd even introduced me—a Congregationalist—to a prospective Jewish tenant as having won the award for "top Jew at the university." This had been one sign among many that it was time to leave.

"Yes, I'm a student of the Bible."

“Well, I’ve been rereading the book of Amos, which I strongly suggest you review. In that book, God destroys all the cities that displease Him. Contrary to several so-called theological opinions, I have no disagreement with God’s harsh treatment. He warned His people, He was merciful, but they continued to break His laws. It’s as if you made some human or animal figures out of putty, but they didn’t meet your standards. What do you do with them? Well, you smash them and start over!” He drove his fist into his palm, probably to illustrate what he was about to do to my damage deposit. But years later, pacing the laundry room at OK Apartments, what I pictured was the jellied body of Ernest running between his fingers.

I was still unsure what to do—I was no longer a boy living on my own. I stared into one of the chicken-wire storage units at a tattered corduroy recliner. It was similar to the one Clarence sat in to deliver that final sermon. Years before, my friend Kurt Moody had sat in the same recliner on the eve of departing for LA. Then I knew: I wouldn’t betray Chowder and his owners. I wouldn’t betray any of them. They had a right, those people and those animals, to live together and be happy. They had a right, quite simply, to live.

THE REST OF THE YEAR went surprisingly well; no one was caught harboring illegal animals. Steph landed a teaching position in another town, so we’d soon be moving again. During our last week at OK, while Steph was off gathering cardboard boxes, Jerry appeared in our doorway. He’d come by to return our damage deposit and to ask a favor. It was time to renew leases, he said, and though Janet was supposed to make the final inspections of the apartments, she was working today. He wondered if I would mind doing a quick run-through on my own. I’d completely forgotten about this final inspection, which might’ve spelled disaster for all of us. Janet’s fortunate absence, along with the fact that I’d convinced Jerry to hire a friend of mine—another animal sympathizer—to be the next maintenance man, suggested the purity of my character was, as Mr. Deluca had promised, manifesting itself generously.

“I’ll be happy to do it.”

“Thanks,” he said, stepping inside. “If you don’t mind, I’ll just park myself here until you get back. I have some deposit checks to write.”

Though school was out, there were quite a few people in the complex, and this gave me a chance to say goodbye to them and their pets. I even said goodbye to Chowder, with whom I’d long been reconciled. At last count, there were five cats, four hamsters, three parakeets, two rabbits, two ferrets, two mice, a green water dragon, a snake, and numerous fish (which weren’t technically illegal, though I took moral credit for them anyway). Ascending the stairs to our apartment, I carried the satisfaction

that this little community had become more diverse, more integral, than when we’d arrived—a collective strength of character that, to recall another favorite quote of Mr. Deluca’s, should require no law to mend.

When I stepped through the doorway, Jerry was sitting on our couch reading the paper.

“How’d it go?” he asked, without looking up.

“Fine,” I replied, then saw something move in the background. Methuselah, probably disturbed by our packing, had decided to emerge from his hiding place and was now in the middle of the floor. Jerry put his paper down, stretched, and stood up.

“Thanks again for all your help,” he said, walking past me through the doorway. He stopped and turned. “Oh, yeah. Did you find any animals?”

“No,” I said. Methuselah’s claws scraped loudly against the kitchen linoleum. Jerry’s eyes shifted over my shoulder, into the apartment. At that moment, despite my earlier conviction, despite everything, I was ready to confess, ready to turn us all over to his mercy. Before I could speak, Jerry handed me the check for our damage deposit. The amount in full.

“Well,” he said, smiling, “that’s a relief.” 🐾

Molt

This is my way of wanting the trees to teach me
the grace of loss the *duende* of failure
the simultaneity of green and groan
let go and belong

white pines I cannot spread a blanket large enough
to gather all that is dropping out of the woody sky
feathers pine needles leaves skin I cannot
lie beneath without hearing the sigh rise again
the sunken cheek the whisker hair still growing
fathoming
corpse and egg

the snake skin dangles over my head
in wind it sways against the trunk
it shimmers empty as a wing

haven’t I too chosen routes that dead end
haven’t I vanished and come back into my own bones
walking or winding or whispering
over and under you

—Laurie Kutchins