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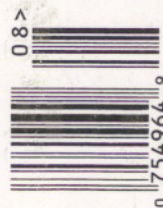
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Dependence Day

It's a beautiful house, it's loaded with food, and it's virtually rent-free. There's only one catch: Your parents still live there. JOEL REESE explains how to survive moving back home.

It was a perfectly reasoned decision at the time. I was twenty-eight, broke, a reporter at a small newspaper in rural California with no chance of moving up. I weighed my options: I could stay there, in a beautiful part of the country, and eke out a meager living—deferring my student loans and accruing interest all the while. I could try to make a go of it in San Francisco—a cool city, sure, but an expensive one, and since I wasn't shaved, pierced, scarred, tattooed, or bisexual, I figured I might have a tough time getting started. One last option seemed like it might be painful, but it was the most logical: low rent, a place I knew, friends and family in the area.

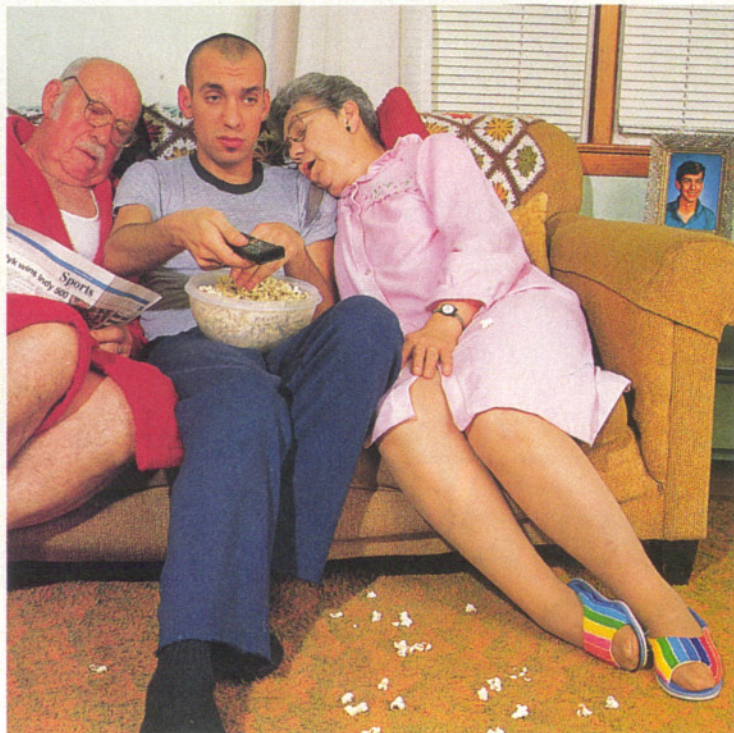
So I headed home to Evanston, a suburb of Chicago, and moved in with my parents.

I vowed not to stay long. One month, tops, and I'd be out of there. I was sure my numerous contacts and intimate knowledge of the city would turn up dozens of writing jobs. But here I sit, six months later, in the house I grew up in. My parents and I don't fight, Mom does the laundry, we all cook. We just got new carpet for the living room. Living here is so comfortable.

I'm miserable.

My brother is upstairs rocking to the Scorpions. My old cat George, a present for my eleventh birthday, follows me around the house meowing. My mom asks me why I'm not married. My dad hired me at his business, so now I make money selling cheese at farmers' markets while I look for work.

No, it's not a paralyzing car accident. It's not a disease from one night of drunken carelessness. It's just damn emasculating. I have younger friends who live in lofts in the city, are married, and have high-paying jobs. Everywhere I look, I see reminders that by now I should be out of the house and in my own place. One episode of *Friends* is



enough to send me into a deep funk.

Sometimes it feels like everyone else my age is getting on with their lives, eating out at dimly lit restaurants after work, or having their girlfriend over for an anniversary bubble bath. I'm at home, clearing the table and watching reruns of *Name That Tune*.

I keep asking myself: How could this happen? Don't I have a master's degree? And most importantly, aren't I out of high school?

It's only a little comforting knowing I'm not the only one. A lot of college graduates my age are moving back home. They call us boomerang kids, or the excruciating ILYAs—Incompletely Launched Young Adults.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that almost 5 million men and women aged twenty-five to thirty-four are sleeping under their parents' roofs. What it often comes down to is this: According to David Lipsky and Alexander Abrams' book *Late Bloomers*, college tuitions have increased at twice the rate of inflation since 1978, which has led 21.6 million college students to take out huge student loans. Combine that debt with a tight job market, low starting wages, and unpaid internships, and what you get is forced smiles and weak hugs from Mom and Dad

as Johnny moves back into his old room, complete with Farrah Fawcett poster taped to the closet door.

Oh, I know what you're saying, Mr. Smug: *I would never move home*. But let's just say, for whatever reason, that you do. Let's just say that you piss off your boss, or your company is bought out by Microsoft, and it happens. Here are a few well-learned tips to keeping your sanity until you land that great job you're about to get so you can afford that one-bedroom apartment in the hippest part of town.

Be ready for the inevitable freak-out. You'll try to tell yourself that

it's not a big deal, that it will be temporary, and, really, isn't it time you got to know your parents better anyway? It's all bullshit. At some point you will have a moment of existential crisis where you stop, look around at your predicament, and say, "My God, what have I done?"

For me, that moment came the first time Mom told me to clean my room. I thought she was joking, but then she said, "I've got company coming. Can you put new pillowcases on your bed too?" I tossed some books into the closet, threw my clothes under the bed, and went for a run. A seething, gritted-teeth, seven-mile run. I ended up on a rock by Lake Michigan, watching the waves roll in, cursing my stupidity for ever thinking that this was a viable alternative.

The point is, losing your shit is inevitable. Just divert that energy into increasing your resolve to move out *as soon as possible*.

Old flames are not your friends. If you've moved back to town from somewhere else, nothing will be more tempting than falling back in with an ex who is still in the neighborhood (provided she's not married, or isn't still furious with you for whatever reason she broke up with you in the first place). ➡

MR. MEANS

Instead, put a personals ad in the local paper, go to a singles bar, or ask out that librarian who looks like all she needs is a tender caress to unleash the sex kitten within. Just don't find yourself saying: "Yeah, Holly" (or whatever her name is), "I've really missed you the past five years. We should get together and catch up."

Don't make that call. You will feel like a desperate, mealy-mouthed teenager again. The last thing you need is to spiral back into old habits. Move on. If it means clandestine nights with the Jenny McCarthy Playboy video on your parents' big-screen TV, so be it.

Don't buy into the favorite-son-come-home myth. Your parents may be smiles and hugs when you arrive, but they're probably just as bummed as you are that you're back. They are likely just settling into retirement, or near it, and the last thing they want is your sullen ass moping around. Again.

You may very well resent them for your predicament. You will be annoyed by Mom's prying questions, and you will be flummoxed by Dad's middle-aged eccentricities, such as his compulsion to quote Thoreau despite an inability to remember how to turn on the stereo. Your parents may make you wince, but don't hassle them. They're doing you a favor. Yes, you're feeling stuck, but don't make it worse by being an asshole.

Keep up a social life. Go out with friends, go to clubs, bars, plays, anything. Just get out of the house. Let your parents know in advance you won't be sleeping there every night and not to pester you about it. And if you do go on a date, don't make a big deal about the fact that you live at home—hiding it or putting off the news will only make you look more pathetic later.

Keep moving. Exercise. Use your anxiety to run, swim, lift weights, become automatic from twenty feet out. It'll help fight depression.

Similarly, avoid the siren song of the remote control. Crash on its rocks and you're history. Sure, your parents' behemoth TV is nice, and tonight is the *Planet of the Apes* retrospective, but don't let it happen. You'll end up fat, pale, and you won't just feel like a loser—you'll be one.

There are times you're going to feel pathetic. Don't. You're not. In the serpentine path of your life, some time at home isn't the worst thing. You'll probably live six hundred more months—what's five with your parents?

Indeed, there are benefits: In some ways, it's not so bad to have home-cooked meals, low rent, and the security of family while you look for the next

step. It will allow you to accrue some cash and give you time to figure out what you want to do next. Despite how it feels right now, it is not forever. Believe it or not, very soon you will look back on this and laugh.

And remember: You're not alone. Last week I was at a coffee shop when this beautiful, tall woman drove up on a motorcycle and came inside. She sat near me, and I decided to put my living situation behind me and strike up a conversation. We talked for

I vowed not to stay long. One month, *tops*, and I'd be out of there. Here I sit six months later.

an hour, then as she was leaving she gave me her card and told me to call her.

"By the way," she asked as she left, "where do you live?"

My heart sank.

"Um, well, I just moved back here, and so while I'm figuring out what to do, I, uh . . ."

"You live with your parents," she said.

"Yeah," I said, staring at my shoes.

"Don't worry," she said, smiling. "So do I."

Joel Reese recently moved into his own apartment in Chicago.