

First apartments: Small but cozy

By Paul Joly
NC News Service

Maureen and I hung around together for eight years before we ran out of excuses and decided to get married.

Many of our friends had long ago figured out that one apartment rent is half the price of two. Some seemed scandalized by our traditional morality when they realized we weren't living together.

They were genuinely surprised when we persisted in taking separate apartments, especially after we moved a thousand miles from home to a town where neither of us knew one other person.

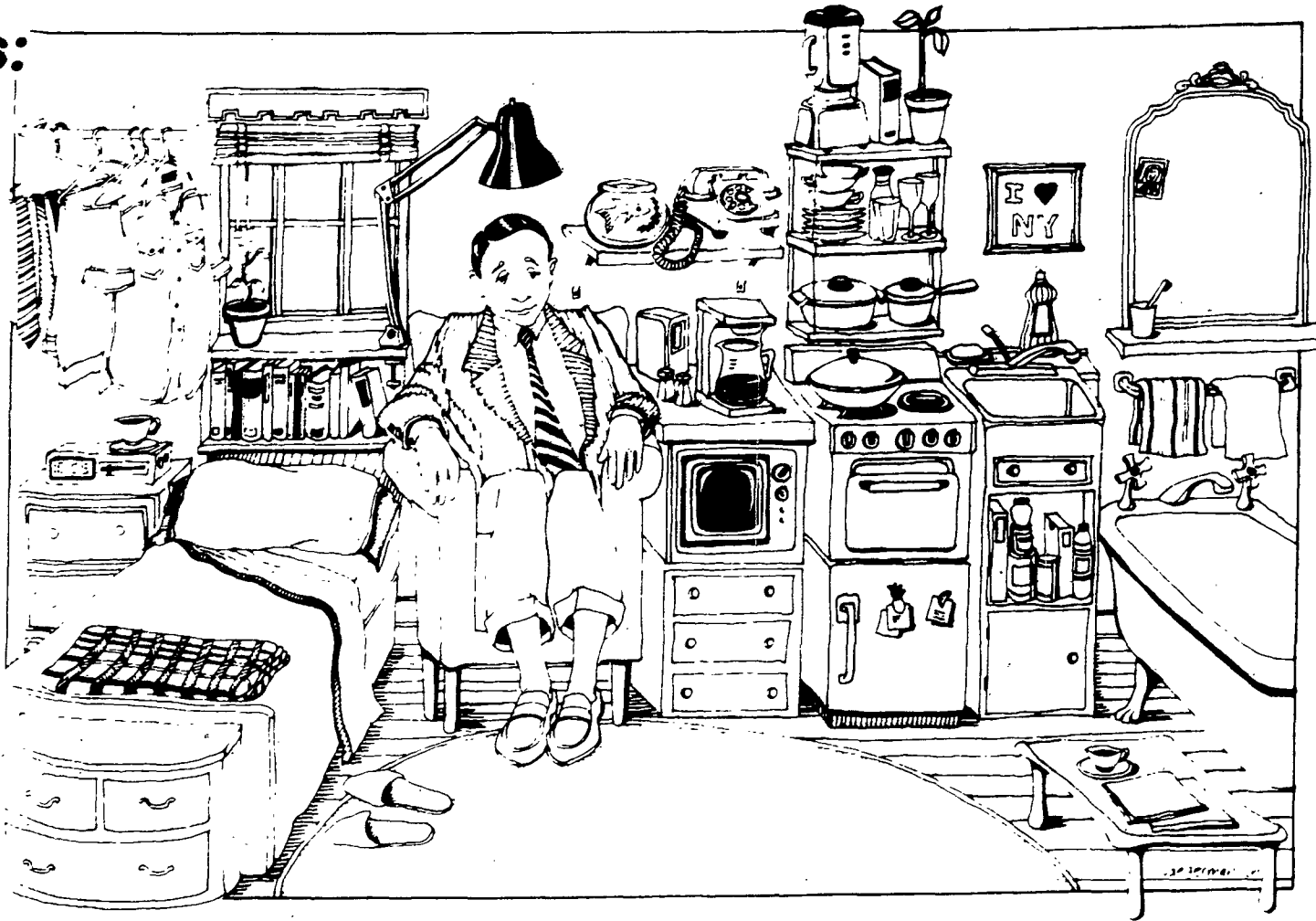
Our fifth-hand cars looked pretty shabby next to the shiny new ones of our unmarried friends who had one rent and two incomes, but at least our parents still spoke to us. For us, it was a choice between living debt-free or guilt-free.

When we finally did decide to get married, we were glad we had gone by *The Book* for all those years. Setting up house as newlyweds was an adventure we wouldn't have wanted to miss.

The day after we returned from the honeymoon, we stuffed the car to the roof, Maureen kissed her mother goodbye and we set out from Philadelphia to Oklahoma, a journey that Maureen calls her trail of tears. She borrowed the expression from the legacy of the American Indians who were uprooted from their homes around the country and forced to move to Oklahoma.

Maureen cried at least part of every day during that trip to my apartment in Oklahoma where had recently relocated after changing jobs. She was crying and at the same time assuring me of how happy she was that we were starting our life together.

But for some reason, even after the reception, the honeymoon and the trip, our marriage didn't seem quite real until we walked into that apartment together for the first time. It was like somebody grabbed us both, shook us and screamed, "Hey, you two, you're married now!"



The mailbox was jammed with cards addressed to "Mr. and Mrs. Joly." For a second I thought I was getting my parents' mail.

Before the wedding, I spent months fixing up the place like I've never fixed up a place before. It looked nice. But it looked like home three days after Maureen walked in.

What a difference curtains on the windows can make. And pictures on the walls. Food in the refrigerator. Furniture. It's the little things that make a home.

Until then, I thought apartment sinks were to keep dirty pots and pans in until the next meal, and to catch lumps of cold canned stew

that fell off the fork during stand-up meals hunched over the stainless steel basin.

When we walked in the door, the first thing I did was to take my new wife on a tour of the apartment. "This is the living room," I said. "Over here is the side of the living room that is the kitchen. Check out this new dish drainer."

"Now come over to the other end of the room and I'll show you the bedroom...Here we are — this is the part of the living room that is the bedroom."

"Closet? No, that's the bathroom. See this shelf? I built it myself — don't touch it."

"Closet? No, that's the heater

room...What sheet? Oh, that sheet hanging in the corner? That's the closet. Check it out. You'll be surprised how much you can get in there."

"See, you just fold your clothes and put them in these boxes — then they all stack nice and neat. What do you mean you don't think they'll fit? The stack is only half way to the ceiling. I've been saving the rest of the space for you."

Maureen cried for about 10 minutes; then she told me again how happy she was. We popped open a bottle of champagne. She looked around and said, "It's a nice place." And she meant it.

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