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Room Wanted! Jeepers, Peepers, Save us from the Creepers! Part 1

By Cynthia Brian

Fall is fast approaching and your daughter has transferred to a new university in a far away city for her junior year. She's done with dorm rooms and no longer wants to live on-campus. College confidence convinces her that she'll find a fantastic roommate in a fabulous apartment nearby. She turns to the free classifieds on the internet to post her requirements. Soon her in-box fills with "chill" people offering rooms at a price she can afford. Unfortunately, most of the offers are ones she will not want to accept.

21 year old female looking for a cool house/roommates

"Hi! My name is Shelley and I'm a 21-year old female student. I live in Berkeley now, but I am moving to Chicago in August to start my junior year at the university. Not too familiar with the area.

I'm looking for a furnished room in a cool place with laid back, fun people. I don't party too much, but I like to have a good time! I want a roomie (or roomies) who are outgoing and nice. I like to be outdoors (running, swimming, walking) and I also like cooking, drinking, painting, music. School doesn't start until the end of August but I can move in anytime. I can send you links (facebook, blog, myspace) to give you a better idea of me, and of course, a picture. If you are interested, please e-mail with details of your place. Or text me at xxx-xxx-xxxx. Let's chill!"

Do you see any problem here? This is an actual posting on a recent classified site with numerous similar other posts. Her name, cities, and the phone number have been changed. Shelley probably felt this was a sweet, honest, harmless ad. She was wrong.

As a parent, how can we protect our children when they are legally adults, yet so unaccustomed to the craziness that looms in the world beyond our reach? Although most people are straightforward and trustworthy, the web has provided an easy avenue for unethical or criminal behavior to transpire. Our messages may be filled with good intentions and frank disclosures that actually spell danger. The son of a friend of mine was offered free room and board in a beautiful home in exchange for sexual services. Another teen connected with a dirty old man posing as a student. The creepers are interested in both men and women. They post inviting stories to numerous sites to ensnare the unsuspecting. Common sense rules of protection are the same whether off or on-line. Strangers are strangers until we make them friends. Here are a few precautionary tips to help you help your offspring straddle the safety net:

- Edit the posting. Write it in a professional manner without indicating age, sex, religion, or personal details. There will be plenty of opportunities to get to know the proposed roommate.

"Seeking to share an upscale furnished apartment with other students in a quiet area close to campus. I have \$xxx for rent. Please contact me with information. Thank you."

- Do not provide any personal information, including email. Email addresses can be "Googled." Check the box on the classified page that restricts all contact information.

- Delete responses from "owners" who are out of town. These are normally scammers.

- Once you have an offer that appears legitimate, ask for photos and as much information as possible regarding rent, rules, deposits, and expectations.

- Arrange for a phone conversation.

- Never send any money in advance.

- If your gut instinct feels right, take along a companion to view the property. Meet the proprietor face to face.

- Always carry your cell phone. Let friends know where you will be.

- Before signing a lease agreement, make sure to read all the fine print. It is customary for homeowners to order a credit or background check with the fee being your responsibility. Prices range from \$25-40 and at that time you'll have to provide personal proprietary information.

- Rental services are an alternative for finding the ideal room. Many real estate agencies specialize in managing rental properties. Fees are normally paid by the homeowner. This could be a great option, especially when you are dealing with living in a new area.

- If you believe you may have happened upon a scam, file a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

They can be reached on-line at <http://ftc.gov/multimedia/video/scam-watch/file-a-complaint.shtml> or by phone at 877-FTC-HELP (4357)

Keep in mind that if it sounds too good to be true, your intuition is probably right. Err on the side of safety. My hope is that you'll share this information with your tech savvy young adult and together you'll navigate the perilous waters to discover the calm seas of a happy college living experience.

Happy Hunting!

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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