

September 18, 2008

Monthly Trouble

My roommate Jason gets it once a month without fail, and it's always the same thing: bitchiness; anger; uncontrollable mood swings. I dread that time of the month when the curse... the misery... the monthly bill arrives. Code red! Code red! The scarlet letter is in the mail! It's the dreaded electric bill.

I had not even lived here one week when the first electric bill of my tenancy arrived. I opened up the envelope to learn that the bill had not been paid for several months. It was about \$200.

Afraid that my roommate would try to stick me with one-third of the present amount owed, I whipped out my handy-dandy calculator, a piece of paper, and a pen. I was technically responsible for only one-third of four days. My total - \$3.65.

I left a check and a note for Jason with a clear and simple description of how I arrived at the amount.

Kill Bill

Needless to say, Jason was NOT happy. He forbade me to open his mail and claimed full responsibility for handling payments of the electric bill. He's the primary tenant, the bill is in his name, so he would take care of things.

One month later, the electric bill arrived. It was placed on the bureau in the living room where all the mail sits. The bill sat there unopened day in and day out for about three weeks! It was completely ignored. That is apparently Jason's way of taking care of things.

When a letter from the electric company arrived, I expressed my concern to my other roommate Rory. He ripped open the letter. It was a warning from the electric company that our electricity would be turned off if the bill wasn't paid soon. We opened the original bill, calculated our payments, wrote checks, and slipped them under Jason's door.

The next month was the same thing. The bill sat there ignored day after day after day until Rory and I finally opened it and gave our checks to Jason.

From then on I said, "Screw it!" Rory and I developed a system that worked. I opened the bill, wrote a check, and gave everything to Rory. Rory wrote out a check and gave everything to Jason. The checks are payable to Jason who then writes his own check for the full amount to Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E). Luckily, there are no late fees to worry about. It's easy, no?

No!

Round 1

About three months ago, I noticed that Jason made two huge payments of \$195 in one month. Normally, our bill is only \$90, so this was a massive overpayment. I think he was catching up on some late payments, but accidentally wrote two identical checks. That's when the trouble began.

In a drunken stupor (i.e. an average evening), Jason accused Rory and I of underpaying the electric bill. He said that he made an overpayment, so now we owe him money. I explained to Jason that we each pay one-third of the monthly expenses regardless of what he decides to pay to PG&E. Jason would hear nothing of it.

"Why am I paying more than you?" he asked in an accusatory tone.

"You're not," I said. "You overpaid last month. This month you can take our checks and just deposit them in your account without writing a check to PG&E."

"But I paid more than you, and you make more money than anybody else."

"What?" I barked. "I've been paying the correct amount since I moved in. Am I supposed to pay more than my fair share just because I happen to make more money? I am not paying any more than one-third of the bill."

"So why did I end up paying more to PG&E?"

"Because you're stupid?"

I couldn't help myself. At that point, Rory jumped into the conversation, but the discussion went nowhere. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get Jason to understand that my appropriate payment was only one-third of the monthly charge... regardless of how much he overpaid or underpaid the electric company.

Round 2

A few days ago, the same fight erupted over the exact same thing. Jason insisted that he paid more to PG&E than everybody else. He barged into his bedroom and came out with a handful of old bills with notes written on the envelopes.

"What does this say?" he asked, holding up an envelope with some numbers on it.

"The amounts of the checks we wrote to you, I suppose. That doesn't prove anything."

I went into my room and emerged with my laptop computer. I powered it up and opened Quicken, where I track all my finances. I showed him all of the checks I had written for the electric bills, including memos with the billing cycle dates. He refused to look.

I said, "Rory and I actually DO owe you some money. We never saw the May-June bill. If you show it to me, I'll write you a check right now."

Jason looked and looked, but couldn't find the bill.

I said, "Call PG&E and have them send you a copy. It's easy."

He didn't call. He just left the apartment. I picked up the phone, called PG&E, and ordered a copy of the missing May-June bill.

Round 3

Our third fight began when the May-June bill arrived on the same day that Jason learned about the newest bill, presently in Rory's hands.

"Is there ANOTHER electric bill?" he asked, referring to the one in Rory's room, as if my opening the mail makes the bills come more often.

"Yes," I said. "I wrote out my check a week ago and gave it to Rory."

"And another one came today," he exclaimed.

"Oh, that would be the May-June bill that we never received. I called PG&E and had them send us a copy. If I can see that one, I'll give you a check."

"I don't want you opening my mail."

"I'll give you a check. Just show me the bill." He didn't. I got impatient. "I'm giving you money. You don't even have to ask for it. The bill comes, and I give you my payment. I don't get it. Would you prefer that I not give you money? We have a system that works. What's the problem?"

"I've been doing this for 11 years," he said. "I have a system."

"Well, it's obviously not a good one. You actually need to OPEN the envelope for a system to work. Put the bill on the refrigerator or something. It's easy. If you want, I'll make a spreadsheet and track the bills and payments. That's what I do for a living."

"Yeah, well that's work... this is real life."

Inside my head I laughed, though I was laughing at him, not with him.

After more pointless back and forth discussion, we finally came to an agreement. I am not to open the electric bill under any circumstances. "It's a federal offense," as he likes to remind me, "to open somebody else's mail."

"Fine... it is now your responsibility to open the mail and make it known to me that payment is due. And let me make it clear that I am not writing any checks unless I physically see the electric bill. Plus, if multiple bills are provided to me for multiple months, I'll take just as many months to pay them off. I don't want you giving me a bill after five months, then saying I owe you \$200, which I can't afford."

He stormed off, muttering something under his breath and slamming the front door on his way out.

It's been three days, and he still hasn't spoken to me. He also hasn't shown me the May-June bill, which I have yet to see.

In my apartment, the lights are often on, but nobody is home. We'll see for how long the lights stay on before PG&E turns off our power.

