

The Houseguest
by Kris Gillis

This particular young couple had not yet been married long enough to have had their first fight, had not lived together long enough to have decided once and for all on which side of the bathroom sink their toothbrushes would reside, were so new to each other that the young husband still flushed with heat whenever he fished through a pile of clean laundry and discovered the cup of a bra hidden under his t-shirt. They lived on the outskirts of the city because they could not afford a downtown loft, and they did not want to afford the suburbs. The bars in their neighborhood attracted a loyal and, on rare occasions, boisterous crowd. They did not mind the potholes and patches in the streets, the uneven sidewalks, or the unkempt lawns of the mostly two-story, shotgun homes, all built around the turn of the 20th century. They had decided, against their parents' pleading, to live where every house had its own unique character, but where one could also wander into any home on the street and find it familiar.

The wife's mother offered the couple a gun.

"Mom, stop," the young wife said.

"You never know," her mom said.

"Never know what? When I'll want to shoot someone?"

The young husband intervened, pointing out that they had already decided to take Bear, their family's aging golden retriever. He noted that, even if Bear was a hundred-pound lapdog, his bark would make any intruder think twice.

Originally, the couple thought they might make some friends at the tavern down the street, The Falcon's Nest, and one night found themselves crammed against the rail of the bar shouting to each other over the combined noise of a jukebox and what appeared to be the local high school's some-year reunion. After several different people asked them what year they graduated, the couple realized that they were mistaken. It was the regular weekend crowd, which seemed to consist of every member of every graduating class old enough to drink, and even a few who couldn't. That was their one and only night at The Falcon.

It was a Saturday morning, and the young wife had woken up to her alarm, set earlier than usual. She had entered to run in the city's "Saturday Scram," an annual charity 5K that snaked through the trendy part of downtown and concluded with free donuts and whiskey

samples. She scurried quietly between the bedroom and bathroom, twisting her hair into two tight buns, applying sunscreen, and hopping into her running shorts. The young husband had decided his running days were over and would instead hold his wife's belongings during the race and cheer from a convenient spot. That seemed strenuous enough for him on a weekend morning.

He still lay in bed, surprised that the alarm had woken him. Usually, it was his fat, orange tabby, Julius, who stepped on his throat precisely at 7:00am to remind him that food existed and that he wanted some. It was stranger, however, that Julius was not even in the room. That Bear was not in the room was less surprising. Bear spent most nights guarding the front door, lounging on the cool tiles at the entrance. The young husband was about to abandon thinking altogether for a few more minutes of sleep when his wife appeared in the bedroom doorway, waving her toothbrush like a wand as she spoke.

“Why does it look like someone's in the daybed?”

“What do you mean?” he said. His wife's amused tone did not match the possible weight of her question.

“I mean, I know it's not, but it kind of looks like someone's in the daybed. What is that?”

Before replying, he had several thoughts. His first was that nobody was in the daybed. Second, he figured that Julius and Bear had been rough housing, no doubt, during the night and jumbled the pillows and blankets into what looked like a sleeping person. Julius hid downstairs whenever he caused a ruckus, which accounted for his absence. Third, he thought about how his wife had given him the ideal conditions for one of his typical pranks.

“The animals have probably just messed up the pillows and blankets,” he said, dismissing even the notion of concern.

“I guess,” she said and dropped her voice, “but it looks like a person.” She turned a nervous eye in the direction of the spare bedroom.

The young husband sighed, “I'll check it out.”

He threw off the warm covers, pulled on a t-shirt from his pile of clothes on the floor, and then walked to his wife. He took her by the shoulders and positioned her near the bed so when he screamed in fake terror that “oh my god, someone is in the daybed,” he could safely tackle her onto the rumpled mound of pillows and blankets. Then he walked the short distance to the spare bedroom, turned right, and looked inside.

His eyes scanned the familiar sites. Immediately to his left was their barrister bookcase. The bathroom door stood open on the left wall, where his wife had been walking back and forth through the room getting ready. Shelves lined the wall to the closet door, and his grandfather peered back from a portrait on the opposite wall. To his right was the old daybed he saved from the scrapheap when his sister remodeled. What he saw next did not make sense.

He expected to see several large pillows in various states of disarray and half covered by the disheveled comforter. He expected the shape to look like a human only to his wife, who had yet to don her glasses or contacts. He did not expect to agree with her. The pillows stood upright as they always did. Underneath the duvet was a large, s-curved lump, tapered at the end closest him into the exact shape of a person curled on his side to sleep. He laughed, bemused, because it seemed impossible. Yet, there it was in front of him. He forgot all about his plan to scare his wife.

“It *does* look like someone’s in the daybed,” he said. For some reason, he decided to speak in a whisper. “That part looks just like legs, and then the rest of the body would go up that way.” He gestured in the air as he spoke.

“But really though,” she said. She watched him for reassurance and placed one hand on her hip. Her other hand waved figure eights in the air with her toothbrush like a wizard casting a half-hearted spell.

“If you look where the body would be—” he trailed off. The guest room came into sharp focus. He watched the blanket swell and collapse, swell and collapse, swell and collapse with the steady breathing of the person it covered. Still, it was hard to believe, yet there on the floor lay an unfamiliar red and white trucker hat. The hallway seemed to tilt beneath his feet. He did not understand how this could be true.

He replayed last night’s event at top speed. They had ordered take-out Thai, watched a movie on Netflix, and dozed a while on the couch before going to bed proper. He had wanted his wife to feel rested for the race, so sent her upstairs while he had let Bear out. He had let Bear out. He, not his wife, had let Bear out. His wife, who always double-checked that the deadbolt to the kitchen door caught after letting out the dog, especially late at night, had gone upstairs to brush her teeth, while he, who had several times before been reminded about checking the door and leaving the house unlocked for hours, had let Bear out. He had also, it now seemed, let someone in.

His breathing had become shallow, and his chest heaved in fear. He glared back at his wife and managed to hiss, “Go downstairs now. There’s someone in the daybed.”

His wife, unfortunately, mistook her husband’s terror as overacting. She had fallen for similar bits a thousand times already, and this one felt too strained even for him. The hyperventilating, the wide eyes, the way his mouth hung open, bull. It was too much. Every trace of concern vanished, and she shook her toothbrush at him. “That was a good one. You almost had me,” she said and started toward the door.

The husband regretted every prank he had ever played on anyone ever and issued a silent vow never to do such a thing again. He thrust out one hand, pleading with her to stop, and pressed his other index finger against his lips, shaking his head in quick bursts.

“Okay, it’s time to stop now. We’re going to be late. This—.”

She stopped talking and stood dead still when the old springs on the suspension deck of the daybed creaked. It was her turn to hyperventilate. Neither hazarded a glance into the room. They chose instead to gaze into each other’s eyes until they were sure they had not been murdered.

“I need you to go downstairs,” he finally mouthed. “There’s someone in the daybed.” She nodded as though even nodding her head were too loud, and the two of them inched down the stairs without a sound.

Once they stepped into the dining room, the couple strained their ears for several seconds at the silence in the house. During that time, Bear lumbered from his spot by the front door and whined to go out.

“Get him out of here now,” said the husband. His wife, startled by the force of his command, hustled the dog through the kitchen, unlocked the back door, and ushered Bear outside. The husband saw Bear through the kitchen window trot his usual path through the yard, unfazed. His wife came back.

“How is that a person up there?” she asked.

“I don’t know. How would I know?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “How did they get there?”

“Alan and Bella know where the hide-a-key is. Are they in town?”

“Not that I know of. Alan would’ve called. I wouldn’t put this past Bella.”

“But she doesn’t even know we have that daybed. You really think that’s Bella?”

“I don’t know. No.”

At this point, the husband admitted the only reasonable explanation for their predicament.

“I must not have shut the door hard enough when I let Bear out last night.”

“Oh my god, so we have no idea who that is?”

“No. That’s just some random person off the street.”

The wife buried her head in her hands.

“How many times have I told you about checking—”

“Well it’s too late for that now. We have to do something before he wakes up.”

“Do we call the cops?”

“No, I don’t want the cops here.”

“Do we go to the race and hope they’re gone when we get back?”

“God, no,” he said. “We can’t leave a stranger sleeping in our house. Plus, the rest of your running stuff is upstairs. You can’t go back up there. That’s crazy.”

“So what then? I say we call the cops.”

“What if they shoot him? We can’t kill the first person to sleep in our guest room. I don’t even want this person arrested. We just need him gone. Plus, the police will take too long to get here, and I don’t want him waking up in the meantime.”

“So what then?”

“I’m going to wake him up.”

The couple gaped at one another, the husband amazed by what he said, the wife by what she heard.

“You are not,” she finally said.

“I most certainly am. Look, we’re all animals here. Whoever that is up there is going to be just as scared as we are when he wakes up.”

“If we’re all animals, you’re going to take the bat up there with you just like you do when you mow the yard.” In the first week after they bought the house, their neighbor’s half-crazed mutt had pushed under their fence and chased the husband around his own backyard. The day after the attack, he had rummaged for his old tee-ball bat in the junk closet. He kept it by the backdoor for whenever he and the neighbor’s dog were outside together.

“If he were a threat,” the husband rebutted, “Bear would have gone crazy the moment he messed with the door or barked at us this morning. Julius is hiding because he hides whenever anyone comes over. I’m not taking the bat.”

“Where *is* Julius? I hope that person didn’t let him out,” she said with a start, walked to the living room doorway, and peered in. Julius lay curled up on his usual chair by the window. “He’s not even hiding.” She walked back to where her husband stood.

“See? It’s settled, no bat,” he said. “I just need to wake him up before he wakes up on his own. It’s going to be fine.” He desperately wanted everything he had said to be true. “But if it’s not, be ready to get out fast.”

He grabbed his wife and kissed her hard. “In case I don’t make it,” he said.

“Stop it,” she said. “That’s not funny, and you’re taking the bat. This is not going to be the first fight of our married life. Pork rinds.”

“No, you can’t pork rind me for this.”

She wrapped her arms around her husband’s waist and stared up at him. “Pork. Rinds.”

About six months into their dating relationship, they had attended a party hosted by one of the husband’s college friends. The friend had stocked his party with their old game day favorites, pork rinds and Old Crow whiskey, the preferred snack of his friend’s great-grandfather. The husband, then the boyfriend, spent much of the evening trying to convince his future wife to try the fried pig skin. Under the influence of too much Old Crow, he failed to realize how much his pressure annoyed her. She finally relented. She grabbed a skin from the bowl, held it up for the whole party to see, took a bite, recoiled, and handed the crisp back to her then boyfriend, who ceremoniously refused it and led everyone in a chant of “finish it, finish it,” which she did. Then she threw up on her feet. This triggered at least two other people to vomit and loads more to dry heave. Nobody made it to a trash can. She had looked up from her soiled shoes to her future husband and, through tears, said, “I want to go home.” “Pork rinds” had been her safe word ever since.

“I’m going to look stupid holding a child’s bat.”

“P-O-R-K-R—”

The husband groaned, beaten. “Fine, but if he beats me with my own childhood bat, “tee-ball” is my new safe word.”

“Then don’t let him take it away from you. Anyway, you said he wasn’t going to be violent. Now go defend the palace, my prince.”

“You’re right. It’s going to be fine,” he said. Then he grabbed the small bat from the kitchen and walked back to the stairs. “What are you going to do?”

“Defend the kitchen.”

The husband snorted.

“I’m not joking,” she said.

“Alright, Joan of Arc. We can’t lose any more time. Wish me luck.”

He mounted the steps two at a time with deliberate movement. When he stood on the landing, he looked back to see his wife peering up at him, leaning on the jamb. Then he forced himself toward the spare bedroom doorway and looked at the lump under the covers, which had not moved since last he saw it. He steeled himself. He wanted to appear capable, but not anxious to fight.

“Excuse me,” his voice croaked out. Morning sun streamed through the window, reflecting off dust particles that hung in the air. The lump stayed still.

He cleared his throat and, with more force, said again, “Excuse me. Excuse me,” while he tapped the bat against the door frame.

At that, the white covers whipped away, and a complete stranger bolted up, startled and heaving as one revived from drowning. He and the husband locked eyes. Neither recognized the other at all. The man tilted his head like a curious dog, and then he looked around a room he also did not recognize.

“I don’t know how I got here,” the man said once he calmed enough to speak.

“I don’t know either,” the husband replied. He heard his wife rush into the kitchen.

“The last thing I remember was being at the bar.” That was the least surprising thing the husband had heard all morning.

The man swung his feet to the floor. He checked his pockets and looked around the room. His eyes drifted back to the husband standing in the doorway and then down to the bat he gripped. “You got a game to play?”

“Oh, this? Uh—no I—”

“No, I get it,” the man said, holding up a rough hand to stop the husband from fumbling for an excuse. “You won’t be needing that.”

The husband relaxed his grip on the bat, and the man studied the room. His eyes lingered on the only place the husband wanted this stranger to avoid: the shelves on the wall opposite the guest bed. “Looks like you, uh—” He broke off and squinted toward the shelves.

Four wire racks spanned the length of the wall between the bathroom and closet doors. Along every shelf, stacked five high in some places was the husband’s collection of board games. Over a hundred colorful boxes crowded the shelves, bearing names such as *Galaxy Star Haul*, *Moon City Mages*, and *Castle Defender: Orc Edition*, all festooned with images of working-class aliens, battling wizards, and marauding goblins. The husband would rather have found this stranger rummaging through his and his wife’s underwear drawers than to see him considering the contents of those cardboard boxes. He felt humiliated. It was the only time he regretted turning down his mother-in-law’s gun.

“Looks like you, uh,” the man said, “do have a game to play.”

Before the husband could explain, the stranger dispelled the need for embarrassment. “No, it’s cool man. Wild, but cool,” he said.

He stood up and faced the doorway. The man was tall with short hair that laid straight forward. His ratty t-shirt and cargo shorts hinted he might have been in his twenties, but his tired eyes and graying scruff might have placed him in his forties. On his right forearm was the fading tattoo of an anatomical heart, surrounded by thorns and on fire; a simple cross bloomed from its top, and, from a wound in its bottom, it seemed to spurt blood down his wrist. He patted his t-shirt pocket and found there a crushed pack of Marlboro Reds. He shook one out and slid it behind his ear. He found his shoes, worn white New Balance high tops, half under the bed and snatched his hat from the floor.

“I’m so sorry. Where am I?” he said.

“You’re in our guest bedroom.”

“Yeah, but where’s that?”

“On the second floor of our house.”

The stranger frowned.

“Oh, sorry, duh,” said the young husband and gave their address.

“Just a minute, and I’ll get out of here.” The man bent to tie his sneakers.

“Take your time, man,” the husband said. He leaned the tee-ball bat against the wall inside the bedroom and waited. The two descended the stairs together.

The husband entered the dining room first. He only had to wonder where his wife was for a moment because, when he looked left, he saw her on the far side of the kitchen. Beside their hanging fern, in a pose reminiscent of Conan the Barbarian, the young wife, knees bent in an athletic crouch, held aloft their twelve-inch cast iron skillet, prepared for battle.

The husband mouthed “No!” but not before the stranger stepped in between them and also spotted the warrior in running shorts. Immediately, he raised his hands in surrender.

“Oh, no, I can’t stay for breakfast,” he said. “You all have been too kind already, and I don’t want to overstay my welcome.”

“You sure?” the husband said, attracting the strangers puzzled attention. “She’d be happy to cook you up some eggs.” Over his shoulder, he saw his wife’s baffled shrug. Her mouth hung open in an epic “WHAT?”

The stranger turned back to the wife, who faked a smile. “No, I couldn’t,” he said. He rested his hand on the back of one of the simple wooden chairs pushed under the dining room table. “Nice place,” he said. “Sorry again. Didn’t mean to scare to you.”

“No problem,” said the young husband. “Happens to the best of us. Glad you enjoyed your stay.” He and the man shared an awkward chuckle.

“Well, I should be going.”

“Yeah, of course. Have a good one.” The husband went to the front door and opened it. The man nodded once and took his leave, wafting stale cigarette smoke as he stepped out onto the front porch. The husband closed the door and locked it. The whole house sighed in relief.

“Happy to cook you up some eggs?”

“Shut up.” The husband waved her away. “What was I supposed to say?”

“Happens to the best of us,” his wife continued to mock as she hung the pan back on its rack.

“I get it. Stop,” he said. “At least I wasn’t wielding a frying pan.”

“That’s right. You had a tee-ball bat.”

“Not fair!”

She giggled and took his side, looking out the front door. She nuzzled under his arm and squeezed him tight. “Who do you think that was?” she asked.

“That, my dear, was our first house guest.”

“Did you get his name upstairs?”

“I didn’t want to ask. Didn’t want to spook him.”

“That’s probably for the best,” she said. “Did he mess anything up?”

“Doesn’t seem like it. He didn’t smoke in the house, didn’t throw up anywhere, didn’t wet the bed from what I could tell, and didn’t stab us in our sleep. Not a bad first guest, if you ask me.”

“Maybe we should invite him back.” They both laughed at that. “Why am I not scared? I feel like I should be scared.”

“It’s weird, right? I’m not either. I mean, why should we be scared? That went as well as it possibly could have gone. He came in drunk enough to be fine with Bear, shut the door behind him so the cat didn’t get out, didn’t wake us up, didn’t make a mess, and apologized before he left. Better he wound up here than somewhere on the curb.”

“I guess, yeah,” she said. “I feel bad now about the frying pan.” They watched the stranger in the middle of their street, turning in slow circles, looking for anything familiar.

Later, with a few of their acquaintances from across town, the couple would begin to codify this story into a founding myth of their marriage: the morning they woke up to a stranger in their new guest bed. They would explore all of the ways the situation could have gone terribly wrong: how the guy might have broken in if the deadbolt had been latched, littering their kitchen with broken glass; how, had the man been less drunk, he might have provoked Bear to attack; how he might have woken up to their alarms and terrified everyone, the whole situation escalating into shouts and threats and calls to the police; how in his stupor, the man might have crawled in bed with them. That last thought did give the couple the willies, picturing how the man, blackout drunk, might have staggered into their bedroom, swaying over their dreaming bodies before finding the daybed empty. The husband shivered to imagine waking up to the stranger shoving his way under the covers, grunting “move over” and reeking of alcohol, and all the trouble that would follow. They both preferred to think the man went straight to the spare room.

They would also lament that their strange house guest had perhaps the better story to tell, how he, noted party hound, had gotten blackout drunk, as usual, and this time woke up in some absolute nerd’s board game room, the nerd himself holding a child’s bat, whining “excuse me, excuse me,” what a nerd.

Their story would become a fan favorite, one the couple would refine and recite on command for friends and relatives, one they would someday tell their own children, but more as a warning, when their kids moved into their own places, no doubt while the husband checked their deadbolts. But that was all to come later. In the meantime, the couple stood in the dining room of their house, moments after the end of an invasion.

“We need to leave soon, or you’ll be late for your race,” the husband said.

“Yeah, we need to go,” his wife said, but neither of them moved, needing to hold each other a little longer. They watched as the stranger finally decided on a direction and disappeared into the cool morning light, and they kept watching the empty street for several minutes through the brittle, wavy glass of their front door that the merest elbow could shatter.