

The House Guest

by Robert B. Slocum

Tom's breath fogged the dining room window as he looked out toward the driveway and the front gate. It was the night before Thanksgiving, and his son, Alex, was running late. Tom was aware of the dinner smells that reached him from the kitchen, where his wife, Beth, was keeping it warm. The dinner had been ready for an hour. This was Alex's first trip home in years, and he was bringing a friend.

Christine was Alex's friend. That's what he called her. They'd been living together for at least a couple of months. One early Thursday morning Tom acted on an impulse to call Alex before breakfast. Christine answered. At first Tom didn't know what to say, so he didn't say anything. He checked the screen on his phone to make sure he had called the right number. And when he saw there was no mistake, it took another few moments for him to ask for Alex. But Christine took it all in stride. "Oh, yes, Alex," she answered smoothly. "It will be just a few moments until he can come to the phone." He thought he heard a muffled sound, maybe a snicker, as she passed the receiver to his son.

Talking with Alex had been a challenge for some time. Sometimes they seemed to annoy each other, with conversations resolving into simple questions and short answers. It had been months since they had spoken. Then one day in October the phone rang, and Alex wanted to bring his friend home for Thanksgiving. Tom gladly agreed. So now he was glancing from the window to the hall clock, and back again, waiting for his son and their house guest.

When they arrived, Alex strode across the doorway, and then stepped back to make room for Christine. She was beautiful, her auburn hair tumbled gracefully over her shoulders, and she smiled radiantly as she took in the details of the foyer. Her eyes sparkled. Beth took her wrap, and gave her a gentle hug. Christine extended her hand to Tom, and he found himself wondering if she wanted him to kiss it. Instead, he shook her hand politely, and turned back toward the dining room. "Come on in," he said, "We can talk over dinner. I bet you're starved."

After they were seated and started on their meal, Tom asked Alex about his graduate work at the university. "Well," he answered crisply, "I'm taking a break from my dissertation these days. Since Christine and I are engaged, we've been talking about her research grant and where we'll go." Tom swallowed hard on this new information, and took another sip from his water glass as he tried to put together the words for what he would say next. Christine quickly filled the pause in the conversation. "Oh, yes, the funds for my grant will be available after the first of the year, and we can spend at least the next six months on excavation sites and ruins in Peru along the Inca trail. My advisor

thinks the results from this project will certainly satisfy the requirements for my doctoral research, and should be publishable.” She paused for a moment, and looked around the table serenely. “Alex has been wonderful in making all the arrangements for us. I can’t imagine how I could have done it without him.” Alex was following her every move with delight. Tom turned back to picking at the salad with his fork.

After dinner, Alex and Christine hurried off to their room. Tom was frustrated that he never really had a chance to talk with Alex. He had basically seen him across the table, and not much more. After pacing across the room in his pajamas, he settled himself restlessly in an upholstered chair near the bed. He tried reading a magazine, but he wasn’t really paying attention. Beth said from across the room, “She certainly is a looker.” Tom made a kind of coughing noise, and turned some more pages in his magazine.

Later, Tom and his wife were in bed together, and the lights were out. But he couldn’t sleep. He was holding her, as he always did, and she was sleeping quietly. She was so peaceful. He didn’t want to wake her. Tom tried shifting his weight, rearranging his pillow, turning the other way. Nothing seemed to make a difference. He finally opened both eyes and looked at the digital clock on the dresser. It was almost 3 a.m.

Tom decided that trying to sleep was futile at that moment. His arm was wrapped around Beth, so he slowly and carefully moved away from her as she continued to sleep. His eyes were well adjusted to the darkness, so he found his bathrobe and headed for the kitchen downstairs to get a glass of milk, and maybe a snack. He took his magazine with him in case he felt like reading in the study until he was ready to go back to bed.

Tom was balancing a monster oatmeal raisin cookie, the magazine, and his milk as he left the kitchen and turned down the hall toward the study. The hall was dark, but there was light in the doorway of the study. Tom had done some work at his desk before going to bed, and he figured he was the last person in the room that night. The house had been quiet when he went upstairs to bed. He wondered if he had been so distracted by the scene at dinner that he forgot to turn off the light.

As he drew closer to the study, Tom could hear a woman’s voice inside the room. She was talking softly and quickly. It was Christine. The door to the bedroom she shared with Alex was closed. When Tom was about five steps from the study door, he began to hear what she was saying . . . yes, yes, the lap of luxury. It’s dork city here, but it’s pretty comfortable.” She laughed. After a short pause, Christine was talking again. “Oh, right. He gave me this ring, and I was suitably impressed. Told him it was just the sweetest thing I’d ever seen. But, uh, by the way, it will just have to be a long engagement because of all my work on the dissertation and the defense and everything.” She laughed again. “Yep, a really long engagement.”

Tom froze in the hall. He didn’t know what to say or do. He was hoping that he wouldn’t drop any of the things in his hands as he stood there in the dark. Finally, slowly, he began to retreat back down the hall. In another few minutes he was back in bed with Beth. His eyes were wide open. After a while, he remembered she always said for him to wake her if he was troubled by a bad dream in the middle of the night. He could never bring himself to wake her. They never seemed to get enough sleep, and he would have felt silly. But this wouldn’t keep. He nudged her gently. “Honey,” he said. “I’ve got to tell you something. I’ve got to talk.”

Early the next morning, Tom walked out toward the front gate to get the paper. It was Thanksgiving Day. In the distance he could see Alex as he sprinted toward him through the gate. He was finishing his training run for the next race on his schedule. Tom flagged him down. “Do you have a minute?” Alex stopped, breathing heavily, and looked at him with a wary expression. Tom figured it was best to get to the point. “I wanted to tell you I’m concerned about Christine. She’s not . . .” Alex’s face hardened, and his

eyes became sharp. "Christine?" he said loudly. "What about Christine? What can you possibly tell me about Christine?" He turned quickly and ran toward the front door of the house. He was moving fast, and the door closed behind him with a bang.

"Not well," Tom answered when Beth asked him how the conversation had gone with Alex. She was silent for a few moments, and then said, "Maybe we should try talking to Christine." Tom was not so confident about that possibility, but later that morning he again found Christine in the study. Alex had gone into town on an errand, and Tom was looking for a book on his desk.

He saw her after he walked into the room. She was reclining on the couch that was near the wall, behind the door. She was still in her pajamas. A large archaeology text was resting on a knee, and a bare foot dangled toward the floor. She seemed to smile as Tom startled when he saw her. Lifting her eyes from the book, she asked, "Does it seem a little warm in here to you?" After hesitating, Tom shrugged his shoulders, and sat down at the desk.

He was a few feet from Christine at this point, and he looked at her for a moment before speaking. "So, Christine, it seems like a lot is happening for you these days. You're finishing grad school. You're traveling abroad. You're marrying Alex. You're joining our family here. It must all feel pretty hectic." She smiled again, and seemed to stretch herself just a little before answering. "Oh, Tom, I'm fine. Alex has just been so much help through all of this, and you know how comfortable I feel here with you and Beth."

He decided to try to be more direct. "Christine," he asked, looking her in the eyes, "are you sure this is what you want? Are you really ready to settle down now?" This time she did laugh, and she cocked her head slightly to one side before saying to him, "My friends ask me that all the time. But Alex is adorable, and he's just what I need. We're so happy." Tom decided he was out of questions, so he shrugged again, retrieved his book, and left the room.

The Thanksgiving dinner was in the dining room, and the meal was wonderful. Tom carved the turkey, and they passed around platters of meat, potatoes, vegetables, stuffing, and breads. When they had finished eating, they remained at the large table for coffee or tea, and conversation. Beth leaned a little toward Christine across the table, and asked her, "Have you talked with Alex about his dissertation research on the R.A.F. in World War II? I heard his advisor told him about some collections of letters and papers that just surfaced in England. I know he's been so excited by this. Won't it be great to go over there to track them all down?"

Christine seemed to glance away for a moment. "Well," she said vaguely, "we really haven't said much about it lately. We've been pretty busy. I had to get my . . ." As she continued, Beth started to move her hand. She brushed her tea cup that was perched near the end of the table. The steaming tea sloshed into her lap, and Beth shrieked. She jumped to her feet, hurting and startled, knocking over her chair. Tom and Alex both rushed to her, and flanked her on either side. Tom used a linen napkin to blot at the wet smears on the front of her dress, and Alex slipped his arm around her back as he comforted her. Christine sat motionless at her place, looking down at the crumbs that were left on her dessert plate. Alex looked from Beth, to Christine, and back to Beth.

Alex and Christine left early the next morning to go back to the university in Lexington. Alex waved from inside the car as they began to drive away. Beth and Tom stood together on the front porch, and watched the car moving toward the front gate. Tom sighed, and said, "I guess I never did tell him what I heard. It's like he's walking into a trap." Beth was silent for a moment, and smiled. "I don't know. I think he's getting the idea." The car flashed its brakes before going through the gate, and turned into the road beyond the stone fence.