

The House Guest

by Ihmani Josh

The woman beat a cheerful knock on the door and soon heard a thunderous thud from the inside, sending vibrations up the thin wood separating her from the curious noise. Muffled voices followed, snipping back and forth between two speakers, before another, softer thump was heard. Another one afterward, and several more in succession to each other, everyone becoming more distant than the last until there was none. She furrowed her eyebrows, knocking once more with hesitation.

“One second!” a familiar female voice hollered and she relaxed her shoulders.

Footsteps padded towards the entrance with a purpose.

“Right on time!” The home owner’s pitch raised to its peak as she ended the sentence, greeting the other with a grin stretching across her face. “Please, come in,” she beckoned. A single step into the home, the guest assured her speculation that this home was certainly out of the ordinary. When she had been waiting outside, she noticed the navy trim of the doorway. The gold detailing and the smokey paint, making the house a standout in the neighbourhood of whites and beiges. Once inside, she took note of the abundance of plant life that characterized the inside as well as the out. The art that was tastefully displayed on walls, and the eccentric choice of furniture. The couple who lived here had given a new heart to the structure when they moved onto the dead-end street.

“You have a beautiful home,” she breathed as she immersed herself in the interior. The other woman tutted in a playful manner, “My husband will appreciate that, he’s the one who took care of the designing. It’s not really *my* thing.”

The guest gave a hum in response, and came out of her relishment to remember her original purpose. “Oh, I’m Diana,” she offered her hand. “You called me here for-” The homeowner seemed preoccupied with her own thoughts, forgetting the initial meaning of this visit. “Oh, that’s right! Diana,” she shook the other woman’s hand with a firm grip, “my name is Henri. Let me show you the bathroom.”

“And I was just leaning over the sink to look in the mirror, and I don’t know,” Henri shook her head and flailed her hand in the general direction of the sink, “it just slipped from my hand.”

Diana inspected the bottom of the black sink, squinting beneath the drain stopper and failing to find the stud. “I’ll have to remove this to get better access,” she determined and tapped a finger on the plug. “Doesn’t seem to be caught on it, unfortunately.”

Henri gave a fervent nod, “Oh, of course. That’s what I expected. Do whatever you need to. That earring was part of my favourite pair,” she bit her lip. Henri looked to the door leading to the hallways, gaze lingering in anticipation for a moment.

Diana frowned, "Don't let it worry you too much," she opened the cabinet below and twisted off the water valves. "This honestly happens all the time," Diana assured, reaching back up to turn and tug the drain plug out.

As Diana worked on this sink with meticulous care, Henri stood inches away and rambled: about her earrings that her husband had bought her early on into their relationship, about her career — Diana halted her task with a shiver when the word 'surgeon' had left Henri's lips, imagining slicing open someone's abdomen and seeing their intestines splayed out on an operating table. The woman fussed about her neighbourhood as well, in particular the aggravating man who's dog trotted into her carefully-tended-to garden on a weekly basis, and insisted that if she had a problem then she should simply invest in a fence to guard her flowers. Even when Diana had sent her to fetch a bucket for the excess water from the pipes Henri refrained from taking a breath, instead opting to shout her stories down the hall.

It was only when Diana cheered and held up the diamond stud in victory did the other woman stop and gasp. "Oh, you've found it!" she chanted gratitude, snatching the earring from Diana to clasp it in her own, digging manicured nails into her soft flesh.

The moment was intruded by someone clearing their throat as they entered the bathroom. Both women whipped their heads around to see the stone-faced man using the knob to support his weight as he stood at the door. "Dinner is ready," he declared, eyeing Henri directly, attempting to send her some sort of signal through his stare.

Henri broke eye contact with him first. "Diana, this is my husband," she explained with a nonchalant wave. She turned to the man and gestured to their guest, "This is Diana. She just retrieved my earring from the sink."

"Nice to meet you," he nodded, then swallowed. "Are you staying for dinner?" "Oh, yes! You should stay for dinner, absolutely," Henri exclaimed before Diana could give a response of her own. She felt heat rise to her cheeks at the kind offer, not detecting the glare of the man at the door.

"Well I would appreciate that, I should probably—"

"No, no. Stay, have one plate," Henri insisted. "What did you make?" she inquired of her husband.

He appeared taken aback at the common question. His jaw slightly hung as he hesitated to answer. "Lasagna," he gulped. He sent a quick glance over his shoulder, down the hallway.

"Stay," Henri urged once more, her tone more of a demand than a plea.

"I wasn't aware that you were home," Diana told Henri's husband. "Didn't see you when I walked in." Henri had gone to her bedroom to tuck away the earring and throw the towel that had been used as a precautionary measure into the washing machine, leaving the plumber to make small talk with the man as she assisted him in setting the table. From their large dining room, Diana

assumed they must have guests stay often.

“I had to step out for a moment,” he said simply, starving Diana’s inquisitive mind.

“Do you say grace?” Henri asked as she strided into the room, taking her seat in a single swift motion, as her husband placed the lasagna at the center and began to cut into section it off with a knife.

“Sorry?” Diana responded, missing the question as she watched the man put three segments onto three separate plates. She hadn’t realized how hungry she had been. The husband glanced at her through his lashes. He set down the largest piece on the placemat at her seat. She murmured a thank you.

“I hope you like it,” he whispered, more to himself than to her. His words went unnoticed by the two women.

“I said, ‘do you say grace?’” Henri repeated. “Because, we usually do not. However, if you do then we absolutely could.”

“Oh, no, I’m not religious,” Diana clarified with a polite smile.

Henri nodded. “Alright then,” She dug into her dish, and Diana observed as her manners seemed to disappear almost immediately after she took her first bite. It seemed as though Diana was not the only one who was famished.

Her husband appeared less enthusiastic about the meal. He cut himself a bite only to pick it apart with his fork, crumbling its structure and nibbling at the pasta sheets, uninterested in the meat.

“So, what do you do? For work I mean,” Diana probed with a mouth half-full of food. Whether the man was fond or it himself or not, the meal he had baked was extraordinary and she had never tasted anything like it before. “I hope you’re a cook, because this is delicious.”

His eyes widened and he shared an undecipherable, fleeting look with his wife. He felt his body grow warm and rubbed at the base of his neck. “I-”

Noises from beneath the floorboards tore through the awkward air of the dining room. There were thuds, like the ones Diana had heard before while she waited outside, although now they were accompanied by other sounds as well. Ones that Diana could only compare to smothered screams. Henri’s fork clattered onto her plate as she moved to grip the linen covering the table and give an intense stare to her dish. Her husband’s head whipped around, first focusing on the unlit hallway leading out of the room, then to Henri, before landing on Diana.

“Excuse me, I have to go take care of something” he breathed then repeated, “I have to go take care of something — I think I might’ve left a door open when I came in. Wouldn’t want the neighbour’s dog getting in while tearing up the lawn. Rude rottweiler,” He rambled as he shoved himself away from the table and walked at an urgent speed, disappearing into the dark corridor as the disruptions from below continued.

Henri, for the first time all day, had nothing to say. Her eyes remained transfixed on the table and Diana's stomach began to churn. The lasagna did not seem to be sitting as well as it went down. In fact, the remnants on her tongue started to taste foul. The meat wedged between her teeth seemed to feel more alive, wiggling and worming in her mouth. She felt vomit arise as she listened to the sounds below grow louder, more desperate, before stopping all together with one booming strike.