

## Nosy People

My friends and I planned our skiing trip for months. We needed a fairly big house to accommodate the whole group and Airbnb seemed like the only way to go, much cheaper than four hotel rooms for all of us. But we are young and none of us has previous reviews on Airbnb and no one wanted to rent to us. Finally, after trying ten places, I was finally able to book for the whole group in one place. The host seemed a little confused by the process, and this place only had two reviews, apparently a new listing. The profile picture showed an older couple. They might not have known all the tricks the other hosts used to weed us young people out.

We arrived that Friday night. It was too late to ski. We were excited to see the house and claim our spots. Unfortunately, the host didn't explicitly list the number of beds in the house. Luckily, we found they had tons of sofas that we could use. The floor itself was pretty darn comfy too, with carpeting, so that was an option if we needed anything else. We're young and flexible.

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Saturday morning I woke up with a migraine and skiing was out for me. I lay in bed and tried desperately to sleep. It didn't work. Finally, I got up and wandered around the house, feeling slightly better. I still, however, did not feel like going skiing.

My friends had woken up and were eating breakfast.

"Hey, Esme, get dressed. We're heading out to the slopes."

"I don't feel so good so I'm going to stay here."

Bad luck: alone in the house, eerily quiet, that winter silence of Vermont, every squeak of a floorboard echoed, as if

someone else had taken a step. The emptiness and strangeness overwhelmed my migraine. I felt better- and worse, as I began to freak out a little- but the car was off at the ski resort and I was going to be alone for a long time.

I should play loud music to drown out the squeaks. I should make tea. I should get used to this place. As the water was boiling, I decided to look around a bit. I confirmed that there was nothing to worry about, looked in every room, realized there were more toilets than beds, and perused the bookshelf: Cancer: What You Need to Know, The Contented Child: Help Your Children Balance Achievement and Happiness, and Finance for Dummies. I noted the themes of the titles - and that there was not a single non-fiction or novel on the shelf. I was starting to get a sense of the host's family.

I looked at the family pictures on the wall of the stairway. The faded color film photos from the 80s or 90s showed scenes skiing, two Asian children, middle school age maybe, and their parents, presumably, a middle-aged, white couple. I call them the Asian children because everyone else in every photo was white.

Turning to the dining room, I saw several photos of the Asian son, as a child, teenager, and young adult, one with a woman who was apparently his wife. There were photos of his children around the mirror on the prominent side table. I made a brief mental note: where is the daughter?

Then I noticed the pictures on the wall on the way down on the stairway wall. There, without a doubt, was the wedding of the Asian son. There was the same woman in the dining room, pretty clearly his wife sometime before, looking younger, although a bit over-styled in her wedding getup for my taste. There were the parents, now with some gray hair. I noticed a young, bearded man in the group photo in jeans and a t-shirt -

the only one not dressed appropriately. I thought it must be the wife's younger brother as that was the only photo in which he showed up. Not only was he not wearing a suit - he was smiling way too much.

Then it hit me: the sister was missing, the girl from the skiing pictures in the mudroom. She didn't go to her brother's wedding?

Now I needed to know. I went back to the dining room to open the photo album, which was conveniently lying on the cabinet. These people left far more personal items lying around than I would have left for strangers.

Unfortunately, there was no copy in the photo album, no names, and the photos were not in chronological order. I developed a new hypothesis: the couple had two white, probably bio children many years prior to adopting the two Asian children. Yes, checking again, there were the older two with much younger versions of the parents, definitely four children in sets of two. I checked the wedding pictures again. Yes, there were the white children, standing with their younger brother and his new wife and the parents. No younger Asian sister.

Maybe she died? I rifled through the photo book furiously. There she was. In her 30s, apparently single, visiting the ski Nosy People page 5 house in Vermont, very much alive. There were at least 15 photos of her brother for every photo of her, at least after high school. She was alive but was estranged. Seems like it took ten years for the trauma of missing the wedding to abate, and then only partially.

I closed that photo album. I realized something very important. I am nosy as hell. None of this was in any way my business and I do not know these people from Adam.

"Whatcha looking at?"

Startled, I knocked the photo album on the floor.

"Max," I stammered, "you're still here."

"Yeah," he said, "I felt terrible. I had the worst headache this morning and couldn't ski. I think the whole house reeks of chemicals."

"Yeah, maybe. I had a headache too," I said, as I scooped the album back up off the floor. "Where were you sleeping? I thought I checked the whole house."

"There's an office in the basement, with a treadmill and some dead weights. I slept on the sofa down there. Anyway," Max continued, "why are you looking at these people's photos?" he asked, innocently, with no hint of accusation.

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Still, this was completely embarrassing. With what was I going to answer to that question? The truth? That I'm a nosy busybody?

"'Cause I found some stuff in the office that got me curious about these people."

I'm off the hook! Max is a stalker too!

"Whatcha find?"

"Pretty tragic. It's the diary of the Mom as she was dying of cancer."

"You didn't read it did you?"

"They left it right on the desk," he said. "There she was dying, and she keeps mentioning that she wants to see all her kids. Seems like one of them hadn't visited."

"Was it a girl? Asian?" I think I seemed a bit too enthusiastic and excited. I would have to tone that down or Max would think I was literally off my rocker.

"Asian? I don't know," said Max.

At that point, I smelled something. "Oh shit!" I said and ran

to the kitchen.

The tea kettle was bone dry and smoking. I slipped into the sink, turned on the water and the steam hissed and flooded the kitchen.

"You could have used the water cooker," Max said, pointing at an electric kettle on the counter.

Of course people like this would have a water cooker. I should have looked a little harder. For a wannabe detective putting together the mysteries of this family, I sure did miss a few obvious points.

"The pot is right there," Max repeated, annoyingly.

"Thanks, Sherlock," I said, "And if you were a bit more observant you would know that the youngest of the children is an Asian girl, probably adopted, who skipped her brother's wedding."

"Yeah," Max said, "You're way ahead of me. All I have is the cancer diary and all of the owner's bank statements and tax returns."

"You broke into his files?" I asked, incredulous.

"No, he left them right on the table as well," Max said.

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By midday, we knew almost everything. By dinner, we knew what was coming, that the dividends would be maturing and how much each child would inherit, or, as the case may be, not inherit. We knew their anxieties and personalities. We had uncovered two secrets from the past and one, financial, scheduled for the near future. There was no way May could have known. Her father, Frank, had clearly planned this transfer two years in advance for January of the new year, only two days away now. If she knew, she might be able to do something before losing out on a million dollars.

"Sam is a complete jerk," I said to Max, referring to the

older bio son now in California.

"I can kind of see his point," Max said, "Felicity was never fair to him."

At this point, we heard the car pull into the driveway and our friend tumble out, chatting happily.

"Wow," one said, "you two missed a great day on the slopes."

"And the craziest thing," said another, "we met someone. May, meet Esme and Max, our sick friends. You're not going to believe this but this is May's house!"

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May smiled at Max and I. I leaned over our pile of photos and papers to try and hide their contents. But Max, Max is as subtle as an elephant.

"Nice to meet you May. You are about to be screwed out of a million dollars by your father Frank. The Black Rock security will mature in two days and you won't get a dime."

The moral of this story is don't rent your house to nosy people.