

The Visitor

by

James Gregory Maynard

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Bing Crosby croons ‘I’m dreaming of a white Christmas’ as the glare of the television spotlights the unshaven muscular man sitting on the sofa, staring at the merriment dancing across the screen. On the coffee table in front of him sits a half-finished bottle of Jack Daniels, a cup and a 38 revolver with one shell in it. As the credits roll, he picks up the cup, finishing the last of the numbing nectar. Picking up the gun, he flips it from side to side, inspecting the design, admiring its simplicity and acknowledging its purpose. He spins the cylinder to align the bullet then cocks the hammer.

Bing-Bong, Bing-Bong. The doorbell chimes, shaking him out of his fixation. “Who the hell is ringing the bell on a crappy night like this,” he mumbles as he lays the 38 on the coffee table and staggers to the front door. He looks out the peephole and sees a snow covered young man standing in the blowing storm and opens the door.

“What are you doing walking around in this weather?”

The tall slender fellow raises his hood shrouded head and smiles. “My car ran off the road back toward the highway and I saw your yard light hoping somebody was here. Can I come in? I’m freezing my ass off out here.”

“Yeah, yeah sure. Here, let me knock the snow off you. This is my mother’s house, and she’ll kill me if I mess it up.”

Rubbing his hands together, the stranger looks around the dark home. “Your mom’s place, is she here?”

“No. She’s at my sister’s for the holidays, in Tampa.”

“So, you’re alone on Christmas? Man, what a bummer. Don’t you have any other family?” The visitor stomps his feet shaking the snow to the floor mat.

“I used to have a wife and kid. But, when I got home from Iraq last week I found out she can’t handle being married to a Marine anymore and is seeing someone else. I haven’t even seen my daughter yet. She was born while I was deployed.”

“Man, that’s cold. What a bitch. Where is she now? Can’t you go there to see the kid?”

“Nah, she moved back to San Diego. I met her when I was at Camp Pendleton. She was living here with my mom but when winter set in she went home to stay with her parents. She mailed me this letter.” he Marine bent over picking up the simple one page note from the coffee table. “I tried to call her, but they won’t let me talk to her.”

“Man, the whole family sound like a bunch of assholes.”

“I guess.”

“What’s your name?” The visitor queries as he ambles about the living room.

“Kyle, Kyle Stedman. What’s yours?” Kyle switches on the table lamps book ending the sofa.

“Hilary Slump. Helluva a name, eh?”

“Different for sure. How old are you?”

Hilary pushes his hood back. “Let’s see, I was 18.”

“Was 18?” Kyle looks at this young man with ear and eyebrow piercings and tattoos around his neck and over both hands.

“I guess that makes me nineteen now. The few friends I had called me Hil. My dad was a mean prick. I think he gave me this name so the jocks would beat me up and give me wedgies. He thought I was the reason my mom died when I was born.”

“Wow! That’s heavy shit. What’s with the hardware?” Kyle walks toward the kitchen. “You want coffee or tea, or something warm to drink?”

“No thanks I’ll be fine. I tried for most of my youth to please my father, but nothing worked. So, when I was about fifteen I got tats and stainless just to piss him off.” Hil paces around inspecting the room. “Nice homey place your mom has. Where’s your dad?”

“He left her a few years ago and lives in Websterville a few counties over. I don’t see him much. He’s still on my shit list for what he did to mom.” Kyle stands in the doorway, silhouetted by the kitchen light.

Hil stops at the television admiring the only Christmas decoration in the room, a green porcelain tree with lights sticking out of little holes. “My dad had a one like this. It was the only Christmas tree we ever had. I hated it. I got no gifts at Christmas. He’d give me a few bucks to go buy video games. Did you have a real tree when you were a kid? You get gifts?”

“Sorry man. Yeah, mom was big on holidays. She always had the house decorated and plenty of gifts for my sister and me.” Kyle walks in and sits on the couch.

“Why not this year with you coming home?”

“She didn’t know I was returning early. I wanted to surprise her and my wife. That didn’t work out, did it?”

Hilary turns and stares at the coffee table. “Looks like you got the surprise. What’s with the pistol?”

“Ah, well I was just... it’s my dad’s old gun, and I was checking it out.”

“Is it loaded?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me see the bullet. I ain’t seen one in a while. Was always fascinated by bullets.”

Kyle flips open the cylinder and drops the shell into his hand then tosses it to Hil.

Hil holds it up and looks it over. “Do some serious damage, this little rascal can. My prick of a dad had a pistol like that. I should have shot him with it.”

Kyle watches Hil slip the cartridge into his jean’s pocket. “So, what are you doing out on a night like this?” Kyle yawns - the effects of a half a bottle of Jack Daniels and a long day’s wear on his body.

“After bumming around and things came to an end. I started helping people and found it made me feel good about myself, for a change. Besides, perhaps I’ll get a break doing good deeds. So, I came out this way to help a guy out of a bad situation.”

Kyle lies back on the couch, weariness overwhelming him. “Well, we can pull you out of the ditch in the morning and you can get to him tomorrow. Why don’t you make yourself comfortable and catch some shut eye. I’m beat.” Kyle closes his eyes and drifts off to sleep.

“Go ahead man. I’m fine.”

Sunshine pours through the east bay window, blanketing Kyle. The brilliance of the day summoning him awake. Rubbing his eyes and stretching, he looks around the room for Hil, calling his name, “Hil... Hil, hmm?” Walking from behind the coffee table, he steps on something sharp, yelps and hops about the living room holding his foot. He turns and sees the bullet lying on the carpet and picks it up. Must have had a hole in his pants pocket he muses, setting it on the end stand.

Kyle searches the house for a slumbering Hil, wondering if he had already left to get his car out of the ditch. He quickly throws on a sweatshirt and boots, grabs his coat and stocking cap and

trudges through knee deep snow to his Chevy four-wheel-drive pickup truck. After cleaning off the windows and letting the engine warm, he backs out of the driveway, noticing there are no tracks marking Hilary's departure, thinking the wind has drifted them in.

On the drive to the highway he finds no signs of a car running off the road. Kyle continues into town for breakfast at Sherri's Diner. There is no sign of Hil.

"Hi, Kyle. When did you get home?" Lily, an old school mate, asks from behind the counter. She holds up a clean cup. "Coffee?"

"Hi, Lily... Four days ago. Coffee would be great." He slips onto a stool.

"I'm happy you made it back safe and sound. Did you have a nice Christmas?" Wisps of steam roll off the lip of the cup as Lily pours the fresh pot. "Got any plans for New Year's Eve?"

"Mom's in Florida with Sandy and her family. I think I'll drive down and be with them. It's funny. Around midnight, a fellow came to the house. Said he ran off the road. His name was Hilary Slump. But he was gone when I woke up this morning. I was going to help him pull his car out of the ditch."

Lily gives Kyle an odd look then turns to the cook. "Hey Hermie, who was the kid who committed suicide last summer?"

"That was Hank Slump's kid, Hilary. Shot himself dead with a 38 special."