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The woodsy weekend getaway was just what the couple needed — until a gun changed everything | GUEST COMMENTARY



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A couple heads into the woods for kayaking and conversation over a fire, but their peace of mind doesn't last once Harold and his "protection" appear.

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Hot still in the woods on this trip, but hotter where we're coming from, in the city on the other side of the bay. Usually we're in a tent, but my wife got us two last-minute nights in a cabin among an island of bald cypress around a big pond in the Delaware fields. No water, but we'll have overhead lights. No toilet, but there's a fridge. And a door with, of all things out here, a lock.

My wife's job is to get herself, as soon as possible, out on her kayak so that she can weave in and of those bald cypresses. My job is to turn firewood into coals for dinner later. But before then, a chair, a beer, something to read. Herons, silhouetted against that bright mirror of water, big as dinosaurs if you squint your eyes, crash, splash, talk to each other, take off again. If Spanish moss were draped from these pines, it'd be South Carolina, Georgia, somewhere like that. A common water snake, black rings on brown, rests between hunts, its danger end just poking out. There's a lot of life in this pond, around it.

A voice off to my left, as I'm stacking tinder, from the next site over. A man, about my age, through the brush, saying hello. I'll call him Harold. He's from the town just down the road. He drives a concrete truck back and forth over the bridge to the suburbs of the other big city on the crowded side of the bay. He wants to show me his place for the weekend. He, like us, was lucky to get it. It's a yurt. Air conditioning, power, plenty of options for where to sleep. We're halfway up the handful of steps when he says, don't mind the protection.

I ask him: What was that? I understand his words on their own, as words, but I don't know what they mean. My first thought is a rattlesnake. Even in the moment, between steps two and three, I know this makes no sense, but the image in my head just before he opens the door is a coiled rope of scaled muscle on the floor, vibrating tail in the air like a wagging index finger, cold eyes locked on me.

Harold's moved on, talking up his yurt, but I don't hear any of it. He opens the door. Right away, I see it, not a rattlesnake but a pistol, matte-black, in a beam of sun on the floor, close enough that I could touch it with a big toe, its business end pointed at me, an endless, forever O.

Already the tour's halfway over. Harold points out the skylight, the bunk beds, and we're done. Once outside, it seems obvious the friendly thing to do is to guide him through our cabin. On the walk over, Harold says he just had to get away, get out in the woods. He needed the green, the calm. The cabin tour is even quicker than the yurt tour, and then he's walking back through the brush; he back to his fire, me to mine. I pick up my phone to text my wife but remember where she is, and anyway there's no cell service here. I try to read, but it's difficult to think of anything other than that pistol on the floor, that snake in the grass, the coolness, its eye, its teeth. I can't figure out if the reason he showed me his place for the weekend was so that I'd see his gun, so that I'd know.

I've lived in Baltimore for six mayors now. Like anything you love, you love it despite its flaws. There is terrible poverty, desperation, inequality and the violence that mix produces. Still, I've heard exactly one gunshot fired for some reason other than celebration. In that time, I have seen two drawn police-owned guns, both aimed at the same mentally ill man in a downtown park. I am not ignorant. I read the newspapers. I know there are other guns in my town, many others, too many, and I know that some of those guns kill. I have friends who have had guns pointed at them, but not me.

You might say: not yet, you haven't. And maybe you'd be right. But maybe is a magical word, a slippery word, a catch-all. Maybe covers a lot of things. Maybe covers everything. Maybe we're alone in the universe, but also maybe there are doctors and athletes three stars over. The thing about maybe is that both things on either side of it are true. Maybe yes and maybe no. Maybe Coke and maybe Pepsi. Maybe protection, maybe danger.

My wife and I cook, eat, talk, watch. We try to look at the stars through the pines. We start out ranking the states and get about halfway through. My wife goes in before I do. I burn more wood, read a little by headlamp. We're camping, sort of. We're getting away from home for a couple dozen hours, like everyone else around that big pond among those bald cypresses in the middle of those fields. Harold's girlfriend shows up. They do what we were doing. They sit around a tall fire, laughing, opening beers. The fire gets low. I go inside.

My wife is already asleep, and soon I'm halfway there, too, when, in that dark, in that deep quiet, voices come close, closer, then closer still. Voices right outside the cabin walls. Then a *bang! bang! bang!* on the door, and I'm awake as I've ever been. And right away I think of that gun.

I go to the window first, pull back the blind, try to see. Don't open that door, I say. We shout through the cabin walls: Can we help you?

From outside, a female voice. We got locked out and were hoping you had cell reception so you could call the office and get the code to our door.

Um, I say, in my head racing through our very few options.

I'm Harold's girlfriend, she says. Harold's in the bathroom.

I saw his gun earlier, I say.

Yeah, she says.

Didn't they give you a slip of paper with the door code on it?

We lost it.

We don't have any cell service. I'm sorry.

That's OK.

And I don't feel real comfortable opening up this door.

I understand.

With that gun on the floor over there.

I understand. No problem, she says. Have a good night.

And then she's gone.

Lights on inside now, my wife and I as awake as possible, and talking through the facts. No cell service, woman asking us to open the door but the man off somewhere (or maybe not), hardly anyone else around, gun. We're back in bed, talking about how strong do we think that door is, will it take bullets, should I have lied and said we have a gun, too? Is the only answer, once a gun is introduced to a situation, another gun? Eventually, tiredness falls again, we get quiet, but in our heads it's a loop: gun, bleeding, gun, explosion, gun, screaming, gun, dying.

Ears still cranked to a million, but nothing from Harold and his girlfriend. Eventually, sleep comes. Next morning, my wife passes by Harold as they're packing out. A smile, a hi, how are you, drive safe, and that's it. Another day.

Maybe it's protection, maybe it's a threat. A neighbor needs help, comes knocking. If it's not for that rattlesnake on the floor, our door is open in a second. A knock, then hey, we're locked out, then one of our hands on the door handle, and then, together, we'll see what we can do to get you right. But, from the start, the balance is off. Maybe it's a shield, maybe it's a sword. Maybe it's protection, maybe it's a fence.

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