

## Homebody



Marc slowly tried to get up from the couch. His head felt as if a house had collapsed on top of him and was still lying there. Flashes of light exploded before his eyes when he tried to open them, and he was dizzy. Moving slowly, like an old man, he tried to sit up and stay upright. He had a bad taste in his mouth and his tongue felt swollen. He felt gross. As his eyes got used to the light in the living room, he looked around weakly, squinting into the bright sunlight coming in through the balcony door. Why the hell had he slept on the couch? And what had happened to the apartment?

He couldn't remember a thing about the previous night. The room was strewn with empty pizza boxes, potato chip crumbs, empty bottles, used glasses, magazines, DVDs without cases, and cases without DVDs. When he tried to think back to the previous night, his head just started hurting even more. His brain refused to work in his current state. He'd need some aspirin to dull his hangover at least a little bit. Carefully, as if he was an unstable explosive, he finally got up and shuffled in slow-motion into the hallway and to the bathroom. Looking into the mirror, he couldn't help but laugh.

"Man, I look like shit," he slurred, running ice cold water over his face.

He rummaged through the medicine cabinet looking for aspirin, pushing aside the illegal substances. Working in a chem lab, he could get his hands on a lot of things if he wanted to.

He closed the cabinet, popped an aspirin into his mouth, and washed it down with a few gulps of water. Then he looked back at his reflection. A small sliver of a memory came back. He had made some interesting drinks last night, infused liberally with his illegal drugs, and had partied hard with his buddies. Apparently he had been too liberal this time because most of the night was still blacked-out in his memory. At least the others seemed to have been sober enough to make their way home. He had hardly finished the thought when he heard someone groaning from the other side of the hallway. He grinned. So someone hadn't found their way home after all, pro-

bably hadn't even tried. Sighing and trying to ignore his headache, he followed the sounds and found his friend Tony lying curled up in front of the toilet in the second bathroom.

"Had one too many?" he asked, grinning.

"Oh, shut up. What were you, trying to kill us?" Tony said weakly, sounding pissed off. "You have some aspirin and some coffee?"

Marc dragged his friend out of the puddle of vomit, opened the little bathroom window, closed the door behind them, and pushed Tony along before him to the master bathroom and straight into the shower.

"While you're cleaning your sad corpse, I'll make breakfast."

Marc shuffled off to the kitchen.



"Another one?" he chuckled, when he almost fell over a pair of legs. Then he paused. He'd never seen that guy before. Considering his partial black-out, that wasn't saying much, though. He knelt down and started turning the fat, bald man over. He didn't look like he'd be one of their friends. So why was this guy lying in his kitchen? Marc turned him over and gasped. The guy's eyes were wide open, his face blue. Instinctively, he felt for a pulse anyway, not wanting the guy to suffocate in his kitchen. But it was too late -- this was a dead body.

Shocked and panicking, he jumped up, which caused an explosion of lights to go off in his tortured head, and ran back to Tony.

"Tony!" he yelled, ignoring his protesting head. "There's a dead body in my kitchen!"

He stormed into the bathroom, almost crashing right into Tony, who had left the shower because it was hurting his head and who was now standing in front of the sink to take his aspirin.

Tony stared at his friend as he barged in, panicked, his face drained of blood.

"Hey man, chill," Tony said quietly so as to not set off his headache even more. "That's just after-effects from the brew you cooked up last night. Hallucinations."

"No man, I'm telling you, there's a dead body in the kitchen. Come and look!"

Reluctantly, Tony let himself get dragged off, swallowing his aspirin on the way. Once in the kitchen, he looked around but couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, aside from the impressive mess they had made.

Not so Marc, who was frantically pointing to a spot on the kitchen floor.

"See?" he kept saying, "see?!"

Tony couldn't see anything and didn't hesitate to say so.

"Are you screwing with me, man? There's nobody there. And there wasn't anybody here besides Joey, Dave, Mike, and us two, so who would be lying around dead in your kitchen? You seriously must have gotten too much of your stuff."

He slapped Marc on the back and turned to leave. Seemed it wasn't such a good idea to use homemade drugs on a regular basis, if this was the result. Maybe Marc shouldn't have finished all the left-overs after the others had gone home. He himself had drunk a lot less than the others and it had still made him sick enough that it had seemed more appealing to sleep in front of Marc's toilet than to go home. As fast as his head would let him, he gathered up his things and walked to the front door.

"YOU'RE screwing with ME!" Marc was screaming now, even though his head felt like it was about to explode. "There's a dead body in my kitchen! So, what, are you all in on it? Are you trying to frame me or something? Or is this your stupid idea of a joke?"

He ran after Tony, grabbing his arm.

"Tell me what's going on, man! What's that guy doing in my kitchen?"

Tony pulled himself free.

"There is no guy in your kitchen! You're losing it, man!"

He quickly left the apartment and was lucky enough to catch the elevator door still open. He got in. Marc ran after him but was too slow. Stunned, Marc hammered his fists on the elevator door until his elderly neighbor stepped out into the hallway, shaking her head disapprovingly. She quickly went back into her apartment; her neighbor didn't seem to be in a state where he would suffer a comment from her.

Marc was full of conflicting emotions when he stepped back into his apartment. Tony hadn't looked guilty or like he was in on some joke. He had almost looked worried. Could it really just be bad hallucinations from the drugs, not an actual dead body in the kitchen? Maybe he just needed to get some more sleep. Once he was sober again, everything would turn out okay. He went straight to his bedroom without even looking into the kitchen, flopped down on the bed, and fell asleep minutes later.

When he woke up in the afternoon, he felt better. He was confident as he stepped into the hallway and walked to the kitchen. Refreshed and rested, everything would be back to normal.

The dead body was still there, lying face-down again, as he had found it.

"No way! A dead body can't just turn itself over! Someone's screwing with me!"

He stepped closer to the body.

"Hey, this isn't cool. You've had your fun, now piss off!"

He kicked the guy's fat thigh but there wasn't any reaction. The dead body stayed dead.

"Okay, he can't be dead, there was no one here to turn him back over."

He decided to scare the bald guy into giving up.

"So, if you're dead anyway, you don't mind me throwing you off the balcony, do you?" he said loudly and started dragging the guy into the living room.

No reaction yet.

He opened the glass door and stepped out on his eleventh-floor balcony. It was cool outside and there was nobody around. Well, some kids were building sand castles in the sandbox out in front of the high-rise, but other than that, everything was quiet.

He dragged the fat man out onto the balcony, breathing heavily.

"All right, buddy, this is your last chance. If you don't stop being 'dead,' I'll push you down here -- then you'll really be dead."

Still no reaction.

Marc propped the body up against the railing. It slumped forwards, fell over the railing and plummeted straight down, head first. Marc stood gaping. He had never watched a dead man commit suicide before.

As nonchalantly as possible, he looked down at where the fat guy lay right beside the children's sandbox, his limbs contorted. The children didn't seem to notice him. Marc felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. This wasn't normal. No way this was happening. His buddies pulling a prank on him, maybe. The guy not actually being dead, too. But a body crashing to the ground next to a bunch of playing kids and lying there, all beaten up, and they didn't notice? Impossible. Maybe the kids were in on the joke?



Either way -- no more dead guy in his kitchen. He turned up the music and started cleaning up the previous night's mess.

When he took down the trash two hours later, the bald guy was still lying unnoticed next to the kids. Now there were also other neighbors walking past him with their dogs, and mothers calling in their kids to dinner. He couldn't believe it. He hurried back to the elevator as fast as he could without raising suspicion. How had nobody noticed the dead guy yet?

He spent the evening in front of the TV, but he kept stepping out onto the balcony to look for his fat friend. It got darker, and every so often people would walk past the body, but nobody seemed to care. Finally, he made an anonymous phone call to the police and reported a dead body in the playground. Shortly thereafter, he heard the sirens and nervously sat down in front of the TV. Trying not to raise suspicion was key. Then he jumped back up -- *everybody* would be looking out of their windows, curious to see what was going on. He would stand out like a sore thumb if he was the only one who wasn't watching. Quickly, he stepped out onto the balcony, staring down at the policemen standing right next to the sandbox and talking. They weren't paying any attention to the body.

"What the hell?!" Marc thought.

He waited until the neighbors had moved away from their windows again before he stepped back inside. The police left soon after. Impossible! This couldn't be an elaborate prank anymore, could it?

It was a long time before Marc finally fell into an uneasy slumber in front of the TV. He woke up only three hours later. He checked his watch. 6:30 AM. Not exactly his usual time to wake up on a Sunday morning. Oh, well. The TV was still on and Marc gave the Teletubbies a disgusted look before switching over to MTV. He got up to make coffee. What else was there to do at such an ungodly hour? He couldn't say if he was truly surprised to see the fat guy lying in the kitchen. He looked just as he had when he had found him the first time, except a bit more shattered and twisted. Marc felt fear welling up inside him. No way this was a prank. This was absurd, and disgusting. Frantically, he thought about how he could get rid of the body. Or maybe it really just was a hallucination? It had to be, since nobody else had been able to see the guy.

"Just great," he muttered angrily, sitting back down on the couch. "How am I supposed to get rid of a hallucination? But I can't just live with a dead body in the apartment!"

He would have to think of something.



Six months had passed.

Marc had quit his job and was sitting in front of the TV, unshaven and in his pyjamas. His dead friend was lying in the kitchen, reeking. His buddies had come over the previous day, seriously worried about him. They hadn't been able to see or smell the body; they had only implored him to stop taking his homemade drugs. Marc had seen the looks they exchanged when he threw open the window because of the stink of decomposition that nobody but him could smell.

Drugs! As if that was his problem. His problem was a dead guy whom no one but him could see, whom he didn't know, and whom he couldn't get rid of. He had tried every method of disposal he could think of, but the guy hadn't exploded, nor had he dissolved in acid, nor had he drowned. Not even after Marc had dismembered him, or laid him on the tracks in front of an oncoming train, had the guy disappeared. No matter what he did to him, every morning the fat man was back in the same spot in the kitchen, except that he got increasingly awful to look at. And the smell was insane.

Sure, he had tried to ignore the body, to tell himself that it was just a hallucination, but that hadn't worked. He had tried to get rid of him and, in between the various attempts, to simply accept him being there because he couldn't think of what else to do. Sometimes he kicked him, breaking down in the kitchen, sobbing with rage and helplessness. At other times, he was upbeat because he had found another sure-fire method of disposal. At those times, he would tell the guy what was in store for him, talk to him, greeting him by name every morning. He had named him Charlie.

Though he had realized that the situation was out of control, he still hadn't dared to go and see a psychiatrist. His story was so unbelievable, they would probably have locked him away for the rest of his life. And for all he knew, the body would follow him right onto the closed ward.

The exorcists and voodoo priests he had hired to get rid of the body had been a complete waste. They hadn't even been able to see the body, but they had been more than happy to take Marc's money. When he complained, they told him that there had to be a very strong force at play, too strong for their own powers.

So Marc was left with trying to think up his own solutions, all of them unsuccessful and pointless. His mental state had gotten increasingly muddled, mistakes at his jobs had piled up. His doctor had felt sorry for him, diagnosed burn-out syndrome, and told him to take a week of sick leave. That's when he had decided to quit his job. He just hadn't seen the point anymore.

Now he was sitting on his couch, desperate, looking over to the kitchen where Charlie was lying, stinking and mysterious as always, just lying there, mocking him with his sheer presence.

Where could he go to finally be free from having to see the dead man? He didn't hesitate -- he pulled back the curtains and stepped out onto the balcony. There weren't many solutions, but this one would work. Of that he was certain as he jumped over the railing.



"All right, this is the apartment. We're renting it out furnished. The previous tenant just up and left; nobody knows where he went. He left all his things, so we kept the furniture in here. Everything has been cleaned, of course. Take your time to look around. If you're interested, you can move right in."

The young med student only took a few minutes to look around the comfortable, sunny apartment. What a stroke of luck! He didn't really have enough money to buy furniture, so renting a furnished apartment would help a lot. And if the former tenant had been stupid enough just to leave everything...

"I'll take it!" he told the realtor as he put down his suitcase. "I'm going to move in right away."

"That was quick! Wonderful! Let's take care of the paperwork, then I'll be out of your way and you can enjoy your first night in your new home."

They sat down on the couch, signed the various papers, then the realtor left. The student put his feet up on the coffee table and leaned back.

"Awesome apartment," he thought.

Later, he put his things up around the apartment. He assessed his work proudly, rewarded himself with a beer and a movie -- how nice that even the TV had been left behind! -- and fell asleep on the couch.





The first night in the new apartment had been great. He woke up refreshed, and stretched contentedly. Weekend! The perfect time to throw a little house warming party. But his plans changed abruptly when he walked into his kitchen and found a dead young man on the floor, a man he had never seen before in his life...

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