

There was a sharp knock on the door and without permission to enter, in rushed Billy talking loud and fast. This time there was someone following him. A bleach blond woman in stiletto heels, with a low cut blouse, not good looking, not bad looking either, but trying to hide her age with a lot of make-up. He introduced her as his wife. But it was hard to focus on her because Billy was talking loudly and gesticulating and moving around with much animation. My husband, Morty and I had not seen Billy in at least five years. He was the son of a friend of my husband, or actually, someone who used to be a friend of my husband's, till he got sick of being taken advantage of. My husband, that is.

The last time we saw Billy, his father had kicked him out. Now mind you, Billy was a grown man, well into his thirties, five years before. Now he was forty. It seemed that his father didn't get along with Billy's new wife, and had kicked them both out. They needed a place to stay, and how about that apartment in the basement? Did we have it rented? Now he knew we didn't have it rented because Morty was real lackadaisical about fixing it up. No descent person would rent it in the condition that it was in. But Billy wasn't quite what you'd call descent. I saw dollar signs. One thing I knew about Billy, he'd always had a job and the rent from that apartment would really come in handy.

That's when she came into focus. She had a way of just starting in like she'd known you her entire life. Her name was Darlene. She had her CASACT certification and she said she was looking for a job as a drug counselor. She had to leave her last job because of Billy. But it was all right, because Billy had a good job and he didn't want her to work anyway. He was a steamfitter and had a union job in the city. And she was very

religious. In fact they were on their way to church right then. Praise the Lord! I wondered exactly what church she was going to, dressed the way she was dressed.

It wasn't just the money from the rental that made us easy prey for anybody with a hard luck story. Morty and I had been homeless ourselves for a short while on two occasions. The first time, I had been pregnant with our first child. The second time, we had a six year old and a three year old. We had ended up staying with a couple, who were in dire straits themselves, living in a house with no electricity or central heating for two months in the winter. The baby had been sick the entire time. We knew what it was like to struggle. People had helped us out and we believed strongly in helping others out. We didn't need to attend church every Sunday to follow the golden rule.

Teenagers, friends of our children, old enough to be kicked out by their parents, but not old enough to make it on their own, found refuge at Bess and Morty's. A couple of Morty's friends had slept on the couch in the living room for months at a time. Even Morty's obnoxious brother had slept on the couch, which really tried the limits of my compassion. He had started fights with all our friends until they just stopped coming by.

Billy and Darlene got me and Morty to agree to let them stay, with a lot of hand gestures, loud talking, promises of rent paid on time, and quite a bit of suspiciously - perky -for -forty cleavage. They finally left for church, leaving us in a "What just happened?" daze. We both took a much-needed deep breath and got on with our day.

They moved in and nothing much happened for a while except for the loud talking that you could hear all the way from the basement and the constant interruptions into our relatively quiet life. "Do you have a garbage bag or a little milk for coffee?" or "Could we use the washing machine?" We were generous people. One day, the loud talking got

too loud and Darlene was screaming. I'm not as spry as I used to be so I nagged Morty to go down and see what was going on. After quite a bit of yelling and screaming from Morty there was dead silence. When Morty came back upstairs, he was uncharacteristically somber. "He was beating the living shit out of her, Bess." Shaking his head in disbelief. "I kicked him out. Told him not to come back."

"Way to go, Morty!" I patted him on the back. "Is she okay?"

"I told her to come up and let you have a look at her."

"Oh, I guess" I said reluctantly. I was kind, but I wasn't a nurse. I didn't wish Darlene any harm, but I wasn't sure how much I liked her. She came up and was pretty beat up but didn't need to go to the hospital or anything. With Billy gone, who was going to pay the rent? Darlene didn't work. Far as I could see, she just slept all day till he came home. And on those rare occasions she was awake, she was clip clopping around my house in heels, wearing tank tops, drinking my coffee and talking a mile a minute to Morty. But Morty was getting his money's worth of fake boob cleavage. I was trying to be magnanimous about it, acting like I was beyond being jealous of Morty's attention to her.

Billy came back in a week, begging for us to let him stay. He said he was sorry and that he would never do it again. I thought, "That's what they always say". I let him come back though, because, like I said, things were tough. Morty was retired and his pension was small, having worked mostly off the books, his working years. I was the only one working and I didn't make much money. I'm not too proud to say that my financial need was eclipsing my natural inclination to being caring and helpful. So we gave him another chance, warning him that this was his last one. Darlene, of course

wanted him to stay. She loved Billy so, so much. Although we fed her and gave her a place to live, we didn't give her money. Billy had that union job in the city and he did pay his rent regularly, just like he promised. He was good that way.

The next few months passed relatively uneventfully. Billy got up at five in the morning and went to work. I got up at seven and went to work. Morty cooked and cleaned a little and Darlene slept, slept and chatted with Morty. Occasionally, when Billy had a day off, they would go to the food pantry and say they needed food. They'd come back with bagfuls of canned goods, day old bread, and boxes of pasta. Now mind you, Billy made twice as much money as I did, and I wouldn't think of going to the food pantry. But they were funny like that. They'd also get large refill cups when they bought fast food and go and refill them anytime, without even purchasing anything. And wherever they would go they would stop in the bathroom and steal toilet paper. When they got coffee from Seven-Eleven, they would take enough sugar packets and creamers to last them a month.

One evening Billy got home from work and Morty wanted to show him a picture he had taken that he was quite proud of. Morty had recently discovered digital photography and was taking pictures of everything and making them look like sketches and paintings with Photoshop. I was actually getting a little bored with looking at Morty's pictures but something made me glance over at what he was showing Billy. It was a picture of Darlene sitting at my kitchen table, leaning over it so much that her plastic boobs were almost totally exposed, spilling out of her push-up bra and onto my kitchen table. Now I'm no prude, but it really vexed me that I was getting up at seven in

the morning and going to work, while he was taking pictures of Darlene's boobs. I really didn't make a big deal about but I let Morty know that I didn't like it at all.

A few months went by and things were very quiet downstairs, a little too quiet. Billy had gotten laid off due to a temporary work slow-down. There were a lot more trips to the food pantry and a lot more industrial size toilet paper rolls lying around their apartment. Billy was collecting unemployment so he was still able to pay the rent. Darlene didn't have as much time to sleep and chat with Morty because Billy wanted her near him all the time. It was kind of weird. He kept saying my wife this and my wife that, like he was trying to convince himself. They didn't seem to go to church anymore. In fact, they only went two or three times in the entire six months they stayed here.

One Sunday afternoon I heard shrill screaming and cursing from downstairs. It was Darlene's voice and Billy seemed to be trying to calm her down. I squeezed Morty's shoulder and urged, "Morty, get down there. He's beating her again, that monster, that wife beater!" Now by this time, I didn't like Darlene at all, but I'd be damned if I was going to sit around and listen to her getting beaten. So Morty hurried down to the basement and found the door locked. He was about to go back upstairs to get the key, when something made him look through the basement window. They were quite large windows for a basement, so that they could let more light in. What he saw was Darlene sitting on a kitchen chair with her bare arm tied off and extended. Billy had a syringe in his hand preparing to inject her. She was yelling all right, but not because he was hurting her. She was yelling because he wasn't injecting her with heroin fast enough.

Morty and I have re-evaluated our views on helping people. After this last time, he seems very motivated to getting that basement apartment fixed up so we can get some descent people to rent it. and get a little help with the bills.