

## Simon Stopped By

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BECAUSE HE SPENT MUCH of his time monitoring the unfair world around him in which he was the ultimate victim, Simon was wholly unprepared for the day the bad guys actually came.

When his ex-wife Carolina went away for a week to a conference and offered to pay Simon to stop by her place to check up on it, he at first argued, telling Carolina that he didn't need her charity, that housesitting was not a *job*. He had, however, pulled in half of his next month's rent money from a house-sitting gig just a few weeks ago, but he didn't mention this to her, especially when he saw she was wearing a new crewneck sweater he knew was thanks to her recent promotion as a marketing manager for a large pharmaceutical company.

'It's not house sitting,' Carolina had said. 'Definitely not. Do not stay there, actually. That's not what I'm asking. Just come by and make sure there are no leaks or other drama.'

He'd tried to tell her she didn't have to settle for this condo, that she hadn't had to own property at all. Or, even if she truly felt pressure to, she should wait. But *no*, she'd protested with a palm in the air. She'd 'loved' the place, it 'spoke' to her. In that palm, Simon saw it all: the desperation to re-align her life, now divorced because of his realization after the fact at how ill-fitting marriage was. He'd stalled every time she'd mentioned buying a home during their three years of matrimony. The condo, he knew, was her way of saying 'I'm free.'

'Sure,' he'd said after her request for him to house-sit. He closed his eyes and thought of her king-sized bed, her multiple pillows. He thought of his love for her, not over and out, just reshaped. He thought of how his continued vitality to her was one of the realest things he had.

Carolina was the only woman Simon had ever known who

had shared his life outlook, which was often cruelly mistaken for entitlement. 'I wouldn't think twice about running over a squirrel or killing it in any manner, if necessary,' she'd said on one of their first dates. 'It's an animal for Chrissake. When did animals become better than humans?' He knew, at that statement, he'd met his match.

She hadn't needed to show him how to care for her condo; he knew the way her brain worked, even though it was vastly different from his. But he humored her on a tour and through her to-do list, assuming fifty percent of her instructions were meant to tortuously relive their domestic history, and fifty percent meant to impress him.

'Please, please, *please*, lock the upper bolt after you stop by.' Simon noticed the specificity of Carolina's 'stop by' instead of 'come over,' emphasizing a reminder of brevity.

'Caro, you're in a gated community, and you have a regular bottom lock. Stop stressing out so much.'

Their fingers had brushed as she passed him her keys, and Simon noticed a light pink polish on her nails, still short as ever. She tugged the key back and jutted out her chin. She had a new freckle on the left side of her mouth near the crease. She sighed out dramatically, and Simon recognized a familiar but repulsive mix on her breath of coffee and banana.

'If you can't remember or are going to take your high horse...'  
Carolina continued on, threatening to cancel Simon for the job, and he tuned out, amused by her subtle misuse of expressions, and veered toward a biologically-based assumption that in her acting superior to him, she was flirting. Finally, he convinced her he would do an exemplary job at her home, including but not limited to locking the top bolt after his 'extremely brief' visits.

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He had not planned to stay at her place for the next three days, but once the first night passed when he accidentally fell asleep on

the couch with the attached ottoman, and after having eaten five of her flavored tortillas with melted muenster cheese, and after having taken a bath in one of the 1.5 bathrooms, it seemed that his presence there was hardly offensive.

His keep was earned by his certainty that there were no leaks in any portion of the home, nor any other potential areas of concern in any way, shape or form. For having 73 other neighbors ('They are not my *actual* neighbors; neighbors go in the place of separate walls next to you; they are not stuck like Velcro build blocks *around* you,' Carolina had argued), Simon saw very little of the other occupants.

A dog's nails scuffling along the floor in the unit above bordered on becoming a problem until Simon took Carolina's long-reaching Swiffer wand and tapped it aggressively on the ceiling multiple times, and the sound faded shortly thereafter. He made a mental note to encourage Caro to file a grievance with her HOA that despite any Pet Policy, she, as a homeowner, was compromising her integrity through the imbalance with what she paid to live there and the existence of an animal capable of everyday disruption and chaos.

On the fourth night, his routine so established at Caro's condo that he could not recall the exact hue of the futon in his rental studio, Simon chuckled to himself thinking he should've hired a house sitter for his own place, though he was only three miles away.

He sunbathed on Caro's narrow patio that was exactly the length of his body, from the top of his head to his second toes, which were unjustly two to three millimeters longer than his big toes, and which veered off to the sides of his body like fronds of two old, bored palm trees.

As he lay, he looked around through the slats in Caro's balcony fence to see if any other tenant had been granted a better setup. Though nothing seemed apparent for a satisfying round of jealousy about superior patios, Simon did enjoy his vantage point, which allowed discreet spying-on through several glass sliding

doors, where he could see interesting or heinous furniture and room layouts, each view quickly summarized in his head (*Rich Prick*; *Old*; *Pretentious*; and *Hideous*).

About to shift his eyes away from the courtyard, Simon landed on one last unit, across and to the north of the pool. His stomach clocked the activity before his brain did. A person—smaller, and so perhaps a woman, or perhaps elderly—suddenly went from a standing position to the ground, from a form with bones to something empty, dropping to nothing in a blink. At the same time, the lowering of an arm or a weapon came from around some corner or wall, a flash of movement like a puppet show with no sound. Simon's insides—full from tortellini soup he'd found in Caro's fridge which he recognized as a recipe she'd made on special occasions when they were married, and which occurred to him after it was gone that perhaps she'd put it in the freezer for when she returned to home to 'save an immediate trip to the grocer'—dropped in a similar manner as the neighbor's body had, and despite a new urgency in his bowels, he was paralyzed. There was no other movement inside the unit, but Simon was aware that the bad guy—or guys—would need to egress from the home and go on some sort of lam. He knew from having used the laundry room on his second night that the buildings across from one another connected via a simple catwalk. *Fucking layout*, thought Simon.

The non-thought negotiation about staying put or going inside ended in forcing his body into an upright situation, then double-overing so that his lower belly and its sporadic hair pattern folded over his cargo shorts with a gnawing gouge at the waist. He slid the screen door open slowly, quietly, and then crawled inside, knees pushing excruciatingly into the threshold and then onto Caro's laminated hard floor.

He closed the door in the same quiet manner, from the ground, his fingernails bending from the weight and near-impossible low-to-ground angle. *Those dicks*, Simon thought. *This sucks for me*. His cuticle bled. He licked the finger while lying flat on the floor. His heart throbbed, and he smelled Caro's sunscreen that he'd generously used, and his own sweat. He hadn't washed

since the bath, and he had been looking forward to trying out the shower, observing the strength of the water pressure, using some of Caro's shampoo, of which she had several bottles both in the tub and also on standby in the hall closet, and thought how unfair it was that this unexpected crime was making it impossible to know when that shower might take place.

Simon lowered himself to the ground and rolled onto his left side, having been suddenly swamped with fury about the realization that these guys were getting in his way of taking care of his ex-wife's home, when the footsteps neared the front door. The sound was that of scuffing, of boots, and surprisingly, not of voices. The aggression was heard in the cadence of their steps, urgent and creeping at the same time—proving to Simon that these joy-stealing bad guys *were* looking for someone or something.

'Fuck you,' Simon said aloud, but at a moderate volume. 'Fuck you,' he said again, loudly, and everything around him—every item Carolina owned in this home without him—was at risk. *These entitled assholes, he thought, rubbing their shit-stained, oversized boots on Caro's complex's common space, had less than no right to be there.* The threat to Caro's stuff—a sofa, a papasan chair, plants, mismatching Fiestaware, a plastic step stool, her frayed toothbrush, too-thin sweaters, the overabundance of non-fiction books, nubbed down candles, all of which he regarded not with judgment as he had the items seen through patio doors in other units but with love and affection—it was all too much.

Simon would never let anyone take the parts of a life his ex-wife had worked so hard to build after Simon left her. And so he went, shirtless and thirsty to the front door, angry for all that these bad guys had made him feel when he was entitled to feel so good.

And because of his anger, the strength of it having accumulated in him for so long, perhaps his entire existence, really, Simon had a type of blindness to the visceral reality, so sure he was that his lot in life granted him a counter to all that had come to him wrongfully; that it granted him an exemption from the most savage coincidence; that it granted him the impossibility

that he had been seen across the courtyard; that it granted him an utter unlikeliness that sheer randomness could affect him; so sure of all these things that he could not have possibly predicted that he himself would, indeed, be the next target of the bad guys' evil.