

The Friend of Friends

By: Robin Pascoe

“You don’t know me,” said the voice on the telephone. “But good friends of your’s gave me your number and said I should call if I needed any help.”

“Just a minute, please.” The expatriate husband who had answered the phone quickly beckoned to his wife.

“Another one of those calls!” he said to his spouse. “Your friends back home have been handing out our phone number again. You take this call.”

“Hello,” she said, trying to put a cheerful, helpful note in her voice when she was really feeling quite put out. It was, after all, a Friday night and she wanted to relax. “Can I help you?”

“Your friends, the Smiths, gave me your number and told me to call if I got into any trouble while visiting over here.”

“How can we help?” She deliberately brought her husband into the situation. Afterall, she wouldn’t even be overseas if it were not for his job.

“Well,” the caller began tentatively, “I seem to have lost my passport, credit cards and travellers cheques,” he finally admitted. “But other than that, I’m having a wonderful time. It’s such a fascinating country.”

The wife took a deep breath.

“By the way, the Smiths send their love.”

“The Smiths were right. They said I could count on your help,” said the distressed traveller, climbing into the wife’s car at the front door of a low budget hotel he could no longer afford.

“No problem,” said the wife through gritted teeth. “We have a spare bedroom set up for emergencies like this. Believe me, you are the not the first friend of friends who has used the room.”

She knew her tone had sounded sarcastic. In an attempt to rustle up some empathy, she reminded herself how overwhelmed she would be if the situation were reversed. So, assuming a more friendly manner, she turned to her passenger and inquired how long he was planning on visiting the country.

“I’m supposed to be here six months,” he said.

“Why...why so long?” she asked with visions of a permanent visitor rushing through her head. “Normally, people just buzz through here quickly to shop.”

“I have come to teach.”

Looking closely at him now, she realized he was nowhere near the age of either herself or for that matter, the friends who had given out her phone number.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

“How do you know the Smiths?”

“Actually, I don’t. I know a girl who is dating their son.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t been able to get a hold of anyone at our Embassy,” said the husband the minute his wife and the young man came through the front door. “It’s the weekend anyway. Since it’s not an emergency, nothing would be done about a new passport until Monday.”

“Oh dear,” was all the wife could manage to say.

“So how are the Smiths?” the husband asked, taking the traveller’s luggage and carrying it to the spare bedroom.

Overhearing this, the wife hesitated before informing him: “It turns out he doesn’t actually know the Smiths.”

“Oh?”

“He knows their son’s girlfriend who somehow managed to secure our phone number before he headed out here – for six months – to teach.”

Her husband gave her an exasperated look. “So you mean to tell me he’s not really a friend of the Smiths?”

“Technically, no. He’s a friend of a friend of our friends’ son.”

“Well, actually that’s not quite true either,” the young man interjected, overhearing them. Before offering any further explanation, he said: “I haven’t eaten in two days.” He let the comment hang there without saying anything else.

“Why don’t you unpack a few things and I’ll see what’s in the kitchen,” said the wife. Her husband started to follow her out the door to the spare room, but not before asking the visitor: “What did you mean when you said you are not a friend of a friend of our friends’ son?”

“I mean you have been so kind I wouldn’t want to lead you further astray. It’s just that I was desperate and had to call someone.”

“Go on.”

“OK. I don’t actually know your friends’ son’s girlfriend either. I know a friend of her’s.”

“So what you are saying,” said the husband, choosing his words carefully, “is that you know a friend of a friend of the girlfriend of the son of our friends.”

“Yes.”

The husband glared at his wife and was about to say something to her when the young man spoke first: “Does this mean I can’t have something to eat?”

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