

Why the hell are they coming?

by Christine Callahan

I couldn't hear Tommy's explanation. Everything was drowned out by the deafening garble of gate announcements, plus my cell reception was shit. I picked up the two bags of presents from the grimy floor and immediately felt the weight of my knapsack. The strap was too tight but I figured it was too much of a hassle to futz with. I decided to suffer. That decision made it all the harder to drag myself over to the 7th Avenue side for a few more bars on my phone. Thanks to the shlepping, the call dropped completely. I attempted to call my brother back, but was distracted by an argument breaking out between a hippy chick and two extremely good looking effeminate men. The more she denied their claim, the faster her purple yoga mat that was sticking out of her tote bag swung. The male couple used harsh language to defend their position at the vending machine. In between accusations they took turns scolding and comforting a small white poodle that whimpered from a designer picnic basket. People in line with ipods, holding Starbucks cups while texting began blurting out. "Someone fucken go already!" A woman rocking an infant shouted "Speed it up, no one cares!" It reminded me, I still needed to buy my ticket.

When I saw the voice mail symbol on my phone, I pressed #1. The message was not from Tommy but from Mom. It went like this:

"Hi! I'm calling to let you know that Harvey's sister and her husband need to stay with us on Christmas Eve. You know them, you know them, Julie and Frank. I introduced you to them at Laurie's wedding. Anyway, we only have one extra bed and with all the kids taking up the couches, it would be better for you, to sleep on the air mattress. You can set it up in the living room with the kids or if you want more privacy it does fit in the hallway by the kitchen. I wanted to let you know in advance because you always say that you don't like 'surprise changes at the last minute'. See you when you get here, oh yeah, this Mom."

How is a hallway private? I noticed the time. I didn't want to get charged extra on the train so I ventured to the vending machines. I picked the one with the longest line because it was the closest and drama free. My T-mobile bullshit wouldn't let me make a call but somehow I still had access to my voice mail. The next message was from Tommy.

"Hey, it's Tommy, we just got cut off! This is a heads up, Frank and what's her name, are crashing at Mom's. She said you can use the air mattress but she lost the pump thing, you know that plug-in part that fills it up. I'd say you could stay at my place but last time you complained that I didn't have any clean towels. It makes more sense for you to force some of those little brats sleep on the floor. My car got fucked up, I'm not sure who's car I'll be picking you up with. Text me when you get off the train. Oh and by-the-way, she told me not to tell you about the pump thing because she's afraid you'll just come for dinner and not stay over, so don't say I told you anything!"

This was really going to suck. He gave me a good idea, just go for dinner and come back late. It was my turn at the vending machine. Every time I tried to enter my password the screen displayed, "Error, please insert card". I used cash but it kept rejecting my crinkled bills by spitting them out over and over. I gave up. I had enough cash to pay the surcharge but I was hungry. I didn't have enough money for everything. I made a bargain with myself. I'd miss this train, go to an ATM, but a ticket, get a bagel and call Mom. Tommy is notorious for getting things wrong.

The line at the ATM was relatively short and my debit card worked fine, so I was feeling slightly hopeful. I planted myself back on a vending machine line. A miracle occurred, and I could dial to get the scoop.

"Hi, I got your message. First of all, a hallway is not private. Also so what's this business about not having a pump for the air mattress?"

"Did Tommy tell you that? He loves to embellish the truth. What I told him was that I definitely have the pump but don't know where it is. I couldn't find it. I grabbed the air mattress from the basement but I know it's somewhere. I used it to blow up the kid's pool toys over the summer. It is probably in the garage. In fact I know it's there. Tommy will be driving a different car, he said to text him."

There was a long silence. I told her a lie about the train boarding to get off the phone. I left the vending machine line and went to "Hot 'N' Crusty Bagels" to think things over. I sat chewing at a wobbly formica table contemplating my existence. My phone rang, I let it go to voice mail. It was Tommy.

"False alarm, Frank and what's her name decided to stay with Laurie. They said they can't take the commotion with all the rambunctious kids. So you got the extra bedroom. Remember, I don't have my car, text me."

The smell of garlic on my "everything with butter" made me nauseous. I trashed the half eaten bagel and I walked over to Duane Reade. I placed the bags of presents under the white frosted plastic tree. I headed for the A train to Harlem.