

The Out-of-Towners

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Many of us went "home" for the holidays, but what is home to us can be a sticky web for a significant other. Relationships with families of origin are complicated enough (with divorce, stepparents and siblings), but coming into these existing relationships as an outsider can lead to nothing less than a farce -- as my husband, Ryan, and I proved during this holiday season.

Though we have been together for six years, this was the first Christmas we've spent with my dad, Jay, and his wife, Suze, at their home in the Bay Area. Our first night, Ryan and I decided to go in the hot tub (it was too cold for those Californians to join us). I exited the tub first in order to take a shower and asked if he would be all right alone (filled with sake, in hot water, in an unfamiliar setting). His reply, "You know, Jen, there are moments of the day when I'm not around you. I'll be fine."

Famous last words.

I assumed my husband would follow shortly. But as I laid in bed after my shower, at least 20 minutes went by. I started to get up to check on Ryan, but hesitated due to his comment regarding my over-concern for his safety. I managed to wait half an hour before I crawled out of bed to make sure he was all right.

Call it intuition. All the lights in the house were off, the patio door was locked and the hot tub was closed -- but he was nowhere to be found. I whispered, "Ryan. Ryan!" as I searched the house and started to panic. I was scolding myself for leaving him alone when

I heard a gentle knocking at the front door. "Ryan?" I whispered again. "Yes, honey. It's me" was the reply.

I opened the front door and found my shivering husband. He had been outside in the cold, barefoot and wet, wearing nothing but a bathrobe for more than 40 minutes.

"I knew I should have stayed with you, " I said.

"I knew you'd crack and come find me," he answered.

The next day Suze said she had heard someone come in and sent my father to lock up the house for the night. Neither thought that maybe one of us had decided to luxuriate for a while longer than the other. Dad hadn't even noticed the tub lights still on.

My husband had been locked out of the house by my father. What would Freud say about that?

Although my parents have a sliding glass door that leads from their bedroom to the backyard that Ryan could have easily knocked on, my husband is much too polite to make such a scene. Not wanting to wake our generous hosts he instead took an elaborate adventure in the dark around the perimeter of the house and knocked on the guest bedroom window. Unfortunately, this was at the exact same time I "cracked" and went in search of him. He thought he was terrifying me by knocking at the window -- I wasn't even there to hear him. As my father later pointed out, it's a scene straight out of a Steve Martin film.

Perhaps, if you were in my husband's predicament, you'd ring the doorbell. Or knock on that patio door. But stop and think about it before you judge my sweet husband. Would you want to be embarrassed in front of your in-laws? Or give them a late-night scare?

The ways in which we feel comfortable behaving around our own families are often stunted when around the family of a significant other -- and they should be.

With the in-laws we are much more polite, much less drunk and in constant negotiation between wanting to please the new "Mom" and "Dad" and indulging a partner's often (over)sensitive reactions to family dynamics. It's a delicate and often exhausting balance for an outsider, one that might even freeze your toes.

Ryan's outdoor adventure is comical, but it also speaks to the endearing lengths a partner will (unnecessarily) go to in order to "keep the peace" on just such a trip home. He would have slept outside all night -- in the cold -- with only the hot tub to warm him rather than disturb my family's slumber.

What Ryan does not yet realize is that he belongs to them now, too. As we left for home, Suze pulled my husband aside and told him I was lucky to have him. She's right.

As we continuously integrate our lives, hopefully the lines between family of origin and in-laws will eventually blur. I also hope that, through Suze's gesture, next time Ryan will feel more comfortable knocking on their bedroom door.

It's all right if he wakes them up. He's family.