



Karen Anderson

If I come for a visit, will I have to stay in your guest bedroom?

When you're an overnight guest at the home of a friend or family member, it's only natural that you stay in the guest bedroom ... whether you like it or not.

When I was growing up, houses had something called “the guest room.” It was a small, pastel bedroom at the back of the house, in the basement, or up on the second floor, furnished with out-of-date beds and dressers inherited from the grandparents or left behind when the kids went off to college.

What the guest room lacked in style it made up for with décor: ruffled curtains on the windows, a white chenille bedspread, and mountains of lumpy little throw pillows. The dresser was cluttered with breakable knick-knacks, and there was always something to trip over – a fringed rug or an oversized rocking chair (positioned diabolically between the bed and the bathroom).

My first experience with one of these guest rooms came when relatives insisted that my mother and I stay with them instead of at a hotel. There was no soda machine, no swimming pool and no large-screen TV. We slept in a squishy bed that, by the rules of the universe that govern guest rooms, was ice-cold and would remain so throughout the night.

My mother sneezed (she was miserably allergic to the feather pillows) and then wheezed the traditional incantation of houseguests worldwide: “It’s only for two nights.”

Fast-forward 50 years. Today, we live in sleek, urban environments. The idea of maintaining a room in the house for the sole purpose of storing dumpy old furniture and freezing the occasional guest is nearly beyond comprehension. Our spare rooms have been pressed into full-time service as home offices, man caves, TV rooms, and crafts studios.

At our house, guests stay in our basement TV room, where the sofa opens into a full-size bed. Unfortunately, the more comfortable we find the sofa, the less comfortable

the guests find the bed. A few years back, we bought one of those inflatable guest beds and our friends Mark and Rita gave it a try. The bed was initially quite comfortable, they reported the next morning. But when Rita got out of bed in the middle of the night, her side of the bed rose quickly, Mark’s side fell to compensate, and the bed launched him into the air and halfway across the room.

Horried, the Scholarly Gentleman and I rushed downstairs to investigate. But we were too late. The cats had arrived first, and the inflatable bed, mistaken for the world’s largest cat toy, had been permanently decommissioned.

I’m sure it wasn’t revenge, but the next time I visited Mark and Rita I had a guest room experience that nearly killed me. It wasn’t at their house. They have a perfectly lovely guest room that doubles as Rita’s home office. But their daughter had come home from school with the flu, so they arranged for me to spend the last night of my trip at their neighbor’s house.

The neighbor was a pleasant fellow who made me a cup of tea in his cozy kitchen before taking me to the basement guest quarters: a dark, non-insulated room with a bed up against a single-pane window that was stuck partially open. It was the dead of winter.

“You might want to turn on the space heater for a few minutes,” he said without a hint of irony.

Cranking the tiny heater to the max, I set to work on a plan that would enable me to survive the night without freezing and possibly get a few hours of sleep. It began with a scalding hot shower, after which I dressed in all the clothes I’d

worn plus all the clothes in my suitcase plus my down coat. Then I found two towels, heated them on the feeble space heater, lined the frozen bed with the warm towels, and leapt in.

Very soon thereafter, a second raid was required. I heated two more towels and wrapped them, turban-style, around my head. Then I sprinkled a package of crackers from my purse on the blanket to lure the household’s blessedly large, furry cat into bunking with me.

“Good grief,” said the Scholarly Gentleman when he heard the story. “Are you really going to write about that?”

“Maybe,” I said. “If only I could explain why I didn’t just leave and go to a hotel.”

