

The Landlady – by Roald Dahl

Synopsis

Billy Weaver arrives in Bath after taking the train from London. He's never been to the town before, but he's due to start a new job there soon and he's excited at the prospect. He heads toward The Bell and Dragon, which is a pub he's been told he could spend the night at. On the way though, he notices a sign in the window of a nearby house: "BED AND BREAKFAST." Billy looks in the window and notices that it's a charming house, with a roaring fire and a little dog curled up asleep on the rug.

On an impulse, he decides to check it out and rings the bell. It is answered immediately a little old lady who invites him to enter and tells him the room rate. As it's less than half what he was prepared to pay, Billy decides to stay. She tells him that he is the only guest as she takes him to his room. When he goes downstairs to sign the guest-book, he notices that there are only two names in the entire book. The names are over two years old... and what's more, they strike him as being familiar.

As he struggles to remember where he's heard the names before, the landlady brings him a cup of tea. He seems to remember that one of them was an Eton schoolboy that disappeared, but she assures him that her Mr. Temple was different. Billy sits down before the fire with his tea and notices a strange odour that comes from the woman, something like walnuts or new leather. They begin talking about the former guests, and she notes that both of them were handsome young men just like him. He asks if they left recently, and she replies that both of them are still in the house on the fourth floor.

Billy is confused and tries to change the subject by commenting on a parrot in a cage, which he thought was alive but just realized is stuffed. The landlady reveals that she herself stuffed the bird, and as she is a taxidermist she stuffs all her own pets. Billy realises with a shock that the little dachshund by the fire isn't alive. He also notices a curious bitter almond taste in his tea, and he asks the landlady again: "Haven't there been *any* other guests here except them in the last two or three years?" She gives him a little smile as she replies, "No, my dear. Only you."

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