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Hotel Caper

By Steve Schuster

When Kevin and Renae Gallagher of Illinois traveled with their friends Bryan and Susan Bruner to Milwaukee in June to attend Summerfest, they never expected to become the victims of a burglary – not after they booked a suite at a Downtown hotel, the Comfort Inn and Suites on East State Street (the former Park East Hotel).

As was later reported in the *Chicago Tribune*, the Gallaghers claim that when they went out for coffee on the second morning of their stay (as the Bruners slept soundly in another of the suite's rooms), the suite was burglarized, resulting in the loss of \$2,000 in valuables, including purses, wallets, cameras, cell phones and luggage.

Both couples blame the hotel's lax security for allowing the theft to happen. But Lawrence Duffy, the hotel's general manager, says the victims told him the break-in happened after they left their door propped open, an allegation the victims deny. He says the hotel rarely has problems with crime.

Duffy even suggests the "thefts" reported could be an attempt to get some kind of compensation for things they lost at Summerfest. "The question does arise. They could have lost (their belongings) down at the Summerfest Grounds and came back drunk. These guys were down there and came back late. How do I know they didn't leave their wallets on a picnic table?" he says.

Because of the alleged thefts, the hotel didn't charge the couples for their stay. Duffy says he fully cooperated with the Milwaukee police investigation and even ordered a "line up" with all of the hotel's housekeepers to determine if anyone could identify an alleged suspect, but no one could.

But the victims insist they never told anyone they left the door open or unlocked. "Even if I hadn't locked the door, I wouldn't have told them that," Gallagher says.

But he told a slightly different story in an earlier phone interview with *NewsBuzz*. Gallagher said they were "not exactly sure if the door was closed." The *Tribune* reported it was possible that "the early risers tried so hard to be quiet when they left that the door failed to latch."



THE COMFORT INN AND SUITES

Susan Bruner says, “The security was just awful. They didn’t even have a secure lock to the back door of the lobby. Even when I think about it, they didn’t have (the same security) even low cost hotels have.”

Security expert Chris McGoey of CrimeDoctor.com defended the hotel’s security practices with one exception, the back door not requiring a key card to open. He says that if the victims’ story is true, it’s quite possible the theft was committed by another hotel guest.

Gallagher says he’s considered suing the hotel, but under state law, the hotel would most likely not be liable for the lost belongings because it provided locks for the suite and likely posted the various required legal notices inside of it.

The belongings were never recovered. A government credit card belonging to Susan Bruner (an Illinois county government employee) was later traced to a gas station in Milwaukee, where it was used several times in rapid succession.

Regardless of what really happened, the Illinois tourists still enjoyed their time at Summerfest and the Tom Petty concert that drew them to Milwaukee. “It’s a great town. We liked Summerfest. But what a bad ending,” Bruner says.