

“The Visit”

August, 1971

There were few in Mildred Goodhardt’s circle of friends and family whom she actually liked, much less loved, without obligation. She just couldn’t (and *yes*—she had tried) summon a kind enough word for those who hovered close, for those with whom she shared her life.

She attempted to extinguish the guilt for her shortcomings along with her cigarette, pressing the remaining inch or so, tinged pink from her lipstick, into the car’s ashtray. Then she eased her thick, bare calf out of the passenger door of the astro-blue Plymouth. Her size-ten foot, middle toe curling arthritically over the big one and squeezed into her only pair of nice summer sandals, made a hushed landing on the hot, soft tar of the parking lot at the Howard Johnson’s.

She nearly missed seeing the orange car pull in and park at the far end of the lot. She had been lost in menial thoughts, the kind that consumed her regularly. She fretted over the empty birdfeeder by the kitchen window and the unwashed bunch of parsley that Raymond, her husband of forty-two years, had brought in from the garden. He went out at dawn each morning to assess what might be ready to harvest, or to turn the pale underbelly of a melon or a squash upward to the sun. Perhaps (she suspected) he went out there to escape her.

She had put the sandy parsley stems in a glass of water and set it on the kitchen sill for when they returned home. Then she would add it to the two cans of tuna she had already stretched with celery, hard-boiled eggs, and a sweet pickle dressing as she listened to the punctuated thoughts of Paul Harvey on the radio. That would be their supper tonight, supper for four instead of two.

She ruminated about what she would serve three days hence when she handed *them*—her two granddaughters—over to the other set of grandparents who lived on the good side of town. She had tried to arrange delivery, but they said retrieval worked better. Now she’d have to set the

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dining room table, iron a tablecloth, maybe even bake something—in such heat! She would need to dust the china coffee cups despite the forecast calling for a string of hot and humid days in which iced tea, sweetened with a spoonful of lemonade concentrate she kept in the freezer, might be a better fit.

“Raymond,” she muttered, in a half-hearted alert that it was time to get out of the car.

“Mmmm?” was all he said in return.

Mildred swung her other leg out of the car and then leaned heavily on the door’s edge to pull herself up. An uncomfortable feeling, a crisscross of emotion, swept through her as she saw her granddaughters emerge from the back seat of the orange car. Mildred fought against it. This visit was a plan her son and daughter-in-law had concocted over Christmas, no doubt after a lengthy happy hour in the basement “bar.” She could remember a few things from that evening, like the glitter of the tinsel she had draped in uneven lengths along the bar’s edge (she lacked an artistic eye), and the faint scent of bayberry. A dangerous combination of Cold Duck and Drambuie had opened her up to possibilities she wouldn’t have otherwise considered. When she had seen her granddaughters spinning around the room in their homemade purple velvet matching skirts and white tights, and when she sent them into the cold cellar to refill the cookie tray from the stacks of tins she had arranged on the card table, amassed from a month worth of baking, she *thought* she could do it. Others did this kind of summer hosting for their grandchildren. And it was only for a few days.

When they toasted 1971 in the middle of a blizzard, and then had eaten chocolate-dipped coconut and peanut butter Easter eggs during the spring thaw with not another mention of it, Mildred felt certain the whole idea had been forgotten. By May she was sure it had. But then the phone rang one hot evening in July, just as she had finished tending plants on the back porch.

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Her son, Earl, had said, “How about next month? The girls could spend half the week with you and half the week with Jane’s parents.”

“Why, sure. That would be ... nice,” was all she could say back, her voice sinking lower with each syllable.

It was the girls, not her son, who sent her into this abyss. The sight of him brought her a measure of joy she found almost nowhere else. He was the exception to every bit of disappointment and alienation she had ever felt. She had been lucky enough to see him grow past childhood. An orphan herself, she knew the value of mere presence. But the girls, whom she wanted to adore, drew her insecurities to the surface like little leeches drew sick blood.

She stalled, dipping her tall frame forward to check her lipstick in the car’s side mirror, hoping that some had survived the cigarette she had nursed since Avon Grove. She smoked because Raymond did. To give it up would be one less thing they’d have in common. Her menthol mixed with his harsher, unfiltered Camels on the morning ride through the country side, silent except for Raymond’s occasional comment about how tall the corn was despite the dry spell, a matter too unimportant to merit a nod. She was consumed with how they would manage the visit. He’d be working at the Mill all day and she’d be left all alone to entertain them.

How would she fill the hours? Hard as she tried, she couldn’t picture herself on the floor between them, doll in hand, playing make believe, or resting her heavy chest against the edge of the dining room table to search for the perfect color crayon. He, of course, would draw for them the portrait of an Indian chief he had drawn since childhood. The sketch was rudimentary, a simple profile in pencil, yet they never seemed to tire of it, asking him to draw it again and again, hanging off his shoulder and pointing to places on the paper where he could add another feather,

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a necklace, or an extra trail of smoke from the pipe. He always signed the masterpiece with his initials in cautious block letters, a result of his sixth grade education.

“Do you think I should take them on the bus into town one day, you know, for shopping at the 5&10?” she asked at the stoplight.

He kept his eyes on the road as he dipped his right hand into the weathered paper sack filled with broken pretzel bits and hard candy from the sale bin at the farmer’s market. She had never known him to travel without his “provisions”—working off of the panic from the years he had no sustenance. “Don’t see why not,” he said with a shrug. The bitter scent of tobacco on his breath mixed with the sweetness of a piece of hard candy. Lime, she thought.

Mildred dabbed the perspiration from her face with a tissue as they began to accelerate again. *This* he had noticed.

“I’m not turning on the air conditioner. Eats too much gas,” he said. It wasn’t unusual for him to turn off the engine when they hit downhill stretches, coasting, just for the thrill of it and not because it saved him a few dimes in fuel. She had to admit that barreling down the narrow roads without the roar of the engine and with only the sound of the wind rushing between them was intoxicating. Sometimes she imagined careening off the side, through the guardrail, suspended in mid-air for precious seconds until they hit a tree or crashed onto the rocks below. That thought had occasionally brought a measure of comfort, too. And shame.

Back in the parking lot, she walked a few paces from the car door and stood out in the middle of the concrete desert, her son not yet aware of her presence. In that moment she was happy. She watched him bend over to check something on the passenger’s side of the car. He was tall like her, and had dark hair and almond shaped eyes that sloped downward—brown like Raymond’s. A cigarette was tucked between his index and middle finger.

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“There he is. See him, Millie?” Raymond called out, using her pet name.

She held her lip between her teeth.

“Yes, I see, now. Come on,” she said. Her impatience with him was emphasized though the cadence and manner of speaking that was natural to their Pennsylvania German accent, of which she was more aware in the presence of her son, who had lost any traces of it in the Army and in the years he had been living in Delaware. She noticed the absence of common phrases, and how he never prefaced or finished off his sentences with the customary “now (v)once,” or “now then,” and how his inflection was no longer hitting early in a sentence or question, like it did for her. Sometimes he’d slip back into the accent as a joke, or perhaps an apology for moving away.

She had spoken loud enough at that instant, she hoped, that she wouldn’t have to glance back at Raymond. She had already glared at him that morning when he dipped his toast, buttered and jellied and then folded over, into his mint-green coffee mug. He ate the soggy bread greedily, without the benefit of his false teeth, which sat marinating in the prescribed liquid underneath the bathroom sink. As he gummed his wet toast, he didn’t stop to wipe up the drips of coffee and crumbs that slid down his unshaven chin and onto his bare chest. He grunted in delight, and rather than laugh or smile, all she could think to do was throw a paper napkin his way and scold him. As frustrated as it made her seeing him like that, so sated by something so small, she was jealous of his simple pleasures.

She watched her son close the car door and take each child by the hand. The youngest had on a bright yellow sundress that blurred in the wavy heat. He protectively drew the girls in, closer than she thought necessary. She had done that to him. Made him too cautious. She had hoped his time in the service, overseas for much of it, would give him a sense of adventure, of

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freedom. For a while it had. In his letters that arrived more frequently than she had expected, he wrote of weekend jaunts to bordering countries, taking in the Opera or symphony, going to museums. He was doing all the things that weren't available in their small industrial town, and even if they had been, she hadn't the means to indulge him in that kind of curiosity.