The Visit

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Abstract

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Winner, Freshman SKETCH Contest

"I CAN'T wait to see Ruth." Gram's trembling voice cut into the quiet of the room. She looked very small sitting in the Louis XIV chair that we had always called the "King's chair." It was big enough for my sister and me to sit in together, and Gram was so thin. The little twinge of annoyance that I usually felt whenever she spoke was drowned now as I remembered all she had done in the past two months. No wonder she could hardly wait to see Ruth!

Sugar was sitting across from me, hemming a dress intently, and Pop, as usual, was absorbed in the mists of Time. My family was so nice—no one else had a mother who let you call her Sugar! The living room was straightened for a change—Sugar was as excited as Gram about Ruth's arrival, but for a different reason. Ruth had always been her favorite niece, and my nicest cousin.

Sugar looked up and said thickly, around a mouthful of pins, "Come and try this on now." She pulled the smooth cotton down over my head, tugged at the hem to straighten it, and stepped back to get the effect, head cocked critically, blue eyes considering. Pop peered around the edges of Time.

"Looks slick," he remarked briefly, and returned to his post as a one-man army.

"Don't you think it's a little long, Marian?"

I went to the mirror in the hall to see if Gram was right.

"I think it's just about the way I like it," I called back, but Gram wasn't listening. She was standing tensely at the window watching as a car slid slowly to a stop in front of the house.

"Here she comes now—oh no, it's only David!"

There was more than disappointment in her tone, and Gram wasn't often bitter.

As Uncle Dave came up the walk, I waited at the door, won-
dering impatiently why he was taking such a long time. Usually he walked as though he were eager to get where he was going. Today he seemed to dawdle—holding his hat in his hand, looking tired and thinner than the last time I’d seen him—not at all like the gay, noisy uncle who used to leave a dollar bill under our pillows when he came to visit.

He gave me a juicy kiss on the way in, and went hesitantly into the living room. Gram, back in the big chair, froze into position after an icicle-hung “Hello, David.” Sugar looked a little bit stiff at first—she’s always been sort of suspicious of Uncle Dave because he’s one of those “Charming People.” But Pop, oblivious to the tension strung across the room, had dropped his magazine, and came to the door to meet him.

“Hello, Dave—glad to see you! Come in, won’t you? Pat, take his coat—we got a telegram from Ruth this morning, and she’s on her way over.”

I was proud of the way Pop was acting. He was coming through beautifully in a tight situation—though he probably didn’t know it! Uncle Dave looked surprised, and, more than that, trapped, at the mention of Ruth’s name.

“She’s coming here?” He twisted the brim of his hat in his fingers, rolling the soft felt. His laugh was nervous, but his face was serious when he spoke. “Well—I guess I’ll wait—if you don’t mind. I haven’t seen her for quite a while, you know.”

“Of course you’ll wait—sit down, Dave.”

He settled himself in a comfortable chair, and pulled his pipe out of his pocket. This was a ritual that I always loved to watch. Usually he got it filled and lit almost automatically, talking nonsense to us kids, or starting a serious conversation with Pop at the same time. Today he surprised me.

“Mind if I smoke?” It sounded uncertain.

Sugar gave him a smile.

“Go right ahead, Dave. After all—why not?” Her voice stopped suddenly.

Pop said, with a laugh, “What a way to put it! What’s the matter, old girl?” But Sugar didn’t answer his teasing.

Gram had me worried. Disapproval had tightened up her features, and she hadn’t moved or said a word since her first restrained greeting. Uncle Dave filled his pipe, spilling tobacco on the chair, and then laid it in the ashtray and turned directly to Gram.
"I heard—that is, Mrs. Porter told me what you did for Ruth in New York. I certainly appreciate it."

He waited, like a small boy expecting a scolding—fingers tapping on the table beside him, a half-ashamed, half-apprehensive look on his face.

Gram finally spoke—a minimum of words.

"No more than any decent person would do."

"We didn't know—Ruth didn't tell us she was taking benzedrine. I hadn't realized her job meant missing so much sleep—we could have helped her if she'd stayed at home."

Gram glanced at him, and then resumed the eyes-straight-ahead position.

"Any child would leave home if her father and step-mother thought she was losing her mind."

The fingers stopped tapping and curled tightly around the pipe. I couldn't blame Uncle Dave for getting angry. Gram was being unreasonable. His tone, when he spoke, matched hers.

"Who told you that, Mom?"

"Ruth told me she overheard Edna talking to the doctor. That child would be in an institution now if I hadn't been lucky enough to find her in New York."

"Believe me, Mom, I knew nothing—"

Gram got up like an avenging little ghost and drifted silently towards the kitchen. Uncle Dave picked up his pipe. He scratched a match furiously across the box, lit the pipe, and puffed intently for a minute or two.

Pop said easily, "Well, Dave, how's the Bakelite business?"

"We had a strike at one of our plants," said Uncle Dave, and he proceeded to tell about it, but his mind wasn't on it.

A few minutes later when the doorbell rang, I got up to open the door, but Gram was already out of the house and halfway down the walk. Ruth's bubbling voice, mixed with Gram's half-hysterical welcome, came clearly.

"Hi, Gram! Where is everybody? Uncle Dick, Aunt Marian—where are you?"

Sugar beamed and threw her arms around Ruth as she met her at the door.

"Darling, how are you—you're looking wonderful! The uniform is so becoming, and you've gained some weight! You'll never guess who's waiting inside for you with Uncle Dick!"

Ruth did look wonderful. Short dark hair curled up around
her pretty, excited face, and happiness lit her black eyes like twin candles. She rushed towards the living-room door.

I caught a glimpse of Uncle Dave’s face through the open door. There was a variety of expression in it—eagerness, uncertainty, and a trace of wistfulness.

Ruth stopped short at the door. Her father managed a weak smile, and a tentative, “Hello, Ruthie.” But Ruthie exclaimed, “Dad! How wonderful!” and flew over to kiss him. Then she sat down on the floor beside him, and started talking—all about Hunter College, and her training, interrupting herself to ask about her two brothers and the people at home.

Everybody was relieved. Uncle Dave pretended to be as calm as Ruthie, but one hand fiddled with the ashtray beside him. Then as the conversation proceeded, it slowly relaxed. Only the anxiousness of his smile, and his too-ready laugh showed that he was still a little unsure.

Ruthie stopped chattering for a moment, and turned to Sugar. “Aunt Marian,” she said, “I love to visit you. You and Uncle Dick are two of my favorite people, and you have the nicest home I’ve seen in a long time.”

“I think it’s pretty nice, too, Marian,” Uncle Dave said seriously. “Our house always seems to be too full of people.”

A car horn honked impatiently outside the house. Then a car door slammed, and Edna swept regally up the walk. This time no one beat me to the door.

“Hello, chick,” she said in her booming voice. I ducked as she leaned to kiss me.

Gram had disappeared again—fortunately. Sugar was painfully polite when Edna came in. Ruth greeted her coolly, and Uncle Dave shifted nervously in his chair and started pulling thoughtfully at his pipe.

Edna’s frizzy hair stood out fretfully around her coarse red face. Her hat was on crooked, and her makeup was smeared, but she was the only person in the room who seemed at ease. She spoke in a loud voice, as if she were on a stage.

Ruth was looking out the window, her back to the room. Edna pounced on her, as if she had been gone for two hours instead of two months, as if nothing had happened to create an awkward situation between them.

“Why, Ruth dear—what a nice surprise! We hadn’t expected
you for another month—had we, David?” Uncle Dave murmured something, but it didn’t matter because she went right on talking.

“I just dropped in to pick David up—we’re on our way to the Clarks’ cocktail party. Ruthie—I want you to come with us. I’m so proud of our little Wave—and dying to show you off. How long do you have, dear? The maid can move out of your old room—of course you’ll be staying with us while you’re in town.”

“Don’t bother,” Ruth said faintly. “I can stay here—can’t I, Aunt Marian?”

“Well—” Edna shrugged—“if you’d rather—” she walked to the mirror and straightened her hat. The atmosphere was beginning to make her self-conscious.

“Won’t you have a cup of tea, Edna?” Sugar spoke suddenly. “I think that’s what Mom is fixing right now.”

“Oh, no—” and to me Edna’s voice sounded relieved— “We really must be going. Are you coming, David?”

Uncle Dave didn’t answer right away. Then he suddenly looked up and smiled.

“Why don’t you go on ahead, I may get there later—and I may not. I want to visit with Ruthie for a while.”

“Well,” said Edna uncertainly, “I guess I’ll be on my way then. So long, everybody—Ruthie, Marian dear—call me sometime. David, I’ll be home around eight.”

Not till the sound of the car had faded into the distance did Uncle Dave heave a sigh of relief. He looked over at Ruthie, and this time the smile was real.

“Hey, there, sailor—how about having dinner with an elderly gent who’s got an eye for a pretty girl?”

Ruth’s black eyes warmed as she smiled back at him.

“I was always warned about men like you—but I guess I’ll take the chance this time!”

“Don’t go so soon—I hear Mom coming right now with tea.” Sugar looked truly happy, and her voice was sincere.

Ruthie got up and took the tray from Gram, and I passed the cups around as she filled them. The room was peaceful, and really nice. It was just like it had been so many times before—and it made me feel good.

As Uncle Dave and Ruth left the house, we stood in the door and watched them go down the walk. Pop grinned over at Sugar.

“I think that’s pretty nice,” he said.
Gram had been standing beside me. Suddenly she went down the steps and started towards them.

“David—”

Uncle Dave, startled, turned and looked at her.

“David, don’t keep Ruthie out too late—and, stop in to see us when you bring her back!”

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The Silk Triangle

Keith Shillington

Last night you lifted up
Your huge and horned hand
And tore a hole in heaven.
Slipping in your telescope
As one slips a straw in soda,
You cried, “See! Just an infinite there!”
And thinking to have slyly cut my strings,
Jeered, “Dance, Marionette, dance—”
I rose up from out my huddled heap
And lurched a hollow square.
Then I saw your frothed and awkward jaw
And idiot eye
And knew you had forgotten
The heavy-handed Infinite of Love.