The Visit

Nell Bruner*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

"I’m glad you decided to come with me.” As we climbed the uneven stairs, the large woman in front of me turned her head back to speak...
"I'M GLAD you decided to come with me." As we climbed the uneven stairs, the large woman in front of me turned her head back to speak. "I don't like to visit this part of the city alone. That's why I delayed supper to come. It's better to come before it gets really dark."

At the top of the third flight of stairs, we came to a door, dark in the absence of artificial light. The woman knocked twice briskly before the door was opened. She immediately stepped in, beckoning me to follow. "Good evening, Coutine."

The woman who had opened the door smiled, her lips parting to show her single tooth. "Good evening, Madame, will you come in?"

It was apparent that we had arrived during her dinner hour from the smells of potatoes frying and of fifty-franc-a-litre beer.

The man, who had been sitting at the table in the center of the room, quickly pushed his chair back, wiping his mouth with a napkin as he got up.

"Madame, may I present my husband?" Coutine half turned and extended her arm in the direction of the man, who stiffly half bowed, then backed away mumbling in a voice scarcely audible.
“Good evening, Madame, Mademoiselle.” He laid his napkin on the scrubbed tabletop, a full shade lighter than the four legs. The napkin and a few partially served plates surrounded the brown beer-bottle centerpiece.

“And this must be your child.” Madame turned to look at the small boy sitting on the floor. “My, what a fine child he is.”

The child, a boy of about four, got up, brushing off the seat of his pants with the back of his hand. He bowed slowly, greeted us and returned to the scraps of wrapping paper on the floor. Picking up a thick pencil, he drew the fourth leg of the animal he had started.

“Coutine,” Madame lowered her voice. “I am sorry to have to interrupt your dinner, but I am very much in need of help tomorrow. The girl I have, she is just a child, and cannot cope with an elaborate dinner . . .” The two women conversed in low tones.

From the stove came the sounds of boiling water and spattering grease and the smell of scorching potatoes. “Would Madame please excuse me to take care of the things on the stove?”

“Certainly, Coutine.”

Coutine turned quickly, brushing the partially drawn curtain which divided the room in half. Swaying, it revealed the laundry hanging from ropes across the ceiling, and the edge of the toilet. She turned off both burners of the small stove, then took the pot of boiling water and refilled it at the large metal sink between the laundry and stove. The towels beside the sink indicated that it served as sink, washbasin, and washtub. Drying her hands in her apron, she returned to the conversation. “I'm so sorry, Madame. Madame was saying . . .”

“If you would pick up these things at the store, it would save me a trip. Lettuce, Camembert . . .”

Coutine’s husband had remained behind the wooden table. The naked bulb hanging by its cord from the ceiling above the window cast the man’s shadow on the cheap cotton curtains at the window behind him. In the artificial light the mends made an irregular pattern of square shadows.

The boy, crouching on the floor as he drew, started to add a rope-like tail with a ball of fluff on the end. Then he
changed his mind and instead made many long, straight hairs. When he finished, he sat back on his heels to survey his work. He lifted his eyes from the work when he heard himself mentioned.

"And the boy, on such short notice, I cannot leave him with my sister."

Madame raised her voice again. "Oh, you may bring him. If he will be good, he may play in the garden."

Satisfied with his picture, the boy picked it up. He climbed on the bed behind him, wrinkling the worn coverlet and drawing it up to show the trundle bed underneath. Behind the bed the wall was papered with magazine pictures, a bowl of flowers overlapping a wedding scene with white cracks where the glossy, colored pages had been folded and dog-eared. The center portion of the wall was covered with colored pictures and photographs of movie stars and of women pouring OMO into their washing machines. Near the edges of the wall, the pictures were only black and white; in the far corners the covering was news sections and financial pages. The boy held his newest work against the wall next to another of his drawings which had been pasted over the chaotic mixture.

Madame raised her voice once more. "At nine o'clock, then?"

"At nine o'clock, Madame."

"Good night, Coutine. Good night, sir."

"Good night, Madame, Mademoiselle." Coutine and her husband replied in unison as we went out into the unlit hall.