The Visitor

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DORIS and I were sitting on the front steps after supper. Our front yard isn't too big, but it's big enough to set up the little charcoal broiler and cook up a couple of steaks. Doris had done a good job on them that evening and we were sitting in the heat and watching the cars go by. We live on Culver boulevard, the one that feeds in directly to Route Sixty-Six. All the eastbound traffic goes by right in front of us. We like it that way. Because chances are most of the cars are going cross-country and each of us sort of likes to imagine himself in one of them — alone.

Oh, don't get me wrong. We love each other. It's just that we both had given up a lot when we got married. But right then, sitting on the steps, I was fairly content. It's not too hard to be satisfied on a full stomach of steak and a cool-tasting cigarette. We had on our Levi's and Doris was wearing one of her sexy white blouses. Myself, I had on a scivvie shirt.

I saw the guy walking up the road, still about fifty yards away. He had a decent looking suitcase and a slight smile that was visible even at that distance. I looked over at Doris, who was engrossed in watching the smoke from her Pall Mall curl up in the still air. She's a fine-looking woman, with real white skin and bulges in the right places. Her forehead is a little high, but her long dark hair makes up for it. Her eyes are wide set and sort of a dark green color, like grass just before it turns brown in the fall. I nudged her gently and motioned down the highway without actually doing so. We understand each other that way. A glance, a touch, and just about any message is transmitted instantly.

Doris looked at him, too. We waited expectantly. He came closer. He was tall and lanky. Not the weak lankiness that you find in college kids or office workers. But the deceptive slimness that hides sliding steel bands of muscle.
His stride was long and easy, the brown suitcase flowing along in effortless synchronization with his body. The face was as lean as his build; the eyes spoke of empty deserts and mercury arc lamps along a freeway and the ocean at dawn, just as the sun strikes the breakers. His blond hair looked wind-blown although there wasn’t a breeze stirring.

Doris and I saw ourselves in that guy. The kind of people we had been before that strange night in Jacksonville three years ago, when we met on a blind date and . . . but that’s another story.

He was passing by our hedge now. What if he went on without stopping? He had to stop! Couldn’t he feel the desperate mental energy we were sending out? Right in front of us he slowed down. The suitcase went into little gyrations for an instant, angry at having its rhythm disturbed. He stopped then and looked at us from the world’s side of the hedge. At first the eyes had a flat look, the one reserved for Sunday-school teachers and shoe store proprietors. Then he saw the hunger in our faces and smiled warily, showing the big even teeth. He began the rituals.

“Evening,” folks.”

“Evenin,” we said in unison. “Pretty hot out on that road, isn’t it?” I said, half-friendly and half-questioning.

His smile widened. “Pretty hot, mister, you’re right. But I gotta make it to San Bernardino by morning.”

Doris spoke then. It was necessary. The invitation had to be unanimous. “Think a cup of coffee would slow you up any?”

“Maybe, ma’am,” he said with a courteous nod, “maybe not.”

“I don’t think it would,” I said, “lotsa daylight left and a half hour won’t hurt none . . . go get us some cups, honey.” Doris walked through the screen door barefooted. She likes to go barefoot, especially in wet grass. No accounting for tastes, I guess. Our visitor slipped easily through the slit in the hedge. I stood up as he approached. We shook hands. I, of course, spoke first.

“Ron Schlund.”

“Bob Fayer.”
He set the suitcase off to the left. Far enough to be out of the way but near enough to be grabbed at an instant’s notice. We stood, waiting for Doris. The cupboard door slammed faintly, deep in the small house’s interior; then the padding of Doris’s feet across the rug and the screen door opening.

“Doris Schlund.”

“Bob Fayer.” They nodded politely, as is the custom.

Bob and I sat down, he crosslegged on the warm grass and I back on the step. Doris poured the cups from the gray metal pot on the grill one at a time. First to me, then to Bob, then one for herself. She sat next to me on the step.

“Where you headin’, you say?” I asked.

“San Bernardino. Got a ride waitin’ there. Headin’ back East. Figure it’s time to see the relations again.”

Doris and I nodded in understanding. The roaming. The government job on the dam until it is finished. The college for a semester to quench the small but bitter thirst for book knowledge. The three-year hitch in the Army Airborne. But occasionally it is necessary to visit one’s own people. Whether they care or not is unimportant; it must be done.

“Ever in Chicago?” asked Doris. The question was ridiculous, but essential and proper.

“Yes, ma’am, several times.”

“The Gate of Horn, surely you’ve been there.”

“Oh yes. I was there on a night Odetta sang.”

“Really!” Doris closed her eyes. Memories of long ago and far away flooded in. “Oh, it was great. It was always so crowded.”

“Yeah,” I said, “if you had to go to the head, you might as well forget about it!”

“You’re right!” he laughed, “and you drop somethin’ on the floor, might as well leave it. You can’t bend over.”

“Hey,” said Doris, “you must have been in Jacksonville. Do you know that stretch of beach down . . .”

Memories, a person’s most precious possessions. You forget the bad ones, which is as it should be. But you can’t stay too long in one place or the remembrances blur into
nothing. Living in one place, time will pass as quickly as a spring rain, leaving you with nothing but an old body and empty mind. But move, sink in roots and emotions for a time; and then move on before they grow stale. And then they're always there in your mind to remember and enjoy. All of them.

"... So I said to this M.P., 'I don't care if you are from the base Provost Marshall. When you're in Alpha company's area and I'm sergeant-of-the-guard, I do the talkin'!' So this bastard started to go for his gun . . ."

The night setting in unnoticed. The whizzing cars driving by with first parking lights on, and then headlights. The nearly half-full moon sitting overhead, like a distant friend. The hum of tires sounding pleasant in the sultry California night. The sound of the gasoline pumps in the small station on the other side of the tall poplars.

"... She had no sense at all. My other roommates at least had the sense to take precautions, not her. The first time she was out on a date . . ."

The glowing cigarettes. The coffee poured again and yet again. The talk was specific and minutely detailed, the incidents coming to life and bursting forth in brilliant color and emotion in their midst. You will not find talk like this in the Friday evening bridge club. Look for it in the people with a careless gait in their walk or in people who always seem to be looking at the horizon, even in a crowded barroom.

"... I saw the cable starting to go. I hollered and we all waited. Everybody got set to leap; wasn't any time to do anything but set yourself and hope your reflexes were fast enough. Them babies will slice off a leg with no strain at . . ."

Time wore on. The hunger rose again in Doris and me. The hunger we could hold in check but never completely blot out. I felt like packing my bags and jumping in the car. I wanted to go back . . . no, not back. You can never go back. Once it's over, it's over and never returns. But you can look for something new. It's always there, waiting for you, down the highway or over the next range of mountains. It's always there.
“. . . ’Pantaloon in Black’ I think was the name of it. I read it on the bus to San Francisco. It was beautiful. I cried over that, I truly cried. It was like a miracle; when I got there and went to look for a room. . . .”

This was not my wife anymore. She was a friend, perhaps a bed partner for one night, but not my wife. Nor was I her husband. I suddenly knew her no better than the visitor did. After all, how well do two wanderers ever know each other? They want no one intruding on their inner thoughts. They say they do and talk earnestly, “You do understand, don’t you?”. You say yes and may actually think so. But not really, not really and truly.

“Gotta get goin’, folks.” We all stood. “Thank you for the coffee, Doris.” He picked up the suitcase.

“If you’re ever around here again,” I said, “stop by. You’re always welcome.”

“Yes,” agreed Doris earnestly.

“Thank you. I’ll do that.” Just before going through the hedge again, he turned and looked at the house and yard.

“You sure you people belong here?” He realized his error as soon as he spoke, but it was too late. He did the only thing possible. He slid rapidly through the hedge and vanished up the road.

I looked at my friend, Doris. The tears were streaming down freely but her arms hung limply. “Oh Ron, it’s gone. It’s all so gone.” I put my arm hesitantly around her shoulders and gently led her into the house.

It was time to get out the bottle again and relive that night in Jacksonville three years ago.