

The Thanksgiving Visitor

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We waited for the stranger, a distant relation from Denmark, to take a car from the wrong train station because he didn't know the transfer from the city to the country like we did. We waited for him after hearing stories of his past, his less than acceptable houseguest routine, his varying professional endeavors. But we waited for him like it was an honor, which it was, because it was his first Thanksgiving.

When he arrived—taller, younger, more polite, more handsome than we had prepared for—he drank a whiskey sour like the rest of us, a family recipe, the glass held tightly in his hand like the breath in our throats. We had been avoiding ours, nursing ours, because of the early hour; but he finished his like someone who cared. We then emptied ours, embarrassed, like he was the host whose lead we were blessed to follow. We realized this was no longer our home; we relinquished it quickly and gladly because we had no choice.

He had scruff on his face and grease in his hair (some of us didn't shave the next morning in order to follow this new trend, others didn't bathe). He kept his reflective black boots on while the rest of us stared at our sock feet, horrified at our nudity. He played our games, ate our cheese, smiled when we did, asked the right questions. All his questions were the right questions. Though we knew the answers, they were never as beautiful as the questions.

At dinner, which took place midday, we talked about our traditional foods as if they were exciting. We asked if he liked the different sauces. He was familiar with sauces. He told us how to describe them in his tongue. We all tried on his tongue. We asked if he could tell the difference between two varieties of stuffing (some of us laughed at the word, our word). He claimed he was served only one. That was the trick, we said. We smiled our smile at each other. Then he smiled, embarrassed. And we were jealous of his smile. We smiled his smile to ourselves.

What was he thankful for? Whiskey sours, he said. We laughed, but now we were drinking wine so we stopped our mouths stylishly with the thin glasses, the weak barrier. We loved the whiskey sours too, we said, as if it had not been us who had made them. We were thankful for retirement, real estate, the color blue. We were stupid. He asked about our school systems, our professional tracks. We were stupid.

We noticed his leather jacket and began to tug at our own clothes: last year's sweaters, baggy pants that were nice once. His leather jacket (a leather jacket, can we say it enough!) had transitioned effortlessly to the inside world and now we all clamored to suggest a post-meal walk so we could put on our own jackets, for we felt increasingly naked. More layers, how could we not need more layers? We clung to whatever armor we had.

In the distraction of it all we forgot to mention what happened here, on this island. Why perhaps we looked sleep-deprived and excited, ready to brave cold drafty rooms over our isolated beds at night.

There was a fire.

Not in our home but nearby. A tudor home burned to the ground, a body found inside, close to the door, perhaps trying to get out, perhaps devoted—like the captain of a sinking ship—to the helm. Murder or suicide, we all played throughout the holiday. A family member wanting insurance money, a man wanting to get out of a bind. The debate was pointless but it was everything.

We took him to the house.

In the wake of Halloween the police tape across the driveway could have been a physical gag to scare children. We mentioned that, for the first time, there was not a single police car on the property. Yesterday there were ten. We bowed under the yellow donotcrosspolicedonotcross-police, tripping over an abandoned newspaper still in its blue plastic skin. We had our cameras for a school project and, next to him, we pretended we knew what we were doing. Through the viewfinder we saw the frame of the house, part of the front still intact, all the windows screaming open with smoky jagged teeth and lies to shout. We counted the ownerless furniture strewn on the lawn by firemen saved for nobody. A large blackened fire extinguisher guarded the empty doorframe. Though open to the sky, any room through the doors and the windows looked dark, and we didn't know what we wanted, to go in or not.

Our eyes leaked tears in the wind. We told him it was the coldest day of the year. He told us he wasn't dressed properly. We told him that we weren't either. We smiled. We were always dressed properly. We suggested we leave.

On our walk out of the trespassed driveway we counted the Boxes of Joe left on the curb by the regiment of officers in quiet, waiting cars who had been devoted to the watch: sixteen. We continued to smell a lingering whisper of smoke all the way back to our home, like the cold had frozen the scent in, like the fire would forever be happening. We smiled a lot because we wanted him to feel safe. But we also wanted him to protect us.

At home we let the sun set in the front room with the piano, which we liked to play alone until we could no longer read the music. This time we let him watch us. He couldn't play, so we were more at ease. We played our best songs and laughed when we made mistakes and told him not to judge us for we hadn't played since last Thanksgiving. He told us it was beautiful—don't stop. We felt beautiful but we stopped.

We talked about movies and we liked all the same ones, the Hitchcocks, the Godards, the old musicals. We picked a new movie to watch, one we had loved and thought he should too. We watched him watch it. He blinked many times and looked down. We were devastated.

We looked at ourselves in the kitchen light, hoping one of us would open another bottle of wine. It was that or bed. He excused himself to the bathroom, which was too close to the kitchen. We heard his steps, placed him on different tiles of the room. He was washing his hands, he was walking to the towels to dry his wet hands. He paused, then walked to the door. He fumbled with both the lock and the handle and then returned himself to us. Things we didn't know: Did he use soap, did he like the wallpaper, did he know we had forgotten to wash the towels before his visit? We asked if he loved his first Thanksgiving. He said it was his favorite one.

We could now go to our rooms.

In bed we thought about tomorrow, how long he'd stay, where he needed to go. We thought about how we would talk about him. We crafted sentences. For the first time we began to document our own lives. We fell asleep note-taking, like schoolchildren.

We woke up to the sound of him showering, to his need for a towel. We gave him one, embarrassed, excited, like this oversight had been planned.

While we drank coffee, he said he wanted to visit the nearby house of a former American president he'd read about, an estate tour. We said we were just thinking the same thing. He said he would need to stop for more coffee along the way. He needed three cups before noon. We said, us too, we understand completely, we're always so tired. We smiled. With him next to us, we hardly needed one.

The road to the mansion welcomed us like we traveled it every day. We flew by trees and cemeteries and shops like we already knew them, like we didn't spend most of our time in the city, with no car, no space. We wanted to show him we, too, had a home somewhere.

Our tour guide rejoiced in the foreign company, over-explaining America (a particular America), making sure those who had traveled from other Americas, Florida, Colorado, Ohio, felt second, third, fourth best. We stood in the back like delinquents, invincible, crawling our hands across molding we were told not even to photograph, wandering into unseen rooms cold with preservation. The president was five eight, the tour guide said. What is five eight, he asked us. We're five eight, we said, showing the length of our body. Look at us. No, no, he said, like we didn't understand. In the second maid's room he said excitedly, 176 centimeters, you're 176 centimeters. We beamed like he saw our entire body and loved it. Later we counted the animal heads together, picked which rooms we'd like to wake up in, read in, which curtains and rugs we hated, which mantle ornament we believed we could pocket.

When we returned to the car we looked at the bag at his feet. I must leave, he said. We protested though we knew he had only packed for a night, though we knew which train he planned to take. We drove back through those welcoming streets, now consoling us as if we approached a funeral. He shook our hands at the station and we all promised to see each other in the future.

Perhaps for his second Thanksgiving, perhaps sooner, perhaps never. We watched him climb the steps to the platform. Then we turned away because we knew he wouldn't want to be treated like a child. We poured what was left of ourselves back into the car, the new open space much larger than the size of the departed. We sighed, like we had all loved him the same way. We smiled like we were strong.

When we returned to our city, with streets beginning to grow Christmas trees propped up in plastic skirts, we thought of him. We breathed in the pine smell and hummed along to holiday jingles as if they were old memories we had with him. We laughed to ourselves, pretending, never judging ourselves for the ache; for how can pain be condemned?

We are back in our alone world: instead of wine and whiskey, we open our beers by the light of the refrigerator; instead of two kinds of stuffing, we consume our noodles from Styrofoam cups bought at midnight on the corner; instead of loving our height, we are just our height.

But we are never really alone are we? Not now, not anymore. When we put our kids to bed, when we develop the photos for our school projects, when we get promoted at our first job, he is there. When we look out onto our gray street, we look out the windows of the memory of our two discovered homes, one burning, one frozen in time. We had a home once. We had a family once. We were an *us* once. Because we shared us with him.

We think about the time he spoke our names in his tongue and then spoke in our tongue to tell us he had spoken of us. Our ears burn, burn for him, speaking of us in his tongue. Speaking of us, so do we speak of him, like he is a story to tell, like he is here, the man on the tip of a tongue. Like we could ever forget. ♦

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