

*Visitation*

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by

**Dick Croy**

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Well-caffeinated, ingrained with my usual breakfast of the fruit-laden granola which is a Metaphysically Meatless Messhall specialty, I emerge, today's partially perused paper in hand, onto the boardwalk. It's the beginning of what promises to be a beautiful spring day. The northern half of Santa Monica Bay, embraced in curvilinear marriage by the coastal mountains which share its name, is the pellucid blue of a sunny smogless morning, and the lavender-hued Santa Monicas stand out in sharp granitic detail in their landward, sheltering arc from Pt. Dume to Topanga Canyon. An uncommon clarity (both atmospherically and, in the observer, emotionally) enhances the panorama's familiar kinesthetic kinship to an architectural vault, drawing the eyes and awareness not up but inward, into the heart of the land.

I stand there, taking it all in with a great lungful of blessedly crisp fresh air, hearing behind me the action and exclamations of the paddle ball courts, and resolve to channel all this cafe-aucularity into a memorable day for both me and my 4-year-old daughter Miranda, who awaits my visit just up the coast in Oxnard. That's an assumption actually; her mother may not even have reminded her I'm coming. However, as I've been making the trip most weekends ever since they moved there, three years ago, she hardly needs to be told.

...But does it necessarily follow that she's looking forward to my arrival? Slapping Southern California's version of the *Times* against the side of my leg, I picture Miranda superimposed over this cadenced inner dialogue during my brisk walk up the boardwalk — which, this being L.A. (Venice to be more precise), has never been made of boards; the term is a corruption of Broadwalk, the promenade's former name.

On my left, just past the producing oil well disguised as a lighthouse and beyond the retreating shadow of the Sidewalk Cafe, an informal Tai Chi class is in session on the still-wet grass. Two elderly women in loose-fitting clothes, a humorless-looking man in his late 20s wearing the *gi* of the martial arts, and a smattering of younger beach people in shorts and halter tops enact a slo-mo tableau, a hieroglyphic pantomime punched up by the morning sun. The long straight hair of the hippies lends grace to their mildly contorted postures, as if in this group performance it signifies water falling over an assemblage of jagged rocks. Breakfasters at the cafe, behind their newspapers, sunglasses and mugs of steaming coffee — far inferior to that served by the "Meatwess", as Miranda calls it — are oblivious to the familiar scene.

The short drive up the coast will be even more beautiful than usual today. I ought to take Miranda to the beach this afternoon, the bird sanctuary where Rich — my ex's second husband — lets his German short-hair run. He'll probably go with us; the two of us get along great together. It's good for Miranda to do things with both her fathers, Daddy Rich and Daddy Bob, occasionally.

Rich has a daughter, Stacy, of his own, a cute redhead whose restless adolescent energy can't quite conceal the pain that has apparently accompanied her through childhood like the silent, evasive friend who plays such a prominent role in your child's life for awhile without ever

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connecting with yours. Miranda loves Stacy and the sudden acquisition of a stepsister who has entered her life like someone from a foreign country, more exotic even than Flora, the live-in Mexican teenager my ex-wife located in the extraordinary two weeks when she found a job, a house and a green-cardless au pair after the final separation which led leisurely but inevitably to our divorce. Miranda was nearly two then, already seasoned by one major change in her young life after another; for her Flora came with the house and her father's renewed absence. She was three when her mother met Rich, and Stacy came to live with them a few months later.

Stacy is so hip and wild and grown up in Miranda's adoring eyes, living at a pace that to her seems much faster, though in fact it's somnambulist, compared to Rich and Alison. Either way it's in a rebellious counterpoint representing for Miranda a sort of bridge or causeway, a transition zone, between her world and theirs. Though Stacy is three times her age Miranda perceived at once that they are allies as well as friends in a middle ground between childhood and the Forbidden City where adults make all the rules kids must blindly obey.

Miranda quickly learned that popular music is both language and the very medium in which Stacy lives, a not so secret but exclusive world with passwords and incantations you sing to open hidden doors, lower drawbridges and gain entrance to a shared experience that is bigger and more grand than Miranda's play world and far more exciting than the hierarchic stultified habitat of adults.

"Band on the run!" croons Miranda, donning the wings of Paul McCartney's post-Beatles band, impossibly large adorable brown eyes directed toward her inner world but now focused on the distant horizon revealed by her new elevation. I smile to see (and hear) her surveying this new realm and have come to know the bittersweet experience of watching her climb into Rich's lap for the love she gets on all those days of the week when I'm in L.A. editing film. Creating the splendid career I dream of.

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In the kiosk just ahead a group of winos, most of whom I know by sight, bluster and argue with one another on the boardwalk amidst the reek of urine.

"I never said that!" growls the lone woman among them. "Cocksucker's either lyin' or hearin' things again."

"You sure as hell did say it," mumbles a man hoarding a brown paper bag on the bench across from her.

One of the two younger beachbums, neither of whom looks older than twenty-two or -three, tries to restore peace. "You just heard her wrong, Scotty."

"She ain't gonna steal yer fuckin' pint," adds the other, slouched against one of the green wooden columns supporting the kiosk's shingled roof.

"If you shared it you wouldn't have to worry 'bout gettin' it stole."

I've walked past them by now and steal a look behind me to see how the man with the bottle is holding out against this diversionary assault by youth on the material possessions of their elders.

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“Gimme a swaller a that and I’ll make damn sure she don’t get none!”

Both dissolute twenty-somethings have risen stiffly and unsurely to their feet but Scotty warns them away. I’m tempted to stop and see how it all turns out but not much. Once before I saw Scotty — though I didn’t know his name then, we’ve never been introduced — throw his bottle, bag and all, to the ground hard enough to smash it, rather than letting it be taken away from him. My guess is he’ll do it again.

I turn around and keep walking, my ears attuned to the sound of breaking glass, but all I hear are Scotty’s drunken protests until the drums of the conga players drown them out. The kiosk at the foot of Breeze Avenue, the Venice “walk street” on which I share the second floor of a large frame house half a block from the beach, is where the drummers have hung out as long as I’ve lived here. All last summer and into the fall the beat went on — *De-de-dut-de-DAH, de-de-dut-de-DAH* — from 9 in the morning til well past dusk. Drumming season began again just a couple of weeks ago.

I’ve come to associate this resonant, repetitive rhythm as the bass line for Venice beach life nearly as much as the sound of the surf — and, later, the roar of jets taking off from LAX’s north runway — came with living next to the ocean in Playa del Rey. The drummers aren’t just members of the community; their drumming is in some way part of its infrastructure, as tangible an asset as streets and sidewalks. Like electricity it provides a current, a carrier wave whose modulations infuse activity on the boardwalk with a subtle power and animation.

I feel it now, overriding the uninspired slap...slap...slap of the newspaper against my thigh with an aliveness and music that awakens a few sluggish neurons the coffee failed to rouse, quickening my step and awareness, elevating my pulse. Caffeine for the soul, brotah!

I don’t know any of these particular half dozen or so black dudes personally, although I notice that Raymond’s hangin’ out with them this morning. We’ve never spoken to each other but I think he knows who I am. He’s given me a smile once or twice that seems full of sly, though not mean-spirited, recognition. I smile ruefully to myself, recalling all too easily the night Dianna told me a lot more about Raymond and herself than I had any interest in hearing. No, that’s not true — I *had* to hear it, the same way one has to gawk at a grizzly accident. I just didn’t *want* to hear.

“You have no room to complain,” she’d told me defiantly. “I get to see you one or two nights a week now if I’m lucky. I don’t tell you how to behave with Alison now that you’re living with her again, and I don’t expect you to tell me how to live my life when your marriage keeps you away.”

Though I can see her point, the consequences are still hard to take.

When Alison and I first separated and she took Miranda back to the Midwest to live with her parents, her voice and manner growing increasingly brittle in our long-distance telephone calls, it seemed to me less and less likely that we’d ever get back together again. With Dianna in the picture, that would have been all right with me if it was what my wife really wanted — with one immeasurable exception: my relationship with Miranda, which had been interrupted after just four months. I could still feel the way she used to relax in my arms after she and her mother had had a little too much of each other by the end of the day. The warmth which overflowed my heart then was the most profound purpose in my experience for being alive. Alison and I agreed in retrospect that Miranda, though she came into the world unplanned and almost two years later, was the real reason we’d gotten married.

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So when my father helped engineer a surprising reconciliation during a Christmas homecoming, four months after Alison had left me, I didn't even consider telling her about Dianna. She'd never have come back to the West Coast; I'd have lost my daughter for good. And Dianna had understood, continuing to share my love as passionately as ever. But though she'd tried to accept the situation, Alison's return in the spring drove Dianna back to her own roots in the Memphis suburb where she'd been reared a nouveau Southern belle. Her own six-year marriage had fallen victim to our passions and she now felt as adrift as I had begun to experience myself becoming claustrophobically self-entangled in a metastasizing web of lies.

"You're doing what's right for you and your family. Now I have to do what's right for me," she said.

Ah, life! Is that what the drums are talking about now? How to go with it, flow with it...see all the excruciating humor in a lifetime of incidents so painful to the ego — or is that only what I'm hearing?

Just beyond the conga kiosk are the two sets of swings where I've brought my daughter so many times. Before turning up the sidewalk to my apartment, I stand there a moment seeing not only Miranda with her short blonde hair and little red corduroy pants in one of the baby swings but myself as well, pumping high over the sand while Miranda plays with another child nearby. Cut off from my own routine — let out for recess if I can let loose of myself — the giddy rise and fall, rising and falling of that horizon of blue water an excellent childhood analogue for life's ups and downs. The experiences we relive when we bring children into the world. The lessons we learn and relearn from them, the things they open us to.

At this time in our life together Miranda has stopped coming to see me. Instead of alternating our weekends between Oxnard and Venice, she wants our visits to be at her house exclusively. Not realizing at first — or choosing not to see — that it wasn't me but my spare bachelor pad on the beach or our weekends in L.A. she was rejecting, I was hurt and angry when she took this desperate stand. She started crying one Saturday as we were about to get in the car to drive to my place, and the more I tried to persuade, then bully her into going with me, the harder Miranda cried.

"What's wrong with her?" I demanded of my soon-to-be ex-wife, as if she were somehow to blame.

Understanding where this unreasonable attitude was coming from, Alison ignored the insolence in my tone of voice. "I don't know," she said, as baffled as I. "She's been looking forward to going with you all morning. At least I thought she was." Though she wasn't old enough to tell us why she'd changed her mind or decided to follow her own wishes rather than mine, Miranda was making it all too clear how strongly she felt about the issue.

"I think you'd better stay here don't you?" Alison suggested tactfully, and by now I'd come to the same conclusion, no matter the disruption to whatever weekend plans I'd had for the two of us. I've tried ever since then to determine what prompted Miranda's sudden disenchantment with our visitation arrangement. Was it the time I spanked her for trying to be helpful, when she spilled a half gallon of milk on the floor of my apartment after I'd told her not to try lifting it? The time I rode home with her on the back of my bike in her infant seat, disgusted with her for some probably minor infraction, and refused to turn around or answer her as she kept wailing, "Dad-dy!"?

Or maybe my regrettable lapse in common sense when I took her out on the breakwater near my neighborhood to look for crabs. We ventured out partway on the long rock jetty together

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until I told her to wait while I located our quarry and came back for her. She said she would, but when I turned around just a couple of minutes later she had disappeared, and a woman on the beach was gesturing frantically, forefinger pointing down. Miranda had apparently fallen through the rocks.

As I ran to her, to where she'd been, with a cold sinking feeling where my heart had gone into free-fall, I imagined Miranda wedged between rocks where I couldn't get to her, face submerged in the hiss and suck of the surf. At first it appeared my worst fears had been realized: all that was visible were the tiny soles of her tennies. But when I stooped to lift her, trying to be careful to keep her head from banging against the rocks or her face from being scraped by their sharp edges, she came right up with nary a scratch and, amazingly, no tears.

Who knows? I'm not even sure any more whether these incidents occurred before or after she resumed spending weekends with Dianna and me again — with me alone after Dianna and I finally went our separate ways. Unsurprisingly, Miranda doesn't even remember the first two experiences, and recalls her fall through the rocks as resulting from her failure to follow my instructions rather than my irresponsibly putting her in harm's way. The past we've shared isn't really a common past at all.

Ben Feinstein, my short bald cerebral-looking next-door neighbor is hunkered down in his fenced-in patio, tending his beloved plants as I approach.

“Beautiful morning!” I enthuse when he glances up.

He grins. “Spring's finally here.”

I've been in Southern California almost ten years now, and it's taken me just about that long to appreciate the change in seasons here after growing up in the Midwest. But the very subtlety of the transitions makes them all the more worth savoring for seasoned Los Angelenos.

“Is Elizabeth here this weekend?” I ask Ben of his 10-year-old daughter.

“Don't know yet,” he says, grimacing. “Her mother's got a burr up her butt about something, as usual. I hope so, we haven't seen her for a month.”

“Well, good luck. Your roses look great!”

The pride of the artist blooms across Ben's face, and he ogles them for probably the hundredth time this morning, this time through my eyes. “Thanks....Lauren and I are having some friends over this evening, by the way. Can you join us, or are you going to Oxnard?”

“Oxnard — thanks though; I'm sure it'll be a good time.”

“Should be. You have one too.” He dives back into his almost indecently sensual pruning before I've even turned away. If he weren't so straight-laced I'm sure I'd overhear Ben moaning as I turn in at my gate. What those roses and succulents of his could tell Cleve Backster, the lie detector expert who first wired plants for their emotional response!

My upstairs apartment is especially bright and airy this morning with the sun, free of its customary filter of smog, streaming in through dusty fronds of the two palm trees in front and the open, uncurtained windows that make up nearly the whole front wall of my living room. If that's the right word for a room in which I do so little: virtually no entertaining and very little reading, since there are neither lamps nor any furniture to speak of — just a corner of the hardwood floor

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beneath the windows on which I've laid foam covered with a couple of quilts for lounging and, rarely, watching TV.

In fact, other than working, sleeping and the necessities of health and hygiene, there's little I do in my apartment these days. Most of my time when I'm not pushing film through the clattering old Moviola that takes up half my bedroom is spent out on the beach and the boardwalk or in one of the local cafes over coffee and a tablet gradually filling up with all kinds of gibberish that no one but me can read. And with Dianna now gone for good my weekends belong exclusively to Miranda.

Until her boycott, Miranda had always seemed to accept the barrenness of my pad as just the way Daddy Bob lives. She got a big kick out of discovering my socks and underwear in a cupboard in the kitchen, and I didn't spoil her amusement by pointing out that this is the only storage space I have, given the furnishings that came with the apartment.

We've had some good times here together though — or were they a lot better for me than for her? I remember one night last year in particular, the subject of a poem I wrote about my daughter:

If God, the universe, is yes  
all divisions, every cell wall's  
a no — that the integrity  
of God's plenteous parts  
be maintained.  
All no's together then  
make yes  
and the more, the stronger  
the no's  
the greater the yes.

We conscious beings  
must balance our no  
with the yes of our source  
the source of our destruction.  
When we step across God's threshold  
we may finally shout YES without restraint  
until that glorious word  
is what we become.  
But as children  
we must each begin to learn  
the unique depth and strength  
of our no.

The stillness in my apartment this Saturday night  
as I read in one room and my three-year-old daughter  
sleeps in the next  
becomes the space between the lines on the page.  
I put the book down and read the room  
filled with her sleep  
her deep childish breaths  
a metrical punctuation.

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I see our day together and it is seamless  
and perfect, all its irritations  
the brilliant points of an inner  
silently whirling diamond.

*“nnNo!”*

My ears.  
The drums distended into cones  
like seashells  
from which emerge antennae.  
The vehemence in the word!  
What dream has prompted  
this bitter denunciation of life’s plan?  
My ear-cones penetrate the wall between our rooms  
hover over her open mouth  
her now peacefully rising and falling breast.

Reassured, I withdraw  
book still dangling from my hand  
in my own breast a rising excitement.  
My daughter has said no to life.  
In fear, yes — but to articulate that fear  
from the depths of dream  
to call it out into these bare rooms  
where I her father am but an onlooker...  
isn’t this the essence  
of human consciousness?  
To confront that which is dark, menacing  
terrible in human nature  
and to challenge it  
deny its supremacy?

In sleep  
my child has faced the demons  
which her mother and father  
our parents, the human race  
have led to her door.  
And though her voice was tremulous with fear  
it spoke for her, for me  
for all of us.

She said — I heard this in her voice  
she said, “No, I will not have this!”  
She said defiantly  
“I am here to live!”

Within the hour I’ve thrown a change of clothes and toiletries into my overnight bag and am driving through the I-10 underpass beneath the streets of Santa Monica to the Pacific Coast Highway. Though emerging into the same bright sunshine, now that I’m on the road, with the ocean and coastline right beside me, the day seems more full of promise than ever. Traffic’s already getting heavy but still moving at the speed limit and faster as I head north. The radio’s on loud, a Saturday morning program of avant pop music on Santa Monica College’s KCRW. I stop at the liquor store in Malibu to buy the pair of six-packs I usually bring along for Alison, Rich and myself, then settle in for the drive.

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Dianna's been on my mind off and on all morning and I wonder idly how she's doing now. The last time we talked she was living with an ironworker and sculptor somewhere way out in the Valley. She invited me to come visit them some weekend — meet Dave, have a few beers and resume the friendship that got bent out of shape when we stopped being lovers. I wasn't quite ready for this at first, but the idea has become more appealing over time.

The fact that this is the woman I broke up my marriage for is the source of both emotions: the initial reluctance, revulsion even, to see her with a new man; and the gradually mutating love in which the gaping cavity where passion used to reside is being filled in by the remembrance of Dianna's big heart and exquisite sensitivity. Also, what's the new guy like? What are they like together?

Of course Miranda wasn't aware at the time that my love for Dianna was responsible for the divorce between her parents. It *wasn't* entirely responsible; when Alison and I first separated the only thing going on between Dianna and me was friendship and a mutual attraction. But with Alison out of the picture things happened quickly. She says it was my deception, after she and Miranda had returned and I was living with them while secretly seeing Dianna, that made her decide to move out for good. After the whirlwind two weeks in which she found a job and house in a new city and her Mexican housekeeper — with her mother flying out to help during the transition — Alison and I remained on remarkably good terms while she tried to decide whether or not to seek a divorce. Even her mother treated me decently when I drove up on weekends to be with Miranda.

By the time we agreed to call it quits, things had settled down enough that Alison was comfortable with Miranda's coming to visit me, knowing that Dianna had returned to L.A. and was living with me. And Miranda was as quickly won over by Dianna as I had been. She was still nursing then and the few times she slept with us she would suckle Dianna's ample but milkless breasts upon awakening in the middle of the night.

Miranda missed Dianna for a while after we broke up, but now she hardly speaks of her unless I bring her name up myself. It seems that Dianna has come and gone without leaving much of a trace in Miranda's memory. I'm the one aware of the way a choice I made has affected my daughter's life.

The million-dollar homes clustered in the hills above Malibu — some of them abandoned where the land has slipped, allowing whole hillsides to barge in uninvited

—; the seaside campus of Pepperdine University, sprawled on its immaculate grassy slope like any sun-drunk beachgoer catchin' some rays; the discreetly walled and gated estates overlooking the ocean to my left, below the level of the highway...all are behind me now as the terrain opens up ahead, just north of the surfers at Paradise Cove, to present as beautiful a view as there is anywhere in California. Here the rugged slopes and escarpments of the Santa Monicas are fronted by an Alpine-like vista of green highlands in whose every cranny and indentation are nestled homes and whole communities as far as the eye can see. The spacious fan-shaped panorama — narrow at the highway, spreading wide in ascent — is always green even in the driest months of the year; my eyes greedily drink it in every time I make the drive.

The highway, which until now has run due west all the way from Pacific Palisades, turns northerly, and after Zuma Beach the landscape, riotous with wildflowers on the landward side, becomes too rugged in most places for all but the most determined California builder to carve into homesites. Where permanent residences on foundations are all but absent, campers and

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motorhomes are in abundance, lined up along the beach in Trancas. Paralleling them just beyond the reach of the surf, their owners' fishing poles, many unattended, all stand at the same jaunty angle in the sand. I drive lost in thought but seeing as much as I can comprehend until approaching Mugu Rock, an outcrop of granite jutting into the ocean, where cars are usually parked, with people clambering over its vaguely cone-shaped surface.

"Look, Daddy, Goo Wock!"

Why does this memory of Miranda move me so? Is it because of the way the sighting prompted a burst of conscious recognition (much like the eruption of the rock itself above the ocean's surface) from beneath the cloud cover of the infant mind — and I was there to share the moment with her? Is this so precious because, as an absentee father, of the multitude of similar everyday epiphanies I've missed?

My eyes actually well up at the mentally hoarded sound of Miranda's gleeful childish voice. And in mulling over the reason for this as I drive on into the military and agricultural outskirts of Oxnard, I recall another rare moment of tears during a weekend Dianna and I spent together at Big Bear, a little mountain community just east of L.A. I don't remember whether it was before my wife and daughter returned from the Midwest or after they moved up here some six months later.

In a moment of clarity and self-pity within an otherwise effective cloud cover of my own, a sudden glimpse into the sorrow brought about by my self-centered pursuit of the Great Love of My Life — sorrow in a number of lives but most particularly my daughter's and my own — made me burst into tears in the middle of a romantic picnic Dianna and I had been enjoying in the mountains. Usually so solicitous and encouraging of any release of emotional defenses, Dianna on this occasion seemed almost scornful when I was able to choke out what had come over me. She saw the self-pity but missed perhaps the genuine overwhelming remorse — which has seldom resurfaced since then.

"Are you starting to be sorry this has all happened between us?" she asked.

"Not between *us*, of course not," I reassured her. "I'm just sorry it has to involve Miranda."

"You're Miranda's father, no one's going to take her away from you," said Dianna. "Certainly not Alison, she's not a vindictive sort of person. She won't make it difficult for you to see your own daughter."

"If she moves back East, which she's talked about doing, I sure won't be able to see her very often. That isn't the point though; it isn't how *other* people might affect my relationship with Miranda. It's what I've done myself."

I don't remember whether I expressed more than a general feeling of guilt and loss to Dianna, whether I actually accepted the responsibility for making some kind of choice between her and my daughter, as I had between Dianna and my strong, independent wife. But I recognize now that I have ever afterwards had to live by just such a choice — as I tearfully acknowledged to Miranda years later over the first and only joint we've ever shared. She'd never seen me cry before, and her luminous brown eyes grew even wider as the words and sobs came tumbling out.

"Oh, Daddy," she said compassionately, rising from her chair to comfort me. "It's all right — you've been a good father. I know you love me." We hugged and consoled each other as I choked out temporary release from a father's burden of guilt.

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Alison and Miranda rejoined me three months after the Christmas reunion at my parents' home. I'd rented a two-bedroom house for us in the "Tree" section of Manhattan Beach, teeming with young families beneath a lush canopy of deciduous and evergreen foliage and, paradoxically, the shadow of a sprawling Chevron refinery which sucked crude oil from offshore tankers less than a mile from the leaf-green neighborhood. We were reunited "for good" this time, Miranda was probably told, as Alison tried to explain another major move to our bi-coastal daughter.

A few days before their arrival I organized a group of friends to help get the place habitable, and Dianna and I spent the warm windy night in foot-high grass in the fenced-in back yard. I thought we were invisible to neighbors I hadn't met yet but after she and Miranda moved out, some of the friends Alison had made during our six-month sojourn finally came forward to tell her what they'd seen or heard about the work party and its aftermath.

Alison grew a resplendent organic garden that summer. Bougainvillea covered much of the roof and the property's lush landscaping included fuchsia, which I photographed Miranda inspecting with sensitive chubby fingers and an expression of enchantment. Before Alison gave in and hired a service, clotheslines were festooned with Miranda's fluttering diapers, crisply nautical in the nearly constant sea breeze which found its way down over the hills separating our neighborhood from the frenetic action of the beachfront and "stew zoo" a half mile away.

I hiked the eucalyptus-lined streets of those shaded hills regularly with Miranda on my back, talking to her until her occasional chatter ceased and I could feel, and tell by the pointing and smiles of passersby, that her head was lolling from side to side as she slept slumped to one side or the other of her infant seat. I remember one afternoon in particular, standing at the crest of a hill which presented an unforgettable view between trees and houses of the distant ocean: a vivid miraculous blue catching sunlight on its stippled surface and flinging it like confetti into our bedazzled eyes.

"Look, Sweetie, the ocean! Isn't it beautiful?" I turned so Miranda could see and capture this precious facet of life on the tabula rasa of her infant memory, but she said nothing and I could only imagine the expression on her face.

After our walks I took her three or four times to a playground near our house. She had begun walking at my parents' at about seven months; now, more than a year old, she roamed the usually deserted playground in a sort of daze, not fully awake from her rambling nap, not quite sure what to make at first of the unfamiliar shapes of the merry-go-round, swings and slide.

Perhaps of everything she did at this age I loved most to watch my daughter drink juice from her plastic spouted cup. The way she savored it, her pursed little lips pooched out like the petals of a rose to extract the maximum sweetness and flavor from the last drop. Although Miranda would go to sleep in her own room, in the middle of the night she'd often awake crying, and I'd go in and lift her from her crib to sleep between her mother and me. Alison said she occasionally felt a strange, even sinister "presence" in Miranda's room and told me she'd find the closet door she'd left open closed, or vice versa, at times.

I was working for a small ad agency in Silverlake then, almost an hour's commute if I didn't have much traffic to fight. The dual life I was leading was never more exhausting or abhorrent than on those long drives home from work when my mind, freed from the rigors of writing ad copy extolling drilling tools — heavy metal in the oil field — would wrap itself around the enigma of how I was to extricate myself from the lies and deceit that made the world of advertising a saint's monastic existence in comparison. To be scrupulously honest, it wasn't the perpetual guilty *awareness* of my lies so much as the crushing burden of maintaining and sustaining them that I found so agonizing. There had to be some kind of solution, but it never

## Visitation

revealed itself to me — not a feasible one anyway. Only thoughts too terrible to contemplate or to confess playing at the edge of consciousness: the horrifying, bestial images of Hieronymous Bosch projected into my own life, into my own insurmountable problems.

Dianna resolved them for me when she left for Memphis. The truth finally oozed out: the eruption of pus from a festering wound.

The highway has left the coast now to skirt a lagoon and the Navy's Seabee base at Port Hueneme. The terrain has flattened into the rich farmland of California agribusiness, with windbreaks of graceful towering eucalyptus marking off citrus groves and endless fields of strawberries, broccoli, cauliflower and other vegetables under acres and acres of plastic wrap. Then downtown Oxnard: a colorful hybrid of Steinbeckian description and Latino flavor, especially on Sundays when the plain but festive streets are alive with Hispanic families and the young, looking for action.

The sunny little displaced border town is more sedate late this Saturday morning as I find my way to the suburbs which sprawl like connective tissue between Oxnard and Ventura, its more upscale neighbor just up the coast. Turning into the pleasant tree-lined neighborhood where Alison and Rich have recently bought a house, I feel my pulse rise, as if the tribal drumbeat from my own community has carried up the coast to enliven yet another culture. No, I tell myself — *I'm* the carrier, I'm the bringer of the message from a father to his daughter. Does she know I'm coming, is she expecting me — or has Miranda grown tired of waiting, always waiting for me?

When I turn the corner into her street, the first thing to greet my anxious eyes is the sight of my little girl in the front yard, sitting at the curb in her own little rocking chair, waiting for her dad.

**END OF STORY**

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