

A Visitation

Mrs Wilding said she would answer the doorbell herself.

Natalia had better see to the lamb; the lamb *had* to be on before seven. That was vital, she repeated, as she strode to the hall.

For a terrible moment, she thought herself the victim of some monstrous prank: the doorway was empty. Cars passed slowly in the street; the plane trees whispered in the breeze. She felt bitterness rise in her stomach and throat. But then she looked down, thank goodness – for there it was.

Her first vague impulse was to wonder how, on her husband's return from the office, she would describe this caller over their lamb casserole. A sort of child, she supposed: unusual, certainly. Yet its strange appearance seemed somehow to accord, quite naturally, with the equally odd fact of its having arrived, without notice, this April afternoon – so that Mrs Wilding's surprise mingled with something like approval, a nod almost of recognition. *Of course*, her smile seemed to say: *here you are at last*.

Its eyes (if those were, indeed, eyes) remained fixed on her. It did not say a word. *Curious*, she thought. 'But how rude of me, do come in. I'll have Natalia put out some tea.'

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As he opened the door, Mr Wilding felt the usual trepidation, and the usual twinge of shame at having felt it. His wife was already appearing from the front room. 'Darling,' she sang, 'we have a guest!' He looked around rather wildly. 'A guest? Who?'

As his answer shuffled into the hall, he at once had to suppress any sign of surprise at its really quite extraordinary appearance. 'Right, um, yes, of course, pleasure to meet you, absolute pleasure. Ha!' For precisely three seconds his hand remained outstretched and unshaken, before snapping back manically to brush at his lapel. The visitor was already heading up to the drawing room. Mr Wilding felt he ought to have been warned about this. 'Do we know...it?' he whispered, as he put down his briefcase.

'Dear! Be sensible. We only met this afternoon. But do you know, I've come almost to feel that we have met before.' She laughed wonderingly as she, too, turned to the staircase. Her husband loped after her. He indulged his wife's ventures with a mixture of resignation and relief. He supposed that this one had something to do with the animal sanctuary: a sort of adoption scheme, perhaps. He thought he should like a whisky, and wondered if the visitor drank.

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Their guest had no obvious mouth, but would raise and replace its glass according to the rhythm of its hostess's conversation, which flowed ceaselessly on in a clear, sparkling stream. It was ever so attentive, she thought, despite its reservedness. They had had such a marvellous tea. She wondered at the day affording such unexpected respite from the usual monotony of the week; horribly, *horribly* dull, it had been. She sometimes felt that she only truly existed in the minds of those people she talked to at dinner parties. On such occasions she acquired that reality that was otherwise the preserve of characters in novels; she saw herself, as it were, in the third person – or as though on an enormous screen: lavishly, abundantly real.

Left alone in the large square house she seemed hardly to exist at all.

Sometimes she wished she were stupid.

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Mr Wilding sipped his whisky suspiciously. There was something not quite right about the effect this visitor was having on his wife. There now occurred to him all kinds of questions that he had not thought to ask, out in the hall, but it was too late: he was compelled by the occasion to a breezy nonchalance – to well-timed nods and smiles – while the undesirability of the whole situation grew increasingly clear to him. What about this person did his wife find so damn charming? It seemed to him quite unexceptional – conversationally, anyway; its appearance, obviously, was rather unique. Actually, why *did* it look like that?

This, he supposed, was subordinate to the larger question of *what*, exactly, this visitor was; but that had better wait until later. He didn't quite know how to formulate the question politely. Of more immediate concern was how long it planned to stay. It had come for tea, his wife had said, and therefore stayed (he glanced discreetly at his watch) at least four hours already. Surely it wouldn't stay the night. Fear suddenly gripped Mr Wilding. He began to sweat.

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'We stopped for a few days last year,' she was explaining. 'Darling, you loved Sicily, didn't you?' She turned suddenly to her husband. This was her third attempt to engage him in the conversation. He did not look remotely at ease. 'Yes, a wonderful summer,' he began mechanically. 'I mean –' He stopped, gave a short embarrassed laugh. He looked down and watched the ice melt in his glass. Then he mumbled back over to the drinks cabinet.

He was always so cautious around her: she could see him tip-toeing around certain subjects – as he would tip-toe past the bed where she pretended to sleep. His each morning's departure – his 'see you this evening' – had the strained gentleness of one handling a very fragile, very expensive china doll. It made her feel quite odd. She wanted to tell him that it was alright, he could say it, he *should* say it, because she could not, could only summon every day in the tone of her voice that lightness which, moment to moment, kept her up above the world – and him on the tips of his toes. He never did say it. Still, she had only herself to blame, didn't she?

'Yes,' she heard herself saying, 'its a genuine Reynolds. We had it authenticated only last spring – on the basis of that particular shade of brown, I'm told. It's been in my husband's family as long as anyone can remember. I think it's rather a nice one...'

The guest inclined its head, and she suddenly grinned. 'Actually, it's hideous, isn't it?'

Her laugh drew a glance of surprise and alarm from her husband, returning from the cabinet. 'What's the joke?' he asked, and smiled stiffly at the guest, as though at once to accuse and absolve it of telling an unduly amusing anecdote. 'Oh, don't worry,' said his wife, through little aftershocks of laughter. 'You worry far too much, you know. Far, far too much.'

'But let's have supper,' she proclaimed, with a little clap of her hands. 'It's nothing elaborate, I'm afraid; we weren't expecting company, but – oh! it is *such* a pleasure to have you.' And her face lit up again. For it *was* a pleasure. It was, she felt, a kind of miracle. The wine had made her pleasantly warm, and as the three of them went through to the dining room she smiled and hummed a little.

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It really was very warm. Why was it so warm? His wife seemed untroubled – inordinately untroubled, Mr Wilding thought, though her cheeks were rather flushed; he hoped she wasn't

getting excitable. Their guest's state of comfort was harder to gauge. Perhaps he should open a window, just in case.

There was a lull in the conversation, and he noticed that his wife was smiling broadly. Her bright eyes turned from him to the other. 'I'd better make sure Natalia's put in the pudding,' she declared suddenly.

'Wait, darling—'

'I won't be long!' She flung her napkin down beside her plate and swept from the room.

Mr Wilding looked resignedly across the table, and gave a smile he hoped suggested some appropriate mixture of warmth and self-irony. He realised he was grimacing. He averted his eyes and poked at his casserole, assessing it, as the seconds passed, with ever more theatrical displays of interest and approval, while rattling mentally through the things he might say. Somehow none of them seemed suitable. 'It's rather warm in here, isn't it?' The guest said nothing. Several cushions had been placed on its chair so that its head (*such* a odd shape) rose just above the level of the table. 'I don't know if you're interested in wine,' he said hesitantly. 'This one comes from a little chateau in the south-west. We drove by there last September, after —' No, that wouldn't do. 'I must say, it's very good of you to call on my wife. Gives me great peace of mind, to know she has these...' He trailed off. For several silent seconds, his fork remained suspended above his plate. No, it couldn't be done, this was asking too much of him. His chair made an awful sound as he pushed it back. 'I'll just check on my wife I think, make sure everything is... Sorry, I'll just be a moment.'

As he fled onto the landing he nearly collided with her. 'What on earth are you doing?'

'Just, um, checking everything's alright.'

'Darling, I've been gone two minutes. Our poor guest!'

'I have nothing to say to it,' he whispered frantically. 'I mean, does it even have ears?'

'Do be serious!' she hissed. 'And try to make a good impression, especially after that performance with the handshake. I don't know *what* that was all about. You do make yourself look ridiculous sometimes — rushing out like this!'

'I just thought—'

'What did you think? That I'd be slashing my wrists in the bathroom, or something?' She laughed loudly. Mr Wilding winced. 'Darling, please...' he began. But already she had swept past him, already he heard her musical '*So sorry!*'

He followed her, and tried on his grimace again.

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She hoped her husband was enjoying himself as much as she was, though she knew he was not. She half-realised she had not asked him about his day at the office, and half-wondered whether he'd want sex that night. Everything seemed suddenly rather trivial, but not in the usual way: it was all so funny. She wanted to laugh. She knew, somehow, that her guest did too. 'These plates were a wedding present,' she was saying. 'I've always liked the gold rims.' But, she realised, it did not matter what she was saying; whatever she said, her guest would understand what she meant. And that was the important thing: to get one's meaning across — on the edge of a plate or painting, on the surface of a lamb casserole. Her guest's smooth body glistened in the candlelight — with secret knowledge, she imagined.

When she looked over to her husband the contrast was rather startling, like an optical illusion. Stooped a little over his plate, his eyes swivelling nervously between them, he looked like a man taken apart and reassembled — not so neatly as before, with less hair, and with something essential missing, some piece the mechanics had mislaid in their haste. Actually, he seemed rather nervous, chewing on his broccoli like that. How funny, she thought: what a funny man he was,

really, when you noticed him properly. She wondered if he had a nickname at the office: *Baldy*, *Fish-Eyes*, *Old Stick-Insect*.

Limp-dick, she thought, and snorted.

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What was she laughing about? This was a complete stranger, for God's sake. He stole some quick glances through the candlesticks; it was so difficult to know what their guest was thinking. At any rate, he thought, his wife was being rather indiscreet. It occurred to him to wonder what they had discussed over tea. He began to resent that she should talk so effusively to this strangest of strangers, but so rarely was honest with him. When she looked at her guest – and she did little else – there was something in her eyes, something bold and unnerving and almost familiar.

He stabbed at his broccoli aggressively.

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The more she looked at her guest, the more familiar it seemed, and more beautiful. Yes, it was beautiful: she hadn't quite noticed it before. Not the beauty of symmetry, naturally; its proportions were a little confusing. Nor really the beauty of a child, she decided; no, it was something else after all: something terribly pure.

'I'm not sure I told you,' she was saying, 'my husband works in the City. Awfully long hours, you know. I could get up to anything.' She did not look at her husband, but registered a kind of jolt in her peripheral vision. 'It's such a big house, I hardly see Natalia. She did a wonderful job with the casserole, don't you think?' She paused for a moment to swallow. 'Sometimes, in this house, I wonder if anyone would ever find me.' (Mr Wilding made a desperate lunge for the salt cellar.) 'Yes, sometimes I wonder that.'

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No, really, he thought, with mounting alarm: what the hell was going on here? Who was this person, anyway, and what was it doing to his wife? He wanted desperately to be alone with her. Damn the pudding, he thought; what was taking so long? He had to get it out of here. In his mind he began to draw up strategies. 'I'm sorry,' he could say, 'my wife is rather tired. Do you think...' Too direct. A yawn, a slap of the knees? He had no way of knowing what signals it was capable of picking up. It was impossible to read. He tried to meet his wife's eyes; maybe if they got on the same page...

'Do you know,' she broke out, 'I've a splendid idea!' Mr Wilding felt suddenly sick with dread. 'Why don't I ask Natalia to make up the guest room?'

His stomach turned over. 'Dear, I'm not sure...' He froze. The guest, whose only movement throughout the meal had been a mechanical raising and lowering of its fork, now stretched a babyish hand towards the red. Mr Wilding recoiled slightly. His wife let out a gasp. Very slowly, very deliberately, it lifted the bottle from the white cloth, moved it in a flat arc to the table's edge, held it for a second above the floor, and let go. The bottle shattered. Wine began to seep between the floorboards. Mrs Wilding cried out. The guest now raised its gold-rimmed plate; Mr Wilding stretched an impotent hand across the table. Another crash. Mr Wilding's shoes were spattered with flecks of casserole. His wife was trembling. 'Don't worry,' he said firmly, and made to stand.

Only when she threw back her head did he see that she was laughing.

For a moment he was unable to move. The guest was lobbing spoons at the window-pane, and his wife's body was shaking – literally *shaking* – with laughter. *Hysteria*, yes – the word as it

came to him lifted the spell. He sprang from his chair. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I don’t know what this is all about...’ But the guest had already gone through to the drawing room.

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Mrs Wilding had never laughed so hard in all her life.

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‘Look,’ Mr Wilding repeated, as he entered the drawing room. The guest was lurching from wall to wall, pulling books from the shelves and stuffing from the sofas. ‘I think you’ve rather overstayed your welcome.’ It paused in one corner, turned and inclined its head. Mr Wilding had almost reached it when he heard the crash behind him.

She stood in the centre of the room, her arms half-outstretched as though to embrace him. Beneath them, at her feet, was the Reynolds, twisted in its broken frame.

Mr Wilding watched his wife plunge her heel through the canvas.

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When she looked up from the painting she saw that her husband was red-faced, covered in sweat – and yet she could not quite manage a laugh. He was staring at her, and she saw in his eyes the sadness, deep and final, of one who stops swimming and lets himself drown. For a moment each was stilled in the gaze of the other, and she found herself on the brink of something unexpected, something that he felt too. She might almost reach out, might almost say –

Down went the mirror behind him; he turned. ‘Get out,’ he shouted, ‘Get the fuck out!’

It stopped at once; its whole body seemed to sag. It looked around Mr Wilding’s legs – straight at her. The slight tilt of its head conveyed infinite understanding.

‘Wait, don’t–’ she began, but already it was out on the landing, pursued by Mr Wilding. When she reached the stairs they were down in the hall, framed in the open doorway. The darkness beyond was absolute. ‘Wait!’ she screamed. But already the door had closed and it was gone.

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Cautiously, he put an arm around her; then he thought better of it and gave her a little pat on the shoulder instead. ‘Well,’ he said, and was silent for several seconds. ‘Time for bed, I should think.’

‘That was my chance,’ she whispered, and he realised with a surge of panic that she was crying. He began to talk very rapidly. ‘You don’t mean that,’ he said, ‘that wasn’t who you thought it was. It wasn’t a guest, it was an intruder – should never have been invited in, you understand. I don’t know what you were thinking – what *I* was thinking, letting it happen, letting it drag everything back up; it’s no use, it’s done. Forget the painting,’ he said, with a strange military gesture, ‘but forget everything else, too – for us. *This* is our chance, not... that. The present and the future, that’s where life is. That’s why it’s good to keep busy, with your, you know, your projects. The animal sanctuary...’ His hand was shaking. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I do love you. I do care, I...’

‘Please stop,’ she told him, and he did. She seized his hand desperately and squeezed it. They were sitting together on the staircase, as they’d done back then, after each of their marvellous parties, and as they had not done for a year.