

Visitation Hour

by John Woodington

Katy says to me, five years old, “Daddy, when will you and mommy get your divorce?” As if it was any other natural marital acquisition, like a new car, or a new refrigerator. I know where she gets it. She watches too much VH1 for a five-year-old. She sits cross-legged in front of the TV, not turning back to me, knowing that I’m lying on the couch behind her, and that I’ll groggily acknowledge her question like all the others at the next blissful lull in Brett Michaels’ whining monologue.

But I don’t wait for a lull, not for that one. “You’ve been watching this show too much,” I say.

“Have not,” she says as a blonde floozy vomits off screen, the burp of her retching loud enough to unsettle my own stomach.

“Why don’t we watch Disney Channel instead?”

Katy turns back to me, scowling. “Brett Michaels is my boyfriend, daddy.” As if I should’ve known.

“Isn’t he a little old for you?”

She turns back to the screen. “Daddy, he’s not even real, you know.”

I sink farther into the couch cushions. “Neither am I.”

The show cuts to even louder commercials, but Katy has the remote, and doesn’t lower the volume. She doesn’t know that button yet. She looks around. “When’s mommy coming home to watch the show?”

Liz left yesterday, and I haven’t heard from her since.

“Soon,” I say.

“How soon?”

“Any minute now.”

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The divorce is final three months and two days later, just as spring heats into summer, our vacation plans long gone, the prospect of going to Duluth for a long weekend well out of my

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budget, the desire to travel completely evaporated from my body. "Curt," my coworkers say, the male ones, grass widowers themselves, "You're free. Get the hell outta here. Go somewhere to clear your head. You've got no ties now. That's a gift."

But they don't know what they're talking about. They have never been left, never been abandoned. They were the leavers, the abandoners; they wanted to loose the ties that bound them. I enjoyed the ties, miss the ties, need them for fundamental stability, to say nothing of happiness or satisfaction.

I don't tell them this. I reply with noncommittal grunts and wavering head motions and we'll sees.

Though Liz left me, and though she took on another man while we were still married, I am the one that lost everything, material and ethereal. The house, the car, my daughter, my happiness. You will have a visitation hour once every two weeks with your daughter, they say. And they mean it.

It goes this way because she told the judge that I was abusive, that I hurt her, that she ran from the home to save her life. I never once injured her, or hit her, or grabbed her arm in anger. But the judge did not believe me.

And in the clearer moments of the mornings, when I wake up alone, I don't believe me either.

* * *

"Isn't mommy's new house sexy?" Katy says to me, six now, still watching too much VH1. It's not a house, I want to tell her. It's a condominium, moderately furnished with spare furniture donated by various sympathetic friends. The man for whom Liz left me has now left her, and left her with nothing, and she has had to be rescued by those who believe she has fallen upon hard times. She works fifty hours a week at her job, but only gets paid for forty, and that forty doesn't pay for new furniture. Barely pays the rent in a place this close to the Twin Cities, I'm sure. Hard to tell Katy this, though. Hard to tell her that daddy hasn't yet found the money to purchase a bed, and sleeps most nights in the recliner, dosing off

while watching Brett Michaels and the slutty women competing for him, feeling that this is the only daily connection to Katy available, similar to distant lovers simultaneously gazing at the moon.

"It's super sexy," I tell her, and she giggles and combs out the knots she's tied in her naked Malibu Barbie's hair.

Liz breezes into the room in a slinky red dress, her hair straightened, hoisting her huge purse onto her thin shoulder. "It's time to go, Curt," she says.

"It's only been half an hour," I say.

"It's time to go, Curt."

"Okay," I say.

* * *

They're getting to me. It was easy to deny them at first, the grass widowers, with their suggestions of solitary excursions. But the loneliness has become excruciating, an entity unto itself, an ever-present nonroommate in my two room apartment in St. Louis Park. And so I've given in a little, and begun joining them for their weekly Tuesday night poker game. We play Omaha, feeling it sets us apart from the fair-weather followers who've taken up Hold 'Em. As if we needed to be set apart any more than we already are.

"On Sunday I watched the entire final season of Battlestar Galactica on DVD," Tim Geiger says. He's twice divorced, and twice as big as me, which is saying something.

"About time," Keith Hubner says. He sits on my left, and still wears his wedding band on his right hand. He raises the pot. "What'd you do this weekend?" He says this to Tom Ragatta, who sits across from him in a black sweatshirt and blue sweatpants.

Ragatta shrugs, then raises the pot. "Nada."

"That's pretty exciting," Hubner says.

They don't ask me, so I volunteer. "I saw my daughter," I say, and call the raise.

Ragatta huffs. "I'd go see my son, but he lives with my ex-wife."

And everyone but me laughs.

"The jerk!" Hubner says.

And they laugh some more. Then we show our cards.

"Kings," Ragatta says.

"Jacks and threes," Geiger says.

It comes to me. I set my cards face down on the cut up surface of the folding table and push them into the discard pile. "I've got nothing," I say.

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"You should get a six-pack, daddy," Katy says, barely seven years old. "You have to be super buff on the beach." She sits in a permanently-reclined recliner at Liz's apartment, which she gets for a discount by agreeing to help the superintendent with various chores each month.

"When are you going to the beach?" I ask her, sitting on an ottoman in front of her, our hour nearly gone, though I just got here.

"Every day," she says, cocking her head at me, puzzled.

"When we move, we'll go to the beach every day. Duh, dad."

"When are you moving to the beach?"

"Next week, when I'm done with school. Duh."

* * *

"Because I can make more money there," Liz says to me on the phone. "I've already got a job offer waiting."

"That's a lie," I say. "You just want to get away from me."

"I want to give my daughter a better life than what she has now."

"And you think you can do that alone in California?"

"I can do it alone anywhere," Liz says. "California's where I'm going because it's warmer there."

"Cost of living is higher."

"Only in the city."

I shake my head, but realize she can't see it. "That's not true, either."

"True or not, we're going. Friday."

“But what about Katy? When can I see her? She'll be two thousand miles away. Don't you want her to see her father?”

“You can still see her every other Thursday from six to seven.”

* * *

Though she's never been one to bluff, I get a good dose of false hope in my head and go to her Minneapolis apartment the following Thursday for my visitation hour with Katy, six days after they've supposedly fled for the California coast.

The apartment has already been rented out to an old man, late seventies by the look of him when he opens the door to my incessant knocking, his voice quavering as he accosts me for my ruckus.

“I'm trying to nap in here,” he says, his bottom jaw wobbling with each word. “The hell're you doing here? Who are you? I don't buy things from door-to-door salesmen and I don't take kindly to Jehovah's Witnesses.”

I apologize in a terrified daze, then scramble down to the ground floor to the superintendent's office. I open the door without knocking, and find a large man in a tight gray polo shirt and khaki slacks smoking a cigarette in a squeaky metal swivel chair.

“Where's Liz?” I ask him.

“Three C?” he says. “She moved out last Friday.”

“You're kidding me.”

He slowly spins toward me and puffs out a thick blue gout of smoke. “Do I look like a kidder?”

* * *

In my savings account and checking account are three hundred and forty dollars and change. My mother lends me a hundred more, my aunt fifty, my brother another seventy-five, my coworkers (the female ones) another twenty in singles, and I pool it all together and manage one round-trip ticket on Sun Country Airlines, leaving tomorrow, Wednesday, and returning Thursday at 8:47 p.m., a little more than an hour and a half after my court-appointed visitation hour with my only daughter.

I fly out with only a carry-on bag, nothing more than small toiletries and a change of clothes packed. The flight is turbulent and interminable, like I'm flying farther and farther away from Katy, instead of toward her. When I land, I give the pretense that I've missed my flight, and sleep in a chair in the LAX terminal until the gray morning filters in through the windows of the atrium. I spend the day finding the cheapest route to Liz's new apartment—the address of which I obtained indirectly from her lawyer—and at 5:17 p.m. I take a taxi the seventeen minutes to her apartment, pay him with the last of my money, and wait on the street corner for my time to arrive. And then I go to see her.

The building is tall and old and the front door looks like it has been broken many times by vandals and thieves and angry husbands. The hinges are made of thick steel, much thicker than could possibly be necessary. I ring up to Liz's apartment, get her voice on the intercom.

"Hello?" she says.

"Hi," I say.

"Oh my God," she says, and after a long pause the door before me buzzes and unlocks.

When she opens the door of her eighth-floor box of an apartment, Katy squeezes around her legs and rushes to hug me. I only see her hazy blonde outline, and quickly wipe my eyes before she notices. Liz stands still in the doorway. Down the hall, shouting bleeds through the peeling wallpaper, and then there's a hard thump, and the shouting ceases.

"I knew you were moving out here, daddy," Katy says. "What took you so long? Mom said you weren't coming."

"I'm here," I say. "I want to go to the beach."

She gasps. "Me too!"

"Curt," Liz says. She guides Katy back into the apartment, tells her to get her swimsuit. "What're you doing here?"

"I came to see Katy. For my hour."

Liz shakes her head. "You would do that."

"I had to," I say. "I have to."

"How can you afford it?"

"I can't," I say. "After this I can't. I can't even afford dinner before I head back."

"Don't you get it, though? Why you shouldn't be coming out here? Why we're out here in the first place?"

"No," I tell her. "Don't you get why I came?"

* * *

Turns out I can't afford to take Katy to the beach, nor can I afford to get a taxi back to the airport, and since Liz doesn't have a car yet, I have to walk it back to LAX. I miss my flight and have to wait for the next, at 10:58 pm. They don't charge me extra for the flight bump. I don't know what I'd do if they did. Then again, maybe I do. I'd walk it back, back across the desert and the Rockies and the plains and the lakes and finally to my insignificant apartment and my insignificant job, where I'll slave away and save every penny until I can fly out again for a single hour to be with my daughter. In my off-work hours I'll hunt for a job in the Los Angeles area and I'll finally make my way out there permanently, until Liz moves again and takes Katy with her. And then I'll do it all over again.

