

Visitation

by Sturla Grey

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She used to tell a story, saying that before I was born she had visits from me. I wanted to tell her yes, I had come, but the words couldn't come out. She would tell me the story, her own personal folklore, she entertained it as a daydream and I would know already, and I'd recall easily the light, the room, her smell, her speeding and fitful thoughts. I could hear her thoughts before I entered, just like a radio broadcast, listening to them exhausted me a little, yet I was enraptured by her and made it my one intention to be with her soon. You search for an inlet, seek the opportunity, and when it comes you attach yourself to it with all your might and the electric push comes behind you as hard as anything that has any mass in the world of effects, and this is how you become flesh and consciousness together. I did not want to become flesh with anyone else but her as my mother. It's not apparent to me how I came to that certainty.

All the time you know fully how much the journey will hurt, how crushing to love things of flesh and transitory desire, that your skin will break open and pain will envelop you over and over again, the only thing in the place of effects is loss, again and again like a serial story, and yet you must come.

My mother and father had no other purpose in meeting each other than for my opportunity. My father would never know or love me, but my mother's only reason for coming through was to see me on the plane of the visual and champion me. The first time I saw her was in the hobbit house, before she ever considered being a mother. In fact she had already become positive she would not be a mother, she thought herself barren. The house was empty, she was on her knees in the small sunroom, painting the baseboards around the bottom of the stucco wall. I saw the top of her head and listened to

the thoughts racing, tumbling in one on top of another in a constant clatter, this mind was so different from mine, which is slow but thorough, which takes one parcel of thought at a time and allows it to live by itself for moments before it drifts away. My mind can dwell luxuriously in silence without discomfort, in silence I see visions and splinters of color and shapes that enchant me so deeply, her mind can never stop its rush of tight words, yelling and interruptions in on itself. In the first visit I regarded her hands on the paintbrush, long and determined. She did not sense me right then.

I moved through the attached room, which was bigger, had a cold and black fireplace, large windows that were all opened out into the canyon. Mountain light diffused into particles of gold and flowed in the manner of water. In the ten yards this gave her to detect things in the periphery of her vision, I caught her glance. I came into her retina as the slight shadow of a young lady with long hair, walking by the doorway and stepping into the stairwell that lead to the upstairs bedroom. I made contact. I heard the thoughts racing, terribly afraid. "*Ghost, ghost!*" They yelled. Then, a calming "*This is happening again, there are ghosts, this is not new.*" She soothed the temporary fright with the prior visits she'd had throughout her life from the other spirits who had no intention of coming through her. The time was not upon us yet so I left through the bathroom ceiling and was in the lightless realm again.

The next time, I was drawn back with force, I decided not to become visible as there were dogs in the house now, but I was compelled to dwell nonetheless because my father was present. There was a cold crushing rain pelting the hobbit house and it was a black night, the whole house was dark except for flashes from the flame of the fire in the living room. They were having intercourse, and I could hear his thoughts, each time his hand reached another place on her body he was anticipating how he would move inside her, get deeper, he was trying not to orgasm too quickly. His mind

went blank and loud when she sucked on his penis, he left his body too but could not sense me there in the dark.

I was drawn by the safety of darkness in the kitchen where the lights were off. There I touched the electric kettle on the counter used for making hot water and it had a light that came on and off. They noticed, my father came near me and raised the device for her to see. Her mind was suddenly silent with fright. It would not be long.

Days later in the heat of an afternoon my mother was on the kitchen counter, her backside bare, and my father came up to her and went inside of her with his penis and immediately made purchase with an injection of spermatozoa. I liked the dark kitchen and dwelt there, in the moment of fleeting seconds I went inside of her and I began. I heard my father say: "If you weren't pregnant before, you sure as hell are now." And my mother was denying this statement in her mind as idiotic because she was certain she could not become pregnant.

Two days later in the embryo I had become, the drop from the top to the sides of the uterus happened and I was embedded. I swam in her bloodstream. She felt the painful tap and a small amount of blood came out and I heard her think "It's happened."

These events are as clear to me as the pictures passing before me right now. Mother has been gone eight weeks. It was three days until the end of school when they came and took her. I was dressed and ready and she was wearing a bright orange blouse that had paisleys on it, her hair was pulled back and she was speaking harshly, telling me to stand by the door so we could leave, and I was looking through the cut crystal glass of our front door when I saw black forms moving. I was confused and my heart raced suddenly with a doom that made my knees shake so I put my eye up to a flat piece of the glass and peered out.

“Mom, mom, there are a lot of police coming up our front steps.”

I saw her face go pale just after they started pounding on the door and my knees buckled with fear. I felt they would kill us.

“Oh god, oh god!” Mom was saying quietly. She looked around for her cell phone and picked it up, she sent a text out while the pounding on the door went on.

“What should I do?” I was crying now.

“Stand back, I have to open the door.” She said to me with a shaking voice, her hands took me by the shoulders and moved me stiffly to the side. She opened the door.

A Chinese officer shoved the door open as soon as the latch turned.

“Wait a second” she said trying to come across calm. “My child is here. She's a small child, please calm down.”

“Are you Lana Chorley?” the Chinese officer insisted with no inflection of feeling. The officers standing behind him on the threshold looked eager to get in.

“Yes.”

He pulled my mother onto the front stoop and turned her around roughly. Our puppy ran out the door.

“Oh wait, please — can we get the dog she's only a puppy. “ I have nowhere I can run officer, please let me get the dog inside.”

I saw that my mother was shaking so badly her legs were waving like reeds. For a moment my mother and six black uniforms with

guns were swirling in the street as a team trying to catch the puppy. My mother looked up and began to laugh, it was a nervous tittering, but there was delight in her eyes at the crazy spectacle of our small black puppy eluding, probably taunting all these armed police. I had learned already that moments of extreme absurdity were one of her most passionate pleasures in life, this brought her into contact with the divine and her face would get translucent with delight. Police, mother, they all bobbed around helplessly, unable to catch the dog. My face was buried in the corner of the front stoop and I was sobbing. I felt they would kill my mother. I felt this was a time when I would never see her again. Mommy caught the puppy and brought her inside.

“You are under arrest.” The Chinese officer asserted again and turned her around, taking the cuffs from his belt to shackle her.

“I have nowhere to run officer and I won't give you a bad time.” She said, sounding calmer. I couldn't stop sobbing. The intensity of their initial approach had been diluted by the puppy's escapade and the officer relented silently, connecting the handcuffs back to his belt.

The police locked the dog in our house and took us both to the back of a patrol car. They pushed us inside. My mother had her cell phone and started dialing people as we sped toward the police station with the windows open. Our long hair swirled and raised up in the summer wind already hot at eight in the morning. Now, the officers in the front seat seemed to ignore us. My mother reached someone on the phone and told them she was going to jail and I was with her and needed to be collected. My stomach dropped when I heard her say this and my sobbing intensified.

We walked into the rear doors of the police station just like we were walking into a grocery store. The cops indicated a stout woman with a salon-curled hairdo, brunette, ugly and squat in the face and with a lot of lipstick, wearing regular clothes and a gun.

The woman gave me a tattered rag doll and directed me into a tiny white office with messed up coloring books while she stood outside and spoke with my mother. I heard my mother say someone was coming to get me. My mother said she had the bail money. I didn't care about the rag doll, I stared at my mother's face and tore words from her moving lips with my eyes to find out what was going to happen to us now.

"You promised you would give me a booking appointment if you decided to arrest me." My mother said to the lady with the gun.

"I called your attorney and he never returned my call." She answered and I knew she was lying. My mother watched her walk away and turned to see me in the plastic chair, staring back at her in despair. "I love you." Mommy said. My sobbing grew more desperate and she came to hold me.

Connie appeared. The mother of my friend Bella. She was tall and cool and simply asked me to come with her, my mother was still standing there, the lady officer in regular clothes had walked off somewhere. My mother grabbed me and held me too tight.

"This won't take long Francine I will be with you tonight. Please don't worry."

Connie wasn't speaking to my mother. Her anger rose in the air, palpable choking fumes. We walked out together.

In the weeks that have passed I've been allowed to speak to my mother three times. She gets angry with me because I have trouble going back and forth on the phone. The way I miss her hurts so much it takes away my words even more. She will start to yell "Are you there!? Do you know how long it took for me to be able to make this call?! Francine?!"

Her voice trembles with terror and exhaustion. I taste it coming over the wire. I unravel with sadness and my heart is a cauldron of acid in my body, it takes my words away. It takes my words away, there is nothing I can do. Connie tears the phone meanly out of my hand. I begin to cry.

In the days and weeks we've been apart I have ceased to live as me. It feels very much like the no-body realm except there is pain here, there is loss, and my heart is entirely pulverized with longing for my mother. I move through days with Connie and the father, Mark, giving me the things needed to keep me alive, some food, occasionally a bath, but it's done with a thick resentment that makes me feel beaten down. They never smile. They don't talk to me of what is going to happen to my mother. I am sure I will never see her again. My despair swallows me whole.

Bella used to be my best friend, and now she beats me and tears at my arms with nasty fingernail pinches whenever Connie is not looking. My arms are torn and bruised from her constant abuse but she tells Connie I do it to myself. I cry, and Bella wants that, so she gets what she wants. My eyes are raw from tears, if they stop for an hour my eyes grow painfully dry until I can cry again. It is summer and there is no school and no escape from these people who are meant to be caring for me. Bella is my age, white skin, tan freckles across her nose and cheeks, dark brown hair cut at her shoulders and blunt, bangs, soft, rounder than me, fatter, her bottom is wide. She likes to sing and tells me she is going to be Katy Perry when she grows up. I listen to her singing. She does have a voice and she does pose, like a pop star, so I think of her as getting famous one day, of seeing her on TV. Their home is a two-story townhouse on the beach. It's dark grey with stone floors, truly a one bedroom, but Bella's sleeping area is in a den off the master bedroom that looks out onto the constant parade of homeless, jugglers, dealers, tourists, ambling past day and night. This is where I sleep.

One day Connie comes in and says we are taking a trip to Idaho. I hear her speaking meanly of my mother to Mark. She calls her a loser, says mother sent all of our money to pay for my plane ticket and my medicine. Mark is a man my mother knew from AA. Bella and I would go to the beach together and attend each other's birthdays before this all happened. Mark would come and drop Bella at our house for a sleepover on Friday night and not come back for her for three days. Bella was fun then, she was my very best friend even though we didn't go to school together. Now I run from her like she is a bad monster lumbering after me, ready to pinch. Mark has seen her do it, says nothing, does nothing.

I am standing there listening to them talk like I don't exist. Connie's cell phone rings and she picks it up to look at the screen. "It's your mother." She tells me. Then to Mark "I am not in the mood to talk to the bitch." I listen as the phone rings two more times. I want to call out that I would like to talk to my mother. I can't remember the last time I heard her voice. I am surprised to know she is still alive. The ringing of the phone stops as Connie walks out of the room. In this moment I see my mother putting down the unanswered phone and falling into a deep, dark, bottomless pit and dying.

Before we go to Idaho, Mark finds out I have lice. They have not been washing my hair. I do not know what lice is. He tells me it's bugs, parasites. I want to know where they came from. He asks me "Does it matter?"

When it gets very, very bad I pull out of my body and think only of my mother's arms. There is no softness or warmth like the place in her arms, so I go there, with Connie yanking my hand and dragging me down from her SUV into the special parlor where they rid little girls of nits. Connie wants to hurt me as much as she can. I am not there anymore though, I am safe in my mother's arms. I smell her salty breath and soap-scented hair. There is nothing that can hurt me there. She would kill anyone who came to me there, in her

arms. The smell of the chemicals on my head brings more water to my eyes. The skin on my head is burning like mad. I am immune to the tearing of the tiny comb, the glowering of Connie, standing there, arms crossed, telling the hairdresser how stupid I am, that I can hardly talk. Her face is a cold white mask with small steel blue eyes I imagine follow me where ever I move. I imagine her cell phone ringing then, of hearing my mother's voice on the other end, just so I can know that she really is still alive.

My mother once drove us all the way to Berkeley to see a specialist for my disorder. Mother told me he was the most important specialist for my problem, a homeopath, which made me think for a minute about homosexual, but the two were not connected. When we got there we sat in his room with large crystals and chimes and candles and a dancing Shiva. My mother and the specialist talked for hours until he turned to speak with me. Then he told my mother I was still left behind in the ether, that he felt I had not come fully into the physical realm and this was the source of my loss of speech, my moving around like an octopus in the air with my limbs, my unspecific gaze. So he gave me ether, which I was to take every day. We stopped taking it soon as it drove me wild with hyperactivity and auditory dreams. I do believe I am in the ether. I think I breathe ether.

In Idaho with Connie and Bella there is a condominium complex with other vacationers. It's big and tan and all the rooms have shag carpet. The balcony off the living room looks out on a plain that moves flatly toward an enormous mountain range cracking the sky with its crags and peaks. My mother has died. I am certain she no longer exists. Inside of me is vacant and painful with hardness. My arms are black with pinch marks. I am wondering what they did with our puppy. I think of when we first got the puppy and she was six weeks old, tiny enough to hold in one hand. My mother got out the baby sling she used to carry me in when I was born and took the puppy around in it, with her little face peeking out. My mother did

the dishes that way and drove me to school. She let me pat the puppy's head and let me name her. Pearl.

Bella wants to watch TV. It's always on and it hurts my ears. The constant droning of a laugh track, bad music, hours on end of advertisements, I have nothing to read. The boredom of it erodes me into ash and I lay with my eyes closed behind the sofa so I don't have to watch it. For hours Bella finally ignores me. Mother had me enrolled in summer school before she went away but Connie wouldn't let me go because she didn't want to drive me. It was a puppet making class, and I was excited to go, it cost my mother nine hundred dollars to get the class. When things were valuable like that my mother would state the ticket price so I would know, so I would appreciate the value of the thing. I saw the brochure, you had all the things you needed to make a fantastic art project and the teacher had a happy smile on her face and wore pretty hanging earrings, the room was white with a lot of colorful art work on the walls. My speech therapist was also gone. Uncle Dan was supposed to bring my mother's money to the speech therapist so I could still go but he never brought the money. He never came to see me again when my mother had gone away.

My mother took me to see the speech therapist twice every week for an hour each time. The office had big picture windows where the sun streamed in and there were big kingly trees outside that would mesmerize me. Neera, the therapist, would coax my attention back and use all kinds of warmth and facial affect to entice me to talk. Her goal was to get me to go past three turns in a conversation. She was soft and kind to me but I was too exhausted to go past three turns and the things she wanted to talk about were not of interest to me. To have that now, her toys and games, her face, a person that both me and my mother saw together, I want this so much but Connie will not take me. In my dreams at night Neera is there in a room with my mother and I will go out the door with my mother when the appointment is over and go in our car and go home to the

puppy. I see my mother in the kitchen making us dinner, the side of her face and the deepening dark shadows under her eyes, her tiredness draped around her, a lead cloak. There is a warm yellow tungsten light to our kitchen and the smell of her food makes me lift, floated up by warmth, I am safe.

In Idaho they have dead animals' heads nailed up on the walls whenever we go somewhere. Connie takes us to an outdoor ice skating rink in the hot summer sun and there is a murdered deer nailed above the ticket booth that I cannot take my eyes off of. It's been so long since I have heard my mother's voice and I know she has slipped away, they left her in a dungeon and I will never see her again. Bella and I skate with a pair of boys from the condominium next to us. The boys start fighting and one slings the other down on the ice and breaks his arm. Paramedics come. The sun is reflecting up off the ice into my face and my eyes can't stop tightly squinting. Connie comes to pick us up and drive us home. She says "Oh your mother called but you missed it, sorry." I am amazed my mother is still alive. The idea that I was standing at the ice rink watching a boy get his arm broken while my mother could have talked to me rends me down the middle and makes me cry again. Connie says "Oh, Jesus. Really."

At night I am visited, they didn't come the whole time I was away from my room, in my house, the pink room with white trim that my mother made for me, with a big white bed that had an iron angel at the top, until I got to Idaho. I am asleep in the room with Bella and they come, appearing in vapor. The slight one with the long pretty hair and the face whose edges are soft and indiscernible, the boy and his coral colored mist. Delighted, I am smiling inside my sleep with such surprised delight they have found me and we are together again. It's the talk of the realm without light, they always let me see them. Words are not there, nor thoughts. Everything simply is; is known, is touched, is complete. Here is perfection, peace, and the first time in weeks I know that I will see my mother again and live

with her, eat her food again and be safe from attacks and lice in my hair. They let me know this without any words, just light — its quality holds the meaning of everything. My eyes open and I feel my face smiling. I am thinking of the night when my mother is home and she lays me out on my bed and brushes my whole body down with the Wilbarger brush. It kind of hurts but feels good at the same time. She massages my body after that from head to toe. She sings Silent Night, Moondance, I am falling sweetly asleep in the middle of that song. Mother is strong over me.

It was strange from the beginning when Richie came over. He felt like a lurking shadow of a person, he was angry with a sweet, made up smile on his face. It was not hard for me to avoid him and I knew that when he was around he wanted everything from my mother. Once Mark came over to pick up Bella after a play date and when they were gone I heard Richie yelling at my mother in the kitchen. "He wants to fuck you!" Mother is telling him to go home, she's taking me out to go surfing. When Richie started calling the police on my mother she told me, every time, she wanted to me to know what was happening. Her telling me, her warning me it could end up in something terrible, that our lives could be taken away at any time if Richie convinced them she was bad, it didn't dampen the burn of the loss when it did come. Watching her taken away was a shock that sapped blood from my bones, the color from my eyes, knowing people could take something that so much belonged to you, there was a tearing that her preparation did not lessen.

I went in my room and played Animal Jam on my computer when Richie started to tear into her, press down on her, follow her around and demand her acquiescence. Stardoll. The high heels and accessories for pretty dressing. In there you can change your hair color and hairdo, choose clothes from a bottomless wardrobe. When I got bigger I would have a clean white house like that, no shadows in the corners, no laundry needing to be done. Stardolls have perfect little dogs that don't get hair on everything.

In Los Angeles summer is carrying on forever, it will never end. I want to go to my school, that reprieve, when will it come. Mark comes in on a Saturday morning early when I am still asleep and says "We are going to see your mother." We start to get ready and Bella is more excited than me. She is taking great care in choosing an outfit for jail. A sequins vest. She gives me what she wants me to wear. All of my clothes were left behind in the pink house. I obey her, sometimes this makes her stop pinching, when I am wordless and simply do everything she says.

August light, the sky is hard, dry and flat, bleak, beige, standing still, particulate reflects everything from above and below back at itself. The sky is asphalt, like the freeway. Driving lasts forever, a movie and a half in the DVD player, I am bored looking out the window, Bella sings along to every song by Hanna Montana, Mark is talking on his cell phone, yelling something in French. Closer to the county jail the homes have bars on all the windows, abandoned cars on the lawn, a place for the dying.

After driving an infinite time we stand in line an infinite time. There are grandmas with babies on their hips, husbands, wives, lovers. The visitors all look tough and poor. They wear cheap clothes, flowered polyester blouses with snags. Inside the building we get screened through metal detectors, Mark empties his pockets, and an army of beige uniforms with guns process us through the rooms, each one leading a step closer to visitation. At the end of processing we stand in a room with thirty or forty others, there is nowhere to sit, flecked tiles gleam up into my eyes, cinder block, lockers to leave your stuff. A guard calls our number and Bella's eyes light up, she grabs my hand too hard, we are shoved into an elevator with twenty others and go up three floors. When we come out there are two more guards with guns, they point us toward a big steel door, we go inside to a panel of desks all connected with dividers between them and phones, glass windows that look into the other side, which

is inside the jail. We are pushed down to the last cubicle. We are standing there when the prisoners start coming in.

At first I don't recognize mother when she is standing there in front of me, her hair is dark with blonde ends, a royal blue county jail suit that envelops her totally, she is in a balloon of blue twill fabric, and another lady is standing next to her, old, missing teeth in front, long black and grey hair, bigger, wrinkled, black eyes, white skin with freckles.

My mother starts to cry and when her face crumples that's when I see her, I know her crying, she points at me and says:

“That's my girl, Pump. That's my Francine.”

“Oh my God!” the old lady exclaims, “God she is so gorgeous!” She waves at me then and I am horrified, the black holes where her teeth should be are intruding on everything in my mind while I am trying to look at my mother, see all of her.

The old lady steps off to the side to see a man who is there to visit with her next to us. My mother's gaze dials in on me, we are in a bubble together, her face is hard, and sad, searching me.

“Why aren't you wearing any pants?” She asks me, fear in her face.

I look down at my long cold legs that are bare from the hips down.

Bella says “It's a mini dress.”

“It's a tank top!” My mother is livid suddenly, shooting her eyes at Mark. “What's going on here? Why are her arms all pocked and bloody? Where are her clothes?”

Mark and my mother are yelling at each other. My mother has a violence with him that tears him open and he is afraid for a second

then fierce. If they were to get in a fight without the glass between my mother would disjoint him with one punch. The voices are sharp and pierce my eardrums and I go blank looking at the gleaming floor tiles, flecked, with brown and beige. I count them. A guard yells louder in a thunder, "Hey! Shut up or visiting time is over!"

"Francy, Francy!" My mother is yelling to get my attention.

I look up at her, crazed, terrified face -

"I am so sorry about this! I've done this to you. I am so sorry." She is sobbing.

"Uncle Dan has the key to the house, they have to go get you your clothes, your things."

I cannot talk to her. I want to move through the glass and put my hands on her face and make her change back to the mother I had, the bright mother, my blonde-haired mother with soft warm arms. A loud alarm is sounding and I see her lips moving in a hysteria that contorts her face into playdoh, she is so thin, disappearing in her balloon of royal blue. A guard is yelling at everyone that we have to go now and the phone goes dead.

I step back away from the glass and I see my mother's lips saying "Francy! I love you!"

And Mark turns me around and marches me out the door, Bella is stepping on the backs of my shoes, making my heels raw. I hear the door close behind us, the feet shuffling into the elevator. Someone in here sounds happy. I hear a woman's voice bouncing lightly off the walls of the elevator as we go down, her mother is coming home next week, and they will be having a party.

