

The Visit

A Short Story

By

**Charles O. Gauthier
Huntingtown, MD 20639**

She was going to enter through the back door using the only key she had. Not that she wanted to surprise anyone but she hadn't been home in five years. While they knew that she was coming home for the wedding, there really had not been a time to expect her. And she wanted to ease herself back into this almost forgotten part of a reality that seemed almost a million years ago.

So much was different - the long drive down the narrow peninsula was now a four-lane highway punctuated with stoplights. That blew her mind. Last time she was here there were only two stoplights in the middle of Prince Frederick. And the traffic, it was so unreal - two lanes of endless lines of headlights and taillights in both directions.

Yet so much was the same. Solomons was still a meandering sleepy town with boatyards, restaurants, a few shops and the outdoor bars. They were still there, crowded and noisy.

She turned her headlights out as she pulled into the drive behind the house. She really wanted to absorb as much as possible before going into the house that she had grown to love and loath so much when growing up in sleepy Southern Maryland. Home - home was the huge house that sat on the

small knoll overlooking the harbor where now mostly sailboats and power cruisers were moored, replacing the fleet of oyster boats she remembered from her youth. It had been so long since she had come home. Arizona was more than a galaxy away. She took a deep breath, realizing how difficult it was going to be to walk back into this never changing past that she would be going back into.

The lights from inside the house glowed yellow and warm as she remembered, and walking onto the small back porch she could see down the hall to the kitchen. She saw the whole family in the kitchen and it was like a tableau. The lighting was perfect.

Jesus, she thought, I wish I had my camera.

The overhead kitchen light cast the whole view in an almost vintage old-time movie effect. Her father was leaning against the counter, arms crossed, the shock of wild growth white hair going every which way from under the cap he always wore. He appeared more formidable and his face looked more lined, weathered than she remembered. But even from here she could see that his eyes still had their great intensity. God, did she remember having to look into those eyes so many times.

Her mother was seated at the kitchen table, white hair tied into a neat bun and her glasses falling slightly down her nose. She was talking with James - her older brother - and she noticed James had a full beard now. Her mother took James' face in her hands and she cocked her head just a little, exactly like she always did.

This was home, as it always had been. And as soon she opened the door and walked in, she knew it would not be any more.

The only person she did not see was Tommy - the youngest brother. He worked on the 'Anna Carroll' with their father, or at least he had the last time she had been home which had been for Tommy's marriage to Susan Gibson.

She put her key in the lock, turned it and opened the door. Everyone turned toward her.

" Ettie!!! Welcome home, " her father said loudly.

She half ran down the hall straight into his open arms and joyously embraced and hugged this huge man who was her father.

" God, Dad it has been so long!"

" You're looking good!" He said.

" Taking care of myself, " she said. Ettie turned to her mother.

" Mom . . . Mom, how are you?"

Her mother smiled softly. "I'm much better now that you're here. " She took her into her arms. " So, so glad you came home."

Her brother stood up. "How about your big brother? No hugs here?"

" James - love your emails. Come here, " she said opening her arm and bringing him into a hug with their mother.

" Emails?" Her father said, " what the hell are emails?"

They sat down at the kitchen table.

" Oh, " said Ettie, " That's how James and I keep in touch. Through the Internet - I have it through the University and James - through work?"

" Yeah, actually have it right in the library. Kids use it too. "

" Well, you ask me it ain't going to be nothing. " John said taking his cap off and running his hand through his thick hair.

" You just keep making your Mamma happy and keep in touch by phone. "

" We don't do it enough, Dad, " Ettie said. " So how have you been Mom? "

" Oh..busy. Still working at the bank. Got to. John's work is kind of slow now. Things sure have changed down here a

lot, and now that Tommy's moved on, we just can't get the help. "

" Tommy's not working with Dad anymore? "

" Lord no, " James said, " He's not even living with his wife anymore. He just can't make his mind up about nothing. He's about as fickle as Winter in is Southern Maryland. "

" Now, James, " his mother said, " You should be one to talk. Tommy's been going through some tough times now. He'll be fine. "

James threw up his arms and laughed. " You always did favor that boy. Ah whatever. " He stood up. " Come on, Ettie, let's go bring in your stuff. "

They went out through the back door the to parking area.

" See you're driving a decent car for a change, " James said opening the door to the back seat.

" Oh it's a rental and you know that. I still drive the Rodeo - mostly because of the job, " she said opening the door on the opposite side. She leaned on the car roof. " Hey James? What was Mom talking about? "

He sighed deeply and leaned across from her.

" Sister, " he said, " There is so much going on. "

" Like what? "

" Guess I didn't email you this did I? " He paused. "
Barbara and I have been separated and are going to be
divorced. Been over a year now. "

" You're kidding? Why didn't you tell me? "

" I guess because I thought we'd be getting back
together. But we're not. Barbara actually told me that when I
moved out she literally felt an immense weight lifted from her.
And how do you think that made me feel? "

" Oh my God James, I'm sorry. How are the kids taking it?
"

" Doing actually quite well. Melissa's in fourth grade and
Ben is in Kindergarten - we're together a couple nights a week
and almost every weekend. I'll give Barbara that. She's not
keeping the kids from me. We'll probably work out a joint
custody arrangement. "

" Well I had no idea, " Ettie said pulling out a small
suitcase. " Wait until you hear the bombshell I'm laying. "

" You getting married now? Not after that Steve thing -
you swore never. "

" No, " Ettie said laughing softly. " Maybe I'll get married
someday. That really doesn't matter to me much now. James,
I'm going away - I mean away. "

" What are you talking about. How much farther can you get? Isn't Arizona far enough? "

" You know that is my work, the University has been very supportive. "

" So what's up? "

" Well, " she said, " Remember right after I got my Doctorate there was this chance that I could get this grant program funded? "

" Yeah - right"

" Well, not only did I get it funded, there is an entire expedition going with me, 8 members total, and we have a six year funded research project to research an area in . ." She paused. " The outback of Australia. "

" Australia? My God that's the total other side of the world. When are you going to tell them about this? "

" I don't know. I guess tomorrow after the wedding. I have to go. This is my life."

" Dr. Bourne - paleontologist. God, what a life. "

" Laugh if you will, Brother - but I really love my work. Hey - I'm considered an expert in my field. "

" I bet you are, " he said laughing. " Let's get these bags in before they wonder what happened to us. "

They went back inside the house.

" Well, I'm glad you're here, Ettie, " her Dad said. " Sure do have a lot of catching up to do." He looked at the clock on the wall. " I'm going to head on up. Got to get up early. But hey - you sleep in. We'll get our chance to talk. "

" You bet, Dad, " she said giving him a big hug. She loved being held in the strong arms of her Father. It always was a place she felt security, as though no harm could come to her in the protection of this huge bear of a man. " We will have lots of time to talk tomorrow. I promise. " She kissed him on the cheek. Still as gristly as ever.

" See you in the morning, James, " he said giving the son a hug.

" Want to take your things upstairs now, " her Mother asked.

" Not now. Don't have that much. James and I will take it up in a bit."

" Well, it's after ten, " her Mother said. " I'm so tired I'm going to leave you two down here to talk. I'm afraid I wouldn't be much in conversation. Make sure you latch the doors. "

After her Mother had left to go upstairs, Ettie and James sat at the table. Ettie opened a bottle of wine she had bought and poured them each a glass.

" So, " she said, " What other momentous changes are going on in the Bourne family?"

They sat and talked for a couple of hours, sharing and remembering as they used to from the earliest times remembered, all the way through high school, the closeness of brother and sister. They each loved the other very much.

Around one in the morning, James shook his head.

" I can't stay awake any longer, " he said. " Let me help you take your things up. "

They locked the front and back doors, switched off the lights and as quiet as possible made their way up the creaking stairway.

" Good night little bitty Ettie, " James said kissing his sister on the forehead. " I am so glad you came home. I have really missed you. "

" Goodnight my handsome brother. There may be hope for you yet. See you in the morning. "

She quietly closed the door to her old bedroom. Looking around almost startled her - so much was the same. She sat at the vanity in front of the dresser and looked at herself in the mirror. So much the same here, she thought, and so much so different. Little bitty Ettie, little bitty Ettie, had come home

once again. She quietly changed and climbed into the soft, familiar bed and lay there thinking.

Thirty-four years old and still going by the name she had acquired as a child - Ettie. She liked the name even if her Grandmother had given it to her as a child. It was the singsong, lyrical nature that she liked.

Grandmother Johnson, sitting on the front porch with the family at Narrow Point - the family farm - had first given her the name when she was just over a year old. A toddler in diapers, she stumbled and fumbled across the huge front lawn in the jerky fashion of someone learning to walk. The family sat and watched the children play.

Marietta tripped over a gnarled protrusion and fell down. Undaunted and not crying she got back up and carefully edged around the root. The people on the porch laughed uproariously.

" Ain't that just like a Bourne, " John said.

" I would say she had the tenacity of the Johnson side, if you don't mind, " Grandmother Johnson said.

Marietta turned and looked back at the porch. The Grandmother held out her arms.

" Come to Grammie. Come Ettie. Come to your Grandmother now, dear. Come on."

And the little girl, giggling and bouncing, came running back up the small hill, up the stairs one at a time and then fast as she could into the outstretched arms of her Grandmother.

" Bless you sweet thing, " she said hugging the little girl. " Little Ettie does love her Grandmother. Doesn't she. " The little girl giggled and squealed. " And Grandmother does love Ettie. " They laughed together.

And the name had stuck. From then on she had been Ettie. Even when taunted as a child by her brother - " Ettie Ettie likes spaghetti " - over and over until she cried, she grew to really like the name. She liked it because it was so different, and because it tied her directly to part of her past that she only vaguely knew - the vast wealth and historical significance of Narrow Point Farm.

She lay in the bed thinking about this room where she had grown and changed. She felt she could have been sixteen again, so little of it had changed. The light, the views, the shadows, the creaks, the smells - were all the same. But she knew she was not. And she was going to be going really far away from all of this - further than even memories.

Little bitty Ettie cried herself to sleep. She knew she would be back. She knew that the next time she came back that it would be because someone - part of the family - would

be gone. She knew that this was really her last weekend with her family.