



The Visitor

By Richard Miller

Chapter 1

It's late.

I make the last of the corrections to the current page, and then add it to the already large pile that's accumulated on the table next to me.

And it's a bunch of them.

Corrections, that is.

And pages.

Pages and pages full of corrections. For the life of me, I don't know why I can't get it right the first time - or second, or third. This is my fourth time editing this manuscript, and the results are no different this time than the previous three efforts, with each completed page looking something like Frankenstein from all the scars my red pen has inflicted.

I don't get it. Am I overwriting? Am I not writing enough? Or, maybe I'm using the right amount of words, just not the right ones? I don't know. I never know. But I should, shouldn't I? After all, I'm a writer. You would think by now I could tell if something is written correctly or not, but I don't think I can. I really don't. And if I can't - can't tell if something is written correctly - it means I spend most of my time rewriting things that were perfectly fine to begin with! Who knows what the truth is? It all gets so confusing sometimes that it hurts my head. It really does. It makes me wonder if I even know what I'm doing.

And you know what? Maybe I don't. Maybe I'm clueless. But my writing sells, so apparently, I'm doing something right.

Or, not.

Maybe it's just stupid people buying my books.

Is that it? Is that what I'm doing? Making a living off stupid people? Is that my audience, stupid? And if so, what happens if they suddenly wise up? What if my readers wake up one day and realize that I have no idea as to what I'm doing? Then what? I think I have enough money to retire, but I don't know that for a fact. Everything's paid for - the beach house, the car, furniture - and I'm not an extravagant person, so I don't really need much money to live on. If I had to, I could probably get a job in town and make ends meet that way. I could do something simple like walk dogs or something. Yes. A dog walker. I could do that. I could walk dogs, and people would pay me.

...I think.

Yes, I think they would. I think people would pay me to walk their dog. Surely they wouldn't expect me to do it for free, would they? Maybe. It depends. It depends on whether there's someone else already walking dogs, and does it for free. Then everyone would expect me to do it for free, as well. But I don't think that's the case. I don't think anyone is walking dogs. I'd be the first, so yes, I'm pretty sure I could make it.

So why do I worry about it?

I don't know, but I do. I'm like that. I worry about things.

I grab my coffee cup and take a test sip to make sure I've added the right amount of cream and sugar, which I have. That's the way I like it, my coffee, with cream and sugar. And it tastes so very good on a night like tonight. Except for the gentle crackle of the fireplace, everything is quiet.

And peaceful.

And warm.

And the coffee tastes so very good.

I take another sip and it warms my throat in a most pleasing way. It's a good feeling, the warm coffee, and one I very much like. I like that feeling. I like coffee, and I like it with cream and sugar.

But I need to finish my coffee. I need to finish it because that's my routine, and has been for a long time now. Once I finish my last cup for the night, I continue to work until the caffeine wears off and I'm sufficiently tired - tired enough to fall asleep without issue; without thoughts and ideas racing through my mind keeping me awake. Just peaceful, restful slumber.

I look up from the current page to grab my cup, and that's when I see her, sitting in the reading chair across from mine. She's suddenly just... 'there'.

But how? Where did she come from? How did she get to the chair without me seeing her? She couldn't have simply walked to it and sat down, or I would have noticed. Even while looking down at the current page, I would have seen her from the corner of my eye. If nothing else, I would have at least heard her. Yes, I would have heard her walking across the hardwood floor.

But, I didn't.

I didn't hear her.

But wait. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I wouldn't have heard her. I see that she's barefoot, so I guess if she were careful, she could have crossed the floor without making much noise, without me hearing her footfalls. But why would she do that? Creep around that way, making sure I don't hear her? Why?

I think about it for a moment, the girl being so...so...*sneaky* that way, and realize that I could be jumping to conclusions here; that it may not be as much a matter of her being sneaky as it is a matter of her simply being polite. It could be that she saw I was working and didn't want to disturb me. Maybe that's it. But even if I didn't hear her, as careful as she may have been, I think I would have at least seen her. I'm almost sure of it.

But, I didn't.

I didn't see her.

I neither saw nor heard this girl.

Either way, she was at least considerate enough not to distract me, so I'm grateful to her for that much. Still, she's invading my space. She's in the place I go to, alone, to work, and I need to work. I need this finished and done, and once I'm done, I need to deliver it to my agent. He's waiting for it. He tells me that every day, that he's waiting on me, that I should be finished by now.

But I'm not. I'm not finished.

So, I need to work.

I need this done; it's important.

I look at her. I look at the girl sitting in the chair across from me, and I watch her. I watch her because I'm wondering if she will remain quiet, the way she is now, or if she will begin making some type of noise. I need to know. Her making noise would disturb my concentration, and I can't have that. I need to focus on what I'm doing or I can't work, so it's important that I know what her intentions are.

I consider asking her about it - you know, if she intends on making noise, but I don't. I don't want to bother her. After all, she was nice enough not to bother me, so maybe I should simply return the courtesy and not bother her. It would be the polite thing to do.

But she already looks bothered. Why, I'm not sure. It couldn't be because of me, because frankly, I don't know this girl, and I don't think she knows me. Or, if she does, how? How would she know me? I keep to myself, and other than groceries and small errands, I rarely venture out for anything. I'm mostly here in the beach house, alone. And even on the few occasions I do go into town, I never speak to anyone. No one knows me, so how would she?

I don't think she does - know me, that is. I don't even think she knows I'm here, or sees me, even. In fact, she may not know *she's* here, for that matter. But then, I don't think she cares. She seems more concerned with whatever it is she's staring at on the floor, near the front of the fireplace, and slightly to the right. I don't see anything, but I think she does. But if she sees it, why can't I? It may be that whatever it is she sees on the floor is the thing that's bothering her, making her sad. Because that's the way she looks, like she's sad. And her being sad is making me sad, and I can't afford to be that way. Not right now, because I have work to do and I can't work if I'm sad. That's just how I am.

But she doesn't know this, about the way I am. She doesn't know it because she doesn't know *me*. Or, at least I don't think she does. So maybe I should tell her - about the way I am, I mean.

Or, maybe not.

She looks so sad, I don't want to risk making her even sadder. She seems sad enough. But she looks too young to be that sad. She looks to be...I don't know...seventeen? Maybe eighteen? Too young to be that sad. Why would anyone that age have a reason to be that sad?

I wonder about it, why she's that way, so sad, but I don't ask. I'm not that curious to know. Besides, I don't know her that well, not well enough to be asking such personal questions like that. In fact, I don't know her at all. At least I don't think I do, because I'm fairly certain I'd remember her if I did.

But I don't.

I don't remember this girl, and I don't think I know her.

But maybe she knows me.

Maybe she's one of my readers, and that's why she's here. She read one of my books, and it made her sad, and now she blames me for her unhappiness, and that's why she came here tonight, to tell me as much, to tell me to quit making her unhappy.

But I don't write sad books – not that I know of - so maybe it's something else. Maybe she thinks my books are stupid, and stupid books make her sad, she being one of the stupid readers who finally got wise to me. That would make sense. But she's so young. Do people that young read my books?

I don't know.

Maybe I should ask her.

Or, maybe it's best that I just leave her alone. She was, after all, nice enough not to have disturbed me.

And that's what she looks like, a nice person.

Sad, but nice.

Very nice, in fact.

Sweet and innocent, even.

Like someone who would never intentionally bother someone else, though it appears as if someone has bothered her.

But who?

Surely, it wasn't me. I mean, I don't even know this girl. I know I don't because I'd remember her if I did. I'd remember having met a girl as pretty as she is. Very pretty, actually. So pretty that she almost doesn't look real, as if I'm looking at a painting instead, a painting of a very pretty, but at the same time, very sad girl. 'Surreal', I guess, is the word I'm looking for here. She looks surreal, meaning that she looks real, but at the same time, doesn't. And that's something I'd remember.

Either way, real or unreal, she is quite a thing to behold. She has these beautiful, big brown eyes that are perfectly framed by the brows that sit above them. Her hair is a striking shade of auburn that cascades downward in soft, gentle waves to her shoulders and just a bit beyond. It's parted in the middle, her hair, and perfectly groomed as if having just been brushed. She has a pert, upturned nose and full, pouty lips that need no lipstick. And her face...as smooth and white as porcelain, like a Geisha, only, she's not Asian. And her cheeks...so very rosy that she looks as if she's blushing.

In all, I'd say she looks angelic, like an angel, except angels aren't sad, and she is. Very sad.

I suddenly realize that I'm tired. Probably because it's late and I didn't finish my coffee. I didn't finish it because I was distracted, by her, which is why I live alone, so that I'm never disturbed that way. Because that's how I do it. That's how I write, by being alone. That's my routine, and has been for a long time now.

A very long time, it seems.

And, I've been alone for a long time now.

A very long time.

...it seems.

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I decide that I'm done for the night. I turn off the reading lamp and leave it up to the fireplace to illuminate the room with its soothing orange glow. The girl hasn't moved, nor has her countenance changed. She's still sitting in the same exact position as before, with her legs folded under her, and her eyes still fixed on that same spot on the floor, at that same thing. The thing I do not see, but she does. She sees it, and I guess that's all that matters.

I'm tired, and I'm going to bed. I don't know what she will do. Maybe she will leave and move on her way, or maybe she will simply stay where she is. If she stays, she can sleep in the chair she's sitting in, and the fireplace will keep her warm, the way it does me while I work.

And maybe that's why she's here, she needed a place to stay for the night. Somewhere comfortable and quiet, and warm. That would make sense. Not only would it explain why she came here, but it would also explain why she's dressed the way she is, in a thin, white cotton night gown, one with tiny, pink flowers printed on it.

And that's fine. She can sleep here if she wants, at least for tonight. Then, in the morning when she wakes, she will no doubt take her leave and return to wherever it is she came from. But for now, she just sits and stares - stares with her beautiful, but sad, brown eyes.

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I walk the short distance to the bedroom and change into my flannel pajamas, the red plaid ones. They're my favorites. I don't remember where I got them, but it seems as if I've had them forever. And maybe that's why they're my favorites, because I've known them so long. They're familiar to me, like an old friend. And, they're comfortable. Familiar and comfortable, just like an old friend should be.

And, they keep me warm at night when it's cold, like tonight.

But I don't remember buying them, the pajamas. And maybe I didn't. Maybe they were a gift from someone. A gift from an old, comfortable friend, perhaps.

I don't remember.

I slip beneath the thick, insulating comforter, and as I do, I notice the girl standing there next to my bed, standing and looking at me. Not watching me, mind you, just looking at me. There's a difference.

Her nightgown is thin, but she doesn't appear to be cold. I have another pair of flannels, the blue plaid ones I never wear, but I don't offer them to her. I don't offer them because she doesn't appear to be cold; otherwise, I would. I would *gladly* let her wear them. I don't wear them because they're new, so they seem different somehow, foreign and unfamiliar. And that's why I never wear them, because I don't know them. Not like the red flannels. But she could. She could wear them if she wanted, and it probably wouldn't matter to her that they're new.

But she doesn't look like she's cold. She looks...I dunno know...warm? Comfortable?

I don't know.

All I know is that she no longer looks sad, just morose. And there's a difference between the two conditions. You become morose once the sadness has passed. And maybe she will be sad again in the future, but for now, she's simply morose.

And warm.

And comfortable.

Warm and comfortable, like maybe she likes being here.

Or, not.

I have no way of knowing, really. Not for sure. But in some strange way, it almost feels as if she belongs here.
Don't ask me why.

I'm tired, so I sleep.

Chapter 2

I wake, but not because an alarm clock woke me. I don't own one. I don't have a clock, or a watch for that matter. Maybe other people do, but I don't. I don't have them because I don't need them. I'm a writer, and writers don't need to know what time it is.

I crawl out of bed, and the first thing I notice is the girl. It'd be hard not to. She's asleep on the floor next to the bed, curled into a fetal position, and using her folded hands as a pillow. And in this position, lying there the way she is, she no longer seems sad *or* morose, just peaceful.

And comfortable.

Even on the floor, she looks comfortable.

So, I let her sleep.

Because asleep, she seems to be at peace, as if sleep itself may be a kind of sanctuary for her, a form of relief, maybe, from all of life's hardships and cruelties, protecting her, as it were, from the things that would otherwise make her sad, even if only for a while. It is for this reason that I'm careful not to disturb her, careful not to disrupt the peaceful place she seems to be in. I want to cover her with a blanket to make sure she's warm, but I don't. I don't want to risk waking her. Besides, she looks warm enough.

I get out of bed, grab my robe, and then quietly make my way across the floor to the doorway on the opposite side of the room. Once there, I step from the room into the hallway, but before I close the door and leave, I take a last look at my mysterious guest and see that she's still fast asleep. Still comfortable, and still at peace. And I'm glad for that. I'm glad because I think that, more than anything, this is what this girl needs, to be at peace and no longer sad.

And now it is I who stands and looks at her.

I don't watch her, though; I just look.

There's a difference.

She was already a pretty girl, but looking at her now, lying there that way, asleep and so at peace, I realize just how beautiful she really is. And, again, it gives me a good feeling just to look at her. I'm not sure why, but it does. It's like the coffee. It simply feels good and is a feeling I very much enjoy. I'm certain now that I don't know her, but I'm beginning to wish that I did. She looks like someone I would want to know. I take one last look at her then close the door and tiptoe away. Once down the hallway, I proceed to the kitchen and begin my day in the usual way - by starting a pot of coffee.

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My coffee pot is a simple one, a mid-priced Mr. Coffee machine I bought from Walmart. It was on sale, and only a few dollars more than the cheap, basic model. The difference being that the cheap model didn't have a timer or a

clock. This one does, but I never use them, the clock *or* the timer. I never even bothered to set the clock display because I don't need it. I don't need to know what time it is. I'm a writer. I bought the more expensive model simply because it was on sale, and therefore, a better value. But really, I don't use the more expensive features the pot offers. I don't believe that either one - the clock *or* the timer - makes my coffee taste any better. I could be wrong, having never tested that theory, but I'm pretty sure I'm right about this. I think the coffee probably tastes the same.

And I like the coffee my machine makes.

And I like it with cream and sugar.

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With the coffee now brewing, I make my way to the fireplace, and as I do, I stop and inspect the spot on the floor the girl was staring at. I look, and look good, but I still don't see anything. Nothing. But I think she did. Or, maybe she didn't. Maybe it was simply a convenient place for her to rest her gaze, I don't know. What I do know is that she's asleep, and asleep, she is at peace.

And that's a good thing, her being at peace, because everyone needs that. At some point, everyone needs peaceful serenity in their life. Even a pretty young girl like her - *especially* a pretty young girl like her. She needs it, as do we all. We all need peace in our lives. Which is unfortunate, because, as far as I can tell, none of us has it. Or, at least I don't. Some people say they have it, but I don't believe them. What I believe is that they want it so bad, they convince themselves they have it, but they don't. Not really. Just the 'illusion' of peace. That's what they have, just an illusion, something that looks real, but isn't.

But what *is* peace? Is it a lack of worry? And don't we all do that? Worry? And if not, why not? What kind of people is it that never worry? Would it be people who simply don't care about anything? That, they don't care about anything because they have nothing to care about? After all, if you don't have anything to care about, would you ever worry?

I guess not.

But I care about things, so I worry. Maybe more than I should. Are there guidelines or standards for how much a person should worry? And what if you don't meet the minimum standard? In other words, you don't worry enough. Should you worry about that?

I don't know.

It's all too much for me to think about right now, this early in the morning. Especially since I haven't had my coffee yet. But I will, soon. Even as I speak, my mid-priced Mr. Coffee machine - the one with the clock I don't need - is diligently at work brewing it for me. It brews it for me so that I don't have to.

And that's one less thing I have to worry about - brewing coffee.

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I stoop in front of the fireplace and separate the wire mesh screen. I grab a couple of logs from the basket and place them in the middle of the still glowing embers. Soon, there will be a fire, and it will once again warm the room. The fire will crackle, and I will listen to it as I sit and drink my coffee. I will sit here in the peace and quiet of the morning, sipping my coffee, and enjoying the sound the fire makes and the warmth it brings me.

And I will enjoy my coffee.

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With the fire properly tended to, I make my way to the rear entrance to address the next morning's task, the newspaper.

The house has a front deck as well, but the rear deck is the one that faces the beach and the ocean waves that wash over it. Aside from the study, it's my favorite place to be. It's also where the paper boy leaves the newspaper.

I open the door leading to the rear deck, and instantly, the sound of the surf rolling in reminds me of why I live here to begin with. It's a soothing, gentle sound, the waves coming ashore, and one that is wonderfully accented by the salty smell of the ocean. And, like the coffee, and looking at the girl, gives me a good feeling inside.

I step outside and take it all in, and as I do, I feel the cool sea breeze on my face as it makes its way onto shore, and somewhere - somewhere up above me, seagulls are making their presence known. At this point, the sky is still a misty grey smear across the horizon, but that will change soon enough. Shortly, the sun will rise and chase the haze away, and with its departure, a new day will reveal itself. And with the new day, the cycle of life here on the beach will once again repeat itself, the way it does every day.

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The beach house itself sits atop tall pylons that keep it protected from the occasional storm, and at the same time, affords me a wonderfully elevated view of the surrounding area. And I like that, the elevated view. I like it because, in a way, it isolates me from the world below; a world I'm not sure I know very well, and likewise, a world that doesn't know me at all.

And I like that about my life - that the world and I remain strangers to one another. I don't understand it, the world outside, and I am quite certain that it doesn't understand me. And I'm ok with that. It's an arrangement that has worked for the two of us for a long time now.

A very long time.

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Even though there are other beach houses along this stretch, there is a fair amount of distance between each one, giving all of us, the owners and occupants, the amount of privacy one would expect from homes in this price range. Adding to this element is the fact that I'm the only year-round resident among them, with the other homes simply serving as seasonal or occasional getaways for their owners - that is, for the people who prefer to live elsewhere.

But I prefer to live here.

I look for the morning paper, and, as usual, find it at my feet. The paperboy's throwing skills are such that I rarely need to venture more than a few steps from the back door to retrieve the morning news.

I reach down and grab the paper, and then make my way back to the kitchen, where I discover that not only has the girl woken, but that she's now sitting at the smallish, two-person breakfast table situated next to the window, a bay window that provides a particularly nice view of the beach.

I grab the coffee pot, pour a cup, and prepare it in the usual way, with cream and sugar. Coffee made, I make my way to the chair opposite the girl and lay the newspaper on the table in front of me. But I don't read it, the paper. I never do. I don't really know why I subscribe to it, even, other than I need to feel like a normal person...that I'm like everyone else.

But I'm not. I'm not like everyone else. In fact, I'm not like anyone you're ever likely to meet. Still, I like pretending like I am, like I'm normal - that I belong, that I fit in.

But I'm not, and I don't. I'm not normal, and I don't fit in.

And never will.

I lift my cup and take my first sip of the day, relishing both the taste and the warm sensation the coffee brings on its way down.

And it tastes so very good.

In the meantime, the girl does little more than sit with her hands in her lap and look at me. It's a look of no particular meaning or significance, just a look; a look now devoid of any sadness or moroseness. It's more like a blank stare, actually, slightly catatonic and distant. Like she's here, but at the same time, she's not. Either way, I'm just glad that she's no longer sad. I don't want to be around sad people this morning. I just want to enjoy my coffee and not read the paper.

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I'm on my third - or, I dunno, maybe my fourth - sip when she finally speaks...

"Can I have some?"

And this makes me feel bad. It was thoughtless of me not to ask her if she'd like a cup. But I don't know her. I don't know this girl, so I have no way of knowing if she drinks coffee or not. Some people do, some don't. Still, I should have asked. It would have been the polite thing to do. It's not that I meant to be rude or neglectful or anything, it's just that I'm not accustomed to having guests. I've never had one before. She's my first.

I apologize for my poor manners and then promptly make my way to the coffee machine, where I prepare myself a cup in the same exact fashion as mine, with cream and sugar. Once done, I return to my seat and set the cup in front of her. The girl, in turn, grabs the cup and lifts it to her lips using both hands. She blows into the cup a few times to cool it, and then ever so gingerly, begins to sip the still steaming liquid. It was only then, with her hands held up that way, holding the cup, and the sleeves of her nightgown having slipped down her forearms some, that I noticed it, the scarred-over wounds on both her wrists. I'd never seen these types of scars on a person before, not in real life, still, I instantly understood what they meant. The girl sees me staring at her wrists and instantly turns her head away from me, no doubt embarrassed by the awkward moment. She directs her gaze, instead, to somewhere else, to somewhere outside the bay window. Not knowing what else to do, I turn my own attention away from her and direct it, instead, to the still unread newspaper lying in front of me. I lift the paper from the table and, as nonchalantly as I can, begin reading it (or, rather, pretending to), acting as if nothing had happened, nothing at all. I do this, ignore the whole matter, because I have no desire to make this girl feel any more uncomfortable than she may already be. So, instead, I simply resume my morning ritual as if everything were simply business as usual. I drink my coffee, pretend to read the paper, and lose myself to the peace and tranquility of the morning.

And then, after some time had passed, curiosity finally got the best of me. I look up from the paper and ask her...

"Why did you do it?"

But I get no reply. Not that I expected one, mind you, but there isn't so much as a discernible change in her expression, even - at least not that I can see. That being the case, her obviously not wanting to talk about the matter, I return my attention back to the paper and continue with my morning.

But that's not what I want to do, the usual, everyday morning routine. I can do that any day, and do. But today is different. It's different because I am, at this moment, sitting across the table from a very young, very beautiful woman, who, for whatever reason, has decided to visit me. And what kind of fool would I be not to take advantage of that? To enjoy the company of such a lovely creature, something that, for me, is a rarity these days. So, yes, it's all I want to do, look at her. I want to sit here, in the peaceful quiet of the morning, enjoy my coffee, and admire this girl's magnificent beauty. *That's* what I really want to do. I want to do it because, as I've said, looking at her makes me feel good. It gives me a warm feeling inside, a feeling that I not only enjoy, but also, a feeling I have not known in a long time.

A very long time.

And the coffee? It gives me a warm feeling as well. So, I sit and enjoy the two - the coffee and the girl's silent company - silent, maybe, but no less welcomed.

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The girl continues to sip her coffee, only not as frequently as I do. Still, I can tell that she enjoys it. I can see it in her brown eyes as she sits quietly, sipping from her cup and gazing out of the window; gazing, perhaps, to

somewhere far away, to somewhere beyond the boundaries of the beach, even, and the waves washing over it; to somewhere, perhaps, beyond the horizon itself, maybe. I don't know, and I don't ask.

And then suddenly - and quite unexpectedly - the girl once again speaks to me. In a somewhat detached monotone, she tells me...

"Because I was sad."

She says this without altering her distant stare in the slightest, almost as if it were simply a thought to herself that I just happened to overhear.

I take another sip and consider the reply. I ask her...

"Why?"

"Because I was alone. No one loved me."

"How do you know? Surely your parents loved you."

"Yes, they did. That's not what I mean."

"I don't understand."

She finally turns and looks at me, but this time, the look is even more distant and blank than before...

"Someone did love me, once, and I loved them. But then they didn't love me anymore. They stopped."

"How do you know?"

"They went away. They went away and left me behind."

"Why?"

No reply. Instead, she returns her gaze to the bay window, back to that distant place. I return my own attention back to my coffee cup and notice that I don't have much left. Soon, it will be time to make another one. In the meantime, I sit, and I sip.

And then, once again, and as equally unexpected as before...

"I don't know why."

"And that's what makes you sad?"

"Yes."

I take another sip and think for a moment, and then I ask her...

"Did it have to end that way? Wasn't there something else you could have done?"

She takes a long, thoughtful sip of her own coffee and replies...

"Maybe. I don't know. But it doesn't matter now."

And sadly enough, she was right, and there was no reason to continue the dialogue further. Nothing she and I could say would change the facts, so I changed the subject, instead...

"Why did you come here?"

The question shakes her free from her distant stare. She turns and looks at me with her beautiful brown eyes, her blank expression having now relaxed some, and replaced by a different look, a look of concern. Concern for me...

"Because you're alone."

It was the way she said it, as if a judgment had just been passed down on me, and I had been found guilty, guilty of a self-imposed sentence of solitude and loneliness, of self-imposed seclusion; seclusion from people, from society, and in the end, seclusion from life itself.

I take a long, thoughtful sip from my cup, and after a while, I tell her...

"I like being alone."

She returns her gaze back to the window as before. She takes a slow, deliberate sip from her cup and then lowers it, still holding it with both hands just below her chin, seemingly lost in her own thoughts as she considers what it is I just told her. She takes a few more sips from her cup and then turns her attention back to me. It's at this point that I notice that her expression has changed. It has transitioned from a kind of distant stoicism into a more personal look, a look of warm affection, affectionate, even, to the point of almost being loving. And her voice, it changes as well. It dissolves from its somewhat flat, impersonal monotone and becomes softer and much more tender, more personal. It, too, taking on an affectionate quality all its own. She tells me...

"But you shouldn't. You should never like being alone. You should have someone who cares about you, who loves you, someone who will never leave you."

It was the most penetrating words anyone has ever spoken to me. I could feel her soft, tender voice carry them inside me, and then fill me like a spilled liquid, slowly spreading a feeling of warmth throughout my entire being.

But it was more than just her voice. It was her eyes as well, her beautiful, infinitely brown eyes, reaching out to me, drawing me to them as if I were a ship lost at sea, and they, her eyes – her glowing, effervescent eyes - were the beacons guiding me home to safety...to a safe place. Her place. And for a moment, I was. I was that lost ship, lost in a fog of my own creation; a fog of self-inflicted isolation. And as I looked into her eyes, her guiding lights, as it were, I did. I felt safe. Safe and warm, and so at peace. For the first time that I can remember, I was at peace.

I set my cup down. Suddenly, I didn't want anymore.

And now it's me that stares out the window, as does she, and together we watch the waves as they roll in and gently wash over the wet sand of the beach, something they've no doubt done for a very long time, and something, I imagine, they will continue to do for a long time to come; long after her and I are no longer here to witness them. I tell her...

"I don't know what that's like, to have someone."

Without changing her gaze *or* expression, she replies...

"I know."

And with that, we sat in silence as we watched the world outside the window, both quite content to be where we were, doing what we were doing.

And at some point, I say something else. I say it - not so much for her benefit, but rather, for my own. I tell her...

"I like being with you."

She replies...

"I know."

And with that, nothing else was said.

We were to never speak again.

Chapter 3

Over the next couple of days, I worked feverishly towards finishing the manuscript, both night and day. Mostly at night, though, with the daytime being reserved for running errands and conducting other business, such as lengthy calls to my agent and publisher and whatnot.

But it was in the quiet of the night, in the glow of the fireplace, that she would come to me. And always in the same manner as her first visit. She was simply 'there'. She would come and take her rightful place in the chair that has since become hers.

And in that chair, opposite mine, and bathed in the warm glow of the fireplace, she would keep me company as she resumed her distant study of the spot on the floor, just in front of the fireplace and slightly to her right.

I would make her a cup of coffee and, as unobtrusively as I could, set it on the table next to her, being ever so careful not to disturb her, but it would always go untouched. I don't think that it was so much a matter of her being uninterested in the coffee as it was a matter of her being preoccupied with the spot on the floor she seemed to be so enamored with. Just in front of the fireplace and slightly to the right. And even though it would always go untouched, I still made a cup for her, always with cream and sugar, just the way she likes it.

And aside from the coffee, I didn't know what else to do for her. So, I sat, and I wrote, and then later, would edit the things I had written. And occasionally I would look up and glance in her direction, almost as if to check on her, but I don't know why. Because nothing about her ever changed. She simply sat in silence and stared. And me... Well, I was just happy that she was here. Not only that she was here, but that she was no longer sad, just stoic. Stoic and silent.

And even though I wrote and edited while she sat and kept me company, what I discovered I was mostly doing was...not being alone.

And because of her, I now know what that's like.

And when I went to bed at night, lying under the comforter waiting for sleep to come, she would be there with me, standing in her usual spot, watching over me. Then, once satisfied that I was comfortably asleep, she would take her own place on the floor, lying as she does, curled in her usual child-like way and using her folded hands as a pillow. And when sleep would finally come to me, I was not alone.

And neither was she.

Chapter 4

The day finally came when I convinced myself that the manuscript was actually finished, finished in its entirety. No more late-night rewrites and edits, no more endless stress and turmoil, wondering whether what I had written was correct or not. It was over and done with now. That being the case, I printed the story out in its final draft form and then packaged it for delivery to my agent in New York. I then made a flight reservation for the next morning.

The following morning, I began my day the way I always do: I make a fresh pot of coffee, place logs in the fireplace, and then retrieve the morning newspaper. Once I had the newspaper safely in hand, I proceeded to the kitchen, where I joined my lovely new friend, the girl.

And, as was the routine now, I would prepare two cups of coffee and take my place at the breakfast table across from her, setting one of the steaming cups on her side. It didn't matter which cup since they were the same, both with cream and sugar, just the way we like it. She would work on her cup as I would mine, and as we did, we both gazed out of the window at a world that neither of us really understood, and likewise, one we really didn't belong to.

And that's what we would do, she and I. We sat in our warm, comfortable silence, enjoying our coffee, both staring out at a place somewhere far beyond the window. Somewhere beyond the beach and the waves. Somewhere beyond the horizon itself, even. To somewhere only she and I would ever go, a place only her and I knew.

Our place.

After I had ignored the newspaper long enough, I got up, grabbed the manuscript and my travel bag, and headed for the car.

I unlocked the door and opened it only to find the girl sitting in the passenger seat, her head turned away from me and staring out of the passenger side window, still dressed in nothing more than her nightgown.

I start the car and give it time to warm up. I turn the heater on, but not too high, just high enough, and then I adjust all the vents. I want to make sure she's warm, but that the hot, dry air doesn't blow directly on her. I then turned the wipers on. Not that it was snowing, not yet anyway, I just wanted to make sure that they were functioning properly, just in case. I then adjust the rearview mirrors, making sure they provide me with the proper view.

And then I run out of things to do.

Suddenly, I realize what it is I'm doing. I'm fidgeting. I'm stalling for time in an effort to delay the inevitable, my departure. And maybe I was doing this, stalling that way, out of fear, afraid of being separated from her; afraid that, if I leave, she won't be here when I return; afraid because, in the short time she's been around, I have come to depend on her, relying on her being here with me and around me, to the point I can't imagine anything otherwise. It's as if I can't remember what it was like for her *not* to be around, as if she's *always* been here, but I know that can't be true. Still, that's the way it feels.

And maybe – just maybe - that's what I fear most of all, the fear itself, I don't know. All I do know is that I don't want to leave. I don't want to make this trip, but I know that I have to. Too much depends on it. So, I do the only thing I can. I pull out of the driveway and begin the two-hour journey to the airport.

* * * * *

The airport is located in a neighboring city, and was the closest one I could find with planes big enough to take me to where I'm going; planes big enough to carry me all the way to New York. New York City, to be exact.

It's a long trip, so I consider turning the radio on to pass the time, thinking that maybe she might enjoy listening to some music, but I don't. Instead, I leave the radio off. I leave it off because I think that, like me, she would prefer the silence. We both do. We both prefer the warm, comfortable silence we share. We prefer it because it suits us, and has since become something we both enjoy.

That, and our coffee.

We enjoy our coffee.

And our mornings.

We enjoy our mornings as we sit in our comfortable silence together and look out at the world beyond the window, beyond the beach, and the waves; beyond the horizon, even. Maybe even beyond life itself, to a place only she and I ever visit, or know.

And that's what we like, her and I.

And we like each other.

* * * * *

We arrive at the airport on time, and I park in the long-term section. I park in the long-term parking since I'm not sure how long I will be in New York. New York City, actually - the big peach, or banana, or something like that. I can't remember.

I turn the car off and just sit for a moment, maybe to collect my thoughts, or maybe because I don't want to leave her. Either way, I have a few minutes, so I just sit. I sit and enjoy the fact that she's sitting next to me.

And as I sit, I think. I think about her, and I wonder if she is thinking about me. Probably not. But that's not what's important, whether or not she's thinking about me. What *is* important is that she has not been sad in a long time, not since that first morning, the morning she spoke to me and told me the things she did. And like me, she's been at peace ever since.

And that's what's important, that she's at peace now – that in finding me, she found what it was she was looking for, that kind of peace, the kind of peace she has with me.

That's what's important.

Still, I can't help but wonder about it, wonder if she thinks about me the way I'm always thinking about her.

But I'll never ask.

I grab the manuscript and my travel bag from the back seat and open the door. I open it, but I don't move. I don't want to get out of the car. I don't want to leave her. I just want to stay where I am and sit with her, to just be with her.

But I can't do that. I can't stay. I *have* to go. The book is done now, and I have to deliver it to the people who I know are waiting for it, even as I sit here.

It's what I do.

I'm a writer.

I turn to look at the girl one last time, only to find that she's no longer peering out the passenger window. Instead, she has turned her head and is now looking at me, looking at me with those incredibly beautiful brown eyes of hers, eyes that have not known sadness since she has been with me.

And even though it's a sad moment for the two of us, me having to leave, she doesn't let it show. Instead, she smiles at me. For the first time since I have known her, she smiles. And what a beautiful smile it is. It is, in fact, the most beautiful smile I have ever seen. A smile so incredibly captivating in its beauty that it instantly fills me with an almost unbearable warmth inside; a glow, if you will. A glow, the likes of which I have never before known. Not until that moment, the moment she smiled at me.

The sadness may have been gone, but still, there were tears on her face just the same, rolling down her perfect porcelain cheeks. The kind of tears only a heart can produce.

Tears for me.

My tears.

I smile back at her, and as I do, I give her something in return - tears, the ones rolling down my own cheeks.

Tears for her.

Her tears.

Tears only a heart can produce.

And the tears between us said it all. Said more than any words I could ever write. More than *anyone* could ever write.

She looked into my eyes, and I looked into hers, and that's the way we said goodbye, the eyes. They said it for us.

I exit the car and make my way to the awaiting flight, the one that will take me to New York. New York City, actually. The big pear...strawberry...the big something. I don't remember what.

The plane takes off, and as I stare out my window, I watch as things below grow smaller and smaller until I can no longer see them, only clouds. I'm surrounded by clouds now. And as I look at them, at the infinite whiteness of it all, I suddenly realize that this is the place she and I would gaze out at through the kitchen window as we sat in the quiet of the morning enjoying our coffee, sitting in our comfortable silence as our minds wandered through the endless cotton candy-like landscapes the clouds would create just for the two of us to enjoy.

And enjoy we did. We enjoyed the clouds, we enjoyed our coffee, and most of all, we enjoyed each other.

And the coffee would always taste so good.

So very good.

Coffee with cream and sugar, the way she and I like it.

And we like each other.

* * * * *

I returned from New York several days later. I arrive at the airport from which I departed and began the trek across the various parking lots until I reached long-term parking. I look around and eventually find my car, and then rush to it, half hoping that she would be there, sitting in the passenger seat waiting for me.

But she wasn't.

She wasn't there.

Nor was she at the beach house when I returned. It was empty and cold. There was no crackling fire to warm me, nor was there a fresh cup of coffee to enjoy.

And, no late-night visitor sitting in silence and studying a spot on the floor. A spot just in front of the fireplace, and slightly to the right of a now-empty chair. Her chair.

She was gone. And somehow...somehow...I knew. Inside, I knew. I knew she wouldn't be back. In fact, I never saw her again.

At least I don't think I have.

I'm not sure.

From time to time, while outside on the rear deck looking out over the beach, I would think that I saw her, at a distance. She would be sitting in the surf with her arms wrapped around her folded legs, letting the waves wash over her.

Sitting and staring.

Staring at a place far away. Somewhere distant. Somewhere beyond the horizon, even. Maybe staring at the clouds the way she and I once did as we sat at the breakfast table. Sitting together, enjoying our coffee, and sharing a warm, comfortable silence. A silence in which words were never spoken because none were ever needed.

She and I didn't need words. Maybe other people need them, words, but she and I didn't. They were simply not necessary. Only the coffee. Coffee with cream and sugar.

And each other.

And that was the only thing that mattered, and nothing else.

And, as always, the coffee, like the unspoken feelings between us, was always so very good.

So very good.

* * * * *

And then there are the dreams. I'd never dreamed before - not before her - but I do now. Every night since she left, the same dream, over and over. A simple dream at that. One that never differs, nor would I want it to.

In my dream, she is here, with me again, standing near my bed as I sleep, looking at me. No, not looking - watching. She's watching me. There's a difference. Different because she watches over me, as if guarding me while I sleep, protecting me, and making sure that I'm okay.

And I guess once she knows that I'm fast asleep and OK, she, herself, sleeps on the bedroom floor as before, dressed in her thin, white cotton nightgown with the little pink flowers on it. She curls up in her usual fetal position, like a small, angelic child, and uses her folded hands as a pillow.

And on the floor, sleeping next to my bed, she is comfortable. And warm. And most of all, she is at peace.

And every morning I wake, I quickly look down at the floor, half hoping to find her lying there, still fast asleep.

But she never is.

But it feels like she is - or was - sleeping on the floor and watching over me as I slept; there with me, making sure I was not alone, caring about me, being there every night and never leaving me. And maybe...maybe, in some strange way, loving me, even.

But it was only a dream.

...I think.

I don't know.

I don't know a lot of things. For example, I don't know who she is, or where it is she came from, even. In fact, I don't really know her at all. All I do know is that since I met her that first night, the night she first appeared in the chair, I have never again felt alone.

And I hope that wherever she is, the same is true for her.

I don't even know her name.

I simply call her 'the visitor'.

And I miss her.

And I love her.