

Stephen Lewis

The Visitor

The bay sparkles, and I have the windows of my truck down to let in the warm breeze off the water. As I turn my eyes back to the road, I see a huge, old Caddy filling its lane coming toward me. Barely above the Caddy's steering wheel, clutched by two small hands, is a head of white hair. Just like that other time.

Another three miles past cherry trees, some still bearing bright red fruit a week after the harvest, and I reach the turn-off onto the two tracks that lead to the small, century-old farmhouse I now rent. Its paint, like that on the barn behind it, has long ago flecked off to reveal the graying wood clapboard beneath. To the right of the house, an untended meadow with waist-high grass waving in the midsummer breeze gives way to an abandoned apple orchard whose ancient trees will offer their fruit in a month. Behind and to the left, new growth hardwoods muscle between the conifers and close in on the house and barn. A cloud of dust and pebbles rising from the ruts in the two tracks follow my pickup.

Henry, my senior-citizen retriever mix, rises stiff-legged from his nap in a pool of sunlight beneath the west-facing window in the front room. Giving his head a quick scratch, I see that the light is blinking on the answering machine on the scarred buffet left by the previous tenant. I start to hit the playback button, but instead pour my self-imposed limit of two fingers of Dewars from the decanter next to the machine. I lift the glass, but then put it down and fill it to the top. After a good sized gulp, I settle myself onto the futon I rescued from a yard sale right after a spring storm soaked it. A pungent aroma of mold rises from the fabric. I take another swallow and close my eyes against the image I know will rise from the corner of my memory where I try to keep it chained.

Henry, tail wagging, rests his jaw on my knee and looks up at me as though he understands. When I don't respond, he offers a low rumbling sound from deep in his throat. It is his version of a cat's purring, almost like a snore but smoother, and it is irresistible. I reach my hand down and scratch his ears with one hand while with the other I lift the glass and drain it dry.

The white head of the driver in the Caddy morphs into that other one, the one that troubles my sleep.

Just turned sixteen, her knapsack for her weekend with me at her feet, and her learners permit in her little beaded purse, Susan fairly vibrated as I came to a stop next to her on the driveway of the chalet where she lives with her mother. Judy stepped out of the front door and walked a few feet toward us, stopping on the edge of the lawn. A smile struggled to form on her face as her daughter ran her fingers over her birthday present, a little turquoise Escort that emptied my bank account.

"Isn't it cute?" Susan asked.

"Yes," Judy said.

"I got a pretty good deal on it," I said. "Phil down at the station on Union checked it out for me."

"What'd he say?" Judy asked.

"It's good. Got a couple of little things to take care of."

The half smile dissipated like vapor before a cold breeze.

"Like what?"

"A warning light that stays on. Probably a short."

"Couldn't Phil fix it?"

Susan ran over to her mother and threw her arms around her.

"It's OK, Mom."

"I'm sure it will be," Judy said. "As soon as your father explains."

"No," I said, "Phil couldn't find the problem. You know how many miles of wire there are in a car?"

"I have no idea Ed. You're the electrician."

"You gotta take it to a specialist. Charges by the hour. Could wind up costing more than the car."

"Get it fixed," Judy said.

"You gonna pay for it?"

"Just get it fixed."

"I can't until I get paid again."

"If you managed your money better Ed . . . Just be careful, you hear?"

"Can we stop at the Freeze?" Susan asked, and I couldn't be sure whether she wanted ice cream or was telling me to cool down.

From a great distance, I hear a ringing sound, and then my legs are lifted by some force. The ringing continues, only louder, and my feet drop to the floor. Henry's anxious whine brings me to full consciousness, aware that I fell asleep with my feet on the dog's back. The empty Scotch glass is still in my hand.

After a beep, Karen's voice fills the room.

"Ed, are you OK? For God's sake say something. Or are you lying on the floor in a pool of Scotch?"

I clear my throat.

"I drank the Scotch," I say.

"All of it?"

"All that was in my glass."

"I'm coming over."

"Please."

Susan dug her long spoon into the bottom of a root beer float. With deliberation, she lifted the spoon with a glob of vanilla ice cream clinging to its tip and steered it into her mouth. Swallowing, she left a smear of ice cream on her upper lip. Her pink tongue emerged to lick her lip clean. The eyes of the two teenaged boys at the next table did not leave her. I stared hard until with a smirk they turned away. One said something to the other, and they both broke into laughter. I rose a little out of my chair.

"They're just fooling," Susan, ever the sensible one, said. Laying her spoon down, she asked, "Can I drive now? From here?"

"I'll get us out of town," I said.

I hear the lock click open and there is Karen, her arms loaded with grocery bags. She walks past me into the kitchen and opens the refrigerator, and with efficient motions removes the leftover Chinese takeout and unpacks the groceries and then sits down next to me.

"I've put a nice bottle of Chardonnay in the fridge. We can cook up some pasta with clam sauce. I brought Italian bread and some olive oil dip."

I don't answer. She leans into me.

"You are one hell of a reclamation project," she says.

I can almost smile.

"That's something, anyway," I say.

"Get cleaned up. Take a shave."

Later, after dinner, she glances at the police report tacked to the wall next to the kitchen table where we are sipping our wine.

"When are you going to take that down?"

"I'm trying," I answer.

"You've been saying that for some time."

"I know."

I pulled the car onto the shoulder, put the parking brake on, and turned the engine off. Ahead lay the peninsula.

"Did you have to do all that?" she asked.

"Impatient?"

"Yes."

"You need to practice starting, and pulling out into traffic."

"Dad, I'm almost ready for the test." She leaned over, pecked my cheek, and opened her door.

Sitting in the passenger seat, I watched the lights on the dash come on as she turned the key past the first stop. The engine roared to life, and the lights went out. All but one.

"OK," I said, "let's go."

I saw her eyes looking at the dash.

"It's OK," I said.

"But Mom..."

"It's OK."

"Did you call Fred Matthiesson?" Karen asks.

"No."

"He'll hire somebody else if you don't get back to him soon."

She picks up the pile of envelopes with my address in the cellophane window.

"How much do you think?" she asks.

"I have no idea."

"Why don't I open them and find out."

"No."

"Then we'll go with an estimate." She glances at each envelope, jots numbers on a piece of paper, and adds the figures. "In the neighborhood of, let's say, an even thousand. A couple of weeks work for Matthiesson, you'll probably be clear."

"I'll call him tomorrow."

"What about right now?" She reaches into her purse. "Here's his card. It has his home number. I'm sure he wouldn't mind, after all the favors you did for him."

"That was before."

"I know. So does he."

"Tomorrow. I'll call him tomorrow."

She slides the card to me.

In bed, we watch lightning trace its white-hot zigzags across the black sky, then listen to the thunder, the splatter of large drops against the window pane. She turns her back to me and we settle into a spoon embrace. Feeling her body, I'm warm and secure.

Until my memory imposes the image of a wrinkled face, edged in white hair, and bony fingers clenched around a steering wheel. I can almost hear what is about to follow.

She looked in the rear view mirror, the side view mirror, then over her shoulder to check the blind spot, all just as I taught her. She flicked the left turn blinker on and eased back onto the road.

The sign said the speed limit was thirty-five, and the needle on the speedometer stopped at thirty. Her back a little tense and leaning forward, she had her hands right where they were supposed to be at ten and two o'clock.

"Take us home," I said, and the word caught in my throat. She looked puzzled for a moment, and then sorrowful.

"You mean," she said, "your home."

"Yes."

"Do you think..." she began.

"I just don't know."

She pulled the car back onto the shoulder, put on the brake, and threw her arms around my neck. I smelled the youthful innocence. And then the moisture from her eyes on my cheek.

In the morning, Karen's eyes are on me as I pick up the phone.

"Fred, I hear you need an electrician."

"Karen been talkin' to you?" Fred asks.

"Yeah."

"Can you handle it?"

"I think so."

"I don't want to find you a pile of ashes."

I hang up the phone.

"He wants me to start today."

"Will you?" Karen asks.

"Yeah."

"I've got to be off to work myself. See you later?"

I hesitate to tell her, but then I do.

"I said I'd give him a half day."

"Because... you mean..."

"Yeah, this afternoon."

"Do you want me there?"

"No."

"I see." She sounds a little disappointed, but then brightens. "I could help, meet you, after, I mean, it wouldn't be any bother." I don't respond. "But you'll be just fine," she says.

"Yeah. I'll be OK."

The low-lying waters of the bay to the east, on our right. To the left the sun disappearing behind tall hills, called by the locals the bluffs. Oak and maple soaring even higher above the hills, interrupted only here and there by a house perched on the occasional stretch of flat land. When the sun's rays found their way through the breaks in the trees, they were no brighter than the smile on my daughter's face as she guided her new car, taking her father home. Even if that home was no longer the one where she lived with her mother.

After Karen leaves, Henry emerges from the corner of the bathroom where he hangs out while she is here. The mix portion of his DNA argues against the retriever's affection for all humanity, and Karen prefers cats. I've tried to encourage their relationship, but neither is too eager. He takes a drink from his dish and then comes to rest his head on my knee with that low rumble in his throat. I scratch his head.

"Go lie down," I say.

He walks to the door and plops down.

"Oh," I say.

I open the door for him and watch him trot out to find a place to relieve himself. The backyard is not fenced, but I know he won't wander too far away. He hasn't had his breakfast yet. I watch him, nose to the ground searching for whatever it is that dogs seek. He checks out an ancient maple with a trunk three feet or more in diameter, but settles instead on the much thinner trunk of a pine. I realize that I am occupying myself with the dog so as not to deal with the more serious issue of what I am going to do this afternoon after work. I pick up the paper on which I scrawled the address that Fred gave me. The site is a lot by itself on the bluffs. The house must be really big, and that means I can make enough working on it to take care of my cash flow problems for a while.

Strangely, that thought does not cause me much joy.

The house, framed out and sheathed, ready for plumbing and electrical installation before the drywall is put up, is easily five or six thousand square feet. I walk through it, following the plans, seeing where the circuits will go, jotting down the material I'll need to have Fred get for me by tomorrow. I am OK as long as I stay focused on the job. But the moment I relax, a distant drumming gets louder and louder in my head until I have to sit down with my hands over my ears. Then the pounding changes to a screech.

As the setting sun found its way over a cleared building lot high up on the bluffs, Susan flipped the visor down while keeping her other hand at two o'clock. Her speed was still

steady at thirty. I felt the warm glow of pride rise from my belly until it filled the car. Sweet, it was, damned sweet. So sweet that I closed my eyes to lock in my memory the image of Susan confidently driving. I might even have dozed for a few seconds.

"Dad!"

Her voice carried a burden of panic I had never heard in it before. I snapped my eyes open. Past the bluffs, the road turns west and we were heading right into the sun, now almost at ground level.

"What do I do?"

A large sedan wearing a halo was coming at us. The white hair of its driver barely above the steering wheel. A cyclist edging around construction workers on the shoulder, their hard hats glowing. A loud horn blasting from behind us. A glance over my shoulder. Eyes clearing. A semi bearing down on us in a hurry to pick up his load of cherries. Her eyes shift from the rear view mirror to the windshield.

"Slow, easy," I said.

She nodded.

The horn from the truck shook the car. The cyclist wobbled into our path. We swerved away from him. Into the path of the oncoming sedan. I grabbed for the steering wheel to yank us back into our lane. The white haired head, eyes fixed on the road, sped toward us. A high pitched screech. And then nothing.

I woke up on a gurney.

"Where is she?" I asked one of the figures in hospital greens.

"Who?"

She looked at my chart.

"Mr. Huggins?"

"Yes. My daughter, Susan Huggins."

"Oh," she said. Her eyes softened. She leaned over and put her hand on my forehead. It was warm.

"I'm so sorry."

Her name tag said Karen.

The cell phone's ring crawls through the screech in my head.

"How's it going?"

Karen's voice is sugar, but I hear the edge, the fear that I am sitting beneath a tree somewhere, just me and my bottle.

"I'm fine," I begin to say, but then the truth grabs my throat. "No, I'm not."

"Tell me about it."

"I keep hearing the screech. I look at the wiring on the plans, and I see the road. I open the door to the service box and there's a head inside. White haired, lunatic eyes."

"Can you continue? Do you want me to come get you?"

I look at my watch.

"No, about you coming. It's time for me to leave anyway."

"Maybe you will be in better shape tomorrow. After."

"Yeah. After."

Beneath its new tower, the entrance to the hospital is still a construction site,

with plywood walls flanking the walkways to the front door. I look up at the temporary lights.

"Hi there, Ed."

I recognize the face of the security guard, but I can't recall his name and his badge only offers a number.

He glances at the lights.

"They're working fine," he says. "Place lights up at night real good."

I nod.

"Haven't seen you since you finished installing them. Where you been?"

"Been away."

Recognition creeps across his face.

"Oh, right. It was just the next day after you finished, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. The next day."

"You not been here since?" he asks, and I pick up the tinge of disapproval.

"Been away, like I said."

I walk past him.

"Sixth floor, west wing," he calls after me.

Sweat has glued my shirt to my back. Inside the lobby, I shiver from the air conditioning and the prospect of what awaits me. I sit on a bench beneath a plaque honoring donors, the kind who build the sort of house I was just in. I stare at the floor. I hear the soft padding of rubber heels, but don't look up. I recognize the legs beneath the green skirt of a nurse's aide. Her hand finds my shoulder.

"You shouldn't have," I say.

"Don't be such a fool," Karen says. "Besides, you forget. I work here."

I glance at the clock and the visiting hours listed below.

"We'd better go."

The sixth floor. A nurse looks up from the desk in front of the swinging doors that lead into ICU.

"Oh, hi Karen," the nurse says. She glances past Karen to me. "It's not visiting hours for another fifteen minutes. And, you know, only family, one at a time."

"Of course," Karen says. "Ed, give us a minute." She points toward a door over which a sign says "Visitors Waiting Room." *Visitor*. I am a visitor. The word seems so woefully inadequate to describe what I am about to do.

I walk into the room, and take a seat. Across from me a young woman turns the pages of a magazine without pause. She gets to the end, puts it down, picks up another without looking at its cover, and turns its pages. Karen pushes the door open and sits down next to me.

"Judy'll be here when visiting begins. She's always right on time. Lucy says you can go in now."

Queasiness grips my stomach.

"Maybe I'd better come back. When there's more time."

She squeezes my hand.

"No, I don't think so. If she comes earlier than usual..."

"You'll stand guard."

"Something like that."

I start to get up.

"There's something you need to know," Karen says. "Lucy just told me."

I sit back down.

"There's somebody else who comes. Not to visit. Because she can't."

"You mean..."

Karen nods.

"She just checks in at the nurses' station. Then sits here. Sometimes she talks to Judy."

"Does she, you know, ask after me?"

"Yes."

I take a deep breath.

"Well, what the hell." I get up. As I pass the young woman, she looks up for a moment from her magazine, and then glances at her watch.

I was checked over, X-rayed, and sent home with a prescription for painkillers for my bruises. I preferred the Scotch. But that came later. First I had to go to the wrecker.

The Escort had collapsed on the driver's side like it had been smashed by a giant sledgehammer. The driver's door was ripped off. The windshield on the driver's side looked like it had a spider's web in it. The steering wheel was pushed back to within a few inches of the driver's seat. I could only imagine the wheel crushing her ribs, her head flattened against the glass of the windshield. The air bag hung like a limp rag over the passenger's seat. On the shelf in the passenger side door was her beaded purse. On the back seat was her knapsack.

That's when I chose the Scotch, crawled into the bottle, drained it, and bought more.

When Karen called the first time, I told her I didn't want pity. She said that was a good because she wasn't going to dispense any.

Lucy leads me into the ICU. Only two beds are occupied. The first holds an old man with an oxygen mask over his face.

"The woman in the waiting room," I say.

"Her father," Lucy answers.

We arrive at the other occupied bed.

"It's a miracle she's still with us," Lucy says. And then with a glance at her watch, she leaves me to commune with what is left of my daughter.

Karen has tried to prepare me for this moment, telling me that Susan will look as though she is sleeping, just like when she was little and you'd want to kiss her good night, tuck her in, tell her a story. Except there will be the feeding tube going down her throat. And the wires attached to monitor her vital signs. Still, her bruises and abrasions have healed, so she will look pretty much like she did before the accident. What Karen didn't say, of course, was that despite this appearance her brain is now mush. The doctors told me so. They called me up and insisted I listen to them, she is still your daughter after all, you have joint custody, they said, and decisions are going to have to be made, if not now, down the road, don't you want to be involved? So, I listened to them tell me they were not yet sure if recovery was possible, and if it wasn't I asked, what then? And they said, we'll talk about that then, and I said, no, tell me now,

and they asked do you know what persistent vegetative state means? Yeah, I answered, I do, like that woman in Florida, but looking at my daughter I see that was a lie. Nobody does.

I perch on the bed, and take her hand. It feels warm. I imagine a slight squeeze. Is that a flutter of her eyelids? Her color is good. Her breathing regular.

I try to find the words. All I can manage to whisper is her name.

I pressure her hand. I know there is no response. I am reaching out to a shell that no longer houses my daughter.

I fooled myself into thinking that I might feel relief once I made this visit. But it is rage that is welling up inside of me. It needs a target. I close my eyes and see that white haired head above the steering wheel.

She is in the visitor waiting room, her face just as I remember it when it was bearing down on us. She is talking to Karen. She looks up when I open the door. Her pale blue eyes water, and her thin lips tremble.

"Mr. Huggins..." she starts, but then just bows her head. I wait as my rage starts to melt before this frail old woman who has been doing what I have not had the courage to do, and so my anger like steam from a pot of boiling water rises into the air, but leaves behind a scorched, solid bubble. She lifts her head and forces a little smile. She has dentures and they seem to be loose.

"I have a granddaughter," she says, "the same age."

And then she cannot go on. She gets to her feet.

"Maybe you don't want me to come anymore?"

The bubble lifts for a moment.

"It has been good of you to come. Every day. Like I should have."

"Don't blame yourself," she says.

The bubble settles back down. I feel it lodge in my belly. It will be there a long time. Maybe forever.

"But I do," I say.

Back at home, a candle burning down to a stump between two empty wine glasses tinting the reflected light red, I take the police report off the wall.

"Burn it," Karen says. "You know damned well what it says, the sun, the construction, the truck, the cyclist, the other car."

"And the damned driver side air bag that didn't inflate."

"Yes, that too."

The phone rings.

"So you saw her?"

Judy's voice is burdened with tears.

"Yes."

"What do you think? Will she..."

"I pray," I say.

"Do you remember how?"

"I never did. But..."

"Yes. Now would be a good time to learn."

I hang the phone up. Karen takes my hand. In the other is the report. I nod. She places a corner of it into the flame of the candle and then sets it onto

a plate. The paper curls and the smoke rises in a swirling gray vapor. In a few minutes, there are only ashes and a lingering wisp of smoke.

The pain in my gut, though diminished, remains.

Karen looks at me. Hard.

"Will you go to work tomorrow?"

I nod.

"And after?"

"I will sit with her. And think of something to say."

"That is all you can do," Karen says.

"Yes."

Sometimes Susan's eyes open and seem to focus, but the doctors remain skeptical. The bed next to her was empty for a few days, but it is again occupied, this time by a frail old woman whose husband waits for visiting hours each day.

Old people attending old people.

My daughter in the adjoining bed, her face as youthful as on that fateful day.

Karen has moved in. She and Henry are reaching an accommodation, a wary acceptance of each other. I meet her at the hospital every evening after work. Judy visits with Susan during the day. We didn't discuss this arrangement. It just evolved. The white haired driver of the other car, whose name I have learned is Deborah, still comes, but now needs a cane on her way to a walker and perhaps a bed in the unit. Karen keeps her company while I sit with Susan.

We drive home through the changing seasons. The cherry harvest is long over, and the last apples are on the trees. The maples have turned bright orange and yellow as though they were on fire but there is a frost in the air and dry leaves drift down to the ground.