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The Visit

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Gail walked down the dirt road, as slowly as she could; she didn't want to go. The dirt in the road was scuffing up her white sandals. What should she say to her father, how should she act? Gail hadn't seen him in three years, and that was only a visit.

She walked up to the big brick house that belonged to her grandparents. She was living there for the summer, working at the Bible camp her grandfather was managing.

Gail walked in slowly, and went to the kitchen, where she heard voices. She paused in the doorway, and took a deep breath. What could she say? Ask him about his family. That was always a safe one. Gail pushed open the door. There, at the table with Grandma, was her father.

He was different than how she'd imagined him. He looked older, like the 35 he was. She'd remembered him so young. He was no longer slim, but slightly heavy. His clothes were old, out of fashion.

Memories flooded her mind. The time she visited him in Kalamazoo. The time he came up for her birthday, and took her for a walk in the woods, read a book to her. Tossing a beach ball around, playing "Coal Mine" and "Horsey".

Grandma turned around. "Well, hello! Hello! Look who's here! Come in, sit down!" Gail smiled and sat down, her stomach knotted up. The man smiled back. "What does he think of me?" Gail wondered. "Am I how he imagined me?"

"Hi!" She said as grandma left the room. An awkward silence followed.

"Well, Gail, you're quite a young lady now."

"Yes." Gail stared at the table-cloth, then slowly sneaked a look at him. He was so different, yet the same. His voice was different, too—very soft-spoken. She could faintly remember sitting on his lap once, eating ice-cream. Was this really the same man? She studied the table-cloth some more.
“How do you like working here?”
“I love it!” Gail looked at him, then slid her glance away when their eyes met. She swallowed. This man was her father! Surely she should be able to think of something to say!
“Uh-how-how’s your sisters?” he asked.
“Oh fine. How’s your wife and kids?”
“They’re fine . . . I—uh, I’m borrowing Dad’s car to drive back down tomorrow, and bring them up. I didn’t want to bring them in my car, in case it broke down. Would—uh—would you like to ride down with me?”

Her mother’s voice haunted her. “You probably don’t remember, but he was awfully cruel to you girls when you were little . . .” Gail remembered. She tried not to, but she did, faintly. It was all just a dream, with no feelings in it. What could she say to a stranger for two hours? She didn’t want to meet his family.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I have to work tomorrow. I teach the three to five year olds, in the chapel.”

“Oh.” Gail couldn’t tell if he was disappointed or relieved or what. She remembered some things she knew about him—he could never hold down a job. His new family didn’t have much money. He was always behind in his support payments. She cleared her throat.

“Um, going to the beach today?” She asked.

“Yeah, I might go later.”

“Well, I’m going. Maybe you can meet me there. Later.”

“Sure.” Gail smiled, took one last look, and ran upstairs, where Grandma was just coming down.

“Well, Gail! Are you glad to see your first Daddy?” Grandma asked.

Gail mustered up enough enthusiasm to say “Yeah!” and started to walk away, but Grandma stopped her.

“Are you two getting along all right?”

Gail sighed, exasperated. “Yeah, we’re going to the beach later.”

She started to squirm away, but Grandma closed in on her. “Now Gail, I want you to be especially nice to Iva, all right?”

Gail set her face in a firm line. “Yeah, sure, of course,” she said as nicely as she could, starting up the stairs for the third time.

“Because,” Grandma whispered up the stairs after her, “she’s not
too well lately . . . ”

Gail nodded, “Yeah, yeah, sure,” as she hurried away. She didn’t care about her father’s wife at all.

A few minutes later, Gail was walking back up the dirt road, a T-shirt hanging modestly over her bathing suit. She thought of the time Grandma took her to visit him in Kalamazoo. The memory came in flashes: riding with Grandma in the top-down car—waiting in some hospital lobby, watching nurses walk by—seeing her father walk in the lobby, smiling—wondering how he got out of bed if he was sick—going to see a movie—going out for a hamburger.

She hadn’t known at the time that it was a mental hospital.

Gail walked up the beach, and noticed a red flag flying. The waves were high. It would be good body-surfing.

Gail wandered into the pool, located right on the beach. It was practically deserted, everyone was out battling the waves. She went up on the sundeck and opened a book.

The only times her mother ever mentioned Gail’s father was when the support check didn’t come, and it was all bad. A few times Mom mentioned a girlfriend. Once she pointed the girlfriend out to Gail, and visions of her father as a playboy seeped away when she saw a fat, unkempt woman with too much lipstick on.

Gail looked up, and saw her father asking Bruce, the lifeguard, something. Bruce pointed to the sundeck, and her father started walking towards it.

Gail suddenly got an urge to cry. He looked even heavier in the bathing suit. Why did people have to get old, anyhow? Yet his smile was the same as she’d always remembered. He seemed really glad to see her.

They went out to the lake, to body-surf. Gail’s mood lifted a little, it was kind of fun. Once a wave knocked her down, and he reached down and picked her up awkwardly.

“Thanks, Daddy!” she said breathlessly. He dropped his arm slowly, clumsily, and Gail quickly turned around just in time to catch the next wave.

Finally, tired, they started walking up the beach, Gail a step ahead.

“You know,” he said, “I can remember your favorite T.V. show
when you were little. It was Flintstones." Gail looked at him a second, then smiled quickly, and looked back down at the sand.
What were you supposed to say to something like that? Why should he want to remember that? She went back to the time she was dusting and found a letter under the piano. It was from her father to her mother's new husband, offering to let him adopt Gail and her two sisters. She'd almost died when she read that.
Uncle Jason walked up and offered to take them for a canoe ride up the less-turbulent channel. Gail decided to stay, and the two men walked off.
She went back to the pool, to get her things. Bruce walked up, twirling his whistle around in rhythm to his gum-chewing. "Your father seems like a very nice man," he said.
"I guess so."
"You don't think so?"
"I don't know!" Gail replied crossly. She didn't know what she thought. What did everyone expect of her, anyhow? She walked away.
Next day found Gail walking down the dirt road. It was hot out and the road was dusty. She didn't want to meet her father's family.
Gail hadn't seen too much of her father since yesterday afternoon. She'd hidden behind the excuse of work last night and this morning, so she wouldn't have to see him. Gail didn't really have to work, but she didn't want him to find out. She wouldn't hurt him for the world.
Everyone was in the yard, sitting outside. Grandma was holding Timmy. Timmy looked like he was about eight months old. He was fat, and by far the ugliest baby she'd ever seen. Betty was running around the yard. She was too thin and never talked, only smiled a lot. Gail sat on a lawn chair; she said hello to Iva. Her father had met Iva in the hospital. A couple of mentals.
No one was talking. Gail couldn't stand it. She told them that she had to work at the cook-out, and left. She hurried down the road and over to the conference ground, where the cook-out was in progress.
The line was awfully long, there were about two-hundred people. Bruce was on the grill, flipping hamburgers furiously. Fellow waitresses ran around, making sure the buffet tables were filled.
Grandpa walked up and asked Gail to bring some food home to
Iva and her father, since they didn’t feel up to coming. Gail knew it was really because Iva didn’t like crowds, or any people, for that matter.

She filled a tray up with food and walked home.

The old car was gone, the yard was empty. Gail walked inside, and found Grandma crying on the couch.

“Grandma?” Gail asked. “Grandma? What’s wrong?”

Grandma sighed, then explained, “I didn’t know what to say to Iva, so I asked if the baby had lots of sun. Iva blew up, said I was meddling, and that she took care of her children. She argued with your father, and me . . .” And then, apparently, went upstairs to pack what she had just unpacked.

Her father told Grandma that Iva was afraid “They” were going to get her and take her kids away from her. She was relapsing. She might have to go back to the mental hospital. Maybe they’d better go home.

Gail made Grandma lie down, and went up to her room, the one overlooking Mona Lake.

They were gone. Looking out over the lake, all Gail could feel was relief. She hoped her mother never found out they had come. They were strangers, those people. They had driven in and out of her life. She didn’t care about them. So why was she crying?