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### The Visitor

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# The Visitor<sup>1</sup>

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A tall, wiry man stood at the door and pressed the buzzer. His mushroom-coloured trench coat was from another era, and the brim of his brown fedora projected over his tired eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses. His thin, veiny hand cupped a small package against his chest.

It was early Sunday morning. The last of Montreal's winter snow had melted, leaving behind the customary detritus of gravel, sand, and dirt on the sidewalks. The air was cool despite the sunshine.

The old man was getting impatient. He pressed the buzzer again. Inside the apartment, a woman in slacks walked down the narrow corridor to answer the door. Her black hair was dyed, and her dark brown eyes and olive skin were like the man's. Two little boys came up behind her. The second-floor apartment was narrow and cramped, and the muffled sound of the fans from the restaurant kitchen below reverberated throughout.

The woman opened the door and looked up at the man. He was standing there frozen. The woman had been expecting him, but now she wasn't sure if it was really him. So many years had passed.

"Hello, Zena," the old man said awkwardly, his strong Italian accent emphasizing the Z.

He was not at all the way Zena remembered him. He was thinner than she had imagined. His forehead was wrinkled, and his cheeks were hollow and drooping. He was an old man now. Except for his voice. It was still powerful and deep. With just the two words, Zena recalled its unwavering self-assurance.

"Oh, come in," Zena heard herself say. "Give me your coat," she said uncomfortably. The man put his package on the floor against the wall and handed Zena his hat and coat. The two little boys snickered and whispered to each other as they peered from behind a doorway in the narrow corridor. The old man looked at them and smiled faintly. Their whispers and giggles faded as they disappeared behind the doorway.

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<sup>1</sup>An alternate version of this story was published under the title "Homecoming" in *Influence and Confluence: East and West. A Global Anthology on the Short Story*, edited by Maurice A. Lee. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2016

"Please sit," Zena said, as she led the old man into the tiny living room. His knees almost touched the rectangular coffee table as he sat in the armchair facing Zena.

The momentary silence made Zena uncomfortable. "Why did you come?" she finally asked. "Why did you leave?" she continued in the same breath.

The old man remained impassive. "I... I wanted to see you," he said with some hesitation.

"Mother died last year," she said almost accusingly.

"Yes, I know," he replied, looking away.

Zena remembered the last time she had seen her father. It was 25 years ago—in 1945. He had returned from America after six years. The war was over and trans-Atlantic travel had re-opened. Zena was 16. But even then, she had hardly known the man who now sat before her. She had seen him perhaps a half-dozen times in her life, and for short periods. Like many men of his generation, Angelo had left a wife and small children behind in search of a new destiny in the years between the world wars.

For two decades, whenever means allowed, he returned to his family in Calabria. His stays were always brief, and with every stay he added to his wife's burden by getting her pregnant. Zena was the last of a brood of ten. She had only fleeting memories of her father, fashioned through the lens of a child—an uncontested patriarch who did as he pleased.

The last time Angelo returned, the family had high hopes that he would take everyone with him to a new home in a new world. But that was not to be. Zena remembered how everyone's hopes were dashed when he announced that he would be returning to America alone again. He needed more time to prepare for the family's arrival. He would send the money for everyone's passage soon, he had promised.

The family waited weeks, then months, but word never came. Then, letters and postcards stopped coming altogether. Letters sent to his address were returned. All traces of Angelo had vanished.

The family eventually gave up trying to find him. His fate remained unknown until Zena received a letter a few weeks ago.

"My father isn't dead after all," she had said to her husband. "How did he find me? Why is he writing to me now?"

"I am happy to see you," Angelo said, as he sat uncomfortably in his daughter's tiny living room. "Now, you are married, with children of your own..." His voice trailed off.

"We made you out for dead," Zena said without expression. She looked away. *You may as well have been...* is what she wanted to say, but she didn't have the courage. Memories of a fatherless childhood, of a backward village inhabited by close-minded people, gossips—*malelingue*, her mother would call them—of broken promises, of hopes dashed, came crashing into the present.

Angelo understood Zena's resentment, but at this late stage in his life and in his condition, he would take his chances. He knew that his decision to re-emerge carried certain risks. Would any of his children even reply to his missives? Would they agree to see him?

He had started with what he reckoned was the weakest link. Zena was the baby, the one Angelo cherished the most. Even from afar, he had stayed abreast of her situation. It wasn't difficult. There were few degrees of separation among the *paesani* scattered throughout the continent to whom he could surreptitiously inquire about his family. If he would not see any of his other children, at least he will have seen Zena.

"You are wondering what I'm doing here," he told Zena, as they sat facing each other. "You hate me. But I..."

"No, I don't hate you," Zena interrupted. Now she was holding back tears. She regretted that she had answered the letter. She wanted to cry and scream at the same time. But that was not her way. She tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry. The old man who sat before her was but a shadow of the father she remembered, one she had created and recreated in her mind. But still she did not dare berate him or show him any discourtesy.

Maybe she had replied to his letter to let him see that she had managed to make a life for herself in spite of his absence. Or was it out of curiosity, to see if it was really him? Did she long to know that she still had a father? Her thoughts became jumbled.

"I was never a man to stay too long in one place," Angelo broke the silence. "But now I am old and tired." After another brief silence he added, "Your mother and I did not..." He hesitated. "In our day people did not marry for love," he stated matter-of-factly. His mood was sombre.

The two little boys peered from behind the curtain that separated the living room from a small dining room. "*Vieni*," the old man said gently, looking at the boy closest to him. "Come closer." The boy stayed put.

"Anthony, Mike, come say hello to your grandfather," Zena called out to the boys.

The old man reached over and opened the package he had brought. It contained chocolates which he offered the children.

"I see you have a good life," he told Zena. "I am happy for you." He stood up abruptly. "I have stayed too long already." He reached over and took Zena's hand in both of his and bowed his head slightly. He turned to pick up his hat and coat, and in a flash made his way out the door. He was gone. Zena stood motionless in the quiet apartment, wondering if any of it was real.

The phone ringing shattered the stillness in the apartment. It was 3:15 in the morning. Sleepily, Zena picked up the receiver.

"Angelo," she said. "Yes, my father," she confirmed to the voice at the other end.

The voice belonged to a hospital administrator. "He became ill in the taxi," he explained. "There was nothing we could do."

Zena stood in the dark in silence. "How did you get my number?" she asked.

"One of the emergency nurses," the voice explained. "There was another number, in California," he went on. "I called the local number first."

"Oh? California?" Zena was surprised.

"Will you claim the body?" the voice wanted to know.

"Yes, of course," Zena said. "Tomorrow evening. Yes, I know where," she confirmed. She hung up and stood in the dark, alone and dazed.

Zena walked down the narrow corridor towards the entrance of the hospital morgue, the clanging of her heels against the hard, shiny floor echoing off the walls. A young, tanned woman stood by the entrance and stared as Zena approached. She was bleary-eyed and nervous. Zena stopped when she neared the younger woman. The two women looked enough alike that they could be sisters.

"In his will," the young woman began hesitantly, "my father asked to be buried in California. Next to my mother," she continued, as her voice trailed off.

Zena could feel the tears welling up, grasping the full implications of the young woman's pronouncement. It was in California that many years ago her father had chosen to remake his life—with a new family.

Zena took a moment to compose herself. She stared at her younger counterpart from head to toe, turned and walked away.