



Sarah Dickerson

VISITATION RIGHTS

David is late again. It's always by half an hour, every time, and I know I should have figured this out a long time ago. We sit in a plastic yellow booth, me drinking coffee, Esther and Emily across from me dipping Chicken McNuggets into little containers of sauce. Everything is too bright in here, too tan and yellow and hard and plastic. My foot jiggles like crazy.

I drive for an hour to get here, the halfway point between my old home town, where we live now, and where we used to live. I worry myself sick every time, just before we hit the road. What if the car breaks down before we get there? What if I get a flat tire? What if I swerve off a bridge and the whole car sinks into the water below and all of us drown? I saw a television show once that explained how to escape from your car when it's under water, and now I can't remember what they said. How would I get the girls out? Do I open the car window slowly, or quickly? I can't remember, and it's still bothering me, even now that we're already here.

The girls see David every other weekend. Sometimes Thomas comes with him, to say hello, to meet us for dinner. I hold tight to the coffee cup so my fingers won't rattle so much—I don't care about my foot—and look across the table at Emily. She needs a haircut; her bangs reach her nose, and I can hardly see her eyes. Esther is high strung. She prattles on, saying, "Mommy, Mommy, guess what?" and then she talks on, and on and on she goes. I don't listen to a word she says. And no matter how many times I've tried to tell Emily she doesn't have to tip her cup to drink from a straw, she's doing it anyway, and I'm waiting for soda to break through the plastic top and spill into her lap. "You don't have to tip it, Emily. Hold it straight." It would be easier not to have to do this, just stay home with the girls in our little underground apartment. I'd like to forget about these weekend visits, stay home and eat dinner at the coffee table, watch *The Lion King*, take baths and read stories, go to bed. I need a cigarette.

Finally, David and Thomas walk through the doors, both of them grinning like mad. I can't believe it: Thomas's hair is dyed cherry black. He's wearing a black t-shirt with a rock band logo on it, I don't know who. His baggy pants are too long and hang low from his hips. I don't mind the new fashions for kids, but the cherry black hair kills me. And David really kills me. He too is wearing a black t-shirt with a rock band logo on it, and a pair of John-Lennon sunglasses, even though it's getting dark. They look like buddies, and not like father and son, and I know from seeing their home that they live like roommates in college.

David had moved out to be with Michelle, but blames me, says I'm the one that wanted the divorce, like I was supposed to be okay with that. Then he said: "I'm taking Thomas with me."

I hate David now. It makes me nuts how much I hate him.

The two of them were a package deal. Thomas was three, blond and cute like Ricky Schroeder. He called me *Thurrah* because he couldn't say *Sarah*. He liked *He-Man* and re-runs of *Dukes of Hazzard*. I used to sit in the living room of their tiny apartment while David tucked Thomas into bed—*Night-night, sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite*—like tucking an angel into a cloud. He was cute as a button. Just like a fairy. Every single cliché for sweetness—that's what he was.

Later, I washed his hair when he bathed, helped him with his pajamas, read to him, tucked him in myself. *Night-night, sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite*. Later, he called me *Mom*.

Now he is fifteen, and he slides in next to me to gauge my reaction to the new hair color. I respond the way I think he might want me too, shocked and surprised, and give him a hug. He feels sharp and bony beneath all the black, cool and hard. Beneath all the black I know he is sweet, but I don't like the hair color. In fact, I hate it and want to tell him so, but he's not mine enough for that anymore. I wonder if that's why he's grinning so much.

David slips in next to the girls and squashes Emily in the middle. He reaches around her to rub Esther's head and then gives her a one-armed hug. Emily grabs for his sunglasses and

David lets her pull them off and put them on herself. David chuckles and smiles with big white teeth, and Emily is so cute, I have to smile too. For the weekend, the girls will be with David and Thomas—my old family—and during that time, I will be alone.

My foot is shaking. It's out of control.

David and Thomas get meals and sit down. I hold tight to my coffee cup. They are conversing, talking lively, telling me what's new, and Esther says, "Daddy, Daddy, guess what?" and Thomas with cherry black hair is talking to me and I'm saying, "Yeah, oh, really?" I'm not part of this family. I'm watching their gestures, their eating, I'm hearing their talking, and the colors of this place are too much, all the tan and yellow.

"Well," I say. "I have to go." I slide out of the plastic booth and stand, and now it's the four of them. It reminds me of the song Thomas used to sing: *five little monkeys jumping on the bed, one fell off and bumped his head. . . .* "You have a nice time at Daddy's," I say to the girls. "I'll see you on Sunday."

They will be fine.

"Get up and hug me, Tom," I say, and he does, and his body is thin and hard against me, and then he says, "I love you, Mom."

He thinks the divorce is my fault too, that I wasn't nice enough to his father, didn't love him enough, and that's why David is happier with Michelle. I wonder if Thomas is happier.

"I love you, too," I accidentally spit.

The truth is: I hate him.

I hate them both.

I used to ask David, especially near the end, "Do you love me? Do you love me?" He must have said it a million times. Probably just to appease me.

I'm driving home at the speed of light, fast and easy, and I feel good now because I can't wait to get to see my lover, Hugh. Hugh is an artist—a real artist, that is; also an artist in the kitchen. A couple of weeks ago, he made chicken breasts stuffed with some kind of fancy sauce, fried mushrooms (my favorite), and

salad with his own homemade vinaigrette dressing. I like to sit at the stool in his kitchen, drink beer, and watch him cook. It's warm and safe inside and smells like old food and kitty litter. The overhead fluorescent light is burnt out, and a small wall lamp above the sink gives off soft light while he cooks. Kitchen gadgets and mixing bowls litter the counter top, along with spoons and measuring cups and rows of spices bottled and labeled in old half-pint whisky bottles. The dishes and gadgets are always dirty from the night before, or the week before, and he has to wash each item as he uses it. He's never in a hurry, and I'm always mesmerized by how slowly and steadily and easily he slices mushrooms, how calmly he works in the soft light of the kitchen, taking time out from his task now and then to kiss me, and when he does, I throw my arms around his neck and hold on and he has to tell me to let go so he can cook. Sometimes I clean his kitchen for him.

Back in town after dropping off the girls, I'm antsy, anxious again, and I can't wait to get to Hugh's house. But I have to stop at the store first and get a twelve-pack of beer. I run in, impatient, grab the beer, pay for it, run back to the car. Oh! And wine. Sometimes we like to drink wine. I run back into the party store, grab a gallon jug of Chablis, run back out, and head over to Hugh's.

But when I get there I see the house is dark and his truck is gone. He's probably gone to Detroit, perhaps to work at his friend's art studio or visit with his elderly mother. I park in the street, letting the car run. I hate it that he won't tell me when he's leaving, when he won't be home, especially on the weekends he knows I'm free. He won't put up with *expectations*; he's told me that many times. He does not want to report his comings and goings. He is not interested in commitment. I tell myself I'm relieved by the last part.

But I'm not. I feel lost, defeated. Deflated—alone. There is nothing to do but go home, with my twelve-pack of beer and gallon jug of wine, back to my underground apartment, the last place in the world I want to go.

I put the car into drive and move down the street, away from Hugh's house. When I get home, I unlock the front door, walk in, and flip on the kitchen light. I tell myself it's just as well. I ought to stay home and get my own kitchen clean anyway. That's what I should do. There's a lot of things I should do, should have done, all those things balled up into a massive knot of guilt.

I grab a bottle from the twelve-pack and stick the rest into the refrigerator. Sippy cups and baby bottles half-filled with juice sit on the counter top beside plates of half-eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and brown slices of apple. Emily is three, almost four, and still drinks her juice from a bottle, sometimes carrying it around the house between her teeth. She's still in diapers too, and I know I should do something about it. I walk through the kitchen and into the dining room and throw my keys and purse on the table. In the living room, Esther's school bag is still on the floor where she left it, along with Emily's baby dolls, six or seven of them lined up, covered in make-shift baby blankets of kitchen towels and pillow cases, all of them asleep on the floor.

I turn around and stare at my computer, the one my mother bought for me, on the dining room table. *You should write! You've always been so good at it!*

I could. I'm even taking a writing class. I could open a beer and journal out my misery, adding to pages and pages of unhappy thoughts. I like the gentle clicking sound when I hit the keys, the way they feel under my fingertips. I like to watch the words stream across the screen. I could work on my essay, the one about all the places I've lived with David and Thomas, then Esther and Emily, all the places we moved to, the apartments with white-painted drywall, beige carpeting, and Ikea furniture. I used to have trouble finding the studs in the walls to hang things, and I'd end up making a line of nail holes across the walls before I got it right.

I grab a bottle of pills from my purse, open it, and shake out two.



The next morning I wake, and the apartment is still quiet. The living room, the dining room, and the kitchen are the same as the day before, plus seven empty beer bottles and an overflowing ashtray.

I need coffee, and I quickly make a pot and fire up the computer. I will write. I empty the ashtray and set it on the dining room table, and while I wait for my coffee, I read the opening lines of my new essay:

My home is an apartment. It has a living room with a small dining room off to the side. A short hallway leads to the two bedrooms and bathroom. People live above us and next to us in identical apartments, all with beige carpeting and white-painted drywall. If you miss the stud when you're hanging up a picture or painting, the nail sinks all the way into the emptiness behind the drywall, and you have to keep banging along the wall with the hammer until you hear that solid sound.

But I can't do this now. I can't face the hollowness behind the drywall, nor the memories of my efforts to nail down security, my failure to hang on to my marriage. I can't face the emptiness of this apartment either.

I decide to take a walk. I need the exercise and I need to get out of here. I should walk every day; it would be good for me. My life, it seems, is full of *shoulds*. I put on a sweatshirt and grab my Nikes.

I step out of the apartment and think about what I should have done, what I could have done. Walking is good. Out in the sunshine, I pick up the pace. This is good. I watch each foot move forward, one at a time. One, two, one, two, one, two, I watch out for cracks in the sidewalk—doesn't everybody? I like the rhythm. Should I have loved him more? Could I have made him happy? I head up to campus because it's as good a destination as any. I should have loved Thomas more; I should have been more lovable. The tree-lined streets are oddly empty for a Saturday morning; small college towns are funny that way, how they can be so

quiet and seemingly abandoned: no students with school bags, no one on bikes or rollerblades like you might see during the week.

I cross a street and the trees and houses stop. Campus begins: All the buildings are nearly identical, hooked together with long criss-crossing sidewalks over vast lawns with little patches of flower gardens. There are no people and no cars. And so I walk, one, two, one, two.

A truck speeds by, a blue Datsun truck. It's Hugh!

It goes right by me.

So, he is in town. For a moment, I feel happy, relieved. He must be going to the art studio. I head that way quickly, in case he should disappear. One-two-one-two-one-two-one-two. I go around the back of the building where he pulls his truck up by the door. It's locked, so I bang on it. It opens.

"Hi!" he says. He looks so handsome. His curly graying hair is tied back in a pony tail, and his eyes are deep blue. He's wearing loose-fitting green slacks and work boots, and a tan t-shirt with brown lettering that says "Will Teach for Food." He was a popular teacher here once, well-liked, but he never bothered to finish his MFA.

"Hi. I tried to stop by last night."

"Oh, yeah. I was out."

"Oh."

"Yeah. I went out."

"Oh," I say again.

He's looking at me, intently, almost smiling, his arms folded.

"I've got to get some work done. I've been putting it off, and I've got to get it done." He stands there, and I'm waiting for him to ask me to come by later. But he doesn't.

We stand there.

I smell wood, marble dust, metal. Huge shelves with pottery of various shapes and in various stages of firing line the walls. I remember one night we played pool at The Bird. We had made a bet. If I won, he'd give me his coffee maker, the one he kept here at the studio. I can't remember what I was supposed

to give him, because I ended up winning. We drove to campus at two A.M., and Hugh unlocked the building. We came in, grabbed the coffee pot, and went upstairs to the lounge. We had sex on the sofa next to the vending machines.

The building hums.

“Oh,” I say. “Well. I’ll see you then.” He walks me to the door, gives me a hug. I lean my face into his shoulder, and he smells like the studio—artsy. I don’t want to let go. But he pats my back.

“Really, I’ve got to get some work done,” he tells me.

Already I feel the tears coming, but I hang onto them.

“I’ll see you later,” he says.

“Okay.” I walk out the door and walk home: one, two, one, two—*two little monkeys jumping on the bed, one fell off and bumped his head* . . . I start to cry.

I cry all the way home.

I walk into my apartment and it’s all the same: baby bottles and sippy cups on the kitchen counter tops, all the baby dolls on the living room floor. The computer is on. There are five bottles of beer left. And a bottle of wine. I pull the pills out of my purse.

On Sunday, David brings the girls home. They bound in, glad to be home, and David looks at me and my red swollen eyes. “Are you okay?” he asks. I shake my head no and cry some more. It’s strange how I turn to him—the source of my hurt—for comfort. This makes me think about our divorce. We had gone to the courthouse together. Thomas watched the girls at David’s house. After the proceedings, I cried all the way to the car, and David kept his arm around me, holding me close as we walked. I remember him saying, “Don’t do what I did when I first got a divorce,” like he was an old pro, and I was learning the ropes. “Don’t get drunk and pick somebody up at the bar. It’s not worth it.”

“You smell like wine,” is what he says now.

At six o’clock, I make dinner for the girls and myself. We eat at the coffee table. I put them in the bathtub at seven, and at seven

forty-five, I go in and wash their hair. They get out, damp and pruney and wrapped in towels. Two minutes later, they toss their towels to the floor, run into the living room, and yell at the top of their little lungs: “NAKED TIME!”

And they’re off. The old lamp in the corner gives off a soft, perfect light, and Esther is in the lead, about a half a foot taller than Emily. Emily runs after her, both of them squeaky-clean perfect and brand new, squealing and laughing and naked. They run in circles, through the kitchen, into the dining room, the living room, back into the kitchen, and around and around. My job is to sit on the living room floor and pretend to try to catch them and miss.

I’ll let them run, reaching out to grab at them once in a while, which makes them scream and laugh. Finally I won’t be able to resist and I’ll grab at Esther and pull her into my lap with my arms wrapped tight around so she can’t escape. She’ll laugh and wiggle and try to break free, and I’ll feel her naked in my arms, and sniff and kiss her wet head. I’ll let her go and get Emily next. Still and always my baby, little, naked, and helpless, she’ll be hysterical with giggles.

Later, when they’re in pajamas, I’ll read to them. When they’re in bed, I’ll sing all the songs to the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” the ABC song, and “Ba Ba Black Sheep”—and then their favorite, “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” I have to sing them all, every night, but I don’t mind. Then, I’ll say, “Night-night, don’t let the bed bugs bite—sleep tight.”

But really, I don’t usually say that last part, and now Esther is alarmed: “Bugs? What bugs? What are you talking about?”

That was David’s and Thomas’s routine. Not ours.

“There’s no bed bugs here, are there?”

I shouldn’t have said that.

“No,” I tell her. “There are no bed bugs.” But I know it’ll be one of many things she’ll worry about, just as I worry about everything, too. What I won’t know, for a long time, is that there was nothing I could have done to keep David and Thomas from leaving. I could not have loved them any more. Nor could I ever

love my girls more fiercely than I do each night at bedtime. “Go to sleep now,” I tell Esther and kiss her forehead. I see that Emily is already asleep. The hard part is taking care of them alone, and I realize we’ll have to stick with our own bedtime routines.

The hard part is everything, really, and knowing that love isn’t enough.