

The Visit

By

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Not until after the third round of pounding did Leonard Rubin push himself out of his chair. With his impaired hearing, he could have mistaken the initial racket for the neighbors' kid jumping on the floor above him. The second set of banging could have been the Korean restaurant's driver delivering a take-out dinner to Mr. Choi in 308, but when the raucous knocking resumed for the third time, Leonard tucked his toes in his house slippers and unlocked the door to his apartment.

Standing in the doorway stood a woman of about thirty. "Your doorbell's dead," she said, and extended her reddened knuckles toward him as proof of her multiple attempts.

Leonard leaned out and stared at the mute bell. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had rung it. "Yes," he admitted, "it's dead."

"Did you forget about our appointment?" she said and produced a clipboard from an oversized leather bag.

At eighty-seven, Leonard's memory came with gaps. "No," he lied.

"You'd forgotten," the woman said and let out a sigh.

"Come in, then," he said and swung the door three-quarters of the way. "You're letting the heat out into the hallway."

She flashed a smile and brushed past him, the raised collar of her animal fur stroking his cheek. She stood in the middle of his one-bedroom apartment and said, "We talked on the phone. We confirmed for eight."

“Yes,” he said, nodding in comprehension.

“I’m Lisa Randolph, a social worker for L.A County. I work in the C.A.R.E. unit—Caring for Aged, Retired Elders. You agreed to take part in our survey.” She removed her coat and draped it on the back of a chair. He gazed at her summery, slightly above the knee white dress emblazoned with prints of pomegranates; a beautiful dress yet unfit for the frosty night.

She took a seat and scanned the polished-wood furnishings and the tall bookcase belonging to her subject. “You agreed to tell us why you chose to remain here.”

Leonard Rubin was one of few remaining relics in his Korea Town neighborhood. His friends—they could now be counted on one hand—had either moved to condos in the Valley, to fancy retirement hotels on the Westside, or, the more fortunate ones, to permanent, smaller quarters at Mount Sinai cemetery.

“Would you like a cold or hot drink?” he said to the young woman, motioning to his miniature kitchen.

The social worker smiled and crossed one bare leg over the other, making tiny circles with the tip of her black boot. “Tea, that’d be great,” she said, and swiped a pen from under the clipboard. “Do you mind if we get started?”

Leonard filled the kettle under running water and plugged it. He reached for dishes from the cupboard and faced her. The more she talked the more he remembered. Ms. Randolph had confirmed the appointment earlier in the week. His brain wasn’t mush, not like his old friend Saul who hit on his wife around the clock. To get him off her back, she reminded him every time he removed his shorts that they had just made love moments earlier. And Saul, who was in the habit of washing up afterwards, found himself perched inside the shower stall morning and night. Leonard now remembered the woman’s honeyed voice on the telephone, or so he believed. She

had come to complete her administrative forms, to ask why his heart hasn't given out yet, why he had eclipsed the average age of the live-alone retirees, and why he was still taking breaths into his lungs while old geezers in retirement homes were kicking the bucket early. "What's your first question?" he said.

Lisa started off with asking the basics: age, height, weight, marital status, and overall health. He soon told her that other than the occasional laxative, the daily Centrum Silver vitamin, the slippage of his dentures from the unreliable adhesive cream, and that he grew winded laboring up the stairs when the elevator was on the fritz, he was in reasonable shape. Seeing a glint in her eye as she checked off boxes on her clipboard, Leonard said, "I could be your grandfather."

"Yes, I did the math," she said.

The kettle whistled.

Seated at the kitchen table, she sipped the aromatic tea and then resumed completing her forms. "How long have you been a widower, Leonard?"

Leonard nibbled on a biscuit, set his teacup on the saucer, and creased his forehead. Years atop years began to pile in his head. Seasons changed, holidays came and went, and presidents were elected, reelected, and defeated. He outlasted them all. Up early most mornings, he used to snicker at Willard Scott, the television's morning weatherman who held up his famous jar of Smucker's strawberry preserve and introduced that day's one-hundred-year-olds. Most often, the "purty ladies," as he often nicknamed them, were crinkly women staring toothlessly at the TV screen. The weatherman would chuckle and beg to know the secret to their longevity. The mothballed ones, usually living on a Minnesota prairie, declared that prune juice, whole wheat, or yogurt was the panacea for old age. The rebel Southern Belles swore it was the

Kentucky whisky nightcap and a good roll in the hay. Leonard wanted to tell Willard that he was around because he lived inside his head, breakfasting with Leah, helping her shop for shoes on the second level of the May Co. at the corner of Fairfax and Wilshire, or mixing her hair color until it became a lustrous shade of chestnut, but the weatherman held up the jar and said, "How sweet it is."

Leonard rarely witnessed century-old men grace the weatherman's show. Nor did he see ancient men adorn the color pages of the Mediterranean Islands calendar he'd received from his proctologist. In it, widowed Greek women clad in black scarves knotted under their chins huddled hip-to-hip on a wooden bench in front of a whitewashed wall and winced at the blinding sun. No amount of goat's yogurt or booze could help the men enter the Century Club. Women outlived men, and there no was fighting it. And with each year that passed, he celebrated less, believing his wife had been shortchanged; she died decades ago, in 1968, weeks after Kennedy had celebrated his primary victory at the Ambassador Hotel.

"I've been a widower longer than I care to admit," he told the social worker. He rose from his vinyl-padded chair and put the cups on the countertop. "How about I make you something to eat? There's cream cheese, smoked salmon, and pickles in the icebox. It goes great over rye bread."

"Maybe later," she said. "Let me help. Where's your dishwasher?"

Leonard held up his slender, blemished hands. "You're looking at it."

She slipped off a collection of stone-studded rings from her every finger, and placed the cluster of gold and silver in a saucer. "I'm good at washing things," she said and ran the hot water in the sink. Steam engulfed her.

"Are you done with your survey?" Leonard asked.

Ms. Randolph squeezed dishwashing liquid over a sponge and rinsed the cups and saucers, throwing sidelong glances at her subject. “Do you have any children?”

“A son,” he said offhandedly.

“That’s it?”

“I don’t see him much.” Talk about his son often cut his breath short. As a newlywed, Ben chose to move to Milwaukee, his wife’s hometown. He continued his studies in astronomy and later accepted a professorship at a prestigious university. Leonard often told him that California has its own telescopes, but his son preferred to aim his lens at the Wisconsin heavens and, over the years, had visited his father less.

Leonard pulled a checkered dishcloth from a drawer. “You know how it is. Men follow their wives.”

Lisa placed the cups face down on a wooden rack. “Grandchildren?”

The corners of Leonard’s mouth rose to a smile. He shut his eyes, thinking of the time he had spent with Josh at the La Brea Tar Pits.

“But why did so many die?” the twelve-year old had asked him then. The skeletal remains of the prehistoric saber-tooth tigers stretched over the museum floor, their vertebrae assembled with wire and resin, their jaws open wide for a kill. Leonard had wrapped his arm around the shoulder of his sprouting grandson. “A fawn may have stumbled onto the deadly marsh,” he explained. “The black tar that bubbled from below the surface trapped the feet of the unsuspecting youngling. The tigers heard the alarmed animal and pounced on it. They too became immobilized and died. Over the ages the tar pits had become a mass grave.”

Leonard and his grandson went to the museum cafeteria. Josh relished battle stories, collected war maps. He arched his thumbs back, mimicking drawn pistols. “Grandpa, did you see combat when you were young?”

Leonard paid the cashier and placed their lunch trays on a small table. “Sort of,” he said and stirred the ice in his grandson’s A&W root beer. Leonard, then twenty-six, enlisted after Pearl Harbor had been bombed. He joined the navy and was told to report to the shipyards in San Diego. His commanding officer sent him down enormous scaffolds held by ropes. Perched between water and sky, Leonard scrubbed the rust off the giant hulls of the war ships. Once seaworthy, he stood alongside the white-uniformed admirals at the christening podium. He could still savor the spray of the champagne bottle as it smashed against the steel, and how the vessel skidded down the ramp and splashed in the harbor like a huge rubber duck in a bathtub. On one occasion, he sailed aboard one of the destroyers to Honolulu, toured the island, and on his return to San Diego, he met Leah.

“Yes, one grandkid,” he told Ms. Randolph, “I don’t see him much, either, if you can call a six-foot-three, thirty-five-year-old man a grandkid.”

“You’re alone, then,” she said.

“Yes,” Leonard said without shame.

“No co-workers to hang around with from your old job?”

Leonard laughed. Out of the navy, the only thing he’d known how to do was mix paints and clean brushes. He landed a job in a neighborhood hardware store on Vermont and Olympic, three blocks from the apartment building he had now lived in for fifty years. Word got out about his flair for mixing paint. Contractors and architects, driving in from miles away, demanded that only Leonard handle their paints. He mixed the paint for the Brown Derby restaurant, giving the

dome-like hat its chocolaty luster, he poured the perfect jungle green for the Coconut Grove nightclub at the Ambassador Hotel, and he blended the angelic white paint for the HOLLYWOOD sign on the hill. Leah would trek the three blocks to his job and together they'd lunch, bite into pastrami sandwiches and coleslaw, and discuss their awkward son who gazed at the stars on clear summer nights and pointed out the constellations. Leonard would then hop off the workbench, kiss his wife, don his paint-splattered apron, and help the next customer. Mixing had become art.

In the late seventies a nationwide home improvement chain had moved into Korea Town and gobbled up his hardware store. The new management came in with slogans and corporate decrees. Leonard became as disposable as the sample paint strips that littered the concrete aisles. He was let go and was given a pension.

“No, my co-workers have died, retired or moved,” he told Ms. Randolph. She was at the sink washing the cups. He fixed his eyes on her dress, drawn in by the prints of red pomegranates.

Something stirred in him.

The social worker turned and eyed her interviewee. “All done,” she smiled and dried her hands on the dishcloth he gave her. She reached for the saucer that contained her rings. It fell. Leonard dropped to the floor on all fours, his knees scuffing over the linoleum, his eyes more on her than on the scattered rings. She got down with him and picked up the broken saucer pieces while he gathered her rings.

“Will you put them on me?” she said, looking into his eyes.

Leonard felt his heart tremble at the touch of her satiny fingers and her polished nails. He could not remember when he last touched the skin of a woman. She held his frail hand and led him out of the kitchen. "Take me to your bedroom," she said.

The soles of his slippers sank in the heavy tar, his thighs unyielding and, his voice now a choke in his throat, he followed her lead. "Come," she said, motioning to the doorway. He stood before the saber-tooth tiger and watched her pull the dress over her head. A white bra and matching white panties separated a creamy abdomen in which a sunken navel appeared. She unzipped her boots, kicked them. "Undress," she said, and pointed to his woolen vest.

Leonard pulled the sleeveless vest over his pate, the static making his gray hair stand on end. He yanked at his shirttails that were tucked into his corduroys and then unbuckled his belt. He folded his pants and her dress over a chair and stood in his underwear that hung above his bony knees. He shivered in the marsh.

Lisa Randolph smiled. She got under the bed covers, spreading her hair over a pillow. "Come," she offered.

Leonard Rubin gazed at her cat-like eyes and climbed in bed with her.

"Take them off," she told him, gesturing to his underwear. Leonard did as he was told.

"Now mine," she said and turned to her side.

He removed the clasp from her bra and she let it drop to the floor. He then peeled off her panties, pulling them down past the ankles. "Let me hold you," she said and opened her arms.

He fell into them. He buried his face in her breasts and wept without sound. His tears cascaded down his cheeks and into his wanting mouth. Lisa seized him. "Kiss me," she whispered. "Or would you rather die?"

"I don't want to live," he said, and kissed her mouth. "Life without Leah has no purpose."

“Say you want to live,” she demanded. “Say it.”

“I don’t, I don’t,” he wailed.

“You do, you do want to live,” she said and insisted he kiss her hard.

They wrestled in bed, their tangled bodies sinking in the mattress. The springs twanged. She said, “Leah’s dead. Live!”

Leonard felt the release of her grip. His lungs drew in air. She reached for a hand towel and dried Leonard’s wet body. She turned to her side, and pulled the covers to her chin. “Take off your dentures and don’t forget your vitamin in the morning,” she said.

Leonard did as he was told. He got back in bed and hugged her from behind, his bent body fitting hers like a puzzle piece.

He slept.

The late morning light filtered through the cracks in the drawn curtains. Leonard awoke. He sat up and stared at the empty bed. He hobbled out onto the living room and kitchen. The teacups sat on the rack and the dishcloth hung on the stove handle. Ms. Randolph was gone.

Leonard returned to his bed and grazed his nose on the sheets. They smelled of the tiger. He hadn’t lost his mind. He opened the white pages of the telephone book and searched under county services. He dialed.

“There’s no such person working here under that name,” the manager said.

He spelled her name.

“No,” she said.

“She works for C.A.R.E.,” he insisted.

“What’s that?”

He explained.

“No such thing, sir.”

Leonard hung up the phone. He brushed his dentures clean, slipped them in his mouth, combed his hair and got dressed. He unhooked his canvas grocery bag from the back of the kitchen door—the bag Leah had used when they shopped at Farmers’ Market. He pocketed his house keys and decided to climb down the stairs, not bothering to check on the temperamental elevator.

Walking down Olympic, he greeted the Korean storekeepers. He’d promised himself he’d learn to read the Korean-scribed signs that ran from top to bottom along every convenience store, cleaners, and Laundromat, but he never did. He stepped into Mr. Park’s grocery store, asked about Mrs. Park’s glaucoma, and stocked up on his usual staples. He paid and marched back home, reminding himself that he’d need to renew his bus pass next week.

In his kitchen he unloaded the groceries on the narrow countertop and opened his icebox. A thud sounded. He turned. A bagful of pomegranates had scattered on the floor. He gasped. He fell to his knees and scooped up the fruit, recalling how he’d helped Ms. Randolph collect her rings from the floor last night. Vigor infused his limbs. Rapture ran in his veins.

“Leah!”

He reached for a pomegranate and cracked it on the edge of the counter. The red juice squirted his eyes. He laughed. He struck the voluptuous fruit again and again, sending his laughter maddingly through the open window. The thick skin softened. He cleaved open the peel and dug his fingers into the seeds, sinking his teeth in the flesh, covering his face with its nectar, becoming intoxicated with life.

The phone rang.

Leonard pulled his tongue from inside the fruit. He caught sight of his face bobbing on the stainless-steel toaster. The fruit's essence trickled down his neck.

The ringing continued.

"Hello," he answered breathlessly.

"You're okay, father?"

A breeze swelled the kitchen curtain. Leonard pulled at the telephone cord, sat on the floor with his back to the wall, and eyed the constellation the pomegranates had formed. "Do you see anything in that heaven of yours, son?"