The Visit

I think my mother didn't want her parents to see the inside of the hospital. The day-room on the ward is dirty and smells like piss. There are other people there and some are unpredictable, like Calvin what's-his-name, committed from Saticoy, excitable and dressed in too-large faded jeans with string tied between the belt loops to hold his pants up. He'll push his steel chair back and jump up shouting that he is innocent, that God is a liar, and that he didn't start the war. He'll rail against the radio tubes implanted in his brain that tell him what to think, and he'll swear that the government put them there. But the commotion won't go on long. The warders, uniformed in white and with keys dangling from their belts, will charge into the room grabbing at arms and legs, and horse the crazy man, protesting, through a heavy door which is then closed and locked. But you will still hear the commotion through the wall. Calvin's wife and children, clustered at the far edge of the table he has abandoned, will huddle there weeping inconsolably in front of you.

Why would you want to subject your parents to such a thing? It's enough to know that the place exists without having to go there. It's sufficient for them to know that their son-in-law, the father of their grandchildren, is imprisoned there.

To take them there, country folk, would be like inviting them to walk the back streets of downtown Los Angeles where the alcoholics gather in the doorways and puke on the sidewalks. There you might have to step over the rumpled body of someone whose life, undecided on whether to stay or go, hangs in the air like a bad smell.

It's not like that where they come from. Where they come from the wind slides down over the hills like a clear creek and washes over the trees, and the sorrow is clean like new grass coming up through the old and all in its own time. The light is antiseptic, and anguish comes in smaller bites.

So that's why I think my mother arranged not to visit on the ward but to share a picnic lunch in the car out on the asphalt parking lot next to the lawn. Of course, she had to get the permission of the hospital administrator, a psychiatrist, who, some weeks after she wrote her letter, dictated a response, three sentences, which gave my mother permission provided that she brought her father or her brother along to make sure that her husband didn't try to leave.

I found the letter in a packet of papers, not even a quarter inch thick, held together by a rubber band and tucked away in a shoebox. There were fifteen letters, two or three sentences long, each typewritten and signed by a doctor. There were two receipts for candy my mother left for my father. There was a bill, sent five months after my father's admission that demanded fifty dollars of a woman who, by then, must have seen the oncoming headlights of her poverty. The invoice for the fifty dollars wasn't with the letter, because she paid the bill. There was no more evidence of payment until a receipt for ten dollars paid in March, 1945. This thin collection comprised all the communications from the hospital in the first two years of his incarceration.

So that day my mother and my grandmother cobbled together a picnic lunch, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, oranges and figs from the trees in our yard, and a quart jar of water to pass around, and packed it all in a cardboard box which they placed in the trunk of my mother's Chevrolet.

Then we set out traveling south on Highway 101, over Ortega Hill, through Summerland and along the Rincon on the edge of the Pacific Ocean where the oil rigs on either side of the highway rose and fell like giant birds pulling iron worms from the ground; where long, timbered wharfs stretched out to man-made islands and the incoming waves flung salt spume rushing into the wind.

We drove through Ventura and Montalvo until we got to Oxnard where a black man dressed as a chef stood on a wooden platform surrounded by a white picket fence and waved at the passing cars to draw trade to the Colonial Inn on the other side of the highway. My grandfather, sitting in the front seat in a blue suit he had worn every Sunday for many years and would wear for many more Sundays

and sometimes for funerals, even his own, was outraged that a man would be used that way. My grandfather was tethered to a herd of milk cows, arose each morning before the sun drove off the darkness, and the husbanding of the farm exacted his labor and that not discounted.

Nested on the platform behind the rear seat and beneath the back window, I watched as cars and trucks flashed by as we approached dark fields where men, women, and children hovered, bent over rows of truck crops, and hacked at weeds with short-handled hoes. The western reaches of the Santa Monica Mountains rose up beyond the fields, and there a row of eucalyptus trees bordered the drive that led onto the grounds of the State Hospital and ferried us to the administration building.

My mother parked the car and, telling my grandparents she would return soon, walked rapidly up the tiled steps and disappeared through a heavy door. Then we waited, my grandfather, grandmother, brothers and I. There was thick grass manicured and mowed beyond the sandstone curbs of the parking lot, and though my brother and I wanted to get out of the car and lie in the grass, my grandfather said no, that we should wait until my mother returned, for though we waited on strange ground, the iron bands of who he was still constrained him. For children, he created the slowest kind of time there is.

When she returned, my mother steered the Chevrolet southeast between the white, stuccoed hospital buildings on the right and the steep rocky and mule-ear cactus strewn hillside on the left. She stopped the car on a parking pad next to the road. A cement sidewalk and a strip of lawn lay between the five of us and the oak door that stood at the head of concrete steps where she stood and pressed the button that rang a bell within the depths of that place.

Soon a large figure dressed in a white uniform opened the door and stood unmoving, one hand on the edge of the door, until he and my mother both went inside and shut the door behind them. We five sat in the car and watched the door.

When it opened again, my father stepped out on the concrete stoop and into the sunlight

followed by my mother. The figure in white lurked behind and pulled the door shut behind them.

Dressed in his own clothes, blue jeans, almost new, and a white shirt, clean and laundered and topped with a brown leather jacket, my father's appearance belied the place and time. There was nothing about him to mark him as belonging here; none of the shabby and ill-fitting clothing of the friendless. He cut a fine figure as he walked toward the car with my mother on his arm. My brother and I jumped out of the Chevrolet and ran across the grass to meet him, me unabashedly throwing my arms around his waist, while my brother held himself in check. That's the way my older brother was, but when he came near our father, our father reached down and drew him close, and Darrell gave in.

The four of us walked toward the car where my grandfather and grandmother waited with my younger brother. After greeting one another, my father sat in the front seat of the car, pushed past the steering wheel, and settled beside my grandfather. Darrell and I climbed into the back seat next to my grandmother who held Paul on her lap. As we took our places, my mother retrieved the lunch from the trunk of the car and, handing the box to my father, sat down in the driver's seat. We had our “picnic” sitting in the car.

Once we had finished our lunch, my mother told Darrell and me to go out and play, for which we were grateful, as the grownups just sat there talking. We walked across the parking lot to a dirt trail that ran along the edge of the mountain that was covered with pale-green mule ear cactus. There were shacks, thrown together with sheets of tin, lumber, and cardboard on the side of the hill and paths marked out with stones. A couple of shabby, whiskery old men sat in broken-down chairs smoking Bull Durham rollies.

“You live here?” my brother asked another man who was sweeping a trail with a palm frond and roiling up the dust. The old man, indistinguishable from the imprisoned in this place, just shrugged, dropped the frond, and walked off to a small shed where he pulled aside a sack and crawled out of sight. We walked back to the hospital lawn where we looked for seeds underneath a short palm

tree that grew next to the steps leading to the door where our father came out.

Then my mother called us. Darrell and I ran back to the car and climbed into the back seat.

“We have to go home,” she said.

“Take me with you.” My father turned toward her. “Take me with you,” he said again. A clutch of starlings flew down out of a sycamore tree and, landing, hopped across the grass.

“You can't just leave, Charles,” she said. “You need a doctor's release before you can go.”

“You have no idea what this place is like,” he said. His voice was urgent and low. “I want to go home with you and the boys.”

“Mom,” said Darrell, “let him come home with us.” My grandfather reached over the seat and squeezed Darrell's arm.

“I'm sorry,” my mother said, “you can't just leave. You need to finish your treatment. You can come home then.”

“Treatment,” my father spoke the word as though swearing. “What treatment do you think I get here?” Before my mother could answer, he said, “I'm not going back. They're trying to kill me. That's the treatment.” My grandfather put his hand on my father's shoulder.

“Charles, Charles,” he said.

Turning to face him, my father said “You don't know what this place is like, Walter. You have no idea.” He shook his head.

“Charles, please... the boys are here....”

“Take me home,” he pleaded. “I won't go back in there.”

My mother stepped out onto the blacktop. “Okay,” she said. She walked to the white building where, once again, she faced the door and rang the bell. Both doors on the driver's side of the Chevrolet stood wide open.

The hospital door opened, and my mother went in. The door closed behind her. We, in the car,

sat in a bubble of silence except for the drone of a fighter plane high overhead.

When the hospital door opened again, four men dressed in white stepped out onto the landing, down the steps, and quickly walked over to the car. My mother followed behind.

The first man stopped at the open driver's door of our car. The others stood behind him. He bent over and looked into the car.

“Come with us,” he said to my father.

“I won't go back.”

The man in white reached into the car and grabbed my father by the wrist. He pulled, but my father grabbed the steering wheel and held on. Then another of the men came in low, reached into the car, and grabbed my father by the leg. When the two of them pulled, my father fell out on the pavement struggling. His shirt came un-tucked. The others grabbed at him.

“Leave him alone,” yelled Darrell. “Leave him alone.”

“My blood is on your hands,” my father said to my mother. By then my grandmother was crying. Darrell was crying. Paul wailed. My mother sat down in the driver's seat and slumped over the steering wheel.

“They tore his shirt,” Darrell said between sobs.

“My blood is on your hands,” he yelled again as the men dragged him away. They were too many, too big, and too strong for him.

“Why can't he come home?” I whimpered.

The men dragging my struggling father disappeared through the door.

I looked across the seat at my grandfather. He leaned over, put his face in his hands, and wept.

Then we drove home, through Oxnard, Montalvo, Ventura, and along the Rincon where the oil rigs looked like iron birds pulling steel worms from the ground.