

## The Visitor

The visitor has three rules for a successful marriage. Three smooth, clear principles she can draw strength from in moments like this. Communication, compromise, commitment.

She thinks of marriage as she feeds a spoonful of unidentifiable mush to the man she loves. As usual, what should be a hearty meal has been reduced to a soupy mess. Her companion sits in an armchair made of a faux-leather plastic that's noisy but practical. Functionality triumphs over comfort in this place. His thin frame is warmed by a mossy green jumper, and the blanket across his knees makes him look older than he is. His hands rest on his lap, clasped in an unanswered prayer.

These hands once held parts of her nobody else has. His fingers have gently nudged roots from damp earth and burnt their tips on hot pans. They've typed for hours, meaningless words like 'Many thanks' and 'As per your previous email', meaningful words like 'I love you', 'I'll see you soon'. His palms have cradled the heads of newborns with gentleness and wonder. His hands have found hers in crowded rooms and tugged them with silent invitation. Now, his hands hold nothing but their own stories. She reaches over to clasp one, and he makes eye contact with her briefly but does not respond.

The disappointment stings but doesn't penetrate. The visitor brings the spoon to his lips, and he turns the food over in his mouth a little, as if searching for flavour he will not find, then swallows in defeat. It's eerily sedate compared to the meals they've shared in the past. They used to glow in dark bars, kissed by the promise of the night ahead. Moving as one, swaying and warm, a drunken entity. They graduated to Friday night dinners at home, sharing a bottle of red wine as an entrée. On a Mediterranean holiday they pulled apart bread slick with olive oil, and as the sun melted into the sea, she asked him to love her well. He had thought it sounded less like a plea and more of an instruction. They basked in the specific joy of being with somebody who truly knows you, holding an intimacy that in time would seem alien to them both.

He used to eat ferociously, noisily, with enthusiasm and delight. It mostly irritated her but now she would give anything to hear him chew, to see even a hint of enjoyment on his face as he devoured a meal, to taste salt and olive oil on his lips.

She walks over to the window to let some fresh air in. She adjusts the curtains slightly and clean sunshine pours over the room, highlighting its sparsity. On the walls are five framed photos of varying sizes, capturing family and friends of varying closeness. People he no longer recognises. She wonders what he must think of when he looks at these photos and imagines it must be something like buying a new frame in the shop, with a stock photo of smiling strangers.

Plastic pockets are pinned to the wall displaying menus and activity schedules for the week ahead, and information about the emergency exits and procedures. In one there's a photo of him, alongside his name and a list of his supposed hobbies and interests. It reminds her of something from a kindergarten and she feels like ripping it from the wall. His life is not the sum of three bullet points and a grainy photo. He has depths and multitudes, contradictions and complexities. He changed his mind thousands of times. He could be generous, warm, and thoughtful, just as he could be pigheaded, selfish, and stubborn. But none of that is here, and it's not enough. She gently slides the paper from the plastic and begins to write.

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The nurse places a small table between the two armchairs and lays out a silver teapot, two cups, and two biscuits on a saucer. She has poured the tea and left them to add their own milk and sugar. "One biscuit each", the nurse smiles, and leaves the room. While pouring in the milk, the visitor reflects on the depravity of being in the last stages of life and having your biscuits rationed.

Suddenly, he smacks the cup off the table and onto the floor, tea seeping through the carpet like a bloodstain. She doesn't move but holds his eye contact as she places the milk jug back down. He's angry, his hands clenching the side of the chair, his face has reddened and for a moment she sees it.

It passes quicker than a breath, but it's there, a recollection. The nurse rushes back in after hearing the crash. A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth and his visitor starts to laugh from disbelief. "Perhaps it's time to go", the nurse suggests, the usual warmth in her voice waning. "He likes the milk in first", the visitor replies. Before she leaves, she takes his hand and turns his wedding ring around his finger three times. She kisses him on the cheek, with a promise she'll see him soon.

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It doesn't take her long to get home. She finds her husband in the kitchen. He's wearing an apron, hair ruffled by steam, cheeks red from the warmth of the stove. "How was your walk darling?" he asks her. She takes a bottle from the fridge and pours two glasses of wine. "It was lovely", she answers.

She has three rules for a successful marriage. There are feelings she will never communicate, desires that she will not compromise, and people she cannot commit to.