

The Visit

If I went there a second time, I would have lost the war. I mean, I'd been there before and it was hell. But there he was, looking like a tramp in dirty, disheveled clothes and smelling of BO and beer, pleading for my help. He was only 18 and my baby. His soured breath betrayed his inebriation, and it was only mid-afternoon. The innocence I once knew in him lay dormant behind the scruffy, matted blond hair fallen over the once bright, blue eyes. Although I'd given birth to him, I was never really his mother. God knows why he came back to my place then. It wasn't because he missed me. After our big fight, I told him he had to leave. I had no idea where he went. His father never heard from him either. He hated his dad then. Seeing this uncouth apparition standing on my door step, that used to be my son, recalled his strange, first visit last year.

I had been unpacking boxes and organizing my stuff that chilly March afternoon because I had just moved into my new condo. For the first time in my life I was alone—a free woman without responsibility to anyone except myself. I was looking forward to this new life. I anxiously outfitted the second bedroom with new office furnishings.

My daughter was settled into college life in New Mexico and my son was still living with his father, where he'd been since we divorced when Todd was a baby. I still kept my daughter's bed and chest in the second bedroom with the office furniture. I wanted her to know she always had a place to stay. But I couldn't see cramming all my office things in my bedroom when hers would be empty for nine months out of the year. Reina agreed to share her room with some reluctance when I told her. She admitted to some hesitation about leaving home, which surprised me.

Once at college, though, she quickly settled into campus life. In fact, she nearly decided to stay there through the Christmas break. It was the first time she'd lived in snow and the thrill of it changed her ideas about coming back to the bland weather in San Jose, California. Being away from home during the Christmas break isn't a problem for Jewish families, but I did look forward to seeing her nonetheless.

The knock at the door took me by surprise. I set down the liquor bottle I'd been wiping free of dust and stepped over boxes and paper wads and made my way to the front door. I braved opening it without calling, "Who is it?" There he stood, my baby—all 6' 4" and 230 pounds of him, looking as innocent as a giant teddy bear.

"Todd," I stammered. What else could I say—that was his name. I pushed open the screen door, but he just stood there wearing out the welcome mat.

"Hi, Mom. Can I stay with you a little while?" His face beamed and his eyes disappeared like they do when he smiles his broad happy-face smile.

"Bet you're surprised, huh?" he added quickly in a pink-cheeked naiveté.

"Of course, Todd—uh, of course, come in," I motioned him in.

"Thanks, you're great, Mom." He embraced me with his python arms, squeezing me from a size 6 to a size 4 in one hug. My arms barely wrapped around his girth. I raised up on my tiptoes and gave his cheek a kiss.

"Well, OK. Fill me in. What's going on. You and your dad have a fight?" I led him by the hand around boxes and assorted household paraphernalia strewn about the floor. I exposed a chair from beneath

more boxes and paper and tossed the cat off. "Sit down. Make yourself comfortable. Can I get you a Coke or something?"

"No, thanks Mom. I knew you weren't expecting me, so I ate a Big Mac before coming." He sat down, arms and legs spilling over the sides of the swivel rocker.

"You can tell me all about it as I unpack, OK?" I continued arranging the liquor cabinet and unpacking the crystal wine glasses as he talked. I had guessed correctly—he and his father had a loud blow up over some dumb thing. It's never important. They just manage to get in one another's faces. His father thought Todd wasn't helping out much with house chores and Todd crudely expressed his opinions of his step-mother's housekeeping habits. It was true that Doreen's sanitary instincts fell below Todd's standards, but Todd really wasn't in much of a position to complain. Their problems seemed to be more of a tacit agreement to disagree than to compromise.

"So, Dad told me that if I didn't like things the way they were, I'd better find another place to live."

"Well, this wasn't the first time he said that. So, what was different?" I watched him as I wiped clean the last glass.

He leaned over and picked up the cat. "I don't know. I guess I was just tired of hearing it. So I told him I'd be out of there by that night. I packed up my things and drove down here." He rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"And you've been driving all this time since last night? That's a 14-hour drive."

"You're telling me!" he exclaimed through a yawn. "I need a cigarette," he stretched himself up and Brutus jumped down. He dove his hand in his pocket and retrieved a cigarette and lighter.

"Outside, please."

"I know, I know." He walked to the door and went out. He continued talking through the screen door.

"Todd, what about school? If you stay here you have to go back to school." His father let him quit school last year, his junior year. Todd had been failing all his courses. He regularly cut classes and refused to study. Todd was allergic to pressure. He quit soccer when the other kids made fun of his large size. He quit violin lessons because he didn't want to carry the violin case back and forth to school. He quit drum lessons because—well, I'm not sure why.

"Awe, Mom. I need to get a job first and have some money, then I'll go back to school. Besides, I really don't have to go. I can just stay home and study, then take the G.E.D. test." He turned his head away and exhaled a white puff of air.

"Todd, I'm not trying to be a hard-assed. I'm just concerned for your future without a high school education." I scrunched the paper wads into the box I just emptied of crystal and went to the kitchen to put some food out. "I'm going to fix a sandwich. Want to join me?" I rummaged through the refrigerator for whatever was there.

"No, really, Mom. I'm not hungry. I think I'll look up Brian." He tossed his butt into the bushes and came back in.

"I thought you gave up those friends after you moved to Seattle." Despite his refusal to eat, I set two places on the table and brought in bread and cheese and a tomato. He sat down. He seemed fidgety, but I thought he was nervous about appearing in my life so abruptly unannounced.

"Guys don't write letters, Mom, so he doesn't know I 'gave him up,' as you say. Besides, I don't know anyone else here." He picked at a slice of bread, breaking it up in his plate.

"I guess I'm more concerned because you told me once you didn't trust him and that he was a trouble maker." I watched his large, pudgy fingers squishing bits of bread on the plate. It could have been yesterday when he was two.

"Oh, he isn't so bad. Maybe he's changed in the two years I've been gone."

"OK. I guess you're old enough to make up your own mind. Just be careful, OK?"

"Sure, Mom. My trouble-making days are over. Give me some credit for growing up." He sat back in the chair and stretched his long legs out and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Todd, I trust you. I'm just being a mother, I guess."

"I'm sorry, Mom. Well, I think I'll shove off." He got up to leave.

"Wait on a sec. Let me show you your room and stuff." So, I took him on a "tour" of the new place and gave him fresh linens for the bathroom.

"You're on your own. I'm not interested in running your life. Just let me know when you come and go, if you can, so I know where you are if I need you. I usually eat around 6:30 after I get home. I'd love to have you join me."

He kissed me and said, "Thanks. See you later," then left. He never did show up at mealtimes, and we never shared a meal together in the eight months that he stayed here. He always had somewhere to go or someone to see. I never knew what he did, and I rarely saw him.

After the second month, I gave him an ultimatum to find a job. When he complained how hard it was to find a job, I arranged an interview with a friend who was looking for a strong body to do some work in the shipping department of his company. But Todd never showed up. He apologized profusely and gave me a story about his car breaking down.

He finally got a job the third month, washing RVs at a dealer's used vehicle lot. It was a minimum-wage job, and he seemed pleased with it. It didn't last long, though. After a few weeks he said he was "laid off." He soon found another at a fast food place.