

“Good!” shouted the lady, pitching the grounded strawberries at him. “NOW LEAVE ME ALONE!” And she disappeared into the patch, headed towards the porch and the band and the drummer.

The little man sat down and stuffed a strawberry into his mouth, muttering to himself in pink bubbles of strawberry jam about the good old days. He could almost see the lady (even though she was in the house behind him, hidden by the strawberry plants). She was a friend of his, who ate strawberries beside him, although with cream and sugar, and talked art forms by French painters . . .

And this as it came to pass I saw.

## Night Visit

*by Jo Anne Hagen*

*English, Sophomore*

THE FOG had rolled in from the coast in the twilight, a vaporous wave gathering substance in the purpling dusk. By nightfall it had become an impenetrable shroud lying low across the valley. Viscous blackness sucked at the houses, seeped about the foundations. Susan was convinced it was even oozing through the window frames. She huddled in one corner of the overstuffed couch absently watching the television. She hated the fog; it frightened her. And, on this night, when even the familiar rural sounds were muffled into menacing whispers, she could only crouch on the sofa and wait for morning.

“Why,” she thought, “on this of all nights would Tim have to be gone. Why not some night when I could call the neighbors over, have a game of bridge?” She sighed deeply. What neighbors? This place was zero, nowhere.

They had lived here six months, in this remodeled farm home that had caught Tim’s eye; his bucolic nature was nurtured by crisp chirping of crickets on wet fall evenings, the owl’s eerie hoot, the rustle of unseen night animals

hunting for food. Susan had agreed, somewhat reluctantly. She had brought with her a zeal for the light, the bustle and diversion of the city. And, after the first few glowing weeks of painting and buying, had developed an aversion to the solitude that nearly amounted to fear.

She was just about to get up and switch stations when the doorbell chimed. She started, a chill swept over her. "My God," she wondered, "who . . ."

The porch light diffused through the vapor, seemed to cling about the shabby young man on the step. She opened the door a crack keeping her hand on the chain. "What do you want?"

"It's my wife," he apologized, "she don't feel so good."

She stared at him quizzically.

"She's pregnant." Susan noticed a round shadow behind him. "Our car broke down out on the road." The shadow moved forward into the wan light. Susan took the chain down, opened the door wider.

"You want to use the phone?"

"Yeh," he said to his feet.

The man preceded his wife through the door. He was poorly dressed in a thin summer shirt of faded plaid, jeans tattered about the cuffs. She was grossly pregnant in a man's shirt. Her protruding navel was evident through a gap in the front.

"In there." Susan motioned toward the kitchen.

"You alone?" he questioned.

"Well, my husband just went into town for something. He'll be back soon."

"Yeh." She watched him as he surveyed the room, his eyes reflecting its richness.

"Garage around here?"

"In town."

"Probably not open at night, uh?"

"I . . . I don't really know. I'll get the number for you." She leafed through the phone book conscious of their lack of interest at her attempt to help, conscious of their

appraising, searching eyes.

She dialed the number and listened nervously to the vacant ringing.

"We could try the sheriff's office. If your wife doesn't feel well I'm sure they'd come out and get you, take you to the hospital if necessary." He didn't answer, just stretched, scratched his head.

"No need. We'll just stay here tonight."

"But . . ." she began.

"You got lotsa room lady. We ain't gonna hurt nothing."

"I . . ."

"Yer husband's comin' home, right? Well, he won't mind will he, givin' us shelter fer one night?"

"Well . . ."

"I mean, yer husband is comin' home ain't he?" He grinned at her, knowingly, then began walking about the room touching things, running his dusty hand along the shiny stainless range.

"We ain't gonna hurt anythin'," his wife spoke timidly. "You sure got a mighty pretty house. All them pretty pictures too."

"You feelin' better?" The man grinned at his wife.

"Thinkin' I'm feelin' a whole lot better," she smiled back.

"Whyn't you fix us somethin' to eat lady?"

Susan stared at him, openmouthed.

"Well, I mean, we been drivin' all day from the South, and we're really hungry fit to bust. 'S a long drive with an empty belly."

"Surely you could have eaten something on the road."

"When you ain't got no money lady, it's dammed hard to eat."

She felt her stomach grow hard.

"Certainly," she whispered, "bacon and eggs?"

"We ain't picky."

She watched them eat like wild dogs who might not

see another meal for days, sopping the yolk with toast and swallowing the scalding coffee in huge, frantic gulps. The wife chewing up even the last fatty pieces of bacon, the part Susan usually threw away, looked sorrowfully at the empty plate.

"Would you like more?" Susan offered. The woman nodded weakly.

"Fine guns yer husband got there." The man gestured with his yolky fork.

She clenched an egg in her fist.

"Locked up, though ain't they? Them Sunday hunters, city fellers, never done no real huntin'; jes keep them guns locked up all year."

The egg broke in her hand.

"Where I come from you gotta use them guns alla time."

She pretended not to hear him.

"You ever eat possum belly, lady?"

Her stomach, queasy, turned over at the thought.

"Little greasy, ain't it?" He was speaking to his wife but she was greedily watching Susan break another egg into the frying pan.

Susan summoned her courage. "I thought you said your wife was sick." She began in a whisper.

"You'd be sick, too, if you ain't et fer two days." He laughed cruelly, his upper lip curling back to expose uneven, unclean teeth.

"Where are you headed?" She tried it lightly, changing the tone of her voice.

"Dunno," he replied suddenly solemn. "Where there's work, I s'pose."

"You know any work?" His wife mumbled over her plate.

"I . . . no, not around here. Perhaps you should try the employment office in town."

"Sure like them guns a yer man's." He walked toward the gun case, fiddling with the lock.

"Keep your hands off those!" Her own violent tone surprised her.

"Ain't gonna hurt 'em." He threw his hands above his head. "Jes lookin'."

She fed them again, more bacon, more eggs, another pot of coffee.

"I sure am sleepy, I surely am." The man yawned, stretched, headed toward the stairs. "I think I'll turn in."

The wife sat alone at the table watching him walk away. Susan turned to her. "Aren't you tired, too?" Resignedly.

"S'pose. This 'er baby jes keeps jumpin' round and round inside me un I can't sleep nohow."

"Aren't you afraid your baby will be born . . . soon . . . perhaps?"

"Lotsa babies born in cars alla time. Don't hurt 'em none."

Susan wanted to fight with her, tell her she was wrong. Babies should be born in hospitals, clean, sanitary hospitals. Instead, she sighed.

"Thought you said yer husband was comin' home."

"He must have been delayed by the fog." *Keep your guard up.* "Couldn't I find a place for you to stay?"

"We do okay." The woman chewed at her dirty fingernails. "Al says we do okay. Sometimes we stop, like now, and get a good meal, un sometimes we jes keeps travelin',"

"You," she tried not to show bewilderment, "you stop at homes, like this, often?"

"Jes when we need a meal un a good rest, we do. Otherwise, we jes keeps travelin'."

The woman stood clumsily. "Better get my sleep, too." She waddled after her husband.

Sometime during the night Susan fell asleep on the couch, vigil ended. She had tried to stay awake, had held her breath listening for sounds from the bedroom.

She awoke to the sun, instantly recalling the night's events. A search of the house revealed they had gone. The bed was made up, the kitchen things cleared away. A slip of paper, propped against the coffee pot read "Thanks."