

1965

The Visit

Barbara Ann Maynard

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Maynard, Barbara Ann. "The Visit." *New Mexico Quarterly* 35, 2 (1965). <http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol35/iss2/17>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Barbara Ann Maynard

THE VISIT

LEAVING THE COUPE crammed into the berry patch which hugged the roadbed, the two crossed the highway and began to walk along a rutted, narrow wagon path. With a small, sweaty hand, its palm lined with rusty grime, Felix unconsciously wiped his forehead. With his other hand dangling in the hand of his father, the two shuffled screens of copper dust as they walked.

"Pick up your feet, Felix. Lookit your shoes," the father muttered rapidly. Felix ceased dragging his feet.

It was late August, late August when the summer heat scratched flesh. Even the afternoon rains, when they came, were not enough to quell the mounting layers of dust as they floated above the gravel roadbed and stained the weeds. Along the path grew four-o'clocks, which, with the approach of dusk, would give out sweet odors to mingle with those of the wild onion, buttercup and Queen Anne's lace. But that day Herman Frankly did not notice the summer odors, and even six-year-old Felix seemed to forget that soon he would get to pet old Pansy and twist the sticky althea blossoms to bring home to his mama. For they were paying a visit to Uncle Anson, and Uncle Anson was dying.

"What's the matter with Uncle Anson, Papa?" Felix asked for the dozenth time.

"I told you," the man whispered, and as he did so he looked about but did not see anything—the dessicated fields of cane and cotton, the mule chomping bloodweed, or the gradually approaching white clapboard house with its familiar three steps and wrinkled veranda, nor the inner tube dangling ownerless from the chinaberry tree, or the humps and bumps of the sparsely-grassed front yard.

"I told you, now. Your Uncle Anson is dying."

The boy nodded and reached inside his T-shirt to scratch.

"How do you know?" he asked timidly. "Did he tell you?"

The man did not answer. He kept walking; then he pulled the boy a bit to make him walk faster.

"There's Esther Lee waving at us from the stoop." Felix wrenched

his hand away and began to hurry up the path toward the house where the girl, several years his senior, stood beckoning.

"Hi, there, Esther Lee. We came to see Uncle Anson. . . ." And as a breathless afterthought, "because he's dying." Felix whispered the last word.

The girl didn't smile at him nor touch his hair; instead she peered steadily into his face. "You ought not say such things, Felix. You know no better? Besides, he ain't dying. Mama said so."

Felix uttered a spontaneous grunt, which gave voice to his indifference. He didn't exactly know why he shouldn't say such things or why he had whispered the word "dying." Somehow the thought of death and the way his parents mentioned it made it seem exciting. He knew that things went away after a time, as his first dog had done and a bird he had found. And with a certain thrill he had dug them up at irregular intervals only to discover that they didn't look or smell the same anymore; they became completely different things from those he had known and loved. And he would lie awake in his bed and wonder. He early decided that his parents had been playing one of those odd grown-up jokes on him by removing the bodies and replacing smelly hunks of something else instead, but he didn't know why. Now he suspected that they were playing another joke on him. Uncle Anson was not dying after all. He felt angry tears gather in the corners of his eyes.

"I don't care anyhow. Living or dead, it's all the same." And he sighed like his mother did when she said the same thing.

"Oh, no it ain't," she countered. "When you're dead nobody sees you anymore or plays with you. You get plastic flowers on your grave and people complain about weeding it. Other people play with your things, too. There's a lot of difference between living and being dead. Ask anyone, silly." Esther Lee ground her eyes into Felix who was scraping his feet ferociously against the tough ground in an effort to propel himself in the inner tube.

"Hey there, Felix! Stop it! Come in here and say something to your Uncle Anson. He's looking for a visit." His father bulked huge in the doorway, the narrow opening leading into darkness. The man shook his finger, and the boy dropped silently from the tube and shuffled toward the steps.

He tensed his lips, kicked a withered clump of crabgrass, and skipped one of the flaky steps. The veranda boards sighed beneath his small weight. "Where is he?"

His father fingered for the small, wet fingers, and maneuvered the child down the center hall toward the back of the house where they took an abrupt left turn into the second bedroom. There was a familiar odor about; Felix compared it to the calla bed behind his mother's kitchen. And everything was so dark. The boy put an arm around his father's pant's leg.

"Oh stop it, Felix. There's nothing here to fright you. Just your Uncle Anson in here, resting himself." His father shoved him through the cloth-draped doorway.

The room was dark, too, with the exception of some afternoon light coming in through a small window on one side of the brass-poled bed. A patchwork quilt, soiled with crusty yellow spots, was gathered at the foot of the big bed. Felix's eyes washed the room with curiosity. He noticed the night table with bowl and pitcher and a lot of little greasy-fingered bottles, the slop jar shoved almost inconspicuously beneath the bed; the Bible on the windowsill, the dusty cloth covering the closet, a closet so small that it could only hold a few hanging things. The walls weren't painted. Felix's room had white walls, and he had a mirror. Uncle Anson had no mirror.

"Is that Felix I hear?" Felix could barely distinguish his name, but he knew that he was being summoned.

"Yessuh," he muttered and stood fast.

"Well, come here, Felix, and let me see you. I ain't seen you in a long time. My, you grewed a lot in a year." The sick man reached out a hand.

Felix demurred. The outstretched hand had long fingernails, thick and yellow, like the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*. He stuffed his small hands into his pockets and the fingers wrestled there with one another. The yellow claws twitched a command.

"Shake hands with your uncle, Felix. You want him to think you ain't mannered?" His father pulled one of his hands from his pocket and offered it to his uncle. The boy shuddered as the claw raked his palm and the dry, palsied hand slowly closed over his in a tight, almost unbearable grip. Felix stood immobile.

"He's a fine boy, Herman. Would that I had one. I don't repent my four girls, but a son is . . . a son. You're mighty lucky, Herman, mighty lucky." The man had raised up from his pillow and now dropped back.

"Felix is smart, too. He gets good grades. He's a good boy. . . . Now, Anson, Esther Lee will add even more grandchildren." The boy

was somehow torn to attention when so much stress was put on his being a boy. Somehow he knew that grandchildren from a daughter just weren't as important as having a son. He twitched a smile at the sick man.

There was a long silence in which Felix blushed to find himself staring at the man in the bed. He could not keep his eyes from watching the almost imperceptible drops of saliva roll from the man's mouth and down his chin, or else collect in the corners of his lips so that when he spoke it looked as though he were talking through chewing gum. Felix figured that there were about seven drops collected every minute or maybe second. When it was so quiet, he couldn't guess the time very well. And it was quiet—quiet as when he lay in bed and could hear his pulse or heartbeat echoing through his pillow. And he followed the little throb beneath the bed sheet, the heaving of the breast when the man spoke, and he could feel the man's hand burning over his, and his own hand began to itch with a passion that almost made him cry out. He slowly bent his elbow and attempted to retract his hand, but it was useless. The claw had him.

"You comfortable, Anson? I can get Sarah." Herman considered calling his sister-in-law who was sitting in the cramped parlor at the front of the house.

"No. Leave her be. She gets little sleep as 'tis." The man began to cough, to choke.

Felix felt his fingers stiffen within the grasp; he could not get loose. His face felt warm and his eyes stung.

"The doctor say anything new?"

"No. Nothing I didn't already write. A month, week, any day." The two men studied each other.

"Will you die any day, Uncle Anson?" Felix blurted; then, with the sharp look from his father, he allowed his pinioned hand to relax, to be resigned.

"What sort of thing is that to ask a body, Felix? Ain't you got no manners?"

"Well," he began and glanced quickly at the two men. "Well, I was told first that you were going to die. And then Esther Lee said you were only bad sick. I . . . I just wanted to know." The last sentence dripped off into a hushed gust of boy-breath.

The two men looked at one another, and Felix saw tears form in his father's eyes. Again, there was a deep silence, and the boy writhed

inwardly at his awkwardness and hated himself for believing a girl.

For what seemed like the next several hours the two men spoke of times that Felix knew little of, of the lean years when there was no money and no liquor, before the children had come, when Anson and Herman had no thought of women but could only be concerned with the giant coon in the hollow or the scratchy sound of the gray squirrel as he ran frightened across the oak and pecan leaves, of the great catfish wallowing in the mighty river, teasing the grass-shrimped hooks as they dangled near the muddy bank, and the biannual gathering of Spanish moss with which to stuff new ticking, or the hog-butchering on a chilly day, and the feel of cool bayou water in July. On and on they talked and every so often Felix could identify himself with them and in his imagination wrestled with them in the October haystack and stole cucumbers and merlition from the stringy patch around Bayou Noir. There were so many things he, too, could remember, and he wondered at it all—the remembering, the knowing that they did the things, too—even though the two made no mention of him, no acknowledgment that he was even in the room. Again, he attempted to retract his hand; it was futile.

“And how about that whopper of a cottonmouth? Weren’t he the big one? You always were a shot, Anson. Did I tell you, Felix, that your Uncle Anson were a shot?”

The boy nodded. It seemed that every squirrel season his father reminded him of his uncle’s prowess with the .22 and his wish that he, Felix, would soon be able to shoulder the gun and bring home even a brace of geese. The father had bad eyes. But Felix shied at the thought of having to make still the sounds he loved, the cool warmth he enjoyed holding, but he said nothing, just nodded and hoped that his father would forget all about the .22 and his small shoulders, his age, and even his existence.

“I feel a sleep coming on, Herman. Mind while I doze a bit?” The sick man closed his pale eyes, the watery-sick eyes which fascinated Felix. Felix blinked when the scaly lids plunked down. But his hand was held fast. And the boy could feel a tightening in his spine as he turned his head toward the open window and saw the oleander branches bowing with the breeze.

“Maybe we’d better head home, now,” his father said.

Felix could have wept then. The air in the room was congested with the multiple vapors from the Vicks’ bottle and from the other bottles

he was unfamiliar with. He knew only the Vicks' bottle and the Per-tussin bottle to keep away the coughs which made his chest feel like ripping out when he caught cold, as he usually did in the fall. It was almost fall. He swallowed.

"Uncle Anson dying of a cold?" he asked and glanced at the medications.

"No."

"Oh." He lowered his head and wished that he would not ask so many questions because they made his father seem different. But everything was so exciting and at times he just couldn't contain himself.

"I can't get a-loose," he stated bluntly.

"What?" His father was distracted.

"He has me. See?" Felix pointed to the claw.

"It's affection, Felix. He loves you. Now be patient. When he falls deep asleep you can unfix your hand."

Felix waited. He didn't want affection. And he waited. But the hand did not relinquish its grip; in fact, the deeper the man fell into slumber the tighter he grasped the boy's hand. The yellow knuckles became white as they tightened. Felix was loath to cry out, but bit by bit the increasing pressure made the vague aching much less vague.

"What's the matter now?" his father spat at him. His father was fanning his uncle with the palmetto-leaf fan from church.

Felix felt tears roll slowly and quietly down his flushed cheeks. "He's hurting me, Papa. I can't get away. He's hurting me." The boy began to shake spasmodically.

Herman ceased fanning the sick man and as he did so the man shifted uneasily for a moment and continued his shallow rapid breathing. Every so often the man would twitch violently, then cough until the sputum ran down the sides of his mouth, along the deep wrinkles in his chin, dropped to the withered neck and rolled upon the already much-soiled pillow. Herman removed his handkerchief and wiped the sick man's mouth.

"Is he dying?" Felix whispered, squirming in the grasp.

"I don't know," the man snapped. "But I don't figure so since he has such a hold on you. Can't you just sort of wiggle out? I can't believe that you can't pull away, Felix. Besides I'm afraid to quit fanning."

Felix shook his head. "Help me."

The father rose and walked quickly over to the other side of the bed

where Felix stood shaking and writhing, unable now to feel any life in the imprisoned arm, as if it were severed forever from his body. He kept swallowing but the tears continued to flow, now quite freely. Still he did not cry out.

"Esther Lee said he was only real sick. You don't have to die when you're real sick, do you?" The question came as a plea.

"No, I reckon not. But he's going to die, Felix. The doctor said so. Esther Lee doesn't know that. You do." With these words Felix felt a sudden bodily control upon him. He ceased writhing for a moment as the comment was realized.

"I know . . . and she don't," he whispered softly to himself.

For nearly half an hour the three huddled together, the father resting a hot palm upon his son's shoulder, and the dying man unconsciously clutching the boy's tender fingers. Together they waited, Herman for what he had resigned himself to, Anson oblivious of mortal moments, and the boy, curious and expectant and feeling guilty about being that way.

Near seven, as twilight shown in its most subtle pinks, grays and blacks, the sick man began to breathe in a queer fashion. Intermittently, he squeezed the boy's limp hand; then relaxed; then squeezed again, almost as regularly as a heartbeat.

"That's a death rattle if I ever heard one," the father exclaimed. "I heard it when your Uncle Jason passed away and I heard it with your big brother."

Felix recalled neither. But at the words "death rattle" he fixed his eyes on his uncle's Adam's apple, watching the bumpy marble of life bounce up and down, strain against the crepey skin until the sere flesh became taut, then settle lower into the throat to prolong the vital breath. Felix decided that the eerie, raucous sounds did indeed resemble the noise the beans made when bobbing in his Mexican gourd rattle.

"Yes!" he exclaimed. "It sounds just like a rattle, all right!"

His father was too preoccupied to scowl at him for his exuberance. He fanned the sick man's face and body with wild, erratic motions; all the while tears mingled with the red-clay dust and made bloody streaks down his cheeks.

"Get Esther Lee and Sarah!" he ordered.

"I can't. I can't pull a-loose!"

"Dammit, Felix, get them!"

The boy gasped, strained to retract his hand, the sensation in his fingers a long time vanished. He could feel the itchy beads of sweat form beneath his hair which hung limply across his forehead.

"I can't," he whined; panic seized him.

The father ceased fanning long enough to slap the boy resoundingly with the palmetto frond. "Goddamit, you get!"

Frantically the boy tugged to release his hand. But the more he pulled the tighter seemed the grasp.

"Lemme go, Uncle Anson," he moaned desperately. "Lemme go!" But the dying man held.

Again his father swung at him, cursing and crying and sweating. The palmetto frond began to shred. And the dying man gagged, choked, rattled and clung.

Felix howled, "Esther Lee, Aunt Sarah!"

The first to arrive was the girl. With her slender shoulders hunched she peered into the room. "Mama is in the rocking chair. The heat makes her sleep."

She waited for a reply; Herman Frankly motioned to the sick man.

The girl tiptoed to the side of her father, cautiously bending over the withered form. His breathing was even more shallow, his face no longer flushed but slightly blue. She then glared at Felix who still stood caught by the reluctant fingers.

"It's his death rattle," hissed Felix knowingly.

The girl became rigid; then she looked at Herman.

"Is it?"

He nodded and slapped a moist palm across the sick man's forehead.

"I told you," Felix added. "And you said he was only real sick."

Felix straightened his shoulders as the girl glared at him. Yet he continued in his attempt to extricate himself from his uncle's grasp. But it was futile; the white knuckles closed ruthlessly, desperately over his. He looked imploringly at his father.

But Herman continued to fan his brother with the jagged remains of the palmetto frond; deliberately and violently he wafted the frond back and forth with the frantic tempo of futility. Anson's breath grew slighter and slighter; his eyes showed slitlike through the scaly lids, and the boy could see no pupils.

Transfixed, Felix watched the splotched tongue reach out and lap the spittle from the cracked lips, saw the frail limbs convulse and relax, and the eyes gleam sea-foam white. The claws began to pierce the flesh of his palms. He could stand no more.

"Lemme go, lemme go, Uncle Anson!" And as if to no avail, "Lemme go, you dying man, you old, smelling, dying man!" The boy's face was white with rage and horror, his lips compressed so firmly that small blue lines formed in his neck. He began to kick the rickety bed, pulling and tugging as he struggled to break that grasp.

Suddenly, with a pop so audible as to startle the father, the boy's hand broke free and, with the momentum, he fell backwards upon the dusty floor. Still shaking from his rigidity, he slowly stood up and stared at the slit-eyed man, slowly allowing his bright eyes to travel to his father, noting the fierce anguished face there, and moving to the bland, sallow face of Esther Lee. He looked at the rattling, gagging twittering form lying upon the soiled linen.

"I hate you!" he sobbed with the quaking vehemence and indignation of a six-year-old. "I hate all of you!" And he bolted through the door, down the hall toward the sagging veranda and the path toward home, past his aunt oblivious in her rocker, tears dribbling down his peaked face.

Once outside he stumbled over the tick-hound Pansy as she clattered the top step and falling upon her he began to beat her old body, and as she whimpered he beat her harder until the sting in his hands wearied him, and he clutched her and wept.

 BARBARA MAYNARD, instructor in English at the University of Colorado, has had her stories appear in *Delta* and a poem in *America Sings*, a publication of the National Poetry Association. Formerly she was a member of the staffs of Louisiana State University and the University of California at Berkeley. She taught at Montana State College before she joined the University of Colorado faculty in 1964. One summer was spent at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-on-Avon, England.