

A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA  
WESTVIEW



---

Volume 13  
Issue 4 Summer

Article 7

---

7-15-1994

## The Visit

J. R. Prince

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

---

### Recommended Citation

Prince, J. R. (1994) "The Visit," *Westview*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol13/iss4/7>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).



# THE VISIT

*J. R. Prince*

Out of the corner of his left eye he could see his faint reflection in the driver's side window of the pickup. The image seemed to be driving while he watched, caught up in a dream without content. He had been driving into the quiet of the night for over an hour on a nearly empty highway, a highway that he had driven untold times, a road that ran untroubled by any turns for mile after mile, with a silent rhythm that kept no time. He liked driving at night. He liked feeling separated, cushioned, and free from the demand that he be human. A long trip at night could leave him numb and disoriented, unsure at his arrival of the time or his reason for being there. More and more, he liked feeling numb.

He drove along with no sense of motion, but in fact he was driving at an ever-increasing speed, so he covered the hundred mile trip back home as quickly as can only be done on a good highway on the high plains. Out of the corner of that left eye he watched himself drive down the last stretch of dark highway and come to the edge of the small town where he had grown up. As he turned onto the cutoff into his old hometown, he felt the highway's rhythm fade. Pulling onto the poorly paved street behind the high school, a street he had driven down almost every Friday and Saturday night not that many years ago, he felt himself being tugged back to awareness, which he fought back as best he could. Don't expect too much, he thought to himself, don't get your hopes up. But under-

neath the numbness he felt a warm thrill in the pit of his stomach.

The street was small, lined on both sides with small one-story frame houses with low wooden front porches, dirt two-track driveways and carports. There was no curb, only a ditch on either side of the street. Here and there were the remains of elm trees that had died of the blight. There weren't any street lights, but the stadium lights from the football stadium next to the high school parking lot were lit up and managed to light up Potter Street as well.

Turning into the driveway of her house he heard the soft crunch of gravel under his tires, a sound that shook away the last bit of his driving trance. A lump appeared right below his rib cage, making it hard to breathe. The palms of his hands began to itch. He was in no hurry to get out of the truck, so he sat inside for a minute or two to catch his bearings. Whenever he came here now he wanted to run away instead of doing what he was going to do, which was go up to that door and once again subject himself to the open hatred of her family.

A dim yellow bulb on the porch shone down on a fairly new Harley Davidson motorcycle, which must have belonged to her brother Gary. It sat between the inside track of the driveway and the side of the house, just where the house met the porch.

In the carport, he could make out her old white Ford Fairlane, a car she had left at home when she had moved in with him in Wichita Falls back when he first started working there. In the back he could see a baby seat, a new one, not the one they had bought together.

Well, he thought, it's now or never. He crawled out of the truck, noticing how stiff he was. He knew he should have been here earlier, but after work he had gone home to change to fresh clean jeans and put on his best pair of boots, and to get on a nice shirt. Still trying to impress her, but for no reason, he thought. Standing at the door, ready to knock, he found he couldn't bring himself to do it just yet. Instead, he tried to peek through the three little diamond shaped windows to see if her old man was sitting in front of the TV, but he couldn't see anyone. He cleared his throat and lifted his hand to knock, then quickly dropped it again and checked to see whether his shirt was still tucked into his pants in back. Then he decided to take a closer look at Gary's new Harley. Nice motor, he thought, I reckon he must be making money somewhere. A thorough inspection of the motorcycle exhausted his delaying tactics, however, so he sighed and gave a little knock on the door; then he knocked again a little harder.

She answered. She still looked as good as she had when he first picked her up at this door for their first date. He appreciated her looks and the rest of her good points still, but too much water had passed under that bridge. He cleared his throat, and said, "Hi, hon. How you doing?" He noticed with some irritation that his voice cracked when he first started talking. He shouldn't have jumped right in from driving a couple of hours like that.

"OK." She had her arms crossed tightly across her chest, and he saw in her eyes the same look he must have had in his. She looked at him cautiously, with a kind of weariness or exhaustion, a look

that asked only for this contact to be a quiet one. He, on the other hand, had his balled fists shoved deep into the pockets of his jeans, with his shoulders hunched over like he was just waiting for the next bomb to fall. He noticed with relief that the rest of her family didn't seem to be around. He also noticed that he could hardly breathe.

"You're late."

"I know, I couldn't get away from work fast enough. I'm sorry."

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah, you sure are, Travis."

Uh-oh, he thought, here it goes. But in fact it didn't go at all. He didn't react to her taunt, and she really didn't have her heart in it anyway. It was just a habit, one they both had and one they both hated in the other and in themselves. But maybe now they were moving beyond that. If so, divorce had its benefits.

"So where's your family?" he asked.

"They went out to the show over to Lawton. They won't be back for a while."

Damn, he thought, that's lucky. All I needed was that crowd sitting around here looking at me like I was a dog with mange.

Maybe they won't be around tomorrow morning either, he hoped against his better judgment. Where else would they be on a Saturday morning?

"Is he asleep, Mary?" Travis asked. "Can I see him now?"

Mary's look softened then. This, she knew, was the question Travis had driven a hundred miles to ask. For all his faults, and God knew there were a lot of them, Travis loved their son. Every time they spoke about little Jason, she couldn't help but imagine what it would have done to her to lose him



the way Travis had lost him. Ever since the divorce she had a recurring nightmare where someone else, not her, not anyone she knew, had taken custody of her baby, and it terrified her so much that she would awaken with the shakes and almost run into his room to see if he was still there. Now, she knew, Travis too just wanted to go into his room and see if their son was still there. Even if "there" was a place where Travis himself could not always go.

"Yeah, go on in. If he wakes up that's OK."

"Thanks. I'll try to be quiet."

Travis walked down the narrow hall to the room where his eighteen-month-old son was sleeping. As he stepped down the dark corridor his chest tightened up and he began breathing so shallowly and quickly that he was on the verge of hyperventilating. His eyes were burning. Oh God, if he wakes up he can't see me crying. I've got to get a grip on myself, he thought.

Some people have flashy divorces that almost seem fun, leaving no apparent lingering hurts. At least that's the way it seems to be for people who have inherited a lot of money, borrowed a lot more, and spent it all naming things after themselves. But for people like Travis and Mary, with no property to speak of to wrangle over and with a desperate need to end their private war, what caught them both off guard was that it hurt so much. The greatest part of that hurt was bound up in the little boy Travis found sleeping in the little room near the end of the hall.

The sight of his son hit Travis like a fist in the solar plexus. For the first nine months of this boy's life Travis had been the one who bathed him (Mary never did it because Travis wanted to so

much), who changed the diapers whenever he could be at home, who got up in the middle of the night because he was the light sleeper and he selfishly wanted to hold the baby in the quiet and dark. Even when he saw the baby every day, just looking at him when he slept made Travis cry. When little Jason laughed or smiled Travis howled with laughter. These were feelings that Travis had never expected to have, that he could never tell anyone except Mary about, and that even she had no patience with since, of course, they had been in the process of deciding that life with each other was hell on earth.

Jason had been the happiest of children throughout the collapse of his parents' marriage. Of course they had tried not to fight in front of the baby, and of course they had failed. Now he would never hear them fight again. Travis hoped that was worth it. He had to believe it was.

On the night they split up, Jason had been sleeping fitfully, going through the pains of teething. Travis and Mary had been at some friend's house, and were coming home much later than they had planned. Jason had fallen asleep in Travis's arms on the sofa there, and Travis himself felt a little too tired to move. Mary had said, more than once, that, "Maybe we should think about leaving." Travis had agreed each time she said it, but neither moved and so they wound up staying on. Finally they did get out of the house, and as soon as they got to the car Mary started in on Travis.

"Why wouldn't you leave?" she said.

"I said let's go a dozen times," he said.

"But you never got up to leave when I said we ought to leave!" she shouted.



"I said OK when you said we ought to leave, didn't I?"

"Then why didn't we?"

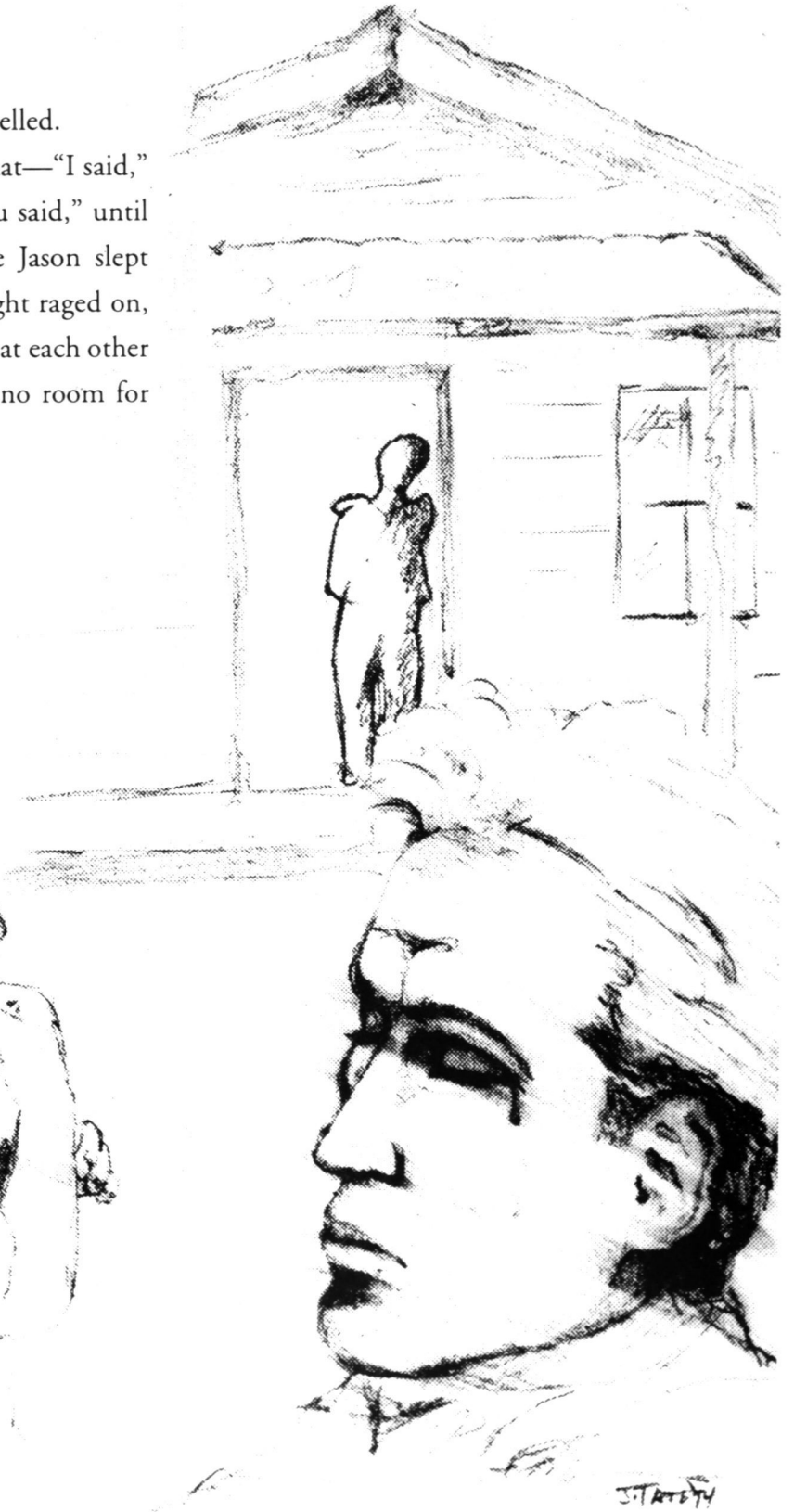
"I don't know. Why didn't we?"

"Because you didn't get up!" she yelled.

And on and on it went just like that—"I said," "you said that I said," "I said that you said," until both of them were screaming, while Jason slept through it all in the car seat. The fight raged on, fiercer and more pointless as they tore at each other in the confines of a closed car, with no room for escape.



Illustration by Jeromie Tate



The fight continued when they got home, and while they put the still blissfully sleeping Jason in his crib, in the pajamas into which they had changed him an hour before while they were at their friend's house. She kept screaming how he should have stood up first, and he kept shouting, "I said OK when you said let's go."

And so it went, banal and stupid and deadly. Halfway through the fight, backed into a corner in defense of his position, Travis thought how easily he could have avoided all this, how he could have just apologized and kept his mouth shut while she burned herself out. God knows he had enough experience waiting her out. But then, what would the point be? Sooner or later he'd lose control, why not now?

Finally, the fight came to the point they usually got to. Mary screamed, "Get out, you bastard! Get out of here now!"

There was nothing new there, and nothing new in Travis' angry stomping out to his car. What was new was that, this time, when he got into his car and drove away, he didn't just drive around town and into the country for a couple of hours, cooling off. Usually he would come back home and find Mary asleep, or pretending to be asleep, and he would slide his way into bed beside her. When they had been to see the preacher who had married them to talk about the upcoming wedding ceremony, he had given them the same advice so many people give—"never go to sleep mad." But Travis and Mary had long ago found that only going to sleep, only escaping into exhaustion, could ever resolve their fights. Or at least end their fights; the next day they would wake either to a wary truce or sometimes a restored passion in

one another, but resolution escaped them.

This time, though, when Travis left he did not come back. He drove a lot further than the outskirts of town. This time he felt the string snap. Without a coherent thought in his head and with his guts in a boil, he drove all the way to his hometown, up to his parents' house, and at two in the morning slipped in the unlocked front door, and fell across the bed in his old room fully dressed, and slept the sleep of the damned.

When he woke up the next morning, he couldn't remember exactly how an argument over when to leave a party had gotten so out of hand. He knew, though, that he had really blown it this time. He knew that not coming home was irrevocable, and he knew that when he did it he knew it. He had just voluntarily killed his marriage.

He didn't want it to end, but he was relieved that it was over. In fact, when he called her on the phone, while his mother politely and worriedly left him alone to call, he could tell in the calm, almost sweet tones of Mary's voice that she too was relieved that one of them had finally made the move that couldn't be taken back. They talked for over an hour on the phone, able to say things to each other without anger and denial that each had been trying to say for all the long time since their lives had begun to crack apart. That was the end, months ago, when Travis last lived at home with his wife and his son, the baby he and Mary had shared into life.

Jason was not a baby anymore, Travis realized when he looked at his sleeping son. Jason was stretching out, losing his baby fat, becoming a boy, a kid, an entire person unto himself. But when he was asleep, softly breathing in his dreams, Travis

still saw the son he rocked to sleep when his first teeth were coming in. What Travis saw with sharp clarity, too, was the boy who would grow up thinking of his father as nothing more than a special visitor. What Travis saw was a boy who could easily wind up, would almost surely wind up, being another man's stepson, because Mary was still young and still very pretty and would not live the rest of her life in her parents' house. What Travis saw was a beautiful boy who would not think of him as the man who rocked him to sleep and sang silly songs to him in the bathtub, but as the man who lived somewhere else. What Travis saw was that nobody but he, Travis himself, would ever think of him as Jason's *real* father.

Travis knew that he mustn't wake Jason. After a while, he would have to slip out of the room and leave the house quietly. He would go spend the night with his parents, who would carefully avoid saying anything about this visit to their sleeping grandson, and spend the night praying that when he picked Jason up the next morning for a day's visit that Jason wouldn't cry for his mommy, like he did the last time. The day would go by, too fast for Travis, and leave him stunned and gasping for more. Then he would drive back to Wichita Falls needing the anesthesia of the road more than ever.

It was foolish to have even come by here tonight, he thought, and really good of Mary to let him. He should just leave the room right then and go out and try to have some sort of civil conversation with the mother of this wonderful child. But he couldn't leave the room. Jason's breathing hypnotized him.

What he did instead of leaving the room as

quietly as he could and walk back into the living room was lower the crib side and lift his son out of bed. He cradled him to his chest and sat quietly in the rocking chair. Slowly rocking, he began to hum and then, very softly, to sing the only hymn he knew by heart, "Amazing Grace," all the verses, the way he had sung to this same boy every night when they rocked alone in the dark. He just couldn't help but do it. His throat burned as he sang, and the water before his eyes blurred his vision. What a fool I am making of myself, he thought, and Mary will be pissed as hell at me if she hears me doing this. God, I hope he doesn't wake up.

He did awaken, though, and listed his towhead to see his father, who was so afraid that his son would see only a stranger. But Jason gave him a bleary-eyed smile, reached up and put his hand around Travis's ear, grabbed his father a little tighter, and went back to sleep. And with that smile, Travis, finally, after lonesome weeks in tight reserve, remembered how to be happy.

Travis kept singing, still very hushed, but with a huge uncontrollable grin on his face. He sang all the verses through, over and over, until he realized the shadow of his ex-wife was behind him in the doorway. He looked up and saw that she was smiling a little and crying a little too. Awkwardly, she reached over and put her hand on his shoulder. He sighed and got out of the rocker to put Jason back in bed. Jason squirmed a little when Travis put him down, but he did not wake up.

Travis and Mary walked back to the living room together. Travis grinned a little because he was embarrassed that Mary had seen him with tears, but then the advantage of having gone



through a divorce together was that they had each seen the other show plenty of embarrassing emotion.

Mary stopped in the living room and suddenly hugged Travis. "Honey, I'm getting married again," she said.

The world collapsed. Travis couldn't say anything. Though he had always known it would happen, he couldn't say anything at all.

"I want you to meet him tomorrow when you bring Jason home. I promise that this won't screw up your visits with Jason. You know I think you're a great dad. Tom won't ever try to cut you out, honest."

I'm already out, he thought. I'm halfway out of my boy's life already. I'm just standing around on the edge of the action. God, just let me keep my balance well enough not to fall off that edge. God, that's all I ask.

Travis shuffled backwards and into the kitchen. He may not have felt welcome in this house, but he sure did know his way around it. After that piece of news, her family could spare a beer. He went to the refrigerator and pulled out a Coors tallboy. He stood at the sink, looking out the kitchen window at the dark and drank half of the beer in one swallow. Mary came in and watched him, not saying anything while he finished the beer. She stood silently against the door, one arm flat against her thigh, the other grabbing its mate by the elbow. Sometimes she thought she would never love anyone like she had loved Travis, and most of the time she knew that was a good thing. Right now she loved him with as much gentleness as she had ever had, a love that could treasure what was good in him even though she knew

they only brought out the worst in each other. Travis turned from the sink and looked at her look at him. Then he crossed the kitchen floor and awkwardly offered her his hand.

"Well. I mean, good luck, sugar," Travis said. "I mean, you know, well, you deserve better than we done, I hope that you get it, really." But what about me? "I'll be happy to meet him, you bet."

"Travis, I want you to know you are a good man. I mean it. I'm sorry we didn't make good ourselves."

"I'm sorry too. But I'm never sorry we tried."

Travis stepped back toward the hall. "I'll be by a little earlier than usual tomorrow, if that is OK. Me and Jason, we got some special catching up to do, I think. OK?"

She smiled a little smile, the kind she used to have for him a long time ago. "OK."

"I gotta go back to his room," Travis said.

He walked rapidly back down the hall, into the room and leaned over and kissed Jason. "I love you, son."

Jason's eyes opened a little. He stirred, turned over to see Travis, and murmured, "Daddy." Then he turned over again and closed his eyes while Travis backed out.

He backed out of the room, out of the hall and out of the house. He backed around the new Harley Davidson, around the hood of his truck, slid behind the wheel, and then started to breathe again. In the dark of his former hometown at midnight he drove away. In the window he saw, reflected by the lights of his dashboard, the silhouette of a man in the window, his reflection, sitting alone at the rim of his vision. When he turned the corner the man faded away.