

*Janice Blue Zwarts*

### **The Intrusion of Mrs. Harvison**

When Mrs. Harvison called that first winter morning I was rather excited. We hadn't had any visitors of any sort for months and I was utterly bored with a routine that consisted of little more than television reruns in the morning and schoolwork in the afternoons. I could not understand my mother's hesitant manner over the telephone, her nervous laugh, and obviously reluctant agreement to "tea at two-thirty, then."

"But we hardly ever see anyone anymore," I said to her when she put the receiver down, a troubled look on her face.

"I know, Jennifer," she agreed. But she wasn't really paying any attention to the words.

We spent our days in virtual isolation in those days, waiting for my father's business to carry him from the east coast to the west and back again. It seemed the railway tracks criss-crossed our snow-bound lives without ever touching us, so seldom were his home-comings. He was an accountant working for the Montreal head office of CN and it always seemed someone needed his services at the far tips of the country, or remote places such as Flin Flon, Manitoba, a name I rolled around my tongue for months in amusement.

While he spent his days in small cramped hotel rooms and dingy railroad stations, ours consisted relentlessly of frozen milk-bottles at the front door, a thin line of snow blown under the back door, mornings passed doing arithmetic to the jangle and exclamations of television game shows (I hated arithmetic), afternoons filled with naps and reading assignments, and, always, waiting for the mail: an infinite white tedium of endless convalescence during which we daily charted the graph of my whimsical temperature fluctuations.

"Better gather up your comic books and put them in your room. Mrs. Harvison doesn't believe in them. I have some tea-biscuits in the cupboard." She turned to me, staring in disapproval at my purple and green pilled sweater. "Change into your yellow blouse. And please,

please don't start rummaging for soup in the pantry when she comes, and don't ask questions about her sons, her husband, or...anything, okay?"

"Really, Mother, give me some credit, for heaven's sake. I'm not a baby," I said. "I know there's something strange about her. I know the rumours about her sons, her "accident." I wouldn't bring up such sensitive issues." I pulled myself to my full four-foot-eleven height and arched my left eye-brow as I'd seen some actress do in the afternoon movies.

"She said she's lonely." My mother was biting absently at her cuticle. She had beautiful nails, despite housework, and never bit them. "I just hope...I just hope this isn't going to start something."

"She's just coming to tea," I said.

"I hope so, Jen, I sure hope so."

At two-thirty we heard the clumping of her cane on the front porch. We opened the door together to a blast of cold air and Mrs. Harvison, smiling in the doorway, a reed-slender woman with delicate cheekbones rouged by the wind. Though she was approaching sixty her black hair was merely streaked by dashes of grey which seemed to add to her fragility. My mother, at thirty-five, also had dashes of grey, prematurely she said. She insisted that Mrs. Harvison dyed her hair.

It was evident, even to an eleven year old, that Mrs. Harvison had a stunning sense of style. She threw her suede coat on my mother's bed so that the Holt Renfrew label was face up. She had that habit of carelessly tossing her personal things aside as though they did not matter to her. She also had an ingenue's way of tossing her head back and throwing her hands up in delight or mock despair. There seemed quite a bit of the actress in Mrs. Harvison.

Her only physical flaw was a limp in her left leg, the result, she claimed, of a horseback riding incident, but everyone knew it had not been there before her hospitalization several years back, the one which was supposed to be for appendicitis. Rumour had it that it was the souvenir she carried from a suicide jump she had attempted from her hospital window. She had, since that time, carried a thin ivory cane which she held self-consciously, banging into people and furniture with it, as though she was blind and not lame, cursing under her breath, her brow creasing and uncreasing in dismay.

I had seen her on the streets of our tiny suburb, and on the provincial bus riding into town. I had once seen her strike a man's foot as it stretched out in her path in the aisle of the bus. The man cursed in pain, but the driver said nothing. Perhaps he didn't even notice.

We made polite conversation and she took out a brush, fluffed her hair, eye-ing herself in the mirror on my mother's heavy oak bureau.

"That's better," she smiled, pursing her lips as for a kiss.

My mother stood behind her in her customary outfit of pull-over and slacks, self-consciously tugging the hem of her sweater and looking, for all her grey hair, like a teen-ager.

"I have a hobby," Mrs. Harvison announced suddenly, pulling a large quantity of wool out of a plastic bag. It was an overwhelming lime green colour you almost had to blink to look at. "I'm knitting booties and sweaters and mittens for children in Africa, through the Brotherhood Relief Fund. A benefactor has donated all this lovely wool, a surplus of some sort. Or a dye lot gone wrong." She laughed in high-pitched sort of way that wasn't really a laugh. "Anyway, Africans love bright colours, so it should be quite appropriate, don't you think? And when I'm finished there will be a write-up with my picture in their monthly newsletter." She was beaming. My mother beamed nervously and said wasn't that wonderful. I agreed that it was wonderful and we went through to the living room to sit awkwardly on the overstuffed couch and unmatched chairs. Mrs. Harvison banged the baseboard, chipping my father's recent paintjob with her cane.

"The trouble is the lint from the wool," she said, plucking pieces of it off her black skirt and looking for an ashtray to put them in. "But it feels so worthwhile. It isn't the prestige I'm interested in, of course, it's the idea of doing something valuable with my time. There's so much time around, and so little to fill it with, it seems."

We sat there nodding in agreement, my mother undoubtedly thinking of all the jobs she had crying out for her attention, and never enough time in which to do them. I kept having this image of some tiny African baby suckling at its mother's breast in a kraal while some little boy ran around in the sand with these lime-green mittens on. The vision didn't work.

"It gives a sense of personal satisfaction," my mother was saying. "That's so important."

"Yes, and when I'm finished all this, I'll make a pair of mittens for Jennifer, if she likes."

"In green?" I asked hesitantly.

"No, no," she laughed, "You're not African! I have a lovely shade of royal blue at home. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" She was busy measuring my palm against hers to determine size. I did not know very much about knitting but I was quite sure that this wasn't the way measurements were taken.

"You have such lovely long fingers, Jennifer. You should play piano."

"No," I said hastily. "I'm tone deaf and I don't care for music."

"You're not tone deaf," my mother said, "and nobody dislikes music."

"Everybody likes music," Mrs. Harvison echoed.

"I don't like studying music in school," I amended, "I don't do very well in it, either."

"That is probably because you are hardly ever there," my mother said wearily. "A month out, a week in. These fevers and colds gain a pernicious hold on her with her asthma problems, and they go on for ages, Mrs. Harvison."

Mrs. Harvison tut-tutted sympathetically, but you could see by the far-away look in her eyes that she wasn't really listening. My mother's tone was slightly brusque when she said, "Well, shall we have some tea-biscuits and nutbread, then? I'll bring them in here."

"Oh, don't go to any bother," Mrs. Harvison said. "We'll all go into the kitchen. It's so cosy in there with your oak table and gingham cushions on the chairs. I always said you had the cosiest and most comfortable kitchen I knew of," she cooed.

"Probably because that's where I spend the major part of my life!" I could see my mother was pleased with the compliment.

As we drank tea and nibbled the nutbread the subject of music came up again.

"I've been thinking of starting up music lessons again in my house. Perhaps Jennifer would benefit from a little instruction." Mrs. Harvison smiled benignly in my direction, and I coughed back a groan, starting to wonder if it had been such a good idea, after all, to have her for tea.

"No, I'm afraid not," my mother said firmly. "She has more than she can handle with her schoolwork and absences." Our guest stared hard at my mother then, and for the first time I thought I saw something like anger in her violet eyes. She sighed heavily.

"This is very good nutbread."

"Thank you," said my mother. "Steinberg's."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You can get it at Steinberg's. That's where I got it, next to the egg-bread."

"Oh I find supermarkets so dreadfully boring. I send Franklin out for the groceries. I just find those things so dreadfully tedious. The utter repetition of housework, day after day, relentless, never letting go of one. Sometimes there just seems no end in sight." Her voice had developed a waver and her eyes roved the kitchen, taking in the clean sideboard, the polished silver in the china cabinet, the tea-towels and napkins. Her own long fingers smoothed at her napkin repeatedly.

"Jennifer," my mother said to me, looking at Mrs. Harvison. "I think it's time you finished that arithmetic for Louise. She'll be here to pick it up later this afternoon." She knew I'd finished the multiplication set that morning but she was using her "no arguments" voice so, reluctantly, but without fuss, I traipsed to my room. Now, I knew, the interesting talk would begin.

I heard the subdued rumblings of voices from my room, just rumblings, but I knew from their pitch that they were troubled. There was no punctuation of laughter, no pauses, just the constant hum, a persistent motor that would not shut off.

As I was sitting on my bed reading *Black Beauty* for perhaps the fifteenth time the rays from the setting sun crept across the room. I was comforted that the world outside still followed the natural rhythms of the season. I thought of my father lodged in a small hotel somewhere in Northern Manitoba, lonely without our company. I thought of his large comforting body, his ruddy-cheeked smile. When he was home nothing could harm us. No danger was so great that he could not protect us from it. Without him my mother trembled in her bed at night. The shadows and noises, augmented in the night, frightened her. And because she was afraid, so was I.

A commuter train whistled at the station two blocks away. I heard the front door open and close and then my mother's hurried footsteps up the stairs.

"Well, thank goodness that's over." She sat down heavily on my bed.

"What did you talk about?"

"Well, Mrs. Harvison has a history of serious depression. I'm not sure I understand too much about it myself. I know she has pills to keep it under control, and I know that it's when she goes off these pills that she starts to run into problems. It seems she's decided to put the pills aside because she feels they are making her too passive, too quiet, that she can't see what's really happening around her. The trouble is when she goes off them she has an even harder time telling what's what. Something in her mind has trouble figuring out what is ....appropriate."

"I don't think I understand. What did she say?"

"Well, she seems to think her husband is plotting something against her, trying to steal her money and planning to run away with his secretary...."

I started to smile. "That sounds corny."

My mother shrugged. "It sounds bizarre. When I'm sitting there with her and I listen to these things, it's as though I have to keep it all at arm's length. It's as though she's pulling me into her...her conspiracy. I start to feel that it all sounds plausible. It's a bit of a twilight zone." She looked at me and smiled. "I do get myself into things, don't I, eh?"

As she went down to begin preparations for supper I thought about what it must be like to be in that sort of twilight zone all the time, but my imagination failed me. Perhaps it was as though it was always night-time with the shadows and strange noises and the fears never leaving.

The next morning the telephone rang again. I went into the kitchen just as my mother was saying good-bye.

"That was Mrs. Harvison again. She said she needs to measure your hands again for the mittens. Maybe she won't stay for too long today." She sat down with another cup of coffee. She'd forgotten about the dishes in the sink waiting to be washed. "Your father will be furious if he thinks I've gotten myself into something again."

"Yeah," I sat down beside her and took a sip of her coffee. She had this knack, one might say, of getting into things, other people's problems. She was a soft touch and it seemed to advertise itself, to stray animals, religious evangelists and all the human flotsam bobbing around. Then she'd become distressed, and when she was upset my father got angry. But he could not change her.

Mrs. Harvison didn't knit at all that afternoon. She almost forgot to measure my hand again. She didn't smile very much and circles were forming under her eyes. She twisted the diamond rings on her finger, waiting for something, waiting, I suppose for me to be banished to my room so that the *grown-ups* could really talk.

Again the afternoon passed with me in my room trying to make intelligible the muffled syllables from downstairs, waiting for the sun to track its course across the sky, waiting for Mrs. Harvison to leave.

When, finally, I heard the door open and close, I came down the stairs.

"More of the same," my mother said, watching the slender figure negotiate the snow and ice of the sidewalk on her way back to her dark house. "She wants us to come to visit *her* tomorrow. She wants me to check the basement and under the beds. I hope all I find is dust." But she didn't laugh.

"I don't know how you get yourself into these things."

"Now you sound like your father. I feel sorry for her. And I don't think the whole thing is all in her mind."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing you'd understand....anyway, tomorrow we'll bundle you up. Your fever's gone. I don't think it'll hurt you. We'll only stay a few minutes. I don't want to leave you here alone....she wants us to stay for tea, but I'll make some excuse. It'll be okay."



I was not afraid of Mrs. Harvison, a little intimidated by her manner sometimes, but certainly not afraid of her. The fantasies of madhouses I wove around her contained no violence. I had no experience with such things, apart from what I had seen on afternoon television. I did know how she felt about going into the basement alone. It was an irrational country, in which fears could somehow materialize from shadows. Cupboards were not unlike the basement. Mine had to be firmly shut at night, and still I could not sleep on my stomach for fear of murderers hiding and waiting to thrust knives in my back. I would lie rigid on my back, steeling myself against the dark, against surrender. To this day my mind resists sleep, resists losing control. I still sleep on my back. I supposed Mrs. Harvison did too.

The next day she answered the door dressed in a crimson wool suit with a frilly hostess apron tied around her waist. She smiled brightly as she ushered us in, instructing us to lay our coats over the arm of a chair in the hall. The house smelled of a musty perfume, like old satins and lace that had been packed in trunks with flower sachets to preserve them. At one time the rooms must have been elegant; now they looked dingy and worn, everything dark, overstuffed and threadbare. Exotic, potted plants were everywhere, their drooping fronds browning from lack of water and the dry air.

"Perhaps your plants need a little water," I suggested, the fronds of a withering Boston fern fluttering to the floor at my touch.

"Oh," she waved her manicured hand, dismissing the room, "this belongs to Franklin, it's not my concern. Come now, I've got everything in here." She led the way to the kitchen pantry where empty bird cages of every description and size hung. "I've been doing a massive clean-up, Jennifer, and I've found all sorts of things you might like to have." She had knelt down awkwardly at the edge of a pile of marvelous rummage. In it were all sorts of miniatures, tiny pewter goblets, tankards, china tea-things for a doll's house, lacquered boxes in vivid colours, and exquisitely detailed stuffed animals no bigger than the size of my palm. "Here," she said, reaching over the pile to hand something to me. "This is a trick box my father gave me. It's from China. See if you can open it." She winked at my mother. I knew the trick, a tiny clasp on the bottom that seemed part of the rich design, but I pretended I could not figure it out. Delightedly she showed me how it opened, fumbling for a minute so that I had to resist the urge to show her. I could feel my mother tense beside me.

"These things are lovely, Mrs. Harvison, but you musn't give them to Jennifer. Some of them must be valuable, you must keep them."

"I'm cleaning out my life, Mrs. Matheson. I want Jennifer to have them."

"But what about your own children, your grand-children?"

"I don't care a fig for what they think. Where are they now, when I need them? I worked so hard, I sacrificed. I gave up my music...." But as quickly as the dark cloud descended, it lifted again and she brightened. "Let's have some tea, some nice hot tea, with lemon and some pound cake. I made it myself, this morning."

"We really shouldn't stay too long, Mrs. Harvison. Jen's not all that well, and I'm expecting a call from Mr. Matheson this afternoon. I thought, perhaps if I could just check the house like you asked, then...."

"But the tea-things are all set out in the living room. You promised...."

"Tea at two-thirty," I said brightly.

"That's right, tea at two-thirty." Mrs. Harvison beamed. "Select a few things to play with and come along into the living room, Jennifer."

I picked out a furry white dog and one of the lacquered boxes.

"You're no help at all," my mother whispered in my ear waiting for me while Mrs. Harvison limped into the living room.

"But look at all this terrific stuff!"

"We're going home right after tea."

But after tea Mrs. Harvison still had things she wanted to show me. The conversation had been bright, about the apparent mild spell due that weekend, about my father's travels, about the ingredients that went into the making of her pound cake.

I could see my mother trying to think up a convenient lie, but she was so truthbound that creativity in this area failed her. She was expecting the phone call, but she couldn't discover a need for my going with her. So I stayed. I would go home when it was supertime, or a little before.

After she left, Mrs. Harvison said: "Your father's coming home tomorrow, isn't he? What do you do for him?"

"Do for him?"

"Yes, what little treats do you prepare? I remember when I was a young girl my father used to go away a lot like yours and for his return I would make him rice pudding with lots of lemon and raisins. He was very fond of it."

"Well, usually he brings us presents," I said. "Jewelry for my mother, just paste of course," I said, trying out a new word and at the same time not wanting to compete with her diamonds. "He brings me a new mystery book or a pennant or T-shirt, or something just silly like 'kissing-dolls'...."



She had begun to frown, a line creasing and uncreasing above her eyes.

"Maybe you should think of doing something for him for a change," she said stiffly. Then, her cane bumping against the baseboard as she limped along the hall, she said, in a softer voice: "Let's go upstairs. There are some pictures I'd like to show you."

She struggled with a black strong box on the top shelf of a closet, upsetting hatboxes and a few cushions. "Oh, just leave them," she kicked aside a cushion. "Franklin can replace them later....if he comes home tonight." She pulled a yellowed programme out and smoothed the curled edges. "It's from a concert I gave a long time ago. I was a MacAlistair then. I played concert piano in the town auditorium. I was supposed to go to Winnipeg to study, but then I met Franklin. He was ten years my senior and he swept me off my feet. Stupidest thing I ever did, running off to marry him. My father tried to have it annulled. That was a long time ago." She thrust it back in the box. Then she sat staring at me. I didn't know what she wanted, or expected me to say.

"It was a nice picture of you, and I think it's very nice to have a programme to mark something in your life," I struggled to find some neutral ground.

"Nice....I suppose to you it seems nice that...." The telephone was ringing and she clutched my hand. "What's that?"

"It's just the telephone." A shiver went down my back.

"Who can it be? Maybe it's them."

I didn't dare ask who "they" were, but a nervous giggle was bubbling up in my throat. I looked around at the other cupboard in the room and was relieved that it was shut and locked, a key in the door. I wondered about the basement. Had my mother checked every corner?

Now I realized that it was growing dark outside. I thought of the still fit and handsome man who was her husband, who nodded at me when I passed him on the street. I feared he might come home while I was still there to find us in the middle of all the cushions and the worn programme. I wondered what he would say, would he notice an outsider, would there be a fight?

"I think maybe I'd better be getting home," I said, easing away from her.

"Oh, please stay," she gathered herself together and struggled up from the bed. "We can make some rice pudding."

"It's getting late," I said. "I don't like walking home in the dark."

"I'll bring you later."

"No, it's really okay, but I think I should go now."

As we were coming down the stairs there was the sound of footsteps on the front porch and the doorbell rang several times. It was my mother.

"I telephoned," she said, her eyes darting from one to the other of us, "there was no answer. I thought something might be wrong. Is your phone not working?"

"It was you, just you," I burst out.

She took me home. She explained to Mrs. Harvison that my father had arrived unexpectedly about an hour ago. He was having a nap, otherwise he would have come to have gotten me in the car. I suspect Mrs. Harvison realized my mother was lying too.

Once we were home she fed me stew and talked of my father coming home. He was flying home as soon as possible, she said. He had to find another position in the company, all this travel, it was too much. She wanted him home, that was final.

We slept downstairs in her bed, the light on in the back porch, so that it wasn't completely dark. It was a cold night.

With daylight there was a soft, quiet snowfall. The world seemed a harmless place again.

But at ten the telephone rang, and again at ten-thirty and finally, at eleven. "What if it's Daddy?"

"We have a signal...two rings, hang up and ring again."

I didn't know when this had been devised...yesterday perhaps?

"We must make it appear that there is no one at home," she said, creeping around at window level. Was this a game: outwit a mad-woman? We put our winter coats in the bedroom facing the front, for a hasty escape if the need arose. Though heaven only knows how since the bedroom windows were small, with double glazing and caulking, and recalcitrant latches. She closed the drapes and set up the card-table in the room. We ate lunch there, which she had prepared furtively in the kitchen. I began to wonder who was crazier.

"It must appear real," my mother said firmly to me. This was not a game and I began to feel fear, fear that there were forces way beyond my mother's control, fear of my dependence on her. "They can tell, these people, they're crafty."

We waited, and she came, slipping and sliding in the snow. I watched from the corner of the window, almost shivering, trying to hold my breath and feeling silly all at the same time. But my mother was serious. "She has her knitting," my mother said. "Get away from the window. You'll move the curtain."

She rang the bell repeatedly, as though she knew we were in. Where, after all, did we have to go? Our car was snow-bound on the driveway. We were as trapped as she.

When we did not answer she struggled round the back door. She peered in and tried the doorhandle. She knocked and knocked until I thought I would burst. "We aren't home, we aren't home," I whispered over and over, knowing I would never forget this, would always be afraid of something. I thought about her worn programme, the dead end she had come to. For us there would be deliverance when my father came home. For her there was nothing. But we couldn't allow her back in.

Finally the coated figure began the walk back down the path.

"She's gone, God, she's finally gone, thank God," my mother was trembling. "She can do what she wants now. We're not responsible anymore, we're not responsible for her now."