

# AN EVENING WITH THE FAMILY (1977)



*The city, there, of the Cimmerians stands  
With clouds and darkness veil'd, on whom the sun  
Deigns not to look with his beam-darting eye,  
Or when he climbs the starry arch,  
or when Earthward he slopes again his west'ring wheels,  
But sad night canopies the woeful race.*

*(Odyssey, XI, 11 )*

"Dinner is ready!" Mrs. Marjorie Willitt, from Oceanside, California modulated with a soprano voice. In the house, the scent of the roasted beef hovered: the kitchen-dining room was floodlit, while from the window one could see the dim light of a yellowish twilight all in all decidedly unpleasant. The fog raised an impenetrable curtain on the other side of the ungainly concrete wall that divided the Willit property from their neighbor.

The wall had its importance because it seemed to be the most absorbing concern of Bruce Willitt. Bruce was a rather good chemist, in the words of his wife, and destined for one quick and safe career in his industry. He worked

around the wall in every moment of free time: some pieces always fell, sometimes it was necessary to increase its height, often he had to make it recede towards the garden of the Willitt. In fact, grandpa George (God rest his soul), when he was still alive, used to say that in other times the property had been much more extensive, but "for various reasons of public interest", as he said, had to be reduced a lot.

The two twins and the daughter Cheryl, fifteen, rushed in, together with Washington the dog, of indefinite age. All four hardly detached themselves from their favorite television program, an interminable series that narrated the cornball adventures of a syrupy little girl and her unhappy half-wild horse.

"And how about your father? Where is he?" Mrs. Willitt asked. "He must be at work in the garage. " "Does he always have to start working at this time? That man hasn't got even a minimum of good sense!" Cheryl was about to defend her father, but it was not necessary. She merely said, "Oh, mum!" And sat down at the set table, and started immediately to eat.

The twins, instead, were washing hands rather noisily. "Is it ever possible that you always have to fight, you two? " Mrs. Willitt asked. As it was a well-rehearsed rhetorical question, the little girl ignored her: "When do we buy a swimming pool? The McGuire have had it for a while. " " And you, how do you know? "Bobby asked frowning. "I know because I saw it, if you really want to know." "I do not want you to go out nosing at other people's houses, kids! You know that very well". "I did not go there to nose," Monica said, "Gladys invited me." "When did you go there?" The mother asked, "OK, I have not gone there, yet, but I'll go tomorrow," Monica concluded with feminine logic.

The father arrived, with the healthy and vigorous look of the average American, who earns bread for the family, raising his children in a good-natured if stern discipline, has no cultural interests, and will die from a heart attack before age fifty-five. "So, are my children all at home?" "Evening, dad," they replied in chorus. "This morning Monica has been bad to Washington," the father said sternly. "She did not feed him." "Poor Washington!" the child

whimpered with a guilty voice. "I forgot about it because mother woke me up late, and I had to run to school."

In the meantime, she had rushed to the quiet corner where Washington had its dinner, she had picked it up, and caressed it to console it. The dog looked at her with a sad expression, probably wondering when they would let him continue his honest dinner. The father went on sternly: "But I do understand that afterward, you did not go to school, how come?" Meanwhile, Cheryl had risen from the table, and had gone to make a phone call (1). Monica had started to explain her reasons: she had not gone to school because Bobby was not well, and she did not go to school without her brother, she had never gone alone. Bobby interrupted her to say that she had started to whine and to say that she did not feel well. He wanted to go to school because he had a baseball training session, and indeed, because of that cry-baby he had seen neither Gus nor Frank nor ... Here Cheryl came very irritated into the room, screaming that she could not speak on the phone. "Are you talking to Fred?" One of the twins insinuated maliciously (he could have been either one of the two). Cheryl left without answering and went on talking on the phone. The parents silenced their children, partly because poor Cheryl otherwise would be back utterly mad, and because they wanted to know what she was doing.

But when she came back, she looked genuinely miserable. "Fred says he cannot go out. And yet he had promised that we would go together to a drive-in movie, and then we were supposed to go to the ice cream parlor. " "With this fog, it does not seem like it's ice-cream time," the mother said. "Then we would have a hot chocolate," Cheryl concluded angrily and went on eating sulkily. At this point, the twins asked if they could go back to watch the TV they had left on for the use of the dog, which had already installed itself in front of it. They had their permission, not without a short investigation whether they had already completed their research on beer-brewing (Miss Robertson had recommended it so warmly!).

"Tomorrow, who is on duty to accompany the children to school?" Bruce asked. "Probably it's up to Ann," his wife replied. "Anyway, leave me the big car, because I would not be surprised if Ann were to call at the last moment to say that she has a headache. " "That's fine, Bruce answered. Do you need the big car tonight? " " I think so, "replied his wife. You know that on Fridays

we always meet at Elizabeth's to play Bridge. On my way there I should pick up Barbara and Judy. " " Try not to be too late, " her husband said. He chose a newspaper and went to his favorite armchair from which, if necessary, he could also keep an eye on the television. The wife got ready. She was still a beautiful woman, Bruce thought - their life was not too difficult, after all, nor exhausting. It was all about knowing how to wait.

Finally, she was ready. As she walked toward the entrance, clinking the keys, the phone rang. "Hello, is it you, Elizabeth? ... Oh! ... I see ... Well, it does not matter. Try to get better, tomorrow. Come on; it's nothing, you're always the same ... But no, it does not matter, we'll meet next week." Bruce heard that she hung up the receiver. Now she was coming back more slowly towards the dining room. Bruce strove to be jovial: "Elizabeth said that tonight's meeting cannot take place, isn't it? Come on, do not take it badly. It just means that we are going to spend the evening together, the two of us. Why don't we have a Martini immediately?" The face of Marjorie, so downcast one moment earlier, lit up in an instant: "You are right. After all, I did not even want to go. You know, today I got tired because of the party for Bobby and Monica ... they were so disappointed, poor children, because their little friends did not come. Monica said it was all Bobby's fault, for in the morning he had said he was ill, and the other children had thought the party was off. " " It is not serious, "Bruce said imperturbably." It will be for another time. Tomorrow why don't we go all together to camp in the mountains? "

Marjorie thought she was lucky to have such a rock-solid man close to her: with him, the problems seemed to disappear. He stood up and headed for the liquor cabinet." "Bruce, now I remember that we are out of gin. Why do not you go to the store at the corner? " "I'll go immediately, dear " and Bruce was already on his way, phlegmatically. Marjorie went with him to the door. They opened it. The fog-filled air had that heavy smell of burnt gas, typical of a big city, although silence reigned and the usual noises were not there. Only the nearby ocean roared in the darkness. The Willitt gate was barely visible at the end of the narrow alley lit by low garden lamps.

Bruce headed for the garage, but Marjorie called him back: "No, listen, let's drink what's there, I do not want you to drive in the fog." He calmly returned home. On the threshold he kissed his wife: they went back and drank a

whiskey. In the next room, one could hear the TV at full blast. Their hands sought each other, in a sweet grasp in which they thought of nothing.

Two hours later, the house was silent. Marjorie and the children had gone to sleep. The dog had not, but he did not need to sleep: it was enough to recharge his batteries, which lasted twenty-four hours. Bruce made the usual round, to make sure that all the mechanisms worked regularly, from the external lights that simulated the alternation of the days, to the speakers that reproduced the roar of the sea. He checked the telephone recorder, the television. He put a newspaper and a bottle of milk on the doorstep so that from the morning everyone could resume the usual fictions.

When the first chemical plants had exploded on Earth, the city authorities had merely evacuated the population in the immediate surroundings and had encircled the dead area with a wall. But the dead area had spread little by little, so much to cover the entire planet now.

It was all that remained of the living area, the Willitt property.

#### NOTE

(1). There were no cell phones in 1977, yet!