

A Visit to the Bronx

(Or, More Specifically, 493 East 170th Street)

a one-act play

by Sharon E. Cooper

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CHARACTERS

SARA, mid-late 20s, F.

Jewish, from North Carolina

JESSIE, 30s, M.

A tour guide, around the same age as Sara, any race/religion

MRS. G., mid-late 20s, F

Sara's grandmother; in the play, the same age as SARA and looks like Sara

MR. G., mid-late 20s, M.

Mrs. G's husband

TIME

2011 and 1951

SETTING

The Bronx—on the street in 2011 and in a livingroom in 1951

Notes:

"A Visit to the Bronx" had its original production at the Michael Weller Theatre in May of 2008. At this point, it was a ten-minute play. I was commissioned to expand this play by The Keller Theatre, in Giessen, Germany, for a September, 2013, production. I attended this production in Germany and an article about this adventure can be found in *The Dramatist*, the national playwriting magazine of The Dramatists Guild—Jan/Feb. 2014. It can also be found on my website: <http://sharonecooper.com/2014/01/30/how-i-found-mistaken-identity-and-got-much-more-originally-published-by-the-dramatists-magazine/#respond>. The play was further developed into this draft for a production at the Philipstown Theatre Depot as part of the Aery Theatre Company 20/20 festival. The director was Ali Keller. Musical rights should be attained for individual productions.

In memory of Maurice Schmilowitz and Gertrude Schmilowitz--who lived many years of her life at 493 East 170th Street. And in memory of Esther and Philip Baumgarten—who lived for many, many years in Cold Spring, New York.

The sound of lightening, thunder, wind and light rain. After a moment, this overlaps with the sound of a radio changing stations and a few seconds of the song “Young at Heart.” SARA walks into the space, the lights shifting on and off in different pockets of the stage, which reveal hints of a 1950s livingroom apartment. A woman dressed like it’s the 1950s passes Sara. Sara doesn’t see her. Sara is on her cell phone.

At the same time, JESSIE, a Bronx tour guide, standing on a bench upstage center, tries to get people to take maps of the Bronx. He holds a large red umbrella.

JESSIE

Welcome to the Bronx! We’ve got Vanessa Williams, Alan Alda—

The woman from the 50s rolls a basketball. Sara kicks the basketball while she tries to balance a small digital camera in one hand, a bag, and her cellphone is against her ear. The woman walks away. Sara never sees her.

SARA (on the phone, overlapping)

It’s on a yellow pad that I left at your place. I have 493 East 170th Street in my phone but I can’t find—

JESSIE (overlapping)

Ellen Barkin--Jennifer Lopez, Funk Master Flex—

SARA (overlapping)

What? It was fine. Funerals are always a barrell of laughs. Two for the price of one. I’m being? *I’m being---*

JESSIE (overlapping)

Ed Koch, Stanley Kubrick, Penny Marshall—

SARA (overlapping)

You would--I don’t—if you were *here*—I’m not—Joel, can you just find this one fucking —Thank you. 493 East 170th street. Let’s talk about it later. Because I don’t want to talk about it now. Because—look, Joel—

JESSIE (overlapping after the address)
Mary J Blige, John Patrick Shanely, Jerry Orbach, Cuba Gooding --

SARA (continuous)
Because I'm trying to find the address of where my **dead grandmother was born**.
Okay?

She hangs up.

Jr.—
JESSIE (finishing Cuba Gooding's name)

SARA
(to Jessie) I'm totally fine, thanks. (to her phone) Where is 493 East 170th Street?

And we hear from her phone: "I'm sorry, I don't understand whereas."

No. *Where is. Where is.* Where is 493 East—

Her phone dies.

SARA
(to her phone) I hate you. I really fucking hate you.

JESSIE
We've got Billy Joel, Ronald Mallett—(trying to get her attention) I'm advertising. Who lived here. I'm a tour guide.

SARA
That's great.

JESSIE
You know (singing) "Uptown Girl—she's been living in her uptown world--"

SARA
Yes, I know *Billy Joel*--

JESSIE
And Ronald Mallett was a theoretical physicist who was born in the Bronx and has a theory that time travel is possible.

SARA
That's just stupid.

The rain picks up. Sara can't open her umbrella.

JESSIE

Do you need anything—any help?

SARA

No, I'm—I'm fine.

JESSIE

I'm sorry. About your grandmother.

Sara fights more with her umbrella, which is broken.

SARA

She never said a nice thing to anyone. She was one of the most unhappy people I've ever met. If that basketball were in her way, she would have kicked it, too.

JESSIE

She took her aggressions out on basketballs?

SARA

She took her aggression out on everyone.

JESSIE

Oh, um—ok. So you want to see where your *mean, aggressive* grandmother was born?

SARA

People kept saying I'm just like her. At the funeral. Just because we'd both kick a basketball doesn't mean I'm (slamming the umbrella on the bench) pissed and unhappy like she was, because I'm not.

JESSIE

I think it's understandable—that you'd be upset—when your grandmother just died.

She picks the umbrella back up and tries to open it, again.

Can I help you—

SARA

Are you an umbrella salesman?

JESSIE

Tours, remember? And you want to see the apartment where your grandmother was born--

Jessie tries to hand her a map. She doesn't look at what it is and tosses it aside.

SARA

And where they lived—their first apartment. My grandfather died too.

Jessie sits on the bench.

JESSIE

Oh, God, was it a car accident?

Sara sits next to Jessie on the bench and takes his umbrella. Jessie puts a hood over his head.

SARA

No. It wasn't. We've been sitting shiva. I couldn't sit anymore. Maybe I just had to get away from the ketchup. My grandfather put it on every little thing. So our guests are like, here's a casserole and ketchup. Here's a cake and ketchup.

JESSIE

Ketchup was a staple of the working class because it was cheap.

Sara, uninterested, gets up with his umbrella, looking for what address is nearby.

Most of the Jews moved out in the 50s but before that, it was known as the Jewish borough. Mostly, they lived in poverty in the southern part, so I guess he wasn't the only-

-

SARA

Thanks Wikipedia. That's great. That's really fucking great.

Jessie stands.

JESSIE

Look, I haven't had a tour all day. Sometimes things come together or people come together when--

SARA

Save it for someone who gives a shit.

It starts to rain, harder. The lights flicker.
The rain stops suddenly. There is a spotlight
on Sara. Jessie is gone.

The woman dressed like it's the 1950s
adjusts the bench and then Sara notices
her—

Aaaahhhh!

SARA

Aaaahhhh!

MRS. G.

The spotlight widens. Sara realizes she's
inside.

Oh shit. I am in your apartment.

SARA

Yes, we left the door open. You are here to see the apartment?

MRS. G.

I am trying to find an apartment.

SARA

Are you an artist?

MRS. G.

No. Yes. Photography. Well, sort of. I mean, not professionally--Shit, ma'am, I'm
sorry—what, where--

SARA

I've never seen anything like that.

MRS. G.

Referring to the camera.

It's better than this dead piece of crap.

SARA

Mrs. G. looks at her phone.

What does that do exactly?

MRS. G.

SARA

Nothing. It's dead.

MRS. G.

Where exactly are you from?

SARA

North Carolina. (noticing her more) Where exactly are you from?

Mrs. G. holds up Sara's umbrella in self defense.

MRS. G.

We don't want any problems, okay?

Sara holds up her phone in self-defense. Mr. G. enters.

SARA

I don't—either, ma'am. I'm just trying to find an apartment.

Sara lowers her phone. Mrs. G. lowers her broom.

MRS. G.

Oh. Okay. Well, then, welcome.

MR. G.

My wife made the best coffee today. Would you like some?

SARA

More than you can possibly imagine.

Mrs. G. leaves. Sara walks around the room, still wondering what the hell is going on.

MR. G.

The layout of this apartment is similar to the one in 4a.

SARA

Yeah, That's--

Sara notices a photograph of a couple on their wedding day.

She looks at Mr. G. She looks at the photograph. Mrs. G. enters and Sara drops her bag, her phone, her camera.

SARA

There. That. Over there. Your wedding photo?

They nod.

This is—freaking fierce--

She gives Mr. G. a huge hug. Mrs. G. watches her. Sara hugs Mrs. G., who stands awkwardly.

MR. G.

Oh, well, gee, thank you. Freaking. Fierce. Are you freaking strong and ready to move into 4a?

MRS. G.

Are you okay?

SARA

(to Mrs. G.) You're being so nice—

MRS. G.

Why wouldn't I be?

MR. G.

The rent for the apartment is \$85—

SARA

Shut up.

MRS. G.

Okay, well, we understand if it's too much--

SARA

No, no, no, it's not--

MR. G.

\$80/month. Final offer. Including utilities.

MRS. G.

Sweetheart, I don't think we can afford—

MR. G. (overlapping)

Look, kiddo—we can afford it.

SARA (overlapping)

(the word stops her in her tracks) Oh. Oh my God. Please. Say it again.

MR. G.

(self-consciously) “Look. Llllooooooohhh.”

SARA

Kiddo. Say kiddo. Say kiddo. Say it. Say it!

MR. G.

Kiddo! Kiddo. Kidddoooo. Kiiiddooooo.

SARA (overlapping)

Yeah, yes, yes!

MRS. G.

(to Mr. G.) If she is (under her breath) not stable--

SARA

(to Mr. G.) You have such a sweet smile and you're so young and handsome--

She touches his face and then his hair.

And look at all your great hair and--

Mrs. G. shoos Sara's hand away.

MRS. G.

Yes, yes, thank you, it is great.

SARA

Tell me everything—about the apartment. Since that's why I'm here.

MRS. G.

It's—modest.

MR. G.

Cozy. With one bedroom and—

MRS. G.

I'm not sure that the apartment is free actually.

MR. G. (overlapping)

It's been free for three months. The money--

SARA

I could give you a down payment, right now. (reaching in her pocket). Here—here's \$20 bucks, and we'll just keep talking. How does that sound?

MR. G.

“Fierce.” Fierce. Fierce!

Mr. G. takes the money.

MRS. G.

Would you like to see the apartment?

SARA

Sure. Later. So--how are you? What's up? What are you doing *today*—like if I weren't here right now, what would you be doing?

MR. G.

Well, we always listen to the radio on Sundays.

MRS. G.

When you're home. Otherwise, I'd be listening to it by myself. And keeping up this apartment and 4a. A lot for us—me--to do. While you're working on the weekend. Again.

SARA

Now that sounds more like you.

MRS. G.

What?

SARA

I said—this round of cashews—is on me. If I had some. Then I would—share—them. With you. You were saying?

MR. G.

So you'd be moving in with your husband?

SARA

Boyfriend.

MR. G.
But you're getting married very soon?

SARA
Married—uhhh—right--

MR. G.
You don't sound like you love him.

MRS. G.
It's really none of our business. So, where is he?

SARA
North Carolina.

MR. G.
What's he doing there when you're here?

MRS. G.
We don't need every detail of her life. Well?

SARA
I don't know.

MR. G.
What do you love about him?

SARA
Um, I—what do you love about her?

MR. G.
She has a heart as big as the Bronx.

MRS. G.
Oh stop. Unless you have more to say.

MR. G.
She speaks her mind—even if no one has asked.

SARA
Yes, yes!

MRS. G.
Yes--

MR. G.

For a relationship to work, you have to be able to compromise. Not everything is going to go your way.

MRS. G.

Or his way.

MR. G.

At the end of the day, they have to be the person you want to talk to—even if you've had a fight that morning over leaving your wet towel on the bathroom floor—I promise I won't do that again.

MRS. G.

Good.

MR. G.

And he has to respect you, even if he doesn't agree with you. And you have to be able to ask for what you need.

MRS. G.

Like I do.

MR. G.

You certainly do.

MRS. G.

And he has to be there for you—

MR. G.

When you really need him.

MRS. G.

Including on the weekend.

MR. G.

(lovingly) Enough, already, with the “you've been working” mishigas—I'm going to work one less shift from now on, alright?

MRS. G.

Good. And if you finish each other's sentences--

MR. G.

Then that's a great indication--

MRS. G.

That you're meant to be together.

SARA
(to Mrs. G.) I've never seen you so, so--happy.

MRS. G.
You haven't known us very long.

SARA
No, I haven't.

MR. G.
How did you meet this young man?

SARA
Dating website.

MR. G.
Website?

SARA
Yeah--after college, you're not going to just randomly meet someone on the street—

They look confused.
Oh, um—so tell me how you met--

MRS. G.
He was on leave—

MR. G.
And she was volunteering.

SARA
You, volunteering—for free?

MRS. G.
Of course.

MR. G.
She says I work all the time. I say she volunteers all the time.

SARA
Huh--

MRS. G.

I asked a group of men who were sitting together if any of them would help me with the dishes. And every one of them shot up their hands.

Mr. G. shoots up his hand.

MR. G.

And she chose me.

MRS. G.

He was the person right in front me.

MR. G.

And later that night, we were dancing.

MRS. G.

And you asked me to wait for you.

MR. G.

I told you you'd be a phenomenal mother.

MRS. G.

A very old mother. Because I had to wait for you.

SARA

And then what?

MR. G.

Who can remember the details? (leaning forward) It was a Wednesday at 6:23pm. The sun was setting over a light blue sky with a smattering of snow-white clouds. It was seven weeks before we were married. I was jumping out of airplanes and felt so free. But so far away from my girl. We were married on July 22, the third Thursday of the month. After the service, we came home and I sang "Young at Heart" to my beautiful new wife. And we danced.

Young at Heart plays. Only Sara can hear it.
Mr. G. sings along as he offers his hand.

"Fairy tales can come true, it can happen to you, when you're young at heart."

She takes his hand.

MRS. G.

We haven't danced together in years.

He forgets Sara. So does Mrs. G. They dance. They are a couple who used to really dance together. It is sweet, with both small and bigger movements that go with the music. In the middle of this, Sara snaps a few pictures.

MR.G.

“For it’s hard, you will find, to be narrow of mind, when you’re young at heart....You can go to extremes with impossible schemes. You can laugh when your dreams fall apart at the seams. And laugh get more exciting with each--”

The lights start to flicker and the music stops suddenly.

SARA

Oh my God, wait stop. (They do.) You’re so happy here now. You live here now.

MR. G.

Yes, until after our child is born.

Sara walks over to Mrs. G. and looks at her stomach.

SARA

Oh my God--mother.

MRS. G.

I’m going to be a mother, yes.

SARA

I, um, wow. Nothing. Wow. Nothing. Listen—You—you all are sooo happy here. I think that you should stay.

MRS. G.

Alright. Okay. It was a pleasure but enough.

Mrs. G. grabs Sara’s things. Sara puts them back down. Mr. G. approaches them.

SARA

No, please, Mr. G.—please—let me stay.

MR. G.

My name’s not Mr. G. It’s Maurice Gellman.

Mrs. G. tries to escort her towards the door.
Sara dodges her.

SARA
You don't want to move to Long Island. There's something wrong with the water.

MRS. G.
Are you from the sanitation department?

SARA
I am your daughter's daughter.

A moment.

MR. G.
And I am Santa Claus.

SARA
How else would I know that (to Mr. G.) you grew up in Brooklyn, and you had a newspaper route--

MRS. G. (overlapping)
How did you know he--

SARA
(to Mr. G.) And when your father came over from Europe, because he didn't want to be a Rabbi, the first thing he bought was a bottle of ketchup and so now the whole family is just ketchup obsessed.

MR. G.
I just liked the flavor.

SARA
What?

MRS. G.
The Rabbi was my side of the family. He didn't want to be a Rabbi so he left and survived. Everyone else—

A moment.

SARA
They all died? All of them?

MRS. G.

My father survived and came here, to America. And we--

SARA (overlapping)

Why didn't you ever talk about it? Why didn't anyone ever talk about it? Don't you think it'd be something useful—that it'd be good information to—be up front about--

MR. G.

It sounds like you need to calm down a little. Be a little less fierce. Now.

MRS. G.

It—was—just a few years ago. No one said we had to talk about it.

SARA

But why wouldn't you?

MRS. G.

We are in America now and we are good Americans. We are saving up for a television. We have a tree at Christmas. What are you--a Russian spy? An FBI spy?

The sound of a storm.

SARA

Would you let me stay if I were? Would you give me some time and let me think about all the questions I want to ask? What will happen when I can't ask (to Mr. G.) what it was like to be in a war and how you turned out so warm and gentle and kind anyway, what it was like to grow up surrounded by ghosts—what it was like to grow up without air conditioning--what it was like—to have one foot in this country and one foot somewhere else--what it was like in the beginning. When you started here together. When you were these people.

MR. G.

We are these people.

SARA

But you won't always be.

The lights change. The phone rings. Thunder. Lightning and Rain. The sounds of New York City, cars honking, sirens, etc. She looks at the phone in her hand. She looks back to her grandparents but they are gone. She is back outside.

A basketball rolls by. She stops it. Picks it up. Looks around—And then places it gently on the ground.

It's cloudy. Jessie's in the middle of his spiel.

Sara's phone rings. She picks up the phone.

JESSIE

Ed Koch, Stanley Kubrick--

SARA (on phone)

Hi. Joel. (to Joel) I'm sorry you couldn't make it too.

JESSIE

Penny Marshall, Mary J Blige--

SARA (on phone)

I think it's a sign, you know?

JESSIE

Cuba Gooding Jr.--

SARA (on phone)

No hard feelings. Yeah. Okay. Bye.

She hangs up.

JESSIE

We've got Robert Mallett—well-known scientist whose text scientifically proves the possibility of time travel. I know, it's hard to believe. Here—do you need one of these?

He hands her an umbrella.

I always carry an extra.

It stops raining. They look up.

JESSIE

I feel like I've been saying the same names all day, over and over again.

SARA

Are you from the Bronx?

JESSIE

Cary, North Carolina.

SARA

No shit, I'm from Raleigh.

JESSIE

Do I know you? You seem, somehow, familiar.

SARA

My grandparents just died. I've been in Queens for a few weeks. So I've been around. Sort of.

JESSIE

I'm sorry.

SARA

Queens isn't so bad.

JESSIE

About your grandparents.

SARA

Yeah, me too. She's been sick for a while. I've been sitting with her, holding her hand, holding my grandfather's hand. A few hours after she died, my grandfather died too—a sudden heart attack. I guess his heart couldn't continue without her. I'm sorry, going on and on to someone I just met on the street. (a realization) I just met you on the street.

JESSIE

Welcome to the Bronx!

SARA

Do you ever notice how people say the stupidest things when older people die?

JESSIE--

Sorry, Bronx tour guide.

SARA

No--the last few days, I've been hearing: "Oh, well. At least they had a good, long life" like that somehow makes it easy. I think it's the opposite. They were on the planet so long--I don't know how the world can continue without Mr. and Mrs. G.

JESSIE

Mr. and Mrs.?--

SARA

When I was little I called them Grandma G. and Grandpa G. and my grandfather used to joke and say, "That's Mr. G. and Mrs. G. to you..." And my phone died. Earlier today. It's not reliable. Just like my boyfriend.

JESSIE

It's too bad—

SARA

Thanks. I think it's something with the battery.

JESSIE

That your *boyfriend* can't be here right now to support you, huh? Do you want to use my phone to--

SARA

No—I'm—we broke up. Just now.

JESSIE

Oh—no really? Wow, that's—

SARA

He decided not to come. . . . If you could ask your grandparents anything, what would you ask?

JESSIE

Nothing. Just getting to breathe the same air they're breathing would be enough, you know?

SARA

My grandmother told my mom that if she had known what she knew, she might not have had children. Isn't that a terrible thing to tell a child?

JESSIE

Maybe she just couldn't stand to see them suffer.

SARA

On Long Island, my aunt and uncle developed this rare form of Cancer—my mom was okay but my aunt and uncle didn't make it into their teen years. And I thought I'd come here and maybe have coffee with the people who lived in their--I can't even find 493 East 170th street.

JESSIE

You're standing on it.

SARA

What?

JESSIE

493 East 170th street.

SARA
A basketball court? This can't be right. I'm so—

JESSIE
You're not stupid.

SARA
I shouldn't have—

JESSIE
Bothered. Yeah. Of course you should have.

SARA
You're finishing my sentences.

JESSIE
Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt—

SARA
No—it's—

The wind picks up.

SARA
Did you just hear something?

JESSIE
It's the Bronx.

SARA
Here I was, with this one last opportunity in the last few weeks to talk to them, and I was like a statue. I have 29 birthday cards at home. And I never said thank you. For any of it.

JESSIE
Hey, kiddo--they know.

SARA
I'm Sara.

JESSIE
Jessie.

SARA
Would you like to show me the best coffee in the Bronx?

JESSIE

Okay but then—there’s this place nearby where they give dance lessons—it’s like all that old music—I mean, would you be interested in—look, I’ve got-- moves.

He does a traditional dance move that was similar to Mr. G. He turns and organizes his backpack.

The lights shift slightly. A modern, acoustic version of “Young at Heart” plays.

Sara’s grandparents walk across the basketball court. They do one sweeping turn together. Mrs. G. leads Mr. G. away. Sara watches them.

Jessie turns, the lights shifting back.

JESSIE

Did my dance moves scare you away?

SARA

Maybe a little.

JESSIE

I like a woman who speaks her mind.

Sara looks in the direction of where her grandparents just went.

SARA

Yeah, me too.

As they walk off stage.

So, tell me about this coffee shop.

An empty stage.

A light fades on the basketball court.

Fade to black.

End play.

Sharon E. Cooper