

A Visit to the Bronx
(Or, More Specifically, 493 East 170th Street)

a one-act play

by Sharon E. Cooper

Sharon E. Cooper

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Contact:

Sharon E. Cooper
sharoncooperwrites@gmail.com
www.sharonecooper.com

CHARACTERS

SARA, 29, F.

A southerner, with a slight southern accent, a photographer, a granddaughter searching, Jewish

JESSE, 30s, M.

A tour guide, any race or ethnicity

MRS. G., 29, F

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

MR. G., 27, M.

Mrs. G's husband, a romantic

TIME

2011 and 1951

SETTING

The Bronx—on the street in 2011 and in a living room in 1951

Notes:

"A Visit to the Bronx" had its original production at the Michael Weller. At this point, it was a ten-minute play. I was commissioned to expand this play by The Keller Theatre, in Giessen, Germany. 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: www.sharoncooper.com

Musical rights should be obtained for individual productions.

In memory of Maurice Schmilowitz, Esther Baumgarten, Philip Baumgarten, and especially Gertrude Schmilowitz, who lived many years of her life at 493 East 170th Street.

The sound of a storm, lightning, and thunder. Lights up on SARA, on her cell phone in the Bronx in the middle of a basketball court. She balances a small digital camera in one hand, a bag, and her cellphone is against her ear. She leans her ear to her shoulder awkwardly. As she walks past JESSE, who's slumped down on a bench, he suddenly pops up with great enthusiasm. He shouts the following:

JESSE

Welcome to the Bronx!

Jesse puts on a nice jacket and primps a little.

SARA (on the phone)

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--What? It was fine. Funerals are always a barrier to laughs. Two for the price of one. I'm being? *I'm being*---you would--I don't—if you were *here*—I'm not—Joel, can you just find this one freaking —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--

JESSE (overlapping at "I'm not—Joel...")

We've got Vanessa Williams, Alan Alda, Ellen Barkin--Jennifer Lopez, Funk Master Flex, Ed Koch, Stanley Kubrick, Penny Marshall, Mary J Blige, John Patrick Shanley, Jerry Orbach, Cuba Gooding Jr.--

A basketball rolls by in front of her. She kicks it—hard.

SARA (on the phone, continuous)

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

She hangs up. Jesse looks at her.

SARA

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."

SARA

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

Her phone dies.

SARA

(to her phone) I hate you. I really freaking hate you.

JESSE (announcing more names)

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.

JESSE

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

SARA

Yes, I know *Billy Joel*--

JESSE

And Robert 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.

It starts to rain. She drops her phone as she pulls an umbrella out of her bag. She reaches for her phone as she tries to open the umbrella.

JESSE

Do you need anything—any help?

SARA

No, I'm—(awkwardly standing up) I'm fine.

JESSE

I'm sorry. About your grandmother.

She fights a bit with her umbrella, which is a little 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.

JESSE

She took her aggressions out on basketballs?

SARA

She took her aggression out on everyone.

JESSE

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 pissed and unhappy like she was, because I'm not.

She can't get her umbrella to work. She stomps on it.

JESSE

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

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

Can I help you—

SARA

Are you an umbrella salesman?

JESSE

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

SARA

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

JESSE

Oh, God, was it a car accident?

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.

JESSE

I love ketchup.

SARA

I can't stand it. 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.

JESSE

Ketchup was a staple of the working-class people because it was cheap. Most of the Jews moved out in the 50s but before that, it was known as the Jewish borough. They mostly lived in poverty in the southern part, so I guess he wasn't the only--

Still messing with her umbrella.

SARA

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

JESSE

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.

Her umbrella flies out of her hands. She tries to follow it. The lights shift. The rain stops suddenly. Jesse is gone.

Sara, scared, ends up center stage with a spotlight on her. It's hard for her to see.

A woman dressed like it's the 1950s enters from the kitchen.

SARA

Aaaahhhh!

MRS. G.

Aaaahhhh!

The spotlight widens. Sara realizes she's in an apartment. The walls are covered with wallpaper.

SARA

Oh shit. I am in your apartment.

MRS. G.

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

SARA

I am trying to find an apartment.

MRS. G.

Are you an artist?

SARA

No. Yes. Photography. Well, sort of. I mean, not professionally--

She shows her phone.

Shit, ma'am, I'm sorry—what, where--

MRS. G.

I've never seen anything like that.

Referring to the phone.

SARA

It's a dead piece of crap.

Mrs. G. looks at her phone.

MRS. G.

But what does that do exactly?

SARA

Nothing. It's dead.

MRS. G.

Where exactly are you from?

SARA

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

Mrs. G. holds up a broom in self-defense.

MRS. G.

We don't want any problems, okay?

Holding up her phone in self-defense.

SARA

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

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

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.

Oh—wh—what uh--

She looks at Mr. G. She looks at the photograph. Mrs. G. enters and hands her a cup of coffee. Sara takes it, her hand shaking. She takes a sip and stares at Mrs. G. and back at the photograph. She keeps drinking the coffee until it's gone. She puts the cup down.

Sara drops her bag, her phone, her camera.

Mr. G. rushes to pick up her things. He tries to hand them to her. She's frozen.

MRG. G.

Be careful—those are important (adopting a terrible southern accent) North Carolin--ian things--

SARA

There. That. Over there. Your wedding photo?

They nod.

SARA (cont.)

This is—freaking fierce--

*She gives Mr. G. a hug, gingerly, like she's not sure if he's really there.
Mrs. G. watches her.*

MR. G.

Oh, well, gee, thank you. (thinking, after the hug) Freaking. Fierce like strong. This is so “strong.” Freaking strong. Huh.

She turns to Mrs. G. Mr. G. tries to hand Sara her electronics. Mrs. G. takes them.

SARA

Oh, God, please don't--

MRS. G.

Just putting them over here in this basket so they're together and you won't forget them.

MR. G. (overlapping)

(to Sara) 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—

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

MR. G.
(self-consciously) “Look. Llllooooookkkk.”

SARA
Kiddo. Say kiddo. Say kiddo again. Say it. Say it!

MR. G.
Kiddo. Kiddooooo. Kiiiddooooooo.

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 almost touches his face.

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 room 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. Here—here's \$20 bucks, and we'll just keep talking. How does that sound?

MR. G.

(taking the money) "Fierce." Fierce. Fierce!

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 t—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. You were saying?

MR. G.

(to Mrs. G.) I'm here right now, sweetheart. And aren't you glad?

MRS. G.
(sweetly) Perhaps.

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—I can't think of anything *specifically*. 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.

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

MR. G.
Then that's a great indication--

MRS. G.
That you get each other.

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. After college, you're not going to just randomly meet someone on the street—

MR. G.
Web-site.

SARA
Right. That's shorthand where I'm from about how someone might, um, might meet—in er, uh—how, um, did you two meet?

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. And that wasn't our first dance to “Young at Heart”—

MRS. G.
You were on leave—and I 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.

Anyway, 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.

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.

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.

MR. G.

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

He offers his hand.

MRS. G.

We haven't danced together in years.

She takes it. He sings. They forget Sara's there. They dance. He twirls her.

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.”

SARA wipes tears from her eyes. She takes a picture.

MR. G.

“And life gets more exciting with each passing day. And love is either in your heart or on its way.”

*She looks down at the pictures she’s taken.
She sings.*

SARA

“And if you should survive to 105, look at all you’ll derive out of being alive--” Oh my God, wait stop. Stop dancing! 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., looking at Sara’s stomach.

SARA

Oh my God--mother.

MRS. G.

I’m going to be a mother, you

SARA

I, um, wow. Nothing. Wow. Nothing. Listen—

MR. G.

Now, you listen. We made a deal. We’re going to have a big back yard soon but we want to rent the apartment for one year and then—

SARA

No, no, no--that’s not the problem. You—you all are sooo happy here. I think that you should stay.

MRS. G.

Alright. Okay. It was really 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 and then—laughter and--

MR. G.

And I am Santa Claus.

MRS. G.

And we're definitely not renting you the apartment.

SARA

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

MRS. G. (overlapping)

If you are some kind of spy--

SARA

And that your mother said that ketchup would make you strong and healthy like a king, or 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. One of those stories is definitely true--

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--

SARA

All of them?

MRS. G.

My father survived and came here, to America. And we are good Americans. How do you know so much--

SARA (overlapping)

(loudly) Why didn't you ever talk about it? Why didn't anyone ever--

MR. G.

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

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 fine. We are in America now. We eat ketchup. 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—(to Mrs. G.), 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.

She picks up their photograph.

MR. G.

We are those people. Right now.

SARA

But you won't always be.

The lights change. The phone rings. Thunder. Lightning and rain. She looks at the phone in her hand. She looks back to her grandparents and they are gone. The apartment fades away. It's cloudy. Jesse's in the middle of his spiel.

JESSE

We've got Vanessa Williams, Alan Alda, Ellen Barkin--

The sounds of New York City, cars honking, sirens, etc. Sara picks up the phone.

SARA (on phone)

Hi. Joel. Can you hold on?

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

SARA (on phone)

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

JESSE

Ed Koch, Stanley Kubrick, Penny Marshall, Mary J Blige--

SARA (on phone)

I think it's a sign, you know?

JESSE

John Patrick Shanley, Jerry Orbach, Cuba Gooding Jr.--

SARA (on phone)

No hard feelings. Yeah. Okay. Bye.

JESSE

We've got Robert Mallett—well-known scientist whose text scientifically proves the possibility of time travel.

SARA

Wow. Yeah. Right. Hi.

JESSE

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.

Isn't that always the way?

JESSE

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

SARA

(singing) Right. "Uptown girl, she's been living in a downtown world"—

JESSE

Hey, that's Billy Joel. Also a Bronx guy.

SARA

Yeah. I know. Are you from the Bronx?

JESSE

Cary, North Carolina.

SARA

No shit, I'm from Raleigh.

JESSE

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

SARA

Yeah, um, yeah. You too. My grandparents just died. I've been in Queens for a few weeks. So I've been around. Sort of.

JESSE

I'm sorry.

SARA

Queens isn't so bad.

JESSE

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.

JESSE

Welcome to the Bronx!

SARA

Yeah. Thanks. I had to get away from the smell at their house--My grandfather ate ketchup on everything. And our friends and family think it's like some great tribute--

JESSE

Ketchup was a staple of the working class in the 1950s. It was cheap.

SARA

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

JESSE--

Sorry, Bronx tour guide.

SARA

Not you. 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.

JESSE

Your grandparents?

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..." (teary) And my phone died. Earlier today. Because it's not reliable. Like my boyfriend.

He hands her a tissue.

JESSE

It's too bad—

SARA

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

JESSE

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.

JESSE

Oh—no really? Wow, that's—

SARA

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

JESSE

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?

JESSE

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

SARA

On Long Island, my uncle and aunt developed this rare form of Cancer—my mom was okay but her brother and sister didn't make it into their teen years. I used to think that she was always unhappy—being here now—I think, maybe--so here's what's really ridiculous. I thought I'd come here, and maybe have coffee with the people who live in their apartment--I can't even find 493 East 170th street.

He gently points up.

JESSE

You're standing on it.

SARA

What?

She looks up. It's true.

JESSE

493 East 170th street.

SARA

A basketball court?

He picks up the basketball.

Proof. JESSE

This can't be right. I'm so— SARA

You're not stupid. JESSE

I shouldn't have— SARA

Bothered. Yeah. Of course you should have. JESSE

You're finishing my sentences. SARA

Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt— JESSE

No—it's— SARA

How did you know my grandparents have all passed? JESSE

The wind picks up.

Did you just hear something? SARA

It's the Bronx. JESSE

SARA
I didn't say any of the right things when they were dying. Here you are, with this one last opportunity, and I was like a statue. Even though she always complained about having to travel, they never missed a dance recital or a prom picture or a graduation. Or a birthday. I have 29 birthday cards at home. And I never said thank you. For any of it.

Hey, kiddo--they know. JESSE

A moment and then—

SARA

I'm Sara.

JESSE

Jesse.

SARA

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

JESSE

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

He busts a move and dances off stage.

She turns back and sees her grandparents walk past, holding hands. Her grandparents twirl in a circle. And then they stop and look at her. Holding hands, they walk away.

JESSE returns.

JESSE

Did my dance moves scare you away?

SARA

Maybe a little.

She looks back at the empty space once more.

JESSE

I like a woman who speaks her mind.

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.