

The Visit

A suburban house. A phone rings, offstage. We hear a voice.

Charles This morning? Oh! What time?

Sabina appears, a woman in her early fifties, expensively but simply dressed.

Sabina The roses are ready to flower. (She smiles.) My gift of years ago.

She reaches the door, and it opens. Charles is there, a man of seventy or so.

Charles Good morning. We'll have tea in the garden, but you'll want to look around the house ...

They go in, and the audience listens to their thoughts, via music evocative of what they have been for each other. Charles takes a jug of orange juice and two glasses to a table in the garden. Sabina enters the kitchen, finds that her host is outside, then turns to another door. The music swells with passion. She moves back to the lounge, out of sight. Charles comes in again and, seeing the kettle boiling, makes tea.

Sabina (returning) I'm glad you've still got the red sofa.

Charles I should have it re-covered, but it wouldn't be the same.

Sabina smiles, and there is an undercurrent of tenderness before Charles speaks again.

Charles It's a lovely morning. Let's sit outside.

She picks up the cups and saucers, while he carries the teapot. They sit at a table.

Sabina We always sat here.

Charles I had to take the plum tree out. It was almost dead, it looked awful. I've got new trees in, but they're not doing well in the drought.

Sabina It's been ever so dry ...

Charles (lifting his cup) English Breakfast. Some things never change.

Sabina We sell paintings we used to like, we bring new children into the world ... and we drink the tea we've been drinking for years.

Charles Would you have liked something different?

Sabina No. Very much no. I was hoping I'd find everything the same ...

Charles There's not much that's changed. A few new power points, a towel or two, a bath mat ...

They both laugh.

Sabina I stayed at your house more than you at mine. Or that's how I remember it ...

The orchestra remembers too.

Charles Your mother? (He's referring to his enemy of long ago.)

Sabina Died of Alzheimer's. Long drawn out. Very painful for me.

He nods soberly.

Charles You looked after her?

Sabina Five and a half years. Until almost the end.

They go in on themselves.

Charles Your son's a musician. I read about him in the paper.

Sabina He's very popular. I'm not sure where that comes from.

Charles They do that to us, don't they?

Sabina I've had two more. Both musical. Tanya was such a good pianist I thought she should have a real chance ...

Charles What did you do?

Sabina I took her to Vienna for lessons. It cost a fortune ...

Charles And did she learn?

Sabina Every time she came home I could hear the difference. And she knew all the young people from the classes, they were always in our apartment, chattering about music ...

Charles ... not football; that would be a relief.

Sabina Vienna has magic ...

Charles Look at the people who've lived there.

Sabina The children's grandmother had rented the apartment for us. I had a fair idea of where it was, the children had no idea. As we came into the street Miles picked out a place with a lovely balcony, and he was right. That was the one.

Charles Did you visit any composers' homes?

Sabina I didn't, though they're everywhere. Beethoven must have moved every six weeks! But in Vienna you hear people practising wherever you walk. You have to like it because you can't escape it.

Charles So what brought you home ... if that's the word?

Sabina Tanya came to me after an exam. She said, I'm as good as most, but I'm not a star. I knew at once what she was saying.

Charles Concert artists lead unusual lives.

Sabina It wasn't what she wanted. You can't do it unless you know you're special ...

Charles *Believe* you're special ...

Sabina Miles joined a choir. He sang so beautifully, they wanted him for solos all the time. Then his voice broke!

Charles Is he still singing?

Sabina Only a little. I think he only did it to keep up with Tanya. Becoming a baritone gave him an excuse to get out.

Charles Some more tea?

Sabina No. I'll move onto the juice in a minute.

Charles It's from an upmarket supermarket. They squeeze oranges at the front of the shop. It's so enticing I can't go past. I always buy a bottle and it's gone in no time.

Sabina What are you listening to these days?

Charles I've gone spiritual in my old age. Schutz. And very austere things, like the Goldberg variations. Beethoven's late works. Every composer has to write early works, but I'm impatient to get to more developed things ...

Sabina Who are the great pianists, would you say?

Charles Heavens! I'm sure you know better than I do; you were in Vienna ...

Sabina We heard some wonderful concerts ... but who are the players you like?

Charles Mostly I don't care who's playing, but some pianists are special. Michelangeli in Debussy, Perahia in Mozart, and Alfred Brendel in Beethoven: they'd be my favourites, I suppose ...

Sabina I'll pick up a few CDs when I'm in a shop, and I'll listen. You picked some well known names.

Charles They're all I know. I don't keep up with the ratings. I don't think I'd know where to look.

He pours himself an orange juice and looks inquiringly at her. She nods, and he pours a glass for her, and moves it across the table to be near her hand. She sips, and looks at him.

Sabina What has time done to us?

Charles What it always does. It's given us chances.

Sabina It's made me a mother.

The house behind them begins to fill with music, tender music, brimming with the confidence of love that's shared, and known.

Charles You were *already* a mother.

Sabina I was a self-centred mother. My own mother only partially grew out of that stage. I had to do better.

Charles When did this come to you?

Sabina It took a long time. I was aware of it, and I fought it. I wanted to be me. I wanted to be with you.

The house responds, as if it's listening to the two of them. What it's saying is most seductive, about the richness achievable when two souls combine.

Charles (humbly) I think we're being spoken to.

Sabina This house always had magic for me. My own house was full of myself, and all my worries.

Charles I wanted things to be perfect for you.

Sabina And they were. But you were providing the solution, and I had to find it for myself.

Charles I always hoped that whatever we faced, we'd find our answers together.

Sabina And we did, for a time ...

The music from the house now includes two voices, a woman and a man, designated in this script as C and S; they should be younger voices than those of Charles and Sabina; how similar they are in other respects is for composer and producer to decide.

S Whisper, darling, everything that's secret in your heart ...

C They say we *fall* in love, but we don't, we rise, we soar, we fly ...

S I'm flying with you. Is that the earth, down there below?

C Who knows what it is? Everything that matters is here ...

Charles and Sabina look at each other, a little shaken to have their thoughts of years ago presented to their minds.

Charles What now? I feel quite disarmed.

Sabina If you felt now as you felt then, you'd rush inside to sing. But you're here with me. What happened to you when I left, can you tell me that?

Charles We should let them finish.

They listen for a few moments longer as their younger selves sing ecstatically in the house.

S If we can find a place to land, we'll settle there, and fill it with our love ...

C We've got this bed, this room, this house, this is the centre of our world ...

S This is yours, and my place is mine, we'll find a place of our own ...

C ... and everything that's marvellous will grow for us there ...

Charles (sadly) Hope, hope, hope ...

Sabina Hope doesn't have to be fulfilled. It's enough for it to have been there.

Charles Night after night I woke in that bed that had been ours, wanting to die. Night after night I lay there thinking I'd throw myself off a bridge. I'd do it in the dark and they would find me in the morning.

Sabina You're calm and quiet today.

She sips a little of the orange juice.

Charles I never did it. I had my children to live for, as you had yours.

Sabina Do you ever think of people whose children die before their mother? The generations are wrong? It's awful.

Charles We should die in our proper turn. Otherwise it's wrong.

Sabina But wrong things happen all the time.

Charles I lost you when I didn't want to.

Sabina And what happened then?

Charles A change came over me. Through no decision of mine. I could feel it happening, but wasn't sure what it was ...

Sabina Eventually you knew?

Charles It seemed to me that I didn't matter any more. I'd had my flare of passion, like that flare of colour before the dawn, which fades ...

Sabina ... and in its place? Came what?

Charles Where there had been my incandescent passion for you ...

Sabina ... there was now ...

Charles ... an ocean of tenderness for mankind. Poor struggling, stupid, misguided humanity, wanting good to come into the world ... I was part of them, they were part of me. I couldn't be separate, and special, any more.

Sabina Ah!

Charles And what happened to you?

Sabina Listen!

They listen for a time to their own younger voices, singing passionately, tenderly, inside the house.

S My love, my love of loves, my love without a name ...

C Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

S Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

S & C Aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ...

The woman and man in the garden listen to the singers' and the orchestra's passion as its echoes die away.

Sabina We were lucky. Very few get as far as we did. As high ...

Charles I never wanted to come down.

Sabina It was like travelling in space. You can't make a life out there.

Charles I think we could have made a place anywhere.

Sabina You were further advanced than me. I had such a long way to travel before I could be with you.

Charles I was ready to wait.

Sabina If I asked you to wait then I'd have made you my goal. But you weren't my goal, you were my temptation.

Charles That's a word reserved for things we can never achieve ...

Sabina ... and we achieved it almost every time we got together. That's why it was so tempting. I had to be free to lose myself, to wander in the dark, lost, and see where I arrived. You had no such problem. (Charles attends closely to what she's saying.) The problem was in me, and your solution was so tempting. Something told me I had to find a way forward of my own.

Charles Heavens!

He says this because the back door is opening and the two younger people, C and S, the singers, are coming into the garden

Sabina They want to sit where we are!

Charles and Sabina stand, and move aside. C & S take the vacated chairs, C fills the two glasses, they touch their glasses together, then sip, each of them absorbed in the other.

Charles Shall we go inside?

Sabina We'll sit on the red sofa. For old times.

Charles and Sabina go inside, keeping a pace or two from each other; he holds the door for her as she goes in, then follows. The

orchestra plays tenderly, quietly, thoughtfully, as if the new (old) couple have all the time in the world.

C I've never learned to meditate.

S We don't need to. The world's gone still.

C We are the centre, aren't we.

S I am when I'm with you. I'm troubled a lot of the time. Unsure. So I get in the car.

C When I know you're coming, some magic enters my mind.

S Yes! Everything's possible, when I'm here!

C Yes!

S (at the bottom of her register, passionately)
Oooooooooohhh ...

C (lightly, rising) Oooooooooohhh ...

S Do you think clouds have psychological problems?

C (laughing) They can't keep still! They're always floating somewhere ...

S ... or getting swept up in storms!

C What's a storm like for a cloud? They're part of it, don't forget!

S I always feel I can understand a storm ...

C Can you get inside and know what it's feeling?

S They rumble, they crack, they flash with light ...

C Do they do it to scare us, or to illuminate themselves?

S They can't help themselves, I think. It's what they're made to do!

C You understand the nature of a storm?

S Yes, bugger it, I do.

C Why bugger it, darling?

S I'd be better off if I was earthbound ...

C What would you like to be on earth?

S One of the sheets on your bed.

C Then you mustn't mind if I become the other.

S A bed only has two sheets ...

C It's what the two of them do for each other that makes the meaning ...

S We've never sat outside in a storm.

C We've woken up and listened to the rumbling ...

S And we've held each other, and I've been at peace.

C That peace we give each other is the most beautiful thing ...

S Who are those people that were sitting here before?

C The ones that went inside?

S She was going to sit on my sofa. I don't want to find her there.

C She won't hurt it darling. Lots of people have sat on it, over the years.

S Not any more. It's mine. (listening) Sssshh!

The younger couple listen, trying to catch what's happening in the house.

Charles Were you curious about me? What brought me to your mind?

Sabina You're always there ...

Charles The family ghost, so familiar that nobody gets frightened?

Sabina (laughing) We couldn't sell the house, unless you agreed to come!

Charles May I ask, then: are you getting ready for a move?

Sabina It's not the house that holds you, though this one does: it's my mind. That's where you'll always live.

Charles That part of me that lives in you ... is out of my control.

Sabina Controls are useful, but they only go so far.

Charles (inquiring) My love?

Sabina It's years since you said that word to me.

The orchestra, which has been jocular, suddenly goes quiet. The younger couple notice this.

C What *are* those people doing?

S Making peace with each other, I think.

C Why do they need to, I wonder? What's been going on?

S I think they may once have been in love.

C Passion and the elderly. They don't go together, do they?

S I sometimes think we need to have our passions early, so we can get on with our lives ...

C It's passion that drives us. When you rang ... unexpectedly you could come ... my heart began to pump. It only steadied when my hand touched yours.

S That's our magic darling. I feel spotlit when I'm near you. I'm the chosen star and the universe is watching to see what I'll do.

C What will you do? Tell me, you soaring star!

S I don't know my love. I'm living in the minute, there's nothing I can do to bring about an end. I'm in a current, and it's sweeping me along ...

C I want to be that current ...

S You are! I don't know where you're taking me but I'm happy in your stream.

C Hold me darling.

She stands and presses herself against him.

C Let's go inside my love.

S Those people are still in there. Sitting on our sofa as if they owned it!

C Then we'll suggest that they let us have the house ... (He pauses, because Charles and Sabina have come out again. They stand near the back door. She is about to go.) She's going, I think.

Charles It was good of you to come. I won't come out to the car. It would upset me to see you drive away.

Sabina leans forward. He presses his cheek against hers. Their hands touch for a moment, then she's gone.

Charles (wanting to regain his composure) I forgot to show her my flowers ...

He walks slowly, blundering, perhaps, into the garden, passing C & S without any eye contact; it's possible that he doesn't know they're there.

Sabina (pausing by the roses she noticed as she came in) Oh you roses, you've lived here all those years ... you didn't go away!

Then Sabina's gone. Charles is somewhere at the back of his garden, talking to his flowers, and C & S are holding each other tenderly. C stands, embraced by S.

C Will we hold each other now, my love?

S Hold me darling.

C Let's go inside.

The young couple go inside to resume their loving. Charles comes back to the table, the jug of juice and glasses. He's holding some flowers of Eucalyptus Lehmannii.

Charles I wish I'd shown her these, but she'll see them in her mind.

He sits in the chair he sat in before, twirling the flowers of the eucalypt in his fingers as he thinks of what has been.