

THE VISIT
A One-Act Play

THE VISIT

Character List

- PATRICIA:** (female): A well-spoken, middle-class woman aged 45-55 from the Home Counties.
- BETTY:** (female): An older woman living in a suburban council flat.

SCENE: A small living room. An older woman (BETTY) is sitting in an armchair asleep. She is wearing slippers. A redtop newspaper is on the floor at her feet. The television is showing the Jeremy Kyle show on which people are shouting at each other. The volume is loud. There is a knock on the door off set. BETTY continues sleeping. The knock is repeated, louder this time. The TV continues to blare out. A smartly dressed, middle-aged woman (PATRICIA) holding a handbag pokes her head round the door anxiously. She comes in cautiously. She has an upper-class accent.

PATRICIA: Hello...Mrs Johnson...Mrs Johnson...hello...oh dear...

PATRICIA approaches BETTY's chair and stands over her. She is still fast asleep. She stands for a moment then gingerly touches her shoulder. BETTY stirs and wakes with a start.

BETTY: What's going on? Who the hell are you?

PATRICIA: Oh, I'm terribly sorry to burst in on you like this, unannounced, but the back door was open...actually...so I came in. I do hope I haven't alarmed you.

BETTY: It's always open so that I don't have to get up every time some bloody nuisance comes knocking. You're not from the council, are you? I told the last bloke next time I'm going to fill *him* in, never mind his bloody form.

PATRICIA: Oh no, I'm not from the council. Please rest assured! No, apologies for absence is first item on the agenda, I'm afraid. Mrs Wharton is so sorry that she couldn't make it today as she's been called away on a very important meeting.

BETTY: Mrs Wharton? Never heard of her. Just a minute, she wasn't the woman down the road with five kids who ran away with the pools bloke from Mitcham was she? Blimey, she never needed a treble chance, that one. One was enough for her. (*cackles*).

PATRICIA: Er, no, that doesn't sound like Mrs Wharton at all, actually. No, Mrs Wharton is my co-ordinating officer, who unfortunately couldn't be here to, er, introduce us, so to speak, so that our first session together could get off to a flying start. Um, would it be possible to turn the sound down a little? And may I sit down please?

BETTY picks up the controller from the arm of the chair and turns the TV down.

PATRICIA is nervous, and very tense. She perches on the edge of the sofa.

BETTY: What session are you talking about? Are you a hairdresser or something?

PATRICIA: (*laughing nervously*) A hairdresser? Oh, how funny! No, I'm actually what we call a befriender. I'm part of a team of who make it their business to call on vulner— erm, people who need hel— um, people who'd benefit from contact with other people to help improve their quality of life, er, going forward. To cut a long story short, in a nutshell, without beating about the bush, I'd be absolutely delighted to be your 'listening friend'.

BETTY: Listening friend? And what makes you think I need one?

PATRICIA: Well, you must have been amenable to the idea when you saw Mrs Wharton, otherwise I wouldn't be here. You'd have been vetted for suitability to enter the programme. And I'm really delighted that you qualified.

BETTY: I still don't know what you're talking about, but then I can't remember anything these days. What was she wearing?

PATRICIA: It was probably taupe.

BETTY: Taupe, what the hell's that, for god's sake?

PATRICIA: Fawn, well more a sort of browny grey really. But let's talk about you and your life here on the Beddington Estate. Oh, and please feel free to ask me anything, anything at all. I'll be here once a week, if you'd like me to be, so you'll have plenty of time to think of any questions between visits. So, what do you like doing?

BETTY: Driving racing cars.

PATRICIA: Racing cars?

BETTY: Yes, and in my spare time I run marathons. The old blood pressure goes through the roof at about 20 miles, but who cares when you're having fun?

PATRICIA: Oh, you're pulling my leg, aren't you! You had me believing you for a minute. No, really, how do you spend your time?

BETTY: Now look, what's all this about? You come in here without so much as a by-your-leave and I'm supposed to tell you all my worldly secrets. Why do you think I want to? I don't want to be rude, but why don't you bugger off and leave me alone.

PATRICIA: I'm so sorry if I've offended you. I really didn't mean to. This was all arranged with Mrs Wharton some while ago now, you obviously don't remember. It's my first time doing this sort of thing and I did want to get off to a good start on my first time out. I'll have to report back to Mrs Wharton to tell what happened, or what didn't...actually. Oh dear....

She gets up from the chair to leave.

BETTY: All right, look, I'm sorry love. I was playing silly buggers again. You're only trying to help. Let's start again. You want to know something about me, do you? Well, I'm 83—

PATRICIA: —83? Well I wouldn't have believed it!

BETTY: You thought I was 93, didn't you? Cheek!

PATRICIA: Oh, no I assure you—

BETTY: Only joking. You'll have to get used to that. No, I've been on my own since Jack died.

PATRICIA: I'm sorry.

BETTY: Yes, cancer, 20 years ago. We both smoked like flippin' chimneys in those days. Gawd knows what the place must have smelt like, let alone us. But everyone had a niff about them then; if it wasn't nicotine it was BO. I blame those shirts they used to wear with those detachable collars. You smelt 'em 100 yards off, that's the truth. Some of them wore the same shirt for three weeks on the trot. Must have had to take 'em off with a potato peeler. (*chuckles*)

PATRICIA: Absolutely...Yes, smells can be quite evocative, can't they. A chap on the bus coming over here was wearing the same aftershave Trevor used to use. Old Spice it was.

BETTY: Who's Trevor?

PATRICIA: Trevor's my husband. He's an accountant in the City. Always working, on the go all day, like a worker ant, his little feelers on the go, foraging away all the hours god made, and weekends, more often than not.

BETTY: So your Trevor's an ant?

PATRICIA: Well sometimes it seems like that, always scurrying around, you know, like an ant, or a...a...field mouse, working all the time. Well, most of the time...

BETTY: I remember Jack when he worked on the fish counter at Sainsbury's. Made your eyes water, it did. I got used to it after a while and it was nice because people never sat next to us in the pictures.

PATRICIA: Sounds as though the two of you had a good life together.

BETTY: Yes, he was a good man. I wouldn't have changed a thing about him really – apart from those smelly old shirts.

PATRICIA: What happened in the end? I mean, if you'd rather not say...

BETTY: No, that's all right, dear. We were looking forward to him retiring and getting his pension, but he never made it. Those ruddy fags saw to that.

PATRICIA: Oh, I am sorry. Trevor never smoked, thank goodness.

BETTY: So your Trevor don't use aftershave and don't smoke neither. He must do something apart from working. He must be a boozer, then. Yes, that's it. I bet the two of you sit down of an evening and go through the whisky bottle till you're both pie-eyed. Go on, tell me I'm not wrong.

PATRICIA: Well, I assume you're pulling my leg again. No, Trevor doesn't like alcohol, except for the occasional glass of wine. When you're working with figures you've got to keep your wits about you. That's what he tells me anyway.

BETTY: There's nothing wrong with a little drop of the other. Not all the time, but when the time's right. Jack wasn't a boozer, if you know what I mean, but he enjoyed his beer and a nip of scotch on birthdays or at Christmas. I used to have one too. It helps you get on, especially if you've had a tiff or something.

PATRICIA: Yes, I'd love to have a drink sometimes, you know, a glass or two of bubbly and not think of the consequences (*laughs*).

BETTY: Why not have a sly one on your own when he's not looking?

PATRICIA: I don't think that'd be a good idea; the start of the slippery slope and all that. I wouldn't know when to stop and I'd be running down to the off-licence every two minutes, ha, in my nightie at three in the afternoon. It'd be another thing for Trevor to pick me up on...

BETTY: Oh, to hell with Trevor.

PATRICIA: What?

BETTY: Don't you do anything that he doesn't? Look, do us a favour and go to the sideboard; there's a bottle of sherry and some glasses. Bring 'em over here and we'll have a little snifter.

PATRICIA: Oh, I don't think I'd better, (*looks at watch*) at 11 in the morning. I'd be three sheets to the wind by lunchtime. But I'll get it for you.

PATRICIA gets up and heads towards the sideboard. On it she sees a framed photograph of BETTY and Jack on their wedding day. She picks it up and looks at it.

BETTY: The bottle's on the right and there should be some glasses there too.

PATRICIA: You both look very happy.

BETTY: What've you got there? Oh, the wedding one. It would've been bad if we'd had long faces that day, wouldn't it?

PATRICIA: It would have been a bit early for doubts to creep in, yes.
(*laughs*)

BETTY: We had a good do at the Corner House afterwards. Our own private room, all done out nice with silver cutlery and real linen serviettes, all starched and pressed like dickie fronts. Jack never used his as he was afraid of messing it up. So he used the handkerchief in his top pocket instead. I've always remembered that.

PATRICIA: It's always the little things...(pause). Our pictures are in an album somewhere. I haven't looked at it for years.

She locates the bottle and the two glasses then hesitates.

PATRICIA: You wouldn't prefer a cup of tea?

BETTY: Tea be blowed. Give me that ruddy bottle and let's both have a bit of warmth from sunny Spain.

PATRICIA puts the bottle and glasses down on the table between them. BETTY opens the bottle with a flourish and starts filling a small wine glass.

PATRICIA: Well, just a small one then. Ooh, that's a bit more than I wanted. If I didn't know you better I'd think you were trying to get me squiffy! (*laughs*).

BETTY: Cheerio. We'll both feel better after one of these.

They raise their glasses and PATRICIA takes a sip. BETTY takes a longer draft. They sit and look wonderingly at their glasses.

BETTY: Ooh, lovely and warming.

PATRICIA: Yes, smooth and silky, just like a satin dress I had once. So nice...

BETTY: Lovely.

Both women take another sip or two and sit staring into the distance.

PATRICIA: You know, I told a little white lie earlier, about drinking on my own. Twenty years ago when our son William was five we went to Malaga and Trevor bought a bottle of Sandemans at the airport. Every evening while he was downstairs reading a paper I'd sit on our little balcony and drink a glass watching the sun go down. Then I'd put it away and wash the glass ready for when Trevor came up. That bottle lasted a week and he never had a drop. Then I bought another and he thought it was the same one. I polished that one off, too.

BETTY: It's good to have a little nip when it's nice and quiet. And how were you sure Trevor had his nose in the paper downstairs and wasn't off with the dancing girls?

- PATRICIA: Well he told me it was the only way he could catch up with events back home, you know financial things, stocks and shares and all that.
- BETTY: He couldn't wait to be alone with his wife then...
- PATRICIA: Conversation was never one of his strong points, with me anyhow. 'Idle chat', he calls it. I got used to it after a while and got on with looking after William. I loved doing that. I'd read to him to get him off and then fall asleep myself beside him on his little bed. Just the two of us, all cosy and nice. Really cosy...
- Both finish their glasses and BETTY pours them another. PATRICIA gazes into the distance, then takes a long draught.*
- BETTY: I can see the two of you now, like a couple of broad beans in a pod.
- PATRICIA: Then Trevor would come home and want his dinner. He had to shake me to get me to wake up sometimes, I was so tired.
- BETTY: You should have told him to bugger off and get it himself.
(laughs)
- PATRICIA: *(forced brightness)* Oh, no, he was right, absolutely. There I was lolling about when he'd been working all day.
- BETTY: That'd drive me bonkers, I'm telling you.
- PATRICIA: It was just his way. He'd say in this disapproving voice of his: 'You've done nothing all day to be sleeping all over the place'. *(sighs)* He could be a bit... hurtful ... sometimes. *(Brightens)* But it's fine...
- BETTY: Fine? Sounds to me like you were a bloody slave in your own home, if you don't mind me saying so.
- PATRICIA: Well, I really don't want to give you the impression that I was a downtrodden little housewife. No, I mean, we had – have –

some really nice times, quite often, in fact. (*Brightly*) So, anyway, what's your favourite TV programme?

BETTY: What about William?

PATRICIA: Mine's the Antiques Road Show and those nature programmes with David Attenborough. The ones with birds, birds especially. Escaping to Africa for the winter, leaving all their cares far behind them. That's a wonderful thing to see.

PATRICIA finishes her second glass.

(*BEAT*) Mrs Wharton says we have to beware of crossing boundaries.

BETTY: What boundaries?

PATRICIA: Personal ones. She says we have to be careful to stay within the guidelines, but (*sounding tipsy*) as of this moment I've forgotten what they are. Could I have another, please?

BETTY fills PATRICIA'S glass, and half hers.

Thank you.

PATRICIA takes a long draught and puts the empty glass down on the table. BETTY fills it again.

Mmmh...so sweet. William was such a sensitive little boy. So artistic. He loved painting and when he was older he wanted to go to art school. But Trevor said no. He refused to even discuss it. Wouldn't hear of it.

BETTY: Why not, if he was such a good painter?

PATRICIA: He wanted William to be an accountant; but he would have hated it and Trevor couldn't understand that. Oh, the rows there were over that, both of them shouting at each other like maniacs. One night it actually came to blows, the two of them

rolling about on the floor, like all-in wrestlers. It was awful, awful. I tried to drag them apart but they were so strong...

BETTY: What happened after that?

PATRICIA: William saved up enough money for a flight to Australia and six months later he was off. Just like that.

PATRICIA tries to click her fingers but fails and tries again, successfully this time.

BETTY: A bird leaving the nest.

PATRICIA: I thought I'd get over it, but I haven't, you know I miss him so much, you see. I really miss him.

BETTY: I know how it feels, dear. Jack was called up for National Service in about '51 I think it was, something like that anyway, and I didn't know where to turn really. I remember my mum saying to me ——

PATRICIA: (*raising her voice angrily*) —— No, no no! For god's sake, why do people keep telling me they know how I feel, because they don't. You don't. No-one does. No-one at all.

PATRICIA covers her face with her hands

BETTY: You're right, love. Only you know.

PATRICIA: I'm really sorry, but everyone goes on about how natural it is for children to leave home, but it wasn't natural, not at all. He was driven out. That's the long and short of it, and he couldn't have got further away if he'd tried, could he?

BETTY: And you were left on your own.

PATRICIA: (*bitterly*) I was, but not Trevor. No, dear old Trevor was hardly ever alone. Those business dinners and the times he didn't come home. He was so bloody arrogant he thought I'd never suspect anything. He must have thought I was such a stupid idiot.

PATRICIA bursts into tears

PATRICIA: *(through sobs)* God he's a bastard! I hate him! Really hate him!

She breaks down completely.

Oh, I'm terribly sorry, so sorry, I do apologise...It got to me all of a sudden.

BETTY: No, don't worry dear; a good cry's a tonic sometimes.

BETTY pours the last of the sherry into their glasses. PATRICIA dabs at her eyes and takes another drink.

PATRICIA: *(tentatively)* I'd sit up waiting for him, no phone call or anything. I'd turn in and lie awake hoping the phone would ring. He did once or twice, and it was always the same story. Missed the train, had to stay up in town, all the usual excuses. But it was obvious what he was up to.

BETTY: You always know when they've been telling porkies.

PATRICIA: The pity of it was that he assumed I was too stupid to suspect anything. For two pins I'd have packed my bags and left him to it.

BETTY: Why didn't you?

PATRICIA: Look, I don't know whether I want to go on about it any more. I think I've said too much already.

BETTY: Those ruddy boundaries again! You said at the start I could ask you anything, didn't you? Or was I dreaming?

PATRICIA: Yes, but I really didn't think I'd be talking like this... to a stranger.

BETTY: But we're friends now, aren't we? That's what you wanted, wasn't it?

PATRICIA: Yes, yes I did.

BETTY: So... why don't you leave him? There must be somewhere you can go.

PATRICIA: (*her voice rising*) Nowhere. I can't go anywhere; I'm stuck, stuck in that bloody place with someone who despises me. That's why I'm doing this, you know, befriending; to get me out of the house and do something worthwhile with my life while I can. I've got nothing, nothing; my son's been driven away, I can't see him or my grandchild, and it's all down to that man – I can't even say his name any more.

BETTY: Well, you could make a clean break of it and go and see William in Australia.

PATRICIA: Oh, I've thought of it so many times. But how can I walk out just like that?

BETTY: Listen. You don't owe him nothing. Pack your bags and follow those birds of yours away from here while you're still young enough to fly.

PATRICIA: It's a huge step.

BETTY: The biggest thing you'll ever do and it's only you who's holding you back. Look, haven't you got any family or friends you could go and stay with for a while?

PATRICIA: No, not really.

BETTY: Well, you could come here, you know.

PATRICIA: Pardon?

BETTY: There's a spare bedroom here. It's not the Ritz, but it's not too bad, if you ignore the wallpaper. It'd be the first step.

PATRICIA: I couldn't possibly.

BETTY: It's up to you my love. The invitation's open for as long as you like, until you sort something out.

PATRICIA: Thank you so much. I'm so grateful for the offer, I really am.

BETTY: Look, have a think about it and let me know what you decide. The door's always open, you know that.

PATRICIA: Oh, Mrs Johnson, it's been so good to talk to you.

BETTY: Mrs who?

PATRICIA: Mrs Johnson.

BETTY: Johnson? No, I'm Betty Phillips. Who's Mrs Johnson?

PATRICIA: Mrs Johnson. 53 Middleton Terrace?

BETTY: This is 57.

PATRICIA stares at BETTY, then fumbles in her bag.

PATRICIA: 57? Oh no, I can't believe it!

PATRICIA tries to stand up and staggers.

BETTY: You're lucky you didn't call next door. (*Turns round in her chair and shouts to the wall*) She a right cow, she is!

PATRICIA: Ooh, I'll never be able to face Mrs Johnson like this.

BETTY: Why don't you go and have a little lie down for a bit? You'll feel better and then you can go and do your befriending, or whatever you call it. It's that door on the left.

PATRICIA holds on to the back of the chair for support.

PATRICIA: That'd be a good idea.

*She walks unsteadily to the door and exits.
BETTY calls after her.*

BETTY: Take as long as you like and if I'm asleep don't bother to wake me up. I did enjoy our chat, I really did. Let me know what you're going to do. You know where I am now. Don't forget – number 57, the one with welcome on the mat.

BETTY takes the TV controller and turns the volume up and settles back in her chair. The Jeremy Kyle show is still on, with people arguing and shouting.

BLACK OUT
CURTAIN