

DENIS EMORINE

THE VISIT

Translation from the French by Brian Cole

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Synopsis

Catherine and Jean are awaiting the arrival of their son, Didier, who left the family home ten years ago. A curious couple who never cease to spy on each other, to destroy without ever really understanding each other. The memory of Catherine's first husband, who died as a deportee, has poisoned their life. The return of Didier will exacerbate the situation: hurt, misunderstood, he too has accounts to settle ...

THE VISIT

CAST:

The mother, in her sixties.

The father, similarly.

The son, between thirty and forty.

The father and mother are sitting at each side of a dining table. Numerous photographs are spread out in front of them. The father frequently looks at his watch, the mother looks at the clock which is in front of her.

The Father (*very quickly*): Do you think he will come?

The Mother (*irritated*): He said so, didn't he?

The Father (*nervously*): He said so, he said so (*hand gesture as if to sweep away an objection*), so what? What does that prove? You never change your mind, do you?

The Mother (*annoyed, in dry tones*): It is not just a question of a normal visit (*she represses a sob*): he has been away for nearly (*pause*) ten years!

The Father (*as if unworried*): That long? Are you sure?

The Mother (*pointing to the photos, containing herself*): It is all there. Yes, (*firmly*) nearly ten years.

A pause. Each is enclosed in dumbness, avoiding the eye of the other.

The Father (*with a start*): Did you hear something?

The Mother: What?

The Father: A noise, I don't know. Like (*he considers*) a scratching.

He gets up suddenly, goes to open the door, listens and sits down again, annoyed. He looks at his wife, the table, makes a gesture of sweeping away the photos. He is heard to sigh.

The Mother (*in forced tones*): So? Now you are hearing voices?

The Father: Please Catherine! Don't make that sort of joke!

The Mother: That sort! (*Aggressively*) That sort of joke! How he says that! He is your son, after all.

The Father (*in a different voice*): Please (*begging*), please.

The Mother (*teasing*): The prodigal son announcing his return to the parental home after ten years of absence!

The Father (*shouting*): That's enough! I forbid you! (*in a broken voice*) I forbid you, you understand.

His lip is trembling, his hands also. They look at each other in silence like two enemies, then with a certain awkward tenderness, at last more

and more hostilely. Neither lowers their eyes. The sound of a voice is heard outside ... Suddenly the Mother lifts a finger.

The Mother : That time I really thought ...

They both half rise, tense; unmoving, they seem to expect a familiar noise, they sit.

The Father: So, now it's Joan of Arc? It is you that are hearing voices now!

He sneers, looking at her with hostility.

The Mother : You think that is funny?

The Father (*triumphant, but uncertainly*): Each has his turn! (*He looks his wife in the eye.*) Admit it, basically you were afraid?

The Mother : Me, afraid? Of what, my God?

The Father (*with a honeyed smile*): Well ... of seeing him again!

The Mother (*uncertainly*): Not a bit of it! Absolutely not ... (*She lifts her head.*) I shall tell him ...

The Father (*interrupting her, worriedly*): What? What are you going to tell him?

The Mother (*not listening to him*): I, his mother, that it is shameful, infamous to have left his parents like that, on the threshold of old age.

The Father (*laughing unpleasantly*): Oh! la! la! What a melodrama! Infamous, I ask you! That's it, hardly returned and already scolded like a naughty boy!

The Mother (*holding out her arms*): But he is a naughty boy! (*Sobs.*) My little boy, my tiny little boy, my son!

The Father (*touched despite himself*): A naughty boy, at his age ... Look here, Catherine!

The Mother (*sorts through the photographs, examining several*): Yes my little boy (*she emphasises "my"*) ... a mother ...

The Father (*annoyed*): A mother, a mother what? (*He shrugs his shoulders.*) And a father, that doesn't count, I suppose?

The Mother (*dignified*): It is not the same.

The Father (*more and more annoyed*): Not the same, not the same ... What do you know about it? Eh?

The Mother (*at once proud and scornful*): It was I who made him.

The Father (*annoyed, he gets up suddenly*): Alright! Alright Catherine! Let's do without the cliché, if you please. (*She does not reply. He adds nastily*) If you made him you were not capable of keeping him!

Pause. She acknowledges the stroke. They look at each other warily.

The Mother : You had no right to say that.

The Father (*ashamed*): I didn't mean ... Words, you know (*a gesture of powerlessness*), you get carried away.

The Mother (*bitterly*): You didn't mean to, but you said it! (*Silence.*) After all, I am not the only one to blame! (*She shouts*) You exist, you too!

The Father (*sits down heavily, avoiding the eye of his wife who is looking at the photographs in silence*): That is true ... Yes ... And yet ... You remember? (*The Mother does not reply.*) You remember, Catherine?

The Mother (*stubbornly*): What?

The Father: Him, when he was little, very ... Oh, I don't know! (*Begging*) Catherine, look, Catherine ...

The Mother weeps silently. He gets up, goes to embrace her. She pushes him away.

The Mother (*roughly*): No! (*He holds out his arms.*) No, leave me alone!

The Father (*again holds out his arms to the Mother. Another rejection. He drops onto his chair*): Catherine ...

The Mother (*in a strangled voice, as if regretfully*): What?

The Father (*looking at her intensely*): Catherine, I really didn't want ...

The Mother (*weeping silently*): I know ... Yes, I know.

Pause.

The Father: But he will come back!

The Mother (*dejectedly*): Who knows?

The Father: But ... he said so, Catherine! You must realise you don't break a silence of ten years just like that, for nothing ... (*Silence.*) What are we going to say to him?

The Mother (*bitterly*): Hello.

The Father: What?

The Mother : Yes, what! Hello! We shall say: "hello."

The Father: That's an original idea!

He looks at her, watching her reaction. Both laugh, nervously.

The Father (*visibly moved*): I am sorry, Catherine.

The Mother (*similarly*): Sorry, Jean.

Pause. They look at each other again.

The Father: What a couple we are! Two oldies lamenting the past ...
(*Silence.*) Their sad

past ...

The Mother (*indignantly*): The past, our son?

The Father: Yes ... Well ... OK. You understand what I mean ... In one sense, he ...

The Mother (*still indignant*): It's ten years since he walked out on us!

The Father (*conciliatory*): Let's not exaggerate. He did not walk out on us. He went away.

The Mother : It's the same thing!

The Father: Certainly not, Catherine, look! Walked out! You always have to dramatise everything!

The Mother : Yes, yes! Walked out, I insist! Walked-out! A mother ...

The Father: Oh no! Don't start that again! A mother this, a mother that!
(*His voice trembles.*)

And I, I suppose I did not love him? I (*lifting his arms to the heavens*), his father!

The Mother : I was the one who gave him life.

The Father: My, my! That's enough now. No trashy literature! You would think we were in a cheap novel (*scornfully*) for the use of old women. Indeed! (*He declaims, clasping his hands.*)

A mother dies, her heart broken by anger and joy at seeing her son – the rogue – who abandoned her ten years ago! Weep, you cottages! Share our grief, mothers of France with hearts overflowing with infinite tenderness! Sentiment! Sentiment! (*He picks up some photographs and throws them into the air.*) Ah! That's good! That is moving! (*A short silence. He gets his breath back.*) Even Victor Hugo had recourse to tears. (*He searches in his memory.*) "A mother's love, love that no-one forgets!" Did you say something? You will say all that to your little child, eh? You-will-tell-him-all-that?

A silence. The Mother lowers her head. He looks at her for a while.

The Father (*brusquely*): And me? (*More gently.*) And me, do I count for nothing in your eyes?

The Mother (*very quickly*): Be quiet!

The Father (*gently*): And me? Do I count for nothing in your eyes, Catherine? (*No reaction from the Mother.*) Alright, listen ...

The Mother (*sighing*): What?

The Father: If he had not said he was coming back ...

The Mother : For a visit, that's different.

The Father (*annoyed, he contains himself*): His visit, if you wish, yes. Well then ... (*He hesitates*) we should have gone on as before (*pause*) being happy.

The Mother (*lifts her eyes to the heavens*): Being happy! (*She shakes her head.*) That takes the biscuit!

The Father: Yes, being happy. I insist, Catherine, on being happy. You are surely not going to tell me ...

He hesitates as if afraid to go on.

The Mother : What? What am I not going to tell you?

The Father (*in a strangled voice*): That we have not been happy together?

The Mother (*without conviction*): Oh yes, of course ...

The Father (*drily*): It is mad that you seem to be convinced by these poor words: happy together.

Pause. She does not reply.

The Father: Eh, Catherine?

The Mother : What? What do you want? How am I supposed to answer? That I love you? That you are the only one I ever loved? (*Musing*) Before ... yes, before ...

The Father (*cries out*): Oh, I know what you will say to me. I know, I know it all too well! Before (*he recites like a well-learned lesson*) you had a first husband, rich and handsome: a real love-match and then the Germans killed him in the war and ... and ...

The Mother (*coldly*): And I met you.

The Father: Yes, you met me and you married me.

The Mother (*coldly*): And I married you.

The Father (*triumphant*): And you married me. You see. So you did love me? (*The Mother is silent. He shakes her.*) You loved me, you loved me, say it! (*He lets her go.*) Say it! Say it!

The Mother (*wearily*): If you say so, yes, I loved you.

The Father: And we lived together.

The Mother (*she looks at him with a sort of hatred*): Ah yes! A real love-match. (*She keeps looking at him and laughs wickedly.*) You are happy? You are happy? But just look at you, it is you who are in a bad novel, my poor friend! (*Grandiloquently*) Weep, cottages, feeling! Feeling! That is what you want!

The Father (*insistently*): Then why? Why did you marry me?

The Mother (*drily*): You really want to know? (*He does not reply, but looks at her intensely*)

Out of pity, quite simply. You understand? Out of pity! You were all alone, pathetic, lost. You had just lost your parents a few months apart. I gave myself up, that's all.

The Father (*articulates with difficulty*): You don't have the right ... you don't have the right ...

She shrugs her shoulders, saying nothing. Long silence. She tries to speak, he interrupts her with a gesture.

The Father: Did he know about it?

The Mother : Who, he?

The Father: Our son.

The Mother : No ... Perhaps ... Does it matter?

The Father (weakly): Exactly ...

The Mother (her voice increases in volume): Does it matter? To provide a reason for his departure, an alibi, a justification? But what difference does it make, in the end?

Long silence.

The Father (with difficulty): Don't you realise?

The Mother (distractedly): Yes?

The Father: If you had had ... if you had had a child by ... by the other one?

The Mother and Father (together): I would never have married you!

Long silence.

The Mother (*speaking in a staccato voice*): We did not live together for long (*she speaks quickly*), a few months and then ... the deportation ... the de...

She does not finish and looks at the Father who clenches his fists.

The Father: There has always been that ... that death between us.

The Mother (*horrified*): Be quiet! Be quiet, now! (*She weeps in silence.*) It's you, it is your fault! (*She points a finger at the Father.*) It is you that wanted to know ...

The Father: You never told him? (*She does not answer.*) You never told her?

The Mother (*wearily*): No, I don't think so. But anyway, does it matter?

The Father (*icily*): You said that before.

The Mother (*irritated*): Because you already asked me that. Leave me alone, now! What does it matter to you, anyway?

The Father (*impassive*): Nothing. Nothing at all.

Long silence. In the distance, muffled, music is heard, then no longer. They do not dare to look at each other.

The Mother (*clumsily taking his hand, which he does not withdraw*): What are we going to say to our little one when he comes?

The Father: Our little one? That he is a sod! (*She wants to speak, he presses her hand.*) That he is a little sod and that it is his fault that his parents, his ... progenitors are here tearing each other apart with hatred, for pleasure, from ... boredom!

The Mother (*scornfully*): What a speech! You always have to exaggerate, to be seen as the victim ... (*Pause*) Listen, let's forget all that. We must ... we must get ready for his visit, you understand? (*Calmer*) Come on, calm down. Let's both calm down. We must be relaxed ...

The Father (*interrupting her*): And serene. (*He simpers, voice pitched high, with an affectation he thinks is feminine.*) And how have you been all this time, my love? Oh, how thin you are! You have not been looking after yourself. You are working too hard, I suppose? You do not look healthy. And those badly mended trousers ... Mummy will put that right!

The Mother: You are sick, quite odious!

The Father (*continuing*): Sit down darling. You'll see how Mummy will look after you, my little treasure ... (*he makes a gesture of passing his hand through the hair of an imaginary person.*) You certainly have a lot to tell us since ... ten years ago (*he emphasises the "ten years"*). Eh? For ten years your darling mama has moped, pined for her darling. As for your father, let's not speak of him. No sensitivity, nothing, a real stone!

You know how men are ... well, not all, but most. Your father at least. His tele, his newspaper, his armchair and slippers. You ...

The Mother (*interrupting him, she shouts, with hands over her ears*): Stop! Stop it!

The Father says nothing, out of breath. They look at each other for a long moment.

The Mother (*pitiful*): Why, but why make us suffer like this, both of us? It is frightening!

The Father (*laughing bitterly*): Is that what you think? What a sight we shall present to our dear son!

He is still laughing nervously. Suddenly he stops.

The Father: Get to the point, what time should he be here?

The Mother (*looking at the clock*): I don't know. He couldn't say exactly. Remember his letter (*she goes towards the sideboard and picks up the letter*), he must be very busy.

The Father (*morosely*): No doubt. Do you think he is married?

The Mother: Who knows? (*She looks at the letter again.*) He has always been close, taciturn. He doesn't give us much detail. (*She takes her husband by the shoulders.*) Jean, please, Jean! Forget all that, the past, those stupid quarrels, and let's devote ourselves to our son!

The Father (*drily*): It's like a dream! And for the last ten years he devoted himself to us?

The Mother (*excited*): Please Jean, please! Come on, make an effort! You will kiss him, you will take him by the shoulders ... What do I know? Like someone returning from a long voyage!

The Father (*mocking*): Yes, round the world! (*Pause*) After all our confessions ...

He shrugs his shoulders, frowns. The Mother gently takes him by the shoulders.

The Mother (*excited*): Let's do it, do it ... Precisely because of that! Jean ... (*She gives him a tender look.*) Let's forget it. Forget it ... Let's start again.

The Father (*sarcastically*): That's it ... that's it, let's start again!

The Mother: Just make an effort. Let's forgive. (*Very softly*) Just for me.

The Father (*after some time*): I don't know.

c her hands): Yes! Yes! You know. It is you who are right: let's be happy like we were ... before.

The Father (*sneering*): In your dreams!

The Mother: After all, let's look at things as they are. We certainly have part of the responsibility for our son's walking out ... (*She is suddenly silent, seeming to reflect. All the following tirade should be spoken in a feverish tone, excitedly as if the Mother was under the influence of some evil or rather of a form of delirium.*) Our grand-parents knew the war ...

our parents knew the war! We suffered from it, we too. It is in us still (*she points a finger at her husband and includes herself*), it has not stopped its ravages of our couple, we carry it in our genes, we transmit its destructive effects to our children! Who knows whether we create our own misfortune because ... because it still has us in its clutch ... It is death that is in us when we give life! (*The Mother seems more and more impassioned, as if crazy. The Father makes a gesture of protection.*) War is still running ... in us, in our veins ... Our children carry the suffering that we have endured, the suffering transmitted at their birth! (*She interrupts herself, distracted, broken by this flood, puts her hands to her face, turns imploring towards the father.*) We are guilty, Jean, guilty ... (*Pause. She seems to recover herself, to wake up after a nightmare.*) And yet, let's recover ourselves, Jean! Let's recover ourselves at last. Let's try to be happy together as we should have been ... before!

The Father (*he cannot subdue his emotion, makes visible efforts to get control of himself.*)

So, Catherine, I think you are mistaken. Guilty, we? (*He raises his voice.*) And if we are?

What does that change? (*Decisively*) No, Catherine, no! (*A very short pause.*) Too bad! I am not playing games any more, I am too old for that.

Silence.

The Mother (*dejected*): But what is the point? (*She raises her voice.*) What is the point of his coming if it is just to show him dysfunctional parents!

The Father: What else can we show him?

The Mother: But if he wants to see us again it is because he has kept in his heart some love for us!

The Father (*sarcastically*): Yes ... pretty deep in his heart though!

The Mother (*passionately*): Think, Jean, think. It is he who made the first approaches, he took the trouble to write to us, to us, there (*she points to the letter*), and you would disappoint this approach, refuse that love?

The Father (*sarcastically*): That love? It is some love! Do you really know what you are saying, Catherine? Love, him?

The Mother (*cries out*): Yes, love! Why not, after all? Ten years of separation do not obliterate feelings, I am convinced! I refuse to give our son (*she emphasises "our"*) the appearance of a ... of a ...

(*searching for the right word*) of a rejection. Jean, Jean, I beg you, it was you who spoke of being happy, it was you ...

The Father (*pretending to be unaffected*): I said that, I did?

The Mother: You said it, you did. Let's not waste the few moments that are left to us (*her voice trembles*) to spend with our son!

A long silence. The Father looks at the distraught Mother, then whispering:

The Father (*softly*): That's good.

The Mother: It's true, it really is true? Oh, Jean! How happy we shall be, the three of us!

The Father (*his voice trembles*): You really think so?

The Mother (*spontaneously*): Yes, yes my darling, I think so.

The Father: My darling? You called me "my darling"?

The Mother (*pretending surprise*): Well, yes! Is that so surprising?

The Father (*moved*): It is just that I have not been used to it, for so many years ...

The Mother (*shaking him*): Quite, quite. Let's rediscover ourselves, my darling, let's dare ...

