

## The Visit

Ray Bradbury

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9:45–10:07

(On reading about a young actor's death and his heart placed in another man's body last night.)

**S**he had called and there was to be a visit.

At first the young man had been reluctant, had said no, no thanks, he was sorry, he understood, but no.

But then when he heard her silence on the other end of the telephone, no sound at all, but the kind of grief which keeps to itself, he had waited a long while and then said, yes, all right, come over, but, please, don't stay too long. This is a strange situation and I don't know how to handle it.

Nor did she. Going to the young man's apartment, she wondered what she would say and how she would react, and what he would say. She was terribly afraid of doing something so emotional that he would have to push her out of the apartment and slam the door.

For she didn't know this young man at all. He was a total and complete stranger. They had never met and only yesterday she had found his name at last, after a desperate search through friends at a local hospital. And now, before it was too late, she simply had to visit a totally unknown person for the most peculiar reasons in all her life or, for that matter, in the lives of all mothers in the world since civilization began.

“Please wait.”

She gave the cabdriver a twenty-dollar bill to ensure his being there should she come out sooner than she expected, and stood at the entrance to the apartment building for a long moment before she took a deep breath, opened the door, went in, and took the elevator up to the third floor.

She shut her eyes outside his door, and took another deep breath and knocked. There was no answer. With sudden panic, she knocked very hard.

This time, at last, the door opened.

The young man, somewhere between twenty and twenty-four, looked timidly out at her and said, "You're Mrs. Hadley?"

"You don't look like him at all," she heard herself say. "I mean—" She caught herself and flushed and almost turned to go away.

"You didn't really expect me to, did you?"

He opened the door wider and stepped aside. There was coffee waiting on a small table in the center of the apartment.

"No, no, silly. I didn't know what I was saying."

"Sit down, please. I'm William Robinson. Bill to you, I guess. Black or white?"

"Black." And she watched him pour.

"How did you find me?" he said, handing the cup over.

She took it with trembling fingers. "I know some people at the hospital. They did some checking."

"They shouldn't have."

"Yes, I know. But I kept at them. You see, I'm going away to live in France for a year, maybe more. This was my last chance to visit my—I mean—"

She lapsed into silence and stared into the coffee cup.

"So they put two and two together, even though the files were supposed to be locked?" he said quietly.

"Yes," she said. "It all came together. The night my son died was the same night you were brought into the hospital for a heart transplant. It had to be you. There was no other operation like that that night or that week. I knew that when you left the hospital, my son, his heart anyway"—she had difficulty saying it—"went with you." She put down the coffee cup.

"I don't know why I'm here," she said.

"Yes, you do," he said.

"Not really, I don't. It's all so strange and sad and terrible and at the same time, I don't know, God's gift. Does that make any sense?"

"To me it does. I'm alive because of the gift."

Now it was his turn to fall silent, pour himself coffee, stir it and drink.

"When you leave here," said the young man, "where will you go?"

"Go?" said the woman uncertainly.

"I mean—" The young man winced with his own lack of ease. The words simply would not come. "I mean, have you other visits to make? Are there other—"

"I see." The woman nodded several times, took hold of herself with a motion of her body, looking at her hands in her lap, and at last shrugged. "Yes, there are others. My son, his vision was given to someone in Oregon.

There is someone else in Tucson—”

“You don’t have to continue,” said the young man. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, no. It is all so strange, so ridiculous. It is all so new. Just a few years ago, nothing like this could have happened. Now we’re in a new time. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. Sometimes I start one and then do the other. I wake up confused. I often wonder if he is confused. But that’s even sillier. He is nowhere.”

“He is somewhere,” said the young man. “He is here. And I’m alive because he is here at this very moment.”

The woman’s eyes grew very bright, but no tears fell.

“Yes. Thank you for that.”

“No, I thank him, and you for allowing me to live.”

The woman jumped up suddenly, as if propelled by an emotion stronger than she knew. She looked around for the perfectly obvious door and seemed not to see it.

“Where are you going?”

“I—” she said.

“You just got here!”

“This is stupid!” she cried. “Embarrassing. I’m putting too much of a burden on you, on myself. I’m going now before it all gets so ludicrous I go mad—”

“Stay,” said the young man.

Obedient to the command, she almost sat down.

“Finish your coffee.”

She remained standing, but picked up her coffee cup with shaking hands. The soft rattle of the cup was the only sound for a time as she slaked the coffee with some unquenchable thirst. Then she put the empty cup down and said: “I really must go. I feel faint. I feel I might fall down. I am so embarrassed with myself, with coming here. God bless you, young man, and may you have a long life.”

She started toward the door, but he stood in her way.

“Do what you came to do,” he said.

“What, what?”

“You know. You know very well. I won’t mind it. Do it.”

“I—”

“Go on,” he said gently, and shut his eyes, his hands at his side, waiting.

She stared into his face and then at his chest, where under his shirt there seemed the gentlest stirring.

“Now,” he said quietly.

She almost moved.

“Now,” he said, for a final time.

She took one step forward. She turned her head and quietly moved her right ear down and then again down, inch by inch, until it touched the young man’s chest.

She might have cried out, but did not. She might have exclaimed something, but did not. Her eyes were also shut now and she was listening. Her lips moved, saying something, perhaps a name, over and over, almost to the rhythm of the pulse she heard under the shirt, under the flesh, within the body of the patient young man.

The heart was beating there.

She listened.

The heart beat with a steady and regular sound.

She listened for a long while. Her breath slowly drained out of her, as color came into her cheeks.

She listened.

The heart beat.

Then she raised her head, looked at the young man’s face for a final time, and very swiftly touched her lips to his cheek, turned, and hurried across the room, with no thanks, for none was needed. At the door she did not even turn around but opened it and went out and closed the door softly.

The young man waited for a long moment. His right hand came up and slid across his shirt, across his chest to feel what lay underneath. His eyes were still shut and his face emotionless.

Then he turned and sat down without looking where he sat and picked up his coffee cup to finish his coffee.

The strong pulse, the great vibration of the life within his chest, traveled along his arm and into the cup and caused it to pulse in a steady rhythm, unending, as he placed it against his lips, and drank the coffee as if it were a medicine, a gift, that would refill the cup again and again through more days than he could possibly guess or see. He drained the cup.

Only then did he open his eyes and see that the room was empty.