

The Jacaranda Tree

a play

in two acts

by

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THE JACARANDA TREE

was shortlisted in the 2004 Rodney Seaborn Playwright's Award, received an Honourable Mention in the Virtual Theatre Project's International Play Competition of 2004 and was workshopped as a part of Theatrelab 2005.

Characters

RACHEL PARKIN	mid thirties
DAN PARKIN	her husband, mid thirties
SIMON PARKIN	their son, twelve
RICHARD McINNALLY	a writer, mid thirties

Setting

A rammed earth house in the middle of the countryside.

Time

The play takes place over a few days in early Spring.

1. Morning

A garden underneath the Jacaranda tree. Bright sunlight.

RACHEL and **SIMON** sit at easels. **RACHEL** sharpens a piece of charcoal with a knife, she hums “Over the sea to Skye” quietly. **SIMON** is mixing colours on a palette. Eventually:

SIMON: Why do people paint trees brown ?

RACHEL LOOKS UP.

SIMON: They’re not brown.

RACHEL: Some trees are.

SIMON: But not our tree.

RACHEL: (LOOKING AT THE TREE) No, it’s ... (BEAT) what colour is it ?

SIMON: Colours.

RACHEL: Alright, what colours ?

SIMON: Not brown.

RACHEL: I think we’ve established that. (PAUSE.) Well ?

SIMON: Can’t tell you.

RACHEL: Why not ?

SIMON: It’s up to you to choose the colour. Every person has to decide their own colours.

RACHEL: Is this some secret painter code ?

SIMON: No. That’s what makes painting so great. Every painter looks at something and sees it completely different. Different shapes, different lines, different –

RACHEL: Colours.

SIMON: You said it.

PAUSE.

RACHEL: So ?

SIMON: Mum ! Look at the tree. Find what colours. Your colours.

RACHEL: You almost sound patronising.

SIMON: What does that mean ?

RACHEL: Never mind.

RACHEL LOOKS AT THE TREE.

RACHEL: Well, the flowers are purple. Or is that mauve ?

SIMON: Maybe they're blue.

RACHEL: They're not blue. Is Lavender a colour ? But they can't be Lavender can they ?
Lavender is lavender, not ... How can you call that blue ?

SIMON: (SHRUGS, THEN) Not the only colour.

RACHEL: No, the trunk. That's easier. That's grey.

SIMON: And ?

RACHEL: And what ?

SIMON: Under the bark.

RACHEL: Soft pink, almost flesh.

SIMON: Like the colour of skin.

RACHEL: Your skin.

RACHEL LOOKS AT SIMON. HE SMILES.

SIMON: So, you got grey, pink and purple –

RACHEL: Or mauve or blue – you said ? So what do I do now ?

SIMON: Now, you paint. And ...

RACHEL: And what ?

SIMON: Sing me your song.

RACHEL: I can't sing.

SIMON: Yes you can. Helps me concentrate. (PAUSE) Mum. Sing. For me.

RACHEL: (SINGS) Speed bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing,
Onward, the sailors cry
Carry the lad that's born to be king,
Over the sea to Skye.

THE SONG ENDS. **SIMON LOOKS AT RACHEL.**

SIMON: I love you Mum.

RACHEL: And I love you Simon.

SIMON RETURNS TO HIS PAINTING. RACHEL WATCHES HIM.

THE LIGHTS FADE.

2. Afternoon.

Lights up. A bare room. Two chairs, a coat rack – empty. On one side a fireplace - wood stacked neatly nearby.

RICHARD stands at the window looking out. **RACHEL** stands nearby watching him.

RICHARD: That tree really is amazing. They look striking at this time of year. A delicate carpet of little purple flowers. And this window is perfectly placed to view it. Standing right here, it looks ... beautiful. Exactly how I pictured it. (PAUSE) They are purple aren't they ? Or would you call them mauve ?

RACHEL: I'd say purple. It's more vibrant than mauve. Although Simon might disagree with both of us. He would say they're blue.

RICHARD: Blue ? Well whatever colour they are - they look ... beautiful.

RICHARD TURNS TO FACE RACHEL. RACHEL MOVES AWAY, TIDYING.

RACHEL: It's good of you to come. All this way.

RICHARD: Tracked you down.

RACHEL: You make it sound like you're a detective.

RICHARD: Well, I was. Kind of.

RACHEL: We weren't hiding.

RICHARD: No, I'd just ... misplaced you. (BEAT) Is it okay ? That I've ... arrived.

RACHEL: Of course. It's a...surprise. A wonderful...surprise. How did you get here ?

RICHARD: Two trains, a taxi, another train and finally a bus.

RACHEL: You didn't walk all the way from town ?

RICHARD: A very friendly poultry farmer dropped me at your gate.

RACHEL: Mr Reynolds ?

RICHARD: "Call me Max." We drove out in this huge truck, loaded with chooks.

RACHEL: Must've been an experience.

RICHARD: Not one I'd care to repeat - the smell. And that's just Max. Hope I didn't get chicken poop on your floor.

RACHEL: Don't worry. It'll blend right in.

RICHARD: "Call me Max." (BEAT. **RICHARD** SMILES.) It's good to see you Rach.

RACHEL: It's good to see you - Rich. Now, I'll get you some tea. Then you'll have to excuse me. I must pick up Simon from School.

RICHARD: He goes to school ?

RACHEL: There's a little schoolhouse just out of town. We're not complete barbarians.

RICHARD: I wasn't ...

RACHEL: Common mistake.

RICHARD: How old is he ?

RACHEL: Twelve.

RICHARD: He'll be a man in no time.

RACHEL: They have to grow up. Sometimes you don't want them to – but they have to. Dan should be home soon.

RICHARD: You sure it's okay if I...

RACHEL: He'll be over the moon.

RICHARD: Dan or Simon ?

RACHEL: Both. Over the moon. White with one ?

RICHARD: What ?

RACHEL: Your tea ?

RICHARD: What an impressive memory you have.

RACHEL: Or honey ? We have some nice local Sandalwood.

RICHARD: Local Sandalwood. That would be lovely.

SHE STARTS TO EXIT.

RICHARD: Do you know what day it is ?

RACHEL: No.

RICHARD: Today is the first day of spring. Although we don't really have spring do we ? Just a period when summer and winter get confused.

RACHEL: Personally I prefer winter.

RICHARD: Really ?

RACHEL: In summer, the sun...

RICHARD: Yes in summer there is sun.

RACHEL: It gets so hot. But that's just me. Your ...

RICHARD TURNS TO LOOK OUT THE WINDOW.

RICHARD: It really is ... beautiful.

RACHEL EXITS. LIGHTS FADE.

3. Dusk

House. Living Room.

The room is dark. **RICHARD** is asleep in an armchair, an empty tea mug in his hand. **DAN** sits nearby watching him. **RICHARD**'s pair of dusty shoes sit in front of the fireplace.

RICHARD suddenly wakes. He sees **DAN**.

RICHARD: What are you doing ?

DAN: Wondering.

RICHARD: Wondering what ?

DAN: What the fuck you're doing in my lounge room.

RICHARD: Dan. It's me.

DAN: Who's me ?

RICHARD: Richard.

DAN: Richard ?

RICHARD: Yes.

DAN: (TURNING ON LIGHT) Rich. What the fuck are you doing here ? Well this is - How are you ? How long has it been ?

RICHARD: A long time.

DAN: You can't imagine. What this means - The fact that you - Rachel, she'll - She'll - (CALLING) Rachel.

RICHARD: She's gone to pick up Simon.

DAN: Has she ?

RICHARD: (INDICATING MUG) But she did make me some tea first, with your finest local Sandalwood. (STANDING) Shit. I'm sorry. This must look awful. You come home from a hard day's work and here I am. Sitting in your chair. Drinking your tea. You must think I'm some kind of overgrown Goldilocks.

DAN: Too ugly for Goldilocks.

RICHARD: But I'm in your house. And you haven't even welcomed me.

DAN: Well ... welcome.

DAN GOES TO RICHARD. RICHARD PUTS OUT HIS HAND.

DAN HUGS RICHARD. RICHARD IS MOMENTARILY SURPRISED. THEN HE RETURNS THE EMBRACE.

DAN: Richard. Rich.

RICHARD: Good old Dan.

DAN: Good – old – I haven't heard that in - Now stand there so I can get a look at you. Narrow gutted bastard aren't you ? Don't you eat ?

RICHARD: Now and then.

DAN: Well eat some more. Look at me.

RICHARD: You look good.

DAN: Not as good as you. Skinny but good. And now - How did you get here ?

RICHARD: The chook truck.

DAN: Stinky Max.

RICHARD: Very stinky Max. (SNIFFS HIMSELF) Now, Stinky Rich.

DAN: Mate, this is the country. Everything stinks out here.

RICHARD: (MOVING AROUND) You've been busy. This place, it's ... What is it ?

DAN: Rammed earth. Floor's mud.

RICHARD: Really ?

DAN: Eliminates the dust problem. It's still there but you don't see it anymore.

RICHARD: You've done wonders.

DAN: Thank you.

RICHARD: I mean it. It's superb. Everything ordered. Everything in its place.

DAN: Rachel likes a neat house.

RICHARD: Neat home. Nothing amiss, not one stray speck of dirt –

DAN: Apart from the floor.

RICHARD: But it still feels...warm. Must be the warmth of love pervading every corner.

DAN LOOKS AT RICHARD.

RICHARD: What ?

DAN : Ten years and you're still talking crap. How long you staying ?

RICHARD: I shouldn't really be here at all. Meant to be at some dreadful book fair. Took a ... detour.

DAN: Shit. Well, stuff 'em. They can have you anytime. And we only get you -

RICHARD: Exactly.

DAN: (GRABBING TEACUP) You want another ?

RICHARD: No I'm fine.

DAN: Come on. Local sandalwood.

RICHARD: Okay.

DAN: Okay.

DAN STARTS TO EXIT. HE STOPS AND TURNS TO RICHARD.

DAN: Richard !

RICHARD: (STARTLED) What ?

DAN: Fuck me.

RICHARD: No thanks.

BLACKOUT.

4. Night

Living Room.

DAN and **RICHARD** seated in the armchairs. **RICHARD's** shoes now sit beside **DAN's** boots under the coat rack. They both have wine glasses.

DAN: You don't want to hear this.

RICHARD: I do.

DAN: You don't want to hear this.

RICHARD: I do.

DAN: Okay. But remember you asked for it. Well, I started with – now you can stop me anytime.

RICHARD: Dan – just shut up and tell me how you built your home.

DAN: Well that's where you're wrong - for starters. A house like this isn't built. It's made. Made with your own two hands. Bastard nearly killed me. With most houses you start with the floor but with this place I started with the walls. First I had to find the right poles. Nice long ones – but strong enough to hold up a house. Searched everywhere. Nearly gave up before I even started. Then one day I'm out driving round the back of the property and there they were. Stringy bark. Beautiful, golden colour. Under my nose all along. So there and then I decided – everything should be local. All from my own land. Little did I know the crap I was getting myself into.

RICHARD LAUGHS.

DAN: So I cut down ten Stringies, dragged 'em up here - whacked 'em in the ground. I got the earth – right from where I found the trees. Tonnes of it. Mixed it up with gravel and sand - and clay - from down near the pond. Then I dampened the mixture - but not too wet. The dampness of snow - that's what they say. Snow. Then I rammed it in. (HE GOES TO THE WALL.) You do it all by hand. Get this big metal plunger and just hammer it down. It's amazing how solid the walls become. Touch it. (HE FEELS THE WALL.) Come on.

RICHARD TENTATIVELY COMES OVER TO FEEL THE WALL.

RICHARD: Feels like concrete.

DAN: Tougher than that. They say it'll stand for hundreds of years. Longer than those prisons other people live in. Then came the really hard part – the roof. Cut down a few more of the stringy barks then I laid planks of red gum across them to make the ceiling. Held them in place with little wooden spikes. That bit nearly drove me insane but by then I was determined. One hundred percent natural. That's why it had to be a thatched roof. Bugger to put up - fell off it, twice - but after all I'd been through could hardly whack a great chunk of corrugated iron on top could I? Well, could I?

RICHARD: (LAUGHING) No.

DAN: Too right. Then finally came the floor. (HE KNEELS ON THE FLOOR.) And this was the fun part. Mixed up this huge batch of mud and just slopped it on. Smoothed it out. Then we got some plants from around the property and pushed them in to the mud to make little patterns. (HE FEELS THE PATTERN WITH HIS FINGERS) Dandelion, bracken ferns, gum leaves. Wild grasses, wild flowers. Even some she oak and nuts. The perfect finishing touch. We did it together. All three of us. Simon loved it. Called it “squidgy mud”. Right here he pressed in his own hand. Squeezed in his little fingers. At first I was a bit pissed off. Not part of the plan. But then Rachel said “Why not? Our hands. We built it didn't we?” (HE PRESSES HIS HAND INTO HIS HANDPRINT) And then Rach and I both pressed our hands in alongside Simon's. Left our mark. (BEAT) Looks great, doesn't it?

RICHARD: Wouldn't be asking if it didn't.

DAN: Thanks. (LOOKING OUT) The first time I saw this spot, the tree out the back – I knew this was where I had to build it. It was one of those moments when everything becomes clear. What did you use to call it ?

RICHARD: “A moment of clarity.”

DAN: That's the one. Have less moments like that these days.

RICHARD: (BEAT) Incredible story. So how long did it take you ?

DAN: All up ... five years.

RICHARD: Five years.

DAN: Of blood, sweat and crap. Nearly gave up a hundred times. But look around - it's worth it. (HE LAUGHS) Only problem is now I can't stop building the bloody things. When everybody around here saw what a good job I'd done - and I'm not bragging –

RICHARD: Go ahead, brag.

DAN: Thank you - I will then. When they saw how beautiful the house was - they all wanted one. So that's what I do now, make people's homes. Not exactly the way I planned it but it'll do. For now. Look at me, I'm a fuckin' builder.

RICHARD: “Dan the builder”.

DAN: Still, shouldn't whinge I guess. Building is very simple. Not like life, life is a lot more ... (TURNING TO **RICHARD**) “Time bleeds.”

RICHARD: What ?

DAN: “Time bleeds”.

RICHARD: You're quoting me ?

DAN: “Drip by drip and then one day you wake up and years have gone by.”

RICHARD: You read my book ?

DAN: I skimmed it. Saw it in the bookshop in town. Couldn't miss it, could I ? Your big ugly mug staring out at me.

RICHARD: Ta.

DAN: No, it's good Rich. Bloody good. Had me hanging on to the last page. What was the word ? "Haunting."

RICHARD: Bullshit.

DAN: Yeah, but it was pretty good.

RICHARD: And Rachel ?

DAN: Rachel ?

RICHARD: Did she like the book ?

DAN: ... Ask her yourself.

PAUSE. **RICHARD SMILES.**

RICHARD: A toast.

DAN: Shit. A toast ? Very official.

RICHARD: To - moments of clarity.

DAN: Moments of clarity.

THEY CLINK GLASSES AND DRINK.

RICHARD: Look at me.

DAN: What ?

RICHARD: Just do it Dan. Look at me.

DAN: Shit. This is heavy.

RICHARD: Look at me.

DAN LOOKS AT RICHARD. THEY ARE NOW VERY CLOSE.

RICHARD: You were always like a brother to me.

DAN: Only a brother ? Shit. You were much closer to me than that. Bloody hell. This is a bit much. Where's Rachel ?

RICHARD: Don't worry. She's busy.

DAN: Nonsense. She should be here.

RICHARD: Probably checking on Simon. He sounds like a great kid.

DAN: He is. Sorry about the dinner.

RICHARD: No need to apologise. It was fine.

DAN: Bit bland though. It would've been great to have something special - A treat.

RICHARD: Next time.

DAN: Just between you and me, Rachel's cooking's become a bit like that of late. Bland. I'm not complaining - well not so she can hear or she'd kill me. It's like she cooks the food till there's no flavour left. Or chooses food with no flavour to start with - like cabbage. Or Brussel sprouts. It's almost like we're being punished.

RICHARD: (LAUGHING) No.

DAN: Yes. A little bit of spice from time to time – not too much. Just a little - would be nice. Spice is nice - ole!

RICHARD: You've been the perfect host.

DAN: Except for the boiled cabbage.

RICHARD: Even that was perfect. Perfect boiled cabbage.

DAN: See if I can rustle us up a perfect T-bone steak for tomorrow night. Where is Rachel ? (PAUSE.) Rich Rich Rich.

RICHARD: Dan Dan Dan.

PAUSE.

DAN: (CALLS) Rachel.

RICHARD: Don't worry.

DAN: No. Our oldest and dearest - She should be - (CALLS) Rachel.

RICHARD: She'll come.

DAN: Stuff that. We want her now.

DAN EXITS. RICHARD ALONE. LONG PAUSE. DAN RETURNS, FOLLOWED BY RACHEL.

DAN: Found her.

DAN SITS BACK IN THE CHAIR. RACHEL SITS NEAR THE FIREPLACE.

DAN: That's better.

DAN TAKES THE WINE AND POURS RICHARD SOME MORE. THEN HE TOPS HIS OWN GLASS UP. RACHEL HOLDS OUT GLASS.

DAN: Should you be drinking darling ?

RACHEL: It's a special occasion.

DAN: (SLIGHT PAUSE) Of course it is. (HE POURS RACHEL SOME WINE.) Rach has to be careful, don't you love ? She's on ... anti-biotics.

RICHARD: Anything wrong ?

DAN: Tail end of some virus.

RACHEL: Don't worry. It's not contagious.

RACHEL AND DAN LAUGH. RICHARD JOINS IN.

DAN: Hardly ever drinks these days. Even when she's not on anti-biotics. Some kind of health kick. "The boiled cabbage diet."

RACHEL: Shut up Dan - you're drunk.

DAN: Just a little bit tipsy. It's a cele-fucking-bration isn't it ? Our old friend has come back from the dead. Drink up.

DAN DRINKS. RICHARD JOINS HIM.

RICHARD: Simon settled down ?

RACHEL: He's sleeping. Like an angel. Our angel.

RICHARD: I'm looking forward to meeting him.

RACHEL: Tomorrow. Before school.

DAN: You'll have to be up early. They piss off at sparrow fart.

RACHEL: He's a beautiful boy.

PAUSE.

DAN: Rich Rich Rich.

RICHARD: Dan Dan Dan.

RACHEL: Rach Rach Rach.

THEY LAUGH. **DAN** SUDDENLY HOLDS OUT HIS ARMS.

DAN: Listen.

RICHARD: What ?

DAN: Listen.

THEY LISTEN.

RICHARD: I don't hear anything.

DAN: Exactly. Don't get that in the city.

RICHARD: Thank God.

RACHEL: I like the silence. Except at night. At night it roars in my ears and I can't hear anything except the blood trickling slowly through my brain. So loud I can't sleep. (PAUSE. SHE SMILES.) So tell me Richard. How did you find us ? Who tipped you off ?

DAN: You make it sound like he tracked us down.

RACHEL: He did.

DAN LAUGHS.

RICHARD: I was launching my new book at our Alma Mater.

DAN: The hero returns. What's it called ?

RICHARD: "A Desolate Summer."

RACHEL: Another cheery tome ?

RICHARD: It's about a young boy with a secret, growing up near an industrial estate.

RACHEL: More thinly-veiled autobiography ?

RICHARD: No. This is original.

RACHEL: Can't wait to read it.

DAN: Don't have a spare copy with you ?

RICHARD: Fortunately not.

DAN: I'll pick us up a copy next time I go into town. We enjoyed the last one.

RACHEL: Well I'm not sure enjoyed is the right word. That Captain, lost at sea. Dark, stormy nights. Very...long.

DAN: You liked it.

RACHEL: I read it.

DAN: Did more than that. Bloody thing almost fell apart.

RACHEL: I read it. So the launch ?

RICHARD: I ran into Steve Lamont.

DAN: Stevie Lamont ! Two pot psycho, how is he ?

RICHARD: Working in the Library.

DAN: Still ? I wonder if he can put the books in the right order yet.

RICHARD: Probably not. He told me where you were.

RACHEL: Surprised he had our address.

RICHARD: He didn't. He had an approximate location. Helpful Post Office did the rest.

RACHEL: How proactive of you.

DAN: Well, I'm glad you found us.

RACHEL: Pity he'll be leaving tomorrow.

DAN: Tomorrow ?

RICHARD: (LAUGHS) Trying to get rid of me already ?

RACHEL: Dan said you have a book fair.

RICHARD: Pretty crappy book fair, in Dandenong, but yes – I have a book fair.

DAN: But you can't go ? You just got here.

RACHEL: He has commitments.

DAN: Well tell them you've got another commitment - to catching up with old friends. Or tell them you've just had an idea for your new book and you need to stay out here and work on it. You can write in the old studio.

RACHEL: The studio ?

RICHARD: I wouldn't like to -

DAN: Nonsense. I can clear a space and everything.

RACHEL: But Simon and I paint in the studio.

DAN: Only when it rains, which it hasn't for months - and here's a newsflash. It's not about to. Come on Rich. It'll be great. Another person in the house. Say yes.

RACHEL: There's nowhere for him to sleep.

DAN: Of course there is. He can sleep in here.

RACHEL: But Dan - Richard can't stay. He has his book. He's expected. He'll have to head off tomorrow.

DAN: But he just got here !

RACHEL: A schedule's a schedule.

DAN: Yes but - Bloody hell. I was really looking forward to this.

RACHEL: Maybe next time.

PAUSE.

RICHARD: I guess I could make a call.

DAN: Could you ?

RICHARD: I don't see what it would hurt. Not going to sell many books in Dandenong.

RACHEL: But Richard, people are expecting you.

DAN: They can wait.

RACHEL: Dan, darling - it's his career.

DAN: And it can wait. We're much more important than some bloody book fair in bloody Dandenong. (TO **RICHARD**) Look, Richard agrees. Don't you Rich ? And it's not a holiday. He'll be writing. Killing two birds with one stone. He'll tell his bloody publisher he's getting inspired. Two old friends are inspiring him.

RACHEL: If only...

DAN: What "if only" ? Give me the number. I'll call the bastard. You're not going anywhere. Come on Richard. I'm down on my hands and knees. I'm begging you.

RACHEL: Such drama.

DAN: Come on matey. Stay.

RICHARD: (LOOKING AT **RACHEL**) If it's okay with Rachel.

DAN: Nonsense. Of course it is.

RICHARD: Rachel ?

RACHEL: (PAUSE THEN LOOKING AT **RICHARD**) That would be lovely.

DAN HUGS RACHEL. HE KISSES HER ON THE CHEEK.

DAN: That's what I like to hear. Let's have some wine. (GRABBING THE WINE) Just like the old days. "Break out the burgundy." Our wonderful old friend - has come back to us. The Three Musketeers –

RICHARD: Three Boozerteers.

DAN: What ?

RICHARD: You remember – “Booze and tears” ?

RACHEL: You mean “Booze then tears”.

DAN: Well to whoever we are – (RAISING GLASS) cheers.

RICHARD: Cheers.

RACHEL: Cheers.

THEY CLINK GLASSES. LIGHTS FADE.

5. The following morning.

Bright sunshine. **RACHEL** sits at her easel under the Jacaranda tree in a white sun hat, painting. **SIMON**'s easel is set up next to hers. A small canvas sits on **SIMON**'s easel.

RACHEL: (SINGS) Speed bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing,
Onward, the sailors cry
Carry the lad that's born to be king
Over the sea to Skye

RICHARD ENTERS. HE STANDS AT A DISTANCE, WATCHING RACHEL.

RACHEL: (NOT TURNING AROUND.) Hello Richard.

RICHARD: Sorry. Didn't mean to intrude.

RACHEL: You're not.

RICHARD: Beautiful song.

RACHEL: Simon's favourite. There is a final verse but I can never seem to remember the words.

PAUSE.

RICHARD: I saw you from the studio. Under the tree. Thought I'd come and ... Beautiful spot.

RACHEL: The most beautiful.

RICHARD: And the ... tree. It's even more incredible when you're standing right up close.
How old is it ?

RICHARD REACHES OUT HIS HAND AND TOUCHES THE TREE. RACHEL WATCHES HIM.

RACHEL: You should be writing.

RICHARD: Delaying the inevitable.

RACHEL: Dan will want a full report. He'll probably even want you to read him the highlights.

RICHARD: God no.

RACHEL: God yes. While he's cooking up those bloody T-bone steaks.

RICHARD: Sorry.

RACHEL: If you want to stuff your face full of dead cow go right ahead.

RICHARD: It was Dan's idea.

RACHEL: Didn't hear you objecting. Go on. Gorge yourself. As for me – I'm soaking some lentils. For me and my son.

RICHARD: He's a vegetarian too ?

RACHEL: By his own choice.

RICHARD: He really does sound like the perfect kid.

RACHEL: Pretty close. How's the studio ?

RICHARD: Perfect as well. It's just -

RACHEL: It's okay Richard.

RICHARD: I can't help feeling I'm tossing you out. You said yourself you and Simon use it.

RACHEL: Only when it rains. And like Dan said – "it doesn't."

RICHARD: But it might.

RACHEL: Sadly, for those who need it, I don't think so.

RICHARD: But still - it's your studio.

RACHEL: And while you're here - Simon and I are giving it to you.

RICHARD: Thank you.

RACHEL RETURNS TO HER PAINTING.

RICHARD: I woke up and the house was empty.

RACHEL: You looked so exhausted we didn't want to wake you.

RICHARD: You should have. Can't wait to meet him. Simon.

RACHEL: We'll know next time.

RICHARD: There's always tonight. (HE LOOKS AWAY.) Bloody hell.

RACHEL: What ?

RICHARD: The house. For a moment, it ... wasn't there.

RACHEL: Strange isn't it ? That's why Dan built it here. To disappear into the landscape.

RICHARD: Well, he succeeded.

RICHARD GOES TO THE SMALL EASEL.

RICHARD: Is this one of Simon's ?

RACHEL: Yes.

RICHARD: Was he painting with you earlier ?

RACHEL: School this morning. But I like to keep his easel set up even when he's not here. Imagine he's painting alongside me.

RICHARD: Your inspiration.

RICHARD PICKS UP THE PAINTING.

RICHARD: Is this oil ?

RACHEL: (QUICKLY) What are you doing ? (GOING TO HIM) Put that down.

RACHEL TAKES THE PAINTING FROM RICHARD'S HAND AND PUTS IT BACK ON THE EASEL.

RACHEL: I'm sorry.

RICHARD: Don't apologise.

RACHEL: It's just that Simon is very particular. He doesn't like anybody to touch his paintings.

RICHARD: Of course.

RACHEL: He's funny about it.

RICHARD: Not at all. I should've thought. I wouldn't want anybody swapping my pages around while I wasn't looking.

RACHEL GOES BACK TO HER EASEL.

RICHARD: (STARTING TO GO) I'll just ...

RACHEL: Stay. I like to chat while I paint. And Simon's not here now.

RICHARD: Okay, then what shall we chat about ?

RACHEL: You were always the one who was good with words. (PAUSE) Well ... I'm waiting.

RICHARD: Sorry. Dan was telling me about the house. He's done a great job. A beautiful home.

RACHEL: No, it's a house.

RICHARD: That's a bit harsh. Feels pretty homely to me.

RACHEL: Where the fuck have you been living ? (SHE LAUGHS) Come on Richard. You can do better than this. A penny for your thoughts.

RICHARD: Only a penny ?

RACHEL: We're saving for a yacht.

RICHARD: To sail on your lake ?

RACHEL: Daily.

RICHARD: Well actually, I've been thinking about Dan.

RACHEL: Good God. Why ?

RICHARD: About the day we first met. Did we ever tell you about that ?

RACHEL: My god – a Dan and Richard story I haven't heard.

RICHARD: Well it was a long time ago. We were seven.

RACHEL: You were seven once ?

RICHARD: Hard to believe but true. It was all because of a meat pie.

RACHEL: I'm breathless with anticipation.

RICHARD: I was at Primary School. It was a scorching hot day – bit like today - and for some ludicrous reason on this boiling hot day I bought myself an even more boiling meat pie. I took the pie back to my corner of the playground, under the eucalyptus, and without thinking I just opened my little choppers and took the biggest bite a seven year old could take, crammed my mouth full of this steaming hot meat pie.

RACHEL: Ouch !

RICHARD: Immediately the pie started to burn my little cheeks and tongue. So I started to spit it out but the still steaming chunks landed on my knees and my cheap cotton shirt. So now my chest, my knees, my mouth and my fingers – because they're still holding the pie – are all on fire and I well, well – I just start to blubber. Blubber and blubber. By now every other kid in the school is laughing at me and then – I don't where he appears from or how – standing right in front of me is – Dan - and in an instant – like magic - he produces this blue lunch box and whips the pie out of my hand and into the box.

RACHEL: Probably just wanted it for himself.

RICHARD: Then he says, easy as you like, "Don't worry. Happens to me all the time." And that was it. Bonded for life.

RACHEL: Oh the sacrifice.

RICHARD: Some times I wonder what would've happened if it was the other way around. If Dan had been the laughing stock and I'd been the lunch box wielding saviour. Would that mean that now Dan would be the fuck up and I'd be the happily married family man ?

RACHEL: You're not a fuck up Richard.

RICHARD: Says you.

RACHEL AND RICHARD ARE VERY CLOSE.

RACHEL: Where have you been ?

RICHARD: Somewhere else

RACHEL: Then fill me in.

RICHARD: Oh you know ? This and that.

RACHEL: Richard.

RICHARD: It's a long story.

RACHEL: Then begin. (PAUSE) So you'll tell me about homicidal meat pies but not where you've been for the last ten years.

RICHARD: Ancient history is so much more glamorous than recent events.

RACHEL: I would still like to hear.

PAUSE.

RICHARD: For the first five years I was in a - wait for it ... a retirement village.

RACHEL: Bit young aren't you ?

RICHARD: Possibly. I worked there. As the cleaner. I became quite adept at unblocking toilets.

RACHEL: Can you be adept at unblocking toilets ?

RICHARD: Well if you can I was. Even had my own granny flat out the back.

RACHEL: With all the other Grannies. How lovely. Where was this ?

RICHARD: Perth.

RACHEL: Goodness - you joined the Foreign Legion.

RICHARD: And that's how I started writing.

RACHEL: You've lost me.

RICHARD: At night I was pretty bored - not much to do in my granny flat.

RACHEL: What - no Bingo Nights ? A trip to the Pokies ? All those flashing lights ?

RICHARD: Not really my thing. So I started scribbling. And to my surprise I discovered the words seemed to come quite quickly. Looks like deep down I had a few things I needed to get off my chest. Never really thought much of it. Just writing for myself. Then one day the good woman who ran the village –

RACHEL: The Commandant.

RICHARD: Superintendent I think. Anyway, quite without my knowledge I should point out – she sent my manuscript to a literary competition. Next thing I knew there was a letter in the mail. My little scribbles were going to be in print. And then surprise number three. People actually bought the bloody thing.

RACHEL: People like Dan and me.

RICHARD: Not only did they buy it - they actually seemed to like it.

RACHEL: Well Dan did.

RICHARD: From this I draw a sobering conclusion. Being a complete nutcase - I determine there must be a hell of a lot of other nutcases out there.

RACHEL: Well spotted. So now you're Richard McInnally - the great and successful author.

RICHARD: And certified nutcase.

RACHEL: Only the author part is new.

RICHARD: Thank you. But despite my success I felt something deep down was missing. An ache I had to soothe, so one fine afternoon I threw it all away and came in search of my old friends - Rachel and Dan - and my new friend, Simon.

RACHEL PLACES DOWN HER BRUSH. SHE STANDS.

RICHARD: Finished ?

RACHEL: You always have to do it don't you ? Can't help yourself. You always have to go that one step too far.

RICHARD: What ? What did I do ?

RACHEL: This doesn't belong to you Richard. Understand ? None of it belongs to you.

RICHARD: I just –

RACHEL HOLDS UP A FINGER OVER RICHARD'S MOUTH, SILENCING HIM.

RACHEL: Let me give you a piece of advice. One that I have learnt from hard won experience. Let - it - go. Let go of what happened or it will destroy you.

RACHEL EXITS. RICHARD WATCHES HER GO.

LIGHTS FADE.

6. That night

The living room is empty. A fire burns in the fireplace.

DAN and **RICHARD** enter, returning from a walk around the property. **DAN** is wearing a thick blue coat and heavy boots. He carries a large torch. **RICHARD** is in black shoes and a jumper.

DAN: Here we are. Park yourself in front of the fire.

RICHARD GOES STRAIGHT TO THE FIRE. HE HUDDLES IN FRONT OF IT, TRYING TO WARM UP. DAN TAKES OFF HIS COAT AND BOOTS.

DAN: So, how was that ?

RICHARD: Great. (REMOVING SHOES) Dusty, but great.

DAN: Give you a broad idea of what we're dealing with.

RICHARD: The torchlight was very ... illuminating. I could almost make out distant shapes against the sky.

DAN: Stop whinging ! It was your idea.

RICHARD: Just didn't think it would be that bloody cold.

DAN: I warned you.

RICHARD: And I didn't believe you. But I do now.

DAN: Should take you roo shooting one night. Then you'll really be cold.

RICHARD: You go roo shooting ?

DAN: No.

DAN POURS THEM A COUPLE OF GLASSES OF RED WINE.

DAN: (HANDING GLASS TO **RICHARD**) This'll warm you up.

RICHARD: Thanks.

DAN: One good thing - it gives us a chance to impress you with our fireplace.

RICHARD: Which is like everything else in this bloody house. Perfect.

DAN: And –

RICHARD: One hundred percent natural.

DAN: Did you at least walk off some of the steak ?

RICHARD: A fraction.

DAN: Good steak.

RICHARD: Perfect.

DAN: Best in the state.

RICHARD: As you said.

DAN: And cooked ?

RICHARD: To perfection.

DAN: A bit of spice. Tastes nice.

TOGETHER: Ole !

DAN LAUGHS. PAUSE.

RICHARD: Is Simon okay ?

DAN: Simon ?

RICHARD: Rachel took his dinner into him. I thought maybe he wasn't well.

DAN: The "lentil stew" ? No wonder he's crook.

RICHARD: Now that's one thing I didn't miss.

DAN: Eh ?

RICHARD: The never ending stream of bad jokes.

DAN: They weren't that bad.

RICHARD: Says you.

DAN: Well then, we better get pissed quick. After a couple of bottles of this I might just be funny.

RICHARD: After a couple of bottles, even I'll be funny.

THEY DRINK.

DAN: Pity Rachel didn't join us. She could do with a bit of red meat inside her.

RICHARD: Thanks for the charming image.

DAN: She's sticking to the boiled cabbage.

RICHARD: Lentils.

DAN: Oops, so sorry. All rabbit food to me.

PAUSE.

RICHARD: Rachel was painting today. Under the tree.

DAN: Her favourite spot.

RICHARD: The "most beautiful". Had Simon's easel set up beside her. You've got a great family. You must be very proud.

DAN: Who wouldn't be ? To families.

RICHARD: Families.

THEY DRINK.

DAN: Well, this is nice. Relaxing - after a good meal.

RICHARD: Freezing your tits off.

DAN: Something to come back to of an evening. Makes the place feel like...

RICHARD: Like what ?

DAN: (SHRUGS) Home. (BEAT) We're very adaptable - us humans.

RICHARD: Go on.

DAN: Well, you end up in a situation that you would never have believed possible but you stick it out and one day passes and then another and another ... And one morning you wake up and what once would've seemed the strangest thing imaginable, now seems almost ... normal.

RICHARD: I'm not sure I get you.

DAN: Don't worry mate. Neither do I.

PAUSE.

RICHARD: Do you want to talk about something ?

DAN: We already are.

RICHARD: It's just I'm sensing -

DAN: What - your shit up your arse?

RICHARD: Lovely. And today Rachel...

DAN: What ?

RICHARD: She seemed ...I don't know.

DAN: And neither will I if you don't tell me.

RICHARD: (PAUSE) Odd.

DAN: Odd ? (LAUGHING) Mate, that's because she is odd. Haven't you worked that out by now ?

RICHARD: Balance.

DAN: Huh ?

RICHARD: You always had balance. "Good old Dan." That's why she chose you.

DAN: Didn't know there was any choosing involved ?

RICHARD: You know what I mean ?

DAN: Not sure that I do.

RICHARD: You're a nice guy. That's why she ended up with you. I'm difficult, challenging, sharp.

DAN: Maybe you're just immature. (PAUSE) I still remember the moment - the exact moment - when I ... knew.

RICHARD: Knew?

DAN: It was when I went to Scotland with my Dad. End of third year. You remember? You and Rach stayed at home. I was in Thurso, right at the top of Scotland. Not far from the North Pole. I was standing out on this dock, bitterly cold, wind howling in my face. I was looking out to sea and just in the distance I could make out this little island. Last stop before you hit the ice. It was frozen, completely barren. No sign of life anywhere. But I remember thinking how beautiful it looked ... in this distant, lonely kind of way. And that's when I ... knew. Nothing would be beautiful if I couldn't share it with her. So I ran straight back to the hotel and picked up the phone. Didn't care what time it was back home.

RICHARD: Just after seven. The phone woke me up.

DAN: I often wonder what would have happened if I'd never stood on the dock. If I'd never seen that island. She means a lot to me. I know I don't act like it sometimes but she does mean ...

RICHARD: She's your wife.

DAN: For better or worse.

RICHARD: She loves you. You love her.

DAN: I don't have to love her mate. I'm married to her. Hey, you want to swap? You stay here and I'll go on the book tour. Anyway, what are you complaining about ? "Balance." You're a published writer. And what am I ? A glorified brickies' labourer. Sorry, glorified rammed Earth labourer. Stuff balance.

RACHEL: (ENTERS) Temperature of one hundred and three and he's still full of beans.

DAN: Must be all those lentils.

RACHEL: Very funny. So, you two enjoy your evening stroll ?

RICHARD: Perfect. I'm still recovering.

RACHEL: Wuss. And your dead cow ? Clogging the arteries up nicely ?

DAN: It was delicious thank you. The fresh blood oozed down our throats.

RICHARD: Actually I thought the lentils looked pretty good.

DAN: Crawler. (TO **RACHEL**) You gonna join us ?

RACHEL: I better get some sleep. Simon will probably need me during the night.

RICHARD: If you want me to keep an eye on him.

RACHEL: Don't want you coming down with it too. But don't let me stop you.

DAN: Don't worry. You won't. (NUDGING **RICHARD**) Actually we're having a nice little chat. All about you.

RACHEL: Enjoy yourself. (TO **RICHARD**) See you in the morning.

DAN: (TO **RACHEL**) It was all about a Bus Stop.

RACHEL: How fascinating for you.

DAN: One very special Bus Stop in particular. Weren't we Rich ?

RICHARD: (TO **DAN**) Don't you dare blame me.

RACHEL: I would've thought you had better things to talk about.

DAN: Oh this was a very special Bus Stop. Back when Rich and I were at Uni.

RACHEL: I can't remember back that far.

DAN: Sure you can.

RACHEL: No Dan.

DAN: Yes Rach. One Tuesday afternoon, many years ago –

RACHEL: Dan, I said –

DAN: Rachel, I said - One Tuesday afternoon, many years ago – I left University and went to the Bus stop. Now this was strange wasn't it Rich ?

RICHARD HESITATES.

DAN: Wasn't it Rich ?

RACHEL GIVES RICHARD A WARNING LOOK.

RICHARD: Yes.

DAN: Because usually I walked home but that day was ... (TO RICHARD) That day was...

RICHARD: Unusually hot.

DAN: So I went to the Bus Stop, and at the –

RICHARD: Bus Stop.

DAN: There was this funny little girl –

RACHEL: (BEING DRAWN IN) Beautiful damsel in distress.

DAN: Funny little girl and she was all -

RICHARD: Sweating and frazzled.

RACHEL: It was hot.

DAN: And she had this huge street map in her hands, almost as big as her. And she was so angry she was twisting it over and over. Almost ripping it apart.

RACHEL: I couldn't find where I wanted to go.

DAN: So I went over –

RICHARD: Very politely

DAN: And said –

RACHEL: Very sweetly.

RICHARD: “May I help you ?”

DAN: And to my surprise the funny little girl replied:

RACHEL: “No. And piss off.”

RACHEL AND RICHARD LAUGH.

DAN: Now I was a little affronted by this –

RACHEL: As you would be.

DAN: So I said:

RICHARD: "Sorry, I thought you were lost."

DAN: And she said:

RACHEL: "I'm not lost I just don't know where I am."

DAN: Now it just happened that where she was going -

RICHARD: 47 O'Riordan Street

DAN: was just around the corner -

RICHARD: From where you lived -

DAN: So I said:

RACHEL: Again very sweetly -

RICHARD: "I live near there. Would you like me to show you ?"

RACHEL: (LAUGHING) That's not all he showed me.

DAN: Wait your turn. So we walked –

RICHARD: Through the sun drenched park -

DAN: And on the way the funny little girl told me –

RACHEL: "I've just arrived in the big city and I'm staying at a Boarding House – "

DAN: At 47 O'Riordan Street. Then I said:

RICHARD: "But there isn't a boarding house at 47 O'Riordan Street."

DAN: But she wouldn't believe me.

RICHARD: Can you blame her ?

DAN: So we got to the address and guess what ?

RACHEL: No Boarding House.

DAN: It had been replaced by -

ALL: A Triple X Bookstore.

DAN: Tears, wailing –

RACHEL: Wailing ?

RICHARD: Don't forget the gnashing of teeth.

DAN: Complete devastation, but then I said –

RICHARD: “I have a sofa at my house.”

RACHEL: So innocent. Butter wouldn't melt in his –

DAN: Bum.

RICHARD: “You can stay with us. Just till you get on your –“

RACHEL: Back.

DAN: Feet.

RICHARD: Quizzical looks, Suspicion.

RACHEL: “Can I trust you ?”

RICHARD: “Do I know you ?”

DAN: “Who are you ?”

RICHARD: “I'm Dan.”

DAN: “Of course I'll have to check it with my housemate-“

RACHEL: Richard.

RICHARD: “But he won't mind.”

RACHEL: “He's my best -

DAN: friend.” And -

RICHARD: He didn't mind.

DAN: So the funny little girl -

RACHEL: Who couldn't find her way –

RICHARD: Came home to stay.

DAN: In their lounge room.

RACHEL: Their very cramped lounge room.

RICHARD: On the sofa.

RACHEL: The very small sofa.

DAN: And she stayed -

RICHARD: And she stayed -

RACHEL: And she stayed.

RICHARD: Till she moved upstairs into Dan's room.

DAN: And no matter how hard we tried

RICHARD: We could never bloody get rid of her.

RACHEL: You never tried to get rid of me.

DAN: Cause we knew –

RACHEL: I'd never have gone.

DAN: And thus ends –

ALL: “The story of the Bus Stop.”

RACHEL: The Three Boozerteers.

RICHARD: Complete with booze and tears,

DAN: Together Forever.

RACHEL: And ever.

RICHARD: Till death us do part.

PAUSE. THEY BURST INTO LAUGHTER. **RACHEL STANDS.**

RACHEL: And now, I am going to bed.

DAN: Come on Rach. We've just started. More stories.

RICHARD: How about “the busted bathtub” ?

RACHEL: Not that. Please.

DAN: Alright. Then “fisticuffs on Election night”.

RACHEL: I don’t even know that one. Nor do I want to.

DAN: Rach.

RACHEL: No Dan. Simon may need me.

DAN LOOKS AT RACHEL.

DAN: Okay. Tomorrow night.

RACHEL: We’ll see. (EXITING) Good night Richard.

DAN: Another ?

RICHARD: Actually I'm a bit tired too. Might hit the sack.

DAN: Why ? What did the sack do to you ?

**DAN TAKES THE WINE GLASSES. HE EXITS INTO THE KITCHEN.
RICHARD PREPARES HIMSELF FOR BED. DAN RETURNS.**

DAN: You want the light off ?

RICHARD: I might read for a while.

DAN: Goodnight then. (STARTS GO BUT STOPS) You know, it’s good that you’ve come. Give everything a good shake. See what’s nailed down and what gets thrown out with the trash.

RICHARD: I’m not sure ...

DAN: (HE SMILES) Sleep well.

DAN EXITS.

RICHARD STARTS TO PULL BACK THE COVERS THEN STOPS.

HE REACHES UNDER THE BED AND PULLS OUT AN OBJECT COVERED WITH A CLOTH. HE REMOVES THE CLOTH TO REVEAL’S SIMON’S SMALL LANDSCAPE PAINTING.

HE SITS ON THE BED, STARING AT THE PICTURE IN HIS HANDS AS THE LIGHTS FADE.

7. Later.

The living room. Light from the fading embers.

RICHARD is sleeping. Suddenly he wakes, aware that somebody else is in the room. In the corner we can just make out the faint outline of **RACHEL**.

RACHEL: Can't sleep. And the rest of the house is so cold.

RICHARD GETS OUT OF BED.

RACHEL: What are you doing ?

RICHARD: Turning on the light.

RACHEL: Don't. I can't stand it. It's so ... bright.

RICHARD: Your house.

RACHEL: I've asked Daniel to change it - countless times. Put in a dimmer - a stronger lampshade - but ... "One hundred percent natural. Have to make the lamp shade out of mud."

RICHARD: I'll light the candle. (HE GOES TO A CANDLE IN THE CORNER AND LIGHTS IT.) Now I can see you.

RACHEL: Afraid I'm not much to look at these days.

RICHARD: You are as breathtakingly beautiful as ever.

PAUSE.

RACHEL: Thank you.

RICHARD: So... why ?

RACHEL: Why ?

RICHARD: Why can't you sleep ?

RACHEL LOOKS AT HIM. SHE LOOKS AWAY.

RICHARD: Sorry. Shouldn't pry.

RACHEL: No, it's alright. Some nights I just ... can't.

RICHARD: Some days are better than others.

RACHEL: (SMILES) You always understood that.

RICHARD: You're probably just worried about Simon.

RACHEL: I went to a therapist once - he said I should talk about things. Said it would be good for me. But that's not me. I find it very difficult to talk about things that have ... hurt me.

RICHARD: It's not easy.

RACHEL: What he didn't understand was there was nothing I wanted to recover from. I didn't want to move on. I was happy where I was.

RICHARD: That's okay. You don't have to go anywhere. We'll just sit here. In front of the fire. Till you feel like going back to bed.

RACHEL: No more questions ?

RICHARD SHAKES HIS HEAD.

RACHEL: Pity. I was just starting to enjoy them. Can I sit with you ?

RICHARD LOOKS AT RACHEL.

RICHARD: Dan is...

RACHEL: Richard – I'm just going to sit next to you.

RICHARD: Your bed.

RACHEL SITS NEXT TO RICHARD ON THE BED.

RICHARD: Comfortable ?

RACHEL: Yes - I am comfortable.

RICHARD: Good, can't have you being uncomfortable.

RACHEL: Why do you always have to say such stupid things ? In all the time I have known you - you have always said such ridiculously stupid things.

RICHARD: Boyish charm ?

RACHEL LAUGHS.

RICHARD: Ha, ha - got you to laugh.

RACHEL: What do you want here Richard ?

RICHARD: To see you, Dan, Simon.

RACHEL LOOKS AT HIM.

RICHARD: I just want to know why.

RACHEL: (SHE STANDS) Don't we all.

RICHARD: Don't go.

RACHEL: I need to check on Simon.

RICHARD: (GRABBING HER HAND) He's okay.

RACHEL: Richard - I need to go to my son.

RICHARD: Please Rachel. Don't run away from this.

RACHEL: It's ten years.

RICHARD: I know but I still feel ...

RACHEL: What do you feel ? Go home Richard. Go back to your book fair. Leave us here ... in peace.

RICHARD: Very fucked up peace.

RACHEL: If you really understood - you would leave. You'd walk down that path and never come back. What can you possibly achieve ?

RICHARD: I need to know what happened.

RACHEL: Let go of my hand.

RICHARD LETS HER HAND GO.

RICHARD: It could've been me at that Bus Stop.

RACHEL: Yes, but...

RICHARD: But what ?

RACHEL: You wouldn't have known where I needed to go.

RACHEL WALKS TO THE DOOR. SHE LISTENS. SILENCE. RACHEL GOES OVER TO THE HAND PRINTS IN THE FLOOR AND KNEELS NEXT TO THEM. SHE BEGINS TRACING THE HAND PRINTS WITH HER FINGERS.

RACHEL: I'm glad to see you finally found your place.

RICHARD: My place ?

RACHEL: An outlet. You always were good at telling stories.

RICHARD: I'll try and take that as a compliment.

RACHEL: I never knew you could write. Tell stories - yes. But actually write them down.

RICHARD: We all deal with things in our own way.

RACHEL: And yours was by creating fantasy ?

RICHARD: Thinly veiled autobiography.

RACHEL: Touche.

RICHARD SMILES.

RACHEL: (SHE LOOKS AT **RICHARD**.) Come here. Let me look at you.

RICHARD HESITATES.

RACHEL: I'm not going to bite.

**RICHARD MOVES CLOSER TO HER. THEY SIT NEXT TO THE HAND PRINTS.
RACHEL TAKES HIS FACE IN HER HANDS. SHE EXAMINES IT, CLOSELY.**

RICHARD: How do I look ?

RACHEL: You lose.

RICHARD: What ?

RACHEL: Spoke first. (SHE LOOKS AGAIN.) Few more lines around the mouth. Wrinkles on your forehead. But overall, pretty much...the same.

RICHARD: And the eyes ?

RACHEL: No. They haven't changed. Not at all.

RACHEL DROPS HER HANDS.

RICHARD: Who's breaking the moment now ?

RACHEL STICKS OUT HER TONGUE.

- RACHEL: Your parents must be horrified.
- RICHARD: I think they're quite proud.
- RACHEL: All those years at University - wasted.
- RICHARD: My legal training does come in handy. Make sure my publisher isn't ripping me off.
- RACHEL: Forget it. I'm not one to talk. As for my own education, such as it was, the only person I analyse these days is myself and that's a forgone conclusion. One hundred percent basket case.
- RICHARD: You're too hard.
- RACHEL: I'm not. Trust me.
- RICHARD: What about your own creative streak ? The paintings. And now you're passing it on to Simon.
- RACHEL: That's where people are wrong. They think that I introduced Simon to painting when actually it was the other way round. I had no interest whatsoever until he showed me how fulfilling a few brush strokes could be.
- RICHARD: He really does sound like an amazing child.
- RACHEL: He is an amazing child. One of the very few people I could truly call unique.
- RICHARD: Now you know why I had to come.
- RACHEL: You're doing it again.
- RICHARD: That's not fair.
- RACHEL: Fair ? What does that mean ? You said it. We all deal with things in our own way. Or not deal - as the case maybe.
- SIMON: You can't keep him away from me forever.
- RACHEL: I'm not keeping him away from you.

RICHARD TAKES RACHEL'S FACE IN HIS HANDS..

- RICHARD: Look at me Rachel.
- RACHEL: My husband is in the next room.
- RICHARD: Look at me. What happened ?

RACHEL: Ten years.

RICHARD: Twelve years. Twelve years and nine months. So you've had plenty of time to rehearse your answer.

RACHEL: You're the one who left. I came back from the phone and you were gone.

RICHARD: That's a very selective version of events. It leaves out who was on the phone and the smile that gradually grew on your face. I knew exactly what that smile meant. A moment of clarity. I knew exactly where I stood - or didn't stand, to be precise. It also leaves out the night before and the promise that you made.

RACHEL: I never promised you anything.

RICHARD: Yes you did. That night. That night was a promise. And then it was all gone in one four minute phone call.

RACHEL: What we had was real.

RICHARD: Then why ?

RACHEL: You're a writer – figure it out.

RICHARD: How can you be so flippant about this ? I need to know the truth.

RACHEL: The truth ? There's no such thing as truth. Only memory. You remember things however you want to remember them.

RICHARD: I need to know.

RACHEL: Do you ? No matter what the cost.

RICHARD: Is Simon my son ?

RACHEL'S FACE SLOWLY CHANGES. SHE LOOKS INTO THE FIRE.

RACHEL: Sometimes he's so extraordinary – so over poweringly magical – I wonder if he's even mine.

RACHEL LIES DOWN ON THE BED. RICHARD WATCHES HER.

RACHEL: Do you ever think that maybe there is only a certain amount of happiness in the world ? And maybe we just used up our share too quickly.

RICHARD: No. I think happiness is infinite.

RACHEL: I'm just going to lie here for a little while.

RICHARD LIES DOWN. **RACHEL** LOOKS INTO THE FIRE.

RACHEL: Richard...

RICHARD: Yes ?

RACHEL: Blow out the candle.

RICHARD GETS UP AND GOES TO THE CANDLE. HE BLOWS IT OUT.

BLACKOUT. END ACT 1.

Act 2**1. Afternoon**

The garden beneath the Jacaranda tree. Bright sunlight.

SIMON is painting at his easel. He wears a hat to protect him from the sun.

RICHARD enters. He stands at a distance watching **SIMON**, then:

RICHARD: That's a great painting.

SIMON: That's cause I'm a great painter.

RICHARD: Yes you are. Your Mum told me.

SIMON: I'm painting flowers from the garden. Lavender and –

TOGETHER: Jacaranda.

SIMON: Yeah. And look, (SHOWING PAINT) I made the colour for the flowers. Got it just right.

RICHARD: Very good flowers.

SIMON: I made it – with red and blue and a little itsy bit of green. See ?

RICHARD: It's a great painting.

SIMON: You already said that.

RICHARD: Sorry.

SIMON: Don't have to apologise.

RICHARD COMES CLOSER.

RICHARD: Do you know who I am ?

SIMON: You're Richard. The writer. Mum told me.

RICHARD: What else did she tell you ?

SIMON: Stuff.

RICHARD: Good stuff or bad stuff ?

SIMON: Just stuff. Don't be so nosey. You wrote that book.

RICHARD: You know about that ?

SIMON: Course. I read it.

RICHARD: You read my book ?

SIMON: Mum helped me. She reads it to me in bed. Before I go to sleep.

RICHARD: She reads you my book in bed ?

SIMON: Oh der ! That's what I said. You're not very smart for a writer are you ?

RICHARD: No. (PAUSE) So you were saying - about the book ?

SIMON: I like it. Helps me dream.

RICHARD: And what do you dream ?

SIMON: I dream I'm Captain Stringman, standing up on the bridge, lost on the stormy seas. I have to hold on to the wheel or the waves will knock me overboard. I scan the horizon, looking for the lighthouse, trying to save my crew.

RICHARD: Are you a good Captain ?

SIMON: I'm the best. I save all the crew. Every time.

RICHARD: But that's not what happens in the book.

SIMON: I know but that's stupid. Captain Stringman would save the crew. He's a good Captain.

RICHARD: Not everybody agrees with you.

SIMON: Then they're stupid too. You wanna help ?

RICHARD: Sure.

SIMON: 'kay, (POINTING TO PAINTING) now in front is the tree. That's the subject. And in the background is the house and there's the garden.

RICHARD: And who's this standing on the lawn ?

SIMON: That's Mum and that's you.

RICHARD: Where's Dan ? (BEAT) Your dad.

SIMON: He's inside. Standing at the window. Now I'm doing the colour for the flowers. You mix up the colour for the branches. Can you do that ?

RICHARD: I'll give it a go.

SIMON: Don't worry if you get it wrong. I'll help you.

SIMON AND RICHARD MIX UP THE PAINTS.

RICHARD: Would you like to be a writer one day ?

SIMON: Nah. I like painting. More real. You can see everything when you paint.

RICHARD: You can see everything when you write to. In your mind - and in your dreams.

SIMON: Yeah but I still like painting more.

RICHARD: You can do both.

SIMON: Wouldn't be any good.

RICHARD: You don't know that. I could help you. You don't know unless you try.

SIMON: That's what Dad says. Okay, you can show me how to write. One thing but.

RICHARD: What ?

SIMON: You're a better writer but I'm a better painter.

RICHARD: No debate.

SIMON: (LOOKING AT **RICHARD'S** PAINT) No. The branches are grey, not brown. Look at the tree. Are you stupid ? This is not a kid's painting you know.

RICHARD: Sorry.

SIMON: That's okay. I forgive you. Now I'll show you how to make grey. First you take white and some black. But that's the easy part. To get it right you gotta put in some yellow. That's what most people don't know.

RICHARD WATCHES AS SIMON CONTINUES TO MIX THE PAINT.

THE LIGHTS FADE.

2. Morning

Living Room. Orange light spills in through the window.

RICHARD lies in the bed. From offstage we hear the loud clatter of pots and pans hitting the floor.

DAN: (OFF) Shit !

RICHARD SITS BOLT UPRIGHT IN THE BED. FOR A MOMENT HE DOESN'T KNOW WHERE HE IS.

DAN: (OFF) Why does she always -

RICHARD REMEMBERS WHERE HE IS AND CHECKS THE BED BESIDE HIM. IT'S EMPTY. DAN ENTERS CARRYING TWO POTS.

DAN: (SEEING **RICHARD**) Didn't mean to wake you. Just trying to- She always packs everything in so - Shit, sorry. Morning.

RICHARD: Morning.

DAN: How'd you sleep ?

RICHARD: Well ... well.

DAN: (BANGING THE POTS TOGETHER) Nothing like the silence of the country. Don't get much traffic out here.

RICHARD: Slept right through.

DAN: Nothing to report then ?

RICHARD RETURNS DAN'S LOOK.

DAN: Good.

RICHARD STARTS TO GET OUT OF BED.

DAN: Stay there. I'll put the brekky on. Cook us up something with a little spice.

RICHARD: I'm up.

DAN: Well then, break - fast is on its way.

RICHARD: Dan the devil in the kitchen.

DAN: Hope you don't want eggs.

RICHARD: Why not ?

DAN: We ain't got none.

DAN CLANGS THE POT AGAIN AND EXITS. RICHARD GETS OUT OF BED. HE PULLS ON HIS JUMPER AND JEANS. WE HEAR POTS CLANGING OFF.

RICHARD: Whatever you're having is fine.

DAN: (OFF) Well I ain't having eggs. Maybe I'll cook us up that other T-bone from last night. Steak - the breakfast of ... people who drink too much the night before.

RICHARD: (TO HIMSELF) Great.

DAN: (ENTERING) What was that ?

RICHARD: I said "great". (HE LOOKS OUT THE WINDOW.) What time is it ?

DAN: Quarter past eight.

RICHARD: It must be thirty degrees.

DAN: (EXITING) This is nothing. Come noon it'll really be baking. You should try it up on a roof one day.

RICHARD: Try fixing dunnies.

DAN: (OFF) Sorry ?

RICHARD: (LOUDER) Last night we had the fire going.

DAN: (ENTERING) Welcome to our world. Freezing one moment, scorching the next. Nice wind coming up too. That's the problem with all these beautiful days.

RICHARD: Beautiful days ?

DAN: Everybody always wants beautiful days. Big yellow sun, clear blue sky. But what people don't realise is if every day's like that you end up with - (POINTING OUT WINDOW) this. A tinderbox full of dry trees. Smell.

RICHARD: (SMELLS) Smoke ?

DAN: And look at the sky. "Red sky at night, shepherd's delight. Red sky at morning, - Shepherd's warning."

RICHARD: One of Simon's little sayings ?

DAN: Mine actually. (EXITS)

RICHARD: How far away would they be ?

DAN: (OFF) Twenty clicks. Maybe less.

RICHARD: You had any out here ?

DAN: (OFF) Not just yet. But ... (RE-APPEARING) here's hoping. You gotta match ?

RICHARD: And you're still going to work ?

DAN: If I didn't go to work every time there was a bushfire somewhere 'round here, I'd never go to work. Anyway, you two don't want me hanging around.

RICHARD: Excuse me ?

DAN: Don't you and Rachel want to catch up ? Old times. Nostalgia.

RICHARD: Not desperately, no.

DAN APPROACHES RICHARD.

DAN: Have you noticed the light lately ? The haze. Everything's bathed in this weird orange light. Even when there are no fires around.

RICHARD: Can't say that I have.

DAN: Maybe it's always been like that, and I've just never noticed.

DAN IS NOW VERY CLOSE TO RICHARD.

RICHARD: Daniel.

DAN: Yes Richard.

RICHARD: I have no idea what you're talking about. (BEAT) Is this about something I said ? Last night.

DAN: Matey, to tell you the truth I was so pissed last night I can't remember what the fuck either of us said. But if I ever do, you'll be the first to know.

DAN EXITS. RICHARD NOTICES SIMON'S LANDSCAPE POKING OUT FROM UNDER THE BED.

RICHARD GETS DOWN ON HIS KNEES AND PUSHES THE LANDSCAPE BACK UNDER THE BED.

RACHEL ENTERS, SHE LOOKS WELL RESTED WITH A SMILE ON HER FACE. SHE WATCHES RICHARD.

RACHEL: What are you doing ?

RICHARD SURPRISED, LOOKS UP TO SEE HER.

RICHARD: Good morning.

RACHEL: What are you doing ?

RICHARD: Lost my sock. (HE FEELS AROUND UNDER THE BED AND PULLS OUT A SOCK) Here it is.

RACHEL: Where's Daniel ?

RICHARD: Making breakfast.

RACHEL: God save us.

DAN ENTERS, HOLDING THE STEAK ON A FORK AND A PLATE.

DAN: T-bone or not t-bone - that is the question. (SEEING **RACHEL**.) You're up.

RACHEL: So I am. Thank you for pointing that out. (TO RICHARD) Coffee ?

RICHARD: Thanks.

RACHEL: Dan ?

DAN: You're making coffee ?

RACHEL: I'm making coffee.

DAN: (SLIGHT PAUSE) Then absolutely.

**RACHEL SMILES AT RICHARD AND EXITS INTO THE KITCHEN.
DAN LOOKS AT RICHARD.**

DAN: (WHISPERED) She's very ... chirpy.

RICHARD: (WHISPERING BACK) Maybe she's happy because Simon is feeling better.

DAN: (WHISPERED) Maybe.

RACHEL ENTERS.

RACHEL: Anything wrong ? (REFERRING TO T-BONE.) Are you holding that for any particular reason ?

DAN: I was thinking about cooking it up for breakfast.

RACHEL: And are you ?

DAN: I'm late. Better head off. Guess I'll have to pass on the coffee as well.

DAN GOES TO HAND RACHEL THE T-BONE.

- RACHEL: Don't bring that thing anywhere near me. (TO **RICHARD**) And you ? I'm thinking of pancakes. With fig jam.
- RICHARD: Sounds great.
- DAN: Going all out.
- RACHEL: I make very good pancakes. You'll love them. And I also have an announcement.
- DAN: We're all ears.
- RACHEL: Tonight I am cooking dinner.
- DAN: That's great Rach. You cooked dinner last night.
- RACHEL: Tonight I'm really cooking dinner. Chicken korma. Just like the old days.
- RICHARD: Chicken korma ?
- RACHEL: Hot and spicy. Just the way you like it. Nice red wine. The Three Boozeteers - together again.
- RICHARD: A little spice - is nice.
- DAN: (WITHOUT ENTHUSIASM) Ole. What happened to the boiled cabbage ?
- RACHEL: If you don't behave you will get boiled cabbage. And afterwards, blueberries, raspberries and fresh cream.
- RICHARD: Sounds perfect.
- RACHEL: Alright with you Dan ?
- DAN: Super.
- RACHEL: You want your coffee in here Rich ?
- RICHARD: Thanks.
- RACHEL: (STARTING TO EXIT) Won't be long.
- RICHARD: What about Simon ?
- RACHEL: Simon ?
- RICHARD: Isn't he going to school ?

RACHEL: I'm not sure. Dan ?

DAN: I don't think we should risk it. Just yet.

RICHARD: School's probably closed anyway. With the fires.

RACHEL NODS AND EXITS. DAN LOOKS AT RICHARD.

DAN: Coffee, pancakes. Well, that's just dandy. A miraculous transformation, wouldn't you say ?

RICHARD: What ?

DAN: Frosty, the Snow-woman. (CALLS) See you tonight Rach.

RACHEL: (OFF) Bye.

DAN: Have a good day Rich. Enjoy your ... work.

RICHARD: Thanks Dan. I will.

DAN: Oh and mind this for me.

RICHARD: What ?

DAN HANDS HIM THE T-BONE. AGAIN THEY ARE VERY CLOSE. DAN SMILES. HE EXITS.

RICHARD PUTS THE T-BONE BACK ON THE PLATE. HE GOES TO THE ENTRANCE TO THE KITCHEN AND CHECKS INSIDE.

HE GOES BACK TO THE BED AND PULLS OUT THE LANDSCAPE. HE QUICKLY PLACES IT ON THE MANTELPIECE.

THERE IS A NOISE OFF. RICHARD HURRIEDLY MOVES TO THE WINDOW. HE LOOKS OUT.

RACHEL ENTERS, CARRYING COFFEE.

RACHEL: Here we are. Richard ?

RICHARD: (TURNING) Sorry. Million miles away.

RACHEL: No you're not. You're right here. With me.

SHE HANDS THE COFFEE TO RICHARD. RACHEL LOOKS AT HIM. RICHARD SHIFTS UNEASILY.

RICHARD: I might go and get started.

RACHEL: What about our pancakes ?

RICHARD: Not really a breakfast person.

RACHEL: You used to be.

RICHARD: I used to be a lot of things.

RICHARD LOOKS AT RACHEL. HALF-SMILE. HE STARTS TO LEAVE.

RACHEL: Good luck. If that's what you say.

RICHARD: Much appreciated.

RACHEL WATCHES RICHARD GO. SHE SITS AND SIPS HER COFFEE, SMILING. SHE SEES THE T-BONE, FORK STILL STANDING UPRIGHT. A SILENT GROAN.

SHE LOOKS AWAY AND SEES THE LANDSCAPE NOW ON THE MANTELPIECE. RACHEL FREEZES.

SIMON ENTERS. HE GETS A CHAIR AND PLACES IT UNDER THE MANTELPIECE. HE STANDS ON TOP OF THE CHAIR AND REACHES UP TO TAKE DOWN THE LANDSCAPE.

HE GETS DOWN FROM THE CHAIR AND GOES TOWARD RACHEL, HOLDING THE PAINTING. RACHEL LOOKS AWAY.

SIMON: Mum. Mum.

RACHEL: (NOT LOOKING AT HIM) Back to bed Simon.

SIMON: I brought you my painting.

RACHEL: I've seen your painting.

SIMON: But you told me to.

RACHEL: No I didn't.

SIMON: You said if ever you were sad I should bring you my painting.

RACHEL: But I'm not sad Simon. I'm happy. Very very happy.

SIMON: But you said when I'm not here you're always sad.

RACHEL STILL REFUSES TO LOOK AT HIM.

SIMON: Mum. Look at me.

RACHEL: Not now Simon.

SIMON: Mum ! Look at me.

RACHEL TURNS TO SIMON. SIMON HOLDS UP THE PAINTING. HE SMILES. RACHEL OPENS UP HER ARMS. SIMON RUNS TO HER. RACHEL TAKES THE PAINTING AND KISSES HIM.

RACHEL: Thank you my beautiful boy.

SIMON: Are you happy now Mum ?

RACHEL: I'm always happy when I'm with you.

BEAT. RACHEL SUDDENLY STANDS.

RACHEL: Now back to bed.

SIMON: But I want to stay with you.

RACHEL: No Simon. I'm busy now. Back to bed.

SIMON: Mum.

RACHEL: (STRONGER) Simon. You're sick. Go back to bed.

SIMON: Okay. I love you Mummy.

RACHEL: (NOT LOOKING) And I love you Simon.

SIMON EXITS. RACHEL IS STILL. SHE LOOKS DOWN AT THE PAINTING.

THE LIGHTS FADE.

3. Afternoon.

The Studio.

A bare room. Around the walls, canvases covered by tarpaulins. Hazy orange sunlight breaks through the windows.

RICHARD sits at a desk, typing on a laptop computer. He stops. He writes in a notebook.

RACHEL appears at the door, a plate of sandwiches and glass of juice on a tray in her hand.

RACHEL: Thought you might like some lunch. No tomato. I remembered you like them in sauces but not sandwiches. Very strange.

RICHARD: That formidable memory again.

RACHEL: (PLACING THE SANDWICHES ON THE DESK.) And some freshly squeezed orange juice.

RICHARD: You're spoiling me.

RACHEL: Like an old married couple.

RICHARD TAKES A SANDWICH. RACHEL WALKS AROUND THE STUDIO.

RICHARD: Smoke's clearing.

RACHEL: Yes, it seems to be.

RICHARD: They've got the fires under control ?

RACHEL: I wouldn't know. Don't worry. I'm sure "Good ol Dan" we'll give us the latest update in graphic detail as soon as he returns. (SLIGHT PAUSE) I haven't been in here for so long.

RICHARD: I thought you and Simon painted in here.

RACHEL: Only when it rains, remember ?

RICHARD: And it doesn't.

RACHEL: (SHE SMILES) Mind if I...

RICHARD: Your house.

RACHEL: Don't want to disturb you.

RICHARD: You could never do that.

RACHEL: Oh Richard, this fantasy version you have of me in your head is absolutely delicious. Dreadfully unrealistic but delicious.

RACHEL WANDERS ACROSS STAGE. SHE STOPS NEAR THE TARPAULIN.

RACHEL: So what is it this time? "A slightly less desolate Autumn"?

RICHARD: Maybe I'll leave the title up to Dan.

RACHEL: Dan? A book?

RICHARD: No. I guess it's not his ...

RACHEL: That's the endearing thing about my husband. His roguish charm. Or is that roughish charm, ? You know what they say about still waters ?

RICHARD: They run deep.

RACHEL: No. They're stagnant.

RICHARD: Listen, last night ...

RACHEL: Yes.

RICHARD: If I said or did anything ... out of order. You know what I mean ?

RACHEL: There's no need to apologise.

PAUSE.

RICHARD: I had a dream last night.

RACHEL: I'm scared to ask.

RICHARD: About Simon.

RACHEL: Is that so?

RICHARD: Guess what he was doing?

RACHEL: Now I'm really scared.

RICHARD: Painting, under the Jacaranda Tree. He showed me how to make grey.

RACHEL: Not purple.

RICHARD: No, grey.

RACHEL: How ... sweet. (PAUSE.) You know Richard, I'm beginning to realise the mistake I made. All those years ago.

RICHARD: Don't.

RACHEL: Isn't this what you wanted to hear?

RICHARD: Not anymore. It's not fair to Dan.

RACHEL: Who cares about Dan? Butcher Boy Bill.

RICHARD: He's your husband.

RACHEL: Let me tell you about good old Dan. Everything he feels or felt, it hasn't disappeared. He's just pushed it down, bottled it up. It's still there - waiting - and one quiet Sunday afternoon he will finally explode and we'll be picking up pieces of good old Dan from all over his precious landscaped garden.

RICHARD: I thought that was your method.

RACHEL: No - I wallow. Submerge myself in it till I can't breathe.

RICHARD: And what about me?

RACHEL: You just do what you've always done.

RICHARD: Which is ?

RACHEL: Run away. (PAUSE) I didn't mean that. It's just reflex.

RICHARD: I wouldn't be too worried about good old Dan. It's good old Rachel that I'd be worried about. And the little secret that is slowly devouring her from the inside.

RACHEL: If only you knew. (BEAT) It might've been you at that Bus Stop, remember ?

RICHARD: Yes, but I wouldn't have known where you needed to go. (PAUSE) I'm sorry. I didn't mean to -

RACHEL: That's just it Richard. You never mean anything.

RICHARD: Except when I write. I mean everything when I write.

RACHEL: Better hurry up and finish your book then.

RICHARD: I just –

RACHEL: And that about sums you up Richard. You *just*. You *just* want to dredge up some sordid little past. You *just* want some needless little drama. You *just* want to gabble on with a lot of words that don't mean anything. You talk and talk but you never say the one thing you really want to say.

RICHARD: I didn't come here to take Dan's place.

RACHEL: Then why did you come ?

RICHARD: To see my son.

RACHEL: You don't know that.

RICHARD: Because you won't tell me. Or ... Let me see him.

RACHEL: It could be very confusing for Simon.

RICHARD: He has a right to know.

RACHEL: He's twelve years old.

RACHEL IS SUDDENLY WEAK. SHE SWAYS ON HER FEET.

**RICHARD GOES TO HER AND HOLDS HER. THEIR LIPS ARE VERY CLOSE.
RICHARD KISSES RACHEL.**

**AT FIRST RACHEL RESPONDS. BUT SLOWLY SHE GOES LIMP IN RICHARD'S
ARMS. RICHARD RELEASES HER. SHE MOVES AWAY.**

RICHARD: What did I ever do to make you love him instead of me?

RACHEL: You did the worse thing possible. You fell in love with me. (BEAT) I did love you.
I just loved him more.

RICHARD: Then why did you do it? If you were in love with Dan so much -

RACHEL: So it was my fault ?

RICHARD: You could've said "No", kicked me out, gone with Dan to Scotland. God knows he
wanted you to.

RACHEL: It was only one night.

RICHARD: To you.

RACHEL: I ...

RICHARD: Don't you dare stop now.

RACHEL: I knew how you felt about me.

RICHARD: I was in love with you.

RACHEL: I could see that. I could see the way you loved me. Total, selfless, all consuming.
More than Dan ever could. I couldn't just let that go. I had to ... experience it. I
thought maybe if I did I would start to feel the same way.

RICHARD: But you didn't ?

RACHEL: Not the way you wanted me to. I couldn't forget Dan. Boring, plain, bad-joke cracking Dan. I hated myself for it but no matter how hard I tried – he was still there. When he got back and I found out I was pregnant - I realised it might have been yours and I thought about not having it. But how could I not allow what might have been the product of the love you felt for me - that incredible blinding love - how could I not bring that into the world ? The wonder of a miraculous human being. This most magical child. (PAUSE) I remember when we first came here. Simon and I went walking in what would become our garden. Underneath our Jacaranda tree. The one I begged Dan to build the house around. The one I wanted to look out onto every morning when I woke up. We dragged our feet through the delicate purple flowers. You could hardly see the grass underneath they were so thick. It was like a fine Persian rug. Afterwards we found pine cones. We took them home and painted them silver. They sat on the mantelpiece all year. Our very own homemade Christmas.

RICHARD: I want to see Simon.

RACHEL: You can't.

RICHARD: I need to see my son.

RACHEL: You don't know that.

RICHARD: I have a right to be acknowledged.

RACHEL: He's my son. That's all I know.

RICHARD: Don't you feel anything ?

RACHEL: (COMPOSING HERSELF) No. Things just pass through me and disappear.

PAUSE.

RICHARD: What happened to you ?

RACHEL: Something I could have never imagined - not in the darkest corner of the blackest moment.

RICHARD HEADS FOR THE DOOR.

RACHEL: Running away - again. Back to your little fantasy life. Quick Richard run. Run ! (A DESPERATE CRY) Don't ...

BUT RICHARD HAS GONE.

RACHEL AGAIN GOES WEAK. SHE STUMBLES TO THE TABLE. HOLDING HERSELF UP. SHE TAKES LONG, DEEP BREATHS – RECOVERING.

SHE GOES TO THE TRAY AND REMOVES IT, REVEALING **SIMON'S** LANDSCAPE, HIDDEN UNDERNEATH. SHE PLACES IT ON THE FLOOR AND GOES TO THE TARPAULIN. SHE LIFTS IT UP. REVEALING MORE OF **SIMON'S** PAINTINGS.

SHE PILES THE PAINTINGS ONE ON TOP OF EACH OTHER AND THEN CARRIES THEM OVER AND PLACES THEM ON THE FLOOR NEXT TO THE FIRST PAINTING.

SHE KNEELS BEHIND THE FIRST PAINTING AND PULLS OUT THE KNIFE SHE USED EARLIER TO SHARPEN THE CHARCOAL.

RACHEL SLOWLY RAISES THE KNIFE ABOVE HER HEAD AND THEN BRINGS IT DOWN - STABBING IN TO THE PAINTING. SHE RIPS AT THE CANVAS, CUTTING INTO THE FABRIC - AS THE LIGHTS FADE.

4. Dusk.

The Living Room is in darkness. A fire smoulders in the fireplace. Smoke fills the air.

DAN enters. He sniffs and coughs. He turns on the light. We see the trail of smoke, coming from the fire place.

DAN races to the fireplace. He grabs the tongs and pulls something smouldering from the fire. He stamps it out. **DAN** is suddenly alarmed. He exits.

DAN returns holding **RACHEL**. He drags her limp body along side him, trying to get her to walk.

DAN: Come on Rach. Walk. Walk.

HE PLACES HER DOWN IN A CHAIR AND HOLDS UP A PILL BOTTLE IN HIS HAND. HE LOOKS AT IT.

HE EXITS IN TO THE KITCHEN AND RETURNS WITH A LARGE GLASS OF WATER. HE TRIES TO GET **RACHEL** TO DRINK IT.

DAN: Not today Rach.

RICHARD: (ENTERING) What's wrong?

DAN: Where have you been ?

RICHARD: For a walk.

DAN: Perfect timing.

RICHARD: (SEEING **RACHEL**) Shit – what is it?

DAN: What does it look like?

DAN EXITS. RICHARD LOOKS AT RACHEL, UNSURE WHAT TO DO. DAN RETURNS WITH A SMALL BLACK CASE.

DAN: Help me lie her on the floor.

RICHARD HESITATES.

DAN: Do it !

DAN PICKS UP RACHEL. RICHARD HELPS HIM AND THEY LIE RACHEL ON THE FLOOR.

RICHARD: Shouldn't we call an Ambulance?

DAN: Nearest hospital's two hours away.

DAN UNWRAPS THE CASE. HE TAKES OUT A NEEDLE. HE INJECTS IT INTO A VIAL AND FILLS THE SYRINGE WITH A CLEAR LIQUID.

RICHARD: Have you done this before ?

DAN DOESN'T ANSWER. HE PICKS UP RACHEL'S ARM AND FINDS A VEIN. HE INSERTS THE NEEDLE AND PLUNGES THE SYRINGE.

DAN: (WATCHING **RACHEL**) Come on, come on.

RACHEL BEGINS TO STIR.

DAN: Get her up.

RICHARD HELPS DAN GET RACHEL ON TO HER FEET. THEY START TO WALK HER UP AND DOWN AGAIN. RACHEL STILL DRAGS HER FEET.

DAN: Walk Rach, walk.

RACHEL DOESN'T RESPOND.

DAN: Sit her down.

THEY PLACE HER BACK IN THE CHAIR.

DAN: Hand me the water. (TO **RACHEL**) Not getting off that easy.

DAN SLAPS RACHEL'S FACE. RICHARD PASSES THE GLASS OF WATER TO DAN.

DAN: Open your mouth Rach. Open it or the next one will really sting.

DAN TRIES TO POUR SOME WATER INTO HER MOUTH. AGAIN RACHEL SPITS IT OUT.

DAN: (TO **RICHARD**) Get me a wooden spoon.

RICHARD LOOKS AT HIM.

DAN: You got any other ideas?

RICHARD EXITS INTO THE KITCHEN HE RETURNS WITH THE SPOON. DAN GRABS IT AND PUSHES THE END INTO RACHEL'S MOUTH.

DAN: Okay - now when I open her mouth, you pour the water down.

RICHARD: What?

DAN: Just do it.

DAN PULLS ON THE SPOON, OPENING RACHEL'S MOUTH.

DAN: Now. Now!

RICHARD POURS THE WATER INTO RACHEL'S MOUTH.

SUDDENLY RACHEL STARTS TO COUGH. SHE COLLAPSES ONTO THE FLOOR AND STARTS TO WRETCH VIOLENTLY.

DAN: That's a good girl. Throw 'em up. Throw 'em up.

RACHEL WRETCHES VIOLENTLY, WATER SPURTS FROM HER MOUTH.

DAN SCRAMBLES ON THE FLOOR.HE PICKS UP PILLS FROM THE WATER, GRABBING AS MANY AS HE CAN.

RACHEL: Bastard.

DAN: Just trying to save your life. You can thank me later. It's okay now. (TO **RICHARD**) Pick her up.

RICHARD AND DAN PICK RACHEL UP. THEY HEAD TOWARDS THE BEDROOM.

RACHEL: Fucking prick.

DAN: I love you too.

THEY EXIT AS THE LIGHTS FADE.

5. A short time later.

Living Room. **RICHARD** sits alone in a chair. The fireplace is untouched. The scorched object still lying on the floor in front of it.

RICHARD notices something on the floor. It is the handprints. He goes forward and kneels on the ground, looking at them. He traces a finger along **SIMON**'s handprint.

DAN: (ENTERING) She's sleeping.

RICHARD: (STANDING QUICKLY) Good. Is this a regular event?

DAN: We've had a few ... episodes. One involving a hairbrush was particularly messy. Why? Want to put it in your next book?

RICHARD: Maybe you could've warned me.

DAN: What do you want me to do?

RICHARD: You could apologise. If she'd died - how would I have felt?

DAN: Listen Richard, my wife just tried to kill herself for the umpteenth time - and this time she very nearly succeeded. I've got a little bit more on my mind at the moment than how you feel.

RICHARD: You only have to say one word.

PAUSE.

DAN: (LOOKING AT **RICHARD**) Sorry.

RICHARD: Apology accepted.

DAN: But if you had half a brain you would've seen there was something up from the moment you got here.

RICHARD: You still could've told me. Then I would've known not to leave her by herself.

PAUSE.

DAN: I heard the fires were coming our way so I thought I better head home. Lucky I did.

RICHARD: How far away are they?

DAN: Five ks. Maybe less.

DAN GOES TO THE FIRE. HE PICKS UP THE CHARRED OBJECT WITH THE TONGS. IT IS THE REMAINS OF SIMON'S PAINTING.

DAN: (HOLDING PAINTING UP) Look familiar?

RICHARD: Simon's painting ? But why would she...?

DAN: The pills we've had before. But this is brand new.

RICHARD: Just goes to show. People don't always do what's best for them.

DAN: What the fuck does that mean?

RICHARD: Rachel, ending up with you.

DAN: And she would have been better off with you ?

RICHARD: At least she would've known where she stood. You just never seemed to show anything.

DAN: So you loved her more than me ? Because of all the late night phone calls and sappy poetry. I might've loved her with a little less drama but it doesn't make what I feel any less. In fact it probably makes it stronger. I don't need an audience.

RICHARD: Audience?

DAN: Come off it Richard. You wore it on your sleeve everyday of your life. "I love Rachel but she loves Dan." You used to follow her around like a stray dog. Half the fucking campus used to joke about it. Practically used to drool over her. Must've been in love with her for years. And now you've come back- to claim what is rightfully yours. (POINTING TO BEDROOM) Well there she is. Take her.

RICHARD DOES NOT MOVE.

DAN: Now enough of your crap - I've got a few questions for you.

RICHARD: You should -

DAN: Shut the fuck up and listen. This morning Rachel gets up like she's just won the lottery. Few hours later I come home to a fairly determined and animated suicide attempt. And in the process she burns Simon's painting, which until then has been her most sacred possession. And I might point out - mine as well. So Richard old buddy, what the fuck are you up to ?

RICHARD: She's your wife.

- DAN: You're still pissed off aren't you? Still bitter and twisted after all these years. That she rejected you.
- RICHARD: She didn't reject me. Because I didn't try anything.
- DAN: Don't bullshit a bullshitter Richard. Makes you look stupid. I know what happened. Your fevered night of passion.
- RICHARD: You knew?
- DAN: Didn't have to be Einstein. I came back from Scotland and she was all over me. Guilt is a very strong aphrodisiac. And guess what? Richard had disappeared.
- RICHARD: So now it's my turn to apologise.
- DAN: Why? Christ you'd waited long enough. Probably deserved a sympathy root for persistence.
- RICHARD: If you knew then why did you ask me to stay ?
- DAN: Because I thought you being around might help wake her up. And for the same reason as I wanted you to stay back then. Because you were my best friend. And because I believed Rachel loved me.
- RICHARD: And now?
- DAN: Now I don't believe anything. Full stop.
- RICHARD: But if you know that Rachel and I were together then you must know that Simon...?
- DAN: Well - he certainly ain't mine. (PAUSE) I knew he wasn't mine right from the first moment. You always know your own flesh and blood. Then about a year later – I got the confirmation. You think I only wanted one child ? I wanted a whole tribe. We tried like hell for the next year to have another. No luck. So one day - I went to the Doctor. Guess what? My sperm is barren. Good ol' Dan's shooting blanks. But Rachel still wouldn't admit it. Said it must've been the water or something. Shit - she even made up some crap about radiation levels from the old power plant. So the only son I was ever going to raise wasn't even mine.
- RICHARD: I'm sorry.
- DAN: Are you, really ? I wouldn't be. (HE LOOKS AT **RICHARD**) What's wrong old buddy? Things not working out the way you planned ? How about a nice relaxing trip ? Clear your head. I know a nice little spot in the Highlands. And don't worry I'll mind your wife for you while your gone. Nothing's going to happen.
- RICHARD: You mustn't worry. Rachel doesn't want me. She loves you.

DAN: Worry ? About that thing in there? That doesn't love. That doesn't feel anything. It's like some block of ice. Pitch black. Frozen solid. The real trick is to accept that. The ice age is never going to end. Rachel is gone. Move on.

RICHARD: How can I move on ... from this...?

DAN: Then stay here with Rachel. You two can freeze together for all of eternity.

RICHARD: I wouldn't want to deprive you.

DAN: Did you ever think that the person who betrayed me all those years ago wasn't Rachel ? It was you.

RICHARD: You brought her home. Not me.

DAN: You were my fucking brother. My best friend.

RICHARD: I loved her.

DAN: More than me? We'd been together since we were seven.

RICHARD: More than anything. I still do.

DAN: Then you're a braver man than me.

RACHEL: (OFF SINGING) Speed bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing,
Onward, the sailors cry

DAN: (TO RICHARD) Sit tight old buddy. The best is yet to come.

RACHEL APPEARS UPSTAGE. HER BARE FEET ARE DUSTY

RACHEL: (ENTERING) Carry the lad that's born to be king
Over the sea to Skye

Loud the winds howl, loud the waves roar,
Thunder clouds rend the air;
Baffled our foe's stand on the shore
Follow they will not dare

DAN: (OVER SINGING) You should take a good look at that tree out the back sometime. About two thirds of the way up. On the left. You have to look carefully. Moss. Dust. If you didn't know what happened- you'd think everything was just -

RICHARD: What are you talking about ?

RACHEL: Though the waves leap, soft shall ye sleep
Ocean's a royal bed
Rocked in the deep, Mother will keep
Watch by your weary head

DAN: Look Richard. It's Rachel. You remember her.

RACHEL: I've been in the garden. I was standing on the lawn, just near the tree. Spring. You can actually feel it in the air. Smell it, taste it. There's a bit of a breeze and the wind is tossing the jacaranda flowers up towards the clouds. So beautiful. The flowers. So fragile and delicate.

SHE OPENS HER HANDS TO REVEAL IT IS FULL OF DEAD JACARANDA FLOWER HUSKS. SHE LETS THEM SLIP TO THE GROUND.

RACHEL: They live for such a short time. One day they're alive on the trees. Full of colour. The next they're little brown husks lying in the corner. Needing to be swept away.

DAN: Come love. I'll put you back to bed.

RACHEL: (SUDDENLY ALARMED) No ! Mustn't sleep.

DAN: Then you can just sit here with us. With me and Richard.

RACHEL: (SEEING **RICHARD**) Oh, hello Richard.

DAN: We'll all just sit quietly. Together.

DAN EASES RACHEL DOWN ON TO THE FLOOR. RICHARD LOOKS AWAY.

DAN: Oh come on Rich. Open your eyes. This was always going to get ugly. Don't pretend you didn't know that.

RICHARD: (TO **DAN**) Where are the keys ? I'll get the car.

RACHEL: (ALARMED AGAIN) No! No car! Won't make it. Not enough time.

DAN: (TO **RACHEL**) Okay. No car. We'll all just sit here. Nice and quiet.

RACHEL SITS ON THE FLOOR, STROKING HER HAIR.

DAN: (TO **RICHARD**) Where do you want to go ?

RICHARD: The hospital.

DAN: What for ?

RICHARD: Well fuck, I don't know. Take her somewhere. She needs help.

DAN: Mate, how do you help this ?

RACHEL: (SUDDEN, LOUD) Crack, crack, piercing crack.

DAN: (SOOTHING **RACHEL**) It's okay Rach. I'm here.

RACHEL: The sound - in my dreams.

DAN: You're awake now. Dreams can't hurt you.

RACHEL: Rattling every bone in my body.

DAN: (TO **RACHEL**) Sssh. It's okay. It's okay. Don't talk about that now.

RICHARD: Let her talk.

RACHEL: In the kitchen, banana bread - loved that, his favourite. Then the crack. Piercing. Crack. Car brakes ? Gun shot ? No. Moment of clarity. I knew. I knew !

DAN: (TO **RACHEL**) Quiet now.

RICHARD: Dan, please.

RACHEL: Baking tray – crash. Door, scratching, door. Can't open door. Forget, open door. Then out – garden. Spring. The wind. Soft, so beautiful. Jacaranda fused with pine. Running, corner, running. Sage bush, flowers, branch. Broken, raw. And then ...

DAN: No more.

RACHEL: Feet. Feet behind rock. Rock, something on the rock. Dark, burgundy. Frozen. Blood, blood from his head. Still. Silent. His hair, so soft. Scream, scream – scream ! (SILENCE.) All quiet now. Gone. No ... more. A boy fades away.

A SHARP INTAKE OF BREATH AS IF ALL THE AIR IN **RICHARD'S** BODY HAS SUDDENLY BEEN SUCKED OUT.

HE STAGGERS ACROSS THE ROOM BEFORE SUDDENLY HIS KNEES COLLAPSE AND HE FALLS TO THE GROUND.

DAN: She wanted me to cut it down – afterwards. Decapitate it. And then what? Then we have a bloody stump in the middle of our garden. You think that wouldn't be even worse. Why should it be destroyed? It's stood for over 200 years on that spot - long before we arrived. We were the intruders. So in the end I decided to leave it. The rest of the branch had to be removed. A laidback tree surgeon called Tim came out one day and cut it off. A nice clean incision. The tree bled for awhile - did you know that ? Tree's bleed ? Well they do. Like time. Like us. So in a way it suffered as well. Then the wound healed and the blood dried. The tree lived on. It's strange but in the end all that remains of him is that tree, so it's probably good we didn't cut

DAN: (CONT) it down. It's the only thing she has left. (PAUSE) We're very adaptable – us humans. You end up in a situation that you would never have believed possible - not in your wildest dreams – and at first it seems unbearable. But you stick it out and one day passes and then another and another ... And one morning you wake up and what once would've seemed the strangest thing imaginable, now seems almost ... normal.

RACHEL: (SUDDENLY) Make the call Dan. Make the call.

DAN: No, not that. Not that.

RACHEL: Make the call Dan ! Dan, make the call.

DAN: Not up for that one today.

RACHEL: (STRIKING DAN) Dan ! Make the call !

DAN HOLDS HER HANDS.

RICHARD: What is she talking about ?

DAN: You'll love this. The icing on the cake. The coup de grace. Before it happened I often looked at the tree and wondered if it was okay - if any of the branches needed to come off. I even toyed with the idea of giving Tim a call. Getting him to come out and take a look.

RACHEL: (SOFTLY) Make the call.

DAN: But I just kept putting it off - as you do. As it turned out that was a call I probably needed to make. (BEAT) Don't worry. I haven't gone easy on myself matey. No fear. I've flogged myself good and hard, every morning and every night. He was my boy. But one day you can't blame yourself anymore. You just get too tired. So you stop. You don't forgive yourself - you just try not to remember. You ram it down and move on.

RICHARD: (WATCHING RACHEL) There is no truth. Only memory.

SIMON ENTERS, CARRYING PURPLE JACARANDA FLOWERS CUPPED IN HIS HANDS.

RACHEL: (BRIGHTENING) There he is – my boy. My beautiful boy. (TO SIMON) Come, sit here with us. Let me look at my flowers.

SIMON GOES TOWARD RACHEL. HE SITS ON THE FLOOR BEHIND RACHEL AND STARTS PUTTING THE FLOWERS IN HER HAIR. SIMON LAUGHS AND SMILES.

AN ORANGE LIGHT BEGINS TO GLOW UPSTAGE.

SIMON: You look so beautiful mum.

RACHEL: Beautiful magical flowers from a beautiful magical boy. (SHE KISSES HIM, ON BOTH CHEEKS) My sun. My air.

DAN: There he is. There's your son. Take a good look. He's giving his mother Jacaranda flowers. Of course if you want to see the real thing we'll have to drive over to the other side of town and visit the local cemetery. Rachel doesn't stop by there too often as you might understand. Spoils the illusion.

RACHEL: (SINGS) Speed bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing,
Onward, the sailors cry
Carry the lad that's born to be king
Over the sea to Skye

DAN LOOKS AT RACHEL, SMILING AT SIMON.

DAN: Why would you destroy the landscape? The one precious thing we had left of our son ?

RACHEL SPEAKS TO DAN, BRIGHTLY.

RACHEL: (STROKING SIMON'S HAIR) When I woke up this morning - I had a plan. Fresh start. Destroy the remains. Turn the page. Start with the paintings. Neat little pile, cut them up. Then put them in the fire. Turn the page.

THE ORANGE LIGHT GROWS BRIGHTER. THERE IS THE FAINT SOUND OF WOOD CRACKLING IN FIRE.

DAN: That painting didn't only belong to you.

FLAKES OF GREY ASH HAVE BEGUN TO FLOAT ON TO THE STAGE.

RICHARD: (CATCHING SOME IN HIS HAND) Ash ...

THERE IS THE SOUND OF A BRANCH BREAKING OFF.

RICHARD: (LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW) Shit - it's the tree. She's ...

RACHEL: The tree that I loved to see him climb so much. That tree had a terrible beauty. A terrible beauty born of an angry land. It takes its revenge wherever it can.

DAN: (A SCREAM) It was an accident !

RACHEL: (SEARING) Things like that don't happen by accident ! (SHE TURNS TO SIMON.) But then he came to me – my beautiful boy with his magical smile and I knew. I knew I could never, ever let him go.
(SINGING TO SIMON) Burned are our homes, exile and death

RACHEL: (CONT) Scatter the loyal men
 Yet, e'er the sword cool in the sheath,
 Our sons will come back again.
 (SHE LOOKS UP, A SMILE) The last verse. I remembered the words.

RICHARD GOES TO DAN. DAN IS WATCHING RACHEL, FASCINATED.

RICHARD: Dan – where are the car keys ? We've got to get out here.

SOUND OF THE ROOF BURNING ABOVE. THE ORANGE LIGHT GROWS
 BRIGHTER STILL.

RICHARD: Listen to me ! We have to go. The roof ...

DAN: (VERY CALM) No Rich. No.

RICHARD: Dan !

DAN: Richard – take the car and go.

**RICHARD LOOKS AT DAN. A MOMENT OF DECISION. RICHARD BACKS
 AWAY SLOWLY AND EXITS. DAN WATCHES HIM GO.**

**SIMON STANDS. HE WALKS AWAY FROM RACHEL AND DAN, FURTHER
 INTO THE HOUSE. RACHEL WATCHES IN HORROR.**

RACHEL: No!

**SIMON TURNS AND HOLDS OUT HIS HAND TOWARDS RACHEL. RACHEL
 RAISES HER ARM TOWARDS SIMON. DAN FOLLOWS RACHEL'S GAZE.**

RACHEL: Come Dan. Simon needs us.

RACHEL STARTS TO EDGE TOWARDS SIMON. DAN GRABS HER.

DAN: And what about what I need ? I need my wife back. My wonderful, smiling,
 laughing wife - who I married, who I love, who gave birth to our son. She's been
 gone two years. I need Simon to let her go now. I need you to help me. We
 survived through all this. How can I bring you back?

RACHEL STRETCHES OUT HER ARMS TOWARDS SIMON.

RACHEL: Look Dan, see our son.

DAN LOOKS BACK TOWARDS SIMON.

THE STAGE IS NOW ENGULFED IN GLOWING ORANGE LIGHT. THE SOUND OF
 THE FIRE IS DEAFENING.

SUDDENLY THE SOUND IS CUT OFF. SILENCE.

DAN: (AS IF SEEING HIM) Simon ...

RACHEL: Come fire. Free ...

BLACKOUT.

END PLAY.