

The Son

Written by [Florian Zeller](#)

Translated by [Christopher Hampton](#)

Scene 1

The Doctor *stands facing the audience.*

Doctor So, you're not well? Your father wasn't well also. He couldn't manage?

Your headmaster said you hadn't been to school for more than three months... For three months you pretended... Every morning.

You set off every morning with your bag and everything you needed for the day, but you didn't go there?

Pause

You hardly ever answer when I ask you a question. You behave as if I don't exist You do that a lot...

Is that fair? Do you just make people disappear?

This seemed to be going on since your Mother left you and your father ...?

Since she moved in with her new boyfriend ...

She took your baby brother with her

Did you feel she wanted to abandon you?

Is that it?

And now you deny your father exists to protect yourself ...

Is that how you felt?

Pause. Blackout.

Scene 2

Mother's house. Nicolas is sitting on the sofa. He's biting his nails. Mother is standing in front of him.

Mother I wanted to talk to you, Nicolas...

Pause.

Are you listening to me?

Nicolas Yes.

Mother I know you're having a difficult time and things aren't easy for you... I also know you're angry with me... But we have to talk. Both of us.

Mother *sits down. Pause.*

Your father told me that you haven't been going to school.

Nicolas *shrugs his shoulders.*

What's going on?

Nicolas Nothing.

Mother Don't say 'nothing'. Explain it to me.

Pause.

Nicolas? Why have you stopped going to school?

Nicolas I don't know.

Mother You don't know?

Nicolas No.

Mother There must be a reason?

Nicolas *shrugs his shoulders.*

You can't decide to stop going to school, just like that. It's not an option. Do you hear what I'm saying?

Nicolas Yes.

Pause.

Mother Are you having problems?

Nicolas *sighs.*

What? Why are you sighing?

Nicolas No reason.

Mother Nicolas, I can't help you if you won't tell me anything. And stop biting your nails like that!

Pause.

I've spoken to your father. He tells me you don't sleep at night. That you pace up and down in your room... That you... What is it you're up to?

Nicolas Nothing.

Pause.

Mother And school... I mean... What are you going to do? Are you going to repeat a year? Is that your plan?

Nicolas I really couldn't give a shit.

Mother Terrific! Great attitude...

Pause.

What were you doing? All those days... Where did you go?

Nicolas I walked.

Mother You walked?

Nicolas Yes.

Mother On your own?

Nicolas Yes.

Mother You walked on your own in the street?

Nicolas Or in the park.

Mother But why?

Nicolas *shrugs his shoulders.*

Come on, Nicolas! Do you understand what's going on? Do you honestly believe that this is acceptable? Because you needed to stretch your legs? And in your exam year, as well... Doesn't make any sense!

Pause.

It didn't occur to you that eventually your school would get in touch with us?

Nicolas I wasn't feeling well. Walking was the only thing that relaxed me.

Mother Why weren't you feeling well?

He doesn't answer.

All right, let's say you weren't feeling well! But that's no reason to just give up... In life, you have to struggle.

Nicolas I don't want to struggle any more.

Mother But why? What's the matter with you?

Pause.

Nicolas... Talk to me.

Pause. Nicolas starts biting his nails again.

I don't understand. A couple of years ago, you always had this big smile on your face. And then all of a sudden... What happened to you?

Pause.

Your father's at the end of his patience, you know that? He tells me you're making his life a living hell. That you haven't been behaving well towards him. Is that true?

Pause.

He wants to send you to boarding school. Did you know that? Is that what you want?

Nicolas No.

Mother So?

Nicolas *shrugs his shoulders. All the same, it's clear that the mention of boarding school has unsettled him.*

You have to do something, Nicolas. You can't just let things go like this...

Nicolas I can't manage it.

Mother What makes you say that?

Pause.

(More gently.) Has something happened at school? I mean...

Nicolas No.

Mother Or outside of school?... We can talk to one another, you know.

Nicolas It's not that. It's...

Mother Yes?

Nicolas I don't know how to describe it.

Mother Tell me in your own words.

Nicolas *(sincerely)* It's life, it's weighing me down.

Brief pause. Mother seems moved by this unexpected confidence.

Mother But why? What is it about your life that isn't working?

Nicolas I don't know.

Pause.

I've been telling myself that... maybe...

Mother Go on.

Nicolas No. Nothing. Forget it.

Mother No, tell me...

Nicolas *is hesitating.*

Nicolas, tell me.

Nicolas I'd like to live with you – permanently.

Mother (*caught offguard*) You... You mean...

Nicolas I can't go on living there with him. I want to stay here ... with you.

Mother Yes, but...

Nicolas Me and Dad aren't getting on. He can't put up with me any more... He's at the end of his tether, I know he is. And when I'm with him, I get too many black ideas. It's too difficult. I promise you. And I know it's just going to get worse and worse. I feel it. Also, I'd like to live with my little brother...

Mother (*embarrassed*) Yes.

Nicolas If you send me to boarding school, I'll go crazy.

Mother Of course you won't.

Nicolas Yes, I will, I promise you. My head feels like it's exploding.

Mother Come on, come here.

Mother *takes him in her arms.*

Nicolas Sometimes I feel as if I am going crazy, mum.

Mother *hugs him closer.*

Mother What are you talking about?

Nicolas I'm telling you. I don't understand what's happening to me.

Mother Come on...

Nicolas I don't understand.

Nicolas *weeps.* **Mother** *is unsettled.*

Mother Don't worry. We'll get out of this. Mm? Don't worry. We'll find a solution. Come on... Trust me.

She comforts him. Nicolas is like a small child.

Blackout

*Spotlight up on **Doctor***

Doctor It's my job to find out what's going on in your head

To find out why you feel they abandoned you

They say you frighten them

They also say you were such a sweet child. So wonderful. So sensitive.

I wonder what's happened...

In the distance, the baby starts crying.

Scene 3

*Mother's flat. Tense silence between **Boyfriend** and **Mother**. It stretches out.*

Mother Why are you taking it like this?

Boyfriend Taking it like what?

Pause.

Mother I can't just abandon him.

Boyfriend Why are you talking about abandoning him? He's just telling you these things to make you feel guilty.

Mother That's got nothing to do with it. Please...He's going through a difficult phase. That's a fact.

Pause.

He can stay in my office. I'll put a bed in there. Just temporary.

Boyfriend And what about school?

Mother We'll work something out. There must be a school which would take him in mid-year. Don't you think?

Boyfriend I'm sure.

Mother You've only known him for two years and I can see that... I mean, I know you have a negative impression of him... After everything that happened... But he hasn't always been like this. When he was younger...He was so...

Pause.

There were marks on his forearm.

Boyfriend What?

Mother When I went to see him, I saw he had, I don't know, marks.

Boyfriend What kind of marks?

Mother Little scars all up his arm... As if he'd... Well, you know what I mean... It upset me so much. My little boy... I'd do anything for him, anything. And today, there he was, in front of me, suffering... And what am I doing for him? I mean, you only do that kind of thing when you're suffering, right?

Boyfriend makes an affectionate gesture.

Boyfriend Come on...

Mother And it's true, you're right, I'm feeling guilty. I know it started when... I can't pretend I'm not responsible for the situation. I left

Boyfriend I don't see the connection.

Mother shrugs her shoulders.

It's not your fault if he isn't well.

Mother I don't know.

Boyfriend It's nothing to do with...

He prefers not to complete the sentence.

It's nothing to do with it!

Mother You know, I made him cry. When I told him I was leaving his father, I made him cry. It's not an image I can easily forget.

Boyfriend I understand. But you're not the first woman to... This has nothing to do with what's going on today. Believe me. It's a difficult time for him. Simple as that.

Mother Anyway, there's nothing else I can do. I can't just give up on him.

Boyfriend I understand. Don't worry.

She smiles at him, as if to thank him.

Mother I don't want to be that kind of woman. That kind of Mother.

Pause.

Boyfriend What about us?

Mother What?

Boyfriend What about us? Our life?... Sacha.

Mother It won't make any difference to Sacha. We'll look after him exactly the same way.

Boyfriend You think so?

Mother Of course... Trust me. It's not going to change anything in our lives. I promise you.

She smiles. She'd like to believe it.

Everything'll be fine. You'll see, darling. Everything'll be fine.

*But, like a mental image, **Nicolas** comes slowly into the room. He approaches a chest of drawers or a cupboard, then, with a violent gesture, tips all its contents on to the floor, as well as everything he sees in front of him – as if he wanted to wreck the place completely. **Boyfriend** stands, appalled, in front of the destroyed flat. As for **Mother**, she doesn't seem to notice – she stares forwards.*

Blackout.

Scene 4

Doctor You said the whole problem started with your father? Did it?

That you prefer living somewhere else... It's like he doesn't exist anymore – when he phoned, you didn't even pick up. It's as if he didn't exist. As if... as if he's wiped out of your life.

Why has everything turned around like this...? That's what I am trying to understand... to help you with....

They loved you so much If you knew how much they loved you...

Scene 5

*The flat. The things are still all over the floor, books, a lamp, a piece of furniture, etc. But everyone behaves as if everything is normal. Morning. **Nicolas** is sitting on the sofa. He's staring into space. Suddenly, **Mother** comes in. She starts, seeing **Nicolas**.*

Mother Did you sleep well?

*She kisses **Nicolas**'s hair.*

And there's your father telling me you never get up before noon...

Pause.

All right? I didn't expect you to be up so early...

Nicolas I woke up and then I couldn't get back to sleep.

Mother Always takes a bit of time getting used to a new place, haven't you noticed?

Nicolas shrugs his shoulders.

Sacha didn't wake you, did he?

Nicolas No.

Mother He cried a lot last night... You didn't hear him?

Nicolas No.

Mother Good.

She makes a coffee.

You want anything? A coffee?

Nicolas shakes his head.

You don't have anything in the morning?

Nicolas Why was he crying?

Mother Your brother? He doesn't sleep through yet. He was hungry, that's all.

Pause. Nicolas bites his nails. Mother notices.

You were the same, you weren't a great sleeper. I mean, when you were a baby...

Mother notices that Nicolas is elsewhere.

Are you listening to me?

Nicolas Mm?

Mother What's the matter?

Nicolas No, it's just... I was thinking about... about the set-up. And I... I mean, I'm not sure...

Mother What?

Nicolas seems reluctant to answer.

What are you not sure about?

Why are you worrying like this? It'll be fine.

Nicolas I don't know.

Mother You asked me if you could come and live here. I agreed, and that's fine, but it won't work unless you make an effort. Understand? We can't go on like this indefinitely... Going round in circles. Hanging about. Things have to change. And stop biting your nails, you're going to make them bleed!

Pause. Mother pulls herself together. She comes and sits next to Nicolas.

(More gently.) You've been depressed. It can happen to anyone. That they end up on their knees... Understand what I'm saying? To anyone. And now, it's time to stand up again.

Nicolas Yes.

Mother I want this to be a new start. I want to see you smile again... the way you used to.

Pause.

You're an extraordinary boy. With a bit of work, you'll have no difficulty catching up at your new school ... I have confidence in you. I'm sure one day you'll look back on this whole period... And you'll say...

Mother appears to hesitate.

Nicolas What?

Mother You'll even have forgotten the reasons you weren't well.

Nicolas I don't know.

Mother You will! Trust me... We've all been through this. We've all had difficult moments. You just have to accept it.

***Nicolas** stands up. He looks upset. He heads towards his room.*

Mother You don't want anything for breakfast?

Nicolas No.

Mother Where are you going?

Nicolas Back to bed.

***Mother** sighs. **Nicolas** heads for his room. Just before he leaves, he turns back to his Mother. Brief pause.*

Mum?

Mother Yes?

Nicolas Thanks for everything you're doing for me.

***Mother** is surprised by the sincerity of this remark. She smiles at him. **Nicolas** has a go at a smile. He goes out. Blackout.*

Scene 6

***Mother's** flat. Morning. The things are still all over the floor and, in the same way, everyone behaves as if this chaos didn't exist. **Boyfriend** is preparing breakfast. He moves towards the door to **Nicolas's** room.*

Boyfriend Nicolas? Are you ready? It's time to go.

A buzzer goes off in the kitchen. He hurries to deal with it.

*(On his way.)*Nicolas? Do you hear me?

He disappears into the kitchen for a minute.

(Offstage.) I've made your coffee. You just about have time to drink it.

He comes back into the room.

Nicolas?

*He crosses the room and knocks on **Nicolas's** door.*

Nicolas? You're going to be late.

Pause.

Nicolas, I must have called you at least ten times. We can't do this every morning... Do you hear me?

Pause.

Nicolas, I'm speaking to you! Open the door...

Pause.

It's time. You can't be late every day... You were yesterday... Do you hear me?

The door suddenly opens.

Why don't you answer me?

Nicolas I do answer you.

Boyfriend It's time. You have to go.

Nicolas I know.

Boyfriend Come on. I made you a coffee. Sit down. You have just enough time.

Boyfriend goes into the kitchen to fetch the coffee. Nicolas sits down.

Nicolas buries his face in his hands.

Nicolas Where's my Mother?

Boyfriend (offstage) She's already left. She had a very early meeting this morning.

He comes back with a coffee.

Here's your coffee. Do you want anything else?

Boyfriend notices **Nicolas** has his head in his hands.

What's the matter?

*He doesn't answer. **Boyfriend** goes to him.*

Nicolas? What's the matter with you?

Nicolas Nothing.

Boyfriend Is... Are you in pain?

He doesn't answer. You might think he was crying, but you can't see his face.

Nicolas, what's going on? Tell me.

Nicolas I don't know.

Boyfriend Are you unhappy?

He doesn't deny it.

Why are you unhappy?

Nicolas I don't know.

Boyfriend You don't know?

Nicolas No.

Boyfriend Do you often start crying like this for no reason?

He doesn't answer.

Nicolas? Does this often happen?

Nicolas I'm not crying.

Brief pause. Boyfriend is confused. He doesn't know what to do.

Boyfriend What's the matter?

Nicolas I can't seem to understand the point of it!

Boyfriend Of what?

Nicolas Anything... Life...

Boyfriend The point of life?

He seems confused.

Sometimes, you have to decide not to ask yourself that question. Don't you think? You have to be content with moving forward... And not brood about things too much.

He puts an arm around his shoulders, as if to console him.

You're all right here, aren't you? In your new room? You wanted to live here. And see, we organised everything to make it possible. That ought to make you feel better... Doesn't it? Look how fond your Mother is of you. She never stops talking about you. Mm? Come on... You have to be brave.

Nicolas Yes.

Boyfriend And there's your brother as well... He's only little now, but soon you'll be able to teach him stuff and play with him... Mm? You're important to him. Come on...

Nicolas Yes. Sorry. I'm really sorry. I don't know what came over me.

Boyfriend Don't apologise, it can happen to anyone...

Nicolas dries his tears and takes his coffee.

Better?

Nicolas Yes. Thanks.

Boyfriend Come on...

Nicolas Yes. I have to go.

He stands and picks up his bag.

Can I ask you a question?

Boyfriend Of course.

Nicolas When you met my Mother... Did you know she was married?

Boyfriend Mm? I...

Nicolas Did you?

Boyfriend Yes.

Pause.

But she told me straight away that...

Nicolas That what?

Boyfriend Perhaps it's better if you talk to her about this, don't you think?

Nicolas And it didn't put you off?

Boyfriend Sorry?

Nicolas When you met her, the fact you knew that she was married and already had a son, it didn't put you off?

Boyfriend I... What do you want me to say, Nicolas?

Nicolas Nothing, you're right. I don't know why I'm asking you this kind of question... It's stupid.

Boyfriend No, it's not stupid. It's just...

Nicolas Anyway, I have to go. See you later.

*He takes his bag and is gone in a flash. **Boyfriend** finds himself alone, disconcerted by the unpredictability of his changes of mood.*

Boyfriend See you later.

Pause. Blackout.

Scene 7

Doctor I'm trying to understand where this sadness comes from... It's as if...

Now I know a teenager doesn't usually radiate happiness ...

Do you find love disappointing? Nicolas – love ?

Did you like living with your little brother...? Did it bring you all closer together ...?

Nicolas?

Your parents feel like they have failed That's how they are feeling ...

Are they right to think that?

They both talk about a photo - when you were nine. Your father says it is from a safari in Africa... Remember?

A beautiful family - It was taken at dawn... lion cubs suckling from their mother... Do you remember?

And I notice ... In the photo, your face is so open... smiling ...

I haven't seen you smile Nicolas ...

When did you last smile?

Blackout.

Scene 8

Mother's flat. Evening. The things are still all over the floor and, once again, everyone behaves as if this chaos didn't exist. **Mother** opens a bottle of wine and pours out two glasses. **Boyfriend** appears. He looks tired.

Mother Here.

She hands him a glass.

Boyfriend Thanks. That's nice. I'm exhausted.

Mother Had a good day?

Boyfriend Nothing special.

Nicolas appears in his doorway.

Nicolas Mum? Can I talk to you for a minute?

Mother Yes, of course.

Nicolas senses he's interrupted them.

Nicolas But I'm disturbing you, aren't I?

Mother No, no, not at all. Tell me.

Nicolas It's nothing urgent. I just wanted to ask your advice. It can wait... I don't want to interrupt. Will you come and see me afterwards?

Mother Right. I'll join you.

Nicolas Great. Thanks.

He goes back into his room.

Mother Anyway, he looks better. Don't you think? He told me he'd got a very good mark today in philosophy. I think he's starting to regain his self-confidence... I'm so pleased about it... And if I understand correctly, he's been invited out one evening next week...

Boyfriend Has he? That's good.

Mother Yes. Because he needs to see some people. It worries me that he's on his own all the time...

Pause.

Mother There's something else I wanted to talk to you about... The week we planned to spend in Italy...Beginning of May.

Boyfriend You want to cancel it?

Mother I don't want to cancel it. But I'm thinking...Might not be the best moment.

Boyfriend says nothing.

Not only because of my work... Obviously, I hadn't anticipated things would pile up like this... But I was really thinking about Nicolas.

Pause.

I know it's important for you... To be able to spend a bit of time together... We all need a rest... But, how to put this? He's only just started back at school... And I'm not sure we should be leaving him here on his own.

Boyfriend Why shouldn't he come with us?

Mother I thought about that, but I'm not sure it's a good idea. He skipped school for months, I don't think I ought to suggest taking him off to the sun when he should be at school...

Pause.

I know you're disappointed, but I don't think we have a choice.

Boyfriend I understand.

Mother He needs people around him, you know. It's a decisive moment. That's what I feel and I don't want to leave him just when he's...

Boyfriend (interrupting him) I said I understand. Let's cancel our trip. It's not at all important. We'll go another time.

Mother Are you sure?

Boyfriend Yes.

She takes his hand.

Mother Or else... I don't know... You could go without me...

Boyfriend I hadn't actually imagined things turning out like this.

Mother Like what?

Pause.

I promise, as soon as Nicolas settles down... we'll go somewhere. We'll go out more often.

Boyfriend I know, it's just a 'passing phase'.

Mother Why are you saying that?

Boyfriend No reason, sorry. I'm tired. And when I'm tired, I... Don't listen to what I'm saying.

Mother I'm going to see Nicolas. I'll be back soon. All right?

*She crosses the room and knocks on **Nicolas's** door.*

Nicolas?

*Goes into **Nicolas's** room. Boyfriend is on his own. Music, which might be 'Lorsque vous n'aurez rien à faire' from Massenet's Chérubin. Pause. He slowly finishes the glass of wine. Then starts to pick up, one by one, the things that have been lying on the floor since **Nicolas's** apparition. But he does it slowly, with an almost resigned languor, to the rhythm of the melancholy music. This may last some time, a kind of visual response to **Nicolas's** first imagined apparition in Scene Three. And little by little, the flat resumes its original appearance. Blackout.*

Scene 9

*It's a Sunday, but **Mother** is working. The flat is back to its original appearance.*

Boyfriend Can I talk to you for a minute?

Mother Mm?

Boyfriend I know you're working, but... this is important.

Brief pause.

Just now, I... Well, I was just tidying Nicolas's things. I was just doing his room and... Not sure how to put this... I –

Mother Tell me.

Boyfriend I found a knife.

Mother What?

Boyfriend Just a kitchen knife... All the same.

Mother In his room?

Boyfriend Yes.

Mother What's all this about?

Boyfriend It was hidden under his mattress. I took it away, obviously. But I was thinking you ought to speak to him about it...

Mother *exhales and puts down the file.*

I'm sorry. I thought I'd better tell you.

Mother Why did he take a knife?

Boyfriend I don't know.

Mother You think he's...

Indicates his forearms.

I don't understand. Why does he do that? I thought he ...He seems to be doing well, doesn't he?

Boyfriend *shrugs shoulders.*

Don't you think?

Boyfriend I don't know.

Mother He's going to school, he's smiling, he's... he's better.

Boyfriend He's bound to still be a bit fragile... We mustn't over-dramatise. And you're right, he's better, thanks to everything you're doing for him.

Mother *doesn't know what to think about this.*

Mother Do you think so?

Nicolas *appears in his bedroom door.*

Ah. Nicolas...

I wanted a word with you before I get back to it...

Nicolas Now?

Mother Yes.

Nicolas What about?

Boyfriend In that case, we'll leave you... All right?

Mother Yes. See you soon, darling. Have a nice walk.

Boyfriend See you soon.

Goes out.

Nicolas What's going on?

Pause.

Is there a problem?

Mother Yes.

Brief pause. Mother searches for a way to introduce this delicate topic.

Why have you hidden a knife under your mattress?

Nicolas What?

Mother There's a knife under your mattress. You know about this?

Brief pause.

What's it doing there?

Nicolas Nothing.

Mother What do you mean, 'nothing'?

Nicolas It's just there. In case.

Mother In case of what? What are you talking about?

Nicolas I don't know. If there was a burglar... or...Makes me feel safer.

Pause. He's well aware his Mother is not convinced by this explanation.

The other night, I thought I... I heard a noise, even though there was no one there. For a moment, I was afraid. Sometimes, I get a bit paranoid... No need to make a fuss about it.

Pause.

Mother Show me your arm.

Nicolas What?

Mother Show me your arm.

Nicolas No.

Mother *grabs hold of his arm and sees that there are recent scars.*

Mother Nicolas...

They look at each other for a moment without speaking.

Why do you do this?

Nicolas Do what?

Mother You know very well.

Nicolas *shrugs his shoulders.*

Explain it to me. Why do you do this?

Nicolas I don't know.

Mother *seems irritated by these perpetual refusals to answer.*

Mother I don't want you to hurt yourself. Do you understand me?

Nicolas I don't hurt myself.

Mother Have you seen these scars? That's what I call hurting yourself.

Nicolas It's the opposite.

Mother What do you mean, the opposite?

Nicolas Nothing.

Mother No, explain it to me. Explain it to me, Nicolas.

Nicolas *tries to find an explanation.*

Nicolas It relieves me.

Mother Relieves you of what?

Nicolas *shrugs his shoulders.*

Relieves you of what?

Nicolas When I'm in pain, I... It's a way to channel the pain...

Mother But what pain?

Pause.

(Perturbed.) Nicolas... A way to channel what pain?

Pause.

I don't want you to do it anymore.

Nicolas But...

Mother It's not up for discussion. I forbid you to do this. Is that clear?

Pause.

Nicolas. Is that clear?

Nicolas Was it your Boyfriend who found it?

Mother Doesn't matter.

Nicolas I just wanted to have a knife with me. To defend myself.

Mother Defend yourself? Defend yourself from what? What are you talking about? You realise this makes no sense at all?

Nicolas Well, you have a gun!

Mother What?

Nicolas In the utility room, behind the cupboard, there's a gun.

Mother Mm? Yes, but... That's... That's got nothing to do with it. It's...

Nicolas *watches her, waiting for her to complete the sentence.*

It was a present.

Nicolas A present?

Mother Yes. But that's got nothing to do with it. It has nothing to do with our discussion, Nicolas.

Nicolas Who gave you a gun?

Mother *clearly doesn't want to go into the details, but she feels obliged to offer some explanation.*

Mother My Father. A long time ago. He loved hunting. It was his passion. It's a hunting rifle. See, there's nothing out of the ordinary about it. It's not there so I can 'defend myself'.

Nicolas Why did he give you a hunting rifle?

Mother To... He must have thought I'd like it. That it was something we could do together. That... But, you know, I never used it. I loathe hunting. And everything that goes with it.

Nicolas So why do you keep it?

Mother If you must know, I'd forgotten I had it... It was in the cellar for years. I found it when... the time when I moved... And I stuck it behind the cupboard... For the time being. Because the flat doesn't have a cellar...As stupid as that.

Nicolas Is it loaded?

Mother Nicolas... This is not what we're talking about.

Brief pause.

Why do you do this sort of thing? Honestly, I don't understand...

Nicolas I know.

Brief pause. Mother makes an affectionate gesture towards Nicolas.

Mother You know, when you hurt yourself, it's as if you were doing it to me.

Nicolas (*cold, reproachful*) And when you hurt Dad, you were doing it to me.

Mother *is caught offguard. Pause. Blackout.*

Scene 10

Doctor Nicolas you said you were in pain, permanently. And that you were tired, tired of being in pain.

And so was your mother – she felt it – it was the same when she was with her father. He was very absent... And he never encouraged her. That's the thing, when you tell me your Mother's putting pressure on you... She's trying to do what's best. In her own way. But she believes in you. She loves you.

You know her father gave her a gun?

And now she says she loathes hunting. But when she says it, you get the feeling that it's actually her Father that she loathes.

You're not well, Nicolas.

You have so much ahead of you. You have your whole life... We just need to find that smile again – that joy ... Do you understand me?

I hope you do Nicolas.

I hope

He closes his eyes. Pause.

Blackout.

Scene 11

The apartment. Afternoon. Mother arrives back from the office. She goes directly to Nicolas's door and knocks.

Mother Nicolas! Could you come here, please?

Nicolas (*offstage*) What is it?

Mother Come here! I need to talk to you.

Mother *crosses the room. Clearly tense.* **Nicolas** *appears in his doorway.*

Nicolas What?

Mother Sit down.

Nicolas What is it?

Mother I said, sit down. We need to talk.

Nicolas *sits down.*

I'm going to try to speak calmly, but I'm not sure I'll manage it. Because I'm very angry.

Pause.

Why weren't you at school yesterday?

Pause.

I'm listening.

Nicolas I didn't feel well. I... I couldn't bring myself to go. I'm under too much pressure because of this exam and I... I'm sorry.

Mother You're sorry?

Pause.

I spoke to the school. And you know what they told me?

Pause.

They told me you'd never been back there.

Nicolas *lowers his eyes. Pause.*

They told me you were there on the first day, two months ago, and afterwards, you never came back. Never. Not once.

Pause.

They said they'd been sending letters. You're not saying anything?

Pause.

The whole time, you were lying to me!

She can't find anything else to say. Pause.

Explain it to me! What's going on? Are you on drugs?

*This makes **Nicolas** smile.*

Well, then, explain it to me!

Pause.

Because I don't know what else to do with you. I'm telling you honestly, I just don't know... I've tried to listen to you, to be your ... mother ... to give you strength and confidence, but evidently, none of that's any use. Why Nicolas ...?

Pause.

Answer me!

Nicolas I can't manage it.

Mother You can't manage it? I don't even understand what that means. You can't manage what? Getting up in the morning? Concentrating? Making an effort?

Nicolas Living.

Brief pause.

I can't manage living. And it's your fault.

Mother Sorry?

Nicolas If I'm like this. It's your fault.

Mother What are you talking about?

Pause.

What's my fault? What have I done? Tell me.

Nicolas You disgust me.

Mother Sorry?

Pause.

What did you say?

Nicolas You make all these grand speeches about life and work, then you abandon us as if we were pieces of shit without a second glance...what sort of mother does that make you? Bastard!

Mother *cracks and launches at Nicolas. She grabs him by the scruff of the neck and shakes him as he speaks.*

Mother Me, a bastard? Me?

Nicolas *tries to struggle free, but Mother keeps a grip on him.*

I've taken care of you all these years! Have you wanted for anything at all? Have I not always done everything for you? Answer me!

But he won't answer. Mother raises her voice, she's practically in tears and she shakes her son more and more violently, in desperation.

Answer, for Christ's sake!

Mother *goes on, more and more desperately and it turns into an increasingly physical struggle.*

For years, you hear me... I've looked after you. I stayed with your father ... So why are you saying this? Why?

Nicolas Let me go!

Mother Is it because I fell in love with another man? Is that it? Is that my crime? What business is it of yours? Mm? I have the right to reinvent my life. Shit! It's my life! You hear me?

Mother *is almost shouting.*

It's my life!

They both collapse on the floor. Pause. Nicolas is as if paralysed; he never thought his Mother would react so violently. Mother also seems shell-shocked. She gets her breath back and controls herself. Pause. Mother reaches for Nicolas's shoulder, as if she wanted to pacify him, but then moves away to let the tension dissipate. She has some difficulty getting her breath back. Nicolas still hasn't moved. He's like a six-year-old, terrified. Then, Mother turns back to Nicolas.

I'm sorry, Nicolas. I don't know what came over me.

Nicolas *snatches away, gets up on his own and looks at Mother with horror. Then he heads for the front door of the flat.*

Nicolas?

Nicolas *doesn't turn back.*

Nicolas, please...

Nicolas *leaves, slamming the door. Pause. Mother looks totally lost. Blackout.*

Scene 13

Waiting room in an emergency ward.

Doctor (Out the front) Good afternoon. I'm Dr Ramès. I'm looking after your son.

He's in his room. Don't worry. He's resting.

He needs quiet at the moment. In the meantime, I'd like to discuss the situation with you.

The razor blade cut was not very deep, and it was treated very promptly.

He was lucky.

All the same, we need to take some decisions.

Brief pause.

I think it would be important for Nicolas to spend a bit of time under observation.

And what's important is that, in this first phase, he should stay in isolation.

There'll be all sorts of activities and Nicolas will be very closely supervised. But the essential thing for us is that there should be a break with the outside world. And, particularly, the family.

Every time we hospitalise an adolescent, this is what I ask from the parents. Systematically. It allows everyone to take some distance... To lower the stakes... It's nothing against you, you must understand that.

You don't come into it.

At this stage, it's like you don't exist

Pause. Blackout.

Scene 14

Nicolas It's horrible, I swear it is. You have to get me out of here...

Mother Don't worry.

Nicolas You absolutely have to get me out of here. Promise me?

It was dreadful, Mum. The worst week of my life. Everyone here is sick. Anorexics, psychopaths... and... They're all crazy... I swear to you, I have to get out. You can't leave me here. It's hell. You can't leave me in hell.

Mother Don't worry. That's what we're here for, to discuss it with the doctor.

Nicolas He's an idiot. He doesn't understand anything. He stuffs me full of pills, but he doesn't understand the first thing about what's going on in my head. You have to take me back home, please, Mum. I'm begging you.

Mother *is unsettled by Nicolas's nervous state.*

Mother Calm down, son. We'll do what's best. We'll talk to the doctor.

Nicolas *smiles.*

Nicolas I'm so happy to see you. I've missed you, you have no idea how much...

Doctor and Mother stand direct address in spotlights facing the audience

There's music underscoring the rest of this scene: possibly Albinoni's Adagio for Organ and Strings. As the scene rises in intensity, the music becomes more and more present, until, in the last seconds of the scene, it's louder than the voices.

Doctor I can understand that you might want Nicolas to go home. But from a medical point of view, I can't allow it.

Mother Why?

Doctor Nicolas is going through a period of acute depression. He talks a good deal about his suicidal urges.

It's my opinion he'd be potentially at risk outside this institution.

Mother What do you suggest?

Doctor Even if this upsets Nicolas, it seems to me essential to have more time at our disposal. Suicidal impulses are sometimes difficult to identify, even for the subject himself, but we can't ignore them. When things have been stabilised, and we find a suitable treatment, then we can think about letting him go.

Mother (to the Doctor) What would be the procedure for taking him out?

Doctor Nicolas is a minor, he's your responsibility. So it's up to you to make the decision. And in fact you could decide to take him out today. But in that case, I'd have to ask you to sign discharge papers...

Mother Discharge papers?

Doctor You can sign these discharge papers and you'll be home in an hour... But let me tell you, as a doctor, you'll be taking a genuine risk.

Pause. Blackout.

Scene 15

Mother's flat.

Boyfriend All right? How do you feel?

Mother Relieved... Don't you?

Boyfriend I don't know. I hope you've taken the right decision.

Mother I'm sure of it.

Boyfriend (*worried*) The doctor didn't seem sure.

Mother You saw the way he looked when we found him in that refectory... When he understood we'd signed them, the discharge papers, did you see the way he looked? It was like seeing him again, when he was a little boy.

Boyfriend (*looking towards the kitchen*) What's he doing?

Mother Making tea.

Boyfriend I know. But why's he taking so long...?

Mother Look - I want to concentrate on what really counts. And for me, what really counts is to save Nicolas. I feel its possible now. I feel it and I don't want to let go of the feeling.

At this point, the door opens and Nicolas appears with a tray containing a teapot and cups.

Nicolas Here we are... It's ready...

Boyfriend That's nice...

Nicolas *seems to lose his balance slightly.*

Mother Careful.

Nicolas It's all these pills they've stuffed me full of...I get dizzy...

He comes and puts the tray down in front of his parents.

There we are!

Mother Thanks...

Boyfriend *notices there are only two cups.*

Boyfriend Aren't you joining us?

Nicolas No. I made myself a coffee. I needed to wake up.

Nicolas *takes a few steps, then turns back*

I just wanted to say to you... I'm really sorry about everything I've put you through just recently... I know you don't deserve it... And that it's been no joke for you. I'd like to ask you to forgive me. And above all I wanted to tell you that I love you – and dad – I love him too.

Mother And we love you.

Nicolas *goes out. Pause.*

You see...

Boyfriend Yes. He's back to the way he was before.

Mother Absolutely...

Pause.

Boyfriend If you don't have any plans why don't we all go to the cinema?

Mother I'm not sure.

Boyfriend Cheer us up a bit. And I'm sure it would make Nicolas happy...

Mother I have some work to do, but...

Boyfriend Go on, come with us today! Come on... Don't you want to?

*It looks as if **Mother** is about to say yes. Suddenly, there's a detonation. It's immediately recognisable as a gunshot. There seems to be a moment before what's happened penetrates **Mother's** consciousness. Then, almost in slow motion, she gets up and stands motionless for a moment, frozen, as if dazed. Finally, she throws herself in the direction of the bathroom. The stage remains silent and empty for some time. Blackout.*

Scene 16

*Epilogue. Three years later. **Mother** is in the living room.*

*She seems lost in thought. **Boyfriend** comes in.*

Boyfriend Did you remember to buy the wine?

Mother Mm? Yes, yes.

Boyfriend Great. Thanks.

Mother I put it in the pantry.

Boyfriend I've almost finished the dinner. It's in the oven...I just have time to give Sacha his bath.

Mother You want me to do it?

Boyfriend No, no, I'll take care of it.

He goes over to the door and calls.

Sacha? Bathtime! *Exits*

*Pause. **Mother** puts some music on. Suddenly, there's a knock at the door. Is that the guests already? **Mother** checks her watch. She turns off the music and goes to open the door. It's **Nicolas**.*

Mother Here already?

Nicolas I'm not too early, am I?

Mother No, no, not at all. Come in...

They embrace.

Are you on your own?

Nicolas She's on her way. She had to go and see her mother first... I expect she'll be a bit late.

Mother No problem. Come in. How are you? You look well!

Nicolas Very good, thanks. What about you?

Mother You got back this morning?

Nicolas Yes. It was starting to feel as if I hadn't been here for months. I was beginning to miss it.

Mother How's Berlin? All going well?

Nicolas Great. I love the city. Everything's fine. You know I've decided to move in with Élodie. Did Dad tell you?

Mother Congratulations! That's excellent news!

Nicolas And I have a present for you - here it is...

He hands her the book.

Mother Your first novel.

Nicolas I wanted you to be the first person to have it.

Mother *(reading the title)* *Death Can Wait*. Fantastic. When's it coming out?

Nicolas In two months. And if you open it, you'll see, it's dedicated to you...

So, obviously, it talks a bit about what you already know... All those slightly testing years... For you and for dad ... All those difficult moments... But at least it's ended well. I wanted to dedicate it to you... Because I know that, if it wasn't for you... I couldn't have...

Mother *takes him in his arms, preventing him from finishing the sentence.*

Mother I'm so proud of you.

Nicolas *smiles.*

I'm so proud. My big boy. So proud of you.

After a brief pause, Nicolas tries to disengage, but Mother hugs him even tighter, as if she was afraid to let him go. Then, they move apart. Mother is almost embarrassed by how emotional she's become.

*Strangely, instead of heading towards the back of the flat, **Nicolas** moves towards his old room. At the same time, Boyfriend appears in the other door. He doesn't see **Nicolas**, it's as if he's invisible to him.*

Boyfriend What are you doing?

Mother *is still concentrating on **Nicolas**, who is about to disappear into his room. Pause.*

Are you talking to yourself?

*Pause. **Nicolas** takes one last look at him and disappears.*

Are you ok? What's the matter with you?

*Suddenly, **Mother** cracks and starts crying, as if she was crying for the first time. Her body is shaken by a very primitive sob, her pain seems almost physical. **Boyfriend** rushes over.*

What's happening? What's the matter?

Mother *(through his tears)* Nothing.

Boyfriend What's the matter? Are you thinking about Nicolas?

Mother *nods.*

Come on...

Mother *(still weeping hot tears)* I was trying to think about all the things he could have done... He had so much talent... He was so intelligent... And so sensitive... He could have done so many beautiful things with his life...

Boyfriend *(trying to console her)* Shhh

Mother *(still weeping hot tears)* It's all my fault... I could have done more... I should have... I should... Why did I sign those discharge papers?

Boyfriend You did your best. Believe me. Remember what the doctors told you. It was an illness...

Mother No, I should have... I...

Boyfriend Come on, calm down. I know it's hard. But life goes on. Even if it's hard, life goes on.

Mother *(descending still further into her grief)* No, it doesn't go on! It can't go on!

Boyfriend Come on, please. Stop crying. Mm? Come here. Come to me.

Mother *can't stop crying. **Boyfriend** hugs her even more closely. Pause.*

There was no helping him. And nothing you could do to stop him. Do you hear me? Nothing you could do. Come on. Calm down. Calm down, my love. And think about your little boy... He'll be four soon. Think about him. And everything will be all right. Do you understand me? Everything will be all right.

She cradles him. Little by little her grief is calmed.

Pause. Blackout.