

The Son

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Characters

- PIERRE
- ANNE
- SOFIA
- NICOLAS
- NURSE
- DOCTOR

Scene 1

Pierre's flat. Anne stands facing him. He looks tense.

PierreWhat are you doing here?

Anne *doesn't answer.*

Anne, I'm speaking to you...

AnneI...

PierreYes?

AnneI don't know, I...

PierreYou don't know?

AnneNo, sorry. I mean, I don't know where to begin.I...

PierreHas something happened?

Pierre *is looking behind her, as if he's afraid that at any moment, someone might come out of the bedroom.*

You turn up with no warning... You know very well...

AnneI tried to call, but you weren't answering.

PierreWhy? Is there a problem?

AnneIs she here?

PierreMm?

AnneIs she here?

PierreShe's putting the baby to bed. Why?

AnneI didn't want to disturb you. But you never pick up. And I had to speak to you. One way or another.

PierreWhat's the matter?

AnneIt's Nicolas.

PierreOh, yes? Has something happened?

AnneYes. He's not well. And I'm not well either. It's too difficult. I can't manage it.

PierreYou can't manage what?

AnneIt's just impossible. I... I don't know what to do any more. I... this morning, I was summoned to the school, and the headmaster...

Pierre *exhales. She stops dead in the middle of her sentence.* **Pierre** notices.

PierreWhat?

AnneAm I disturbing you? You're making a face, as if I'm disturbing you.

PierreOf course not.

AnneIt's your son I'm talking about!

PierreI know.

AnneYou ought to be just a little bit concerned...

PierreObviously I'm concerned! Why are you saying these things?

AnneBecause you've got this expression. As if I was here to annoy you with problems about... With my problems. When I'm talking to you about Nicolas!

PierreI'm sorry. I'm just a bit... tired. You know what it is, the baby's still not sleeping through and...

Anne*(interrupting him)*Anyway, he summoned me. The headmaster. To find out what was going on. And that's when I found out he hadn't been to school for more than three months...

PierreWhat?

AnneI'm telling you. For three months he's been pretending... Every morning.

PierreWhat are you talking about?

AnneI'm explaining the situation to you and I...

PierreWait a minute... He hasn't been to school for three months? And during all this time, you never noticed anything?

AnneNo.

PierreHow is that possible?

AnneHe set off every morning with his bag and everything he needed for the day, but he didn't go there.

PierreAre you joking? What was he doing? I mean, all day... For three months! Where did he go?

AnneI don't know. He hardly ever answers when I ask him a question. He behaves as if I don't exist.

PierreBut why?

AnneI don't know. I'm worried about him, Pierre. He's not like he was before. Believe me. I don't know what's happened, but something has. He's changed. He... And I'm wondering if... To be absolutely honest with you... I'm even wondering if...

PierreIf what?

Sofia *comes in. Tense moment. Pierre tries to justify Anne's presence.*

Ah, Sofia, I...

Sofia *(hostile)*What's going on?

PierreAnne has come to talk to me about Nicolas. It's just been discovered he hasn't been going to school, and...

AnneIt's not just that, Pierre... He's not well.

PierreYes, he's not well at the moment, and...

AnneHe hasn't been well for months.

SofiaEver since Pierre left you, I expect...

PierreSofia, please.

Pause.

And the headmaster? What did he say?

AnneThey want to expel him.

PierreUnbelievable! Have you told Nicolas?

AnneYes. But he couldn't care less...

PierreWhat's going on in his head?

AnneYou have to speak to him, Pierre. I can't manage it any more. He needs you. You can't abandon him.

PierreI'm not abandoning him! Why are you saying that?

AnneThe other day, I simply asked him to – I can't even remember what, something trivial, to clear his plate away or something like that – and he looked at me with such... with such hatred. I thought he was going to...

PierreTo what?

AnneHe frightens me, do you understand?

Pause.

PierreI'll go and see him tomorrow. All right? I'll drop in at the end of the day. Will he be there?

AnneYes.

PierreI'll drop in and see him. Don't worry.

AnneThanks.

Anne makes an affectionate gesture to thank him. It's not even as much as a gesture, just a hint, a sketch, but it's enough to make **Pierre** feel embarrassed in front of **Sofia**.

He was such a sweet child. So wonderful. Do you remember? So sensitive. I don't know what's happened...

In the distance, the baby starts crying. Sofia hesitates, then leaves the room.

PierreCome on. Don't worry. Everything'll go back to normal.

AnneYou think so?

PierreOf course.

AnneI don't know.

PierreYes, it will. Don't worry. I'm here.

AnneNo, that's exactly it. You're not here any more.

Pause. Blackout.

Scene 2

A different room. Nicolas is sitting on the sofa. He's biting his nails. Pierre is standing in front of him.

PierreI wanted to talk to you, Nicolas... That's...That's why I've come home. You know, I mean... here.

Pause.

Are you listening to me?

NicolasYes.

PierreI 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.

Pierre sits down. *Pause.*

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

Nicolas shrugs his shoulders.

What's going on?

NicolasNothing.

PierreDon't say 'nothing'. Explain it to me.

Pause.

Nicolas? Why have you stopped going to school?

NicolasI don't know.

PierreYou don't know?

NicolasNo.

PierreThere 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?

NicolasYes.

Pause.

PierreAre you having problems?

Nicolas *sighs.*

What? Why are you sighing?

NicolasNo reason.

PierreNicolas, 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 mother. She 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?

NicolasNothing.

Pause.

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

NicolasI really couldn't give a shit.

PierreTerrific! Great attitude...

Pause.

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

NicolasI walked.

PierreYou walked?

NicolasYes.

PierreOn your own?

NicolasYes.

PierreYou walked on your own in the street?

NicolasOr in the park.

PierreBut 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?

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

PierreWhy 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.

NicolasI don't want to struggle any more.

PierreBut 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 mother's at the end of her rope, you know that? She tells me you're making her life a living hell. That you haven't been behaving well towards her. Is that true?

Pause.

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

NicolasNo.

PierreSo?

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...

NicolasI can't manage it.

PierreWhat makes you say that?

Pause.

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

NicolasNo.

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

NicolasIt's not that. It's...

PierreYes?

NicolasI don't know how to describe it.

PierreTell me in your own words.

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

Brief pause. Pierre seems moved by this unexpected confidence.

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

NicolasI don't know.

Pause.

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

PierreGo on.

NicolasNo. Nothing. Forget it.

PierreNo, tell me...

Nicolas *is hesitating.*

Nicolas, tell me.

NicolasI'd like to live with you.

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

NicolasI can't go on here. Because I know I could get out of this. But not here. Not on my own. It's too difficult...

PierreYes, but...

NicolasMe and Mum aren't getting on. She can't put up with me any more... She's at the end of her tether, I know she is. And when I'm here, 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...

Pierre*(embarrassed)*Yes.

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

PierreOf course you won't.

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

PierreCome on, come here.

Pierre *takes him in his arms.*

NicolasSometimes I feel as if I am going crazy, Dad.

Pierre *hugs him closer.*

PierreWhat are you talking about?

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

Pierre Come on...

Nicolas I don't understand.

Nicolas *weeps.* **Pierre** *is unsettled.*

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

He comforts him. **Nicolas** *is like a small child.*

Blackout.

Scene 3

Pierre's flat. *Tense silence between Sofia and Pierre. It stretches out.*

PierreWhy are you taking it like this?

SofiaTaking it like what?

Pause.

PierreI can't just abandon him.

SofiaWhy are you talking about abandoning him? She's just telling you these things to make you feel guilty.

PierreThat's got nothing to do with it, Sofia. 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.

SofiaAnd what about school?

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

SofiaI'm sure.

PierreYou'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...

22*Pause.*

There were marks on his forearm.

SofiaWhat?

PierreWhen I went to see him just now, I saw he had, I don't know, marks.

SofiaWhat kind of marks?

PierreLittle 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?

Sofia *makes an affectionate gesture.*

SofiaCome on...

PierreAnd 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, Sofia.

Sofia I don't see the connection.

Pierre *shrugs his shoulders.*

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

PierreI don't know.

SofiaIt's nothing to do with...

She prefers not to complete the sentence.

It's nothing to do with it, Pierre!

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

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

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

Sofia I understand. Don't worry.

He smiles at her, as if to thank her.

PierreWhen I was his age, my mother was already ill. I was thinking about it just now... I... I went to see her every day in hospital and sat with her. I revised for my exams on a little table opposite her, while she... while she was dying... It was horribly sad. My father never showed up. Too busy living his life. He had his business... His famous hunting parties... He

travelled all the time. But a week before... before she died... I ran into someone on the street, a family friend, who told me he'd had dinner with him the night before... I didn't even know he was in Paris... And he hadn't thought it was worth telling us, or coming in to see her...

Sofia Why are you telling me this?

Pierre I don't know. Sorry. No reason. I... It's all mixed up in my head. What I wanted to say is that I don't want to be that kind of man. That kind of father.

Pause.

Sofia What about us?

Pierre What?

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

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

Sofia You think so?

Pierre 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.

Scene 4

*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, **Pierre** comes in. He starts, seeing **Nicolas**.*

Pierre Ah, you're here! Did you sleep well?

*He kisses **Nicolas**'s hair.*

And there's your mother 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.

Pierre 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.

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

Nicolas No.

PierreGood.

He makes himself a coffee.

You want anything? A coffee?

Nicolas *shakes his head.*

You don't have anything in the morning?

NicolasWhy was he crying?

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

Pause. Nicolas bites his nails. Pierre notices.

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

Pierre *notices that Nicolas is elsewhere.*

Are you listening to me?

NicolasMm?

PierreWhat's the matter?

NicolasNo, it's just... I was thinking about... about the set-up. And I... I mean, I'm not sure...

PierreWhat?

Nicolas *seems reluctant to answer.*

What are you not sure about?

NicolasI'm feeling a bit uncomfortable here... I feel I'm disturbing you both...

PierreOf course not! What makes you say that?

NicolasAnd Sofia... I don't think she likes me. Did she really agree to my moving in here?

PierreObviously, Nicolas. Obviously.

Pause.

NicolasBut it's not only that. There's this school as well... I don't know if I feel right about going there.

PierreSorry?

NicolasI've been thinking about it this morning. Everyone's going to wonder why I'm showing up like this in the middle of a year...

PierreSo?

NicolasI won't know what to say to them.

PierreYou can say anything you like... Why are you worrying so much about what other people think?

NicolasThey're bound to look at me strangely...

PierreNo, they won't... On the contrary... Someone who arrives in the middle of a year, they'll be interested in you, curious... Wonder where you come from.

NicolasExactly. I don't want to answer a lot of questions. I don't want to have to tell them what's been going on.

PierreListen, Nicolas... You're not the first person to change schools in the middle of a year... It happens all the time. I understand it might make you a bit anxious, but that's the way things are. All you have to do is not get thrown out.

NicolasI know, but I was thinking... I've missed so many lessons this year... Because of being absent so often... I'm full of gaps... I'll never be ready in time to take the exams. And it's April already... It's almost the end of the school year... I'm stressed about it, you know? And I was wondering if it might be better to start again in September with less pressure and -

Pierre*(interrupting him)*You'll go back on Monday, Nicolas. It's not negotiable. We've already discussed this.

Pause.

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

NicolasI don't know.

PierreYou 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. Pierre pulls himself together. He 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.

NicolasYes.

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

Pause.

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

Pierre *appears to hesitate.*

NicolasWhat?

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

NicolasI don't know.

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

NicolasOther people don't feel like this. For them, everything's easy.

PierreHow do you know?

NicolasI watch them... All they think about is having a laugh, having fun.

PierreYou're not in their head. Believe me, everybody has problems and fears and... You just have to get past them. That's why you're going back to school, starting Monday. Do you understand?

Pause.

Nicolas, do you understand?

NicolasYes.

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

PierreYou don't want anything for breakfast?

NicolasNo.

PierreWhere are you going?

NicolasBack to bed.

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

Dad?

PierreYes?

NicolasThanks for everything you're doing for me.

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

Scene 5

Pierre'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. Sofia is preparing breakfast. She moves towards the door to Nicolas's room.*

SofiaNicolas? Are you ready? It's time to go.

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

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

She disappears into the kitchen for a minute.

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

She comes back into the room.

Nicolas?

She 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?

NicolasI do answer you.

SofiaIt's time. You have to go.

NicolasI know.

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

Sofia goes into the kitchen to fetch the coffee. **Nicolas** sits down.

(Offstage.) I have to prepare your little brother's bottle as well. I'd better not keep him waiting. I'll hear about it if I do.

Nicolas buries his face in his hands.

NicolasWhere's my father?

Sofia*(offstage)*He's already left. He had a very early meeting this morning.

She comes back with a coffee.

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

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

What's the matter?

He doesn't answer. Sofia goes to him.

Nicolas? What's the matter with you?

NicolasNothing.

Sofias... 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.

NicolasI don't know.

SofiaAre you unhappy?

He doesn't deny it.

Why are you unhappy?

NicolasI don't know.

SofiaYou don't know?

NicolasNo.

SofiaDo you often start crying like this for no reason?

He doesn't answer.

Nicolas? Does this often happen?

NicolasI'm not crying.

Brief pause. Sofia is confused. She doesn't know what to do.

SofiaWhat's the matter?

NicolasI can't seem to understand the point of it!

SofiaOf what?

NicolasAnything... Life...

SofiaThe point of life?

She 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.

She 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 father is of you. He never stops talking about you. Mm? Come on... You have to be brave.

NicolasYes.

SofiaAnd 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...

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

SofiaDon't apologise, it can happen to anyone...

Nicolas *dries his tears and takes his coffee.*

Better?

NicolasYes. Thanks.

SofiaCome on...

NicolasYes. I have to go.

He stands and picks up his bag.

Can I ask you a question?

SofiaOf course.

NicolasWhen you met my father... Did you know he was married?

SofiaMm? I...

NicolasDid you?

SofiaYes.

Pause.

But he told me straight away that...

NicolasThat what?

SofiaPerhaps it's better if you talk to him about this, don't you think?

NicolasI don't know.

SofiaI think it'd be better. Especially as it's time to go now...

NicolasYou know, when he left, my mother took it so badly... She really suffered. And she never stopped saying awful things about him... Whereas I worshipped him. I mean... It was as if I'd been chopped in half. And from then on, I didn't know what to think any more.

SofiaI understand. It's not an easy situation...

NicolasYou think she's angry with me? I mean, for coming here...

SofiaI think she respects your decision.

NicolasSometimes I feel guilty about it.

SofiaYou shouldn't.

NicolasAnd it didn't put you off?

SofiaSorry?

NicolasWhen you met him, the fact you knew that he was married and already had a son, it didn't put you off?

Sofia... What do you want me to say, Nicolas?

NicolasNothing, you're right. I don't know why I'm asking you this kind of question... It's stupid.

SofiaNo, it's not stupid. It's just...

NicolasAnyway, I have to go. See you later.

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

SofiaSee you later.

Pause. Blackout.

Scene 6

Anne's flat. *End of the afternoon. Pierre is sitting opposite her. She seems tense.*

AnneWell?

PierreListen, it's going well.

AnneReally?

PierreYes. Quite well. He started at his new school last week. Did he tell you about it?

AnneHe just left me a message.

PierreHe says the atmosphere is quite good.

AnneThat's good.

PierreObviously, he didn't much want to go there. I had to apply a bit of pressure... but I think he's getting going again.

AnneAnd was he able to tell you what had happened? I mean...

PierreNo. He doesn't say much.

Pause.

AnneI don't understand where this sadness comes from... It's as if...

PierreHe's a teenager, Anne. Have you ever seen a teenager radiating happiness?

AnneIt's not just that. He's different from the others.

PierreWhy do you say that?

AnneNo reason. I don't know.

Pause. Pierre's mobile rings. He cuts it off.

PierreSorry.

AnneWhat about you? Everything all right in your office? You're working very hard at the moment, if I understand correctly...

PierreYes.

AnneI'm told you're going into politics?

PierreMe? No. One of my clients... Signoret, you know him?

Anne*(as if this were proving her point)*Yes.

PierreHe's suggested I join his campaign team. He wants to stand at the primaries. And he's asked me to help him design his platform.

AnneYou must be pleased.

PierreI'd just be an advisor. I don't even know if I'm going to accept... It's likely to take up a lot of time...

AnneWhen I think that when I met you, you were still a promising young lawyer...

Pause. Embarrassment.

PierreBut tell me... I'm sorry, I'm coming back to Nicolas... Why do you say that? That he's different from the others...

She doesn't answer.

He just needs a few rules to be laid down. Don't you think?

AnneI don't know.

PierreIf you ask me, he's been disappointed in love...

AnneYou think so?

PierreThat's what I've been telling myself. I can't see any other explanation... He's had to split up with a girl and... and there we are. There's nothing abnormal about it, unlike what you're suggesting... In fact, nothing could be more normal. At his age...

AnneIt's possible. He's so romantic.

PierreYes.

AnneGuess where he gets that from...

Pause. Embarrassment.

And what about...

PierreSofia?

AnneYes. How's she taking it?

Slight pause.

You can tell me, you know.

PierreTo start with, she was a bit...

AnneHostile, I imagine?

PierreNo, not really. Unsettled, perhaps. There's the baby... She's already quite tired. And she hadn't been expecting to be living with a teenager... right off the bat.

AnneI can understand.

PierreBut all in all, it's going rather well.

AnneHe's not making life too difficult for her?

PierreNo... On the contrary... he's behaving himself. He's making an effort. He's very considerate towards her. There've been some quite happy moments. In fact, I think he likes living with his little brother...

AnneGreat.

PierreYes. I think that side of things is going to work.

AnneGood.

Suddenly, Anne starts crying.

PierreAnne... Anne? What's the matter?

AnneNothing. Sorry.

PierreAnne?

She's trying to hold back the tears, but she breaks down.

I'm sorry if I... I didn't want to hurt you.

AnneI know.

PierreWhy are you crying?

AnneI feel as if...

PierreWhat?

AnneI feel as if I've failed completely.

PierreOf course not.

She goes on crying.

What are you talking about? Anne? You haven't failed in any way.

AnneSorry. It's just that...

PierreThat what?

AnneNothing. Never mind.

Pause. She recovers.

I never imagined he'd leave the house. Him as well...And go and live with you.

PierreMe neither, you know. He's the one who asked me.

AnneWhy didn't he want to live here any more? Does that mean the whole problem started with me? Did it?

PierreOf course not...

AnneYes! If he prefers living somewhere else... And when I phone him, he doesn't even pick up. He never gives me any news... It's as if I don't exist any more. As if... as if he's wiped me out of his life.

PierreAnne... Please... When you came to see me, you told me it was very tense between you, that you couldn't manage it any more... That he was making your life a living hell.

AnneI know.

PierreYou wanted to send him to boarding school, remember?

AnneYes.

PierreYou needed a break. Now, you can have more time to yourself.

AnneHave more time to myself?

Pierre*(walking on eggshells)*Yes, I mean... Because...I don't know... I've never asked you... You're so discreet...

Anne*(clenched)*I'm not seeing anyone. If that's what you wanted to know.

Pause. She gets up and moves away from Pierre.

The other day, I came across a photo of him... I found it by accident when I was tidying up and I put it on my bedside table... A photo of him when he was nine. When we went on that safari in Africa... Remember?

PierreYes. Of course.

AnneI look at it every morning when I wake up. And every time, I'm devastated... It was taken at dawn... We had to be really quiet so we didn't disturb the lion cubs who were suckling from their mother... Do you remember? It was astonishingly beautiful. In the photo, his face is so open... He's like a little sunbeam. Actually, I remember calling him 'my little sunbeam'.

PierreYes.

Anne'My little sunbeam'. When you think about it, at that time, everything seemed to be smiling on us. There was so much... yes, joy, in our family. I don't know what happened. Why everything has turned around like this...

PierreCome on...

AnneTo tell you the truth, I'm afraid this isn't going to end well.

PierreNo!... What are you talking about?

AnneI don't know. I have like a bad feeling about all this. I loved him so much, you know...

PierreI know.

AnneAnd you as well. I loved you so much, Pierre. If you knew how much I loved you...

She smiles, at the same time holding back her tears.

PierreCome on... Don't worry... You're a wonderful mother. You always have been... Mm? It's not your fault if... He's going through a difficult patch, but soon everything will be back to normal.

Anne *shakes her head.*

Yes, it will. Believe me, Anne. Everything will be fine and he'll start smiling again. Like in the photo.

Pause. She dries her tears. Blackout.

Scene 7

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

PierreAll right? Is he asleep?

SofiaHe is. Finally...

PierreHe's taken his time...

SofiaYes. I practically fell asleep myself.

PierreHere.

He hands her a glass.

SofiaThanks. That's nice. I'm exhausted.

PierreHad a good day?

41

SofiaNothing special. I went to the paediatrician. Did some shopping. Otherwise, we stayed here. What about you? How was work? Actually, I was wondering...When do you have to give your answer?

PierreSoon.

Pause. Pierre smiles.

SofiaWhat is it?

PierreMe?

SofiaYes. What is it?

PierreNothing.

SofiaThen why do you look like that?

PierreLike what?

Sofia*(with no malice)*Smug.

He smiles again, amused by Sofia. Pause. Then he puts a box in front of her.

What's that?

She takes her time before picking up the box, feigning indifference. Finally, she opens it. It's earrings.

What's this in aid of?

PierreDo you like them?

SofiaIs this your way of saying sorry?

PierreIt's to thank you.

SofiaWhat for?

PierreYou know very well.

She looks at him.

SofiaThey're pretty.

42

PierreYou know, I'm well aware... I mean, I'm really grateful for how you've handled all this.

Sofia(*mischievously*)Yes, that's what I said. It's your way of saying sorry.

PierreWhat I mean is, it's... lucky you're here.

SofiaOn the other hand, you're not here much... Seems to me you're at work all the time.

PierreExactly, and I've been thinking about the situation. And I'm not sure I should accept Signoret's offer. It's not come at a good time... What with Nicolas...

SofiaYou're going to turn it down?

PierreI'm thinking about it.

SofiaBut you have to accept it, Pierre! You've been talking to me about it for months.

PierreI know.

Nicolas *appears in his doorway.*

NicolasDad? Can I talk to you for a minute?

PierreYes, of course.

Nicolas *senses he's interrupted them.*

NicolasBut I'm disturbing you, aren't I?

PierreNo, no, not at all. Tell me.

NicolasIt'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?

PierreRight. I'll join you.

NicolasGreat. Thanks.

He goes back into his room.

43

PierreAnyway, 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...

SofiaHas he? That's good.

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

Pause.

SofiaAnyway, it went well.

PierreWhat?

SofiaThe paediatrician, with Sacha.

PierreOh? What did he say?

SofiaShe. It's a she.

PierreWhat did she say?

SofiaShe thinks he'll soon be sleeping through. Like you, she says it's just a 'passing phase'.

PierreIf you ask me, as soon as you go back to work, everything'll be easier. He'll go to the crèche, wear himself out in the normal way during the day, and he'll sleep better at night. Don't you think?

Sofia I don't know. Hope so.

She smiles, but disenchantedly. Pause.

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

SofiaYou want to cancel it?

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

Sofia *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.

SofiaWhy shouldn't he come with us?

PierreI 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.

Sofia I understand.

PierreHe 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...

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

Pierre Are you sure?

Sofia Yes.

He takes her hand.

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

45

Sofia Are they mother-of-pearl? They're really very pretty. I don't suppose I'll have much chance to wear them at the moment, but they're very pretty. Thank you.

Sofia *looks at him, cold. There's something in the 'thank you' which is not far from resentment, which stops Pierre in his tracks.*

Pierre Are you angry with me?

Sofia No. It's just I hadn't actually imagined things turning out like this.

Pierre Like what?

Pause.

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

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

Pierre Why are you saying that?

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

She smiles and takes his hand.

Thanks for the present.

She holds the earrings against her ears to show Pierre what they look like. Pierre smiles.

Pierre You remember we're having dinner with Laurent next week?

Sofia Yes.

Pierre *gets up, indicates the earrings.*

Pierre You see, you'll have lots of chances to wear them.

She smiles to show she's all right, but it's a sad smile.

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

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

Nicolas?

He goes into Nicolas's room. Sofia is on her own. Music, which might be 'Lorsque vous n'aurez rien à faire' from Massenet's Chérubin. Pause. She slowly finishes her glass of wine. Then she starts to pick up, one by one, the things that have been lying on the floor since Nicolas's

apparition. But she 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 8

Saturday afternoon. Nicolas is wearing a new jacket and looking at himself in the mirror.

PierreWell?

NicolasI'm not sure.

PierreWell, I think it suits you.

NicolasDo you? I don't look a bit...

PierreA bit what?

NicolasI don't know. I feel sort of ridiculous.

PierreI'm telling you, it's perfect.

Nicolas*looks at himself in the mirror.*

I was walking past this shop, I saw it in the window... And I thought you'd like it. You did tell me you were ⁴⁷going out one evening next week, didn't you? You'll need something to wear...

NicolasIt's nice of you, but...

PierreWhat?

NicolasI'm not sure people my age wear jackets...

PierreAre you joking? The salesman, for example...Hardly older than you... He was wearing one...

NicolasWas he?

PierreHe told me everyone was wearing them now. And, honestly, it suits you. Makes you look stylish.

NicolasYou know, I'm not even sure I'm going to this party...

PierreWhy not?

Nicolas*shrugs his shoulders.*

You have to go. It's important, seeing people... Having a bit of fun... opening yourself up to others... You can't spend all your time on your own...

NicolasI know. But I don't feel very close to people my own age. They're really stupid, you know. For example, they all can't wait to be eighteen, as if that's going to change anything... Fine, have a party to celebrate. But what use is it, being eighteen? None. To be able to go clubbing? I couldn't care less about clubbing. It doesn't interest me.

Pierre So what does interest you?

Nicolas *shrugs his shoulders.*

Nicolas I'd have liked never to be my age. It's too complicated for me. Too many responsibilities. Too much pressure. I preferred it when I was a child. Anyway, I don't know how to dance.

48

Pierre Ah, so that's the problem...

Nicolas I'll just be standing in a corner watching everyone else...

Pierre All you have to do is ask Sofia to teach you...She's the best dancer I know...

On cue, Sofia appears.

Sofia What are you talking about?

Pierre I was just telling Nicolas you're a great dancer.

Sofia Very funny.

Pierre *smiles.*

(To Pierre.) Given the way you dance, you have the nerve to criticise me?

Nicolas *smiles in his turn.*

Nicolas *(to Sofia)* Why? Isn't he a good dancer?

Sofia Let's just say he has his own style.

Pierre My unique style.

Sofia Did you know we met at a wedding?

Nicolas No, I didn't.

Pierre Sofia...

Sofia Everyone was dancing and that was my first sight of your father. He was on the floor, doing his famous hip-sway.

Nicolas *(big smile)* What's that?

Sofia You don't know your father's famous hip-sway?

Nicolas No.

Pierre Sofia... Better you just teach him to dance...He's going to a party next week.

49

Sofia *(to Nicolas)* Watch.

Pierre What are you doing?

She goes and puts on some music. Nicolas is smiling broadly.

Sofia Come on... Pierre... Aren't you going to show us?

Pierre Is this really a good idea?

Sofia *indicates 'yes', pretending to be annoyed.*

I'm afraid to wake Sacha...

Nicolas Come on, Dad!

Pierre All right. At your own risk. You asked for it...

He starts dancing to the music. Sofia and Nicolas burst out laughing. Pierre exaggerates to make them laugh more.

Sofia You see why I immediately fell in love with him...

Nicolas Who wouldn't?

Pierre I know, I'm irresistible.

Sofia When he starts, everyone else stops dancing. He can't help drawing attention to himself.

Nicolas How do you do it?

Pierre Like this, look...

Nicolas *starts dancing himself, imitating his father's movements.*

Nicolas Like this?

Sofia Oh! No! Don't tell me... Not another one?

Pierre That's it! Marvellous! That's all you need for your party!

50

Sofia You'll knock them dead...

Pierre Now I recognise my son! Look at him move! That's my son!

Sofia laughs and Pierre dances with Nicolas. Then Sofia starts dancing as well. They dance for a while. They might even join in with the lyrics. Joyous atmosphere. Suddenly, Nicolas breaks off and stops moving. Something has totally taken over his thoughts. An intense sadness seems to engulf him. He heads towards his room, leaving the others in the middle of their dance.

Nicolas?

Nicolas *leaves. Sofia goes to turn off the music.*

Sofia What's the matter with him?

Pierre I don't know.

Pierre *goes over to Nicolas's door.*

Nicolas?

The door's been locked.

Nicolas? What's the matter?

Sofia Did we say something?

Pierre Nicolas? Open this door... Nicolas?

Pause. Blackout.

Scene 9

*It's a Sunday, but **Pierre** is working. The flat is back to its original appearance. **Sofia** is settling the baby into the pushchair. She's getting ready to go out to the park with Sacha.*

51

Sofia Pierre? Can I talk to you for a minute?

Pierre *has his head in a file.*

Pierre Mm?

Sofia Can I talk to you?

Pierre Are you going out?

Sofia Yes. But I just wanted a word with you before I... If it isn't too much of a distraction...

Pierre Yes?

*Pause. **Pierre** looks up from the file.*

What's going on?

Sofia 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 –

Pierre Tell me.

Sofia I found a knife.

Pierre What?

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

Pierre In his room?

Sofia Yes.

Pierre What's all this about?

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

Pierre *exhales and puts down his file.*

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

52

Pierre Why did he take a knife?

Sofia don't know.

Pierre You think he's...

He indicates his forearms.

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

Sofia *shrugs her shoulders.*

Don't you think?

Sofia don't know.

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

Sofia Yes.

Pierre So? Why is he doing this?

Sofia think the simplest thing would be to talk to him about it.

Pause.

Don't make that face.

Pierre Sorry. Yes. You're right. You... Are you leaving?

Sofia Yes. While the weather's still nice. I'm not suggesting you come with us...

Pierre No, that's nice of you. I have to prepare this file for Monday.

Sofia But we're going to get a bit of sun. Aren't we, my little man?

She notices that Pierre is still lost in thought.

Don't worry. 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.

53

Pierre *doesn't know what to think about this. He's suddenly racked with doubt.*

Pierre Do you think so?

Nicolas *appears in his bedroom door.*

Ah. Nicolas...

Nicolas You going for a walk in the park?

Sofia Just Sacha and me. Your father's staying here. He has work to do.

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

NicolasNow?

PierreYes.

NicolasWhat about?

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

PierreYes. See you soon, darling. Have a nice walk.

SofiaSee you soon.

She goes out with the pushchair.

NicolasWhat's going on?

Pause.

Is there a problem?

PierreYes.

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

Why have you hidden a knife under your mattress?

NicolasWhat?

54

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

Brief pause.

What's it doing there?

NicolasNothing.

PierreWhat do you mean, 'nothing'?

NicolasIt's just there. In case.

PierreIn case of what? What are you talking about?

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

Pause. He's well aware his father 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.

PierreShow me your arm.

NicolasWhat?

PierreShow me your arm.

NicolasNo.

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

PierreNicolas...

They look at each other for a moment without speaking.

Why do you do this?

55

NicolasDo what?

PierreYou know very well.

Nicolas *shrugs his shoulders.*

Explain it to me. Why do you do this?

NicolasI don't know.

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

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

NicolasI don't hurt myself.

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

NicolasIt's the opposite.

PierreWhat do you mean, the opposite?

NicolasNothing.

PierreNo, explain it to me. Explain it to me, Nicolas.

Nicolas *tries to find an explanation.*

NicolasIt relieves me.

PierreRelieves you of what?

Nicolas *shrugs his shoulders.*

Relieves you of what?

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

PierreBut what pain?

Pause.

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

56 *Pause.* **Pierre** *pulls himself together.*

I don't want you to do it any more.

NicolasBut...

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

Pause.

Nicolas. Is that clear?

NicolasYes.

PierreI don't accept this way of... There are things in life you don't do. I mean, do you realise? With a knife?

NicolasWas it Sofia who found it?

PierreDoesn't matter.

NicolasWhat's she doing searching through my things?

PierreShe's not searching through your things. She was kind enough to make your bed. As you never make it yourself!

Nicolas*(trying to gloss things over in adolescent fashion)* Oh, come on...

PierreWhat?

NicolasIt's not as if...

Pierre*(interrupting him)* It's not as if what? You admit you took a knife out of the kitchen so you could...

NicolasI didn't take it for that originally. I just told you. I just wanted to have a knife with me. To defend myself.

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

57

NicolasWell, you have a gun!

PierreWhat?

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

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

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

It was a present.

NicolasA present?

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

NicolasWho gave you a gun?

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

PierreMy 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?

Pierre 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?

Pierre 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.

58

Nicolas Is it loaded?

Pierre 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.

Pause.

Pierre What happened at your last school?

Nicolas *doesn't answer.*

This might be the time to tell me about it, don't you think?

Pause.

Something must have happened... Otherwise, you wouldn't have this kind of... You wouldn't do these things.

Pause.

I won't be able to understand, if you don't say anything... I'm here to help you, Nicolas.

Pause.

If you don't want to talk to me about it, maybe there's someone else you could talk to... What do you think?

Nicolas I don't want to talk about it.

Pause.

Pierre Anyway, if you're in pain, there are other ways to channel it. Why have you given up sport? You ought to go running in the park! We could go together if you like. On Saturday mornings... Or whenever you like! But this, this is unacceptable. Do you understand?

Brief pause. Pierre takes Nicolas's arms.

I'm going to give you some disinfectant.

Nicolas No, no... it's just scratches.

Brief pause. Pierre makes an affectionate gesture towards Nicolas.

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

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

Pierre *is caught offguard. Pause. Blackout.*

Scene 10

A Saturday evening. Pierre's doing up his tie in front of the mirror in the drawing room. Behind him, Nicolas arrives with a bowl of cereal and settles down on the sofa.

Pierre You eating cereal?

Nicolas Yes.

Pierre You wouldn't like to try something a bit more exciting?

Nicolas *looks at him uncomprehendingly.*

I don't know, it's Saturday evening...

Nicolas So?

Pierre Don't you want to see your friends?... Or go to the cinema?...

Nicolas I don't have any friends.

Pierre Why say that?

Nicolas Because it's the truth.

Brief pause.

Pierre You used to have... Sebastien. You used to see him a lot. And... what was he called? Mathieu... The one with the long hair... Why don't you see them any more?

Pause.

And what about that party you told me about...?

Nicolas All right... Dad...

Pierre What?

Nicolas Can you stop now?

Sofia *comes into the room. She's wearing a dress.*

Sofia You haven't seen my earrings, have you, darling? I had them in my hand just now... Since when they've disappeared...

Pierre Mm? No. Have you looked in the bedroom?

Sofia I've looked everywhere... I can't understand it. I'm losing my marbles.

Pierre's mobile rings.

PierreAh... Just a minute. Hello? Yes... Yes...

He goes out. Sofia puts on lipstick, looking at herself in the mirror.

SofiaYou haven't seen them?

NicolasWhat?

SofiaMy mother-of-pearl earrings... The ones your father gave me... They were round here somewhere a minute ago...

NicolasNo.

SofiaI keep losing things at the moment...

Pause.

NicolasYou changed your dress? That one really suits you.

SofiaThat's a nice thing to say.

NicolasNo, it's true. You look beautiful.

Sofia *smiles.*

Where are you going?

SofiaNowhere particularly special... Dinner with some friends... Laurent, do you know him?

NicolasNo.

SofiaWell, I say 'nowhere particularly special', but in fact it is pretty special... It's practically the first time we've gone out since Sacha was born... Some good advice, if you want to go on having a life, don't have a child!

She smiles, but immediately thinks better of it.

I'm joking.

NicolasYou know, I know you... I mean, you didn't choose to live with me... And I... I do... I appreciate the fact you... Because you weren't against my moving in here...

SofiaWhy should I be against it?

NicolasI don't know.

SofiaYou're Sacha's brother. So it's your home as well here.

NicolasYes.

Nicolas *looks sad. Suddenly, Sofia has an idea.*

SofiaAre you still thinking about that girl?

Nicolas *looks at her, astonished.*

Your father told me... What I mean is... He told me you'd finally explained to him what happened... At your old school.

NicolasWhat did he tell you?

SofiaHe just said... I mean, that you'd had this girlfriend and that you'd broken up...

Pause.

*(Kindly.)*Don't worry. In the end, we forget these things.

Suddenly, Pierre comes in.

PierreRight. Bad news... Laetitia's stood us up.

SofiaWhat?

PierreI've just had her on the phone.

SofiaBut... Just now? At the last minute?

PierreShe's ill.

SofiaIs this a joke?

PierreI'm sorry.

SofiaShe might at least have said a bit sooner.

PierreShe was really apologetic, but she has a temperature...

SofiaYes, but just like that, at the last minute... What are we going to do?

NicolasWho's Laetitia?

PierreThe young woman who was going to look after Sacha this evening.

SofiaShould I call Marie?

PierreI already have. She's not free.

SofiaGreat. The one time we were able to go out!

PierreWhat shall I do? Call Laurent? Cancel?

Sofia *exhales.*

NicolasYou want me to look after him?

PierreYou?

NicolasIf you like. I could take care of things.

PierreYou... you think you could manage it?

Nicolas*(as if it were self-evident)*Yes.

Sofia *is hesitating.*

PierreWhat do you...?

SofiaNo, it's kind of you, but...

PierreWhy not?

SofiaNo. You know, he's only a baby. It's...

NicolasIt's your decision... I only suggested it to help you out...

SofiaIt's very sweet of you. But I think it would be better if...

PierreAre you sure? Because...

SofiaYes. Very nice. Call Laurent. We'd better cancel.

NicolasJust as you like.

Nicolas leaves. Pierre looks daggers at Sofia.

SofiaWhat?

PierreNothing.

SofiaWhy are you looking at me like that?

PierreWhy do you think? He made a kind suggestion...I don't know why you're refusing.

SofiaYou don't see why?

PierreNo. He's his little brother.

SofiaSo?

PierreSo he can look after him.

SofiaI'm just not sure. He's only a baby, and...

PierreAnd what?

Pause.

You always see things in such a black light.

SofiaBetter to see them in a black light than not to see them at all.

PierreWhat do you mean?

SofiaNothing.

PierreYes. Tell me... What am I not seeing?

SofiaNever mind.

PierreYou really believe Nicolas is not capable of looking after his little brother while he's asleep?

She doesn't answer.

You have to trust him, Sofia. Otherwise how is he going to recover?

SofiaHe's... You know very well. He's coming out of a depression. He's still unstable. And he's even... I'm sorry if this shocks you... But I'm not trusting my son to...

PierreTo...?

She doesn't answer. Nicolas appears in the doorway.

He's holding the earrings in his hand. But Pierre and Sofia aren't aware of his presence.

PierreGo on, say it. You're not trusting your son to...

SofiaStop it.

PierreSay it.

SofiaHe's weird, Pierre. Don't say he isn't. In fact, he's ultra-weird. The look in his eyes, it's worrying sometimes. He... I mean, let's face it, open your eyes, he's not right in the head!

*Suddenly **Sofia** becomes aware of **Nicolas**. **Pierre**, seeing **Sofia**'s aghast expression, turns towards **Nicolas**.*

PierreNicolas... You... What are you doing?

Pause.

Nicolas? You... Ah, you've found the earrings.

SofiaWhere were they?

*Pause. **Nicolas** doesn't move.*

PierreNicolas... You mustn't think... We were arguing because... Well, you understand the situation... It's nothing to do with you... We were just disappointed about not being able to go out tonight... Do you understand? Sofia got a bit over-excited, she wasn't thinking about what she was saying. Do you hear what I'm saying?

Pause.

Nicolas? I'm speaking to you...

Nicolas *moves slowly towards **Sofia** and hands her the earrings.*

NicolasThey were out in the corridor.

He half turns towards his room.

PierreNicolas?

He doesn't turn back.

Nicolas?

*He leaves. **Pierre** and **Sofia** are alone in the room. **Pierre** takes a painful breath. Then he aims a black look, full of reproach, at **Sofia**. Blackout.*

Scene 11

Anne's flat. **Nicolas is on his own. He's writing in an exercise book. Suddenly, the door opens and **Anne** appears. Seeing **Nicolas** makes her jump.**

AnneNicolas? You gave me a fright... What are you doing here?

Pause.

You... You should have told me you were coming by...I... I didn't know.

She comes up to him and greets him.

Are you all right?

NicolasWhat about you?

AnneI'm happy to see you. You... Were you waiting for me?

Nicolas *shrugs his shoulders.*

What's the matter?

NicolasNothing. I wanted to talk to you.

AnneDo you have a bit of time? What time is it?Shouldn't you be at school?

NicolasI was just in the area.

AnneWould you like something to drink or... ?

NicolasNo, thanks.

She sits down.

AnneHow are you? I've left you I don't know how many messages but you never answer...
Tell me. Are you all right?

NicolasSo-so. That's why I came. I wanted to ask you...

AnneWhat?

NicolasI mean, I wanted to know... in fact, I've changed my mind.

AnneWhat about?

NicolasAbout... Do you think I could come back and live here?

AnneHere? But why? I mean... Aren't things going well?

Nicolas *shrugs his shoulders.*

I thought everything was going well. Your father told me you were happy at your new school... Aren't you?

Pause.

Why don't you ever answer me? I left so many messages on your voicemail and...

NicolasI know. I'm sorry...

AnneAre you angry with me?

NicolasNo.

Pause.

AnneTowards the end, things got difficult between us. It's true. But, you know, I'm so happy you've come here to talk to me. I've missed you.

NicolasI've missed you too.

She smiles.

Anne Why do you want to come back here? ... I mean, it's your home... That's your room. But I mean... have you discussed this with your father?

Nicolas No.

Pause.

Anne What's going on, Nicolas?

Nicolas I don't feel good, over there. I was hoping... I thought...

He can't finish his sentence.

But in the end, there's no room for me.

Anne Why do you say that? I thought your father was saying...

Nicolas They find me disturbing more than anything else. I can see it now. I disturb them. And he puts so much pressure on me.

Anne Your father?

Nicolas Yes. He doesn't realise, but he never stops talking to me about my school work. As if that's all there was to life...

Anne It's normal. He worries about you.

Nicolas No. He doesn't give a shit about me. I mean, about who I really am. He just wants me to succeed, like him. The way he has. But I have no desire to be a law student or to become a lawyer. I couldn't give a shit. It doesn't interest me.

Anne I know.

Pause.

At one time, your dream was to be a writer.

Nicolas Yes.

She smiles at him.

Anne Are you still writing?

Nicolas *shrugs his shoulders but in a way that implies the answer 'yes'.*

You remind me of my brother. Both of you are artists.

Nicolas I never said that. Anyway, he went into insurance. So thanks for the comparison...

She smiles.

Anne That's right. I always felt he'd missed out... He could have done great things, I'm sure of it. If he'd persevered... And so could you.

Pause.

Nicolas Anyway, I'm not feeling good over there. I don't think I'll ever be up to standard.

Anne Don't say that...

NicolasIt's true. I feel so worthless... I can see what he thinks of me. I can see it from his side. Even if he denies it... And I don't want to disappoint him.

AnneWhat are you talking about?

Pause.

Your father wants the best for you, Nicolas. It's just you're very different. And I suspect that at the moment he's also under a lot of pressure. Don't you think? You mustn't hold it against him. This business... Has he talked to you about it?

NicolasAbout what?

AnneHe's going to help Signoret draw up his economic plan. He's been dreaming about doing this for years. It's important to him. His father was in politics. He was a town councillor for years, did you know?

NicolasNo.

AnneI suspect there's some connection. In some way, he wants to poach on his territory...

NicolasDid you know he'd given him a gun?

AnneMm?

NicolasSpeaking of poaching... He told me he'd given him a gun.

AnneMaybe. I don't know.

NicolasHe still has it at the flat... I've seen it. He says he loathes hunting. But when he says it, you get the feeling that it's actually his father that he loathes.

Anne *smiles, confirming this.*

Why weren't they on speaking terms?

AnneIt's a long story... Your grandfather was a very... unusual man.

NicolasMeaning?

AnneHe showed no generosity to Pierre. He was very absent... And he never encouraged him. That's the thing, when you tell me your father's putting pressure on you... He's trying to do what's best. In his own way. But he believes in you. He loves you.

Pause.

NicolasI'll never manage it.

AnneWhy do you say that?

Brief pause. Nicolas hesitates to confide any more.

NicolasI...

AnneWhy can't you manage it?

NicolasI'm not well, Mum.

Anne *is thinking about the romantic break-up Pierre has talked to her about. She smiles gently at him. She'd like to show that she understands his unhappiness.*

Anne Your father told me you'd broken up with a girl. Is that it?

Brief pause.

That's not it.

Nicolas No.

Anne All the same...

Nicolas *(interrupting her)* Yes, I know. That's what I told him.

Anne *looks at him uncomprehendingly.*

He didn't understand what was wrong... He needed a rational explanation. You know what he's like... So I told him what he wanted to hear.

Anne You mean...

Nicolas I never even went out with that girl.

Pause. Anne still doesn't understand.

It's just...

Brief pause.

It's just I'm not made like other people.

Anne *looks at him questioningly. What does he mean?*

Sometimes I feel I'm not made for this life. I can't manage it. Even so, I try, every day, with all my strength, but I can't manage it. I'm in pain, permanently. And I'm tired. I'm tired of being in pain.

Anne Nicolas...

Nicolas I want it to end, Mum.

Anne *seems very upset. She takes him in her arms.*

Anne Don't say that, my love. Never say that. Do you understand me? You have so much ahead of you. You have your whole life... So don't say that, my little sunbeam... Do you understand me? Don't say that to your mother.

She caresses him, maternally. He closes his eyes. Pause.

Blackout.

Scene 12

The apartment. Afternoon. Pierre arrives back from his office. He goes directly to Nicolas's door and knocks.

Pierre Nicolas! Could you come here, please?

Nicolas*(offstage)*What is it?

PierreCome here! I need to talk to you.

Pierre *crosses the room. He's clearly tense. Nicolas appears in his doorway.*

NicolasWhat?

PierreSit down.

NicolasWhat is it?

PierreI 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.

What's going on?

Nicolas *doesn't know what he's talking about.*

You obviously don't know what I'm talking about.

NicolasNo.

PierreI'm talking about school... What's going on?

NicolasNothing special. Why?

PierreNothing special?

NicolasNo.

Pause. It's clear that Pierre is trying to restrain himself.

PierreYesterday afternoon you had your mock exam, is that right?

NicolasYes.

PierreThat's what you told me. How did it go?

NicolasI've already told you.

PierreYes, but I'd like you to tell me again.

NicolasQuite well. I think.

PierreGood.

Brief pause.

Only, you see, yesterday afternoon, Sofia went for a walk with Sacha. They went to the park and they saw you. You were sitting on a bench. Apparently, you were writing in an exercise book. In any case, you weren't at school.

Pause.

So I'm going to ask you one last time and this time I want an answer... What's going on?

Pause.

You've started to skip classes again, is that it?

NicolasNo.

PierreThen why weren't you at school yesterday?

NicolasWhy did she tell you that?

PierreThat's not the problem, Nicolas.

NicolasYes, it is the problem.

PierreNo! It is not the problem. The problem is that we're doing everything we can to help you, that we're trying to do our best for you, that we're bending over backwards for your sake, while at the same time you're taking us for... You're taking the piss!

NicolasShe told you because she wants to set us against one another.

PierreThat's not true.

NicolasSince the start, she's wanted me out of here.

PierreYou're wrong. And anyway, that's not what we're talking about. Whether she's said that to me or not is not the problem! The problem is that you're lying to me, Nicolas. Why weren't you at school yesterday?

Pause.

I'm listening.

NicolasI 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.

PierreYou're sorry?

Pause.

I called the school. I called them. 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.

When I think you had the nerve to tell me you were getting good marks and being invited to parties and...The whole time, you were lying to me!

Pause.

Now what am I supposed to do? Send you to boarding school?

Nicolas *gives a strange smile, as if what Pierre has said is predictable.*

What sort of a reaction were you expecting from me? What have you been doing all these days? Because I can't understand what benefit you... You were walking, is that it? You...

Pierre *seems at a loss.*

We give you a chance to climb back up the slope and what do you do? You carry on just as before. You... You lie to everybody... You...

He 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 stand shoulder to shoulder, to give you strength and confidence, but evidently, none of that's any use.

Pause.

You think you can live your life like that? Just doing what you feel like? Getting out of going to school, of taking any responsibility, of growing up... What are you going to do with your life? If you're not doing anything! Tell me, what's to become of you?

Pause. Nicolas says nothing, but is staring at him.

Obviously, you have no answer. And stop staring at me like that. What's the idea? To intimidate me. That won't work, I can tell you right away. Not with me.

Pause.

All right, I'm going to explain to you how things are going to be. From tomorrow on, whether you like it or not, you're going back to school. Is that clear?

NicolasNo.

PierreSorry?

Nicolas*(calmly)*I'm saying no, I will not go back to school.

Pause.

PierreWhat are you playing at, Nicolas?

Pause.

When I was your age, my mother was ill, I didn't see my father any more, I had money problems, but I fought on. I fought on and, believe me, most days it wasn't much fun. And

what's happened to you? What is there in your life that's so dramatic you're not able to go to school like everybody else? Answer me!

Pause.

Answer me, Nicolas!

NicolasI can't manage it.

PierreYou 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?

NicolasLiving.

Brief pause.

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

PierreSorry?

NicolasIf I'm like this. It's your fault.

PierreWhat are you talking about?

Pause.

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

NicolasYou disgust me.

PierreSorry?

Pause.

What did you say?

NicolasYou make all these grand speeches about life and work, then you abandon us as if we were pieces of shit without a second glance...

PierreWhat?

NicolasYou give yourself these superior airs, but since the start you've basically behaved like a bastard.

Pierre *is trying to keep calm.*

PierreTake back what you just said! Nicolas... Do you hear me? Take back what you just said, at once!

NicolasBastard!

Pierre *cracks and launches himself at Nicolas. He grabs him by the scruff of the neck and shakes him as he speaks.*

PierreMe, a bastard? Me?

Nicolas *tries to struggle free, but Pierre 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. **Pierre** raises his voice, he's practically in tears and he shakes his son more and more violently, in desperation.*

Answer, for Christ's sake!

Pierre 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 mother... So why are you saying this? Why?

Nicolas Let me go!

Pierre Is it because I fell in love with another woman? 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?

Pierre is almost shouting.

It's my life!

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

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

*He wants to help him get up, but **Nicolas** snatches away, gets up on his own and looks at **Pierre** 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. **Pierre** looks totally lost. Blackout.

Scene 13

*Waiting room in an emergency ward. **Pierre** is anxiously waiting. Suddenly, **Anne** appears. It looks as if she's been running.*

Pierre Anne...

Anne Where is he?

Pierre They're with him. Don't worry.

Anne How is he? Have they told you anything?

Pierre They found him in time. Everything's going to be all right.

She embraces him tightly.

AnneGod... What's happened?

PierreThe doctor's coming to see us. He'll explain. Don't worry.

AnneBut you're sure there's no danger?

PierreSo they told me.

AnneMy little boy...

PierreCome on, it's almost over. It'll be all right...

AnneBut what happened? What did he do it with?

PierreA razor.

AnneHe told me the other day. He told me he wanted to... I should have listened to him... Or understood him better.

PierreCome on... calm down.

AnneIt's my fault. He came to see me. He came to talk to me and he... told me quite plainly.

PierreAnne, please, calm down... Everything's all right. Do you understand me?

AnneNo, everything's not all right! How can you say that? And why doesn't he have an electric razor?

Pierre *takes her in his arms to calm her down.*

PierreCome on... Calm down. Please... Calm down. It's no use getting into a state. Please...

Pause. She calms down.

AnneHow long do we have to wait?

PierreI don't know.

AnneHow long have you been here?

PierreHalf an hour, something like that. They told me they'd be out to see us soon.

AnneBut why did he do that?

She senses that Pierre is hesitant to answer.

What happened?

PierreI wasn't there. I was working. It was Sofia who found him. She called an ambulance and they brought him here. I came right away.

AnneBut didn't she say anything to you?

PierreNo. All I know is, she... She went out and... She'd forgotten her mobile and she had to go back to the house. That's how she found him in the bathroom... He'd just... We were lucky. The ambulance arrived very quickly... I'm sorry. I'm really sorry.

AnneI don't understand.

PierreIt's more than ten days since... Since our fight...He told you about it, I expect? He hardly ever left the 82 flat. He was going round in circles. He wasn't doing anything. It was hell. For everyone else, as well.

AnneI know.

PierreAfter it happened, his attitude towards me changed... He hardly ever answered me, he wouldn't look me in the eye... I'm telling you, it got really unbearable. And yesterday evening, I lost my temper... D'you understand? I can't get rid of this constant feeling of rage... I want to shake him! He has everything anyone needs to be happy. Everything! And he just lies in bed doing nothing... It's heart-breaking. He's completely switched off. I'm not even talking about school... Forget about that.

AnneSo you had another fight?

Pierre *buries his face in his hands.*

Pierre...

PierreI wanted so much to help him... I wanted to save him. And in the end, what's happened is the opposite... And today, we end up here... It's horrible. I so much wanted to succeed in... For things to turn out differently... To be in a better position to...

AnneI know.

She gently takes his hand as if to console him.

PierreWhat are we going to do?

AnneI don't know. I'm as lost as you are, honestly.

Pierre *looks desperate.*

PierreDo you think it was my fault?

Suddenly, the Doctor appears. Pierre stands up. Then Anne.

Ah... Doctor...

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Doctor(*shaking hands with Anne*)Good afternoon. I'm Dr Ramès. I'm looking after your son.

AnneWhere is Nicolas?

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

PierreHow is he?

DoctorHe's no longer in danger. You don't need to worry.

AnneCan we see him?

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

Pierre *sits down, but Anne stays on her feet.*

AnneWhat's happening?

DoctorThe cut was not very deep, and it was treated very promptly. The worst was prevented. He was lucky.

AnneYou're absolutely sure of that?

DoctorYes. Trust me.

AnneThank God...

DoctorAll the same, we need to take some decisions.

Brief pause. The Doctor gestures to Anne, who sits down. The Doctor sits down himself.

I've been able to talk to your son... He's regained consciousness... And he seems, shall we say, annoyed to have woken up here... Which is very common in this sort of case.

PierreHas he said anything? About what caused him to do this?

DoctorYou know, we're very accustomed to these situations... And I think it would be important for Nicolas to spend a bit of time under observation.

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AnneUnder observation?

PierreYou mean...

DoctorI've just checked and there is a vacancy in our facility.

AnneBut how long would he need to stay?

DoctorWe'll decide that together. All the same, what's important is that, in this first phase, he should stay in isolation.

PierreIn isolation?

AnneWhat does that mean?

DoctorObviously he won't be completely on his own. There'll be the whole medical team, as well as other patients. 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, with the family.

AnneWe won't be able to see him? Is that what you're...

DoctorEvery 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... To decrease the pressure... It's nothing against you, you must understand that. You don't come into it.

AnneBut...

DoctorThen, we'll meet once a week, in my office, with Nicolas, for us all to assess his progress...

PierreWill this last a long time, do you think?

DoctorNot necessarily. What I want is for him to acquire an awareness of what he's done. He doesn't have that at the moment. His tendency at the moment is to minimise it somewhat, which seems to me dangerous. I wouldn't want him to try it again.

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Annel'd like to see him, Doctor.

DoctorYou'll have to come back to bring him his things, obviously... But during this first week it'd be best for you to entrust him to us. Don't worry. We're familiar with these kinds of situations. Sadly, they're very common. We know what needs doing...

A male Nurse appears. He gestures to the Doctor.

Excuse me a minute.

He joins the Nurse, and they exchange a few words in a corner. Pierre and Anne remain silent. They're in shock. Pierre takes Anne's hand. The Doctor comes back to them.

I'm sorry, I have to go back. I suggest you go and see my assistant on the second floor. Ask for the Department of Psychiatry.

Pierre is stunned by the word.

PierrePsychiatry?

DoctorYes. She's familiar with the case. She'll give you information about what steps need taking. All right?

Pierre and Anne don't know how to respond.

Come on... Don't worry. He's finally in very good hands.

The Doctor smiles and leaves. Pierre and Anne remain silent. They don't move. Pause. Blackout.

Scene 14

Pierre's flat. **Sofia** has packed her suitcase. She's getting ready to leave for Italy with Sacha.

PierreAre you ready?

SofiaYes.

Pause.

PierreWhat time is the plane?

SofiaI ordered a taxi. It'll be here in five minutes.

PierreI'll help you down with the suitcase.

SofiaNo, no. It's all right.

Pause. There's a palpable tension between them.

Pierre Listen, I'm sorry about last night... Sorry... I expect I'd had a bit too much to drink and... I was over the top. And stupid. I apologise.

Sofia I don't understand why we have to quarrel like that.

Pierre It's my fault. I'm sorry.

Sofia All we talk about is him. For weeks now... You'd think our lives entirely revolved around him...

Pierre I know.

Pause.

But it's breaking my heart to know you're going away angry with me.

Sofia Stop it, please.

Pierre What?

Sofia Stop saying I'm angry. That's not the problem.

Pause.

Why can't you come with us? Like we planned...

Pierre I can't, Sofia...

Sofia Yes, you can! The doctor told you he needs to be in isolation for a week... So what difference does it make if you're here or somewhere else?

Pierre I don't feel like going to the seaside, knowing he's in there. I'm sorry: I can't.

Sofia You could come for a few days. You need a rest as well... You're done in. It's still possible...

Pierre I can't. I'm sorry. I couldn't go, when... It's beyond me.

Pause.

Sofia When's he coming out?

Pierre Next Monday, I imagine.

Sofia And then?

Brief pause.

Why are you refusing to let him go back to his mother's? I mean, if that's what he wants...

Pierre I didn't say I was refusing. It's just... It won't solve the problem. And then, I don't know... After everything that happened between us... After our row... It would be such a failure...

Sofia For him or for you?

Pause.

PierreSee, the strangest thing is, I can't work out what I'm feeling any more. Sometimes it's rage and then, a moment later, it's pain. Sometimes I'm angry with him and sometimes with myself...

SofiaSounds normal.

PierreI hope I can be a better father to Sacha.

SofiaBut you're a very good father, Pierre. Stop all this!

PierreI'm not sure any more... What makes me sad is to have to play a part I loathe with everything in me.

Sofia *questions him with a look.*

For example, these last weeks I keep catching myself saying things... Exactly the same things my father used to say to me when I was young... things which made me genuinely loathe him... And now it's my turn. Makes me think I've finished up being just like him.

SofiaWhat kind of things?

Pierre'What are you going to do with your life?' or 'When I was your age, I did this or I did that...' or 'What are we going to do with you?' It disgusts me... I'm disappointed... in him... but in myself as well... Especially in myself. I admit it.

Pause.

SofiaWe have to go.

PierreBefore you do, tell me you forgive me for yesterday. I can't let you go like this.

SofiaI'd really like us to stop quarrelling like that.

PierreMe too.

SofiaThese last weeks have been really...

PierreI know.

SofiaNo, you don't know. You aren't here. You're working all day, but I'm here, on my own and...

PierreYou're not on your own.

SofiaYes, I'm on my own! And I'm tired! And there's Sacha as well. Your other son. And he needs you too!

PierreSofia, please... Don't let's start again.

Brief pause.

Sofia*(more gently)*All right. I'll call you when we get there, OK?

PierreOK.

He goes and picks up the baby from the pushchair and hugs him very tightly in his arms.

Come on, little man... Give me a cuddle... As I'm not going to see you for a week. And I'm going to miss you... Look after Mummy, will you? And your godmother as well... And you're going to discover the sea... Mm? You'll see how beautiful it is. You'll see how big it is... I'm really sorry I'm not going to be with you. But I have to stay in Paris. Do you understand? You'll tell me all about it, all right? Will you tell me about it, little man?

He hugs him very tight. For some time. Sofia looks at him, fond and melancholy. Blackout.

Scene 15

A few days later. The hospital. Anne and Pierre are on their feet. The Nurse stands in front of them.

NursePlease sit down.

AnneHow is he?

NurseDr Ramès will see you in a minute. First, I'm going to go and find Nicolas, who's close by; he wanted to talk to you before the meeting.

PierreFine.

NurseI'll be right back. And then I'll go and let the doctor know you've arrived.

He goes out. Pierre and Anne sit down.

PierreHe doesn't seem very bright, that nurse.

AnneWhy do you say that?

PierreI don't trust them at all.

The door opens and Nicolas appears. He's in hospital clothes. He throws himself into his mother's arms and then his father's.

NicolasMum!

AnneDarling!

NicolasI've missed you so much...

AnneWe've missed you. How are you?

NicolasIt seems as if I haven't seen you for months...

PierreWe're here now. We're here...

NurseNicolas, I'm going to leave you for five minutes, as you asked. To have your reunion... And while that's happening, I'm going to look for the doctor. All right?

NicolasYes.

NurseI'll be right back.

The Nurse leaves.

PierreHow are you?

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

PierreDon't worry.

NicolasYou absolutely have to get me out of here.Promise me?

AnneHas it gone badly?

NicolasIt was dreadful, Mum. The worst week of my life. Everyone here is sick. Anorexics, psychopaths... and... They're all crazy... They all talk about dying the whole time... I'm too sensitive for a place like this. Every night, I've been afraid... There's no lock on my door and there's this man who keeps passing to and fro in front of my room and I'm convinced he's going to come back while I'm asleep... There's another one who cries all night. All night, Mum, he doesn't stop for a single minute. 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.

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

NicolasHe'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. He's already explained to me what he's going to tell you... He thinks I'm ill. He told me I was going to have to stay here for weeks and weeks... But I'm telling you, I can't, I won't be able to stand it... I'll crack up... You know me... You know what I'm like... I'm not saying these things just like that. I feel much worse here than I do at home... All these people, I'm finding it too disturbing. I only have one dream, to get back to normal life. And to see you. To be with you. I need you. You have to take me back home. Please, Dad, please, Mum. I'm begging you.

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

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

AnneDon't worry, Nicolas. We're here. We're with you.

Nicolas *smiles.*

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

AnneWe've missed you as well.

The Doctor knocks on the door and comes in, followed by the Nurse.

DoctorHello, good afternoon...

AnneGood afternoon, Doctor...

They shake hands.

DoctorRight... I suggest you sit down. Nicolas, you can sit over here. Vincent, who's a nurse, will stay with us during our conversation.

Pause. The Doctor settles down. Nicolas starts biting his nails.

Good. I expect Nicolas has communicated to you that he wishes to leave the hospital.

PierreYes.

DoctorHe's talked to me about it as well. I've taken it on board that, for him, this has been a testing week.

PierreYes, so it seems.

DoctorWhich is often the case with the first week.

NicolasI don't want to stay here.

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

Nicolas(*to his parents*)You see.

PierreWhy?

DoctorNicolas is going through a period of acute depression. He talks a good deal about his suicidal urges. (*To Nicolas.*) You've spoken to me about it several times, remember, in the course of our conversations?

Nicolas*doesn't answer.*

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

NicolasThat's not true. I'm better. All that counts for me is to come back home. There won't be a problem. I promise.

DoctorNicolas... Only two days ago, when I asked you what you'd do if we let you out today, do you remember your answer?

NicolasI was trying to provoke you.

DoctorI don't think so.

Nicolas(*to his father*)You see... He knows better than I do what I'm feeling.

PierreCalm down, Nicolas.

NicolasI am calm. It's this dimwit who doesn't understand anything.

AnneNicolas, please.

Brief pause.

PierreWhat do you suggest?

DoctorEven 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. They can have serious consequences, and in this kind of situation, recidivism is very common. Nicolas also suffers from a certain disconnect from reality, which causes very significant anxiety issues for him. All that can be treated. When things have been stabilised, and we find a suitable treatment, then we can think about letting him go.

PierreHow much time will that take?

DoctorDifficult to say. Certainly several weeks...

Nicolas*(to his mother)*Mum...

DoctorYou're safe here, Nicolas. We're looking after you. There's a whole team of doctors, nurses and teachers. And there are all our daily activities and...

NicolasYou think you're going to cure me with a pottery class?

DoctorYes, that's part of the process.

NicolasIt's a bunch of crap.

He gets up.

PierreNicolas! Calm down, please.

Pause. Nicolas sits down again.

Do you understand what the doctor's saying? It's for your own good if...

Nicolas*(interrupting him)*For my own good? How do you think I'm going to get better if I'm surrounded by people who are much sicker than I am? I've thought about it, you know... I... All those hours of doing nothing... I've been thinking about everything that's been going on... About my life... And I'm not the same any more... Trust me... I've grown up all of a sudden. I've understood about things... Things I won't do any more...

Pierre *looks at the Doctor, hoping that these assertions might have modified his position.*

What I've understood is that I don't want to finish up in a place like this. It's been like an electric shock. And now, I feel I can return to normal life. I feel I can go back to school... I feel it. You have to trust me. It's as if I'm finally seeing the end of the tunnel. But you have to take me out of here. If you don't, I'm going under. I'm serious. I can't take it... Dad, don't abandon me... You understand me... You've always understood me... Whereas they don't understand me... *(Imploringly.)*Dad... I'm begging you...

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

DoctorNicolas 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...

AnneDischarge papers?

DoctorDischarge papers, yes. Which will specify that you've taken this decision against medical advice. If something were to happen in the next few days, you'd be held responsible, not the hospital.

NicolasBut nothing's going to happen...

Pause.

DoctorI know it's a difficult decision. Especially in front of your son... But you must listen to what I'm telling you. This is not a casual opinion. Your son is in no state to leave here. 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.

Nicolas *is getting anxious, as he senses Pierre changing sides.*

NicolasWhat risk?

DoctorA risk which, as a father, I would never take with my own son... Nicolas needs to be looked after and treated. That's not the parents' role. It's a psychiatrist's role.

NicolasDad... I'm not ill...

DoctorIf we take the right decisions, Nicolas will leave this place in good health and be able to return to a normal life. But make no mistake. The stakes couldn't be higher.

NicolasMum, I'm not ill... I want to go home...

AnneI know, darling... I...

She turns towards Pierre, as if she expects him to be able to make a decision.

Pierre? What... I mean, I don't know... I... Say something.

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.

NicolasDon't leave me here, Dad... I'm begging you...I need you...

Doctor*(trying to interrupt him)*Now...

NicolasI swear to you I understand now... You have to give me a second chance... It was a cry for help... I'm sorry about it with all my heart... I needed you to understand my pain... But I'll never do it again... I swear to you.

DoctorI think your parents have heard your arguments, Nicolas.

NicolasPlease...

Doctor*(to the parents)*And now you're going to have to take a decision.

PierreNow?

DoctorYes. It's important for Nicolas to understand that you support the medical team.

NicolasDad...

Pierre*still doesn't say anything; he's tortured by having to make this decision.*

DoctorYou mustn't feel guilty. This is not about how much you love your son. It's about protecting him. In these circumstances, love is not enough. Love will not be enough.

NicolasDad...

DoctorNicolas, it's lunchtime. I'm going to ask Vincent to accompany you to the refectory.

The Nurse stands up.

But before that, I think it's important your parents make their decision in front of you. It will help you to accept your treatment.

NicolasI want to come home... Dad...

Brief pause.

PierreI'm sorry, Nicolas.

*Suddenly, **Nicolas** jumps up, full of pain and rebelliousness, like the swelling music.*

NicolasNo! Dad! You can't do that to me! Not you!Dad! Not you...

*The **Doctor** gets up, the **Nurse** tries to control **Nicolas**. The lines may overlap.*

DoctorNicolas! Calm down!

NurseSteady... Nicolas!

Nicolas *pushes the **Nurse** away, violently.*

NicolasWhat have I ever done to you?

DoctorVincent will accompany you to the refectory...

*The **Nurse** tries to lead **Nicolas** away, but he's struggling.*

NicolasLeave me alone! Don't touch me! What have I ever done to you?

AnnePierre, do something...

PierreJust a minute...

NicolasDad, help!

NurseCalm down.

PierreNicolas...

NurseSteady on...

DoctorCalm down...

NicolasHelp!

AnnePierre...

PierreStop, you're hurting him!

Doctor*(trying to intercept **Pierre**)*Please!

NurseYou're going to hurt yourself.

NicolasDad! Mum!

NurseCome on, come with me... Please...

DoctorNicolas...

NicolasDad...

Anne *bursts into tears.*

DoctorCome on, Nicolas... Say goodbye to your parents...

NicolasDad...

NurseNow calm down!

*He leads **Nicolas** away by force and makes him leave the room. **Anne** is crying. **Pierre** is paralysed with suffering.*

Come on!

Nicolas (*crying out*)Dad... Dad! Dad!

Pause. Blackout.

Scene 16

Pierre's flat.

AnneAll right? How do you feel?

PierreRelieved... Don't you?

AnneI don't know. I hope we've taken the right decision.

PierreI'm sure of it.

Anne(*worried*)The doctor seemed sure, as well.

PierreHe was saying the first thing that came into his head. And he had such an unpleasant manner. Don't you think? Do you honestly think Nicolas is ill?

AnneI didn't say that.

PierreI prefer to trust what Nicolas told us. Don't you? He told us it was a cry for help and that he wouldn't do it again. We have to trust him. Personally, I believe him when he says this week on his own has made him understand a lot and that he's changed...

AnneYes.

PierreI really believe him. We have to believe him. It's important.

AnneYou saw the way he looked when we found him in that refectory... When he understood we'd signed them, 100the discharge papers, did you see the way he looked? It was like seeing him again, when he was a little boy.

PierreYes. He was so happy... Me too, I was as well. I couldn't have left him in there. You can't leave your child in hell... And I'm sure this will help us to start off again in the right direction. I'm sure of it. This won't all have been for nothing...

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

PierreMaking tea.

AnneI know. But why's he taking so long...?

PierreThe one time he insists on doing something...

AnneHow do you see things? I mean... Down the line...

Pierre Seems a bit utopian to hope he'll go back to school. It's May already... If you ask me, the best thing would be for him to get strong and start again next year. After all, it's not that serious.

Anne But what's he going to do all day? You think you can leave him on his own?

Pierre I've been thinking about it and this is what I wanted to suggest to you... maybe he could come to live with you, since it seems... And during the day, I could take him to the office. To work. I mean, as an intern. What do you think?

Anne (*dubiously*) You think that would interest him?

Pierre In any case, he'd be looked after. He'd learn a few things. And I'd be there.

Anne With all the work you have on?

Pierre I'm going to turn down Signoret's offer.

Anne Are you?

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Pierre Yes. I don't give a damn about politics or his economic programme. I want to concentrate on what really counts. And for me, what really counts is to save Nicolas. I feel it's 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... I even managed to find some madeleines for you, Mum.

Anne That's nice...

Nicolas You still like them?

Anne Yes. Unfortunately.

Nicolas *seems to lose his balance slightly.*

Pierre 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!

Pierre Thanks...

Anne *notices there are only two cups.*

Anne Aren't you joining us?

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

Anne No, thanks.

Nicolas (*offering his father sugar*) Dad?

Pierre No, thanks. Kind offer.

AnneAll right? How are you feeling?

NicolasSo happy to be here. With you.

PierreSo are we.

AnnePierre, you'll have to give me the prescription. You do have it? Then I can go and get it filled... *(To Nicolas.)* I was going to go to the cinema later. Want to come?

NicolasWhy not? But I'd like to take a shower first. The ones in there were so dirty... I've been dreaming about having a shower all week... If it doesn't disturb you.

PierreNo. On the contrary...

Anne and Pierre *laugh.*

NicolasWhat? Why are you laughing? I smell bad, is that it?

PierreNo, no.

NicolasMum? Do I smell bad?

AnneYou really want me to answer that question?

Nicolas *watches them laughing. He looks happy.*

NicolasI like seeing you together. It's been a long time. I mean, since the three of us were all together...

AnneThat's true.

NicolasIt's like the good old days...

Nicolas *smiles. Then he gets up.*

Right. I'm off.

AnneSee you soon. I'll wait for you.

Nicolas *takes a few steps, then turns back towards his parents.*

NicolasI 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.

PierreAnd we love you. Come on, off you go. Don't worry. We'll be waiting for you.

Nicolas *goes out. Pause.*

You see...

AnneYes. He's back to the way he was before. Sweet and attentive...

PierreAbsolutely...

Pause.

AnneIf you're not doing anything today, why don't you come to the cinema with us?

PierreI'm not sure.

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

PierreI have some work to do, but... What were you planning to see?

AnneI need to check the times. Have you been lately?

PierreNo. Haven't had the time.

AnneSomebody told me about a film... I'm trying to remember the name... You remember the time we used to go to the cinema sometimes in the middle of the afternoon? We used to tell everyone we had important meetings, meetings which couldn't be put off, and then we'd rendezvous at that little cinema, near the Rue de l'Odéon... Do you remember?

PierreOf course.

AnneI used to love that. It felt like playing truant, didn't it? Being in the cinema while everyone else was at work...

PierreYes.

AnneIt was so long ago.

Pierre *smiles at her.*

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

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

Scene 17

Epilogue. Three years later. Pierre is in the living room.

He seems lost in thought. Sofia comes in.

SofiaDid you remember to buy the wine?

PierreMm? Yes, yes.

SofiaGreat. Thanks.

PierreI put it in the pantry.

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

PierreYou want me to do it?

SofiaNo, no, I'll take care of it.

She goes over to the door and calls offstage.

Sacha? Bathtime!

She turns back to Pierre.

Is it all right? Aren't you pleased they're coming for dinner?

PierreVery pleased. What about you?

SofiaHave you noticed? Look what I found.

She shows him the earrings.

PierreHa!... You haven't worn them for ages.

SofiaYes. I don't know. I thought they'd go with my dress.

Pierre *smiles at her.*

Right. See you in a minute.

PierreSee you, darling.

She goes out.

Sofia(*offstage*)Sacha? Are you ready?

Pause. Pierre puts some music on. Suddenly, there's a knock at the door. Is that the guests already? Pierre checks his watch. He turns off the music and goes to open the door.

It's Nicolas.

PierreHere already?

NicolasI'm not too early, am I?

PierreNo, no, not at all. Come in...

They embrace.

Are you on your own?

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

PierreNo problem. Come in. How are you? You look well!

NicolasVery good, thanks. What about you?

PierreYou got back this morning?

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

PierreHow's Berlin? All going well?

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

PierreOh, really?

NicolasWe already spend every evening either at her place or mine... We thought it was more sensible to find a bigger place for the two of us...

PierreCongratulations! That's excellent news!

NicolasYes. I'm looking forward to introducing her to you, you know.

PierreAnd I'm looking forward to meeting her. After all this time you've been telling me about her...

NicolasYou'll see, she's so nice. I'm crazy about her. Have they changed the code to get into the building?

PierreI don't think so, no.

NicolasThe code I had didn't work. Is it the same as it always was?

PierreYes.

NicolasOh, right. I must have made a mistake. How's Sacha? Is he here?

PierreHe's just having his bath.

NicolasWe got him a present. But Élodie wants to give it to him. She picked it out.

PierreThat's nice.

NicolasAnd I have a present for you.

PierreFor me?

NicolasYes. In fact, that's why I've come early...Actually, it's more something I wanted to tell you about.

Brief pause. Then Nicolas laughs.

You should see your face! Don't worry! I'm not here to tell you I'm going to be a father!

PierreNever crossed my mind.

NicolasNo, it's something more... Something about me and I wanted you to be the first to know.

PierreI'm listening.

Brief pause.

(Enthusiastic but impatient.) Well, tell me!

Nicolas *laughs again.*

NicolasYou know, besides my architecture course, there was always something else I loved: writing... And recently, I've spent quite a bit of time... Especially since I've been living in Berlin... I don't know why, but it all seems easier over there. It's given me some distance from all sorts of things. And helped me think about everything that was happening, when... I've always wanted to turn it into something positive. So here it is...

He hands him a book.

PierreWhat's this?

NicolasMy first novel.

PierreIsn't? You wrote this?

NicolasI didn't want to tell anyone about it until I had it in my hands. Out of superstition... I was so scared... But now it's here and it really exists... I just called at my publisher's and they've given me the first copy. I wanted you to be the first person to have it.

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

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

Pierre *opens it and confirms that it is in fact dedicated to him. He says nothing, but it's clear he's feeling strong emotions.*

So, obviously, it talks a bit about what you already know... All those slightly testing years... For you and for Mum... 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...

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

PierreI'm so proud of you.

Nicolas *smiles.*

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

Pierre *has tears in his eyes.*

NicolasBetter wait till you've read it... You might not like it.

PierreI know you. I know it'll be beautiful.

NicolasNow you're not going to start crying?

Pierre*(voice full of emotion)*No, sorry. I'm just moved when I see everything you're doing... Everything you've... What you've made of yourself... If we'd known when all that was going on... At the same time, I never doubted you. Never. And really, what I want to tell you is... I'm proud of you. Come on, come here.

He takes him in his arms again and embraces him. After a brief pause, Nicolas tries to disengage, but Pierre hugs him even tighter, as if he was afraid to let him go. Then, they move apart. Pierre is almost embarrassed by how emotional he's become.

NicolasNow, let's hope it's a success!

PierreOf course it'll be a success... Who knows, you might even become famous!

Pierre *laughs unexpectedly. It's so gratifying, after all these years, finally to find his son has turned into this talented young man with a great future.*

NicolasRight. You don't mind if I go and give Sacha a hug? I've missed him a lot, as well.

PierreYes, he'll be happy to see you... He's always talking about his big brother.

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

SofiaPierre?

Pause.

What are you doing?

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

Pierre? Are you talking to yourself?

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

Pierre? What's the matter with you?

*Suddenly, **Pierre** cracks and starts crying, as if he was crying for the first time. His body is shaken by a very primitive sob, his pain seems almost physical. **Sofia** rushes over to him.*

What's happening? Pierre? What's the matter?

Pierre*(through his tears)*Nothing.

SofiaWhat's the matter? Are you thinking about Nicolas?

Pierre *nods.*

Come on...

PierreI should have paid more attention to him...I should have... I should...

SofiaPierre... There was nothing more we could do.We tried everything...

PierreNo.

SofiaYes, we did... You've nothing to blame yourself for. You did everything that was humanly possible.

Pierre *shakes his head.*

Come on, please.

She hugs him and tries to console him physically.

Pierre*(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...

Sofia*(trying to console him)*Pierre...

Pierre*(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?

SofiaYou did your best, Pierre. Believe me. Remember what the doctors told you. It was an illness...

PierreNo, I should have... I...

SofiaCome on, calm down. I know it's hard. But life goes on. There's Sacha. And me, I'm here as well. Mm? And this evening, we have friends coming for dinner. Even if it's hard, life goes on. Life goes on, Pierre.

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

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

Pierre *can't stop crying. Sofia hugs him to her even more closely, as if she was his mother.*
Pause.

Calm down, my love. Calm down... Come on... Shh... Everything will be all right. Mm? Calm down... You've nothing to blame yourself for. You did everything you could for him. It was his choice, Pierre. 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 his grief is calmed.

Pause. Blackout.