

Flowers and Painting

A Play in One Act

by

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Characters:

Rita (F) – early-twenties (British accent).

Ryan (M) – a couple of years older than Rita (American accent that steps into a British one occasionally).

George (M) – early fifties (British accent), with somewhat slowed speech and mannerisms.

They are sister, brother, and father, so there should be a degree of physical resemblance between them.

Alternatively, they may be cast as an adoptive family, with the following added into Scene 1. After the existing text:

Ryan: When you're young, a year is a long time. You get used to things.

Rita: Yeah.

Ryan nods slowly and fiddles with his coffee cup.

Insert:

Rita: Adopted families aren't supposed to break.

Ryan: I suppose that's why we're all meant to be adopted sons and daughters.

(A quiet pause.)

Scene 1:

One simple table in a coffee shop, with two chairs. The table may have a cloth and look rather old fashioned. At the back of the table is a simple vase holding several blue crocuses. Two coffee cups are on the front of the table, perhaps in relative shadow (Rita and Ryan will ignore them until their coffee is delivered, at which point the cups 'appear').

Rita and Ryan walk on stage. Rita carries a small shoulder bag. Ryan looks around, his first time in the coffee shop. Rita, familiar with the place, nods to an unseen waitress. They both look a little nervous.

Rita: *(To the waitress)* Hi. *(Hearing an unheard reply)* Thanks.

Ryan: Thank you.

Rita: I like this table.

Ryan: It's a good table.

Rita: Yeah, I like it.

They sit down.

Ryan: So, this is your regular place, hey?

Rita: I have a few. *(Whispers)* They might think I was a bit weird if I came every day.

Ryan: Very wise.

They both look to the unseen waitress who evidently comes across. They speak to her, and each other, in response to an unheard half of the conversation.

Rita: What would you like?

Ryan: *(To the unseen waitress)* Black coffee, please.

Rita: *(To the unseen waitress)* I'll have an Americano, please.

They listen to their orders repeated back, unheard.

Ryan: They aren't the same?

Rita: I thought that. They brew them different.

Ryan: Oh, Americano, please.

They smile at the unseen waitress who walks away. A moment's quiet.

Ryan: I do like these flowers.

Rita: Me too. They're one of the reasons I come here.

They both consider the crocuses for a moment.

Ryan: Well, what are the chances, hey?

Rita: I know, what are the chances?

Ryan: Yes, I was hoping to find you, planning to. But it's a big city.

Rita: Yes, a lot of people passing by.

Ryan: Yes. Today, I would have been doing, I don't know what... Probably would have had a plan – something – and then yesterday meet my little sister in the park.

Rita: Did you recognise me?

Ryan: (*Ryan nods.*) I mean, there was a photo.

Rita: Oh?

Ryan: A mug-shot – passport photo. You were a teenager, I think.

Rita: Oh dear.

Ryan: And the video calls, too. I mean, maybe even without the photo. It was strange.

Rita: Yeah. And now we're having Americanos. Who called them Americanos?

Ryan: I've wondered that too. English-os wouldn't work though.

Rita: Columbian-os. Columbian-os

Ryan: Ecuadorian-os.

Rita: Brazilian-os. (*A pause.*) Where else do they grow coffee?

Neither of them can think of another country.

Ryan: It's old school. I like this place.

Rita: Yeah, how rare is it to talk to someone?

Ryan: Yeah, not at a counter, but they (*whispering*) actually come over, and talk to you.

Rita: I know.

Ryan: It's wonderful.

Rita: And this is how life used to be.

Ryan: (*Nodding. A quiet pause.*) So, my little sis.

Rita: Yep.

Ryan: I couldn't believe it. Well, maybe you couldn't either.

Rita: (*Holds her hands up as if to scare someone*) Arghh! There I was.

Ryan: Was that me or you?

Rita: That was me scaring you.

Ryan: Did I look scared?

Rita: No... you looked smiley. A big smile.

Ryan: I *was* smiley. I couldn't believe it... except I could. Did you recognise me?

Rita: Yes.

Ryan: Before I recognised you?

Rita: Maybe the same time. I was smiling too. Did it take a while to be sure?

Ryan: I just knew who you were.

Rita: Yeah.

Ryan: Fourteen years.

Rita: Yeah.

A quiet pause.

Ryan: How did you know it was me?

Rita: *(Can't find an answer)* Maybe it was like a balloon. Like seeing your nine-year old head expand like a balloon. Or eleven, thirteen – how old would you have been, the last talk?

Ryan: Yeah, about that. *(A pause.)* Like a balloon? *(Laughs.)*

Rita: *(Miming)* Blown up like a balloon.

Ryan: Fair enough. I suppose my nine-year old – thirteen-year-old – head would expand into this wonderful specimen with enough hot air.

They laugh.

Ryan: Wow. It's been a long time since we were nine.

Rita: Yeah. I was seven.

Ryan: Right, seven. Seven. *(A pause.)* You were so young. I forget.

Rita: You recognised me though.

Ryan: I looked up and walking down the path, my sister. I... didn't really think about it. Very strange.

Rita: Yeh, strange. *(A pause.)* You're not the first Ryan I thought I saw in the park. But this one was really you.

Ryan: So, how have you been doing? What do you do with yourself?

Rita: Didn't the...?

Ryan: There were some details added to my file... But, you tell me everything.

Rita: I work in a marketing department.

Ryan: Ok.

Rita: Marketing things. I don't like it much, but you know.

Ryan: Yeah.

Rita: I go to church on Sundays. Do you still go?

Ryan: I do go to church.

Rita sits back.

Rita: That's one thing... that I wondered, often. If you, still... like, really go to church?

Ryan: Yes, really. Me too – about you. Since Mom and Dad – Mum... And you mentioned on Skype, a long time ago, I remember.

Rita: Yeh. Since very young, I believed.

Ryan: At seven.

Rita: Yes.

Ryan: So young. And I believed at nine. Kept on believing, after Mom, and Dad left, and different home, and you don't stop believing when you know it's true.

They both look over to the unseen waitress and take their hands from the table as she delivers the coffees. They each move their – now noticed – coffee cup before them.

Rita: Thanks.

Ryan: Thank you.

They take sips as the conversation continues.

Rita: Exactly. I had a dodgy spell. Some years I didn't go. But I went again, when I was... eleven – maybe we'd spoken...

Ryan: Some people it takes decades to find their way back.

Rita: So Mum and Dad taught us right.

Ryan: And God, was, is, God.

Rita: *(Nodding)* And what denomination did you end up?

Ryan: Hmm, well now we're onto the tough questions. *(He savours a sip of coffee.)*

Rita: *(Smiling)* You didn't go Catholic did you?

Ryan: Ooo no. Kind of Baptist, kind of Presbyterian; I vary.

Rita: I have been seen in Charismatic. Just occasionally. The old Vineyard songs rock still.

Ryan: Oh don't they?

A moment's pause. They sip coffee.

Rita: Ryan, you didn't come, before, and look for me?

Ryan: Oh.

Rita: When we were a little older?

Ryan: I'm sorry. I... to be honest, there was a while where I kind of forgot about... everything. Maybe on purpose. After Aunt June... she died. Did you know? No. Sorry to say like this.

Rita: I didn't know. Sorry. She went with you and Dad?

Ryan: Yes. After Mom died. After everything. She was in the States with me.

Rita: Your accent...

Ryan: I was there a long time. You can still hear the old me beneath sometimes. *(Rita waits for him to continue.)* Long enough. I won't shake the twang. And so... you're adopted...

Rita: *(Nodding)* Yes. I was blessed. They're called Keith and Pam. I have two sisters, and a brother.

Ryan: Right. A brother. Sisters. Wow.

Rita: Yeh.

Ryan: Should I meet them?

Rita: Yes. I think so. One day. If you want.

Ryan: Ok. Wow. Ok, that'll be... weird, but your family.

Rita: I know.

Ryan: From seven to now, is a long time, isn't it?

Rita: Quite long.

Ryan: *(Looking into his coffee)* You see, June wasn't an aunt. Not really. I'd always thought she was—

Rita: What?

Ryan: *(Nods)* I don't know. No one told me. We were in America.

Rita: I just remember purple hair and blonde, and at the front door. Back door maybe.

Ryan: You remember that? *(Rita nods)* I hate that memory.

Rita: I... It's one of the only ones I have.

Ryan: Seven, is young.

Rita: Yeah, I was bright. But still seven. And I can remember your face, your eyes were wide, and crying I think – but I always wondered if I added that myself. But I was sure it was true. I've replayed that oh, ten-thousand, a hundred-thousand, no that much. But a lot. I just knew, from seven, it was true, and I remembered that it was true and not to doubt it, even when I doubted it. And kept remembering. God. That memory. Cling to what is true. Even though... my life had a settled... you know... sorry, you were telling me.

Ryan: No, Rita, you... I, I remember that. My eyes *were* full of tears. I don't know if they were down my cheeks. But I can remember the full feeling. Full of tears, and Dad pulling me away. And – who were you left with?

Rita: *(She looks down and then promptly up.)* No one.

Ryan: Dad didn't come back, at all?

Rita: What? *(Confused)* No.

Ryan: Why, I still don't – I'm sorry Rita. What happened then, to you?

Rita: I think I went in. I did go in. I thought you'd come back. I made some cheese on toast. Not with the grill – just a toaster, then put the cheese on. But I couldn't eat much. Then, I, brushed my teeth and waited up all night, in bed, but I couldn't sleep. And you, he, didn't come back in the morning, or all next day. I thought, I remember thinking he must have had an accident, or, so I called the police. Where were you?

Ryan: We went on a bus, up north. June was there.

Rita: Ryan, where is Dad?

Ryan: *(A moment's pause; he regretfully shrugs)* I don't know. Never have. *(A pause.)* I remember you by the back door – it was the back door. I remember your face. Fear. Disbelief.

Rita looks down at her coffee cup, then manages a smile.

Rita: He didn't go with you, to America?

Ryan: No.

Rita: I... It was those years later, when a lady from social services sat down with me. She told me they had heard about my brother – you were in America. I had no idea. My Dad was unreliable, difficult to contact.

Ryan: Could you remember about, Mo-Mum's family?

Rita: I knew there was no one else.

Ryan: Can you remember the phone calls, and on Skype?

Rita: Of course.

Ryan: I didn't know what to say.

Rita: Me neither. It was so special – hard to describe. Scary in some way.

Ryan: I know. I always stored up lots and lots to say.

Rita: And thought afterwards, what we hadn't said?

Ryan: Exactly. (*A pause.*) We should have continued them. I should have, arranged...

Rita: Yeh, me too; we should have done.

A quiet moment. Both piece some things together.

Rita: You ever smoke?

Ryan: No, you?

Rita: No. Never.

Ryan: Never, me too. I hate it.

Rita: The smell.

Ryan: I knew people at college.

Rita: You went to uni?

Ryan: Yeh. I went. Cheap college, working too.

Rita: Oh I'm glad. Well done, Ryan. You did well.

Ryan: Thanks. Did you study?

Rita: (*She nods.*) I hate that smell.

Ryan: And people who smoked a lot, they're never the same. It does something to you.

Rita: Lies on TV, online, all over, but I remembered. Changed him, and then he was gone.

Ryan: June was part of it. Got lost along with him, after Mom-Mum had died. She was nice, but she disappeared.

Rita: Left you? (*Ryan nods.*) In the States?

Ryan: In a right state. Sorry, bad joke. A couple of years... She'd bought me some meals, in the fridge, and then I don't know. Poor lady. She was... unhinged... in the doped... she never came out of it... when she stopped the weed... it kept on regardless.

Rita: I feel like we never knew her. I never did.

Ryan: We didn't. Dad was lost. She was there sometimes. I never knew her.

Rita: What did you do, Ryan? How did you cope? You were so little.

Ryan: I prayed. I found a police officer after a couple of days. They got me a foster home. Eventually I had a good one. Nice people. And there were no relatives, no adult relatives I could name. My passport had gone, somewhere. I was kind of a ghost, I guess. Alive. I've read the notes from those years – they found my immigration record; must have contacted

social services here. I imagine they match the notes in your file. Abandonment. Twice, I suppose. What do you do with a kid like that? They had to decide – Child Services, it's called there, and the courts. I was in school.

Rita: Ryan.

Ryan: You were settled. Not easy decisions. It was good they tried to keep us connected – to speak sometimes. It's ok. I was half an American kid.

Rita: I'm sorry.

Ryan: You had a home. That was great. I remember sitting in the living room, of the foster home, in a big armchair. It was a nice home. But not mine... But, and I heard about Dad. They'd located him, but it wasn't possible, I think. When I saw my files, recently, his name was in the records. Looked like temporary housing, in Lincoln. Not a fixed address, I think.

Rita: Ryan, I should have tried more, done something. I'm sorry. And me, thinking...

Ryan: Oh. No... You had a home, a safe, good one. That's how it should be. It was, all, difficult.

Rita: I should...

Ryan: No, he should have.

(A quiet pause.)

Ryan: When you're young, a year is a long time. You get used to things.

Rita: Yeah.

Ryan nods slowly and fiddles with his coffee cup.

Rita: You said she died – Aunt June.

Ryan: Right. Sorry, yeah. Yes. I heard later. The foster people, at that time – they were pretty nice – they told me. I'd almost forgotten how I got there, I think.

Rita nods. She reaches out to the flowers and lifts one partly from the vase, twirling it slowly as she looks.

Ryan: I remembered you. I always thought. I knew the city, but things had gotten foggy. In my head. Memories from that age, when you will them, they are tempted to move. But I knew; it meant something to me, to be your brother. Whatever some psychologists, philosophers say, there are real things, and hey, maybe we circle around them sometimes, unsure, or even get lost. But we were all there once, and it mattered. Our family. And, God is true. Always true. Like you said. And even if I don't know, I'm known, and you're known. He knows.

Rita nods, the flower stilled between her fingers. Ryan looks at it too. She eventually lets the flower drop into the vase.

Rita: I can't believe you say stuff like that. Well, I can. But, it's just... *(A pause.)* So, you came here. To find me?

Ryan: I have your adopted address, those decent people; it's in my bag. I would have called – your family's phone. I was building up to it. Taking a walk in the nearby park. *(He smiles.)* Your park.

Rita: *(Smiling)* It's a good park.

Ryan: It is. My favourite.

Rita: Thank you, for coming to look.

(Ryan nods, smiles, and hides behind a sip of coffee.)

Rita: Dad?

Ryan: But Dad, I don't know. He didn't take the plane with us. He told me if I needed him... I couldn't figure out where he meant. I'd presumed – I've hoped he stopped the drugs.

Rita: He sent me a postcard.

Ryan: Really? A postcard?

Rita: Yeah. Only one. I brought it with me. I thought– *(She looks in her bag.)*

Ryan: Where from?

Rita: It's an art picture, a field of flowers; blue flowers. I thought it might have been his. Like an art print. *(She passes the postcard to Ryan.)* He wrote, 'Take care darling girl. So sorry. Love you, Dad.' No other writing. I've seen this picture more than any other.

Ryan: Crocuses.

Rita reaches out and touches the petals of another flower.

Rita: Yep.

Ryan: *(Studying the picture)* He said to me, he said I 'could always find him, where the flowers grew.' By the bus it was. At the airport. And June took my hand, and I didn't see him then, where he went. I thought about running from her and breaking free. It didn't feel right.

Rita: *(Earnestly)* Why didn't you?

After a short while Ryan manages a shrug and shakes his head – unable to provide an answer.

Rita: I was still there.

Ryan: I know.

Rita: You were my brother.

Ryan: Yeh.

Rita: You are, still are.

Ryan: I wish I had run. Called out. I've often thought. Often.

Rita: Yeh.

Ryan: Wish isn't the word. No wishing. I've often asked God why, why not. Why it went that road.

Rita: I know.

Ryan: To have been the big brother I should have been. At first, I'd told myself, you and Dad were going to fly out after us – even though he'd said– Nothing made sense. I told myself... Ah, I must have known. I don't want to make excuses.

Rita: You were nine.

Ryan: Yeh. Nine. Nine and seven.

Rita cradles her coffee cup and drinks. Ryan holds up the postcard between them.

Ryan: It's strange, this card. Why send this? I've seen this, Rita. I mean, I know it. I thought... I wondered if he'd meant his grave – about where the flowers grew.

Rita: How?

Ryan: But I'd thought about the flowers. It's one of Dad's favourite artists.

Rita: I remember him painting.

Ryan: Upstairs, in the loft. You must have been little.

Rita: I was.

Ryan: He told me about him. (*Referring to the postcard*) The artist.

Rita: I remember the staircase and the tufty carpet. He was happy running up and down those stairs. Carried me, I remember.

Ryan: I remember, and photo frames on the wall, a couple of them. Perhaps of us all. Or art. Maybe both.

Rita: What did he say?

Ryan: I couldn't paint then. I probably couldn't hold the brush. And he was telling me about the fields.

Rita: I think I missed that stage.

Ryan: He loved these paintings. I... I've studied this artist. At college, I studied art.

Rita: Oh.

Ryan: Rita, I know where this is. These fields.

Rita: Where?

Ryan: It's near Lincoln. Villages. Where Dad grew up, I think. Near there.

Rita: I didn't know.

They look at the card. Ryan passes it back to Rita.

Ryan: Maybe he and *Mum* went there, when they were students. I'm sure they must have done. Grandma and Grandpa lived in Lincoln then.

Rita: I never knew, any of this. So... he sent the postcard, from there?

Ryan: *(Shrugs)* It's possible.

Rita: So?

Ryan nods slowly.

Rita: Yeah, I think so.

Ryan: He might not be there. He might have bought this anywhere.

Rita: Yeh, I suppose so. Or had it with him a long time, if he loved it so much. Memories.

Ryan: Yes.

Rita: So, do you want to, go?

Ryan: Do you?

Rita slowly nods. Ryan nods.

Rita: Let's go find our dad.

Ryan: Are you ready to?

Rita *(Nodding)* Are you?

Ryan: *(Nodding)* He might not be alive.

Rita: Yes.

Ryan: Or have been dreaming of the place.

A pause. Both are thinking.

Ryan: What about forgiveness?

Rita: *(Takes her time to answer)* Sometimes I'm all fine. Other times, far from it. I'm ready to go and try and speak to him, to recognise that younger man I remember. In an older face, now. And forgive him. If we go together it'll be easier.

Ryan: Both sides of the garden back door, somehow.

Rita: Right. Somehow.

Rita picks a crocus and takes it from the vase. She turns it over, looking at the flower.

Rita: I always liked this flower. Always did. *(A pause.)* I've only just met my brother. I feel very young all of a sudden.

Ryan: I feel a little bit old.

Rita: We don't know...

Ryan: Yeah.

Rita: Wow.

Ryan: Can you take time off from your marketing job?

Rita: Got holiday saved. Yes, I can tell them.

Ryan: Shall we go.

Rita: Let's go.

Ryan: And try and find him. Just try.

Rita: And remind him of his faith.

Ryan: Right.

They push back their chairs and stand up.

Rita: I just want the truth.

Ryan: When I said it was chance to meet in the park like that, I shouldn't have. There's no truth in chance; or rather, there's no chance in truth.

Rita: We'll find out. We'll, well maybe we won't, but God knows either way. That's enough. More than.

Ryan nods.

Ryan: Prayer, decisions, and try to walk the path He's laid out.

Rita: *(She smiles.)* Yes. *(She places the crocus back in the vase.)*

Ryan: Thank you for the coffee. We didn't pay, did we?

Rita: *(Laughs)* Nope. This is old school.

Ryan: I'll pay.

Ryan starts to walk forward, hand in his pocket. Rita walks forward, reaching for her bag.

Rita: No, it's my coffeeshop. I'll pay.

Ryan: I'm the big brother. I've got it.

Rita: Ok. Thank you.

Ryan: *(A smile and nod to the unseen waitress.)* Can we have the bill, please?

End of Scene

Scene 2:

A garden. A flowerpot stands on the ground, holding the same blue crocuses from Scene 1's vase. A wall is to the side – a plain board, or perhaps the gable-end shape of a large shed.

George stands facing the wall, dressed in a painter's overalls and wearing a large pair of glasses. On the floor nearby sit a large paint pot and an old bag of brushes and decorator's tools. He paints as the scene opens – dipping from time to time into the paint pot (either for water that gradually dries, real paint, or imaginary paint). He holds the paintbrush throughout much of the scene.

George's way of speaking throughout lacks emotion, where it might be expected. His movements are rare, slowed and too thought-through, rather than spontaneous.

After a minute of George slowly painting the wall, Rita and Ryan enter, both carrying back packs. They stand some way off and whisper a few unheard comments between them. They stand awkwardly.

Ryan: Hello. *(George continues painting.)* Hello.

George slowly turns, paintbrush in hand.

George: Hello.

Rita: Are you George, Brown?

George: Yes.

A pause.

Rita: We're Ryan, and Rita.

George considers them a long moment.

George: Oh. *(A pause.)* My, children... Ryan and Rita?

Ryan: Yes.

George: Oh.

Rita: Hello.

George: *(Considering them)* I can see the little faces in you.

The two sides look at each other, a distance between them, which remains for much of the following conversation.

George: *(Rather flat, lacking emotion)* I'm very sorry. Very sorry... for everything.

Ryan: Ok. Thank you.

No one speaks. George barely moves.

Rita: That's it?

George: No. It's... Um...

Ryan: It wasn't too hard to find you.

George: How did you find me?

Ryan: Pictures.

Rita: You sent me a postcard (*hastily rummaging into her bag*).

Ryan: You sent Rita a postcard. A long time ago.

George: Did I?

Rita unzips a different pocket. She finds the postcard and holds it out. With the distance between them, George leans a little to peer.

George: (*Some recognition*) Ah. I see.

A too-long pause.

Ryan: I remembered the painting, from when I was a kid. And we came to find you. We thought you might be here. Possibly. And we asked around, and in local art shops. And they knew you. And, someone pointed us to this house.

George: I thought people used the internet these days to track people down?

Ryan: There's not much there—

Rita: We saw your art in the shops. It's good.

George: I see. (*A pause.*) I'm painting the shed. This is Mrs Grainger's house. She's just gone shopping. I do this as well.

Ryan nods. No one speaks.

George: (*Without the emotion the sentence would normally carry*) I'm glad you're both together. That's good.

Ryan: (*Some anger/exasperation growing*) We met just two days ago. After fourteen years.

George: Oh.

Rita: (*After waiting for more. Some upset audible*) Oh?

George: I really am sorry.

Rita: (*Anger verging*) What? Just that?

Ryan: You're our dad.

Rita: Fourteen years.

George: Yes. Yes. It's a long time. A lot of... Yes, I know. I do.

Ryan: And... We can come back, another time, or *(to Rita)* he's busy – *(to George)* You're busy. Find you another time–

George: No, don't – I mean, stay. Please, I'd like you to stay.

Ryan: Ok.

Rita: Ok.

A long pause.

Rita: You gave me this. Sent me this. *(Waving the postcard, anger breaking out)* After you'd vanished. Where were you?

George: *(Nods.)* I know. I'm sorry, I'm not more how I should be. And wasn't, then.

Rita: I was expecting... We came, to find you. To forgive you! I was expecting... If you were deeply sorry... or didn't want to see us... But, you're just standing there. Dad, do something!

George: Explain... I'll explain... *(Gathering himself)* Even now a person can fall between the cracks. Even then, if you tried.

Ryan: You didn't simply fall down a crack.

George: You sound American.

Ryan: *(Angered)* Of course I do.

George: Yes. Yes. Of course.

Rita: Go on.

George: I, I... You're right, you wouldn't think people can fall down the cracks in this day and age. And perhaps they can't; they have to push themselves through. I, *(to Rita)* I went back to the house, I did. I... a, two days after. The days were mixed at that time. Two days I think. But you weren't there.

Rita: Don't put this on me.

George: No. I wasn't. I didn't mean to. I went back, to find you, but the house was empty. I was a coward. I hid in the bathroom, upstairs, on the floor with my back against the bathtub. For hours. They were knocking, social services, and police. They shouted through the letter box. So I just lay there, for hours, I think. A coward. And then I couldn't leave the house; I didn't dare let them see me. I ate noodles, with boiled water, from the cupboard. I daren't go outside, in case I was seen... Then I thought, they'd realise the door had been locked. Because you didn't have a key. You were a little girl. I had a key – so they'd know. I thought, you'd be better off with them. That's what I... told myself. So I left at night. Walked away. Through the city. It was a long walk.

Rita: Why?

George: *(Shakes his head; slow to reply)* Kept going. And you can live for a long time without being noticed, even now, then. I did odd jobs. I took my paint things. But sooner or later someone asks for your national insurance number. You need better wages. And then they can find you. A year after that they found me and tracked me down. A social worker lady talked to me, and she... They came back another time. But I think they decided I was good for nothing, and you were better in your new homes. They were right. So they left me then. *(A pause.)* I do painting, houses, and sheds; varnishing; flowerpots. They know me. It's a little money but it just pays rent, and some food; and the remainder I buy paints.

Ryan: *(Pained)* We saw your landscapes. They're good. Still good.

George: *(Nodding)* Occasionally they sell. That helps.

They stand. Rita and Ryan wait, look to each other, and back to George. Ryan moves as if to leave, but goes nowhere.

George: I never paid the lady the rent those months for the house. I still need to. I will if I can.

Rita briefly turns away on the spot, hand to her mouth.

Ryan: And what about me?

George: Yes.

Ryan: Why did you send me away?

George: I didn't remember.

Ryan: We went on the bus.

George: I'm sorry. To both of you. I am very sorry. And... it's difficult for me to feel it. And I hear my own words, and I don't believe them. Apart from I know I mean it. But I...

Ryan. You abandoned your daughter, and you sent me away to another country. And didn't care what happened to me? You don't get to claim cowardice as an excuse!

George: Ryan... I did, do that. But... for years I didn't know. I couldn't remember. I thought that maybe I had murdered my own son. I couldn't remember if I had or not. There was this pain between, across my brow, this headache that couldn't leave, that maybe I had done it. Because where were you? If I had done something so terrible. Buried the body. I woke up with it between my head. I thought, should I go to the police, but I had nothing to confess to them. Only to God, every day, every hour.

Rita: You sent my brother away. You did that!

George: I did. The social worker told me you were in America, those years later. It was such a relief. I couldn't feel... but I knew it was a relief.

Ryan: I was living on a kind of collective, with dope-smoking parents – I don't know who they were – and their kids. I was waiting for you and Rita to come and join us. Every day. It

was, almost years. Don't you realise what you've done? And you never came. And I would go to school with other people's kids. I think she was waiting too. What did you tell her?

George doesn't respond; he stares, stunned.

Ryan: *(Increasingly exasperated and angry)* Then we moved. A small town. The middle of America – a boy, a young man. Needing his father. And you didn't even know where I was! And you say relieved. I was all alone! Didn't you care?

George stands, motionless, paint brush hanging at an odd angle in his hand.

George: *(Eventually)* Some things are too much.

Ryan: What!

Rita: Ryan *(a hand out to calm and stay her brother).*

Ryan turns around and takes paces away. He stands, facing off-stage, a hand to his head.

Rita: *(To George)* Why didn't you go then? And for me? You knew where we were? You could have brought us both back.

George's head drops low to his chest.

George: A man can't throw his own children away and then go back and pick them up again. It can't be. There are some things that can be done that are too terrible, that destroy everything. Don't you think?

Ryan: *(Turning back around)* It's another excuse.

Rita: No. What about God? What about forgiveness?

George: Yes. You're right. *(He stares at them.)* Do you believe?

Ryan and Rita: Yes.

George: How? Did they give you Christian families? I didn't think that was allowed anymore.

Rita: Mum and you.

George slowly lifts his arms, as if he might reach out. He drops his paintbrush. They all look to it on the ground.

George: That was the worst of the fear. That I'd thrown my two children's souls away in all my sin.

Ryan: Well, you didn't.

Rita: God caught us.

Slowly, George bends and picks up his paintbrush.

George: Your Mum will be so happy.

Rita: (*Tearfully*) Yes.

Ryan: You don't get to feel good about this. I've been living abroad where you forgot me. You sent me on the plane with June – can you remember June? Who was she?

George: (*Confused*) Perhaps there was a plan to go there – I can't remember. Those days. I was... She was, had been a history teacher. She got the... drugs sometimes. She was struggling... Did she take care of you?

Ryan: For a time. She was a mess, like you. I'm sorry, but she died. I went to school. They... Why didn't she take me back before? Didn't you contact her? Why didn't you come and get me? I was alone out there.

A long pause.

George: I have no answer. I have no reason.

Rita: What about God? You were saved! Don't you believe?

George: (*He nods*) He is all I have.

Rita: Ok.

George: You hear people say, 'I never regret my mistakes; they've made me who I am.' Well, I regret them all; all the wrong that made me who I am. Coward, yes. Inexcusable, yes. Callous, yes. Evil. A man can do little worse than I did, have kept doing. I... would explain, but it is not explanation, I know... but if I can tell you, please. Please. It's as if, as if I've blown a gasket. I don't know what a gasket is, really. But I've blown it. Exploded it. And there's nothing – no replacement part. It's gone.

Several hellish months, with a most hellish week in the middle, when I, threw my own family away. What was left of it. When Your Mum died–

Ryan: Don't use Mo-Mum.

George: (*Nods to Ryan.*) No. I, I wanted to numb myself. But then, you find you can't un-numb. And, and it doesn't end. Why does no one tell you– No, it's my responsibility. I should have never, any of it. I smoked a lot, took a lot. People think of the effects of drugs in the moment, of that day, or days, but the days can be years, ten, thirty, all of them. Sometimes I breath in at night, and I can still feel the smoke, filling my lungs up, roiling inside. It suffocates me. If only I could gasp and breath clean air, but I can't taste it anymore. I can barely find it. Thankfully, sometimes there's a gap, that God opens for me. Sometimes a beautiful gap. I don't deserve any. God's punishing me – or I punished myself. I think both. Yet still grace. Still. Ohh, that your heart might sink, and disappear – why does no one tell you? Why didn't I see it? So much could have been recovered. So much never done. Oh, I long for it, though I can hear my voice, and it doesn't, as if I don't. But I do. I do. I won't complain. I'm sorry.

A pause.

George: It's a horrible sin: to make it as difficult as possible for him to sanctify me. Oh, he can do it. I trust. I know he is, against all my damages. But his work within my soul that should have taken months, or a few years, I have made into the work of decades. He would have raced me on horseback, on cheetah, on eagle's back; but I tore myself, and for my lifetime must crawl with the insects. I did that. A mile at a canter is a decade for me. The fruit can barely grow. A bud, a shoot, is still a miracle. For I cannot feel like I should. I can't. I can't. I must trust that he does. He can.

It is like life adjacent. Trapped outside the house, looking in. I see what happens, what I do, and have done, but can't enter. It's like a nightmare. It would be, if I could only feel what was lost. I don't want pity, that's not right. No. I just...

The fear I feel is a dread, a deep-down dread, that won't resolve into any shade, or rise into colour. I can say all these words, but from a distance. Joy is elusive. Purpose too. Hope. I know it. I know Jesus has me safe. He has saved me, forever, past, present and future. I know, but I can barely feel. So much dread. Yet I know, somehow, I know. I believe him. He has the colours. I am sorry. I can barely... but know that your dad is sorry. The more this wonderful day. *(A pause.)* Please, would you tell me, how did you believe? Keep believing? After everything...

Rita and Ryan look to each other. Rita begins:

Rita: I was with, my adopted mother, and, we walked past a church, and I asked to go in. And she said, there were things to do. But, we went in, and kept going. They are still there, all of them, my adopted family.

Ryan looks at her, open-mouthed. He realises it's his turn.

Ryan: It was difficult. I had a lot of, hurts. But I had a Bible, in my bag. Just that. *(He looks away with emotion.)*

George: *(After standing motionless, staring)* Thank you. Thank you, Jesus. What I said, about some things are too terrible – I'm sorry.

Rita and Ryan stand facing George. They look to each other, then to their father, and in their own time, nod.

George: *(Rare emotion cracks his voice.)* When I... *(surprised)* Oh! *(He puts a hand to his throat in shock. He breathes in deeply.)* When I paint, that's the only time, usually, I can begin to feel. The Creator's presence, his handiwork, it is so beautiful. And to take the smallest part in putting that to canvas. The fields. Flowers. I know then. I know, I know him. It is a sadness, my own, and his joy given. I can glimpse through.

George stands, head dropped. Rita moves and kneels down behind the flowerpot.

Rita: I always liked crocuses.

George: There are fields of them near here. The fields are full of flowers in spring.

Rita: I know *(She gestures with the postcard still in hand).*

George: Oh, yes.

(Rita returns the postcard to her bag's pocket.)

George: I could show you one day perhaps.

Rita stands, gives a nod.

Ryan: *(As if it's time to leave)* Ok then.

George: Mrs Grainger will come back soon from the shops. She'll wonder about her shed.

Ryan: Ok. You need to finish.

George: Yes. *(A pause.)* You could both help me, if you like.

Rita: I can't paint well.

George: Oh, I could show you. I'll tidy up the edges.

Rita: *(After a look to check with Ryan)* Alright then.

George: I don't deserve your help. But I'd be very glad of it.

Ryan: *(After a moment)* I can help too.

George: Good, that's good. Do you remember?

Ryan: *(Nods.)* I've studied art. I'm a painter. I'm like you.

George: Oh.

George stands stunned a moment. He looks bewildered as his children step forward. He kneels down before them and rummages in his decorating bag.

George: Let me get the... *(He rises, holding two more paint brushes.)* We'll have to share the paint pot. *(To Rita – demonstrating how it's done)* Dip the bristles, this far is fine, then wipe on the rim. Then all set.

Rita: Thanks.

George watches as Rita dips her brush and, like a novice, wipes off the excess paint. Ryan then dips his brush matter-of-factly.

Ryan: Where do you want me?

George: *(Takes a moment.)* Right here.

Ryan steps besides his dad – Ryan on the left, George in the middle, Rita on the right. All three turn to face the garden shed.

George: I often pray while I paint.

Ryan: We can join in.

Rita: Yes, we'll join our prayers.

The three of them slowly paint the wall. We don't hear any further conversation, though words are mouthed silently. George demonstrates an up-down stroke to Rita. Ryan pauses his painting and smiles, looking on. Rita goes to the pot for more paint, then back to the wall. They carry on painting together.

Lights out.

End of Play