

PAINTING FROM MEMORY

By

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CAST

BIRD (Bridget) MACKAY, 17

FRANCES (Franny) MACKAY, late twenties, her sister

SHEILA MACKAY, fifties, their mother

SIMON, late twenties

GAYNOR, early thirties, American

ERIC LINN, forties

ACT 1 SCENE 1

The sitting room in a mansion block flat, the décor tired but unremarkable, the furnishings neutral and fairly bland, with a rather shabby sofa. On the coffee table, a vase of ill-assorted flowers, badly arranged. A hairdryer is running in the bedroom, across the hall. As the lights come up BIRD, 17, skimpily dressed in short black skirt, her arms covered, is standing in a spotlight at the front of the stage, staring at what in due course we realise is a painting on the fourth wall. A fragment of Neil Young's 'Birds' gradually becomes audible, and her face dissolves for a moment into a mask of grief. When the lights come up suddenly, the music fades up and she picks up a conversation already begun, wandering around the flat, picking at the crisps and dips. During the following, she tastes one, decides she doesn't like it and scrapes the remaining dip on the crisp back into the bowl and then re-buries the crisp

BIRD Harpic?

FRANCES (OS) (*A note of irritation*) Harpist!

BIRD What? She's called Harpic? Weird. What is she? Romanian or something?

The hairdryer stops. FRANCES appears in the doorway in a dressing gown, with still wet hair. She is in her late twenties, nondescript, anxious. We get the sense that she is always in some way appeasing BIRD

FRANCES She's a *harpist*. American.

BIRD Yeah?

FRANCES I mean, she plays a harp?

BIRD Right.

FRANCES goes back into her bedroom. The dryer re-starts. BIRD thinks for a moment. Shouts

BIRD What, as a job?

FRANCES (OS) What?

BIRD (*Trying another dip*) That's her job? Playing the harp? What's in these? Eurrgh!

FRANCES (OS) Bird! You're not eating those dips, are you? Don't. They're for guests. No, it's her hobby. She's a bit ...

BIRD What?

FRANCES (*Louder, switching off the dryer*) It's her hobby.

BIRD No, I meant, she's a bit what?

FRANCES *(re-appearing)* What? I'm trying to dry my hair!

BIRD You said she's a bit ... what?

FRANCES Oh. Well ... you know.

BIRD You don't like her then.

FRANCES No! I mean ...

BIRD You do like her?

FRANCES She's all right, I suppose, but ...

BIRD A bit 'you know'.

FRANCES Yes.

BIRD *(Turning back to the painting)* She give you this?

FRANCES Mum? No. I chose it.

BIRD Don't like it. It's really depressing. Still, s'pose it goes with the wallpaper.

FRANCES I like it.

BIRD But the ones he did of you –

FRANCES You haven't been eating those, have you? Only they're from Marks.

BIRD What, so I'm not allowed them?

FRANCES No. Yes. No, I mean I'm not sure I've bought enough. Look, I don't want you eating them all. They're for guests.

BIRD I thought I was a guest.

FRANCES Please, just mix them up again, will you, so no-one'll know.

BIRD Does everyone have to do that?

FRANCES Don't be stupid. *(She goes back into the bedroom. The hairdryer starts up again)*

BIRD mouths 'don't be stupid' after her, then takes a bread stick and ostentatiously stirs all the dips, licking the breadstick between each bowl. A mobile bleeps. She looks towards the bedroom. She goes over to a handbag on the sofa and digs out a mobile and reads the text message. She wanders over to the bedroom doorway

BIRD Someone's not coming.

The hairdryer is switched off. FRANCES comes out.

FRANCES What? What now?

BIRD Not coming.

FRANCES Who?

BIRD Dunno. Text. *(She gives FRANCES the phone)* P.

FRANCES *(She reads the text)* Oh, no!

BIRD What?

FRANCES He's not coming.

BIRD 'S what I said. What? You got a new bloke? Brilliant! Who is he?

FRANCES No ... He's not ... Peter.

BIRD Excellent. Drought's over then, sis. Is he fit?

FRANCES No, he's ... God, with you it's always about ...

BIRD What, sex? Too bloody right. Come on, what's he like?

FRANCES Oh God. He promised me ... I'll have to ring him.

As she does so...

BIRD *(Attacking the dips again)* So, he's not coming. Big deal. No need to go off on one.

FRANCES Please, please. Oh great, bloody answer phone. *(Puts on a formal, professional message-leaving voice)* Hi Peter? It's only me, Frances ... Yes ... Just got your text. Wondered what the problem was? Maybe I can help. Ring me, will you? Please. *(To BIRD, as she finishes the call)* Will you stop eating those dips!

BIRD Why d'you do that?

FRANCES Do what?

BIRD That voice. *(Mimicking)* 'Hi Peter? It's only me, Frances.' Makes you sound really needy, sis. Just tell him –

FRANCES Shut up! *(Recovering)* Please stop eating them!

BIRD Chill, babe, OK? I'm starving. You shouldn't have made me come straight from work. I could have gone home first. Can I make myself a sandwich?

FRANCES No! I've just cleaned the kitchen.

BIRD Jesus! I can use a J-cloth, you know!

FRANCES I just don't want you shovelling food into your mouth when everyone arrives. They'll all expect something. It's meant to be a drinks party.

BIRD OK. OK.

FRANCES Anyway, you work in a café. Don't they have food there?

BIRD Forget it – I'll have this instead. *(She pulls a snack bar from her bag)*

FRANCES Please, Bird. You'll get crumbs all over the sofa.

BIRD This thing? Big deal. It's minging, Franny, few crumbs won't make any difference.

FRANCES The new one doesn't arrive until next week. Does it look that bad?

BIRD Yeah, but no-one'll notice, time everyone's piled in. Can I put some music on?

FRANCES No. Just leave things alone. And don't call me Franny. Not tonight. Please. Not in front of my friends.

BIRD Why not?

FRANCES Aren't you going to change?

BIRD A few drinks you said. Not a fucking garden party.

FRANCES Bird, please. Just for tonight, can't you try to ... They'll be here any minute. And anyway, you're supposed to be helping out.

BIRD Am I? Is that why you wanted me to come, so I could be a bloody waitress? I do that all day.

FRANCES It's not much to ask. I just thought ...

BIRD Thanks a bunch. And what's wrong with this? It's clean. It's what I wear at work.

FRANCES You wear that for work?

BIRD Yeah.

FRANCES And the top?

BIRD Yeah?

FRANCES Bird, it's very low-cut. All the men'll be looking at your ...

BIRD Tits, yeah. That's the point. Tits for tips. Duh! So your mates'll get a thrill. Whoopee. Except the bloke who isn't coming. He really your boyfriend?

FRANCES Well ... he's a special friend.

BIRD What's that mean? Shag buddy? *(She rummages in her bag for tin and papers and starts to roll a cigarette)*

FRANCES Bird! Please ... I'd rather you didn't. *(BIRD pulls a face, but puts them away again)* Thanks. It's just –

BIRD Is he?

FRANCES He's just ... a friend.

BIRD So you're not shagging him.

FRANCES Is that a question or a statement?

BIRD Depends on the answer.

FRANCES Bird, please don't start ... Why are you being like this? I thought you'd like to come. I thought it would be nice, meeting my friends –

BIRD What the dodgy harpist and a bloke who isn't coming?

FRANCES They're not the only people I've invited. There'll be about ten of us.

BIRD Ten! I thought you said a party. Ten's not a party.

FRANCES Drinks, that's all.

BIRD So it's not a party at all. *(She slides further into the sofa, sulking)* Load of nerds talking about computers. Great. Can't wait. Simon coming?

FRANCES I think so. Hope so.

BIRD Why? You two still ...?

FRANCES With Gaynor.

BIRD Who?

FRANCES His ... partner.

BIRD (*sitting up*) The harpist! Oh, I get it. A dodgy *attractive* harpist. She know about you and ... oh, right! You want Simon to think you've got a new boyfriend. That's why you wanted this other bloke to come.

FRANCES No, I –

BIRD Oh, yes you did. Poor little Franny, poor big sis, nobody loves her. Not even her imaginary boyfriend.

FRANCES Oh, shut up, will you! Look. I just wanted to have a few friends – (*A sudden thought*) Oh God. Oh God. Oh, no, I've just realised ...

BIRD What?

FRANCES Where's my phone? Where's my phone!

BIRD (*Reaching over to the table*) Here. It's here. What is it?

FRANCES (*Snatching it from BIRD and desperately stabbing the keypad*) I just want to check, oh please let me be wrong – oh no, I thought so. It wasn't from Peter, that text.

BIRD How d'you know?

FRANCES Because he signs himself Peter! Not P. Look. (*She thrusts the phone at BIRD who gets up to look*) Oh God, now he'll –

BIRD Franny! Calm down. What the problem? Who was it, then?

FRANCES Must have been Pauline. P for Pauline. One of the girls at work. Oh, what an idiot. What will he think when he gets my message?

BIRD That you're a bit flaky?

FRANCES No, he'll think I'm desperate, like you said. Needy.

BIRD Well, you are.

FRANCES Thanks.

BIRD You always take things so seriously. It's only a bloke. Only a shag. Or not, in your case. (*Singing*) Poor little Franny, no-one wants her fanny, she's such an old hag, she can't get a shag.

FRANCES Very funny. (*She goes back into the bedroom, slamming the door. The hairdryer starts up*)

BIRD ferrets in her bag and pulls out a CD. She puts it on, quietly at first. It is Neil Young's 'Birds'. She lets it wash over her for a few moments and goes back to the painting. Then she wanders round, opening cupboards and eventually finding a brightly coloured duvet cover in a washing basket. She throws it over the sofa and replaces the cushions. Admires the effect.

Turns up the music loud and throws herself back on the sofa. FRANCES bursts out of her bedroom

FRANCES For God's sake, Bird! I'll have the neighbours round any minute. (*She switches off the CD*) What did you think you were doing? I told you to leave ... Where did you find it?

BIRD It's mine. Brought it with me.

FRANCES ejects the CD and thrusts it at BIRD

FRANCES Well, you can put it away. I hate that song. Hate it.

BIRD Why? It's my favourite. It was –

FRANCES I know what it - (*She notices the duvet cover*) What the - What on earth is that doing on there?

BIRD Don't you like it? Thought it looked good. Better than that -

FRANCES Why can't you leave things alone! Take it off. Come on. Take it off! Get off!

BIRD Chill, Franny –

FRANCES grabs hold of the cover from the back of the sofa and with surprising strength yanks it towards her so BIRD is thrown off the sofa on to the floor

FRANCES You always have to spoil things, don't you? What is it with you? Have to upset things. Every time –

She notices BIRD is lying motionless on the floor

FRANCES Get up! Bird! Bird! ... Come on, get up. Just stop it, will you? Stop mucking about ... you've had your fun ... Come on. Bird? I haven't got time for ... Bird? ... Bird! Oh God ...

FRANCES falls to her knees and pulls BIRD into her arms. BIRD is limp.

FRANCES Bird. Sweetheart. Please, please. Oh God. Oh God. Darling, I never meant ... No ... please. What's wrong? What's the matter? Bird, Bird, please. Say something, please –

BIRD Boo.

BIRD starts laughing and scrambles to her feet, leaving FRANCES on the floor

BIRD Gotcha! Gotcha!

FRANCES Oh God ... Bird! You frightened me to death. You little –

BIRD Your face!

FRANCES I thought you were –

BIRD No such luck, babe. You should see your face!

FRANCES gets up angrily, collects the cover, folds it, puts it away in silent fury. BIRD watches her, then pulls her hair down. It falls around her shoulders. She looks softer, prettier

BIRD There you go. I've made an effort. For your party. Your hair's a mess. Aren't you going to -

FRANCES Sometimes, Bird ...

BIRD Yeah. Sorry. Pax? So, who else is coming?

FRANCES You are a little monster. Honestly. A monster. (*Letting it go*) I don't think you know them. They're mainly from work.

BIRD Mainly?

FRANCES Well, all of them really.

BIRD Except Harpic.

FRANCES Bird. Please. Her name's Gaynor.

BIRD I know. But I prefer Harpic. Do they know about me, then, these people?

FRANCES ... I told them you're coming.

BIRD Your little sister. Aah ...

FRANCES Yes.

BIRD The weirdo.

FRANCES No ...

BIRD Did you warn them?

FRANCES Warn them? What do you mean?

BIRD Yeah, you did. 'Course you did. I bet you told them all about me to make yourself seem more interesting.

FRANCES That is a terrible thing to say.

BIRD You always did that. Franny the martyr with her loony sister.

FRANCES That's not true! You know that's -

BIRD You going to get dressed or what? Finish your hair. *(Suddenly)* Oh God... she's not coming, is she?

FRANCES *(Cautiously)* Who?

BIRD Oh, fucking hell, Franny. I wouldn't have come. You know I wouldn't have come.

FRANCES Bird, please ... Calm down, will you? You're as bad as each other. Can't you just be civil? For my sake? Look ... she 'phoned and ... she's lonely. What else could I do?

BIRD Ignore her. Lonely? Don't make me laugh. Five minutes, and she'll be draped over the sofa, pissed as a fart. Your friends'll love that.

FRANCES She won't. She doesn't drink anymore.

BIRD Yeah, right. Believe that when I see it. *(Lies back on the sofa again)* Just tell her to sod off. She starts anything, I'm out of here.

FRANCES goes towards her bedroom, stops and from behind the sofa, out of BIRD's sight

FRANCES Darling ... Bird, there's something you ought to know ... She's moved back to The Rectory. *(Beat)* She's sold Penhalligan.

A stunned silence

BIRD *(Sitting slowly upright, hugging a cushion)* What?

FRANCES She's sold it.

BIRD Sold Penhalligan? Fuck.

BIRD tries to collect herself, gets up

FRANCES Bird ...?

BIRD Why didn't anyone tell me?

FRANCES I ... we ... You weren't so good at the time. We thought it would upset you.

BIRD Upset me? What? Her selling the place without telling me? Without a chance to say goodbye. Why the fuck would that upset me?

FRANCES I'm sorry. I didn't know how -

BIRD Back to The Rectory? Why? When?

FRANCES I don't know - about three months ago. The tenants were moving out and she thought it was time to ...

BIRD What? Fuck something else up? Jesus. Three months!

She hurls the cushion back onto the sofa; she starts walking around, banging the furniture in rage, increasing FRANCES' nervousness

BIRD Sold it! (*Beat*) She told you of course. (*FRANCES does not reply*) As ever. Shit, Franny, how could you ... ? My home. Our home. (*On the verge of tears, picking up the cushion again*)

FRANCES Look, she had to ... She needed the money. (*BIRD gives a harsh laugh*) She did, Bird. It's not as if it's been exactly rolling in since ... Bird? Please? ... I'm going to get ready. OK? ... Bird?

BIRD goes over to FRANCES, hugs her

BIRD Yeah. OK. Sorry, Franny. Not your fault. It's never your fault.

FRANCES hugs her harder, the cushion between them. She strokes BIRD's hair. A moment. Then BIRD pulls away slightly. The mood is lighter, more playful.

BIRD How much did this cost you?

FRANCES I can't remember. Got it in Next, I think.

BIRD (*Playfully batting FRANCES over the head with the cushion*) The flat, lamebrain.

FRANCES (*Snatching the cushion back*) Ow. Birdbrain. I'll get you for that. (*They both laugh; it's an echo of their childhood*)

BIRD Yeah? You and whose army, Fartpants?

FRANCES (*Laughing with relief. It's going to be OK*) Why, do you like it?

BIRD 'S OK. Yeah, it's all right. Location's good. But the wallpaper ... (*She pulls a face*) How much?

FRANCES I know. It's vile, isn't it?

BIRD (*still playing*) It's worse than that. It's ... shitville on sea.

FRANCES Well ... maybe you could help me do something about it.

BIRD What, you'd trust me alone with a paintbrush?

FRANCES No, I never said alone. I'm not that mad.

BIRD (affectionately) Bitch. Yeah, I'd like that. Be a laugh. Hey, what about orange?

FRANCES Orange? Oh ... I don't know ... bit bright. I was thinking ... cream? (BIRD mimes putting her fingers down her throat) All right! I'll think about it. But ... Great. That's great ... Good. Hair. (She hesitates for a moment) Bird, you will ... you know ...

BIRD What? 'Behave'?

FRANCES Yes.

BIRD 'Course. Go on. Hair.

FRANCES goes back in the bedroom with her mobile and shuts the door. The hairdryer starts up again, as the doorbell rings. BIRD sticks a finger into one of the dips and, licking her fingers, goes to answer the door.

SHEILA (OS) Oh! Bridget! I didn't realise –

BIRD (OS) Bet you didn't. Well - don't just stand there ...

BIRD returns with SHEILA. She is in her fifties, expensively dressed and coiffured. She is carrying a bottle. She is disconcerted to find no other guests

SHEILA Oh!

BIRD Yeah, you're the first. Front of the queue for the booze. Franny's just getting ready. (SHEILA pulls a face at the 'Franny') Oh and hello, Mummy dearest, lovely to see you after so long.

SHEILA You never return my calls, Bridget.

BIRD Bird. Busy.

SHEILA (Struggling) Your hair's looking nice. It's grown.

BIRD Yeah, it does that. That new? (She means SHEILA's outfit)

SHEILA Oh. Yes. D'you like it?

BIRD 'S OK. Bit young for you. Looks quite expensive for someone on the breadline.

FRANCES comes out of the bedroom, brushing her hair. She is still in her dressing gown

FRANCES Was that the – Oh, Mum!

SHEILA (Kissing her) Hello, darling, how lovely to see you. And Bridget. (With a look) What a surprise. You didn't tell me –

BIRD Bird.

SHEILA If you must. Darling, do hurry and get dressed. And you, Bri – Bird.

BIRD I'm dressed.

SHEILA Oh. Didn't you know Frances was having people round?

BIRD People, yes. I didn't know you were coming.

FRANCES I thought it would be nice for us all to ... Anyway. Look, I'll just –

SHEILA It's lovely, the flat. But darling, the stairs! You'll have to get someone in to sort them. The banister rail is terribly rickety.

FRANCES Yes, I know, I've got someone –

SHEILA But this'll be fine once you've decorated. Put your stamp on it. Well done, darling.

BIRD She didn't build it herself. She just bought it.

SHEILA Little house warming present, darling. (*She hands FRANCES a wrapped bottle and wanders around looking things over*) These flowers look a bit sorry for themselves. Shall I get rid –

BIRD They're from me.

SHEILA Oh. (*To FRANCES*) So. How's the job going?

FRANCES Oh, good, yes. (*Unwrapping a bottle of champagne*) Oh, that's lovely! Thanks, Mum. Yes, I'm working on a big new project. Software development in Crawley. Quite a challenge, really ... I'm sort of in charge of it ...

SHEILA Well, that's marvellous, darling! And not before time. . (*Fishing*) And Simon. Is he well?

FRANCES Yes. He's fine. The thing is –

BIRD Simon's history, Ma. Franny's got a new bloke now. Peter.

SHEILA Oh. You didn't say, darling ...

FRANCES Well, Peter's not exactly –

BIRD (*Loudly*) My job's going well, too, thanks.

SHEILA Oh, yes. Good. Good. And ... remind me, when do you ... qualify?

BIRD What?

SHEILA (*Uncertainly*) The restaurant? I thought you were doing an apprenticeship or something like that. As a chef. Isn't that right, Frances?

BIRD It's a café. And I'm a waitress.

SHEILA A café? What sort of café?

BIRD A café. Tea and a wad. All day breakfasts. You should pop by for a cuppa. Next time you're up from Cornwall.

SHEILA (*Glancing at FRANCES*) I thought Frances was going to ... I'm back at The Rectory.

BIRD So I heard. Somewhere along the line. Off you go, sis. (*Taking the bottle of champagne*) I'll put this out of harm's way and then Ma and I can have a nice chat. (*She goes into the kitchen*)

FRANCES (*Trying to head off trouble*) Mum ...

SHEILA (*Sotto voce*) You could have warned me ... Have you said anything yet?

FRANCES No, I ... I haven't had the chance. I will. Later. I will, I promise. She was a bit ... you know ... about the house and everything. Will you be all right together?

SHEILA For goodness sake, Frances! I'll manage. Now, go on. Go!

FRANCES with some reluctance goes into her bedroom. Shuts the door. As BIRD returns, FRANCES' mobile rings in her bedroom and we hear a muffled conversation through the following

SHEILA (*Brightly*) So. How are you enjoying London?

BIRD 'S OK. For a city. Prefer Cornwall. My home.

SHEILA Look, about Penhalligan –

BIRD Don't wanna talk about it. Daddy's exhibition's great.

SHEILA Oh you've been? Only when you didn't make the opening ...

BIRD 'Course I've been! What do you think? I've been every day.

SHEILA Every day! Bridget –

BIRD Making the most of it. Some of us aren't as lucky as Franny. (*She gestures to the unseen painting*) Or you.

SHEILA Listen, there's something I – something Frances -

The doorbell rings. They look at each other.

BIRD What? (*She waits*) Door. Someone ought to get that

They stare at each other. Finally SHEILA starts to get up. FRANCES comes out, hurriedly finishing dressing, her mobile still in her hand. She is upset

FRANCES Was that the door?

BIRD Yeah. Was just going. You OK?

FRANCES No, I'll get it. (*Waving the mobile*) Someone else who can't make it!

The doorbell rings again

BIRD Not Peter then?

FRANCES No. This'll probably be Simon.

BIRD And Harpic.

SHEILA Who?

FRANCES Bird, please. (*She goes to answer the door*) And can you sort the drinks?

BIRD Yes'm. (*She disappears into the kitchen*)

FRANCES (O/S) Oh, Simon! Hi. Gaynor. Lovely to see you. Do please go through...

Simon, late twenties, and Gaynor, a glamorous American in her early thirties, enter. They look surprised to see only SHEILA

FRANCES Come through. Now, this is my mother, Sheila. Mum, this is Simon –

SHEILA Darling, we met! At the concert? The Albert Hall?

FRANCES Oh, of course, sorry ... Yes, right. And this is Gaynor.

GAYNOR Hi.

SHEILA Hello, Simon. Nice to see you again. Good to meet you, Gaynor, is it? Sheila.

GAYNOR And you. Oh, I just love your dress!

SHEILA Thank you. Are you well, Simon? You're looking well.

SIMON (*He kisses her politely. As he does so, FRANCES' mobile alerts her to a text. She moves away from them to read it.*) I'm good. You're looking great. Great. Love that colour on you. (*SHEILA enjoys the compliment*) Listen, Frances, bit of a nuisance but we've had to bring Gaynor's harp with us – we're going straight on to a recital.

SHEILA A harp?

SIMON It's in the hall. Will it be OK there?

FRANCES (*Rejoining them*) The hall? What, downstairs?

GAYNOR In the lobby. Just inside the door.

FRANCES Oh. Oh dear. No, I wouldn't leave it there. The man downstairs has a bike. He might – I would hate it to get damaged.

SHEILA You've brought a harp? What, in a taxi?

GAYNOR It's OK. We just squeezed it into the car but we thought better not leave it in there on the street. Say honey, could you just bring it up in the elevator? I can't afford to risk it.

FRANCES We don't have a lift.

GAYNOR You don't? No kidding. I didn't notice. We always take the stairs, don't we, hon? Though that balustrade –

SHEILA Yes, I said that. It's very unsafe, Frances.

FRANCES I know!

There is the sound of a champagne cork in the kitchen

SIMON Look ... perhaps in the circumstances we should just ... I mean, we have to be there by 7.30.

GAYNOR Yeah ... It would be a squeeze, wouldn't it, once everyone else arrives. Say ... maybe we better take a rain check, Frances. I'm so sorry. Unavoidable. Been in the diary for months.

SIMON Yes, I think you're right, hon –

FRANCES (*Alarmed at their possible departure*) No, no. Don't rush off. Please. I'm sure we can ... There must be something ... Couldn't two of us carry it up? I mean ... Mum? Couldn't we? What do you think?

SIMON No, honestly, Frances, it'll just be in the way. I mean, when the others get here ...

SHEILA It could go in the spare room, surely, darling? Go on. Bring it up quickly. Before the others arrive.

FRANCES Yes. Well ... Thing is, there's not that many more to come, really. Just heard from someone else who can't make it.

SHEILA Oh, Frances! How disappointing!

GAYNOR (*To SIMON*) I thought you said it was a party.

FRANCES Well, drinks. A drinks party. Sort of housewarming. Just a few close friends. Well, friends. For a drink. And some nibbles.

SHEILA Canapés, darling.

GAYNOR Simon, you should have said. A housewarming, Frances! We would have brought you something.

FRANCES No. Oh, no. Please. I didn't mean –

SIMON Well, who else is coming? I thought you said Pauline and Gill. And Sandra?

FRANCES Yes, well, they were, yes. But something came up – suddenly, at work – and they had to cry off.

SIMON Something at work? What was it?

FRANCES I'm not sure.

SIMON I hope it's nothing to do with that Japanese contract. (*Getting his phone out*) They should have rung me. Sorry about this but ... I'd better check. (*To GAYNOR*) Typical of Gill, always thinks she can –

FRANCES (*Stressed*) Look, it's fine. I'm sure they can ... Simon, please. They're dealing with it. OK? Just leave it, will you, Simon! (*Everyone is on edge. SIMON puts his phone back in his pocket. FRANCES recovers*) Let's just ... have a drink, shall we? Enjoy ourselves.

GAYNOR Sure. It's their problem, sweetie, not yours. Frances is right.

SHEILA Still, such a pity, darling. After you'd been to all this trouble, to have so few people turn up.

FRANCES (*To her guests, reassuringly*) But my sister's here.

SIMON Oh, right ... look, I really think it would be better if we left it –

GAYNOR (*Trying to make the best of it*) Oh, honey, I guess we could bring it up. It's not heavy, just kind of unwieldy. But we must be away by 7.15 latest.

FRANCES And I'm still expecting Peter to come.

SIMON Are you? Good. (*To GAYNOR*) You'll like Peter.

SHEILA Yes, I'm looking forward to meeting Frances' new –

FRANCES (*Cutting her off*) And Alan.

SIMON Alan? I didn't know you'd asked him.

FRANCES Yes.

SIMON Alan Rivers? From Accounts?

FRANCES Yes. He's in the book club at work. He's ...quite a laugh actually.

SIMON Is he. Right. (*Abruptly*) Look, Gaynor, how about you and Sheila bring the harp up?

SHEILA (*Startled*) Me?

GAYNOR Up those stairs? I thought you were –

SIMON No, I think you better be in charge, you know, your harp and everything. Sheila, you don't mind, do you? Lending a hand? Only, I've ... hurt my back.

GAYNOR Hurt your ... Since when?

SIMON This morning ... I ... pulled a muscle. In the shower.

GAYNOR Really? You never said.

SIMON No, well, I didn't want to make a fuss.

An awkward pause

SHEILA Right, well ... Gaynor, shall we ...?

GAYNOR, put out, and SHEILA, perplexed, exit

FRANCES Sorry about your back, Simon. You'd better sit –

SIMON Frances, what the hell are you playing at?

FRANCES What? What do you mean?

SIMON Inviting Alan and Peter here.

BIRD returns from the kitchen

BIRD Well, Simon! Hello. How's it going?

FRANCES Why? What do you -

SIMON Bird! Hi. I wasn't expecting ...

BIRD I bet. Long time no see. You want a drink?

SIMON I didn't realise –

FRANCES Simon?

BIRD Yeah, they let me out. Small world, eh? Drink?

SIMON A beer? I'd love a beer. Thanks. Listen, Frances –

BIRD We don't have beer.

SIMON A wine, then. Thanks.

FRANCES Simon!

BIRD Red or white or shampoo?

FRANCES Bird!

SIMON Whatever. Thanks. God, Frances!

BIRD pulls a face and returns to the kitchen, emerging very soon with a tray bearing two wine bottles, one white, one red, to join the champagne already on the table, and some glasses. She slams the tray down. She picks up the bottles one after the other, presenting them to SIMON in the manner of a sommelier, while he continues his conversation with FRANCES.

FRANCES What's the matter? What is it? Have they fallen out or something?

SIMON Jesus, I can't believe you've done that. You must have known.

FRANCES Known what?

SIMON About Alan and Peter. For Christ's sake!

FRANCES What about them!

SIMON You know. Everybody at the office knows.

FRANCES Knows what? For God's sake, Simon!

SIMON *(Exasperated)* Frances! *(BIRD offers him the bottle of red)*. Er, no, thanks, white please. Peter and Alan used to ... you know. *(BIRD now offers the wine and champagne)* Fizz please. Yes, fizz. Thanks.

FRANCES What!?

SIMON They had a thing, you know? Well, no, more than that, lived together for a while.

BIRD laughs

BIRD Oh, Franny you got that one well wrong!

FRANCES Oh God. Oh, Simon ...

SIMON I can't believe you didn't know.

FRANCES How the hell was I supposed to know that?

SIMON Everybody knew!

FRANCES I didn't!

SIMON It's not a secret. Peter won't use the canteen in case he runs into Alan. He's been desperately trying to get another job for months, poor sod. Can't you ring him and put him off?

FRANCES Oh God, Oh God. I've just left a message for him, asking him to come ... His mobile's on answerphone. And I haven't got Alan's number. Have you? I feel such an idiot. I mean, Peter's always been very ... oh God!

BIRD Just because someone's nice to you, doesn't mean they want to get inside your knicks. Does it, Simon?

SIMON What? You thought Peter was interested in –

BIRD Yep. Poor old Franny. *(In a Dalek voice)* Gaydar malfunction.

The sound of laughter as GAYNOR and SHEILA are manhandling the harp into the hallway.

SHEILA (OS) Can you move this chair, Frances?

BIRD What's going on?

FRANCES Just coming. Oh God, Simon! *(To BIRD)* Harp. *(She hurries off)*

BIRD Harp? She's hasn't ...? Oh Christ, she's not going to play it, is she?

SIMON No. Of course not. Don't be ridiculous. Bird -

SHEILA returns, a bit breathless and looking rather flustered

SIMON Thanks so much for doing that, Sheila.

SHEILA Yes. Quite a struggle. *(Caustically)* Hope your back's better soon.

BIRD What's wrong with your back?

SIMON Nothing. Well ... pulled muscle thing. Sheila, you haven't got a drink. (*He goes over to the bottles*) Let me.

BIRD No, no, Simon, Ma doesn't drink.

SIMON Doesn't ... Really?

BIRD Not any more. Do you, Ma?

SHEILA I ... an orange juice would be lovely. Thank you, Simon.

BIRD No, no, no. I'll get it. You watch your back. Don't want you overdoing it, do we? (*She goes into the kitchen*)

SHEILA Oh dear. I am sorry. I'm afraid Bridget can sometimes be a bit ...

SIMON Yes, I know. I've already had the pleasure.

BIRD (*Returning with a carton of juice which she proceeds to pour*) You have indeed.

SIMON (*To SHEILA*) Frances is always talking about her.

BIRD When's this, during a post-coital fag?

SIMON I don't smoke.

BIRD laughs

BIRD Poor old Franny. Just good friends, eh? (*Handing SHEILA her juice*) There you go, mumsy, guaranteed one-hundred percent alcohol-free. You should be safe enough with that.

SHEILA Excuse me, Simon. (*She goes out to the kitchen*)

BIRD Story of my life, my mother deserting me.

SIMON Bird –

BIRD goes over to SIMON and kisses him hard. He pulls away, alarmed

SIMON For God's sake –

BIRD Yeah, you're right, I've had better snogs. Try again.

SIMON No! For Christ's sake, not now. Not here.

BIRD I've missed you. Have you missed me?

SIMON Not now.

BIRD But I'm here now.

SIMON Bird, please.

BIRD Yeah, here I am, right here, right now. Surprise? Nice surprise?

SIMON Yes. Look – the others –

BIRD Just say it. Just say, I've missed you too, Bird. Before Harpic comes back.

SIMON Who?

BIRD Your girlfriend.

SIMON Gaynor.

BIRD Whatever. Or my mother.

SIMON What are you playing at?

BIRD Me? Just being friendly. Renewing our acquaintance.

SIMON Bird -

Noises and some laughter from the bedroom

BIRD Won't kill you. I've missed you. See? Easy. Say it.

SIMON (*Cornered*) I've missed you.

BIRD Liar.

SIMON Bird, please –

BIRD That's better.

SIMON (*Anxious*) You won't –

BIRD What?

SIMON You know. You won't –

BIRD Dunno what you mean.

SIMON Yes, you do, you little ... listen, I'm warning you, if you –

BIRD If I what? Tony's café, King's Cross. Ten am tomorrow.

SIMON What?!

BIRD Ten am. Tomorrow. See you there ...

FRANCES and GAYNOR come back in, finishing a friendly conversation.

FRANCES Come and have a drink. Ah, Bird, there you are. This is Gaynor. Gaynor,, my sister, Bridget.

BIRD *(With extravagant charm, looking at FRANCES who watches anxiously)*
Gaynor. Hell-o. I'm Bird. The family loony. And how's the harp?

GAYNOR Hi, Bird. Nice to meet you. It's fine, thank you for your concern.

BIRD *(To FRANCES)* You never said she was a bloody American.

FRANCES Bird!

GAYNOR *(Taking it in good part)* For my sins. Oh, champagne, how gorgeous! Dare I risk a glass, sweetie, do you think?

SIMON I don't suppose one will do any harm, hon.

BIRD Careful. That's just what my dear old ma used to say. And look at her now.
(She pours GAYNOR a glass) There you go.

FRANCES Where is Mum? I'll have one of those too, thanks.

BIRD Ferreting under the sink for some meths probably. *(Pouring FRANCES a drink)* Here. You all right, Simon? *(Sarcastically)* Hon?

SIMON *(Ignoring her. He goes over to GAYNOR and kisses her cheek)* See what havoc you create with that thing, sweetie?

GAYNOR I know. Should've chosen the flute. Something sensible.

SIMON *(With some feeling)* Yeah. And portable. *(GAYNOR, SIMON and FRANCES laugh which breaks the tension a little)*

FRANCES Have you been playing it long?

GAYNOR About ... oh, my God ... twenty years. *(To SIMON)* How old does that make me sound?

FRANCES It's quite an unusual instrument to play, isn't it? The harp?

GAYNOR I guess. My folks spent years ferrying the pair of us around. Got it jammed in the trunk of my dad's car one time at high school. He goes off for help and meanwhile my teacher's so mad I might miss the concert, he levers the door off to get it out. Dad swears he'd still have a full head of hair but for my harp, love him.

BIRD (*With a look at FRANCES*) That is so sweet. Don't you think that's sweet, Franny?

FRANCES (*Battling on*) And where are you playing tonight?

GAYNOR One of those cute little churches in the City? It's a charity do.

SIMON Hon, I'm going to pop downstairs and check the car. Make sure I didn't leave my briefcase in full view.

SHEILA reappears, as SIMON exits

BIRD Hey, Ma, d'you hear that? Gaynor's's doing a recital for charidee in a church tonight. What say we all go hear her? We could confess our sins at the same time.

SHEILA ignores her pointedly and settles on the arm of the sofa

GAYNOR (*Trying to lighten things*) So. Bird. That's a really pretty name.

SHEILA Her real name's Bridget.

GAYNOR So how come you're called Bird?

BIRD It's what my daddy used to call me.

SHEILA Bridget ...

BIRD It's what Daddy used to call me. Because I was so tiny. Like a little bird.

GAYNOR Neat. My dad used to call me Beaky. No, don't even go there. He still does when he's out to embarrass me. (*Laughing*) Is your dad coming tonight?

BIRD lets out a single harsh bark of laughter

BIRD I wish.

SHEILA I'm afraid my husband is dead, Gaynor.

GAYNOR (*Appalled*) Oh. Hey. I'm sorry. Oh my God. Look, I'm really sorry. Me and my big mouth. Didn't mean to –

BIRD (*Reaching for the bottle*) Nobody means to – nobody ever means to.

She pours a large glass and knocks it back in one go. There is an embarrassed silence. BIRD goes to refill her glass

SHEILA Should you be drinking that, Bridget?

BIRD Why? Is it too good for me? Or is alcoholism hereditary?

SHEILA You know what I mean.

BIRD I'm not sure I do. Perhaps you'd like to spell it out.

FRANCES (*Putting her arm around her and taking the bottle from her*) Bird ... let's check the oven, eh?

BIRD Yeah. See if my head'll fit in it.

They exit

GAYNOR Difficult age.

SHEILA Every age is difficult with Bridget. (*Apologetically*) She really shouldn't drink. She's on medication, you see, and ... well ...

GAYNOR I'm so sorry. I had no idea about your husband. I didn't mean to upset you. Or Bird.

SHEILA She knows that. She just can't resist an audience. (*She sighs then goes over to the table and after a momentary hesitation, pours herself a drink*)

GAYNOR So. You live in London, Sheila?

SHEILA No. Hampshire. Just moved back. From our place in Cornwall. Been there, oh, thirteen, fourteen years. Used to be our holiday home.

GAYNOR Right.

SHEILA Yes. My husband Louis did much of his painting there. He had a studio overlooking the sea.

GAYNOR (*Getting up and looking at the painting*) Forgive my ignorance, but ... should I know him? Is this one of his?

SHEILA Yes. There's an exhibition of his work on at the moment. A retrospective. Obviously. That's an early one. It's called *Forsaken*. Not one of his cheerier paintings.

GAYNOR No. (*A beat*) What is it ...?

SHEILA God knows.

They laugh

SHEILA Sorry. I'm being flippant. It's not typical of his style. Should you know him? No, probably not, if you're not into modern art. He rather fell out of fashion after – after he died. Bit of a renaissance recently, I'm glad to say. Keeps the wolf from the door.

GAYNOR I must get along to see the exhibition.

SHEILA (*Pleased*) Do. If you're interested, that is, and not just being polite. But you better be quick. It closes tomorrow.

GAYNOR Oh! OK. I'll try. So what about where you are now?

SHEILA The Rectory? I'm getting used to it again. It's very odd. It felt like a stranger's house at first, like it didn't fit any more. The walls were different colours for a start. The tenants had re-decorated, several times. And the memories there are ... well ...

GAYNOR waits for her to say more but she doesn't. The moment is broken. SIMON returns as FRANCES comes in with canapés fresh from the oven, on a tray. BIRD follows her. SHEILA quietly gets up and drifts over to the bottles, in time re-filling her glass

FRANCES Careful. They're hot. Please.

GAYNOR hesitates over the tray. BIRD offers SIMON a bread stick and dip

BIRD Dipstick, dipstick? (*Sees SHEILA refilling her glass*) Uh-oh. Looks like the wheels are off the wagon.

FRANCES Gaynor, Simon, please do try one. Oh, Bird darling, napkins. They're in the kitchen. Could you?

GAYNOR Thing is, no offence, Frances, but I don't like to eat before a performance.

BIRD Franny's been liquidising these to buggery all afternoon. Least you can do is try some.

FRANCES Bird, don't be so rude! No, Gaynor, of course you don't have to have one. They're only M&S anyway. Bird, napkins. Please.

SHEILA I'll get them, darling. (*She goes off into the kitchen*)

BIRD Amazing. She can still walk in a straight line.

FRANCES Bird –

BIRD She'll start taking her clothes off in a minute.

SIMON Bird. That's enough!

FRANCES and GAYNOR look taken aback at his intervention

GAYNOR Simon?

SIMON I'm sorry, but –

FRANCES She was only joking, Simon –

BIRD (*Putting her glass down*) No she wasn't. Anyway, relax, everybody. I'm out of here.

FRANCES Bird, please. Don't be silly, I'm sure Simon didn't mean -

BIRD Oh, I'm sure he did. Anyway, time for me to go. Thanks for ... whatever.

She exits towards the spare bedroom

SIMON What's got into her? She's worse than ever.

GAYNOR What do you mean -

FRANCES I'm sorry. Really. I'll just go and have a word -

As FRANCES puts the tray down, GAYNOR looks quizzically at SIMON, signalling an exit. He tries to smooth things over

SIMON Yes. Oh, look at the time! It's getting on, hon. We better be on our way.

FRANCES (*Stopping*) No! No, please. Don't rush off. I'll sort Bird out. Please. Gaynor, at least finish your drink.

GAYNOR Well ... I guess another five minutes won't hurt. She's not leaving on account of what I said, Frances, is she?

FRANCES No, no of course not. Honestly, there's no need for you to rush off -

GAYNOR (*To SIMON*) You didn't tell me about Frances' dad and I asked Bird -

SIMON Oh Christ, I never thought -

FRANCES No, no, really, she's ... she gets upset easily. My mother, you know?

GAYNOR Right. Families, eh? The worst. But your mom's really cute.

FRANCES Cute? Oh. Really? Yes, I suppose -

The sound of the harp being strummed

SIMON What the fuck ...?

FRANCES Bird? Bird! What are you doing?

GAYNOR She's messing with my harp? Jesus. Honey - (*she thrusts her glass into SIMON's hand*)

FRANCES No, I'm sure she's -

They both disappear into the bedroom. Sound of raised voices. SHEILA reappears with a fresh bottle.

SHEILA What's going on?

SIMON Gaynor's harp. Bird went into the bedroom –

SHEILA Bridget? Oh, dear God! I swear, one day –

BIRD backs out the bedroom into the sitting room, followed by GAYNOR and FRANCES

BIRD For Christ's sake, I was just looking at it. What is it? The fucking crown jewels?

SHEILA Bridget, please!

GAYNOR It's OK. It's OK. It's just ... It's a very expensive instrument.

SIMON What the hell did you think you were doing? You don't mess with it. OK?

BIRD OK! OK. Jesus! What's with you guys? Anyway, I'm outa here. Franny, ring me, yeah? Bye bye, mumsy. Ciao, Gaynor. Simon. See you.

She makes eye contact with SIMON as she exits. There is a long awkward silence

SHEILA Drink, anyone?

BLACKOUT

ACT 1 SCENE 2

The following morning. Tony's café, King's Cross. A radio playing in the background. Shabby Formica table, plastic sauce bottles etc. SIMON is sitting at a corner table, trying to read a newspaper, sipping a coffee. He is nervous. From time to time, he checks his watch. He looks over in response to an unseen proprietor.

SIMON No ... no, you're all right, mate. No, I'm good. Just waiting ... Yeah. Maybe in a minute. Thanks.

FRANCES enters. She looks rough, as if she hasn't taken much care over her appearance. SIMON does not look up, but she sees him. She is startled.

FRANCES Simon?

FRANCES is the last person he expected

SIMON Jesus, Frances!

FRANCES What a coincidence. What on earth are you –

SIMON *(Recovering)* A coincidence. Yes. What are you doing here? Meeting someone? Not your kind of place at all, I'd've thought.

FRANCES Yes, I am. No, it's not. God, what a dive! Yes, I'm – all right if I join you?

SIMON Er ... well, I ... yeah, sure, why not? Sit down. Please.

FRANCES *(Brushing the chair seat before doing so)* Is that cup clean?

SIMON *(Looking at it carefully)* Cleanish. Can I get you –

FRANCES No, thanks. *(To proprietor)* No, thanks, not just yet. I'll wait until ... *(To SIMON)* Simon, I'm so glad I've seen you. About last night. I'm terribly sorry. I was going to phone you both. I feel so –

SIMON Forget it. Did the guys make it in the end?

FRANCES No, thank God. Peter rang later but Alan never even ... which I suppose was a blessing in the circumstances ... Some party ... Simon, I feel so embarrassed. God knows what Gaynor thought.

SIMON No, really –

FRANCES I'm sorry. Total disaster. And then Mum. She didn't mean it ... all that stuff about Bird. *(Pause)* I shouldn't have asked her.

SIMON Too right. I know she's your sister, but –

FRANCES I meant Mum.

SIMON Oh. No. It didn't help when she started drinking.

FRANCES No.

SIMON Poor old Frances, eh, always caught in the middle.

FRANCES It's fine when it's just one of them, but when they're together ... It's just ... you know, I always hope, one day ... God knows, you'd think I'd know better after all these years...

SIMON Yes.

FRANCES You see, I feel responsible for her. Bird. That's the problem. It's really not her fault.

SIMON Really.

FRANCES I know people wouldn't think it to look at her but underneath all that bravado she's so fragile.

SIMON Fragile? Bird? Bollocks.

FRANCES What?

SIMON If you ask me, she's a manipulative little bitch.

FRANCES Simon!

SIMON I'm sorry but –

FRANCES No, no ... hang on a minute. Look, I know she behaved badly last night –

SIMON Behaved badly! D'you know what she did?

FRANCES She gets like that. She can't help herself. You know she doesn't mean it.

SIMON I'm talking about Gaynor's harp.

FRANCES Oh. No. No, you're right. She shouldn't have touched that.

SIMON She shouldn't have been there at all! Jesus, Frances, she's a bloody psychopath.

FRANCES Oh, come on, Simon! That's a bit –

SIMON We get to the concert and just as Gaynor's tuning up, one of the strings snaps. Could have taken her eye out.

FRANCES Oh my God! Is she –

SIMON She's all right, thank Christ. Shaken. But –

FRANCES What, and you think -?

SIMON Look, all I know is, Gaynor had checked everything before we left. It was fine. And then Bird starts playing around with it and suddenly ...

FRANCES But it must have been an accident. A coincidence. You can't possibly think –

SIMON A coincidence? What, like this?

FRANCES What do you mean?

SIMON (*Realising his faux pas*) Nothing. Yeah. It could have been an accident. Strings break. I'm just saying it's spooky the way things seem to happen when she's around.

FRANCES That's not fair, Simon.

SIMON Fair! Your sister is a bloody menace, Frances. Fine, you defend her all you like, but I don't want anything more to do with her. I should have known. I wish I'd never –

FRANCES What?

SIMON (*He's said too much*) Forget it. Look, d'you want a coffee or something?

FRANCES No, I – Simon, what did you mean by that?

SIMON I'm sorry. Let's go somewhere else and have a quiet coffee, shall we? This place is awful.

FRANCES stares at him. SIMON won't meet her eye. The penny drops

FRANCES My God. You were going to meet her, weren't you? Here.

SIMON Gaynor?

FRANCES Not Gaynor! Bird! You were. You were going to meet Bird. That's why you're here.

SIMON Frances ... Listen –

FRANCES Oh my God. Have you two been ... Please tell me you haven't –

SIMON Calm down, for Christ's sake. Keep your voice down.

FRANCES (*Getting up*) I can't believe this! You and Bird!

SIMON Frances! Frances, for God's sake. Sit down and get a grip.

FRANCES looks around, aghast. She sits

SIMON Oh ... God! It wasn't while we were ... It was ages after. And anyway, you and me, it's not as if we were ... I mean, let's be honest about it, Frances ... She ... she just phoned me up one day, out of the blue, said, would I like to meet for a drink? Couldn't see the harm in it. *(Beat)* She was fun. Really good company. Bit of a laugh. You know how she can be if she wants. Saw her a couple of times, that's all.

FRANCES And you slept with her.

SIMON Look, you know how these things happen, one thing led to another. You know ...

FRANCES You slept with her.

SIMON Frances –

FRANCES She's 17.

SIMON She doesn't fucking act 17.

(Beat)

FRANCES I bet you both had a good old laugh at me, didn't you?

SIMON No. We never spoke about you.

FRANCES No. Too busy -

She turns away. Silence

SIMON Frances, please. Please, Frances. *(He reaches for her hand again)* It was nothing. I'm sorry, I never meant to hurt you. Believe me. I mean, I wanted us to stay friends. We are still friends, aren't we? Frances?

He glances round the café, clearly embarrassed, smiles briefly at the unseen proprietor. SIMON watches FRANCES struggling for control.

FRANCES She always does it.

SIMON Frances –

FRANCES Has to ... can't leave things alone. Has to stir things up. I know she's had a terrible ... *(Starts crying, not prettily)* I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Pathetic. It's all just getting a bit ... *(She grabs his hand)* Oh God, I'm sorry. Don't tell anyone, will you? Please, Simon. About today. This. Don't tell Gaynor. About all this.

SIMON Like that's likely. Christ, can you imagine? Especially now she's met her.

FRANCES Who?

SIMON Gaynor. Now she's met your bloody sister. (*Beat*) Sorry. Not your fault. I don't know what she's up to, but you can tell Bird I won't play.

FRANCES She doesn't mean anything by it. She doesn't mean half what she says.

SIMON Oh Frances, please! Of course she means it. It's why she does it. She gets off on it.

FRANCES No, Simon, you don't –

SIMON And then this obsession with your father.

FRANCES What are you talking about?

SIMON All those posters of him all over the walls.

FRANCES What, his paintings?

SIMON No, posters of him. At her place. Her room's plastered with them. Don't you think that's weird? I assume they're from the exhibition.

FRANCES Pictures of Dad?

SIMON Yeah. Don't you think it's odd?

FRANCES Yes, I suppose ... I don't know. I've never been there.

SIMON Never ...? Jesus. What a family. No wonder she's so –

FRANCES So what? (*SIMON shrugs*) You don't have any idea about our family.

SIMON No.

FRANCES You don't understand the first thing about Bird! Look, I'll speak to her. All right? Satisfied? Now go.

SIMON Listen, about Gaynor –

FRANCES Just go, will you? Simon, please.

SIMON Frances ... I don't want to leave things ... leave you like this.

FRANCES Like what? This is what things are like. Today. Every day. Just go. I won't tell Gaynor, if that's what you mean.

SIMON Frances –

FRANCES Just fuck off, Simon, will you!

SIMON turns to leave

FRANCES *(Suddenly, appalled, reaching across the table)* Simon! Sorry. I am so sorry. I don't know what ... God ... Tell Gaynor, sorry. Please. For everything. Really, I didn't mean ...

SIMON I know you didn't.

He settles her back in the chair and, very gently, kisses her on the forehead. As he does so, BIRD arrives and stands watching them for a moment. She is dressed all in black, hair pulled back, lots of eye makeup, nose ring. Then she bounds over and throws herself into a chair

BIRD Sweet. Don't let the Homecoming Queen catch you doing that.

SIMON *(Ignoring her)* Goodbye, Frances. You take care of yourself.

He goes

BIRD She will. 'Bye, lover. 'Lo, sis.

FRANCES grabs a napkin from the table and blows her nose noisily. She dries her eyes. She recovers her composure, goes to leave, gathering up her things. She won't look at BIRD

BIRD You got my text then? Bet you thought I wasn't coming. Overslept. Didn't get in 'til late. *(She reaches across to grab FRANCES' hand)* See, I knew you'd come, Franny. You always come. Hey – listen – I was thinking. What about purple? For the sitting room? Just on one wall. Look great. What d'you reckon?

FRANCES hesitates, then sits heavily

BIRD With mirrors and that. Yeah? Or not. We should get some of those colour chart things. God, I'm starving. Got any money? Haven't eaten since last night. *(She pulls FRANCES' bag over and starts rummaging in her purse. She finds a note)* Ta. Want anything? *(FRANCES shakes her head)* Coffee? Bacon sarnie? Okey dokey. Won't be a min.

She disappears over to the counter. FRANCES resignedly waits. Her phone rings. She checks the caller before answering

FRANCES Hi, Mum. How are you feeling? ... Well, it's hardly surprising ... no, it's all right ... yes, I know. I know that. Listen ... no, no, I'm fine. Bit of a cold, that's all. Just listen! Bird - Bridget's here. With me ... No, I'm in a café. Yes, she's ... she's fine. Listen – no, don't worry: leave it to me. I said I would, didn't I? Mum! – no, no! I'm going to tell her now – OK? Look, got to go. I'll phone you again later.

She quickly finishes the call as BIRD returns with a tray, bearing a Coke and a large Belgian bun. She scrapes up the change on the tray and pockets it

BIRD I can guess who that was. Ta for this. Couldn't be arsed to wait while they cooked the bacon. *(She starts on the bun, unwinding it as a child might do, until it is one long*

coil of bun which she proceeds to eat from one end) Still, it's all carbohydrates. You OK? Party go all right after I left? Wanna bite?

FRANCES The party was a disaster. Bird, Simon thinks you did something to Gaynor's harp.

BIRD What?

FRANCES To the strings.

BIRD Yeah? Like what?

FRANCES Did you?

BIRD What do you think?

FRANCES I don't think you did. I don't think you'd do something like that. Not to someone you didn't even know.

BIRD Thanks. But I'd do it to someone I did know?

FRANCES No, I didn't mean that. Why do you always want people to think the worst of you?

BIRD Saves time. So Harpic's harp broke, did it?

FRANCES So Simon said.

BIRD Simon says.

FRANCES Bird, why did you ask us here? It's horrible.

BIRD It's cheap. I like it. Anonymous.

FRANCES Why come to places like this? The world's ugly enough and you ... make it even uglier. And what do you look like?

BIRD Whatever. Don't start. Anyway, you can talk. So. Didn't get much chance to speak to you last night. Not with her on the scene.

FRANCES (*The hurt resurfaces*) And Simon? Why did you -

BIRD Because I could. Because he's an arsehole. Because he's frightened of me.

FRANCES Frightened of you?

BIRD Yeah. Frightened Little Miss America will find out about us.

FRANCES He told me. About ... I thought you and him - it was before Gaynor.

BIRD It was. But can't see her being too thrilled knowing her boyfriend was screwing a nutter like me. Anyway, she's all right. What does she see in him?

FRANCES You're not a nutter.

BIRD Whatever. I wanted to make him sweat.

FRANCES Why?

BIRD Because he hurt you. Hurt my big sis. I wanted to do something for you for once.

FRANCES Oh, Bird! No, darling. You mustn't do that. Simon and me, it wasn't ... it was just a work thing really. Never going to work.

BIRD I watched you watching him and Gaynor last night –

FRANCES I wasn't!

BIRD And I thought he may be an arsehole but p'raps you like arseholes and maybe if I got you two together again –

FRANCES Here?!

BIRD Yeah. So maybe this wasn't such a good choice.

FRANCES You can't do things like this. Messing with people's lives.

BIRD No? Everyone does it to me. So. Last night.

FRANCES A disaster. A complete nightmare. Went from bad to worse, if that's possible. No-one else came. Not one. And then after you left, Mum ...

BIRD Don't tell me. I warned you. Never learn, do you? Her or me. Your choice.

FRANCES We can't go on like this, Bird.

BIRD Can't 'we'?

FRANCES It's tearing both of you apart.

BIRD Nothing left to tear, Fran. Don't be such a drama queen. And she's as hard as nails. She can do what the fuck she likes, long as she leaves me out of it. Don't know why she feels she has to keep trying anyway.

FRANCES Because she loves you.

BIRD Bor-ing. Loves me! Don't want to talk about it. Or her. What's in the bags?

FRANCES Oh. From last night. I thought you might like them. They'll only go to waste.

BIRD Can't have that. Give them here.

FRANCES hands them over and BIRD starts unwrapping them

FRANCES Not in here! You can't start eating them in here.

BIRD They won't mind. Go on. What? What is it?

FRANCES moves BIRD so she is out of direct sight of the proprietor. As she does so, BIRD starts sweeping all the sachets of mayonnaise, ketchup, sugar and tiny milk cartons off the table and into her bag

FRANCES Bird, what the hell are you doing?

BIRD Supplies.

She goes to get up as if to do the same at an adjacent table. FRANCES grabs her wrist and pulls her back into her seat

FRANCES Bird! Will you behave!

BIRD *(Looking across)* 'S OK. They're all tartare sauce. I hate that, don't you?

FRANCES Honestly, you're worse than ... I don't know what you do with your money.

BIRD My money? D'you've any idea what my wages are? Thank Christ for tips.

FRANCES I've told you –

BIRD I don't want your money. I want my money. I want that cow to give me my money. Daddy's money.

FRANCES Oh God, not again, Bird. You know she can't. Not until you're 21.

BIRD So she says. Probably hoping I won't make it to 21. Anyway, what? Go on. You've got something to tell me, haven't you? You're so obvious. *(Beat)* Apart from Penhalligan, that is.

FRANCES Yes, I ... It's about Dad, actually. Good news, in a way.

BIRD Daddy? Yeah?

FRANCES Yes. *(Cautiously)* The thing is ... well ... you know, he's back in the spotlight, thanks to the exhibition. And ... now someone's writing a book about him.

BIRD Cool.

FRANCES He's good, apparently, this writer. Well-known. Thinks the time's right for a re-appraisal.

BIRD Yeah? What's his name, this bloke?

FRANCES Eric ... Linneman ... Lenney ... something like that. I can't remember. It's a biography, Bird. You see? An authorised biography. Not just his work, it's his life. His personal life.

BIRD Yeah? And?

FRANCES Well, you see what that means, don't you? He'll want to talk about everything, family, us ... you see?

BIRD Great. I might learn something.

FRANCES ... and obviously, he'll want to know ... about what happened ...

BIRD 'Course. So?

FRANCES Well, that might ... unsettle you. You see? The more I've thought about it, the more worried I've got.

BIRD stares at her, impassive. FRANCES stumbles on

FRANCES Because ... you know how things knock you off balance sometimes. Bird, you know what I'm saying.

BIRD (*With faux innocence*) What?

FRANCES The thing is ... Mum and I have been talking and we don't think it would be wise for you to meet him.

BIRD Wise?

FRANCES I mean, he's bound to want to talk to us. All of us. But we don't want you upset. And we thought – you know, that it would be better ... for you, in your ...

BIRD Best interests, yeah?

FRANCES Yes –

BIRD If I kept out of it.

FRANCES Yes.

BIRD Right. So how does that work, then, my best interests? Is he going to speak to you?

FRANCES I don't know. I expect so. Yes. Look, I was older when – I can remember more about him. It'll just be little anecdotes and that. You know. What he was like. As a father. That sort of thing. That's what I reckon.

BIRD OK. Let's see if I've got this straight. I'm not to meet this guy because he might upset me. Yeah? But you two can peddle your charming little anecdotes 'til Kingdom come? Is that how it goes? And what about my memories? Don't they count? Or are you just afraid of what I might say? Let the side down.

FRANCES Bird, there's no need to get ... Mum wasn't going to tell you –

BIRD *(Laughing)* I bet she wasn't.

FRANCES But I said that wasn't fair. I said you should know.

BIRD Good old Franny. Bloody right, I should know, but I'm supposed to keep schtum. Has he started yet, this bloke?

FRANCES ... Yes ... He's nice, Bird. Really easy to talk to.

BIRD Is he. So you've met him?

FRANCES Well, I've ... yes, not met him exactly, spoken to him on the phone. He's been at the house. Looking through Dad's papers and things. With Mum.

BIRD He's staying there? At The Rectory?

FRANCES No! In the village. At the pub. You remember the pub?

BIRD Not with her, then.

FRANCES No.

BIRD Sure?

FRANCES Well, I didn't ask, but no ... I'm sure he's not. You know how she is these days about having people stay. She wouldn't.

BIRD I didn't mean screwing him. I meant ... just trying to charm him, get him to paint her in her favourite colours. Tragic widow, keeper of the flame. Victim.

FRANCES *(Refusing to rise to it)* Bird, I'm not getting into any of this. I just thought you ought to know.

BIRD OK, babe. I'm not taking it out on you. You take everything so seriously. For fuck's sake, lighten up, Franny! Don't you ever want to just do ... stuff?

FRANCES Stuff?

BIRD Mad things. You know ... stamp all over a white carpet in some poncey shop in muddy boots ... I dunno ... knock over a pile of cans in a supermarket? I know! Snog a cashier in a bank? I've always wanted to do that.

FRANCES They have glass partitions.

BIRD I know they have glass partitions! But what if you could?

FRANCES No.

BIRD I do. I'd love to see their faces. Can you imagine? Just lean across and ... (*she makes slobbery kissing noises*) ... This bloke, the other day, on the Tube, he starts singing to the woman on the next seat.

FRANCES On the Tube? Did he know her?

BIRD No, total stranger. It was brilliant. He was, like, twenty four or something and she was old, really old, fifty at least. And she's sitting there trying to pretend it isn't happening, head buried in a book and he's singing his heart out, some opera thing, and everyone else is looking away and he's lost in the music and making love to this old bid. Her face is all flushed and we pull into Holborn and she's off like a shot and guess what?

FRANCES Someone arrests him?

BIRD No! He follows her. You can still hear him singing as the train doors close. Brilliant.

FRANCES A loony. He must have been a loony. Mentally ill or something. How awful!

BIRD Yeah, he was mad, but not crazy. It was just ... Daddy would have done something like that. Don't you think he would?

FRANCES Dad?

BIRD Yeah, you can imagine him doing something like that, can't you?

FRANCES Do you want me to take those?

BIRD I wish he'd sung to me.

FRANCES Look, Bird, I'm going to get off now. You OK with ... all this?

BIRD Oh, yeah. Ecstatic.

FRANCES Only, he might ring you. The writer. Try to get hold of you.

BIRD I heard you the first time. Schtum.

FRANCES Promise?

BIRD Cross my heart.

FRANCES Good girl. And you won't ...

BIRD No, been warned off, haven't I? Written out. I know my place. Not a word.
(*Beat*) How old is he?

FRANCES Oh ... Forties? I don't know - might be older. Why?

BIRD Just asking. Want to know what I'm missing. You know me and older men.

FRANCES Like Simon?

BIRD It's legal.

FRANCES I know that. I just don't understand why.

BIRD You'd finished with him. Or vice versa. Just thought it might be a laugh.

FRANCES A laugh. Right.

BIRD For Christ's sake. It was only a shag. No big deal.

FRANCES No. Not for you anyway. (*She gets up*)

BIRD (*Putting out a hand to stop her*) Hey, big Sis.

FRANCES Don't.

BIRD You should try it sometime. It doesn't kill you. I love you, you do know that,
don't you?

FRANCES (*Kissing her lightly*) Take care.

BIRD Bit late for that. See you.

FRANCES What are you doing for the rest of the day?

BIRD What do you think? Last day today. It closes tonight.

FRANCES Oh, Bird ...

BIRD Glutton for punishment, me.

FRANCES And later? You could come round. I could cook you some supper.

BIRD Staying in with my sister on a Saturday night. How sad is that?

FRANCES Or I could come to yours.

BIRD No.

FRANCES goes to leave

BIRD Hey, Franny!

FRANCES (*Hoping she's changed her mind*) Yes?

BIRD holds out the now empty containers

BIRD Finished.

Resignedly FRANCES goes back to collect the rubbish as ...

The lights fade

ACT 1 SCENE 3

A gallery. Later that day. BIRD is standing motionless, staring up at a huge image of her father Louis Mackay on the back wall that bears the legend 'LOUIS MACKAY, 1944 – 1995'. A wall of paintings, all on the fourth wall. Perhaps they are suggested by lighting, perhaps they are represented by empty frames. Their shadows cast oblongs on the floor. A taped commentary is running, as part of the exhibition. It consists of fragments of interviews and quotes from Louis

LOUIS ... owes nothing to anything or anyone but his art. Family, friends, love and affection are but fuel to feed that flame. It's a lonely, selfish road, but it is the only road. The artist has one, and only one, responsibility in life – to serve his art.

The tape finishes. BIRD spins round suddenly. Simultaneous, we hear the same phrase of music we heard at the opening of the play and Louis' voice threaded through it: 'Little BIRD, fold your wings, little BIRD. Sleep now. Sleep.' BIRD is lost in the moment, her face illuminated by a shaft of light. Subtly the lights change to something slightly more naturalistic as the music fades and GAYNOR enters, brochure in hand, looking rather hurried, even breathless, and begins to inspect the exhibits on the fourth wall. She glances over to BIRD, does a double take, looks again

GAYNOR Bridget?

BIRD remains immobile, as if still listening, her eyes closed

GAYNOR Bird?

BIRD opens her eyes

BIRD Yeah? Oh!

GAYNOR Hey. I wasn't sure. This is a nice surprise. How you doing? (*She does a double take at the picture of Louis*) Wow! So that's him? Your dad?

BIRD looks up at the paintings, not the image

BIRD Yeah.

GAYNOR God, don't you look ... Jeez. (*Beat*) Hey, listen, I'm really glad I've bumped into you. I just want to say ... about last night – I didn't realise. Christ, could I have been any more crass?

BIRD Forget it.

GAYNOR Simon told me afterwards about ... what happened. With your Dad and ... I could have killed - No ... I mean ... Jesus! How ever can you –

BIRD What are you doing here?

GAYNOR Bird, I'm really, really sorry.

BIRD You said. Why are you here?

GAYNOR Oh. The exhibition. Last night ... your mum, she was telling me about it. I had nothing planned for today, so I thought ... why not? Say, you haven't seen Simon?

BIRD Simon?

GAYNOR We're supposed to meet up here.

BIRD (*Amused at the coincidence*) No ... no. I haven't seen him. Anyway. How was it? Last night?

GAYNOR The party?

BIRD The concert.

GAYNOR Oh. Fine. Good. Yeah, it was fun.

BIRD Listen, about your harp. The string thing.

GAYNOR What? Oh. The string? How did –

BIRD Look, I was only having a laugh. I never meant –

GAYNOR What? No! Oh, God, you thought ...?

BIRD Yeah. I mean, never realised that it might –

GAYNOR You? No, honestly ... no, it happens. No worries.

BIRD So, me mucking about with it –

GAYNOR Christ, no. Strings go, they just go sometimes. That's life.

BIRD Oh. OK.

GAYNOR starts to look at the pictures

GAYNOR Mmm ... Powerful. Nothing like that one Frances has in her flat. Not what I was expecting at all. Although I don't really know what I was expecting.

BIRD D'you like it?

GAYNOR (*Considering*) I think so. Not sure I understand it. But ... it moves me. If that doesn't sound corny. What is it meant to ...?

BIRD takes her brochure, opens it at the appropriate page and hands it back. She stands watching GAYNOR read it

GAYNOR OK ... (*She laughs*) I'm not sure I'm much the wiser. Not my strong point, art. My reactions are more instinctive than informed.

BIRD 'S OK. There's a commentary thing that runs every half hour. 'Cept you've just missed the last one.

GAYNOR About his work?

BIRD Mainly him talking about his work.

GAYNOR Him talking?

BIRD Yeah. Recordings, interviews. You know.

GAYNOR Oh! Is that weird for you? Hearing his voice?

BIRD shrugs. They move together to the next picture

GAYNOR Oh wow. This is very different. So much colour...

BIRD Yeah. Cornwall.

GAYNOR (*Looking harder*) It's ... it reminds me ... the girl, is it ...?

BIRD Yeah.

GAYNOR God, yes, it is. Yes, I can see it plain as anything now. It's just –

BIRD I know.

GAYNOR You'd hardly think it was ... she's beautiful, really beautiful. I don't mean ... sorry. It's just she's got such a ...

BIRD What?

GAYNOR ... I don't know ... a kind of intensity, like she's looking right inside, kind of ... knows you. No, like you can see right inside her. But, meeting her now ...

BIRD Yeah.

GAYNOR (*Looking from the picture to the image of Louis*) She obviously takes after Sheila. Whereas you ... Well, you look like your dad a lot. No mistake. But Frances ...

BIRD Oh, no. Ma'd been married before. She's my half-sister. (*Beat*) No-one's ever said that to me. About looking like him.

GAYNOR takes this in

GAYNOR You must miss him so much. God, if I lost my dad ... D'you remember much about him?

BIRD looks as if she isn't going to reply, then changes her mind

BIRD Maybe. I think I do. I have pictures.

GAYNOR What do you mean? Like that? (*Gesturing behind her*)

BIRD No. In my head. But I do have pictures, photos too. Stole them.

GAYNOR You what?!

BIRD From her. I had nothing. But I've got that on my wall now. (*Beat*) I wasn't supposed to remember him, I think. So I could (*bitterly*) move on.

GAYNOR Move on?

BIRD It's what my shrink said. Bloody basket case. Her, not me. You got one? Therapist? Must have.

GAYNOR Because I'm American? That's a bit of a cliché.

BIRD Have you?

GAYNOR Yeah. Yeah, I have. Of course.

They both laugh. The ice is broken

BIRD Does it pay then? Playing the harp? Harping?

GAYNOR God, no! I don't do it for a living.

BIRD No?

GAYNOR You gotta be really big to make serious bucks out of it. And I got a shoe collection to service, honey! It's a hobby, is all.

BIRD Right. So ...?

GAYNOR Journalist.

BIRD A journalist? Wow. On a paper?

GAYNOR I wish. No, freelance.

BIRD What sort of stuff?

GAYNOR Whatever I can get. Features, profiles, investigative stuff –

BIRD Cool. How does that work – you get commissioned or something?

GAYNOR Sometimes, yeah. People I've worked for before, editors, whoever. Or I can pitch for work, you know, come up with some idea, some angle, try to sell it to a magazine or something. There's a few folks I go to.

They move to the next painting

GAYNOR Oh, this is good. I like this.

BIRD Ever written a book?

GAYNOR Fiction? No. I know my limitations ... Isn't that wonderful, the light on her face? ... No, it's never really appealed. What I like is all the research, you know, sort of picking away at the fabric until you expose what's underneath.

BIRD Yeah?

GAYNOR These days you can get at so much information – I mean, the internet and stuff, it's all around you, so long as you know where to look, what questions to ask. And I'm a bit of a terrier, won't let go, you know? I don't mind being a pain in the ass. Drives Simon crazy!

BIRD I bet.

GAYNOR See, strictly *entre nous*, I think part of him finds me a bit exotic – don't laugh! You know, freewheeling, bit off centre, *foreign*.

BIRD American.

GAYNOR Exactly! But the other part of him dislikes anything unconventional, anything that rocks the boat. Me, I say, let's give things a go, let's take a look. Turn over a few stones. Ask awkward questions. You never know what you might discover.

BIRD Yeah. I bet you could write a book. (*Beat*) Some bloke's writing one about my Dad.

GAYNOR What, a biography?

BIRD So they tell me.

GAYNOR How cool is that? I hadn't realised your Dad was so... Wow! That's really something. You see what a schmuck I am – I'd never even heard of Louis Mackay until last night!

BIRD Yeah - I might actually learn something.

GAYNOR About what ... what do you mean?

BIRD About my dad. What he was really like. I'm hoping this guy'll shake things up a little. Rattle a few cages.

GAYNOR Oh, I love a bit of cage-rattling. What kind of cages we talking about?

BIRD Oh ... things. You know. Families ... Pity we didn't meet sooner. You could have done it. The book.

GAYNOR I'm flattered! 'Cept I don't write books. And - as you can see - I know diddly-squat about art.

BIRD You could learn. (*Moving to the next picture*) This is my favourite. I love this one. She looks so happy. Like everything's to come. Like there's a future.

GAYNOR Yes. Yes, she does. He ever paint you?

BIRD No. I was only a baby. Just Franny. And her.

GAYNOR Sheila?

BIRD Yeah. For a while. And the models. He used models sometimes. But Franny - he used her a lot. We'd be playing or something and then he'd call her away. I used to cry because he wouldn't let me come too. Said I was too noisy.

GAYNOR Probably thought you'd distract her.

BIRD No, I wouldn't. I'd have sat quiet as a mouse.

GAYNOR I bet you would. (*Beat*) What was he like? Your dad?

BIRD I'm not sure.

GAYNOR I guess you were so young ...

BIRD I was four.

GAYNOR A baby! Oh, Bird ...

BIRD You know ... sometimes I think I know something, experienced it, and then I realise it's something I read or heard, it's not my memory at all. Know what I mean?

GAYNOR We all do that. But, God ... that is so, so tough – not to have any memories –

BIRD See, he was just my dad. My daddy. Big. Noisy. Safe. He used to throw me in the air, up into the sky. I remember that. I was flying. 'Fly, Bird!'. Swimming in the air and then back safe in his arms. And laughing, always laughing. And music. Loud, hard music. That's what I hear. That and ... other stuff. That's what I remember.

GAYNOR What kind of music?

BIRD Like this. (*She pulls a CD case out of her bag and hands it to GAYNOR*) This was one of his favourites.

GAYNOR Oh, great album. Quite a romantic then.

BIRD You think so?

GAYNOR Don't you? Especially ... what's that really famous one? The one about ...
Only Love –

BIRD - Can Break Your Heart, yeah. And *Birds*.

GAYNOR Oh, of course! Yeah! I love that song. How's it go? (*Singing softly*)
... something ... something ...
... you see me
Fly away dah dah
Shadow on the things you know -

BIRD (*Joining in*) Feathers fall around you
And show you the way to go
It's over, it's over.

(*A moment*)

BIRD Yeah. He sang that a lot. Used to play music full blast, all the windows open.
Middle of the night sometimes. Pissed the neighbours right off.

GAYNOR (*Laughing*) I bet.

BIRD He was bold, didn't care what people thought.

GAYNOR Like you.

BIRD Yeah? (*Pleased*) Yeah. Like me.

GAYNOR But, God, what a waste... I mean, all this ... all this talent, all this passion.
Makes you ... I don't know. Question everything. Something terrible like that happening
just when someone was -

BIRD Yeah. Well ...

GAYNOR Oh no, God - I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Bird. I didn't mean ... it must be very
painful for you. Of course. I don't mean to upset you ... but after all this time, do you mind
talking about him?

BIRD Mind? *I love* talking about him. But people won't. They won't. Not with me
anyway. And everyone else, well, there's the elephant sitting in the corner...

GAYNOR How d'you mean? Sheila and Frances don't talk about your father?

BIRD No. I mean, yes, to each other I suppose. But not to me.

GAYNOR They won't talk about him with you?

BIRD No. I try but they – I dunno – like, slide away from it. Like he's theirs and they don't want me to have anything of him.

GAYNOR God!

BIRD See ... I'm always scared that I'm making stuff up. To fill the gaps.

GAYNOR Bird, that's horrible. That is unforgivable. For God's sake! You're not allowed to talk about him? Your own father? Jesus Christ! Why on earth not?

BIRD Why do you think? *(Beat)* I'm not allowed to talk to this writer bloke either.

GAYNOR Say what?!

BIRD Been warned off. Told to stay out of it.

GAYNOR takes this in

GAYNOR That's ridiculous! Incredible ... oh, Bird, you poor kid. What's behind all this ... I just can't believe it! Why don't you contact the guy yourself?

BIRD Can't.

GAYNOR Just ring him. Get his number and ring him up!

BIRD No! I gave my word. To Franny.

GAYNOR But why does she –

BIRD I promised! OK? I promised her.

GAYNOR But why can't you ... Bird, for God's sake! OK, OK, so you don't want to go against Frances, against your sister. I understand that but ... you know, there must be other people ... *(An idea)* This is so weird ... Bird ... listen ... just a thought ... OK, you won't talk to this guy but would it help ... maybe ... if you talked to me about him, about your dad? I mean I don't wanna -

BIRD To you?

GAYNOR Why not? You know, we could, like, explore what you do remember, dig around a bit, see what we can find out. Yeah? I mean, the more I hear about your father ... We could work together on it. What do you say?

BIRD Yeah ... I'd like that. That would be good. That would be really good.

GAYNOR Fantastic.

GAYNOR goes to say something more, thinks better of it. BIRD looks at the huge image of her father one last time. GAYNOR watches her

BIRD Just came to say goodbye today.

GAYNOR Bird, now you listen to me, OK? You deserve some part of him, your Dad. Whatever happened. And you know what, there's no copyright on ideas.

BIRD No?

GAYNOR You know what I'm saying? Just because this guy's working on a book, doesn't mean someone else can't write about your dad, see?

BIRD There's another room you should see, through there. Some of his earlier stuff. You better be quick, though, 'cos it's nearly five. I'll get off now. Things to do. Give my best to Simon, will you. Yeah, give him my love.

GAYNOR Yes. Yes, I will. I'm really glad we ran into each other. Really glad.

BIRD Yeah. Me too.

GAYNOR Be in touch. We're gonna have fun together, Bird. Trust me.

GAYNOR goes to move into the next part of the gallery. As she does so, there is an announcement over the PA system: 'Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for visiting the Louis Mackay exhibition. The gallery will be closing in five minutes. Please make your way to the exit. Thank you.' BIRD is transfixed on the painting of FRANCES. GAYNOR turns back

GAYNOR Hey, Bird, how come you knew about my harp?

BIRD What?

GAYNOR The broken string? How did you know?

BIRD Franny told me.

GAYNOR Oh. (*Working it through*) I guess Simon must've rung her this morning. About last night. (*Beat*) Bird, I do know about Simon.

BIRD (*Turning*) You do?

GAYNOR About him and ... you know.

BIRD What?

GAYNOR Him and Frances.

BIRD Oh.

GAYNOR Yeah. Listen, it was all over before I –

BIRD I know.

GAYNOR Just didn't want you to think –

BIRD I wasn't.

GAYNOR OK. Good. And hey - about you and your dad. I'll call you. Tomorrow? Is tomorrow good?

BIRD Sure.

GAYNOR You got a mobile?

BIRD Yeah. (*As GAYNOR looks expectantly*) Ask Simon.

GAYNOR Simon?

BIRD Yeah. He'll give you my number.

GAYNOR Why would Simon have your –

BIRD Ask him. (*She turns back to the painting*)

GAYNOR Right ... I will. (*Beat*) Yeah, I will. OK. See you then, Bird. (*She goes*)

BIRD is engrossed in the picture. Softly, like an echo, the Neil Young track starts up again, woven with fragments of Louis' voice, whispering his lullaby to BIRD. She turns back to look at him but the picture of Louis begins to fade and disappears as the gallery starts to close down. One by one the lights over the paintings are extinguished until only BIRD's favourite remains. With a cry, she reaches forward as if to wrench the painting off the wall. The security alarm goes off, obliterating the music and amidst the cacophony BIRD sinks to the floor, gazing up at the painting, into the light, waiting to be discovered

BLACKOUT

INTERVAL

ACT 2 SCENE 1

Two weeks later. The study of The Rectory. Late afternoon. The room has an unfinished look, as though SHEILA hasn't quite taken possession of it again. Canvases are stacked up against the wall. The table is littered with sketches, notebooks, papers, boxes. ERIC LINN is sifting through them making the occasional note on his laptop. He is in his forties, inquisitive, perceptive. There are two mugs of tea on the desk. ERIC is listening to SHEILA who is in the kitchen next door but holding a conversation with him

ERIC Harpic?

SHEILA (O/S) (*Laughing*) I said she was a harpist!

SHEILA enters the study carrying a sugar bowl. She is fairly relaxed, but wary of ERIC, as she would be wary of anyone invading her sanctuary. Her eyes are drawn back repeatedly to a stack of notebooks on the desk

ERIC And Bridget. Was she there?

SHEILA Oh. Yes. For a bit. She had to ... sugar?

ERIC Thanks. (*Spooning sugar into his mug*) I've been meaning to ask. Are she and Frances close? I mean, there's a big age difference -

SHEILA What is this? The third degree? (*Laughing*) Yes, yes they are. Frances has always been ... like a ... Anyway. A godsend, really. She's always known how to ... get through to Bridget -

ERIC Kids, eh? Tricky little buggers.

SHEILA Yes.

ERIC (*Sipping his tea*) Mind if I ask a delicate question?

SHEILA Fire away.

ERIC It's just – forgive me - you talk so much about Frances, there's such a warmth there -

SHEILA Yes? Well, she's a lovely girl.

ERIC But ... I just wondered ... you and Bridget?

SHEILA What?

ERIC There's not the same ... I mean, you're different - guarded almost, when you mention her.

SHEILA How do you mean?

ERIC I sense ... not a coldness, no – a sort of reserve ... understandable, I suppose, given the circumstances –

SHEILA Yes.

ERIC I'm sorry if that's –

SHEILA Yes, it is.

ERIC (*Pressing on*) I mean, try as one may, it's hard not to have favourites, isn't it? Despite what everyone says.

SHEILA You're saying I favour Frances?

ERIC I'm just asking. It happens. Perhaps you felt closer to her, felt she needed you more, Louis not being her father –

SHEILA Louis made absolutely no distinction between the girls. He adored them. Both of them. Loved them to bits.

ERIC And do you love her? Bridget?

SHEILA What kind of a –

ERIC Do you?

SHEILA I ... yes, of course I do! She's my daughter!

ERIC So? I've never understood why it's the law that you have to love your kids, regardless. It's a form of heresy to say otherwise. I'll be quite honest with you – my daughter, she's everything to me, whereas my son –

SHEILA Yes. Well, you're a man. It's different for women. Mothers.

ERIC Is it?

SHEILA Yes. Of course it is. (*The subject is closed*) More tea?

ERIC No thanks. Look -

SHEILA I'll let you get on then. Is it going well?

ERIC Yes, yes, it is. These were a find. (*He gestures to the pile of notebooks*)

SHEILA What are they? Oh!

ERIC You recognise them?

SHEILA Yes. (*Beat*) I ... I'd forgotten ... Didn't know they were up there. Where did you ...?

ERIC In the attic. Stuck right behind the water tank. Under a pile of rugs.

SHEILA I just shoved everything I could out of the way in the attic when we let the place. Forgot all about them. (*She casually moves over to the pile and idly starts flicking through them*) Will they be useful?

ERIC Are you kidding? Diaries are like gold dust to biographers. Couldn't believe my luck.

SHEILA No.

ERIC I'm just about ready to wrap up for today, I think. (*He watches her looking through the notebooks*) My God, but he could write, couldn't he? Did he do it every day?

SHEILA His diary? Mmm. Without fail. Even on holiday.

ERIC I'll want to talk to you about Penhalligan at some stage.

SHEILA OK.

ERIC I'm starting to get a shape in my head for the book. It shouldn't be linear. Chronological. He was beyond that; it would be too predictable. Seems to me that the biography ought in some way to, I don't know, give you a flavour of his personality. Something sparky, exceptional – like Louis himself.

SHEILA (*Doubtful*) I see.

ERIC What I mean is, it would be easy enough, obvious really, to do the whole 'born 1944, went to art college, won this, won that, blah blah' thing, but to do him justice, I think we should, I should, start at the end.

SHEILA The end?

ERIC Yes. Open with his death. Snatched away in his prime, then work backwards. A proper retrospective.

SHEILA Yes ... Eric, we had an understanding.

ERIC Of course.

SHEILA You know I don't want this to be about his death. It's his life that's important. Death doesn't define someone.

ERIC Ah, but you see, a terrible event, yes, terrible for you and your family, obviously, but also terribly dramatic for those who admired him - it's an instant hook for the reader.

SHEILA This is not a thriller.

ERIC Sheila, please. You've read my work. It's how I write. Immediate. Vivid.

SHEILA I know. I know. But I don't want it turned into a circus. A freak show.

ERIC A freak show?

SHEILA The way it happened.

ERIC But it was freakish, wasn't it? So stupid. Tragic.

SHEILA Tragic. Yes, a tragedy. And it really happened, to me and my daughters.

ERIC Yes. Look, I'm sorry. It's obviously upsetting you. It's only natural that you find this distressing –

SHEILA Of course it's distressing! (*Recovering*) I'm sorry, Eric. It's just ... No, it's fine. I'll tell you all I can, of course. We agreed. And Frances too.

ERIC Thank you. (*Beat*) But you won't reconsider?

SHEILA You are not to talk to Bridget, no.

ERIC No. (*Beat*) I just wondered: might it help her to talk it through?

SHEILA Talk it through? I don't think you understand. You make it sound like a little unpleasantness we can clear up with a bit of a chat. She's a deeply traumatized young woman. Years of therapy. I don't want that mentioned either. I absolutely forbid you to speak to her.

ERIC OK. I didn't mean to ... But we can talk about her? Her childhood is not off limits?

SHEILA Of course we can talk about her. She's part of Louis's life. His daughter. But you have to be content with what I tell you, what's on record. OK?

ERIC (*Reluctantly*) OK.

(*PAUSE*)

SHEILA Is the pub all right? I've heard mixed reviews.

ERIC It'll do. Rather twee for my taste. And there was a party on the other night – music thumping through the floorboards until half past twelve.

SHEILA You should have complained.

ERIC I would have done if I'd been trying to sleep. But I was working.

SHEILA With all that racket going on?

ERIC Oh, noise doesn't bother me. Once you've worked in a newsroom, you can work through World War III. Feels like you are, sometimes. But it's beautifully quiet here.

SHEILA Louis used to raise hell with the chap who owned the place then. Gordon. Great big beer belly, wobbled when he laughed. Come to think of it, it wobbled when he breathed. Appalling misogynist. He and Louis used to have drinking competitions.

ERIC Somehow I can't see the present owners doing that. Felix and Carl. It's all coulis, cutlets and hanging baskets. Very tasteful.

They laugh. ERIC goes to tidy things up, then pauses

ERIC These diaries, Sheila. Some of the entries – did he use a code?

SHEILA A code?

ERIC The initials and these little symbols. Look. *(He shows her one of the notebooks)*

SHEILA Oh. Don't know. Something to do with what he was working on, I imagine. Progress marks. Reminders, something like that. I can't remember. I don't think I ever read them while he was alive. Still haven't. Well, they've been up in the attic for years. As you saw.

ERIC Never?

SHEILA They were private. You don't read someone's diary, do you?

ERIC Don't you?

SHEILA No. *(ERIC continues to stare at her)* Well, I may have ... you know, if it was left lying around and I was just checking who it belonged to ...

They laugh

SHEILA OK. Once or twice. It's very tempting.

ERIC But ... what?

SHEILA Well, naughty. Yes. Bit like going through someone's pockets. You feel a bit ... sneaky. Dirty.

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