

the
LONGROAD

Shelagh Stephenson

methuen | drama

Characters

Joe, *twenty*

Mary, *his mother, fifty-two*

John, *her husband*

Emma Price, *eighteen*

Elizabeth, *late thirties*

The style of the piece is heightened. It requires the bare minimum of naturalistic settings and props.

An almost bare stage. The backdrop is a huge, grainy photograph of a young boy of eighteen, Danny, smiling into the camera.

Joe, *twenty, enters, walks into a dim spotlight.*

Joe It wasn't even late. Ten o'clock or something. There were people around, masses of them. I went into a shop to get some cigarette papers and when I came out I saw this girl give Danny a punch in the chest, and I said hey, and she looked round and her eyes were black, no colour in them, and I thought she's on something. And as I was thinking this, she walked off, didn't run, she just strolled, and I saw Danny crumple as if all his bones had melted. He didn't make a sound, it wasn't dramatic, not like a film, and I thought he was joking, but at the same time I knew he wasn't because there was something weird about the way he just folded up. People walked past him, one guy even stepped over him, most people didn't notice because it didn't look serious. I went to him and knelt down and there was blood on his shirt, a little round mark over his heart. It was nothing, a tiny nick, but as I held him it spread out like a big red chrysanthemum. A guy came over and said what happened I'm a nurse and I said I don't know is he going to be all right? His face went from normal to the colour of paper right in front of my eyes. He went from being alive to being dead in that instant. I couldn't believe it, I'd never seen anyone dead before except our dog Tansy and it's not the same with an animal, but I knew he was dead, I saw the life drain out of him and his head was in my hands and I was shouting fucking hell somebody do something, and the guy who was the nurse gave him mouth-to-mouth which he must have known was a waste of time but I think he did it for me, to say look, I'm doing something, I'm doing the best I can. Then an ambulance came. I don't know who called it. Police all over the place. Sirens, blue lights. People were still going into bars, dodging round police cars, having a quick glance as they walked past, people who were still alive, like he'd been a minute ago. How could he slip from one state to the other in the blink of an eye? I couldn't take it in: life and death so banged up against each other, so close there's not a hair's breadth between them. I thought this is not happening,

I thought how am I going to tell Mum? If I hadn't taken him into town that night, if we hadn't gone to Soho, if I hadn't gone into the shop for papers, he would still be alive. Someone else would probably be dead because she was fucking nuts, the girl who did it, but I don't care about those other people because I don't know them and Danny was my brother and now every single thing is totally fucked, for ever.

*The lights fade down slightly on **Joe** as his mother, **Mary**, fifty-two, walks into her own dim spotlight. He remains onstage, lit, but in shadow.*

Mary I'd fallen asleep in front of the television and the doorbell rang. I was a bit bleary, I had no idea what time it was. I was expecting it to be the boys, forgotten their key. I had no premonition, nothing like that. John was away, but I wasn't afraid, I wasn't expecting anything bad at all. But as soon as I opened the door and saw the policemen, I thought oh no. It's John. He's been in an accident. He's had a heart attack. Or has there been a bomb somewhere? They were very nice, the police, they came in, I don't remember exactly what they said, it's all a blur, are you Daniel Pritchard's mother, something like that, and of course you know it's bad, they don't send policemen round lightly, they don't have the manpower. The moment they said his name, there was a roaring sound at the back of my head and I knew. I think I said where's Joe, I suddenly felt very panicky about Joe, but they said he's fine, Joe's fine, which could only mean that Dan wasn't. But I didn't want them to say it, I didn't want to know. I felt I was balancing on the edge of something, as if my life had a hinge in it, and I was about to step into some dark other place, and I didn't want to go there. All this must have happened over a matter of seconds but it felt longer than that, everything stretched out like elastic, because in these tiny fragments of time huge, inconceivable things were happening, the world was changed in an instant. So I kept saying would you like a cup of tea because I was trying to stave off the moment when they might tell me Dan was dead, because as long as they didn't say it, it hadn't happened. I realise this is ridiculous. Even when they did say it, I don't remember hearing it. And I wanted to see Joe very badly but they said he'd collapsed, the shock tumbled him over,

so he was still at the hospital. They kept telling me to sit down but I couldn't because sitting down somehow meant taking it in and I didn't want to take it in. I wanted to hop back into the moment before they arrived at my door, when my life was just fine, and I was innocent and Danny was still alive. I'd still like to do that but it would be more than a hop now, it would be a long, long crawl, back through all those days and weeks and months. One day he will have been dead for more days than he lived. He lived for six thousand six hundred and ninety-three days, and I saw him for almost every one of them. It's strange, the things you think of, how many weeks, days, hours, minutes did he live, this is what goes through your head when you can't sleep. Sheep-counting for the bereaved. It doesn't work though. You still can't sleep.

*The lights fade down slightly on **Mary** as her husband **John** enters and walks into his own dim spotlight. She remains onstage, lit, but in shadow.*

John I've taken up running. I needed to stop thinking so I used to trot round the block. Then two blocks. Two miles. Ten miles. Twenty miles. Before it happened I couldn't run for a bus. Now I could do a marathon. Not that I would, because it would involve other people and I'm not interested in that. I like pounding the pavements at night, alone, with my heart pumping, and the blood roaring in my head, drowning out all the stuff. If I didn't have to go to work I would run all day. When I'm out there I don't think about what happened, although it's always there somewhere, but mostly I'm thinking how to get through the next mile. I know what it is, I'm not stupid, I know I'm in flight. Some people drink, some of them sleep all the time, some of them take drugs. I run. We're all in flight from the thing that's too hard to bear. With me, I'm also avoiding talking to people, because I've noticed since it happened that no one knows what to say to you. Or they think you want to talk about it all the time, and actually I don't have the words. This one particular woman, she said to us, at least God is looking after him now and I thought why the fuck wasn't God looking after him before it happened? Why did he have to die to get God's attention? But most of the time I don't have the words. I'm just hollowed out, like an empty cupboard.

In the daytime, when I walk down the street, I feel I've got a flag on top of my head, saying *the man whose son was murdered*. I've seen people cross the road to avoid me. I don't blame them, it must be like talking to an open wound. All we want to be is normal again, not murmured about, all those furtive glances, I can't stand the pity. But normal's over, we know that, there's a new normal now. We tried counselling. A woman with purple nail varnish, and on her left hand she had a silver ring – a heart with a dagger through it. I thought that's my heart she's wearing, and it seemed a bit insensitive of her. Mary says I'm imagining it, she never noticed any ring. Anyway she was rubbish, the counsellor. Nothing can make this better. Have you noticed they're always saying what can we learn from this tragedy, or that one, as if having your son stabbed to death by a total stranger might be part of a GCSE module called what we can learn from random acts of pointless violence? I think of all the things we taught him, the tricks of the trade: don't take sweets from strangers, look right and left before you cross, avoid recreational drugs which involve syringes, scoutmasters who want to share your sleeping bag, use a condom, be aware. And we failed him. Our eighteen years of raising went for nothing, because death came out of nowhere for no reason. There's no meaning to it, there's nothing to be learnt. At three o'clock in the morning, that's what envelops me like a shroud: I can't find any meaning in it at all . . .

Lights fade down slightly as Emma enters and walks into her own dim spotlight. The others remain onstage, lit, but in shadow, like a chorus.

Emma Everybody hates me. It doesn't bother me. I'm used to it. My mum my dad my sisters brothers my nan grandad uncles aunties neighbours people I've never even met. They all hate me. I can't remember anything about it, I was out of it. I only asked him for a quid, because I'd had my bag nicked and how was I supposed to get home I didn't have the tube fare and anyway I only needed a quid. That's all. I never asked him for twenty quid or anything. One quid. I said can you lend me a quid mate, and he said no fuck off, didn't even look at me. He could've just given me the money. It was only a quid. One pound fifty, something like that. Then I could've got the tube.

Could've gone home and everyone would've been fine. He shouldn't have spoke to me like that. I can't remember anything else. I was out of it. It was only a quid. Something like that.

The light changes so that Joe, Mary and John are lit like a painting.

Joe We left the house together, but I came back alone.

Mary On the table next to his bed, a cup of tea, half drunk –

John Two books, half read.

Joe The pillow still indented from his head.

Mary His voice undeleted on the answerphone.

John 'We'll be back around one.'

Joe The house had never seemed so full of him.

Mary In those hours afterwards.

John Every room vibrated with him.

Joe Everything you touched had been touched by him –

Mary Raw, and fresh, and sharp.

John Not rubbed away by time.

Joe He was more present than he'd ever been.

Mary And absolutely gone.

John This huge clanging absence, filling the house like a bell.

Mary A cousin of mine, Jane. She said I couldn't go through what you're going through. I couldn't do it.

John But it's not as if you have a choice, is it?

Joe What would she have done? Died?

Mary Because the problem is you don't die. You go on. One minute follows another. Monday becomes Tuesday becomes Wednesday becomes a week. You put one foot in front of the other.

John You can't put the brake on and say stop.

Joe We asked a doctor –

Mary Who knew these things –

John Would it have hurt him?

Joe Would he feel any pain?

Mary He shook his head.

John But how would he know?

Joe He'd never been stabbed through the heart.

Mary He said adrenalin kicks in.

John Fight or flight. A huge surge of hormones.

Joe He said an antelope felled by a tiger doesn't feel pain.

Mary Feels calm, in fact.

John Dreamy.

Joe Like slipping into a warm bath.

Mary A moment of fear, then a cocoon of relief.

John Acceptance.

Joe Something about endorphins.

Mary I said this is all well and good –

John We realise you're trying to be helpful.

Joe But Dan wasn't a fucking antelope.

Blackout.

Light on Mary and Joe. Mary is reading a newspaper.

Mary Have you seen this?

Joe What?

Mary It's her.

Joe What?

Mary (*showing him a photo in the article she's reading*) Who's that?

Joe (*glancing at it*) I dunno.

Mary It's her.

Joe Who?

Mary Look at it properly.

He looks.

Joe I still don't know.

Mary Not that one. That's a woman called Elizabeth McKellan who's doing some workshop or other. In prisons.

Joe I'm on my way out, Mum.

Mary That one there. Look at her.

Joe I am looking.

Mary That is the person who killed Dan.

Joe How can you tell?

Mary Something about the tilt of her head, I'd recognise it anywhere.

Joe They've blurred their faces, so you can't identify them. Pixelated.

Mary What?

Joe That's what it's called. Pixelated.

Mary Well, that's her. Sitting there, alive. Doing a workshop, while Danny's dead.

Joe looks more closely at the photo.

Joe I dunno, maybe . . .

Mary What is she doing laughing, while Danny's dead?

Joe How d'you know she's laughing? You can't see her face properly.

Mary How can she be there, functioning as normal, when he's dead?

Joe I'm meeting some people, Mum. I'm going to be late.

Mary (*reading from the article*) '... working with women prisoners, to help them understand the narrative of their lives.' They'll be offering them aromatherapy next. All-expenses-paid trips to health farms in Thailand.

Joe I'm going, OK?

Mary The person who killed your brother is sitting around at workshops telling her life story.

Joe I don't care what she does, Mum, because I don't give a fuck about her, OK? Stop reading this shit. Stop torturing yourself.

He takes the paper from her and throws it down.

See you later.

He goes out. Spotlight on Mary. She goes to retrieve the paper.

Mary But I couldn't stop thinking about her. I put the article in my desk drawer, tucked away like a love letter. And every so often I'd get it out and stare at the photo of Emma Price, as if it might hold the answer to something. I was willing her to turn round, to look me in the eye, so I could say to her *Why did you do it?*

Blackout.

Lights up stage right on Joe.

Joe You know in American films when tragedy strikes and the family all hold each other and sob and say I love you Mom, I love you Dad? Why didn't we do that? Our family just imploded. We went from four people to three people and the balance is all screwed up. There's a space where there used to be a person and you can't fill it. My dad, he never cried once,

not as far as I know, not in front of me, and that's not because he didn't love Dan, he did, he loved him more than me, they both did. Dan was their favourite. They say that's not true but it is. I'm cool with it. I've always known it. These are the things that Dan was: clever, funny, handsome, witty, graceful, charming, affectionate, and now he's dead these things are written in stone. They will never alter, they can never be contradicted. He was only eighteen, he didn't have time to fuck up.

Lights up stage left on John, in an armchair, with a glass of whisky and a bottle next to him.

John You shouldn't have left him on the street at that time of night.

Joe It was ten o'clock, Dad.

John What were you doing in the shop anyway?

Joe Buying something. What else would I be doing?

John What?

Joe What d'you mean what?

John What were you buying?

Joe Papers. I was buying papers.

John Papers?

Joe Cigarette papers.

John What were you going to do with them?

Joe I was going to make a papier mâché model of the Taj Mahal.

John You were going to roll joints.

Joe Whatever.

John Don't whatever me, your brother's dead –

Joe And I didn't kill him --

John If you hadn't been buying papers to roll joints --

Joe Spliffs.

John What?

Joe Nobody says joints. It could have been a can of Coke, it could have been anything. She would still have been outside. She would still have had a knife. And he would still be --

John I'm not blaming you --

Joe You are blaming me.

Mary *comes in with Elizabeth, late thirties.*

Mary This is Elizabeth McKellan.

Elizabeth Have I come at a bad moment?

John Are you from victim support?

Elizabeth No --

John Because they're a bunch of arses.

Joe I'm off. He's pissed, by the way.

He starts to go.

Mary Joe, stay, please.

John Anybody can go on a two-week course and come out a *trained counsellor* which just means they can hang around your house drinking tea and saying how are you feeling now and why do they say *trained counsellors*? Is there an untrained variety?

Elizabeth Well, I'm not a counsellor so you're OK --

John We don't need anyone else saying how does that make you feel and you must be very angry, they say it in that mincing little Horlicks voice, just add hot milk, God, I fucking hate them --

He pours himself another drink.

Mary Elizabeth has been working with prisoners. She met the girl . . . she met Emma Price.

Pause.

John Sorry?

Elizabeth Emma Price. She met her.

John I don't understand.

Mary I want us to talk about it --

John About what?

Joe Mum, I don't think you need this at the moment --

Mary Don't tell me what I need, you have no idea what I need.

Elizabeth I thought you'd told them I was coming?

John Somebody tell me what's going on here.

Mary I asked Elizabeth to come because there's something come into our lives that we can't talk about --

Joe We never fucking stop talking about him --

Mary I don't mean Dan. I mean her.

John Who's *her*?

Mary The girl who did it. Emma Price. You must think about her.

John I don't. I refuse to.

Mary Oh for God's sake, she may as well have moved in with us --

John She murdered our son.

Mary I know, but --

John But what?

Mary She can't just be -- there must be more to her than that

John What's does it have to do with us, what she is or what she isn't?

Mary I need to understand –

John No. You want it to mean something. But it doesn't.

He gets up. Looks at Elizabeth.

John You should be ashamed of yourself. Feeding off people's grief. Telling them there's some nirvana at the end where it'll all *make sense* and we'll all understand –

Mary She never said that –

John (to Elizabeth) I'd like you to leave.

Mary I invited her here.

John OK, I'll go.

Mary John, please stay –

John I don't want to talk about this.

He goes out, slightly unsteadily.

Joe Dad . . .

He follows him out. Mary looks at Elizabeth, helplessly.

Mary I'm sorry.

Elizabeth You should have told them. You told me you'd discussed it.

Mary I meant to. I tried.

Pause.

I'm not asking them to excuse her. I'm not asking them to like her, or feel sorry for her. Jesus, I can't tell you some of the thoughts I've had. One night I dreamt I was chasing her along Old Compton Street, and I managed to grab her by the hair, and as she fell, her face looked up at me, white and smooth like an egg. So I stamped on her head and it *was* an egg, and there was a little bloody foetus there, amongst the yolk and bits of shell. What does that mean, d'you think?

Elizabeth Probably that you wanted to kill her. Reasonably enough.

Mary If it was your child who died, would you want to kill her?

Elizabeth Yes.

Mary Why d'you do this?

Elizabeth What?

Mary The prison stuff.

Elizabeth Not because I'm a saint.

Mary Good. I hate saints.

Elizabeth My brother was put away for dealing. I used to visit him. And I got to like prisons. His, anyway – which was fairly enlightened. Does that sound odd?

Mary Yes.

Elizabeth The people are great.

Mary The prisoners?

Elizabeth Lots of them. Yeah. Why shouldn't they be?

Mary I never thought of it like that.

Elizabeth The weird thing about prisons is, you walk through the door and there are all these people who've done terrible things, but also all these people who've done wonderful things. Middle-aged women teaching murderers about gamelan music. Vicars and rabbis and imams and shopkeepers, retired schoolteachers, minor aristocrats – plus fraudsters, killers, dealers, druggies, and people who won't pay their council tax – they're all there, organising choirs and photography workshops, book clubs, and God knows what else, for no money, no kudos, nobody knows about them. There's a whole world in there.

Mary So prison's a bit like the Women's Institute, is that what you're trying to say?

Elizabeth No, sorry, obviously, they're not all doing creative writing and anger management courses. Some of them are doing home-made tattoos and being thoroughly miserable. Just like the outside.

Mary Good. I'm glad. Why should she be singing her head off in a choir when Dan's dead?

Elizabeth I don't think she is in a choir somehow.

Mary D'you know, I've imagined beating her to death with a baseball bat. I've imagined setting her on fire, shooting her, running her over in a tank. Things that scare me, things I've never felt before, never imagined before. There's this kaleidoscopic rage inside me, and I realise I could kill someone. She kills my son, so I kill her, I wipe her off the face of the earth. I could do it. Truly.

Elizabeth I believe you.

Mary I felt if I knew a bit more about her I might be able to see her as a human being. Because it's no good feeling like this, it's killing me. Feeling like a murderer is killing me.

Silence.

Can I show you a picture of him?

Elizabeth I'd like that.

Mary takes a photograph from a drawer.

Mary John put all the photos away after the . . . after it happened.

She hands the photograph to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth He's very handsome.

Mary He was, wasn't he?

Elizabeth He looks like his father.

Mary We've still got all his clothes. My sister keeps telling me to give them away, but I can't. She thinks it's because I go into his room and stroke them, or something. But it's not that,

it's stupider than that. I can't get rid of his clothes because I keep thinking he might need them. When he comes back. I know, of course, that he's not coming back. But there's some fathomless part of my brain that won't accept it. It doesn't seem to be processed properly. And then I look at his shoes, and they're still, you know, moulded to the shape of his feet. You can see the shape of each toe, imprinted there on the insole, the soft pad of his heel. And it seems somehow wrong to throw that last bit of him away because we'll never see his feet again. He actually had a very beautiful feet.

Silence.

Elizabeth After the – after what happened –

Mary You can say murder.

Elizabeth Is that what you say?

Mary Sometimes. Sometimes I just call it I call it 'it'. Or 'the'. After the . . . Before the . . .

Elizabeth Yes.

Mary Some people call it 'the thing'. The thing that happened. Killing, and murder, they're literally unspeakable. You watch people trying to form the words. As if they're talking through shards of glass. John couldn't even say 'dead' for the first few months.

Elizabeth How is he coping now?

Mary You saw him. What do you think?

Elizabeth It's normal. What he's doing is normal.

Mary When he's not running, he's in his shed. A kind of office thing in the garden.

Elizabeth What does he do there?

Mary Nothing. I spied on him once from the upstairs bedroom and he was sitting bolt upright, staring at the wall. When I looked back an hour later he was still there. Still staring at the wall.

Pause.

I think he'd shoot her, you know, if he met her. If he had a gun with him.

Elizabeth Does he have a gun?

Mary God, no. But he used to be in CND. And now he's pure Old Testament. He'd like to smite and scourge and turn her into a pillar of salt.

Elizabeth Wouldn't you?

Mary It won't bring him back, will it? I can say that even though I'm still expecting him to walk through the door at any minute. The college rang up a couple of months ago to ask if he was still taking up his place next year, and d'you know what I said? I said, 'Yes.' Because it seemed too premature to say he was dead. And too cruel. My parents are dead. Shakespeare's dead. The Queen Mother. But I can't seem to put Dan into that category, with all those dead people.

Pause.

I realise this is completely mad. Dead people are dead. They don't go to college. But I can't help it. I still think he might.

Pause.

What's she like?

Elizabeth Emma Price?

Mary She looked normal in court. Not vicious or threatening, or mad. Normal.

Elizabeth She is and she isn't.

Mary Meaning?

Elizabeth On the one hand she's completely normal and on the other she killed your son. Which is not really a normal thing to do.

Mary So she's what? Mad?

Elizabeth You could say damaged, I suppose.

Mary I know all about damage. Everywhere I turn I hit a blank where Dan used to be. The fridge is full of the food he liked, those plastic cheese slices, bright pink yogurt. Joe won't eat them. Why am I still buying this stuff? It's as if I'm saying, don't worry, you may be dead but I'm still taking care of you.

Pause.

Does she have any idea what she's done? The stupid, ignorant, selfish – I looked at her in court and she looked about twelve. I could strangle her. I could beat her to a pulp. I wish she had never been born. She's a waste of space, she's using up resources that could be put to better use. I mean, what is the point of her being alive? Why should she be walking around breathing when Dan is ashes in an urn?

She looks round the room and takes a pot from a cupboard. Bangs it on the table.

There. That's Dan. That's the son I gave birth to. That's what she's done. And even like that he's a better person than she will ever be.

She takes the lid off the pot, and takes out a handful of ash.

I thought it would be just grey, but look, it glints in the light, there are flashes of green and blue, like jewels, can you see them? Look how he catches the light, even now.

Pause.

We don't know what to do with him. So he sits here on a shelf. And every so often I take him down and run him through my fingers.

She looks at Elizabeth.

Mary I had an idea the other day. I thought I'd mix him in with the muesli, and I'd eat a bit of him every day, and for some deranged reason, this was very comforting to me. I mean, he's my son, he was inside me once before, he'd be coming home, in a way. It seemed quite logical. And then it occurred to me that they'd lock me up if I did that.

She puts the ashes back in the pot.

Look at what she's done to me, she's turned me into this person I don't recognise, she's turned me into a person I hate, who's seriously considering eating the ashes of her dead son. How could one stupid, inconsequential, vicious girl do so much damage?

Pause.

I'll never forgive her.

Pause.

Ever.

Elizabeth No. Why should you?

Mary That's what John and Joe are afraid of. They think I'm asking them to do that, and I never would. Before it was John, Joe, Dan and me. Now it's John, Joe, me and Emma Price. And I thought I needed to know something about her, even if I do want to kill her.

She rummages through her bag

I got our lawyer to get the social worker's report. The one the judge took into account when he sentenced her.

She takes out a sheet of paper and hands it to Elizabeth.

Mary Read it and tell me what you think

Elizabeth Now?

Mary Yes.

Elizabeth *(reading)* 'Emma Price. Born 27 May 1989, in Bethnal Green. Mother, Anne Marie, nineteen at the time of her birth, already had eighteen-month-old twins, one of whom had recently died. Cause of death listed as cot death. Twins' father not named, Emma's father named as Jason Price, but doesn't seem to have been much in evidence during childhood. When Emma was two her mother married someone called Damien Wilkins, had another child, boy named Franklin. Marriage broke up soon afterwards. Two years after that, her

mother married again, much older man named Mick Harris. Two children from this marriage, which ended when Mick was sent to prison for fourteen years for armed robbery. Mother subsequently had several relationships, twice hospitalised because of domestic violence. Emma lived variously with mother, maternal grandmother, next-door neighbour, a second cousin, and was briefly, aged seven, taken into care. Mother had drug- and alcohol-related problems, but otherwise an adequate mother.'

Pause.

Mary Did you know any of this?

Elizabeth Some of it.

Mary So is that why?

Elizabeth Why what?

Mary She did it.

Elizabeth It's just a list of historical facts. It might explain some things, it might not.

Mary A bad upbringing's not an excuse.

Elizabeth No. It's not. But –

Mary There are no buts.

Pause.

Elizabeth What is it that you want, Mary? You've obviously gone to enormous trouble to get this report, to track me down –

Mary I want to . . . understand.

Elizabeth You can't say 'I want to understand' on the one hand and 'I will never change how I feel about this' on the other. Understanding *will* change how you feel. It always does. That's the point of understanding, isn't it?

Mary I can see that. I'm not stupid.

Elizabeth This is a long road you're choosing to go down. You might feel better about certain things, but you'll probably

feel worse about others. And I wish I could say you'll feel better at the end of it, but it's possible you won't.

Mary In 1989 Dan was born in Chiswick. Two months later, Emma Price was born in Bethnal Green. They never met each other until she stabbed him to death. I need to piece together how this came about. I need to understand how those two lives collided so catastrophically.

Elizabeth OK.

Mary What did you *really* make of her? When you met her?

Elizabeth She was pretty quiet in the workshops. Hard to draw out.

Mary What did she say?

Elizabeth Absolutely nothing at all for the whole eight weeks. Apart from yes and no. But she'd chosen to come, nobody forced her to do it. She must have come for a reason. At the end of the very last session, when everyone else was leaving, she asked me if I would see her sometimes. She'd never had any visitors.

Mary Why?

Elizabeth Her mother's ill. She's not close to the rest of her family.

Mary How often d'you see her?

Elizabeth Once a fortnight.

Mary D'you like her?

Pause.

Elizabeth I don't dislike her.

Mary And she's very damaged?

Elizabeth I'd say so.

Mary Is she mentally ill?

Elizabeth No. She's just completely fucked up. And I know this is not what you want to hear, but from time to time, she's also extremely funny.

Pause.

Mary Funny?

Elizabeth Yes.

Mary Right.

Pause.

Funny. It's not what I was expecting. I don't associate 'funny' with . . . people like that.

Elizabeth Like what?

Mary Murderers. Which of course is ridiculous, I mean, they can't be in murder mode all the time, can they? They must do normal things like tell jokes and go to the supermarket. When they're not murdering people.

Elizabeth It's not usually a lifestyle choice. Murder. More a moment of madness.

Pause.

Mary So. She's funny, then, Emma Price.

Elizabeth Yes.

Mary Dan was funny.

Elizabeth Was he?

Mary I don't suppose he'd find this very amusing though. Not many laughs in sudden, premature, violent death. Still, it hasn't spoilt *her* sense of humour, apparently. The little fucker.

Blackout.

Lights up on John, with a glass of whisky.

John I'm not pissed. I just need something to take the edge off, because I've done my knee in and I can't run. To be honest, I am putting away a bit more than I used to, but I don't know how to do this stone-cold sober. Before it happened, we were a tight little family. We were a unit. It wasn't *Little House on the Prairie*, but we were solid. And now there are cracks appearing everywhere, huge fissures opening up, crevices where there were none before. Joe thinks Dan was our favourite, but he wasn't. He wasn't.

Pause.

It's just . . . Dan carried all our hopes and they died with him. He was the clever one. He was going to be a lawyer, I felt he was going to be a better version of me, the me I'd liked to have been. But that's not to say that we don't love Joe just as much. It's just . . . I'm ashamed of this, I really am, I hate myself, but I feel the future died with Dan. And I know I shouldn't feel it, I know it's wrong. We still have Joe and thank God for that, but I can't help it. Everything's been chipped away from our family and all the fault lines exposed, all the nerves. No one should have to go through this. And now Mary wants us to talk about the girl that did it to us. Why? I want to wipe her off the face of the earth, I don't want to spend a single moment of my life thinking about this woman, I want her not to exist, I don't want to hear her name, as far as I'm concerned she hasn't got a name. What does she mean, we have to talk about her? What good will that do? I'm not interested in people in prison, they've nothing to do with me, they're criminals, they've wrecked people's lives and I refuse to think about them.

Pause.

I don't know where this stuff comes from actually. It doesn't even feel like me talking. I'm saying things I find . . . hateful. Hate-full. Full of hate. That's what I've become. I've become a person I despise. I can feel it like battery acid, corroding me. And I hate that too. I hear this venom coming from my mouth and I think who is this speaking, it's not me, I'm trapped

inside, a tiny diminished me, not much more than a speck really, waving a desperate semaphore. I went to the doctor last week and I said I've got this pain in my chest, just here, and he said that's your heart, and I said I know it's my fucking heart, I know it is. Why did I imagine there was a pill I could take? Why did I think he could take the pain away? The only time it goes away is when briefly, for a moment, I imagine shooting her.

Blackout.

Lights up on Emma, sitting at a table talking to Elizabeth.

Emma is unnaturally chirpy.

Emma If there's one thing I'm an expert on it's drugs. I could do a degree in drugs, I'd get honours. Dope, crack, coke, uppers, downers, little jelly things I don't even know what they were, I'd take anything, bottles of cough mixture, my nan's sleeping pills, and I loved vodka, I don't know if it's classified as a drug, is it?

Elizabeth Not really, although –

Emma I loved it. And whisky, I'd drink that. Chivas Regal. Cinzano. Tanqueray Gin. I love all the names. Noilly Prat, ever had that? I've always had exotic tastes. Can't stand alecops, although I mean I would if there was nothing else going. But I wouldn't choose them, you know? Have you ever had a drink called Dubonnet?

Elizabeth My grandmother used to drink it.

Emma I found some in this old woman's flat, I was looking after her cat. I showed it to my nan and she said that's Dubonnet, it's delicious. And it was.

Elizabeth Which old woman was that?

Emma I can't remember. She lived upstairs.

Elizabeth When?

Emma I found a bottle of this other stuff once, it was called something like Suze. I showed it to my nan, she said it's French. I used to know a girl called Suze, she was mental. This was made from some sort of vegetable, artichokes I think, or maybe it was some sort of herb, anyway it's bright yellow like piss and it makes you wince, but actually after a couple of glasses it's quite nice. Actually it might not have been artichoke. It sounds like a disease, doesn't it? Artichoke. Ever had it?

Elizabeth The disease?

Emma It's not a disease, I told you, it's a vegetable. You can eat it. But this was a drink.

Elizabeth It sounds disgusting.

Emma It's all right if you mix it with a big bottle of Coke. I had it when I was about eight, I nicked a shopping bag in Selfridges when I was bunking off and there it was. Sixty Silk Cut, a box of cheese straws, a bottle of brandy and a bottle of Suze. Oh, and a packet of Pampers. Some alcoholic must have nicked a kid. I've never seen Suze again. You ever seen it?

Elizabeth No, I—

Emma I'm an expert on all the things that blow your head off, fuck your brain up, and make you feel nice and woozy. I've been drinking since I was six, no kidding. Had my first spliff when I was eight, nicked it from my mum's friend, I can't remember his name, but he was sort of like my dad at the time. It didn't make me sick or anything, and I smoked the whole thing. Yeah. I've always been advanced for my age.

Pause.

You don't believe me, do you?

Elizabeth Were you close to your nan? You mention her a lot.

Emma What's that drink called? It's bright blue.

Elizabeth Whereas you hardly ever mention your mother.

Emma You think I'm not going to drink that, it's a weird colour, nothing you eat's blue, is it?

Elizabeth No.

Emma Or maybe there is something. Can you think of anything?

Elizabeth No.

Emma Smarties. Can you get blue Smarties?

Elizabeth Possibly.

Emma It's not natural, though, is it? Smarties aren't a natural product. You don't, like, grow them, do you?

Elizabeth No. But your point is?

Emma I dunno, oh yeah, Cura-something, that's what it's called.

Elizabeth What?

Emma This drink. The blue one. I can't pronounce it. I drank a whole bottle! I bet you think that's impossible, don't you? How d'you think I did it?

Elizabeth Curaçao.

Emma What?

Elizabeth Blue Curaçao. That's the name of drink.

Emma You mix it with Coke and you can't tell it's blue. It's only the colour that puts you off. D'you see?

Elizabeth Very ingenious.

Emma Yeah. If you ever need advice on cocktails, I'm the person to come to.

Elizabeth What happened to your arm?

Emma I could write a book on cocktails, that would be a laugh, seriously though, I could, why shouldn't I, that girl off *Big Brother* wrote a book, you know who I mean?

Elizabeth I was just asking about your arm.

Emma There's only one thing that bothers me about this place: it doesn't have a bar. I mean, I know you can't have a bar in a prison, we'd all be off our faces, and me I'd be getting into trouble because when I've had a few I can get a bit you know, but I miss it, it's the only thing I miss, the absolute only thing.

Elizabeth There's a bandage sticking out from your sleeve. I can see it. There. What's that?

Emma Oh, yeah. It's a bandage.

Elizabeth What happened?

Emma Cut myself.

Elizabeth How?

Emma God, shut up will you?

Elizabeth How did you cut yourself?

Emma I was depressed.

Elizabeth You did it on purpose?

Emma I'm fine. I've got no problems.

Elizabeth Have you done this before?

Emma Jesus Christ, what fucking planet are you living on, of course I've done it before you stupid cunt.

Silence.

Well, you are. Stupid fucking question.

Elizabeth I think --

Emma Go on then, piss off, I know you're dying to get away.

Elizabeth I'm not.

Emma Well, you're an arse then. What d'you want to stay here for and be insulted?

Elizabeth Is there anything you'd like me to bring you next time I come in?

Emma You're coming back, are you?

Elizabeth D'you want me to?

Emma I wouldn't bother if I was you.

Elizabeth D'you want me to?

Emma *shrugs.*

Emma It's up to you.

Elizabeth But would you like me to?

Emma What d'you think I'm going to tell you?

Elizabeth I'm sorry?

Emma Are you waiting for me to tell you my life story?

Elizabeth Isn't that what you've been doing?

Emma I've not told you anything yet. I've just told you a lot of crap I made up.

Pause.

Elizabeth Why did you ask me to visit you?

Emma I can't remember. It must have seemed like a good idea at the time.

Pause.

D'you want to know about my nan then?

Elizabeth D'you want to tell me?

Emma She was great. She died though.

Elizabeth How old were you when that happened?

Emma She was a tiny little thing. Loved her booze. That's what killed her, I don't think she was that old, fifty or something, she would always give me a nip of something. Cherry brandy

I had off her once. She loved it with lemonade. And she always had these sweets, cherry lips, they were called, tasted like perfume, we used to eat whole handfuls. And liquorice allsorts. Jelly babies. Toblerones. We used to sit there watching *Countdown* with a huge glass of rum and Coke each, and a Toblerone. It was gorgeous. I thought I was really sophisticated. Getting pissed with my granny, aged nine. Fucking mental if you think about it.

Pause.

And then she went and died. She used to say, just a tiny drop of rum for you, you're only little, and then she'd give me a huge great slug of it. I don't think she understood measures and that. One of the first binge drinkers, my nan. She was a laugh though. And then she went and died. Which is the reason I became a junkie streetwalker with a knife in my pocket and the reason I ended up in here.

Elizabeth Really?

Emma Nah. That would be the film though, wouldn't it? 'Tormented childhood and death of grandmother turns girl into killer.'

Elizabeth So what d'you think the real reason might be?

Emma Haven't a clue. Probably I'm quite a bad person.

Elizabeth Is that what you think?

Emma What am I in here for?

Elizabeth Sorry?

Emma What crime?

Elizabeth Murder.

Emma Exactly. Murder. A very bad thing. I'm a danger to the community. A very bad person. I'm a violent criminal. I'm evil.

Elizabeth Is that what you think?

Emma What?

Elizabeth That you're evil?

Emma I dunno. Why?

Elizabeth That's what you just said.

Emma I'll say anything, me.

Elizabeth If I said that his mother wanted to contact you, what would you say?

Emma Whose mother?

Elizabeth Daniel Pritchard's.

Emma Who's he?

Elizabeth You know who he is.

Pause.

Emma Why? Why would she want to do that?

Elizabeth She just wants to make contact, that's all.

Emma Why?

Elizabeth Have you anything against it in principle?

Emma I don't know.

Pause.

What's she going to do, shout at me?

Elizabeth I don't know.

Emma *gets up.*

Emma I have to go. You can bring me some cigarettes next time, if you want.

She goes. Blackout.

Lights up on Mary, Joe and John. They're sitting at a table, with a cloth on it. They've just finished supper. John is drunk. There's a bottle of whisky next to him and a glass at his elbow. The atmosphere is strained.

Mary That was nice, wasn't it?

Silence.

Being together. As a family.

Silence.

Joe Can I go out now?

Mary Just sit here . . . a few minutes. That's all.

Joe Why?

Mary I'm trying – A family should – we should eat together –

Joe We just have. Can I go now?

Mary It's important.

Joe We never did this when Dan was alive. Why do we have to do it now?

Mary Tell him, John.

John Tell him what?

Mary Why we need to sit down together once a day as a family.

John Let him go if he wants to.

Joe Thanks, Dad.

He goes. Mary gets up to clear the table.

John Sit down.

Mary I'm just –

John Sit down –

She does so. He fiddles around in his pocket and brings out a piece of paper.

John *(reading)* 'Dear Emma Price, My name is Mary Pritchard. Daniel Pritchard, the boy you killed, was my son. This is not a hate letter, so please don't throw it away. The only time I saw you was in court, and you looked so normal to have done such a terrible thing. And now you seem to be part of our lives, squatting in our family like a huge cuckoo. The fact is, I am haunted by you, and I know nothing about you. I wondered if you could write back to me and tell me a little about yourself? I realise you must think this very strange, but it would help me so much if you could do this. I need to understand what has happened. I need the whole story so that I can make sense of this senseless thing. Thank you very much. Mary Pritchard.'

She looks at him, afraid. He takes a large slug of whisky.

John Were you actually going to send this?

Mary I –

John Because it's mad, this is the sort of thing a mad person does –

Mary I'm entitled to madness.

John No, no, please don't do this.

Mary I have no illusions about it. I'm not expecting closure, whatever the hell that is, I'm not expecting to move on anywhere –

John You were actually going to send it?

Mary I – yes – I –

John What were you expecting her to say? Sorry?

Mary For God's sake, John, d'you want to keep running for the rest of your life –

John I've stopped running.

Mary You're getting through four bottles of whisky a week! You're still running away. I can't tell if you're running from it or me, you're never sober enough to tell me! I used to get into bed and you'd set off round the block for a jog and come back

three hours later. Now I get into bed and you're downstairs in front of the telly with a bottle of whisky —

John While you're up there writing love letters to a murderer —

Mary Oh don't talk crap, you know nothing, you understand *nothing* —

John *hits her across the face. She hits him back. They've never hit each other before. They both reel. Joe appears.*

Joe I forgot my — What happened?

John and Mary *are both in tears.*

John Nothing. It's over.

He goes to Mary.

John Sorry. I'm so sorry.

Joe What did you do?

Mary We — nothing — there was a disagreement —

John I hit her. I hit her. I'm sorry.

Joe Jesus Christ, Dad, what's happening? What are you doing to each other?

Mary It's OK —

Joe It's not OK! D'you want to know what's happened? The most important person in this house, the person behind every thought, every impulse, every daydream or screaming match, is Danny. A dead person. A dead person is in charge of our lives.

Mary Joe —

Joe Why don't you ask me what I want occasionally? Go on, ask me. I'll tell you. I'd like to be considered as important as my little brother, who happens to be dead. I'd like parity with the stiff, if that's not too much to ask. In fact, I'll go further than that. I'd like to be considered *more* important. Because the great thing about me is that I'm actually breathing, which

I think gives me the edge over a kilo and a half of ash sitting in a tub on the kitchen shelf.

Silence.

Or maybe you disagree?

John *tries to speak, but can't.*

John I — I — that's not —

He turns away and goes out.

Joe What is his problem?

Mary Leave him alone, Joe, please.

Pause.

Joe What happened?

Mary He found a letter I wrote to Emma Price. He thinks I want to forgive her or something.

Joe Do you?

Mary I don't know what I want.

Pause.

I want to be free.

Joe Of what?

Mary As long as I'm shackled to her I'm shackled to Danny's murder, and he was more than that. He was more than just a violent death.

Joe So what are you going to do about it?

Mary I thought you were going out? Go on, you need to get out of here —

Joe Why did he hit you?

Mary I hit him back, by the way.

Joe You've never hit each other. Ever.

Mary He's trying to deal with Danny being killed his way, and I'm trying to deal with it my way. And the problem is, my way makes him want to kill me, too.

Blackout.

Lights up on Emma and Elizabeth. Emma is holding a letter which Elizabeth has just handed over.

Emma Who's it from?

Elizabeth Mary Pritchard.

Emma Who's she?

Elizabeth Daniel Pritchard's mother. I told you about her.

A beat.

Emma What does she want?

Elizabeth Why don't you read it and see?

Emma No thanks.

She tries to hand it back to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth It's addressed to you. Keep it. You might want to read it later.

Emma I won't.

Elizabeth Keep it anyway.

Emma What does she want?

Elizabeth Why don't you read the letter?

Emma Why don't you tell me?

Elizabeth She asked me to give it to you.

Emma I don't want it.

Elizabeth Is that what you'd like me to tell her?

Emma Tell her anything you like.

Elizabeth OK.

Silence.

Emma Did you bring my fags?

Elizabeth Yes.

She rummages in her bag and takes out a pack of cigarettes.

I couldn't get the Rolos. They didn't have any.

Emma Where?

Elizabeth At my local shop.

Emma Must be a pretty poxy shop.

Elizabeth Well, they didn't have any.

Emma Get Rolos anywhere. Poxiest shop on earth sells Rolos.

Elizabeth This one doesn't.

Emma Cos it's poxy.

Elizabeth Are you going to read the letter or not?

Emma You could have got me a bar of fruit and nut instead.

Elizabeth I'll leave it with you.

Emma Or a packet of Starbursts.

Elizabeth You can read it later.

Emma Starbursts used to be called Opal Fruits. Did you know that?

Elizabeth Yes.

Emma A KitKat would've done. Fuck's sake. What's a KitKat cost? Nothing. Have a break, have a KitKat.

Elizabeth *puts the letter on the table between them.*

Elizabeth I'll leave it here, OK?

Emma Stop going on about the fucking letter, will you?

Elizabeth Stop going on about fucking confectionary.

Pause.

Emma I've never heard you swear before.

Elizabeth Well, now you have.

Emma Anyway, I like confectionary. Or sweets as I call them.

Elizabeth I'll get you a KitKat the next time.

Emma You coming back then?

Elizabeth What d'you mean?

Emma Why d'you bother? I'm a waste of time.

Elizabeth No you're not.

Emma I fucking am.

Elizabeth You can certainly be very trying.

Emma (*impersonating her*) 'You can certainly be very trying.'

Elizabeth That's not a very nice thing to do, Emma.

Emma 'That's not a very nice thing to do, Emma.'

Elizabeth Look, we can waste this visit, or we can make it worthwhile, it's up to you.

Emma I don't give a fuck, I never asked you to visit me.

Elizabeth Actually you did.

Emma I don't even like you, you're a cunt with a stupid voice, I even hate what you look like and you don't smell right, you smell fucking terrible, has no one ever told you that?

Elizabeth *is unfazed. She says nothing.*

Emma Have you ever eaten out of a dustbin?

Elizabeth No.

Emma I have.

Elizabeth Really.

Emma I was hungry.

Elizabeth *says nothing*

Emma You don't believe me, do you?

Elizabeth Why d'you think that might be?

Emma I was eight or nine. My brother and me used to go round the bins. One time we found half a birthday cake, just with a bit of ash on it.

Elizabeth You must have been very hungry.

Emma Ha ha, I was only joking.

Elizabeth Were you?

Emma Guess.

Elizabeth You were hungry. Why?

Emma Because no one fed us because my nan was in hospital.

Elizabeth Where was your mother?

Emma Off somewhere.

Elizabeth Where?

Emma I can't remember. She used to go out and not come back. But she must have gone for ages this time because there was nothing in the house to eat and we didn't have any money so we went round the bins.

Elizabeth I'm so sorry. That must have been horrible.

Emma Yeah, it was pretty poxy. You feel a right charlie. Yeah.

Pause.

My nan used to say that. 'A right charlie.'

Elizabeth Was there no one you could have gone to?

Emma My nan, but she was in hospital, I told you.

Elizabeth How long did this go on for?

Emma I can't remember now. I think the woman next door took us into her place and gave us some baked beans.

Pause.

I know what you're thinking, I bet you think I'm going to go whining on again about my rubbish childhood and everything, but I'm not, I mean, it can't have been that bad, can it, or I'd be dead. Like my brother. Someone shot him, I'm not kidding. It's ridiculous, it's like a joke my family, you couldn't put us on the telly, no one would believe it, we've got drugs, shootings, being on the game, broken noses, social services, horrible sex stuff and half the time the electric's cut off. We're one of those families you read about in the papers, the judge said my background was pitiful. Rude bastard. He's right, mind you. I just don't think he should've said it in public, in front of people, you don't want everyone to know your mum was on the game and your grandad was a kiddie fiddler, it's not your fault.

Elizabeth No, it's not your fault.

Emma OK, which bit of what I just said's not true?

Elizabeth Most of it?

Emma Which bit? Guess.

Elizabeth I've no idea.

Emma Because you see the other thing they said about me is I'm a bit of fantasist.

Elizabeth Yes.

Emma D'you think I am?

Elizabeth I think you make things up.

Emma Not everything. Some of what I say's true.

Elizabeth I know.

Emma Ha-ha! Which bit?

Elizabeth I'm not sure.

Pause.

Emma This woman who wrote me the letter.

Elizabeth Mary Pritchard.

Emma What's she want?

Elizabeth I don't know.

Emma Why not?

Elizabeth Because the letter's addressed to you, not me.

Emma Didn't you ask her what she wrote?

Elizabeth No.

Emma I'd have sneaked a look at it.

Pause.

What d'you think she wants then?

Elizabeth Why don't you just read it and see?

Pause.

Emma He was rude to me. Very fucking rude.

Elizabeth Who was?

Emma He made me really pissed off.

Elizabeth Daniel Pritchard?

Emma He didn't need to tell me to fuck off.

Elizabeth You didn't need to stab him.

Emma He grabbed my tit.

Elizabeth You didn't need to stab him.

Emma I was off my face, I was not in possession of my faculties. And he was a fucking rude bastard.

Elizabeth You don't kill people because they're rude.

Emma I did though, didn't I?

Elizabeth And you were --

Emma Coked out of my head.

Elizabeth So you asked him for money. He said fuck off and you stabbed him.

Emma Yeah.

Elizabeth What was going through your head?

Emma I can't remember. I was --

Elizabeth Out of your head.

Emma Yeah.

She gets up.

Anyway. See you.

Elizabeth Are you off?

Emma Yeah. See you.

Elizabeth OK.

Emma Go on then. Bye.

Elizabeth I'll see you next time, yes?

Emma If you want.

Elizabeth *turns to go.*

Emma *(holding it out)* You forgot your letter.

Elizabeth It's not my letter, it's yours.

She goes. Emma looks at the letter for a long time. She puts it in her pocket without opening it.

Blackout.

Lights up on Mary, John and Elizabeth.

John I don't care if she had a rubbish childhood, *I* had a rubbish childhood and I don't go around stabbing strangers because they won't give me the money for crack or heroin or whatever it was. Her dad was a sadistic asshole? That's not a reason, it's not an excuse, fuck the mitigating circumstances, *my* dad was a sadistic asshole --

Mary No he wasn't, you just made that up.

John -- and I don't go around killing people --

Mary Well, good for you. What is the point of comparing yourself to this girl? What are you trying to say? That you're a better person? We know that --

John Of course I'm better than a murderer!

Mary I can't believe we're having this argument, it's absurd --

John You started it --

Elizabeth *gets up.*

Elizabeth Look, I'm going to go, and you can call me later in the week when you've sorted out what it is you want to do. If anything.

John Good idea.

Mary Sit down, he doesn't mean it.

John Yes I do.

Elizabeth Look, for what it's worth, I don't think you should visit Emma. Yet.

John You think she's going to be grateful for your forgiveness or something, but all it's going to do is rake up more grief and more pain --

Mary I never said I was going to forgive her. I just believe she might -- it might give her the chance to -- I don't know . . . she might . . . say sorry . . .

John Oh, don't be so fucking ridiculous!

Mary It's not impossible, is it, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth Well . . . I wouldn't bank on it . . .

John You see?

Elizabeth I mean, obviously it's not impossible –

Mary That's not the reason I'm doing it.

Elizabeth I actually think Emma and I are getting somewhere. But she can't apologise until she completely understands what she's done, d'you see?

John She killed someone. She went to prison. What's *not* to understand?

Mary I know what I'm doing, and I know you don't, but I'm going to meet her. You can stay in the dark, but I'm walking towards the light.

Blackout.

Lights up on Mary and Emma. Visiting time.

Mary Hello.

She stares at Emma.

Emma Hi.

Pause.

Mary How are you?

Emma Fine.

Pause.

Mary Good . . .

Pause.

Thank you for agreeing to meet me.

Emma Whatever.

Mary I'm glad you did.

Pause.

Are you?

Emma Am I what?

Mary Glad. That we could meet.

Emma *shrugs.*

Mary You weren't nervous?

Emma What about?

Mary Meeting me.

Emma It doesn't bother me.

Mary Doesn't it?

Emma No.

Pause.

Mary Danny was our youngest son.

Emma Yeah.

Mary We have another son called Joe. He's twenty.

Emma Right.

Mary Danny was about to go to university.

Emma Good for him.

Elizabeth *appears with three polystyrene cups of tea.*

Elizabeth Three teas.

Emma I don't want tea.

Elizabeth So don't drink it.

Emma I wanted coffee.

Elizabeth Well, I –

Emma Forget it. It doesn't matter.

Mary Please. Get her a coffee, could you?

Elizabeth Sure.

She goes.

Emma Why did you do that?

Mary I suppose I'm trying to show that I mean you no harm.

Emma Why?

Elizabeth Because . . . I don't. Mean you any harm.

Emma You fucking mental?

Elizabeth What d'you mean?

Emma Nothing. Forget it.

Silence.

Mary How are you . . . how are you finding it?

Emma What?

Mary Prison.

Emma It's fine. I don't have a problem with it.

Mary It must be very difficult being away from your family.

Emma You haven't met my family.

Mary No.

Emma Right. Is that it then? Can I go now?

Mary I've only just got here.

Emma What d'you want me to say?

Mary I don't know.

Emma What you doing here then?

Mary I don't know.

Emma Jesus Christ . . .

Mary Elizabeth's gone to get you a coffee, you can't go yet.

Emma Elizabeth's a wanker.

Silence.

Mary You read my letters?

Emma No.

Mary Why not?

Emma I've been busy.

Mary With what?

Elizabeth *comes back with the coffee.*

Elizabeth Here we are.

Mary What have you been busy with?

Emma Bring any sugar?

Elizabeth *puts the sugar on the table.* **Emma** *puts three in her coffee.*

Emma I love sugar.

Mary You said you've been busy.

Emma I love anything sweet. I can eat a whole box of Coco Pops. Not those tinsy ones from the variety pack. A big huge family one. In one sitting. I like sweets, sugar, chocolate, anything like that I can eat, but you know what I can't eat, olives, what is the point of an olive, I mean what is it, it tastes like shit, who invented the olive —

Elizabeth Emma —

Emma What?

Elizabeth Mary doesn't want to hear one of your food rants —

Emma But what *is* an olive?

Mary It's a fruit.

Emma It's not a fucking fruit.

Elizabeth It doesn't matter what olives are, we've established you don't like them, so can we move on –

Emma An orange is a fruit. An apple. An olive is like a piece of shit.

Elizabeth Emma, come on –

Emma A pineapple is a fruit. A lime. Lime's my favourite flavour. I love lime Starbursts. But can you imagine, right, an *olive*-flavoured Starburst? No, right, because a) it would be disgusting, and b) an olive is not a fruit.

Elizabeth Let's get over the olives, can we?

Emma OK.

Pause.

But it's not a fruit though.

Elizabeth Fine.

Pause.

Emma Why doesn't she just tell me what she wants?

Mary I don't want anything.

Emma So what's she doing here then?

Mary Perhaps if you read the letters –

Elizabeth You told me you *had* read them –

Mary D'you still have the letters, Emma?

Emma Yeah, somewhere.

Mary Why is it you won't read them?

Emma *stares stonily ahead.*

Mary Is it because you were frightened of what I might say in them?

Emma No.

Mary Is it –

Emma Look, I don't want to talk about the fucking letters, OK? I don't want to read them because whatever you have to say, I don't want to know, OK? I got no idea what you're doing here. Maybe you want to tell me how lovely your bloody son was, well, I hate to disappoint you he wasn't lovely he was a little shit. And I've got nothing to say to you, so piss off.

Mary *is shocked. She gets up.*

Elizabeth Mary –

Mary No. I made a mistake. I'm going.

Emma Good. And don't come back.

Mary Fine. I won't.

She goes.

Elizabeth What the hell was that about? Why did you do that? We'd been through this, we'd discussed every possibility, you told me you'd read those letters, what on earth were you doing?

Emma *fiddles with her fingers, says nothing*

Elizabeth Can you imagine how much effort it took for her to come in here? Have you any idea what she's been through? Or d'you think it's all about you, is that it?

Emma She kept going on about the fucking letters.

Elizabeth Well, she did take the trouble to write them. The least you could do was to read them.

Emma I'm never going to bloody read them, OK?

Elizabeth OK, I give up. I can't believe what you've just done –

Emma I can't read them. D'you hear what I'm saying?

Elizabeth What d'you mean, you can't?

Emma I can't.

Pause.

Elizabeth Oh.

Pause.

Why didn't you tell me this?

Emma Because it's fucking embarrassing, why d'you think?

A beat.

Elizabeth Does *anyone* know about it?

Emma No.

Elizabeth Oh, Emma . . .

Emma I can do my name, though.

Elizabeth That's good. That's a start.

Emma And sometimes I look at newspapers and books and pretend. So someone says to me you want to read this book, it's great, and I go what's it about and they tell me and I go what's it called and they tell me and they lend it to me. And then I pretend I'm reading it, then I say to someone else, you want to read this book, it's great, and I tell them what it's about and everything.

Elizabeth Have you kept the letters?

Emma Yeah. Of course I have.

A beat.

No one's ever sent me a letter before.

Blackout.

Lights up on Mary. She is sitting staring into space. John and Joe are with her.

Mary I should never have gone.

Pause.

Go on, say it. Say I told you so.

John What happened?

Mary She's horrible.

Joe Like you thought she was going to be *lovable*?

Mary In my head I saw myself . . . not forgiving, but . . . what? I don't know. Bestowing some sort of blessing on someone who doesn't exist. Certainly not the person I met.

John What did she say?

Mary She went on about olives.

Joe Olives?

Mary Is an olive a fruit or not.

John It's a vegetable, isn't it?

Joe It's a snack.

Mary You see? You're doing it now.

John How did you get onto olives in the first place?

Mary No idea. Anyway. Then she said Danny was a little shit.

Joe She didn't know him, Mum. She never met him.

John She has to say that. Obviously. Because if he wasn't a shit why did she kill him?

Mary She didn't read any of my letters, she called Dan a shit, she was rude, she didn't care. She has no concept of what she's done, or if she has she couldn't give a damn.

Silence.

Joe Maybe you should give it another go, Mum.

John No. It's too much. You tried. It's enough.

Joe I'm just saying. Maybe her first instinct was right. Maybe she should go with it.

John Look, can we just get something straight here. I'm prepared to admit the girl might have problems —

Joe Well, what a fucking genius you are, Dad –

John I know she must have things wrong in her life, of course I know that, but I don't seem to be able to care. I cannot care about it, or her, or her scabby childhood or anything else because every time I think about her I just see her putting a knife into Danny and every time I think about her he's killed again and so am I.

Pause.

And I just want us to forget her. Why can't we just forget her?

Joe Because we're shackled to her, Dad. And Mum's trying to unshackle herself.

John Because she's a better person than I am.

Joe No.

John I can't do what you're doing, Mary.

Mary I'm not asking you to.

John But it makes me feel like bad person. So you're cast as Mother Teresa and I'm Adolf Eichmann –

Mary That is not what's happening –

John When you saw her, what did you feel?

Mary What?

John She's sitting there in front of you. She killed your son. What did you feel?

Mary I don't know . . . I was expecting rage, but no . . . Pity, I felt. And despair. Because she was so . . . ordinary. An ordinary cocky girl. And it made me feel like it didn't mean anything, that Dan was dead and it was just random and pointless and . . . ordinary –

She goes to the shelf, takes down the urn of ashes and slams it on the table.

Why didn't you value your life more? Why didn't you just give her the money? You should have died in bed at the age of eighty-five, you stupid – How could you do this to us, Dan, how

could you be so careless, how can you be dead for nothing, you could have crossed the road, why couldn't you have just not been there –

She smashes the urn on the table.

Blackout.

Lights up on visiting time. Mary, Emma and Joe.

Mary This is my son, Joe.

Emma Hello.

Joe Hi.

Mary Joe was there. The night it – when it happened.

Emma Right.

Mary I wanted my husband to come too, but he won't. He can't do it. Not yet.

Emma *shrugs.*

Emma Whatever.

Pause.

Mary Anyway. How are you?

Emma OK.

Pause.

Mary Elizabeth told me about the letters.

Emma Yeah.

Pause.

That's why – it wasn't – I just – I felt stupid or something.

Pause.

I'm sorry but this is really fucking weird. It's doing my head in.

Mary Yes. It is weird.

Emma I mean, you're sitting here with . . .

Joe The person who killed her son. My brother.

Pause.

Emma If I had my time over again I wouldn't have done it.

Mary You're not going to have your time over again though, are you?

Emma No. But I wouldn't have done it.

Pause.

Mary Thank you.

Emma But I did.

Mary Yes.

Emma I did do it.

Mary Yes.

Emma Fucking hell.

Pause.

So. There you go.

Pause.

I said he told me to fuck off and he did but loads of other people had said fuck off an' all, because I was probably being a bit of a pain.

Mary OK.

Emma I said he grabbed my tit.

Joe Dan wouldn't have done that.

Pause.

Emma Yeah. He didn't.

Mary OK.

Emma He didn't do anything.

Mary So . . . ?

Emma I don't know why I did it. I just . . . I was . . . angry or something . . . I didn't mean . . . I didn't think it would, you know, damage him so much . . .

Pause.

I didn't mean to ruin anyone's life.

Mary What about your own?

Emma Mine was rubbish to begin with.

Pause.

Did you hear me? I said I never meant it. I never meant to kill him.

Mary Yes, I know, thank you.

Emma Is that what you wanted to hear?

Mary When I got here I thought I might tell you that I forgave you.

Pause.

Emma You can't do that.

Mary No. I can't. I could say it but I don't feel it.

Joe I can't forgive you either.

Emma So what do you want?

Mary I thought . . . we thought . . . Joe and I – we thought it might be something we could . . . work towards.

Pause.

Emma Are you taking the piss?

Mary No.

Pause.

Did you bring the letters with you?

Emma Yeah. D'you want them back or something?

Mary I thought we could read them together.

Emma I can't –

Mary I know. We'll teach you.

Pause.

Emma It's too late, isn't it?

Joe No.

Pause.

Emma OK . . .

Joe When d'you want to start?

Emma *takes the letters from her pocket and pushes them across the table.*

Mary *opens the first one, and reads, pointing out the words to Emma.*

Mary 'Dear Emma Price, my name is Mary Pritchard. Daniel Pritchard, the boy you killed, was my son . . .'

Fade down lights.

Spotlight on Mary.

Mary I thought when I started this, that all I had to do was say *I forgive you*, and the healing would start. But I can't say it. Yet. Not truthfully anyway. It's a long road, I understand that now. Sometimes I feel forgiveness and sometimes I don't. Sometimes, I wake up in the morning and for a split second, I forget that Dan is dead. And when I remember, it's as new and harsh and as overwhelming as it was on that very first morning. And I don't feel full of forgiveness and love, I feel full of despair and anguish and fury at the person who did it. Forgiveness wouldn't make the grief go away. That's what I've learnt. I must have hoped it would, but when I started this I'd no idea what I was doing. No one tells you how to do these

things, you don't expect you'll ever need to. So I'm groping along in the dark, as best I can.

Spotlight on Joe.

Joe My mum's much better at it than me. Sometimes I find it hard – you look at her and she's just this girl and she's even quite nice. So she's this quite nice girl who did this thing. This terrible thing. And I feel this rage coming up from deep down in my stomach, and I think it's going to burst from my throat. But I have to try and hold the two things side by side in my hands: the ordinary girl, the terrible thing. Because I think now, they're both true. They both have equal weight. One doesn't cancel out the other. Does it?

Spotlight on John.

John I can't do what they're doing. But I don't hold it against them any more. I'm on my road, they're on theirs. The house is calmer now. There seems to be some purpose to the day. I'm running again. It's pathological, I know, but it's better than whisky. The other day, Mary said to me, 'If you could have anything at this moment, what would it be?' Something possible. Not Dan being alive.' And I couldn't answer at first, I couldn't think of anything. But then it came to me: dignity. I'd like for us to have some sort of dignity.

Pause.

I don't want people to think we're brave or pitiable, I don't want to be admired or healed, jollied along, moved on, cheered up and counselled. I just want . . . the grief to be accepted for itself, nothing more, nothing less. And I want to be allowed the dignity of carrying it, as best I can. Without flowers tied to lamp posts, and cuddly toys left in the rain. It's not a thing we value any more, but pain is something we must bear and we should be allowed to be proud in the bearing of it. I never really thought about it before. But dignity is what makes us human. Dignity gives us meaning. Dignity is as vital as air . . .

Spotlight on Emma and Elizabeth. Emma is hesitantly reading a letter.

Emma ' . . . This is not a hate letter, so please don't throw it away. The only time I saw you was in court, and you looked so normal to have done such a terrible thing. And now you seem to be part of our lives, s— s— '

She struggles with the word. Elizabeth looks at it

Elizabeth Squatting.

Emma ' . . . squatting in our family like a huge cuckoo. The fact is, I am haunted by you, and I know nothing about you. I wondered if you could write back to me and tell me a little about yourself? I realise you must think this very strange, but it would help me so much if you could do this. I need to understand what has happened. I need the whole story so that I can make sense of this senseless thing. Thank you very much. Mary Pritchard.'

She looks up. Elizabeth smiles at her.

Blackout.