

# The Gift

by

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Directed by Nigel Townsend

Designed by Annabel Lee

Rehearsal Script: January 2000.

Y Touring Theatre Company

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### Principal Characters

Barbara Kay            Carrier of Friedreich's ataxia, a genetic disorder, and mother of...

Annie Kay             a keen footballer in her teens, who inherits Friedreich's ataxia with profound consequences

and...

Ryan Kay             Annie's younger brother, who is also a carrier of the rogue gene, but not directly affected

Ryan grows up to marry.....

Jennifer             a radical opponent of genetic engineering, who is, however, also carrying the same rogue gene condition as Ryan

however their son...

Mark Kay            (16) is clear of any genetic disorder and is now trying to make some big decisions about what to do with his life.

The action shifts between 2030, 2015 and the present day. The staging of the play should be in non-specific space, with sparing use of bright and distinctive props to indicate location and circumstances. E.g. chrome hospital trolley, a pink walking stick. The movement of the story is a possible character and perhaps by the use of a repeated pattern of a distinct musical phrase.

Friedreich's Ataxia is an 'inherited disease of the central nervous system in which there is a progressive deterioration of co-ordination and muscle control, characterised by unsteadiness and loss of balance'. Friedreich's Ataxia is caused by a defective or 'rogue' gene on chromosome 9 of the human genome. It is a recessive disorder which currently affects approximately 1500 people in the UK. Symptoms normally first appear between the ages of 4 to 16 years.

For information on Friedreich's Ataxia and other cerebella ataxia's contact:

Friedreich's Ataxia Group, Copse Edge, Thursley Road, Elstead, Godalming, Surrey. GU8 6DJ. Tel: 01252 702864

## SCENE ONE

It is the year 2030. We are in the home of Mark Kay (16) and his father Ryan. In darkness we hear a cybercall announcement.

CYBERCALL: You have reached the home of Ryan and Mark Kay. We are receiving you at (substitute time) Euro Standard Time on August 19<sup>th</sup> 2030.

JENNIFER'S VOICE ON CYBERCALL: Ryan - I need to speak to Mark. (beat) Mark – can you hear me? Click on, Mark. Please. It's Mum. We've got to talk!

MARK: No Mum. Not yet. First I've got to get out of here – (Mark tries to close the bag. It is too full.) Oh come on, come on. (he rummages about in the bag, looking for things to take out) – before HE gets back. Aha! ( he pulls out a tennis racquet, reads inscription) "To Mark from Dad. Proud of you." Ha! I bet you were. The Eurasia Under 16 Open Championships, 2028. Is it really two years I've been at that crummy tennis school? Yeah well time flies when you're having fun. Not.

(He throws the racquet down. The bag now shuts. Mark takes a last hurried look around the room. He rushes out – colliding with his father Ryan Kay (46) coming in.)

RYAN: Whooh! (beat, affably) You're home early. How did you get on?

MARK: Well he won of course.

RYAN: That's his job! Playing a pro like Benzo is a great opportunity -

MARK: Humbling.

RYAN: How was the game?

MARK: This little green ball going boing boing over the net and two idiots running about getting sweaty (beat) 'Scuse me dad – I'm in a rush.

RYAN: (stopping him) Evening practise isn't 'til seven –

MARK: I'm not going –

RYAN: Oh I get it. Starting celebrations early? Your birthday's not until tomorrow you know. Tonight you should be training as usual... But I suppose at your age...

MARK: I'm not going training Dad –

RYAN: I know it's frustrating not winning –

MARK: I don't care about winning-

RYAN: Rubbish! This is your last week in junior league. Now you can turn professional if you want. The dreams are all about to start coming true for you

MARK: No – your dreams, not mine (pulls out a paper, thrusts it in his father's hand) See this? I got it a day early, on account of my birthday being Saturday. I'm sixteen, Dad! And what happens at sixteen – at schools all over Eurasia? Come on – you're the geneticist –?

RYAN: (flatly) Gene profiling.

MARK: Right. It's a big deal – of course – at tennis school. Check out what you're made of. See if you can go the distance. But I wasn't called up. Thought maybe it meant they were going to kick me out. But then I get a call to the medics today – for this. My gene profile. (Ryan looks at the print out and frowns) Look Dad! My life at sixteen – a great big blank.

(Pause)

RYAN: (clears his throat) If I was you –

MARK: Which you're not –

RYAN: - I'd be very glad not to have to be told I'd have to cut down on such and such and look forward to arthritis or to start having gene therapy when I was forty blah blah (trying to be comic) bleagh!

MARK: Mark they said – Mark – don't you know? You don't need gene-profiling son. You were screened before you were even born –

RYAN: You know perfectly well why your mother and I went for that screening –

MARK: All this time. Feeling guilty about your sacrifices – all the money you spent on my training, the Academy. And now I understand. It's you who should feel guilty! Why should I bust my guts any more just to fit in with your plans?

RYAN: But you love tennis!

MARK: Not any more.

RYAN: You have a gift –

MARK: Don't say that... don't say that word! Because the one thing I ever thought I was any good at turns out to be just another thing you gave me.

RYAN: You know perfectly well that your mother and I only went for screening because of what happened with my sister Annie –

MARK: That's not the whole story, Dad!

RYAN: All I did was give you the best start in life. What's wrong with that?

MARK: I'm sick of hearing about "best". That's all they talk about in sports college – "Best, fastest, strongest." I want to go where I never hear the word 'best' again.

RYAN: I can't believe you're sixteen. You're behaving like a six year old!

MARK: I'm leaving the academy and...

RYAN: What!

MARK: You deaf or something? I'm leaving the academy and I'm...

RYAN: Oh no you're not... you're not leaving. Not now. Not when we've come this far – not after all I've done to get you this far. Have you any idea how much it costs to send you to the academy.

MARK: Out of my way, Dad, please. (They fight) There, stronger than you dad! You should have thought about that when you selected me out to be your son?

RYAN: What did the medics tell you?

MARK: Everything, they even laughed. Hey Mark – you weren't screened – you were selected. That's why you're so hot at sports. That's why you're here. Couldn't you have loved me fat or stupid or gangly or slow? Couldn't you have loved me as me. Me! Who am I Dad? That paper can't tell me. Can you?

RYAN: Listen.

MARK: I'm through listening to you Dad. I'm leaving the academy and I'm leaving home. Bye bye... (He leaves)

RYAN: You've got to listen to me, Mark! Where are you going? Come back here! Mark! I forbid you to leave this house...

(As if from nowhere – a football bounces on stage)

RYAN: (quietly) Annie?

## SCENE TWO

It is 2000. We are in the garden of the small Kay house. Annie Kay (16) runs on stage after the ball and starts a lively knockabout with her brother Ryan (now aged 14). Annie runs rings around her brother. She plays jokily, flamboyantly – the star player, while Ryan represents everyone else on the field. The game has a slow motion burlesque quality.

RYAN: Annie! Give us a chance...

ANNIE: - now's your chance Ryan, oh no...

RYAN: Annie!

ANNIE: - and he's blown it! So here she goes... round the midfielders... like a jet... bombs the defence... wrong foot, right foot... oh yes... she's through, she's beautiful... just the goalie now... and he doesn't look up to much.

RYAN: (giving up) I can't be bothered.

Annie does some fancy footwork. Picks up the ball

ANNIE: What a pathetic attitude.

RYAN: It's boring.

ANNIE: Aha yes... (placing ball for penalty kick) – open goal... effectively (She licks her finger to the wind, draws back her foot to shoot and suddenly almost comically, falls over to land on her bum) Oh no... oh (She sits on the ground looking puzzled)

RYAN: (can't believe his luck) Ha ha ha! She's given it away! The goalie's got the ball! Ryan's got the ball. It's a gift, folks! And he's off... sprinting towards the half way line...

Their mother Barbara Kay (45) comes to watch. Annie tries to get up. Can't. Seems dazed.)

RYAN: (seeing his mother) Oh and the manager's out now... yeah Barbara Kay, only woman manager in the Premiership... She CAN'T BELIEVE IT... What a turn up (Ryan dribbles the ball around on his own, enjoying his commentary more than the football) - the same Barbara Kay who caused such a sensation in the sixties when as a girl she took the football league to court about sexism... except sexism wasn't invented then... Oh yes she's over the moon... this same mother of two who...

BARBARA: But oh ho ho, what's this... she's coming on...

RYAN: Oh no... Barbara Kay herself is coming on.

Barbara, still holding her tea towel, leaps into action, tackles Ryan and gets the ball back from him easily, she's pretty nifty.

RYAN: Mum!

BARBARA: He thought it was all over – (She races towards the empty 'goal', shoots, scores) IT IS NOW!

BARBARA leaps into the air, in a jokey goal-scorers celebration. She windmills, she aeroplanes, punches her fist in the air and rotates her hips. She does a joke jog round the 'pitch', chanting to the 'crowd')

BARBARA: Ooooh Aaah Bar-bar-ra, I say Ooh Aah Bar-bar-ra (smothering Ryan with a hug) Tea's ready! (to Annie) Come on love what's up?

ANNIE: One minute I was great then... everything went woozy

BARBARA gets her tea towel and jokily mops Annie's legs and then forehead

BARBARA: Oh dearie dearie me. Oh dearie dearie me –

ANNIE: I'm serious mum!

RYAN: Ha ha ha ha Ha! Miss Girlie footballer of the decade tripped and landed on her bum – just like a mere human being...

BARBARA: You okay lovey? You haven't twisted your ankle have you?

ANNIE: No My leg just went – it was weird –

RYAN: She's weird. She fell over.

BARBARA: (to Annie) You ought to be careful, with the trials coming up.

RYAN: Yeah – don't want to waste you r time having knock-about's with me! If you're going to get injured at least do it with glory –

BARBARA: Shush now Ryan will you?

ANNIE: (getting up) Gizzaball Ry –

RYAN: Yeah – pushy, perfectionist, prima donna

ANNIE: - stuffy, scruffy, little squirt!

RYAN: You're sick anyway – playing football all the time.

ANNIE: What do you do? Sit around the house in gangs of spotty boys playing computer games (she mimes wagging the joystick)

BARBARA: (to ANNIE) Well you seem completely recovered from what ever it was now –

As Barbara's back is turned, Annie exaggerates the wagging joystick motion suggestively and pokes out her tongue.

BARBARA: Come on Annie – remember what the coach said about regular meals?

BARBARA goes in

RYAN: (following her) What's for tea mum? (as he passes ANNIE he pulls out his shirt into bosoms) Hey – FA cups!

ANNIE: (not impressed) Ryan!

RYAN: (turning) What?

ANNIE: You're never going to have a girlfriend. Ever. You DO realise that, don't you?

RYAN: Yeah, but maybe you will. All this football'll turn your hormones funny...

Ryan goes in blowing a loud raspberry

ANNIE: (shouts) YOU'VE GOT NO DEDICATION!

Annie remains out in the 'rec a while longer practising ball skills. Something is wrong.

SCENE THREE

2000. Annie is playing football in the garden. Training – trying to work out what's going wrong. Barbara is indoors on the phone, watching her daughter out of the window. Intercut the two lines of dialogue.

BARBARA: Hello. Yes I want to make an appointment –

ANNIE: What's up with me? It can't be nerves –

BARBARA: - for my daughter – Annie Kay. We're Dr. Fleming's patients – (lowers her voice, as if conspiratorially) I want a second opinion –

ANNIE: I know about adrenaline. I know about over training...

BARBARA: No I don't want to speak to the other doctor – I want to see her – do I have to? Oh –

ANNIE: It's not muscles anyway. I can usually do this til... til the cows go to Macdonald's... one, two, three... there it goes again. Sort of gap... I go to do something. I think I'm doing it... but it doesn't happen...

Barbara is on the telephone to the other Doctor. Her voice is more diffident. Speech overlaps Annie's

BARBARA: It's a kind of a gap she says... I'm sure it is nothing serious that's what our doctor said, but all the same...

Someone speaks at the other end of the line. Ryan wanders in. Flops down.

ANNIE: Maybe it's nothing. Yeah sometimes the old magic comes back and I can fly like a bird... Look at that! (She kicks in the air) Flick flick flick. Kick kick kick. I could always be a Gladiator if my country doesn't need me.

BARBARA: (to doctor) Well that's what our Dr. Fleming said, but if it was training, we'd know – wouldn't we.

The Doctor speaks again – a bit more helpful. Barbara nods.

Annie meanwhile is can-canning with hands on hips.

BARBARA: Thank you. Four o'clock. That's fine... (she hangs up) I don't know!

RYAN: What?

BARBARA: Seems like anyone can set themselves up as a doctor these days.

RYAN: Oh maybe that's what I'll do.

BARBARA: (considers Ryan's scruffy baggy form) Mmm, well maybe not anybody...

RYAN: You went to the doctors yesterday.

BARBARA: Yes and we'll go tomorrow if we must.

They look out of the window

RYAN: Thing is, football is a game for boys and men.

BARBARA: Oh Ryan.

RYAN: I'm being scientific here mum. Look at my body –

BARBARA: Very nice.

RYAN: (turning sideways) Right – you played football as a girl, until what age?

BARBARA: thirteen...

RYAN: Ok, well I'm not getting personal here, ma. But what happens to a girl around thirteen?

Barbara looks at him puzzled. Ryan rolls his eyes as if she's sooooo stupid and sticks out his chest.

BARBARA: (laughing) Oh for pity's sake.

RYAN: Bingo – balance problems! That's why boys, men and pre-pubescent girls can play football - (he stands straight and mimes dribbling a ball) – but girls with ... chests – can't! ( He stands with 'tits' and falls over) Well? (gets up) It stands up, don't you think? As a theory?

BARBARA: And what happens to boys around fourteen?

RYAN: What?

BARBARA: They get obsessed with bosoms!

RYAN: Oh ho ho. Guess what mum?

BARBARA: What?

RYAN: It actually happens about ten!

She laughs. Releases her tension.

BARBARA: I don't know. Maybe there's not anything wrong... physically.

RYAN: That's it! Annie's just mental!

BARBARA: Maybe I've pushed Annie too much into football. Maybe she went along with it because after your Dad died she wanted to make me happy –

RYAN: Look at her mum – she's as crazy about it as you are.

Annie is doing stretching exercises in the garden.

BARBARA: - these England trials though... The sacrifices she's made, getting up early, no late nights with her mates. She's sixteen. Maybe it doesn't seem worth it anymore...

Ryan goes awkwardly up to his mother. If he was a bit older or a bit younger, he would hug her. As it is he sort of thumps her on the arm.

RYAN: Mum. You know Annie. She's one gobbie girl. If there was anything bothering her, she'd tell the world about it –

BARBARA: Mmm. But would she tell me?

RYAN: Come on mum.

#### SCENE FOUR

A hospital waiting room in 2000. Barbara and Annie come in and look at the queue in dismay.

BARBARA: Will you look at the queue!

ANNIE: There's a lot of sick people in (*substitute name of town*)

They sit down to wait.

BARBARA: How d'you feel love? –

ANNIE: I feel fine. It's just those... little gaps... getting off the bus just now.

BARBARA: When?

ANNIE: I stumbled mum.

BARBARA: No you didn't.

ANNIE: - you caught my arm.

BARBARA: I never noticed.

They watch as if another patient gets up and goes out. Pause.

ANNIE: I'm sorry mum. You've been so good these last few weeks trailing about with me.

BARBARA: It's only like going training.

ANNIE: Missing that again!

BARBARA: Look at the time! Where's that receptionist? There's never anyone to complain to in hospitals. Mind you I'm sick of them at the surgery looking at me like the bad penny every time we turn up. You think that they'd be grateful that we're trying to look after our health... (Brighter) Still this should be the last of it today –

ANNIE: Unless it's anything serious.

BARBARA: And why we had to see a Neurologist. For your legs! All you want is something for your balance. Vitamins... They're on the wrong tack entirely. Haven't a clue. You could tell that. All those questions about the family, and your father's side? What everyone died of. And your Dad. Car accident. That doesn't matter I suppose to them. That you lost your poor father...

Dr Fisher comes out into the waiting room.

Dr. FISHER: "Ms Kay"

BARBARA: (stands) About time!

Annie remains rooted to her seat

BARBARA: What is it love? Get up. What is it? Can't you stand? – Nurse!

ANNIE; No no no! (Annie stands) Mum – I'm frightened.

They hug each other convulsively

BARBARA: It's going to be alright!

Barbara and Annie pass through to the Consulting Room. Dr. Fisher is there, waiting, in a white coat

Dr. FISHER: Hello Mrs Kay, hello Annie.

They sit down. Dr. Fisher focuses on his papers.

Dr. FISHER: We've got your test results, and I'm sorry to tell you that the news is not good. The unsteadiness you have been experiencing is the early signs of Ataxia.

BARBARA: What?

Dr. FISHER: Ataxia is not itself a disease –

Barbara nods keenly. This is a promising – if it isn't a disease. But Annie sits transfixed in Dr. Fisher kindly gaze, like a rabbit caught in car headlights on a lonely road.

Dr. FISHER: - but a term for problems with the balance part of the brain. From our tests and our meeting the other day we were able to rule out some of the causes of Ataxia such as multiple sclerosis, thyroid disease, alcoholism –

Annie gasps, shakes her head, looks at her mother, surely this is a mistake. Alcoholism? But now Barbara is sitting frozen in horror.

BARBARA: There's been no alcoholism in the Kay family! Are you sure you've got the right notes?

Dr. FISHER: - These are some of the causes of Ataxia that we are able to rule out.

BARBARA: I was going to say –

Dr. FISHER: (continuing) – such as a brain tumour

BARBARA: Oh my good God!

ANNIE: (trying to get her head around it) It's not that?

BARBARA: She hasn't got a brain tumour?

Dr. FISHER: NO.

BARBARA: Thank God! (beat) Alcoholism! I ask you! She's only sixteen.

Dr. FISHER: (deep breath) I'm sorry to tell you that Annie has Friedreich's ataxia – an inherited condition of the central nervous system – that starts to show itself generally in the childhood or teens.

ANNIE: A what condition?

Dr. FISHER: Inherited. Something you're born with.

BARBARA: How can she be born with it? None of us have had it. Look at your notes Doctor. It's a mistake. I've never heard of it.

Dr. FISHER: Friedreich's ataxia is passed on in families in a way we call "recessive". A recessive disorder is going to be relatively rare, as you need both parents to be carriers.

BARBARA: Excuse me?

Dr. FISHER: Both you and your husband, Mrs Kay, had this 'rouge' gene. But it didn't show up in either of you because you had each been born with a matching working gene, which cancelled it out.

BARBARA: So what's the cure? Can you do it at this hospital or do we have to travel? We haven't got a car but –

ANNIE: Is there a cure?

Dr. FISHER: (another deep breath) There are a number of research projects doing excellent work in this field isolating the gene concerned – but –

ANNIE: No cure?

Dr. FISHER: No.

BARBARA: So you're saying that she's just got to put up with this clumsiness and falling over? That's ridiculous, you're telling me that in this day and age, with your stacks of equipment and what not that you can't help my daughter. That's rubbish! What about allergy testing? She eats a lot of protein you see, for training. She's a footballer – she's not ill... she's very fit, always has been – sporty.

ANNIE: Mum, please –

Dr. FISHER: I'm afraid that the diagnosis in Annie's case is quite clear. Now there's some pamphlets here I'd like to give you which –

He holds out pamphlets

ANNIE: I'm going to get worse aren't I? This falling over and that, is just the beginning?

BARBARA: No.

Dr. FISHER: (simultaneously) Yes.

ANNIE: How much worse? How bad will I get?

Dr. FISHER: This is a terrible thing to take in, Annie, I know. What I suggest you do, is read the pamphlets I'm giving you and –

ANNIE: I don't want your fucking pamphlets!

BARBARA: Annie!

ANNIE: I'm going to die!

Dr. FISHER: Don't misunderstand me. You're only sixteen. We're talking in terms of twenty, thirty years –

ANNIE: (interrupts) You're telling me twenty, thirty years of what? Getting worse and worse – (realises) I'll be in a wheelchair!

BARBARA: No!

Dr. FISHER: You'll probably find that –

ANNIE: (screams) Oh no, no. This is a horrible nightmare. Mum – take me home.

BARBARA: Yes – we're going love.

Annie rushes out. Barbara is numb with shock.

BARBARA: (to Dr. Fisher) Are you sure there isn't some mistake?

Dr. FISHER: (shakes head) I'm so sorry Mrs Kay.

BARBARA: She's only sixteen. She's so fit.

As Dr. Fisher leads Barbara out, another horrible thought occurs to her.

BARBARA: Doctor. I have a son. He's fourteen... Will he?

FISHER: I don't know.

BARBARA: (numb) Yes doctor. Thank you.

Barbara goes out. Dr. Fisher buries his head in his hands a moment then has to go out to call in the next patient.

#### SCENE FIVE

It is 2030. Ryan and Mark's home. Ryan enters. Speaking out-loud, he is using his voice coded 'home-net' to try and contact Jennifer Kay (42) on the e-phone. It rings out. All the lines are engaged.

RYAN: Hello, hello... blast these jammed lines.

He fumes, paces about. At last he gets through – to an answering machine

MACHINE: I'm sorry – the net you are calling is in conference.

RYAN: This is urgent... It's Ryan Kay... I need to access my wife urgently... can I have Jennifer Kay's cybercall please –

He gets through to Jennifer's cybercall

JENNIFER: (synthesised sounding delivery) Hello, Jennifer Kay.

RYAN: Listen Jennifer – don't go asking me how I am or long time no hear or anything. I understand that the Academy contacted you about Mark walking today, well –

JENNIFER: "I'm sorry – I'm not at my work station right now, but if you'd like to leave a message with my cybercall"

RYAN: Oh no.

JENNIFER: This is Jennifer Kay's cybercall.

RYAN: Where is my wife?

JENNIFER: Your EX-WIFE is in conference. Would you like me to relay a message?

RYAN: This is urgent. About our son Mark.

JENNIFER: Mark Kay. Born 2014.

RYAN: Yes – yes 2014. Exactly. It's about the prenatal genetic selection we did for Mark –

JENNIFER: Jennifer Kay is against all prenatal interference. I have her bulletins on file.

RYAN: I can't believe I'm arguing with an answering machine!

JENNIFER: "Medicine reflects our culture, in a high technology society we have become concerned with perfection –"

RYAN: Jen? Can you hear me?

JENNIFER: "We are never going to wipe out birth defects, and technology is changing the experience of pregnancy"

RYAN: Jen – is that you?

JENNIFER: This is Jennifer Kay's cybercall.

RYAN: I think I'm going mad?

JENNIFER: Jennifer Kay is in conference. I am downloading Jennifer's bulletin boards on prenatal selection...

RYAN: Please don't I've heard it all before –

JENNIFER: "Perfect health is a totalitarian concept"

RYAN: Stop! Listen. This is really important. Our son Mark has run away from home. I think he may be on his way to see you. Just pass on that message okay!

JENNIFER: Thank-you. Have a high quality day!

RYAN: She never listened. She never understood.

SCENE SIX

It is 2008. Ryan and Jennifer, in their late twenties, sit together in the waiting room. Enter Dr Burnside, a middle aged clinical geneticist in her fifties. She greets them, recognising Ryan.

RYAN: Dr. BURNSIDE! –

DR. BURNSIDE: Hello Mr. Kay

RYAN: We met at –

DR. BURNSIDE: New Genetics Conference, 2003

RYAN: Yes. Five years ago. What a coincidence!

DR. BURNSIDE: You're commercial genetics aren't you?

RYAN: Yup. I'm one of the rats. Or so Jen. is always telling me – (introduces Jennifer) my wife, Dr Burnside – Jennifer Kay.

JENNIFER: Hello. Did you get my results?

DR. BURNSIDE: Hello Mrs Kay, (becoming professional) Help yourself to juice or water and then come through.

Dr Burnside goes on ahead

JENNIFER: Why won't she tell us the results?

RYAN: She's hardly going to tell us in the waiting room, Jen is she?

JENNIFER: Still – you knew her – that's a good omen.

Ryan laughs

RYAN: Shush – this is a temple of science – they don't talk about omens here –

They follow Dr Burnside through. She is setting up her overhead computer screen

DR. BURNSIDE: Please sit down.

They sit. Jennifer nervously takes hold of Ryan's hand. She squeezes it. Dr Burnside prepares to show the results up on her screen.

RYAN: (whispers to Jennifer) Waiting for results is always hard. No matter how prepared you think you are. Like your whole life flashing before you – past and future –

JENNIFER: Yes. I'm totally wired. (beat) There is such a small chance of anything. (beat) Why worry?

DR. BURNSIDE flicks on a screen

DR. BURNSIDE: Well Mr and Mrs Kay, I'm glad you elected to come in and see me,  
because – unfortunately –

She flicks up another page. They look up.

JENNIFER: Oh no!

RYAN: She can't be! (studies the screen) Oh lord yes – I see.

JENNIFER: Ryan – what does it all mean? What about our baby?

DR. BURNSIDE: I'm sure you don't want me to waste your time giving you the statistics  
about how unlikely this is. It's remarkable and unfortunate. What is it –  
(calculates roughly) – Typical rare recessive, 0.036%. One in three thousand.  
Whatever. Jennifer – you're a carrier for Friedreich's Ataxia too. Like Ryan.

RYAN: Well – and to think our friends say we've so little in common!

JENNIFER: It's not funny Ryan!

RYAN: But Jen, at least we're finding out now. When we can do something about it.  
It's not like... with my family.

Ryan's face darkens

SCENE SEVEN

It is 2000. Annie sits on the floor with a stack of coins. Tossing them.

ANNIE: Heads... tails... I lose... I lose... heads... tails again... I lose

Ryan runs in. He has just heard.

RYAN: Annie – (pause) What are you doing?

ANNIE: Something the doctor showed me.

Slight pause

RYAN: Do you want any help Annie?

ANNIE: I can manage thank you. I'm not utterly crippled yet.

RYAN: I meant –

ANNIE: Get lost Ryan.

RYAN: Show me. I want to know... I don't understand.

ANNIE: Do you know what a recessive disorder is? (beat) All our cells are full on DNA, right? Thousands upon thousands of little pairs of genes. One from our mummies and one from our daddies. Now sometimes one half of these pairs of genes is broken, kaput – OK. Like you know an aeroplane has two engines -?

RYAN: Yeah – so if one fails at 50,000 feet, you don't crash.

ANNIE: Right – well a recessive disorder is like that – it has to hit both engines before you're in trouble. Both my engines are blazing Ryan (she throws up the coin and lets it fall) – I'm shot down in flames.

RYAN: But –

ANNIE: BUT NOTHING! CAN'T YOU SEE I WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE!

She runs out.

RYAN: BUT THEY'RE MY MUM AND DAD AS WELL! WHY WON'T ANYONE TELL ME? HAVE I GOT IT TOO?

Ryan flings himself to the floor and lies there motionless. Some time later, Barbara comes in from shopping. Ryan drags himself up morosely on the floor, and sits playing with the coins.

BARBARA: Where's Annie?

RYAN: In her room.

BARBARA: Oh Ryan, you should encourage her to come out – make her some lunch. Try and get her to do things –

RYAN: Like what?

BARBARA: Anything. Watch TV –

RYAN: Everyone looks so healthy, running about. Holiday adverts, body lotion. Change the channels and it's some documentary about people in wheelchairs chaining themselves to railings. It's all too much.

BARBARA: Just do the things you normally do.

RYAN: Argue or play football? I can't ask her to play football can I? I suppose we could argue.

BARBARA: Everything has changed now – we've got to pull together round Annie!

The confusion, fear and distress of recent events – the vague sense of injustice of it all flares up as anger in Ryan.

RYAN: So what's new? This house has always revolved round Annie!

BARBARA: Shush Ryan – she'll hear you!

RYAN: Her football, her training, her this, her that. You and her off to buy football boots. It's ridiculous. I'm your son – what about me?

BARBARA: I love you both. You know that!

RYAN: Annie wants to be a footballer – and everything – whoosh – is football. Annie gets sick – whoosh – chuck out those footballs – (mimics his mothers whisper) "Ryan don't you dare mention football in this house"! (own voice again) Everything is now – sick person – faffing around Annie. Well she seems fine to me!

BARBARA: How dare you say that!

RYAN: She can't lose can she? Healthy she gets all the attention. Sick she gets the red chuffing carpet. MAKE HER LUNCH! WHEN DID SHE EVER MAKE ME –

Ryan stops. Horrified at himself, as Annie comes in. She looks like a sleep walker. Everything goes horribly quiet as she comes in. Then Barbara becomes bright and breezy.

BARBARA: Hello love.

Annie just grunts. She slumps into a chair.

BARBARA: It's shocking out –

ANNIE: What?

BARBARA: Raining something terrible.

They all wait. Each bursting with unspoken screams and words. No one able to form a word.

ANNIE: (looks to the audience) Why doesn't she say it? - "You look terrible". She can't.

BARBARA: She looks terrible. I want to hug her and ask her how she's feeling, but the words won't come. Can't mention feeling because feeling is where it all starts, those little gaps of feeling. Language strangles what I want to say. "How are you?" you say "It's a lovely day" Every little opening gambit humans use to stay in touch, is out of reach. What use is a lovely day to my daughter now that we know what tomorrow will bring? And you know what haunts me of what the doctor said – "born with". "She was born with this", that's all I see – written through everything like a slogan in seaside rock. Because she got it from me you see. My baby girl is falling apart like a broken clockwork toy, because of something in me... And my baby – my Ryan. Supposing he was born with it too?

RYAN: It should've been me. Who'd miss me? My big sister is – well everybody knows – special. She can do anything. When I was ten and that lad from the chippie

stole my kite? Annie punched him and got it back. Most of my mates fancy her – not that they'd admit it. Mum loves Annie. Everyone loves Annie. I love Annie. It's a mistake.

ANNIE: I wake up, feel my legs, with my mind. Run my mind over my legs for hours before I can get out of bed. Will they let me down today? Sometimes – if I think there's no one downstairs – I come down. I get those pamphlets from the drawer. She doesn't think I've read them but I know every word of what I've got to look forward to – clumsiness soon, then speech slurring, like a drunk – take me all day to say good morning then. Incontinence – what will that be like – pissing myself in a big spurt or just seeping all day long? Shit myself too I suppose. Wheel chair next. Can't talk, can't hold a pen. Curvature of the spine – maybe. Heart failure – maybe – if I'm really lucky. SO I can sit here – pretending I'm no here. Practising helplessness... non-life.

RYAN: But what if I have got it? I want to ask but how can I when I'm supposed to be the lucky one.

ANNIE: When what I really want to do - (she jumps up) Is GO MAD AND SCREAM AND HIT THE ROOF, AND BREAK THINGS AND TEAR THE WORLD APART! (she hits her body) AND BREAK THIS – AND THIS (hitting herself) I CAN'T bear it that my body is going to die before I do. HATE IT, HATE IT, HATE MY BODY. My body. My rotten rogue gene body! (she throws her self on the floor, gets up, does it again, lies there in pain) HELP ME, HELP ME, HELP ME, Help me. Because (she gets up) What I really, really want to do – (She sets off, miming virtuoso football control, round the room, dribbling an imaginary ball, running rings around her mother and brother...) Is get selected, play football, play for England, score in the World Cup, feel the wind in my hair, fall in love, get married, manage a team, bring up four children, travel the world, run across hot sand in a far away Island – and fly, fly, fly, like a silver jet plane – but I can't, because my body won't let me...

She stumbles, as she did in the first scene and falls down. Ryan and Barbara are shocked as if seeing her fall suddenly off her chair.

RYAN and BARBARA: Annie!

Annie holds hands up to her mum like a small child

ANNIE: MAKE IT STOP MUM, MAKE IT STOP!

She bursts into tears. Barbara and Ryan rush over.

BARBARA: (hugging her) Oh my baby, my baby, I love you (crying) I love you both.

She pulls Ryan towards them. He cries.

ANNIE: Mum I'm so frightened.

They all hug. Ryan comes forward away from then wiping his eyes.

## SCENE EIGHT

It is 2030. Mark is sitting, slumped morosely on the floor of the station. He looks like Ryan did at the beginning of the previous scene. Ryan enters, wiping his eyes. Mark looks up, glares at his father.

RYAN: Now stay calm. I'm not here for a punch up.

MARK: I'm not going back to the Academy Dad, so you can get that out of your mind.

RYAN: And where are you going?

MARK: I'm going to see Mum.

RYAN: You'd probably be in a wheelchair by now if it had been up to her...

MARK: Don't go shoving all the blame on to her...

RYAN: I'm not. All I'm saying is – it was all I could do to persuade her to select out Friedreich's ataxia.

MARK: At least I would have been truly myself.

RYAN: Mark – please. Look – your mother is great when it comes to theories and fine ideas but when something has to be done...

MARK: You were the one to do it...

RYAN: I had to make the decision, yes. It wasn't easy...

MARK: Oh come on – you're a geneticist. You knew what you were doing...

RYAN: Maybe I did, Mark, but that didn't make it easy

MARK: No?

RYAN: No.

MARK: So tell me.

RYAN: What?

MARK: What happened?

RYAN: Well... we got the bad news – that your mother was a carrier for Friedreich's ataxia too.

MARK: And?

RYAN: I suppose I assumed it would all be straightforward.

SCENE NINE

It is 2014 Dr. Burnside's office. Continuation of scene 6.

Dr. BURNSIDE: I expect you'll want to opt for superovulation.

JENNIFER: Ryan, we need to talk.

RYAN: But Jen –

JENNIFER: I said we could find out. Now we have. Ok.

RYAN: You agreed to take the test. Yes. Because I wanted to find out if there was any remote possibility you were a carrier too.

JENNIFER: Yes.

RYAN: And you are. That changes everything.

JENNIFER: Not for me.

Dr. BURNSIDE: Mrs Kay –

JENNIFER: As my husband joked, Doctor. We don't always think alike. Thank you for giving me my results. But I'm not sure I want to take matters further. I want a natural pregnancy. I don't suppose you will approve.

RYAN: Jennifer – we have a one in four chance that any so-called 'natural' pregnancy will result in a child with Friedreich's ataxia.

JENNIFER: It's my baby we're talking about here!

RYAN: OUR baby!

JENNIFER: But it's horrible to be so choosy – “Oh that baby isn't good enough for me – there's something wrong with it...”

Dr. BURNSIDE: That's precisely what we are trying to avoid.

JENNIFER: I don't expect you to understand.

Dr. BURNSIDE: I'm a mother. I had my children when there wasn't any genetic screening available apart from amniocentesis at 16 weeks of pregnancy. I do understand. I'll tell you something else, Jennifer. I'm Roman Catholic.

JENNIFER: And doing this kind of work!

RYAN: Jen!

Dr. BURNSIDE: That is precisely why I work in pre-conception counselling. Had my 16 week tests in my own pregnancy told me that one of my children was likely to have – Down's Syndrome for example – it would have made no difference. I am opposed to abortion you see.

JENNIFER: - and this is different?

Dr. BURNSIDE: I believe so.

JENNIFER: Not playing God?

RYAN: The risk is the baby's, Jennifer, not yours. It's his life we're talking about –

Dr. BURNSIDE: It's not my place to persuade you one way or another. But it may help you to make up your mind, Mrs Kay, if I explain... Superovulation is part of a new technique. You would be given an injection to make you produce 8 –10 eggs instead of the usual one you produce each month. These eggs are drawn from you by putting a needle through your tummy. All the eggs would be fertilised with Ryan's sperm. Then you can select one egg that doesn't even carry the gene for Friedreich's ataxia.

JENNIFER: So there is no fear of abortion?

Dr. BURNSIDE: Not at all. We can put back the one fertilised egg you chose in your womb and then you can continue with a "natural" pregnancy, secure in the knowledge that your baby will be clear of the gene that causes Friedreich's ataxia.

RYAN: Not even a carrier?

Dr. BURNSIDE: No, you can be sure there's no risk even of that.

JENNIFER: (hesitates) Well...

Dr. BURNSIDE: I can see you need time to think and talk this over. Come back to me when, if, you decide to proceed. I'm sorry you have to face this problem – good luck!

Dr. Burnside leaves. Ryan and Jennifer come out and stand arguing in the waiting room.

JENNIFER: What kind of world do we want our baby to grow up in Ryan? It's important. All this screening, testing – what's it going to do to the richness of human life?

RYAN: 'Richness'? We're talking about crippling and painful illnesses Jen. And there's always going to be accidents and violence to give you enough crippled and maimed people.

JENNIFER: I can't believe you're talking like this!

RYAN: You'd protect your child against an accident if you could, wouldn't you? So why not protect him –

JENNIFER: And what 's all this "son" talk, this "he" talk?

RYAN: Pardon?

JENNIFER: You'd like to select for that too I suppose?

RYAN: I'd prefer a boy, yes.

JENNIFER: Forget it Ryan – you want a perfect baby? Go find a perfect woman!

Jennifer is about to go out.

RYAN: Jennifer wait – can't we work this out?

JENNIFER: (emotional) I'm trying to –

RYAN: At least to protect against the Friedreich's –

Jennifer thinks about this.

JENNIFER: Okay – This is what we do. We screen out the Friedreich's, and then we take a single clean egg – chosen at random – and implant it – how she said – and then carry on with a natural pregnancy.

RYAN: But what if we're going to choose a particular egg, then why don't we also choose the one with the best gene profile?

JENNIFER: No Ryan, no – that's going too far... It's trying to make judgements over someone who isn't even born yet...

RYAN: At least let me look at the profiles –

JENNIFER: No! Lots of artists, writers, thinkers – brilliant men and women – scientists too, Ry – suffered from manic depression, for example. But it was all tied up with what made them original thinkers. Supposing one profile shows something like that. Supposing you select out the very thing that might make our child special...?

RYAN: Our child is going to be special.

JENNIFER: Yes. Promise me, Ryan. Just select out the Friedreich's. Leave everything else to chance.

RYAN: Let's make another appointment –

JENNIFER: You do it. I don't want to set foot in that building any more than I have to.

RYAN: But Jen. –

JENNIFER: Oh Ryan. I want to close my eyes and wake up pregnant. (hold him) The good old-fashioned way.

Ryan laughs and they kiss.

SCENE TEN

Mark and Ryan at the station

MARK: And the rest – as you grown-ups love saying – is history.

RYAN: (irritated) You know full well if I hadn't selected the bundle of cells that was to become you – then you this person Mark Kay – would never have existed! Would never have been so fit and strong, so able...

MARK: Your child would have been who ever he or she was meant to be naturally –

RYAN: Naturally! Nature isn't some big friendly animal a children's story you know. You think, don't you – if you're nice to it, it'll be nice back. But nature isn't like that –

MARK: Mum went along with the screening to please you.

RYAN: No. She went along with it because she thought it was so unlikely anything would be wrong that it didn't matter... and then against all the odds, she was a carrier too. You had a one in four chance of –

MARK: I learned all this in pre-school Dad.

RYAN: (angry) No you didn't. You think you know it all! But it's not facts and figures, it's life itself. SO Don't tell me about what you learnt in pre-school, because I've lived it and I can tell you it's not a pretty sight.

MARK (quietly): Auntie Annie.

RYAN: You won't remember her.

MARK: I do. She had brown hair. She bought me great presents. She had a funny voice – *(he checks himself, suddenly realising what he has said)*

RYAN: She had slurred speech from the Ataxia. Is that all you remember?

(Mark hesitates)

MARK (in a rush): I remember – she was in a wheelchair. I used to be frightened of the wheelchair when I was little. She used to come for tea and I was embarrassed if we went out anywhere because of way people stared. It made me angry. I wanted people to see her as the person she was – my brilliant Auntie Annie with her great jokes and tricks. But they didn't. People stared because she had to have a baby cup and the food went flying and people would pretend they hadn't seen but everyone was looking...

RYAN: And you see I remember her at your age. Running around and full of life and good at everything –

MARK: Dad I'm not saying you were wrong to protect me from Friedreich's. I'm glad Mum didn't talk you out of that. But you didn't stop there – you went behind Mum's back...

RYAN: Wait a minute. Your Mum didn't want anything to do with it. Someone had to select the egg – for your sake – for your sake – she left it all up to me.

MARK: Dad, I know Mum lets her heart rule her head and you're the other way round. I can imagine how you argued but (at the end of the day) we're not talking about you or mum or Annie, we're talking about me. About what you – did to me. You selected me to be male and then what did you do? Try and pick some best bet embryo – with all the genes for physical co-ordination, strength...

RYAN: I admit it. I made you who you are...

MARK: You had no right Dad. It's my life.

RYAN: All parents want what's best for their children.

MARK: You wanted it for YOU! You alone. Do you know how proud I was when I got into tennis college? I thought it was something I was good at! I wasn't the biggest or the strongest. But boy was I fast! Coach said he'd never seen reflexes so quick. And what co-ordination! Remember? That day at trials. He shook your hand. I saw you smiling and nodding. I thought – I'm good at this and he's proud of me. A nice feeling. I wanted you to be proud of me. Of my achievements. But know it turns out – it's not me after all – it's you – and some of those dreams money can buy...

RYAN: (angry) This has nothing to do with money!

Ryan walks over to the small pile of discarded coins. Mark moves over to one side of the stage and sits there – as yet unborn – observing his father in the next scene.

#### SCENE ELEVEN

It is 2000. Annie comes on, walking slightly unsteadily and sits down with Ryan. They set to work, tossing coins. Annie – despite her clumsy hands, manipulates the coins deftly and is demonstrating something to Ryan.

ANNIE: OK? Mum and Dad were both carriers –

Annie manipulates another pair of coins

ANNIE: And their children – us. Have a one in four – twenty five percent – chance of having full blown Friedreich's OR a one in four chance of being okay, and a two in four chance, fifty percent – of having been born a carrier.

RYAN: (unsure) Ye-es? But you've got it, right – so does that mean I'll get it?

ANNIE: No. You've got a one in four chance.

RYAN: Same as you?

ANNIE: 'fraid so.

RYAN: But they only had us two kids. SO it must be a one in TWO chance.

ANNIE: - and you think that since I got it, you won't?

RYAN: I don't know?

ANNIE: Look it's not like saying that if Mr and Mrs Kay have four kids, two will be carriers, one clear and one have Friedreich's...

RYAN: Why not?

ANNIE: It's not that neat. Any kid of two carrier parents has the same odds. Whether they have one child or twenty-one children. Each child is like a new throw, a new lottery ticket. We all start out with the same odds.

RYAN: (tosses coin) Which is 1:4

ANNIE: Which is the odds that two coins tossed together will land as two tails.

RYAN: (tosses second coin) Two heads!

Ryan looks at Annie, optimistic.

ANNIE: Let's hope so. (Beat) Keep practising.

RYAN: Where are you going?

ANNIE: I'm going to the that meeting –

RYAN: For people with Friedreich's? I thought you said all you'd have in common with then is the same illness...

ANNIE: Yeah well – I could say the same about the girls in the football team. All we've got in common is football. But that's stupid – football is (corrects herself) – was – a big part of my life. (falters, continues bravely) But now Friedreich's is part of my life – so I DO have a lot in common with them. From now on, don't I? Catch yer later.

Annie goes out.

Ryan tosses another couple of coins.

RYAN: Okay – so, that's one in four. Annie recessive pattern. Mmm – now this geezer Mendel Annie told me about? He discovered all this did he? Doesn't seem such a hard thing to work out. Easy. Must be more to it... Where's that library ticket? I'm sure I'm supposed to be a member of the... Hang on though –

where's the library? Is it that big building by the McDonalds? Better check it out...

Ryan goes out.

SCENE TWELVE

Annie comes in, walking a bit unsteadily, but helped by a bright pink glitter covered walking stick

ANNIE: Ryan! RYAN! Are you ready! (She casts stick aside) He better get a move on... (She sits down to read her fashion magazine. Reads a while, leafing through, then sighs.) Yeah, yeah, yeah, this is all very well. So supposing I want to have this season's nails... buy the shade – or a cheap one like the one that that Uma Thurman wore in whatever... okay – got the shade... now apply from the middle outwards in long straight strokes. That might be tricky. Where's the advice for people with shaky hands who want trendy nails, that's what I want to know? (beat) It matters you know, it really does. You can't pretend it doesn't. You can't tell me looks aren't everything blah blah and fashion is trivial and someone will love you for the person you are – but what about me? Will they love me for the person I'm going to be?

She looks up to see Ryan with a stack of books...

ANNIE: Oh there you are. Thought you'd wimped out.

RYAN: Just went to pick these up.

ANNIE: You've done more swotting in the past six weeks than I saw you do in six years of schoolwork.

RYAN: This is different.

As Ryan puts down the books, he notices Annie's stick. Even though it is bright pink and very obvious, he says nothing

ANNIE: Notice anything, Ryan?

RYAN: No. (beat) I thought you weren't going to have any "sick persons props"

ANNIE: Well I've changed my mind. I'm sick of cars honking me because I'm slow on the crossing. Sick of old women tutting when I stumble because they think I've been on the cider. (waves the stick) Plus – it stops me falling over!

They laugh

ANNIE: Now – the appointment's in half an hour – have you worked out what to say?

RYAN: I think so.

ANNIE: Go on then. I'm the doctor.

She sits down and assumes a concerned expression

RYAN: Well... doctor... my name is Ryan Kay –

ANNIE: Oh Ryan – they'll know that. It's on your notes.

RYAN: Ok. As you can see from my notes, Doctor, there is chance that I might have been born with a disorder called Friedreich's ataxia.

ANNIE: Yaah boo sucks

RYAN: Annie!

ANNIE: Sorry, couldn't resist, go on.

RYAN: Er...

ANNIE: Yes, yes. I haven't got all week.

RYAN: Both my parents are carriers although there is no history of this disorder showing in our family before, I am one of two children. My elder sister Annie, who is sixteen, is developing Friedreich's now. I know that this Ataxia is a recessive inherited disorder, caused by a rouge gene in one of the 23 pairs of chromosomes in my genome, one of the 50,000 or so genes imprinted in each of my cells...

ANNIE: Ryan – you don't need to go into all this detail –

RYAN: It's interesting.

ANNIE: Just tell him enough to show you mean business, not come across like some nerdy fourteen year old boy.

RYAN: OK... um... I know, Doctor, the Friedreich's ataxia follows a classic Mendelian inheritance pattern. That I have a one in four chance of having this disorder, and a two in four chance that I will be carrying the rogue gene and pass it on to my own children –

ANNIE: (giggles) If you ever get a girlfriend –

RYAN: Shut-up Annie. The Doctor wouldn't say that!

ANNIE: I'm sorry.

RYAN: Therefore, I want to be tested for Friedreich's ataxia.

Annie – as the doctor – considers for a moment, locking a gaze of professional scrutiny on her brother

ANNIE: (considers, then - firmly) No.

RYAN: I want to be tested.

ANNIE: No.

RYAN: Why not?

ANNIE: Because I say so.

RYAN: Oh Annie, the doctor won't be like that.

ANNIE: Oh yes he will. He'll dress it up but he'll be saying 'no'. You have to persuade him why...

RYAN: I want to be tested so that I can plan my future.

ANNIE: But think about the consequences FOR your future, Mr Kay, of a positive result. There is no cure, as you know, and evidence of testing – in your medical records can be a black mark on your future – things like applying for a job – and, and (Annie thinks) – driving licences, insurance policies, mortgages. All these things will become harder for you if you are seen as a handicapped person –

RYAN: (passionate) That's nothing to the effect it will have on my life if I find I've got this disorder. What good will my job be to me then if I've planned my life as an able-bodied person and then find out that I've got it wrong!

ANNIE: Good Ryan, very good!

RYAN: And another thing. Our Dad was killed in a car accident. My mum is a single parent. As it stands, my mother will have to take over caring for my sister as this becomes necessary. I will be the sole breadwinner in my family. Supposing that is not possible. Supposing I have Friedreich's ataxia too, and my mother will have to care for me. Haven't we got a right, as a family, to know what our future holds. Haven't my mother and I –

Ryan is in full flight. He doesn't notice Barbara has come in.

BARBARA: What's going on?

ANNIE: Ryan's going to the doctor, mum.

BARBARA: Why? You're not sick are you?

RYAN: No mum.

ANNIE: He wants to be tested –

BARBARA: Don't go wasting the doctor's time. And what's that silly pink thing?

ANNIE: Oh that's my new stick

BARBARA: You don't need a stick.

ANNIE: I keep falling over.

BARBARA: No you don't, and I'll come out with you, in case –

RYAN: I want to be tested, mum.

BARBARA: No, Ryan, no –

RYAN: Yes.

BARBARA: Leave it, Ryan.

RYAN: I NEED to know.

BARBARA: (erupts) And what about me? Don't I get a say in all this? How do you think I've been feeling all these weeks knowing that it was me that did this to Annie? That she got it off something in me? I couldn't bear it if you have it too, Ryan. Not both of you!

ANNIE: Mum – he wants to know.

BARBARA: What use is a test anyway? They can't cure it! There is nothing they can do! Please Ryan – leave it. No news is good news, love.

ANNIE: What if he has got it...

BARBARA: No! No! I don't think I can take any more...

ANNIE: What's he supposed to do? Sit and wait for it to catch up on him? Like it did to me?

BARBARA: I'm not listening! Leave it! Oh why can't we forget it... stop arguing... I just want it to be like we were before...

ANNIE: Face it, mum – things will never be the same again.

BARBARA: I know – and it's my fault! (beat) Me and your father – we wanted to give our children everything. (She breaks down) And we gave you this...

Ryan and Annie have not seen Barbara cry like this before. For a moment they don't know what to do.

ANNIE: Stop it, Mum, stop it...

BARBARA: - it's all my fault.

ANNIE: (gently) It's not your fault. It's the fault of this freaky gene... But Ryan has the right to know what's going to happen to him. If he's brave enough to face it, we should back him up.

BARBARA: He's too young, Annie love, they won't let him be tested til he's sixteen –

ANNIE: He's not too young to be ill.

BARBARA: Ryan?

RYAN: Mum?

BARBARA: You sure you want to go through with this?

RYAN: Absolutely

BARBARA: I'll come with you.

BARBARA and RYAN go out

ANNIE: I feel like I've just scored a goal!

#### SCENE THIRTEEN

Barbara and Ryan walk into the surgery and sit down in front of Dr. Fleming. Ryan is breathless from having finished his prepared speeches...

FLEMING: Well... You obviously feel very strongly about this, Ryan –

RYAN: I want to be tested.

Pause

FLEMING: I know how strongly you feel about this. But the policy is, as I've outlined, that we do not test children under the age of sixteen except in very usual circumstances and I cannot see the benefits in your son being tested.

BARBARA: So the answer is 'No'.

FLEMING: I'm sorry.

BARBARA: I'm sick of you people telling me "I'm sorry". Who do I complain to?

FLEMING: I beg your pardon.

BARBARA: About all this? It's bloody daft. Who do I complain to?

FLEMING: This is most unusual –

RYAN: I think it's the Community Health Council mum.

BARBARA: Right, we'll go there. Got your bus pass?

RYAN: Let's see, library ticket – Yes! (Brandishes pass) Have pass will travel.

They get up and go out. At the door Barbara turns.

BARBARA: Dr. Fleming – in 1964 a young girl called Barbara Holland took the Football Association to the High Court about being excluded from Junior League games on account of her sex. Lost on that occasion. But only just. And I was fourteen. You have not heard the last of this – be seeing you!

They go out. Dr. Fleming rubs his hands over his tired eyes.

#### SCENE FOURTEEN

Barbara, Ryan and Annie come out of the courtroom. Ryan shakes his hands together in victory. All three are pleased – if a little bewildered by the small crowd on the steps.

BARBARA: So many people! Thank-you all for coming and the support you've shown us in our campaign. Today in this courtroom, with the help of the Community Health Council, we finally won our fight against the local Health Trust. Before all this started in our family, we didn't know anything about genetics, we thought it was just something scientists did. And yet half of all children under sixteen who are in hospital, and half of all deaths of children under sixteen in this country, are from genetic causes. Isn't it something we should be told more about?

RYAN: You see genetics – it's all of us, we're all carriers of something and everything. Only in some of us, that something turns out to be a problem. What mum means – er, I mean what this campaign is about is – it's an issue for everyone, especially young people, to be concerned with, not only the unlucky few who have to face this in their own families. If today is a victory – it is thanks to my sister Annie. Her courage and determination got the ball rolling in this campaign.

ANNIE: Sometimes knowledge is a cure in itself... Now – my brother Ryan has won the right to be tested. After that – for our family – what we do depends on those results. But we'd like to thank you all – our friends in the Ataxia group, families facing disorders who've written to us and shared their experiences – everyone who has supported this campaign. Thank you!

They all smile and wave to the crowd.

#### SCENE FIFTEEN

Annie is at home. Barbara comes in with some post. Annie looks up expectantly. Annie's speech is beginning to show the familiar signs of Ataxic speech, slightly slurring, flatter and more monotonous, a little breathy.

ANNIE: Oh – I thought that was Ryan back from the doctors.

BARBARA: What are you doing?

ANNIE: I'm looking at these catalogues for wheelchairs. What do you think mum, light and sporty or strong and off road sturdy?

BARBARA: Do you need one love? I mean what with the stick and a bit of help, you manage fine.

ANNIE: Yeah, but if I go on this holiday with people from Ataxia, it'll actually be easier, it'll be more fun, to have both hands free and not worry about having to grab a tree or someone's arm if I get wonky. Plus there will be others there so I won't feel funny if it's my first time wearing a wheelchair.

BARBARA: Wear a wheelchair? What an idea!

ANNIE: Yeah, I hoping it'll become a fashion accessory! (beat) What time is it?

BARBARA: Ten to.

ANNIE: Ryan should be back now.

BARBARA: Yes.

(Pause. They look at each other.)

ANNIE: There he is!

RYAN comes in. They try to read his expression. It is neither happy nor sad. Deflated. Tired.

ANNIE: Well?

RYAN: I'm not going to get Friedreich's –

ANNIE: YES!

BARBARA: Oh Ryan, I'm so relieved.

RYAN: But I am a carrier.

ANNIE: Ah well – can't have everything.

BARBARA: But at least we know now – that's the main thing.

RYAN: The doctor said I would need to be careful, in the unlikely event "my future wife" is a carrier. He sounded like you - going on about the unlikely event I ever get a girl friend.

Annie laughs. Ryan smiles weakly. Barbara hugs him.)

BARBARA: Oh Ryan – at least you know. I'll go make some tea.

Barbara goes out, sensing that they need some time alone. Annie watches Ryan. He seems oddly displeased.

ANNIE: What's up? It's good news!

RYAN: Yeah – I know.

ANNIE: If I was you I'd be jumping for joy. (Beat) I've been sitting here chewing my fingernails, looking at wheelchair catalogues! I wanted you to come bursting through the door shouting, "I'm clear, I'm clear"... I WANT SOME GOOD NEWS RY!

RYAN: But how can I be jumping for joy when you've still got it?

(Pause)

ANNIE: There is this bloke at the group, Paul, he's really nice, Ataxic like me... well anyway. He was talking about "Survivor syndrome" – his sister had it bad –

RYAN: Is it another kind of disorder?

ANNIE: No, stupid! It's like when people have been in a plane disaster, you know, but against all odds, they survived. At first they're over the moon. Feel great. But then they start to think – why me? Why did I survive? Maybe they lost people in their own family, and they get obsessed with thinking – why did I escape and not them...

RYAN: Yes! That's it! Why have I escaped and you haven't? I feel like I've abandoned you in the wreckage or something.

Annie hugs Ryan.

ANNIE: All these months fighting to find out – this gene has become our whole life, hasn't it? But it's not got you. So we mustn't let it take over...

RYAN: (guilty) I don't know what to do...

ANNIE: Yes you do. You have escaped to carry on. You can go to college, take the fight into the next round... see if you can get on a course to study genetics, like you said...

RYAN: Yes.

ANNIE: And guess what – I've got some news for you –

RYAN: What?

ANNIE: You will have a girlfriend. You'll have to fight them off –

Ryan gets embarrassed

ANNIE: I mean it kid bro. You might be a nerd right now, but I've got a feeling that you might – just might – grow up to be a lovely guy. Make sure she's worth it. Fall in love with the best woman you can find. Have children. Do the best for those kids of yours. Give them everything you can. No compromises. You deserve it. We deserve it. As a family. Do that for all of us Ryan. Promise?

RYAN: I promise.

ANNIE: That is - you will get a girlfriend – if you can come up with genetic therapy for your zits!

Annie leaves, miming squeezing a zit. Ryan remains alone, trying to imagine what his future will be like. From the sidelines, his son Mark – as yet unborn – watches on.

#### SCENE SIXTEEN

(It is 2030. At the station, Mark is watching his father)

RYAN: I've never had any talent for anything Mark. Everything I've done in life has come hard for me. Then with you – because of – no – thanks to Annie's illness – your mum and I went for genetic screening and – I had this chance. It wasn't a big deal. I had to pick one and all I did was pick the best.

MARK: Do you know what's funny? You go through all this to make me know how you want me. But when it comes down to it, you've failed, haven't you? Because you can give me this or that gene – but you can't make me think like you. Can you? I am me after all, aren't I? I've still got my free will, and that part of me that's me – that's free – is saying no... (beat) I don't know maybe you haven't stolen my life one little bit – you just decided you would try. And all the tennis and the training since – that's part of you still trying to live out your life through me.

RYAN (considers): Perhaps you're right.

MARK: What did you say?

RYAN: I said perhaps you're right.

MARK: I see... well, and another thing, Dad. With your sister Annie. OK – if the technology had been around then, in your mum's day – for screening and selection and that –

RYAN: Go on. I'm listening.

MARK: And your parents had done what you did. Annie would never have been born would she?

RYAN: Well I –

MARK: Haven't you thought about that? You wouldn't have had Annie as your sister then, would you?

RYAN: I wouldn't have changed a thing about Annie –

MARK: But in that case –

RYAN: - except that rogue gene.

MARK: Right. But with me, you didn't just change that rogue gene. You changed everything else as well. Think about it.

Ryan puts his head in his hands.

RYAN: So now I suppose you'll be going to live with your mother?

MARK: Look – I don't think what she did was any more right than you. Look Dad. I have to try and get my head round this. I want to get away on my own, I need to see mum and talk to her too. It's a bit weird finding out at sixteen that you're not the person you thought you were.

RYAN (tearful, trying to be jokey): If you don't want to play tennis, maybe you should take up boxing – that was some slug. You could be –

MARK: Dad! I could be lots of things.

Ryan nods.

MARK: Here's my train – see you Dad.

Mark leaves. Ryan sees the birthday present.

RYAN (calling): Mark!

THE END

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