“VERY SMALL AND VERY FAR AWAY”
© Richard Conlon

First performed by Forest Forge Youth Theatre, Hampshire, UK.
Part of this text is made up from an adaptation of Lucy Clifford’s 1882 short story ‘Wooden Tony’.

WHO IS IN THIS PLAY?
TONY
MOTHER
FATHER
VILLAGERS (2+)
DEALER

SAM (though described as ‘he’ in this text, *SAM can be a ‘she’*)
JACKIE: SAM’S MOTHER
PARENTS (3/4+)
ALEX: AN ADULT ON THE SPECTRUM
CAST/ATTACKERS/DEFENDERS ETC

This play weaves together two very different worlds; the Wooden Tony story of long ago, and a contemporary experience

OPENING:
SILENCE – SAM AND TONY WALK ON, SIT CENTRE. THEY DO NOT SEE EACH OTHER. THEY ARE FROM DIFFERENT TIMES, DIFFERENT WORLDS.
TONY STARTS TO SING HIS SONG, GENTLY, QUIETLY. SAM PAYS NO ATTENTION. BOTH ARE GENTLY ROCKING/STIMMING.
AFTER JUST A FEW SECONDS OF THIS CALM THE CAST INVADES THE STAGE WITH A CHAOS OF RANDOM LINES FROM TWO OPPOSING CAMPS.

SCENE ONE:

ATTACKERS: He’s weird.

DEFENDERS: He’s not *weird.*

ATTACKERS: There’s something odd about him.

DEFENDERS: You’re odd.

ATTACKERS: He looks funny.

DEFENDERS: You look funny!

ATTACKERS: Why’s he doing that?

DEFENDERS: What does it matter to you?

ATTACKERS: Is he mad?

DEFENDERS: No.

ATTACKERS: He looks mad.

DEFENDERS: He's not mad.

ATTACKERS: Is he 'special'?

DEFENDERS: He's special to me.

ATTACKERS: Can't he talk?

DEFENDERS: Not to you.

ATTACKERS: Is he scared of something?

DEFENDERS: He's scared of you.

ATTACKERS: What's so scary about me?

DEFENDERS: If only you knew!

ATTACKERS: So, there is something wrong with him!?

DEFENDERS: There's nothing wrong with him – he is just...*on...the...spectrum!*

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SUDDEN SILENCE & STILLNESS: WE SEE JACKIE PICK UP A BOOK, BLOW THE DUST FROM THE COVER AND OPEN IT. AS SHE READS WE SEE THE STORY BECOME FLESH AROUND HER.

SCENE TWO:

JACKIE: Tony, it seemed, was the laziest boy in the whole country.

VILLAGER: 'No use to anyone'.

JACKIE: Said one neighbour.

VILLAGER: 'The kind of child only a mother could love'.

JACKIE: Said another.

JACKIE & NARRATION: And love him she did, with all her heart.

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CAST: 'Spectrum'...that's a really important word here.

A spectrum – like a scale...

A range...

A band...

Of things that can be very different.

Very different.

But still on the same spectrum.

For instance. Here's a spectrum of height.

THE CAST ARRANGE THEMSELVES RAPIDLY IN HEIGHT ORDER

THE SHORTEST & TALLEST STAND NEXT TO EACH OTHER

See? Same spectrum, but very different.

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JACKIE & NARRATION: But still, Tony's mother tried to make him work:

MOTHER: Tony, look out at the world. All the other boys of your age are happy to chop wood, gather flowers, look after goats and cattle; carry parcels for the tourists, guide them on short expeditions. There they are, out on the hills, earning money for their families.

NARRATION: But Tony would do none of these things and when his mother said -

MOTHER: You must try to make yourself useful!

NARRATION: - he looked so frightened that at last she left him alone and let him do as he pleased. Gradually he grew to look quite foolish, as if there was not a single thought in his head.

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CAST: (a sudden idea) Colour!

Exactly. Every colour you can see is on the same spectrum but red is different from blue is different from yellow is...you get the picture.

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JACKIE & NARRATION: The villagers were not so kind as his mother and had other names for him;

VILLAGER: Wooden-head!

VILLAGER: Timber limbs!

VILLAGER: The boy with sap in his veins!

NARRATION: But his mother tried not to listen.

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CAST: (again with an idea) Politics!

The member opposite has presented an idea to this house which is possibly the worst thing we have ever heard...('hear hear' from the cast)

What our respected member fails to see is that this plan may well be the best thing to happen to this country in years...('hear hear')

Different views, *same spectrum.*

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VILLAGER: He's no use at all to anyone!

VILLAGER: A burden on his poor parents!

VILLAGER: Poor little Wooden-head!

NARRATION: Although she often called him ‘wooden-head’ herself, she did not like to hear others do so.

MOTHER: Perhaps he thinks more than he cares to say.

VILLAGER: But he never tells us what he thinks; and a thinker who says nothing is like a signpost that points to nowhere with nothing written on it!

MOTHER: Well a signpost has to be made before it can be written on and perhaps the words that are worth listening to only come after a lot of thinking. He’ll tell us enough some day.

JACKIE & NARRATION: But ‘will he’ she wondered? ‘Will he’?

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JACKIE WALKS ON, A BOOK IN HAND

SCENE THREE:

CAST: And in a different time, in a different place, a different woman – a *different mother* found the book with the story of Tony in it.
Stumbled across it.
Had never heard of it.
Didn’t know of anyone who knew it or anything of it.
And she asked with wonder and to all who would listen...

JACKIE: How has she done this, this writer from a hundred years ago and more? How has she created this little child... (as if suddenly realising, directly addressing the audience) I'm sorry. You probably need us to stop, take stock. I appreciate that this has been...way too confusing. This...all this...is about me...me and my boy. So, here are the basics, here’s what you need to know. My name is Jackie and when I was younger and less tired...I had a baby.

CAST: (gathering round, but in two camps) He’s lovely.
He looks funny.
He’s smiling.
He’s got wind.
He’s very independent.

He hates to be hugged.

Look at him shuffling around on his little bum.

Shouldn't he be walking by now?

What about the milestones!?

He's so cute with his baby talk.

Shouldn't he be talking by now?

Milestones!

He's wonderful.

There's something wrong with him.

He's perfect.

There's something wrong with him.

A WHITE COATED DOCTOR WRITES A LABEL AND PUTS IT ON SAM...

'AUTISTIC' - JACKIE SITS IN SHOCK

JACKIE: Bloody milestones…

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CAST: And the autistic spectrum? No different. You get the child who won't speak.

The child who can't speak.

And the child who won't shut up!

(a cast member suddenly delivering a stream of words, leaving no space for response) "Do you know when the dinosaurs last walked the earth. I do. Do you know the name of the meteor which wiped them out? I can name more than a hundred dinosaurs. I can give you the measurements, in height, length and weight of lots of dinosaurs. Have I told you my favourite? Which is your favourite? Do you like Dr Who? I like Dr Who. David Tennant was my favourite but I also like Tom Baker who was from years ago when my dad watched it. Which is your favourite alien, I think the Silurians are the best, because they could be real. Which is your favourite type of aeroplane…train…car?"

And you get the ones who have to live in a supported setting, will never have a full independent life – and then the ones who go through school, college, university and maybe end up as software engineers and computer programmers.

So...'spectrum'... important word.

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TONY: Mother, could I be with you but still be far away. I long to be far away.

MOTHER: But son, why would you wish to be far away?

TONY: Then I would be small, I would be so, so small that I could lie in your arms; and no one would want me to do the things that I cannot do, or I forget to do.

MOTHER: But being far away would not make you an inch smaller than you are now!

TONY: But all the people are small when they are far away. So small I could hold them in my hand, so small I could put then in my pocket.

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JACKIE: (for the first time, walking into and through the Wooden Tony story, but speaking directly to audience) So why this story, you're thinking...why are we hearing about 'Wooden Tony'?

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TONY: I watch the people as they come down the pathway, down the hillside. They grow bigger and bigger as they come near; they pass the door and they are as big as you or as big as father and then they pass on, getting smaller and smaller until they are as little as the people that father carves from pieces of wood in the winter.

.....

JACKIE: Because when I discovered this story, this tale from a hundred years ago, more, I thought this woman, this woman from the past who I never knew and who never knew us, *she's written my son*.

.....

TONY: You see mother. I would like to be the same as them, I want nothing more than to be small and far away. Then no one would think to ask me to do the things I cannot do.

MOTHER: But son, you know your father and I are never smaller nor bigger than we are now, it is only the distance which makes it seem so.

TONY: I can only believe my eyes and they seem little to me. And if I went far away, I would be little to you as I was when I was a baby, and

then you would not always be asking me to do this thing or that thing, and be angry at my forgetting.

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JACKIE: (directly to audience) ...you see the little boy she, this woman, wrote of in her story, could have been mine. My little Sam. (she walks up to SAM, hugs him. He barely notices.) I thought, this woman, this woman from the past who I never knew and who never knew us, *she's written my son*. She's written our family. This 'Tony' and my Sam...like two, strange, wonderful, frustrating twins.

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MOTHER: But what is it, my son, that stops you from doing such simple things?

JACKIE & TONY: Mother, there are so many things in my head that come before my eyes and make my hands useless.

JACKIE SHUTS THE BOOK, VISIBLY SHAKEN

NARRATION: And Tony went to the sunshine and sat down on his little stool by the door.

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JACKIE: It was that line. That line more than any –

JACKIE & TONY: - *there are so many things in my head that come before my eyes and make my hands useless...*

JACKIE: That made me think *'he's autistic'*. Sixty years before the condition even had a name, she's written an autistic child. She's written my child. She's written Sam.

(she reflects for a moment) It's strange – when you have a child on the spectrum you get thrown into this community of people, of parents, a group you never thought you'd be part of, a gang you never chose to be in, a club you never wanted to be part of.

A NEW TONE

THE STAGE IS SUDDENLY LIKE A SELF-HELP/SUPPORT GROUP, EACH THROWING THOUGHTS AT A BAFFLED JACKIE

SCENE FOUR:

PARENT: At its simplest you can say that people on the autistic spectrum have difficulties in three areas...

PARENT: They have problems with social interaction, with simply getting on with the everyday business of being with other people...

PARENT: Communication can be difficult, and that can be spoken words or reading other peoples bodies and faces...

PARENT: And their ability to imagine, or to have flexible thought-processes is not very well developed.

PARENT: So there, that's the condition, right? One, two three. Simple? Er, no.

PARENT: Because every time you think you've got a handle on this thing, someone pops up to disprove what you think you know.

PARENT: For every person who shies away from society. There's someone who rushes out into the world engaging with people, inappropriately, chatting, hugging, kissing...

PARENT: There are some children who will never have a hope of ever reading or writing, and others who will get a degree, a masters, a PHD...

PARENT: For every person who brushes off the kind of pain that would have us rolling on the ground, you'll have another who'll scream if they so much as have wool next to their skin...

PARENT: It's slippery. All the people on the spectrum are individuals – just like the rest of us.

ALL PARENTS: (realising Jackie needs a break) D'you want a cup of tea?

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MOTHER: My child. You are no fool despite your strange words, and your voice is sweeter than the words of the wisest of people...

TONY BEGINS TO SING

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PARENT: And you'll hear that all people with autism all have some *special talent...*

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MOTHER: There is not room for an evil thought anywhere within the sound that song.

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PARENT: They can draw beautifully...do amazing maths ‘things’ in their heads...

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MOTHER: While I listen to you I could forgive all squabbles and quarrels, with your father, with the neighbours, with the people who visit our village.

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PARENT: Play the piano like some kind of genius...

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MOTHER: Perhaps my son, if you have a reason to be under the blue sky and on this earth, perhaps your song is it.

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PARENT: Well that’s, what’s a nice word...? *Rubbish.* Because, you see, for every genius, for every autistic person with ‘amazing and special talents’ there are a hundred, a thousand who can’t speak, can’t walk, need to live in nappies – kids like my boy who will never be able to live independently, no chance. And excuse me, but that seems to me like a pretty high price to pay for a handful of ‘geniuses’. (after a moment of reflection) Sorry...do I sound angry?

ALL PARENTS: Yeah, let’s have a cup of tea?

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NARRATION: Tony and his mother and father lived high, high up in the mountains, where they lived a simple life, a good life. And Tony seemed to swim through time, as you might swim with just enough movement to keep yourself from drowning.

Higher up the mountain upon which Tony lived was a grand house, a hotel which was visited by strangers from afar. The strangers talked amongst themselves in a language Tony did not understand, and were curious about the country around, professing to love it much, and day after day they walked over little bits of it. It seemed odd to Tony that they should travel from far-away countries to see the things he had lived in all his life

TONY: – just the hills and valleys, the snow, the goats and the wild flowers, the sunshine and the stillness.

NARRATION: Was it really for these that the strangers came?

TONY: Perhaps these strangers, these travellers are delicate. They must be easy to break, or to kill, or to get lost for though they never cease praising the beauty of the mountains, yet they are afraid to go alone up the steep paths or on the snow-plains which I have wandered over in my sleep.

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JACKIE: You're like Tony, aren't you Sam? People think there isn't a thought in your head but it's full of them.

SAM: *Full of them*

JACKIE: Full to bursting.

SAM: *Bursting...*

JACKIE: (testing) How do you feel Sam....how do you feel Sam? (no response) How do you feel about (plucks a subject out of the air) buses Sam?

SAM: I don't know why people talk about a bus having a number when it's the route which is the number. There is no such thing as a number fourteen bus, only a number fourteen route. I don't point this out to people because they would think that was odd so I try to stay quiet when they say 'here comes the number fourteen', even though they are wrong. I have to get on the buses which they use for the number fourteen route and I like it if it is quiet, when there are more people I get...(can't think of the word) There are too many noises and sights and smells if there are lots of people, they make me...(can't think of the word). I like the buses with the vinyl seats, people say they are leather but they are vinyl, but I can't stand the feel of those fabric seats which are almost like a sort of short fur or fuzz. I can't sit down if the seats are like that. I can stand all the way if I have to. I can't sit where there is a stain or where there is chewing gum on the seat in front or where there is writing on the seat. Most drivers are nice to me, some of them know my face and they are friendly, but some don't even speak. That is rude and they shouldn't do that. I speak to them and they don't speak back – even I know that's rude.

JACKIE: Sam...

SAM: Each bus is allowed thirty-two people sitting and twelve standing, you should not distract the driver if the bus is moving. Each driver has a number on a badge on his or her pocket.

JACKIE: Sam...

SAM: (oblivious) My favourite driver is D252 and the one I really do not like is –

JACKIE: (interrupting) Sam!? Thanks....enough...

SAM: I haven't finished. I have lots more to say about buses!

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PARENT: If you're talking to someone on the spectrum, be careful with metaphor, just think about the usual figures of speech the rest of us use every day.

PARENT: You have to be very literal with my son. If you said...oh I don't know 'pull your socks up'...

PARENT: 'It's raining cats and dogs'

PARENT: 'Wipe that smile off your face'

PARENT: 'He's a wolf in sheep's clothing'

PARENT: 'Let's hit the road – break a leg'

PARENT: 'She's the black sheep of the family'

PARENT: 'He's a diamond... she's a peach'

PARENT: 'That's the icing on the cake'

PARENT: 'You're my knight in shining armour'

PARENT: 'I'm a dog person, my friend is a cat person'

PARENT: ...then you can see this panic in his face.

PARENT: If I say 'watch your step' then he'll watch he may well do just that until I tell him he doesn't have to 'watch his step' anymore. And you really can't say 'watch your tongue'...

PARENT: They think in pictures. They'll *see* the thing you've just said and it won't make sense, and then they're more confused than they were before.

PARENT: And if you say 'I'll be just a second' you'd better be 'a second'. And just a minute had better mean a minute.

PARENT: And if you say ‘the food is on the table’ – but it’s on a plate, then why did you say it was on *the table*...!? You need to be on your guard. Constantly.

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NARRATION: All day long while his father was away, Tony stayed home, watching his mother scrub and clean and wash, and make the soup ready for his father at night. Or he would sit by the doorway, listening to the falling avalanche, and letting the warm sun fall on his face.

MOTHER: (looking at him) Surely he is closer to the wind and the trees than to the other boys of the valley.

NARRATION: Tony felt he belonged to the wind and the trees, and had once been part of them? And he thought…

TONY: Why should I trouble to work?

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PARENT: Funny with food? Don’t even start...only chicken nuggets...

PARENT: Only white food...

PARENT: No food touching other food on the plate...

PARENT: No patterned plates...

PARENT: Nothing wet and sloppy...

PARENT: Nothing with too much flavour...

PARENT: Everything in different dishes...

PARENT: Not eating with us...

PARENT: Not being seen whilst eating...

PARENT: Sandwiches only cut as triangles – never squares, they’d be left aside…

PARENT: So, yes...funny with food. You could say that.

PARENT: And then of course there’s ‘pica’ – wanting to eat things which actually aren’t food. Buttons, batteries, soil, soap, coins...

PARENT: Not really your *five a day* is it?

PARENT: Not covering all your major food-groups there, no.

PARENT: I sometimes wonder how they survive...

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NARRATION: Now his mother was right when she said ‘perhaps he thinks more than he cares to say’ For Tony’s head was full of thoughts, he had more thoughts than he *could* say. He had thoughts he had no words for. He thought:

TONY: Did I journey into this world from the mists beyond it?

NARRATION: He thought:

TONY: Was I very little once when I started on that journey?

NARRATION: He thought:

TONY: One day, when I have done with resting on the mountain, I will go into that distance and be very little once more.

NARRATION: But he could not speak the thoughts in his head. It was sometimes too hard for him to speak the simple words of daily life. ‘Bread’, ‘table’, ‘chair’, ‘mother’, ‘home’.

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PARENT: People on the spectrum need structure. Need parameters. I was once told that if a child faces a day without structure, without knowing what will happen and when, they’ll feel like their looking into a ‘black hole’, and for ages I didn’t know what that meant, how to understand what that ‘black hole’ is. But now I get it. Try this. Imagine you wake up one morning. You don’t know where you are, it’s a foreign country. You only have the clothes you stand in, and they’re no good for the climate you’re in. You have no money, no credit card, no phone, you don’t speak the language, people are looking at you strangely...what do you do...how do you even start to do anything? That’s the kind of ‘black hole’ that terrifies us, but we know we’ll probably never face it. A child on the spectrum teeters on the edge of that hole every day just by wandering into the world, our world. No wonder they look scared most of the time.

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SCENE FIVE:

FATHER: (bursting in with a new energy) I tell you I’ve had it with taking travellers who don’t have the sense they were born with here and there. And for pennies! Pennies! See how they fair without me for a day and then see how happily they would part with a fat gold coin

for my pains, for my labours. And the days when there are none to ferry around are worse as then there is not even a penny in the pot for so much as some meat for the plate. This soup is all I get after a day working or searching for work while others (eyeing Tony) have nothing more to do than watch the clouds and listen to the wind in the trees.

MOTHER: I'm not idle, I wash and fetch and carry and cook and dig and sew…

FATHER: It's not you I mean wife, it is the boy. The boy who neither works with me nor with you – the boy is idle, bone idle!

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JACKIE: Its every parents job to make try and make their child's wishes come true isn't it? To help them fulfil their dreams. Only natural? Sam, what would you like the rest of your life to be like, the whole of the rest of your life...?

SAM: (without a second thought) I would like to stay in my room most of the time, but I am happy to come downstairs to watch things with you, Doctor Who and Merlin because you say you like to watch with me. I would like it if I could play on my X-Box each day for as long as I like without you saying 'stop now' and 'that's enough'. I would like not to wear wool because it hurts me and I would like flies never to come in my room because the noise makes me angry. I would like not to have to always go to sleep at night and be awake in the day because sometimes I'm tired in the day and not tired at night. I would like it if nobody ever moved anything in my room because it is all where it should be, even though you call it tidying. I would like not to have to go to school because I can learn things at home and school is noisy and I can't concentrate there. One day I would quite like to watch all the Star wars films in one go, right through from episode one to six, which would take ten hours and forty three minutes. I wouldn't watch them in the order they came out because that would be four, five, six, one two three which wouldn't make any sense. I would like to have sugar puffs for breakfast and toast and jam for lunch and chicken nuggets and

oven chips and beans for supper but I don't want the beans to touch the chicken nuggets or the chips. I don't mind having a roast on Sundays or Christmas day but everything will have to be on different plates.

JACKIE: You've got it all planned out, haven't you Sam?

SAM: (matter of fact) Yes.

JACKIE: And where will I be while all this is going on?

SAM: I don't know...downstairs? In your room? Maybe shopping. You'll probably be in a lot of places.

JACKIE: You see my problem, what parent wants to help any child to live *that life?*

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MOTHER: Husband, do not be hard on him, for surely his is like a person who has been awaked before his sleep has satisfied him, and his dreams overtake his waking hours. Let him get his dreaming done and perhaps he will rouse to work as men do in the morning time.

FATHER: Nonsense! We can any of us dream the day away who are too stupid to wake and too idle to work.

MOTHER: Please!

FATHER: I mean it! There is nothing to him but a song, and a nonsense song at that! (walks out)

NARRATION: The strange thing about Tony's song was that no-one knew how he had come about it. It was a song which no one taught him, and no one knew. He had learnt it as a solitary bird might learn from its own little lonely heart.

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PARENT: I don't care how wrong it sounds to say it, it's true. If there has to be something wrong with him, then I wish he was in a wheelchair. I wish his legs were busted instead of his head.

PARENT: You learn to think backwards – differently from everyone else. It's a sunny day, let's go to soft-play, because it won't be full. It's overcast, let's go to the beach. It's easier to be where other people are not, unless you want a battle.

PARENT: Kid in a wheelchair? Sympathy. Big strapping boy having a meltdown in the supermarket, banging his head, flailing his arms...you get *those looks.* Bad parent. No sympathy.

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MOTHER: Where did you learn your song my son? (Tony does not answer) Speak son, speak to me. Lord save me from this silence.

VILLAGER: It is hard on you...

NARRATION: Said a passing villager

VILLAGER: ...that thy son should be a fool.

MOTHER: He is no fool.

VILLAGER: Look at him.

MOTHER: I see him clearly, more clearly than you.

VILLAGER: But he only has a song, and even that means nothing.

MOTHER: As the note of a piano means nothing? As a tune on a fiddle means nothing? It means what it is and it is what it means! No more or less! He learnt it in the clouds, from the wind, high on the mountain side, higher than our feet can climb. What there may be at such heights only the like of Tony can tell!

VILLAGER EXITS

Surely you will someday awaken, or what will be the good of you?

NARRATION: But from that time Tony forgot more and more of the things he was told to do, and lived among his dreams, which grew so tangled that even he could not tell the sleeping from the waking ones.

SCENE SIX:

NARRATION: In the winter, when the travellers stayed home, when the cattle were in the barn and when the snow was too deep for crops or flowers, the villagers hunched in their homes for warmth and made best use of the time. Tony used to watch his father cutting bits of wood: chip by chip he seemed to take away the walls that held the little animals and men and women in prison. He never realized that his father's sharp knife and precise eye shaped the toys.

One winter there was a dark knotty piece of wood that fascinated him. Every morning as he drank his milk his eyes wandered towards it. In the evening as he crouched shiveringly by the smouldering fire beneath the black soup-pot, he kept his eyes fixed on it and wondered what strange thing it concealed. One day his father picked it up, and, turning it over and over, said –

FATHER: What shall we discover within you then?

NARRATION: And began to cut.

FATHER: You will be no animal, no donkey, no bird…

NARRATION: And he cut…

FATHER: Nor flight of fancy, no dragon, nor mermaid…

NARRATION: And cut…

FATHER: And neither shall you be a little man, you are not the wood for that, so fine and smooth…

NARRATION: … till there came forth the figure of a girl who had on her face an expression of listening and waiting.

FATHER: (perusing her) Yes, nice. Good work. But I am afraid, my little one, that now I have neither the wood nor the time to make you any little friend. You will have to, for now, go through life quite alone. (turns the puppet towards Tony) Unless, of course, Tony here will provide you with some company. What do you say son, have you a new companion? One who speaks not, nor expects anything from you. Perhaps she is perfect for you.

TONY SHRINKS BACK, IN FEAR.

MOTHER: She is only wood, my lad.

FATHER: Aye, only a wooden head – of little use!

MOTHER: And tomorrow she will be sent to the dealer who lives very far away – so there is nothing to be afraid of. She cannot move, and in all things that cannot move, no danger lies. Only things that live and move have power to frighten, but not this bit of wood that has been shaped by thy father's knife.

FATHER: Your mother is right – she can't harm you (moving to tony) look!

TONY RUNS OFF

NARRATION: And off Tony ran into the soft snow, high into the hills leaving the little wooden girl far behind, her eyes still wide and staring in the cottage. When, after many hours he ventured close to home again, his mother called to him.

MOTHER: (calling) It is safe.

FATHER: (grumbling) It was *always* safe!

MOTHER: (calling) You can return!

FATHER: (grumbling) Or stay and freeze on the hillside if you please!

MOTHER: (as Tony comes closer) She is gone. She is not here. She was nothing more than the handiwork of your father, the skill of his hands.

FATHER: (grumbling) And she'll earn money to put food in his mouth, which is more than he's ever done!

MOTHER: And now she and all his other carvings have been taken by our neighbour, to the city. You need not be afraid of the little girl anymore, you can forget all about her.

NARRATION: And *forget* is what Tony did. Tony forgot because the winter waned and the spring came and the year turned and the sun rose and set and the fields filled with flowers and the herds grazed.

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PARENT: You have this weird time. Like a sort of a grief for the child you didn't get. The one you pictured – growing up, school, uni, good job, married with kids. We all have those plans in our heads, however vaguely. But that child, the one who was going to go on to 'do things' never existed, except in here...so you grieve. You grieve for that child, and you feel sorry for yourself and for them, and then, because you have to, you just *get on with it*. Play the cards you've been dealt, and if you're lucky, you'll see one day that they weren't such bad cards after all.

PARENT: And the big fear, the one you can barely even dare think about sometimes is 'what about when I'm gone'? Who will look after my child? I don't know if I have an answer for that one. There are a lot of us in that situation. We just get on the best we can and hope for the best...

.....

NARRATION: And all year Tony swam through time and barely knew his waking dreams from his sleeping ones. And Tony sang his song and learned nothing new, he became a year older without working for so much as one day. And the winter came and his father carved again.

MOTHER: (doing so, explaining to Tony) And we take each carving, with care and we lay them, wrapped in soft paper, for the dealer from the city to view when he visits. And those he does not want we shall place in a drawer until the summer when the travellers may want them.

FATHER: Lucky things. For they are only wood, no–one shall ever ask them to work! Their joints will never ache, their hands will never blister and crack.

MOTHER: They are small and delicate and will be handled gently and tenderly. They are small and they will, one way or another, see more of the world than I shall. It is true they are lucky.

TONY HAS BEEN LOOKING ALMOST JEALOUSLY AT THEM. WHEN HIS PARENTS HAVE GONE HE PLACES HIMSELF ALONGSIDE THEM

.....

JACKIE LOOKS AROUND TO THE OTHER PARENTS

JACKIE: I just have this fear that if I let Sam have his way then his world will get smaller. If we go out he wants to stay in the car, if people come to the house he'll stay at the edge of the room, if he's in the room at all. I want to push him to join in with life, but me pushing him scares him, and that scares me.

ALEX: (after a moments silence, as if what is about to be said is momentous) I don't know if, maybe, my situation is useful for you to hear about... When my son was diagnosed I thought 'how can there be anything wrong with him, he's just like I was at that age'. And then it clicked. Things 'fell into place'. So many things made sense. And let me tell you, from harsh personal experience – an early diagnosis saves a lot of...pain.

.....

A BEAT, A NEW TONE

SCENE SEVEN:

NARRATION: It was a cold morning when the dealer came from the city – a dark, silent man, black haired, with overhanging eyebrows. And the people of the village clamoured.

VILLAGER: You must want to buy my dried flowers…

VILLAGER: My pictures of the mountains in springtime…

VILLAGER: My delicate lace…

VILLAGER: Knitted clothes for the little ones…

VILLAGER: Polished stones set into rings and things…

FATHER: And of course, the little animals and people of wood crafted by the skill of my knife and my hand.

DEALER: (picking up a puppet, noticing Tony) And who…

FATHER: Who?

DEALER: … is this?

.....

ALEX: I get by, I do ok, proper job, I'm married – but the way I look at it, it's like learning a foreign language. It doesn't matter how good you get at it, you'll never know the subtleties like a native speaker.

.....

FATHER: He is my son.

MOTHER: *Our son.*

BOTH: Tony.

FATHER: But he has little about him that anyone would want or need.

MOTHER: Except his song.

FATHER: Whatever use a song may be.

DEALER: *Song*...you say? Is this the boy they speak of?

FATHER: Speak of?

MOTHER: Who speaks of him?

DEALER: The goat-herds, they say there is a boy who sings a song which was learned in the clouds?

FATHER: It may be.

MOTHER: It is true that Tony's song is known all down the valley and over the mountain too.

FATHER: Though none know it's meaning.

.....

ALEX: You'll never get the hints the little clues...and every day is like that for me. Trying to catch up, scared of getting it wrong...because I don't speak your language.

.....

DEALER: A stranger came to me in the city once and tried to sing it…

FATHER: Tony's song?

MOTHER: The city?

DEALER: …but he could not sing it how it was heard in the mountains.

FATHER: It is no good to Tony, as he is only a fool, who will not use the hands and feet which nature gave him.

MOTHER: Don't judge him harshly. It is true that most are made to use their hands and some their feet, but for some it may be just their hearts to feel and lips to speak which is their best work. Does he not sing a song he has fetched from the clouds? Let the song travel instead of his feet and let the song work instead of his hands.

FATHER: They call him wooden-head around these parts…

MOTHER: So do you.

FATHER: And you! And he might as well be all wooden but for his song. The rest of him is no good at all.

MOTHER: A song has sometimes lived longer than the strongest hands that ever worked, and travelled farther than the sturdiest feet that ever walked.

FATHER: The rest of him is as wooden as the figures I carve from the living oak…

MOTHER: Yet they were hidden in a block of wood, just as Tony's song is hidden in his heart.

FATHER: He would be better without his song…

MOTHER: How can you say that – his own father!

FATHER: He might dream less and work more!

THE TWO SUDDENLY BECOME AWARE OF THEIR BICKERING. STOP, NOTICE THE DEALER SIZING UP TONY.

DEALER: (after a pause) Let him go to the city with me –

MOTHER: Leave us?

DEALER: - and I will take the song from his lips…

MOTHER: The city?

DEALER: …and send it over the world.

FATHER: (hesitantly) Tony…would you like to go to the city?

MOTHER: Away from me?

FATHER: I feel that, in the city, you may get your wish –

MOTHER: What wish?

FATHER: - to be 'very small and very far away'.

MOTHER: I have heard it said that a wish and the granting of that wish do often find themselves strange company. You will be small and far away, but you will not rest in my arms while you are there.

FATHER: But no one here will ask you to work again.

MOTHER: You may go if you wish it, my dear boy, there is much in the world. Much I will never see - I would not keep thee from seeing it.

A NOD FROM TONY, A HANDSHAKE FROM THE DEALER & FATHER

DEALER: It is decided.

.....

SCENE EIGHT:

JACKIE: My little boy. What to do with you eh? What's the best for you? Which bit of advice do I listen to?

CAST: You can't make him into something he's not.
Leave well alone, he's fine in his own little world.
He won't achieve anything if you don't keep behind him all the way.
He has to pass for normal in a normal world.
You're too soft on him.
You're too hard on him.
Yes, he needs help to understand the world, but the world needs help to understand him.
He's just acting up, give him a swift slap, that'll straighten him out.

JACKIE: At least there's no shortage of people happy to chip in with their thoughts.

.....

NARRATION: The next day the villagers came out of their cottages, and watched Tony leave for the city.

MOTHER: Good luck my son.

FATHER: You have got your wish.

MOTHER: (aside, to the father) And you have got yours.

VILLAGER: See how he walks as if we are not here.

VILLAGER: He moves as if in a dream.

VILLAGER: There is not a thought in that wooden head, not a single thought.

NARRATION: But there was. Too many thoughts. Too few words.

VILLAGER: He does not even look back to wave.

VILLAGER: He is leaving this village forever.

VILLAGER: He was barely here at all.

VILLAGER: That's right, that's Tony… 'the boy who was barely there'. (exit chuckling)

MOTHER: Goodbye my son. I will come to see you. I promise.

.....

JACKIE: Sam, I thought, tomorrow, if it's nice, we'll go to the park.

SAM: (baffled, almost distraught) Why?

JACKIE: It's nice to go to the park.

SAM: It's not!

JACKIE: People like parks.

SAM: That's not a fact. The fact is that some people do and some people don't. I don't. Who will be there?

JACKIE: We don't know who'll be there, not until we get there.

SAM: When will we go?

JACKIE: Lunchtime.

SAM: *What time* though?

JACKIE: We'll go at 12.20 if it's nice.

SAM: It might not be nice – might rain.

JACKIE: It might.

SAM: Then what?

JACKIE: Then we'll have our picnic right here, just in the front room.

SAM: Lots to bring.

JACKIE: Not too much.

SAM: Food, drink, cap, if it's sunny, sun-cream, you say I have to wear sun-cream, wipes so I can clean my hands, lotion for bites and stings and things, sunglasses, something to sit on...

JACKIE: A rug will be fine.

SAM: Can't sit on a rug, ants can go through a rug. I want a chair. And I want my DS, and you're not to leave me just sat there, and you're not to say 'go off and play' because I won't.

JACKIE: Trust me, we'll have a great time.

SAM: I hope it rains.

JACKIE: (holding Sam's face making sure she is getting through) It's a tough old world Sam. But it's not as tough as it was. You might be just like little Tony -

SAM: 'Wooden Head'.

JACKIE: That's right. They called him that didn't they? But the world has moved on Sam, it really has.

SAM: Moved on.

JACKIE: And there's a place for you in it, somewhere...we just have to find it, don't we?

SAM: Don't we?

JACKIE: We do. And actually, not repeating what people say would really help.

SAM: Really help.

JACKIE: We'll get there. (almost as a test) Love you.

SAM: Love you.

.....

NARRATION: And on and on walked Tony and the Dealer. And nothing was said. The Dealer kept his eyes on Tony and Tony kept his eyes on the long, straight road. He thought:

TONY: I wonder if, in the trunks of these trees by the road, there are many little figures dwelling, like the one my father carves, just waiting to be set free.

NARRATION: But he said nothing. And the Dealer said nothing.

Eventually, after many hours of walking, when the village was so far away it was not even little in the distance, they stopped. And Tony said nothing. And the Dealer said:

DEALER: Sing.

TONY SINGS, COMPLIANTLY

THE DEALER PULLS OUT A RUDIMENTARY INSTRUMENT AND BEGINS TO REPLICATE THE TUNE IMPERFECTLY

DEALER: Walk.

THEY MOVE ON

NARRATION: On and on walked the two travellers. On and on sang Tony.

DEALER: Stop. (he tries the tune again on his instrument)

NARRATION: The trees swayed in the breeze and the twilight deepened. Night came on. Tony turned his face towards the trees, wanted to walk among them, wanted to go to them as one would go to friends, but though he wanted to, something held him, he could not. The trees knew and held out their arms, they whispered a message…and though he heard it, he did not understand it. But he would, he would learn their language and know their secrets.

DEALER: On. Sing.

NARRATION: And down the road they went, until the trees were wrapped in darkness at last, and into the blackness until that too was behind, and towards them slowly stole the morning light. There was a range of low mountains far in the distance which rose higher and higher as they drew near as if to greet him.

DEALER: Sing.

NARRATION: But now Tony's song was different, it seemed no longer to come from his heart but only from his lips. His song was his no longer. It had gone from him, on its journey into the world.

THE DEALER PLAYS THE SONG ACCURATELY BUT NOT FLUENTLY

NARRATION: But Tony did not care; he felt nothing very much. He was not tired, or warm, or cold, or glad, or sorry, but more in a dream than ever before.

His legs were growing rigid, and his feet were hard, yet somehow lighter to lift than they had been. His whole body felt light, but it moved in a new and strange way.

Before entering the city the two travelled through villages and towns. And Tony looked at the people and felt more than ever a closeness to the things that belonged to Nature's firstness – with the sky and the lake and the trees. But towards the people of the town he felt a strangeness spring up in his heart - between him and them had begun a separation. They seemed to be made of a different texture, of different flesh and blood from himself and they – these people – seemed so tall. And Tony had only enough space in his tired head to wonder if:

TONY: My wish – has - been – granted.

THE DEALER PLAYS THE SONG SMOOTHLY AND ARTICULATELY

DEALER: Sing.

TONY BEGINS BUT DOES NOT KNOW THE SONG NOW, JUST MAKES INCOHERENT RANDOM NOTES

DEALER: It is done.

TONY'S SONG PLAYS AROUND HIM, ONLY HIS EYES ACKNOWLEDGE IT. THE DEALER MANIPULATES HIM, AS HE WOULD A PUPPET OR MANNEQUIN, TONY HAS NO CONTROL. FINALLY THE DEALER IS ABLE TO CONTROL THE RIGID BODY WITHOUT EVEN TOUCHING IT. STILLNESS. TONY ROCKS SLIGHTLY

DEALER: Come.

NARRATION: Only his feet moved just enough to carry him forward, and that was all.

But now the many miles of road were behind, and the sights and sounds of the city were before him. Tony walked through it all, scarcely noticing. But on the street ahead of him his saw the shadow of the dealer and the shadow of his own new form. Suddenly he knew – he was far away and very little.

DEALER: Stop.

TONY IS JERKED AWAY FROM THE DEALER, STANDS APART ON STAGE

NARRATION: And suddenly all about him was wooden – wooden houses and people and animals – he knew that he was a prisoner, but it did not matter, he did not care. A door opened and he entered.

SLOWLY BUILDING, THE SOUND OF TICKING, WHIRRING

DEALER: Up.

.....

SCENE NINE:

CAST: And the story of little Tony and his sad fate infected the mother's mind.

Sam/Tony...Tony/Sam

She thought of him, dreamt of him. Saw him where she knew he was not.

He was everything she could not let her own son become.

He was a splinter in her mind's eye, a presence just out of view.

He was on the corner of each street, he was at the edge of every room.

.....

SAM: You were going to say something.

JACKIE: Was I?

SAM: Before, you talked about how we had a nice time at the park –

JACKIE: Ah yes.

SAM: Then you forgot what you were going to say?

JACKIE: Yes.

SAM: Now do you remember?

JACKIE: Yes.

SAM: Is it the park again.

JACKIE: I thought maybe something new?

SAM: New!? I hate 'new'.

JACKIE: The beach.

SAM: What? Why?

JACKIE: I like the beach.

SAM: Then go, but leave me here. I'll be fine.

JACKIE: Is that right?

SAM: I'll be fine in my room, leave me some food if you want. I won't die.

JACKIE: What if they sell chicken nuggets and chips?

SAM: They won't be the right chips, not the right nuggets. It has to be right, you know that.

JACKIE: I don't want this to be a battle.

SAM: Then let me stay here.

JACKIE: I know you like a plan Sam...and here's the plan...we're going to get in the car, and we'll drive to the beach, and if you want, you can stay in the car, at the beach...but that is where we're going...blow the cobwebs away.

SAM: The beach is there...the cobwebs are here, that's just makes no sense.

JACKIE: No Sam...you're right. I was talking nonsense. (slowly, carefully) Now, let's get in the car....remember the plan.

.....

TONY WALKS UP, THE SOUNDS GET LOUDER. SEATED ON STAGE IS A SIMILARLY STILTED GIRL.

NARRATION: It was her, the girl who he had feared so much when she was carved by the knife of his father. She had been waiting for him. How foolish he had been to fear her, for now he was afraid of nothing.

HE SITS NEXT TO HER, THE NOISES STOP

NARRATION: She seemed not so little now. Just the same size as him. And he now knew that his place was with her and they would never be apart again, that this was like a marriage.

And the two sat, side by side for a time that Tony could no longer measure. A long time or a short time, he did not know. They sat in darkness and in silence. But far away, Tony could hear a music that he thought he knew…

WE HEAR HIS SONG PLAYED BY A FULL BAND IN THE DISTANCE

…but he felt nothing.

THE NOISES BEGIN AGAIN, GROWING UNTIL A BELL TOLLS TWELVE. HE AND THE GIRL WALK IN THEIR STILTED WAY OUT ONSTAGE, BOW, KISS, BOW, TURN AND RETURN TO THEIR SEATS.

NARRATION: So that was his life. Hour after hour it was always the same, as the people of the town looked up from the street below. Day after

day, week after week, month after month, in light and dark, in heat and cold. Spring and summer and autumn and winter. All was darkness until another hour passed and then it all happened again, the same, again, again, again.

.....

SCENE TEN:

JACKIE: (in the car) Sam, it's just a shop. Just a normal shop. People go in them all the time. You can't stay in the car.

SAM: Can stay in the car. This wasn't in the plan.

JACKIE: Sam, there is a world outside this car, outside our house, your room – you have to get involved with it.

SAM: Stay in the car.

JACKIE: We can't do this every time Sam. We just can't. Whole chunks of your life are just spent hiding away, whole chunks of my life are spent helping you hide. We can't do that forever.

SAM: I can.

JACKIE: What if I buy you a dinosaur.

SAM: Bring one back. Back to the car.

JACKIE: No Sam, you come in, you get a dinosaur. That's my deal. (to herself) Why am I negotiating like this?

SAM: What kind?

JACKIE: I don't know what kind! A 'dinosaur-something' - every shop has a dinosaur something. OK?

SAM: Ok.

JACKIE: Are you saying 'ok' or are you just copying me?

SAM: Ok.

JACKIE: Ok.

.....

NARRATION: After a time, a long time or a short time, we do not know. Two weary faces once looked up from the street, the face of a woman and a man, and as the doors opened the two figures came forth on the clock and stood while the song was played, the woman called out -

MOTHER: It is Tony, it is Tony,

FATHER: You are mistaken wife.

MOTHER: It is his song.

FATHER: *It is his song* – I cannot deny it.

.....

SAM IS LYING ON THE FLOOR OF THE SHOP

JACKIE: Please get up Sam, *please.*

SAM: You said.

CAST: What's wrong with him.

SAM: You said.

CAST: What kind of mother is she?

SAM: You said.

CAST: No control.

JACKIE: I wasn't to know, Sam. How could I know? Dear God! Most shops have something dinosaurey, somewhere.

SAM: You said.

CAST: It's embarrassing.

CAST: A child that age.

JACKIE: (trying to keep him calm) I'll make it right Sam, I promise I will, we can make this right, I just need some time, whatever you do, don't.... please don't....

HE STARTS SCREAMING & THRASHING

.....

MOTHER: (calling up) I promised I would come.

FATHER: It is not our son woman – it is no real boy at all!

MOTHER: It is my son. And there beside him is the woman you made, she is wooden - he is wooden.

FATHER: You are dreaming. Tony is gone into the world, and we will go and find him.

MOTHER: No, no, his song has gone into the world, but Tony is there, he is wooden – he is wooden.

NARRATION: And the man looked long and silent.

FATHER: He always had a wooden head, and maybe the rest of him has gone wooden too.

SAM IS STILL SCREAMING AND THRASHING, FINALLY JACKIE JOINS IN, THIS SILENCES SAM.

JACKIE: That shut you up, didn't it?

SHE SITS AND HUGS HIM

I'm sorry I can't make everything right Sam. I'm not perfect and I know the big wide world is confusing for you, and scary. But you know what? It is for me too. We're both just struggling through. Muddling along through the panic. Both feeling our way. No manual, no guidebook to help. Both sat on the floor of a supermarket by the frozen peas.

.....

MOTHER: My son…

FATHER: But he was useless!

MOTHER: Not useless.

FATHER: Was it not you who said 'let his *song* work instead of his hands, and his song travel instead of his feet'?

MOTHER: He is there…

FATHER: But his song was the best part of him, and it has gone into the world, there's comfort in that!?

MOTHER: It does not comfort me, nor should it comfort anyone who loves him.

FATHER: As for the boy, he was barely there at all.

MOTHER: It is Tony that I want, my son who sat by the door and sang, or by the fire watching the wood smoulder, who watched the clouds, he was my boy, he was 'there' to me.

.....

JACKIE: I can't let you disappear Sam. I can't let you hide away forever. I'm a mum, it's my job. I'll fight you all the way if I have to, but you will take some kind of place in this mad and scary world. You'll be the better for it and the world will be the better for having you in it.

SAM: Me in it.

JACKIE: You'll be ok. You've got me. And... I'll be ok, because I've got you.

SAM: Got you.

JACKIE: That's right. I'll be a... a bridge between you and the world. Until you don't need a bridge anymore. There you go, that's my deal, my mother's promise. But I can't let you get your wish, to just stay at home, in your room, in the car. That's not where life is. (looking around) To tell the truth, there's not much of it by the freezers in supermarket either, but do you know what Sam - *it's a start*. (firmly) *You will not be like Tony...*

SAM: Tony.

JACKIE: No matter how like Tony you are.

.....

NARRATION: And as they looked up, the song ceased, the figures of the boy and the girl were tugged, rigid and lifeless back into the darkness and silence of the body of the clock.

.....

SCENE TEN:

JACKIE: Can we carry on now, me and you. Or do we spend the rest of our life here.

SAM: Stay here.

JACKIE: No Sam. Wrong answer. We pick ourselves up, we carry on. You and me. You with your mad *extreme male brain...*

CAST: I thought he was mad.

JACKIE: (suddenly almost vicious) Shut up!

CAST: The cheek of some people. (walks off)

JACKIE: And me with my mad *extreme female heart.*

SAM: Heart.

JACKIE: What a team we make.

SAM: Team.

JACKIE: Look at us. Both scared, both lonely. But d'you know what? This world, however scary you think it is, is no match for this team. No match for an autistic boy and a desperate, very sleep-deprived woman...

SAM: And dinosaurs.

JACKIE: That's true. Lots of dinosaurs.

SAM: And robots.

JACKIE: And robots, them too. When you think about it, we're almost an army.

SAM: And Doctor Who. And the TARDIS, and Harry Potter and aeroplanes and ships and a fire-truck and a tank and a helicopter and a light-sabre...

JACKIE STARTS LAUGHING, SAM LAUGHS TOO. FINALLY THERE ARE BOTH ON THEIR BACKS CHUCKLING

JACKIE: I love you, Sam.

SAM: Love you.

JACKIE: Ah...you're just repeating it, aren't you Sam?

SAM: Repeating it.

JACKIE: Ah but you see Sam, I *really love you.*

SAM: Really love you.

JACKIE: Yeah...right.

SAM: (a sudden very focussed moment, Sam hold his mothers face, to get her attention, as she has done) Really love you.

STILLNESS. JACKIE IS TAKEN ABACK. PERHAPS A TENTATIVE HUG OR JUST HAND TO HAND TOUCH

THIS BECOMES A MOMENT WHERE JACKIE & SAM MIRROR TONY'S MOTHER & FATHER. THE TWO COUPLES DUST THEMSELVES OFF, COLLECT THEIR THINGS

JACKIE & FATHER: Right then...home.

SAM & MOTHER: Home.

ALL FOUR FACE THE AUDIENCE

.....

NARRATION: And nothing was said. But ahead of them lay the long road and the many miles that led back to their house and to their future. From where they stood it seemed very small and very far away.

END

AUTHOR THOUGHTS ON THE TEXT

SOME CONTEXT:
This play unashamedly shuns a traditional story arc, but rather draws together strands and themes in the hope that a cast and an audience will see a pattern in, and draw resonances from, the fragments. I think it can be performed with a cast of as few as thirteen or so, but the first production used a cast of 60(!). I have inserted numbered scenes as I know directors & teachers find them useful in rehearsals, but I would hope for a theatrical experience that seamlessly slips between the worlds within the text.

The first production of 'Very Small...' was in two halves with an interval. I also have a hunch that it could be presented as a single act piece. If you feel the piece needs two halves then simply insert your own 'End of Act One' where you see fit. Similarly, if you feel the text needs some editing for your requirements, please feel free.

I hope 'Very Small...' gives actors and directors a chance to engage in something demanding, something that evolves and emerges in rehearsal. Song, puppetry, shifting narratives and time-zones; all of these are challenges thrown down by me, for you to rise to. I believe that good youth theatre or drama in education gives young people a chance to see the word through the eyes of others, to walk a mile in their shoes – I hope this play fulfils that brief.

This is a special play to me – after finding Lucy Clifford's 1882 story 'Wooden Tony' in 2002, it took me years to find a company to commission it. This play was created with the help of parents of children on the spectrum (as well as adults on the spectrum) and I want their input to be articulated and amplified often and with care and integrity.

RIGHTS:
'Very Small & Very Far Away' can be performed by any youth theatre or school through a simple written agreement – a performing rights fee of £65.00 (or international equivalent) will be charged *only for public performance*. If you would like to simply explore the text in the drama studio, simply go ahead, but please share your thoughts with me on the piece via richard@richardconlon.com.

AFTER CARE:
Though they say pride is a sin, I do pride myself on taking my responsibilities to young actors and students seriously. I will answer cast questions by email or through a Zoom session. If remotely possible I will attend productions and I try to send a 'good luck' card if I know dates and an address.

RC: April 2013