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SF PERUSALS

A Fine Bright Day Today

A play

Philip Goulding

Samuel French — London
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A FINE BRIGHT DAY TODAY

First presented at the Oldham Coliseum Theatre in June 2011 with the following cast:

Margaret	Christine Cox
Rebecca	Samantha Power
Milton	Robin Bowerman

Directed by Kevin Shaw
Designed by Alison Heffernan
Lighting designed by Jane Barrek
Sound designed by Lorna Munden
Original music by Alan Edward Williams

Subsequently presented at the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-Under-Lyme in July 2012 with the following cast:

Margaret	Janine Birkett
Rebecca	Hayley Doherty
Milton	Hugh Simon

Directed by Peter Leslie Wild
Designed by Libby Watson
Lighting designed by Daniella Beattie
Sound designed by James Earls-Davis
Original music by James Earls-Davis with Sue Moffat

CHARACTERS

Margaret Harvey, 50s.
Rebecca Harvey, her daughter, 30s.
Milton Farnsworth, American, 60s.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play takes place in Margaret's kitchen, the yard outside her home and a nearby coastal path, in a British coastal town.

ACT I
SCENE 1 Margaret's kitchen. Autumn, late afternoon
SCENE 2 The same. A few days later, evening
SCENE 3 The same. A few days later, dusk
SCENE 4 The same. A few days later, late evening
SCENE 5 The same. Early the next morning
SCENE 6 The coastal path. A few days later, afternoon
SCENE 7 Margaret's kitchen. The evening of the same day

ACT II
SCENE 1 The yard. The next morning
SCENE 2 The coastal path. A week later, midday
SCENE 3 Margaret's kitchen. A few days later, night
SCENE 4 The coastal path. A few days later
SCENE 5 Margaret's kitchen. A few days later, morning
SCENE 6 The same. A week later, late at night
SCENE 7 Later the same night
SCENE 8 A moment later

Time — the present

Blackouts between scenes should be kept as brief as possible and the design should allow for fluidity of movement from one scene to the next.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Scene Changes

In the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme production, the scenes were set by the actors. Director Peter Leslie Wild's philosophy is that it's not about what moves where, or even who moves it — it's more to do with the story being told. Margaret tidying things away — or unplugging things before she goes out to work. Margaret watching Milton as he puts his bags in that same place on the stage for the last time. Milton handing the key back to Rebecca in exactly the same place she gave it to him at the beginning. Milton holding the chair for Margaret when they sit down for that first meal. What moves where and how obviously depends on the shape of the stage and what props the director deems necessary. Wild confessed he suffers from what he calls "empty stage phobia" and hates the idea of people in black scurrying around pretending not to be there. His belief is that a languid scene change that is interesting will always feel shorter than a rushed one that is uninteresting. The trick is to keep the audience involved for every second.

Props

It is preferable if the oven and toaster are actually operational, so that the scrambled eggs and toast can be created live on stage. This may make timings tricky — but it's good when it works.

Music

The first two productions of the play used specially commissioned music. At Oldham Coliseum Theatre Alan Edward Williams composed and recorded music for cello and piano. For the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme, James Earls-Davis composed and recorded (with Sue Moffat) music for guitar and violin. If commissioned music is not an option then extant music can be used. But it should always be instrumental rather than vocal — and the music chosen should be appropriate to the emotion of the section of the play it is preceding, following or bridging.

Philip Goulding

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Other plays by Philip Goulding
published by Samuel French Ltd:

The Titfield Thunderbolt

ACT I

Scene 1

Margaret's kitchen. Autumn, late afternoon

Music

The main part of the set is the kitchen of a cottage. There is a large, old wooden table and a sideboard with a table lamp on it. Around the table are placed at least three chairs — these need not match. There is a sink, a fridge, a stove and cupboards etc. By the look of it, most of the fittings have not been modernized for over 30 years. Two doors lead off — one through to the front door. The other is the back door, which leads through to the yard, the shed and the drive. The back door is the most in use. There is a mirror and a coat-stand near the front door. We can see some stairs disappearing off up to the next floor

To each side of the main area there are two other playing areas. One area represents the backyard/garden of the cottage. The other spreads across the far downstage area. This represents the cliff-path a few miles from the house. This area overlooks the sea

Margaret Harvey — a woman in her 50s — sits at the kitchen table. She is doing a crossword puzzle in the Mail on Sunday. *There is a dictionary and an encyclopaedia within reach*

Margaret gets up, scurries to the kitchen window and peeps out. A bump sounds from upstairs. Margaret hurries back to the table, leafs through a dictionary. There's the sound of someone coming downstairs

Rebecca Harvey, in her 30s, enters carrying a box of books etc. She stops, looks at Margaret for a moment, then carries the box out through the back door. Margaret looks up only when Rebecca has left the room

The music fades. The sound of seabirds. The Lights rise on Milton Farnsworth on the cliff path. Milton is in his 60s. He is American. He has a beard. He's dressed for outdoors: a high-end multi-pocket gilet/waistcoat, good-quality boots etc. He carries a small sketch book which he may occasionally doodle in. The music fades

Milton stares out to sea. He speaks to the audience

Milton The seascape painter Franklin Bowden Broome visited this coast in nineteen-o-nine and stayed 'til nineteen-eleven. During his time here he befriended — and made sketches of — a number of the local fisher folk. Some of these figures were later incorporated into his large-scale paintings. Though I am a great admirer of Franklin Bowden Broome, I possess neither his talent or his social acumen. In fact, I leave most social gatherings with the nagging sense that I've embarrassed myself in some unspecified way.

Rebecca comes back into the kitchen

Margaret I suppose he's out there. Skulking in his pick-up truck.
Rebecca Why ask? I imagine you'll have sneaked a look.

Rebecca goes off upstairs

Margaret (*after her*) And he'll let you fetch and carry that heavy junk, I suppose.
Rebecca (*off*) I'm fine.

A jet-fighter is heard low overhead, hurtling past. Margaret looks up in annoyance

On the cliff-path Milton ducks in reaction to the low-flying jet-fighter. This annoys and embarrasses him. He straightens up, watches the plane disappear into the distance

Milton I am inextricably drawn to the sea. As it was for Bowden Broome, so it is for me. In his case, of course, it was what he *wished to escape* that led him here — more so than what he hoped to find. He'd become sought-after on the East Coast of America – a minor celebrity. But here, far from the clamour of local fame, he was left alone to enjoy the freedom of anonymity. As for myself, I photograph or sketch for the best part of the day, then — when evening falls — I "nurse a jar" in Ray's Bar and observe the natives at play.

Rebecca comes through with another box

Margaret You'll wear those stairs out, the way you're going.
Rebecca A lot of this stuff is thick with dust.
Margaret You've long been old enough to keep your own cupboards clean.

Rebecca goes out again through the back door

Rebecca (*as she goes*) It was just an observation.
Margaret (*after her*) I'd not bite him, you know, if he was wanting to help.
Milton Although I've found them to be a reticent people in the main, a few of the locals like to talk. I'm a bit of an exotic, maybe. (*Pause*) But I don't confide much, never could. I might endeavour to be more ... *human*, I suppose — dredge up some scraps of personal cogitation to share with Ray. (*Pause*) They're fond of the weather here — I've noticed that. They like *talking* about the weather, is what I mean.

Rebecca comes back in

Margaret You picked a nice day for it at least.

On her way through, Rebecca gets a biscuit from the biscuit jar – she does not replace the lid of the jar

Rebecca goes back upstairs

Milton It's not a hugely entertaining topic, but it passes the time. And — as I come from a land where weather can be extreme — I've compiled and rehearsed a few anecdotes; so everybody's happy in the end. In fact — just yesterday — I think I made a friend.

The Lights go down on Milton

Margaret (*shouting towards the stairs*) I wonder what your father would have thought.

Rebecca comes back down the stairs carrying a bin bag full of stuff

Rebecca That'll do for now.

Rebecca goes to the sink and washes her hands. Margaret continues to half-focus on her crossword through what follows

Margaret I said "I wonder what your father ..."
Rebecca I heard. I imagine he'd be surprised to find I hadn't left before. I hope he'd be pleased. I like to think Dad would have been fond of Pete.
Margaret He had few friends, your father. He wasn't that sort of man.

Rebecca Well, maybe he'd have made an exception in Pete's case. For my sake.

Margaret He liked a drink with his workmates. But I'd not call workmates friends.

Rebecca Look, Mum ... if you expect me to feel guilty, I won't. I'm thirty-one. I couldn't stay living here forever, it was starting to look sad. (*Silence*) I don't *want* us to do this on bad terms, Mum. It's not even your approval I'm after — just your *blessing*. It'd be nice if you had faith in my decision. I'm not *deserting* you, you know — I'll be less than two miles down the road ...

Margaret I've no idea what you're talking about, love. I've sat here, I've not said a word.

Rebecca Perhaps you just need time to get used to it. (*Pause*) It'll be a bit strange for a while, that's all. Like when I first went to school. (*Pause*) I know you still miss him, Mum — that's natural. I miss him too.

Margaret You never knew him, really.

Rebecca It's not *the same*, obviously. But I've always felt *the lack of him* — his absence.

Margaret You shouldn't keep him waiting. He might start tooting.

Rebecca He's not like that. As you'd know if you gave him half a chance.

Margaret I've to get ready for work anyway. I'm on evenings all this week.

Margaret gets up from the table, starts to get ready for work — going to fetch her coat, perhaps

Rebecca Fine. I'll come by later for the rest of my stuff.

Margaret You've got your key.

Rebecca Right. (*Pause*) Fine. Bye.

Rebecca takes the bin bag and exits

Margaret looks after her, surprised by the suddenness of her going

The sound of the truck door slamming and the truck moving off

Margaret replaces the lid on the biscuit jar, unplugs the kettle etc. then exits

As the Lights go down on the kitchen. The lights come up on Milton on the cliff path

Milton What I eventually produce is never quite as I envisaged. Everyday I struggle with my own inadequacy. Why don't I paint something other than the sea — open myself up to other things? If I could *get it right* just once — perhaps ... But she's never still ... never the same. Always familiar, yet somehow strange. Then again: could be the sea is just the sea is just the sea. On my worst days, that's what I really think.

Milton pulls a sweet bar out of one of his pockets, unwraps it and starts to eat with an urgency and no sense of pleasure

Music

Black-out

Scene 2

The same. A few days later. Evening

Music fades

We hear a pick-up truck draw up outside the house. Rebecca comes in the back door

Rebecca Mum? Mum!

Rebecca notices a framed picture propped up on the kitchen table. She picks it up and looks at it. She smiles, then becomes more concerned. She takes care to replace the picture exactly where it was. She goes to the foot of the stairs

Mum?

Margaret enters from the yard, carrying a box of junk, which she places downstage

There you are.

Rebecca goes to Margaret and hugs her. It's a bit awkward; Margaret doesn't hug

Margaret What's this in aid of?

Margaret starts busying herself sorting out the contents of the box

Rebecca Are you OK?
Margaret You thought I'd pine away without you?
Rebecca Of course not. I've been spending at least three nights a week over there for the past two years; it's not such a great upheaval.
Margaret Well, you've your things now, at least.
Rebecca It was mostly just junk, like you said. Stuff I hardly ever look at. Most of it's gone straight in the attic.
Margaret It could have just as well stayed where it was. (*Pause*) I've been sorting through that clutter in the shed. Found that picture of your dad. You could find a place for it, perhaps. It's one he never saw. (*Pause*) I found this, too. (*She hands her a photograph*) You in that daft hat.
Rebecca What a sight I look.
Margaret You were mad about that hat.
Rebecca Did people laugh?
Margaret They found it endearing I think. A tad eccentric, maybe. You were a happy little soul. Always chatting on and making friends. (*Pointedly*) You were a lovely child.
Rebecca (*sarcastically*) Thanks.

Margaret puts the photo of Rebecca on the sideboard. Then she carries on going through the box. She finds an old candleholder, which she puts into a cupboard near the sink

Margaret You could make yourself a drink or something.
Rebecca I'm OK. I'm cutting out caffeine on account of my heads. Pete's convinced that's what's to blame.
Margaret It's more likely the beer.
Rebecca He's had a poem accepted, by the way. It's for an anthology published by a small press.
Margaret Will he get paid?
Rebecca It's a nominal fee.
Margaret What does that mean?
Rebecca It's not about the money, it's more the prestige. Besides, he's making a bit from his creative writing classes; we don't go short. I could do with working less, if anything — I can't believe my caseload. We're the growth industry round here, social services. I'm being flippant.
Margaret It's not much of a joke, love.

Rebecca gets up, fetches a yoghurt from the fridge and begins to eat it

Margaret has found an envelope of photographs

(*Reading the envelope*) "Blackpool nineteen-eighty." Ted and Gwen Davy. And little Neil. He'll have children of his own by now, probably. We lost touch. As the fishing went so many upped and moved away.

Rebecca You could always try to find them. Some people spend half their lives online, seeking out old friends. If you wanted me to help, I can always ...

Margaret maybe discovers a hideous old wall-plate in the box of stuff. Perhaps it's something Rebecca years ago insisted be removed from sight. Margaret places the wall-plate back on a hook on the wall

Margaret I'm not fussed, love. As we haven't kept in contact, I can't have meant that much to them.

Rebecca Or they to you. (*Pause*) Still, you've got the girls at work.

Margaret Oh, they look on me as some old relic. We don't socialize much, these days. A drink on someone's birthday, occasionally a show. I missed the last one though, I can't think why ...

Rebecca It had that bloke off the telly in, the one you don't like.

Margaret And I'm too old to be travelling all that way.

Margaret might find an old vase in the box — which she puts on the sideboard

Rebecca You talk as if you're in your dotage! Oh, I meant to say — I got talking to this bloke down at Ray's. An American. He's staying at that skanky B&B down on Sea View Road. He was saying he could do with somewhere cleaner and quieter.

Margaret What on earth's that got to do with me?

Rebecca I couldn't get much sense out of him at first — he seemed obsessed with the weather. Turns out he's an artist — on the Bowden Broome trail. But he's respectable enough — wears one of those waistcoats with all the pockets. Anyway, we had a couple of pints and I told him you'd a room. He's out most of the day, wandering about – so he'd be no trouble. It wouldn't hurt to meet him, I thought.

Margaret finds some old books at the bottom of the box, which she puts into the sideboard

Margaret I am *not* a rest-home, Rebecca, for sundry waifs and strays.

Rebecca The extra income, too, would come in handy.

Margaret You don't need to worry about me. I've one less mouth to feed, with you not being here.

Rebecca I always paid my share.
Margaret It was never asked for.
Rebecca (*breezily*) Anyway, I told him to drop by one evening this week. (*She gets up and starts to go out*) Oh, I almost forgot, I've some flowers in the car — I thought they'd brighten the place up — I'll fetch them in. Oh ... (*She remembers the photograph of Dad*) Thanks for this, Mum.
Margaret Rebecca ...?
Rebecca What?
Margaret If he does turn up, this *man*, what on earth am I supposed to say?
Rebecca I wouldn't worry. Once he's met you, he's just as likely to decide he doesn't want to stay.

Rebecca exits

Music

Black-out

Scene 3

The same. A few days later. Dusk

The music fades. The sound of rain

There are flowers on the table or the sideboard. There is a banging on the front door. Margaret comes down the stairs carrying a bucket. She wears rubber gloves and an apron. Underneath the apron she's dressed slightly better than usual

Margaret Hold on!
Milton (*off, knocking again*) Anyone about?! Mrs Harvey? It's Milton Farnsworth ...
Margaret Just a minute!

Margaret takes off her rubber gloves. She starts to go to the front door, then remembers she's wearing the apron. She removes it. Pauses briefly to look at herself in the mirror. Arranges her hair. Then opens the front door

A bedraggled Milton is standing there

You're sopping wet.

Milton Yup. I'm kind of aware of that.
Margaret Come in. Wait there.
Milton Your outside light, by the way, doesn't appear to be working.
Margaret It works fine. I'm just not outside.

Margaret comes back through to the kitchen, grabs a pile of old newspapers

Milton Right ... I'll leave my coat and boots here, shall I? (*He starts removing his hat, coat and boots***;** *answering his own question*) Yup.

Milton hangs his coat up. Margaret has started laying a trail of newspapers from the front door to the kitchen table. Milton, in his socks, steps cautiously along the newspaper path

I felt sure the rain would hold off, so I decided to walk. That's not the first time I've been caught out. I guess you suffer from what they call "a changeable climate" along this coast ...

Margaret puts a couple of sheets of newspaper down on a chair

Margaret If you'd park yourself there for now. I've only just this morning done the floor.
Milton I'm pretty dry inside. The coat absorbs the worst of it. I pay a lot of attention to that sort of thing, being out in the elements so much.

Milton sits, then reaches awkwardly back from his sitting position and with his feet drags some newspaper round so that his feet will be on newspaper while he sits in the chair

Margaret I'd not long since made some tea. You'll be ready for a cup, Mr ... Farnsworth, did you say? (*She fetches a tray with teapot, cups and milk*)
Milton It might serve to warm me up. Oh, call me Milton, if you would. And you're Margaret, I believe? Though if you'd prefer I call you Mrs ——
Margaret Margaret's fine. Oh! (*Sudden panic*) Will you take sugar?
Milton No, no ... Just milk.

Margaret pours the tea — hands Milton a cup. He's been searching for something to say

It's a ... cosy set-up you have here.
Margaret It's small — if that's what you mean.

Silence

Milton I hope it's OK me calling round like this ...
Margaret Well, you're here now, anyway.

Silence

Milton So you ... work at the store up on the bypass, is that right?
Margaret It's not very exciting.
Milton Well, I suppose most ——
Margaret But then job opportunities round here are few and far between.
Milton Folk grab what they can, huh? (*Silence*) Have you worked there long?
Margaret Five years, now.
Milton Ah. (*Silence*) And ... um ... so before that ...?
Margaret I was a department manager at the box factory — was there for twenty years. It was a good job, that. They were a nice crowd.
Milton So what made you ...?
Margaret Damn Yanks came in and bought us out. (*Beat*) Oh, sorry — no offence.
Milton None taken.
Margaret They closed us down, you see — shifted it abroad.
Milton For what it's worth, it's the same in the States right now. I've experienced it myself.
Margaret There're kids round here now, Rebecca says, growing up in families where no one in two generations has seen regular work.
Milton In a couple of the places I've stayed it seemed everyone was employed in these call centres ...
Margaret Trying to sell stuff to those who'd just as soon not know.
Milton Not good for the soul, huh?
Margaret I wouldn't think so.

Silence. Less awkward than before

Milton This is very good tea, by the way.
Margaret It's nothing fancy. (*Pause*) There's a drop more.

Milton wasn't really wanting more tea, but she pours some into his cup anyway

Milton So are you serious, Margaret, about me taking a room? Only I bumped into Rebecca last night in Ray's — and she hinted you'd been having second thoughts.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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