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SUNSET SONG

Cast

The Family

Chris Guthrie
John Guthrie
Jean Guthrie
Will Guthrie
Aunt Janet
Uncle Tam
Ewan Tavendale
John Brigson
Mollie Douglas
McIvor
Mrs Melon

Neighbours

Chae Strachan
Kirsty Strachan
Marget Strachan
Rob Duncan

Villagers

Mrs Mutch
Mistress Munro
Mrs Ellison
Mrs Garthmore
Ellison

Galt

James Leslie
Tinker
Farmer

Rev Gibbon
Rev Colquhoun
Dr Meldrum
Lawyer Semple
Lawyer's Clerk
Musician

CHRIS GUTHRIE IS SITTING on the hillside, writing in a notebook.

CHRIS GUTHRIE (*reads*) – For days now the wind had been in the south, it shook and played in the moors and went dandering up the sleeping Grampians, the rushes pecked and quivered about the loch when its hand was upon them, but it brought more heat than cold, and all the parks were fair parched, sucked dry, the red clay soil of Blawearie gaping open for the rain that seemed never-coming ...

JOHN GUTHRIE enters with a shotgun over his arm. He shouts up at CHRIS

JOHN GUTHRIE – Come down here! C'mon! (*she descends; he snatches the notebook and looks at it*) Whit's this nonsense! You've more need to be down in the house helping your mither wash out the hippens, or doing your proper lessons instead of this stupidity.

CHRIS (*meekly*) – Aye, Faither.

GUTHRIE – And stay away from these pagan stones, they're the work of Satan.

CHRIS – They're Druid stones, faither, they've looked out over the Mearns for two thousand years.

GUTHRIE – Ha! What nonsense!

JEAN GUTHRIE and KIRSTY STRACHAN are in the house, tidying

KIRSTY – It’s a braw bit place here, your garden hedges are right bonny with the honeysuckle.

JEAN – Ha! If we could live on the smell of honeysuckle we might farm the place with profit. But John’s feared about the heat. The hayfield is all a crackling dryness and the potato shaws are droopit red and rusty already.

KIRSTY – Folk say there hadn’t been such a drought since eighty-three, and Long Rob of the Mill said you couldn’t blame this one on Gladstone, anyway.

JEAN – John’s not sure what to make of that Rob. When they were up at the Stones, he asked about the loch; and your Chae said there was no bottom to it, and Rob said that made it like the depths of a parson’s depravity. And when John said that was an ill thing to say about a minister, Rob said it was an ill thing to say about a loch.

KIRSTY (*shakes her head*) – Rob’s not got much time for religion, right enough. But I’ll tell you, if Christ ever came down to Kinraddie he’d be more like to get a welcome and a bit meal at Rob’s Mill, than he’d ever get at the Manse.

JEAN (*smiles*) – I’ve still to meet with many of the others round here.

KIRSTY – Be minded, Jean, that the folk of the farms are kindly, and good neighbours, but they’re aye ready to believe when they hear the worst of others, and yet unbelieving that others could think the same of themselves.

JEAN – They’re like folk everywhere, then. I met that Mrs Munro yesterday in the town. Whit like is she?

KIRSTY – Ach, there are worse folk than the Munros, though maybe they’re all in jail. But she *is* the best midwife for miles around.

JEAN (*grimly*) – I hope I’ll not be needing her services, then.

KIRSTY – No, for you’ve ... six, is it? ... already. That’s fair enough.

JEAN – Four was fine. But when I said that to John, he replied, (*mimicking Guthrie’s voice*) ‘We’ll have what God in His mercy may send to us, woman.’ (*sarcastically*) John is fell religious. And sure as anything, God followed up with the twins, just last year.

KIRSTY – Aye, the menfolk, eh?

CHRIS and MARGET are walking along to college

MARGET – I’m going to be a doctor, for Chae says that life came out of women through tunnels of pain, and if God had planned women for anything else but the bearing of children, it was surely the saving of them.

CHRIS – Chae? You call your faither Chae? And not faither?

MARGET (*laughs*) – Some folk think it’s an unco-like thing, but it’s maybe because he’s a socialist and thinks that rich and poor should be equal.

CHRIS – But Marget, what’s the sense of him believing that, then sending his daughter to educate herself to become one of the rich?

MARGET – No, no, I’m to learn, and be ready for the Revolution when it comes.

CHRIS – And if come it never does?

MARGET – Then I’ll not seek out riches anyway, I’ll put my training to good use. Same like you as a teacher?

CHRIS – Aye, but ...

MARGET – But what?

CHRIS sits on a rock, and MARGET joins her

CHRIS – Sometimes I feel there are two Chrisses that fight for my heart. There's the Chris brave with her reading and schooling and speaks proper English words, who'll go on to get her teaching degree; but whiles there's another Chris, who wakes with the peewits and the smell of the earth in her face. Sometimes I hate the land and the coarse speak of the peasant folk, at others I'd almost cry for the beauty and sweetness of the land and skies, and the auld Scots words to tell it to your heart. (*she shakes her head*) Silly, isn't it?

MARGET – It's not silly at all. Chae says that an honest man – or woman – is as good as any school-teacher, and generally a damned sight better. But education's the thing the workers need, to make the most of the new socialist world to come.

CHRIS – I don't think my faither's ready for that. He's gey old-fashioned. Once he leathered my brother Will because in all innocence he'd called a horse Jehovah – just a word he'd heard in the kirk, and liked the sound of it. 'Mind,' said Faither, 'if I ever hear you take your Maker's name in vain again I'll geld you like a foal.' So now Will hates faither, and he whispers his hate to me as we lie in our beds at night.

MARGET – But I've something to tell you, Chris. I'm going off to Aberdeen to live with an auntie there – it's a better place for a scholar, Chae says, and I'll be trained all the sooner. I'll miss you, though.

They walk off across the hills

CHRIS in the house, looking dejected.

CHRIS – So now Marget's gone, there's not a soul in Kinraddie that could take her place. I've no friends.

JEAN – There are others your age, surely.

GUTHRIE – Ach, the servant quines of her age are no more than gowks and gomerils who screech round the barns at night with ploughmen snickering behind them. Friends? Stick to your lessons and let's see you make a name for yourself, you've no time for friends.

JEAN – Take care her head doesn't soften with lessons; learning in books it was that sent that wee daftie up at Cuddiestoun clean skite, they say.

GUTHRIE – Would you rather see her skite wi' book-learning or skite with – (*he stops*)

JEAN (*calmly*) – 'Lust' is the word you're wanting, I'm thinking. And you know all about that, John.

GUTHRIE (*angrily*) – My mother had nine bairns all at hame, but fine they'd managed, God-fearing and decent she'd made them, and if one of your bairns were half as good, the shame need never redden the face of you.

JEAN looks at him with a little smile on her lips

Afternoon light on house and yard. JEAN starts pegging up washing.

JEAN – If you're wanting to help, you could trample the blankets.

She points to a large tub with blankets. CHRIS is about to climb in, holding up her skirt

JEAN – Don't get your skirt too wet. (*She exits*)

CHRIS considers, then removes her skirt and petticoat. She gets back in and vigorously stomps up and down on the blankets, laughing and singing to herself. JEAN comes out with another blanket

JEAN (*laughing*) – God, you’ve strippit! (*she slaps CHRIS on the buttocks*) You’d make a fine lad, Chris quine.

JEAN goes off. CHRIS continues to trample blankets until GUTHRIE and WILL come back. Guthrie stares hard at her, breathing heavily, a discomfoting look of arousal in his eyes. Eventually he snaps out of it and snarls:

GUTHRIE – Get out o’ that at once, you shameful limmer, and get on your clothes!

CHRIS climbs out hastily, ashamed, grabs her clothes and rushes offstage into the house. WILL looks embarrassed and stands at back. JEAN emerges

GUTHRIE – Whit would folk say o’ the quine if they saw her stand there, near naked? We’d be the speak and laughing-stock of the place.

JEAN (*evenly*) – Ah, well, it wouldn’t be the first time you’ve seen a naked lass yourself, John; and if your neighbours haven’t, well, they must have fathered their own bairns with their breeks on.

JEAN picks up the tub and carries it off, shaking her head. GUTHRIE snorts with rage

JEAN re-emerges and takes down the washing. CHRIS comes out hesitantly.

JEAN – What’s vexing you, lass?

CHRIS – I ... I ... it was the look, mother. The look that faither gave me back then. (*Jean starts to say something*) No, not just anger. More as though I saw a caged beast peering from his eyes when he watched me standing in the tub. Oh, mother, I didn’t mean to vex.

JEAN eventually manages a smile, and puts her hands on CHRIS’ shoulders

JEAN – Not you, Chris quine, just life. I cannot advise you a thing, my quine. You’ll have to face men for yourself when the time comes, there’s none can stand and help you. (*pause, and then in a distressed tone, emotional*) Mind that for me sometime, Chris, if I cannot thole it any longer. (*she pauses, staring into the distance, then forces a smile*) Och, we’re daft, the two of us, run out and bring me a pail of water.

CHRIS exits with the pail, JEAN shivers

MRS MUTCH and MRS ELLISON come on with shopping baskets.

MRS MUTCH – ... and they tried to keep it from young Chrissie and the boys, but it all came out at the inquest. So sad.

MRS ELLISON – But why did she poison herself, and the baby twins as well?

MISTRESS MUNRO enters

MRS MUNRO – They say it was because she was with child again, and was sore afraid. She’d had a terrible torment with the twins, she nearly died then. So the verdict was that she had killed herself while of “unsound mind”.

MRS MUTCH – And as for John Guthrie, the hypocrite, and all his blether about it being God’s will. If he’d kept his lust in check, she wouldn’t have been in that state in the first place.

MRS MUNRO – I told young Chris her the night I laid out the bodies, you'll be done with the College now, I'll warrant, education's nonsense and you're better clear of it. You'll find little time for dreaming when you're keeping house at Blawearie.

MRS ELLISON – What about the other bairns, Alec and Dod?

MRS MUNRO – I hear they're being sore teased at school that their mother was a daftie, of unsound mind. Guthrie's brother and his wife are down from Aberdeen way, they might take them to live there.

MRS MUTCH – Aye, amidst sorrows, life goes on. (*they shake their heads and exit*)

UNCLE TAM and AUNTIE JANET come in from the back of the house

JANET – No interrupting anything, are we?

CHRIS – No, Auntie, nothing at all. Shall I get you a cup of tea? And Uncle too?

TAM – That would be fine, Chrissie quine. (*to GUTHRIE*) So John, me and Janet have talked it over, and we've agreed we'll tak' the bairns.

JANET – We've aye talked to the boys, and they're daft delightit when they heard o' it.

GUTHRIE – Well, that's fell kind, the two of you, they need to be away for a bit while. And then, once it's all blown over ...

JANET – Ah. That's what we need to make plain. If the boys come with us, it would be for all time.

GUTHRIE – How do you mean, woman?

JANET – We want to adopt the pair of them. For good.

TAM – All legal like, ken.

GUTHRIE (*angrily*) – So you'd steal the flesh of my body from me?

JANET (*nodding, with full eye contact*) – Aye, John, just that. We've never a wean o' our own, though God knows it's no for want of trying.

GUTHRIE – Hah! Ill blood breeds ill.

JANET (*with dignity*) – Well, John Guthrie, mebbe, but it'll be a long time ere *I* have to kill myself because *my* man beds me like a breeding sow.

GUTHRIE – You dirty bitch!

JANET – You'll not speak to me like that, Guthrie man; come Tam and we'll pack our things ...

CHRIS runs out to WILL in the yard

CHRIS – I can't stand it in there!

WILL – Don't let them worry you, Chris, don't let faither make a damned slave of you, as he'd like to do. We've our own lives to lead.

CHRIS – But what else can I do but bide at home now?

WILL – I'll tell you, for my part as soon as I've saved enough silver, I'll be off to Canada, a man is his own master there.

CHRIS – Oh, Will, and you could send for me as your housekeeper!

There is a pause

CHRIS – Will, is there ... is there a lassie somewhere in Drumlithie, where you go to every evening on your bike, someone you plan to take to Canada?

WILL (*hesitates, then*) – Aye, Chris. There is.

CHRIS (*forcing a smile*) – Then I'm right pleased for you, Will. (*She pauses, then bursts into tears*) Oh, mother, mother, why did you do it?

The GUTHRIES are harvesting; GUTHRIE scything corn, WILL forking it into bundles, CHRIS gathering it up and tying it into sheaves. It is hot backbreaking work.

A TINKER enters and speaks to CHRIS, who points to GUTHRIE. The TINKER goes over to him

TINKER – Good day, sir. I'm looking for work and wonder if you're wanting someone.

GUTHRIE – Maybe, maybe. Let's see the work that you've in you first.

TINKER – Ay, fine that. (*Guthrie hands him his scythe and watches as he starts to work*)

GUTHRIE – Aye, we could take you on for a day or so, if the weather holds.

The TINKER nods. GUTHRIE fetches a second scythe and they work rhythmically.

GUTHRIE (*singing*) – Rock of Ages, cleft for me;
 Let me hide myself in Thee.
 When I soar to worlds unknown
 See Thee on Thy judgement throne;
 Rock of Ages, cleft for me
 Let me hide myself in Thee.

THE OTHERS look at each other, but daren't say anything or break their rhythm.

Gradually the lights dim to evening. GUTHRIE stops, looks around and nods.

GUTHRIE – Aye, that'll do for the day.

Night. There is faint light on the house and barn, and moonlight elsewhere. The TINKER is resting in the barn. CHRIS crosses to him with the tray

CHRIS – Here's meat for you. I'm sorry, I'd have you eat in the house with us if it wasn't for faither.

TINKER – Don't let that fash you, lass, I'm as little anxious for his company as he is for mine.

The TINKER suddenly reaches out and put his arm round her legs and pulls her down onto his lap. He laughs at her astonishment

TINKER – You've never lain with a man yet, lass, I can see, and that's a sore waste of hot blood like yours. So mind I'm here if you want me.

He lets her go. She stands, frozen, staring at him. He pats her bottom

TINKER – Mind, I'll be here.

CHRIS runs back to the house

CHRIS stands in the house, faintly lit by moonlight, silhouetted against the sky. At the far side of the stage, the barn with the TINKER sitting there, smoking a pipe

CHRIS stands looking at herself as in a mirror. Smooths herself over. Studies her face. She runs her hands over her body

She crosses to the window and looks across to the barn at the TINKER. She stares at him, and begins to unbutton her blouse

She pauses for a moment, hands on her body. Then suddenly she shakes her head, frightened at what she is feeling; she pulls her blouse closed, and runs off into the house

WILL and CHRIS are in the house. WILL is reading a paper

CHRIS (*trying to sound nonchalant*) – I met Mollie Douglas in Drumlithie to-day, she asked me to ask you to go down and see her.

WILL *doesn't move*

CHRIS (*grabbing his shoulder*) – Will!

WILL (*shaking off her hand*) – Oh, I hear. What's the good? I can't have a quine like other folk – I haven't even an income, a fee.

CHRIS – Maybe she doesn't want your fee, just you. (*she pauses*) Will, they're saying things about her and you in Drumlithie – Galt and coarse tinks like that.

WILL – What things?

CHRIS – What they aye say – that she's with a baby to you and you're biding away from her now.

WILL – Galt said that?

CHRIS – Hinted at it, but he'll do more than hint when he's not speaking to a sister of yours.

WILL (*angrily*) – That about Mollie? They said that, the orra swine! I'll mash that bloody Galt's head till his own mother won't know it!

CHRIS – That won't help, folk would just snigger and say there was truth in it.

WILL – Then what am I to do?

CHRIS (*blushing*) – Do you love her, Will?

WILL *stands, considering an answer, when GUTHRIE comes in, raging*

GUTHRIE – Will! What's this I hear about you and some orra tink bitch in Drumlithie?

WILL – What the devil are you blithering about?

GUTHRIE – Answer my question, boy! I heard it from the postman.

WILL – Put a question with sense in it, then. How am I to know what you've been hearing? I'm no thought-reader.

GUTHRIE – Damn't to hell, you coarse brute, am I to stand your lip, as well as your whoring, every night? Is't true there's a tink called Mollie Douglas that's with a bairn by you?

WILL (*approaching GUTHRIE*) – If you call Mollie Douglas a tink again, I'll knock the damned teeth down the throat of you, faither though you be.

They stand glaring at each other. GUTHRIE makes to strike but WILL catches his arm

WILL – Mind!

GUTHRIE *lowers his arm. WILL turns and starts to leave*

GUTHRIE – Where do you think you're going?

WILL (*turns and looks at him*) You're so anxious I should lie with my lass and get her with a bairn that I'm off to try and oblige you.

WILL *strides off behind the house. GUTHRIE and CHRIS stare after him*

Morning, in the house. WILL comes in, dressed in a suit

CHRIS (*trying to sound nonchalant*) – Ewan Tavendale was down to see you last night.

WILL – Aye?

CHRIS – He thought you'd be leaving Blawearie soon.

WILL – Did he? God, they'd have the breeks from a Highlandman's haunches, the gossipers of Kinraddie. More likely he was down to take a bit keek at you, Chris lass. I think he's taken a bit fancy to you. So look after yourself, for he's Highland and coarse.

CHRIS blushes

WILL – But as it happens, I *am* off to Aberdeen to-day. Lord, Chris, I wish you were coming as well!

CHRIS (*pleased*) – What, up to Aberdeen? I'd like it fine but I can't.

WILL – Well, will I do?

CHRIS – Aye? You look fair brave. Hurry else you'll miss your train.

WILL – Well, ta-ta, Chris. (*a CLOCK CHIMES*) Oh, to hell!

He runs out the door, turns to wave at CHRIS, and is gone.

Village street. MISTRESS MUNRO, MRS MUTCH and MRS ELLISON enter with their baskets.

MRS MUTCH – ... so of course they just thought Will'd gone to Aberdeen for the day, but he didn't come back that night, nor the next day, nor the one after that.

MRS MUNRO – Old Guthrie was fair put out, he went up to Aberdeen and raged at the police. So they asked around, and found that he'd gone and wed his Mollie Douglas, he'd altered his birth certificate for that; and the earth might have opened and swallowed them up, for there wasn't a trace to be found of either of them.

MRS MUNRO – It just shows what things are coming to, you bring bairns into the world and rear them up and expect some comfort from them in your old age and what do you get? Nothing but a lot of damned impudence. It is all this education nonsense.

The shake their heads sorrowfully and depart

CHRIS is in the house reading a letter when GUTHRIE enters

GUTHRIE – Who's it from, then?

CHRIS – From Will, Faither. He says that, through Mollie's mother, he's got himself a job in the Argentine, a cattleman there on a big ranch, (*she looks up*) he and Mollie were sailing from Southampton on the day he wrote this; and oh! he wishes I could have seen them married, and to remember them kindly.

GUTHRIE – Argentine? Where is this Argentine?

CHRIS – It's a long way off, across the sea.

GUTHRIE snatches the letter and scans it. He goes into a rage

GUTHRIE – Ungrateful brat! Black burning shame he should think of himself.

He stops, seizes up, clasps his chest, then collapses on the floor. CHRIS screams: 'Faither!' and runs to him

GUTHRIE (*hissing, unable to move*) – Leave me, you white-faced bitch! Get the doctor.

DOCTOR MELDRUM goes over to GUTHRIE

MELDRUM – So what’s wrong with you now, Blawearie man?

GUTHRIE (*hissing*) – That’s for you to find out, what the hell do you think you’re paid for?

MELDRUM examines GUTHRIE.

MELDRUM – It’s a bad turn of apoplexy. What folk call a stroke. It’s near-paralysed him.

CHRIS – What brought it on, Doctor?

MELDRUM (*shrugs*) – Could be anything. A fit of temper, receiving some bad news, who can tell?

CHRIS (*avoiding eye contact*) – Bad news? Aye. When will he recover?

MELDRUM (*pauses, then*) – I’m afraid, Miss Guthrie, he probably won’t. He’ll likely be this way for the rest of his days. Are you here all by yourself? Then you’ll need to get help. He’ll need a fair bit nursing and I don’t want to see you run yourself into the ground and end up the same way. We’ll give him a whistle for when he needs you. Good day to you.

*Several days later. CHRIS drops into a seat, exhausted, holding her head in her hands.
GUTHRIE whistles again; she goes to him*

CHRIS – What is it now?

GUTHRIE – Come to me, quine.

CHRIS – I’m here now, faither.

GUTHRIE – No, I mean COME to me. (*he pats the bed*)

CHRIS (*shocked*) – Faither! I will not!

GUTHRIE – They did it in Old Testament times, quine.

CHRIS – No!

GUTHRIE (*angrily*) – You’re my flesh and blood, I can do with you what I want. Do you hear?

CHRIS runs out of the house in tears; she heads towards the standing stones.

Moonlight. CHRIS approaches the stones. She is sobbing. She places her hand against one, and looks up to the sky

CHRIS – Dear God ... hear my prayer ... I wish ... Oh, let him die!

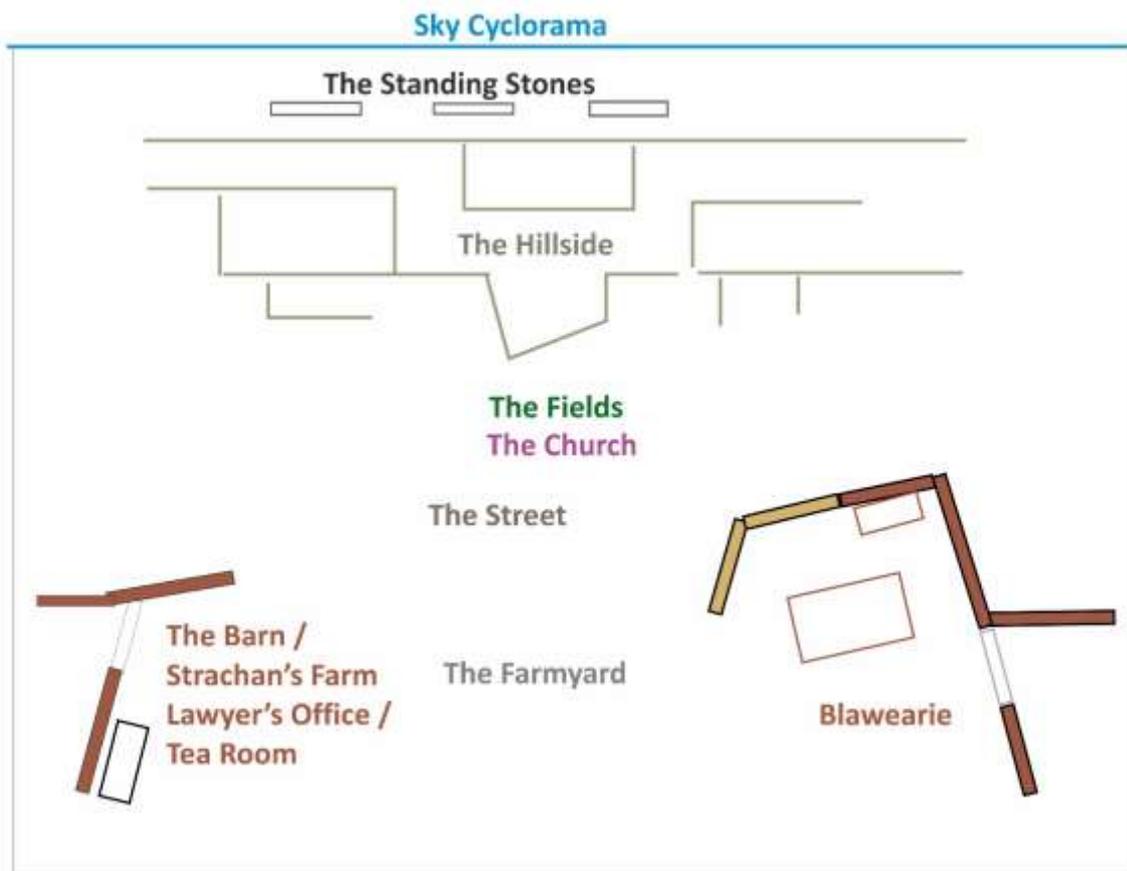
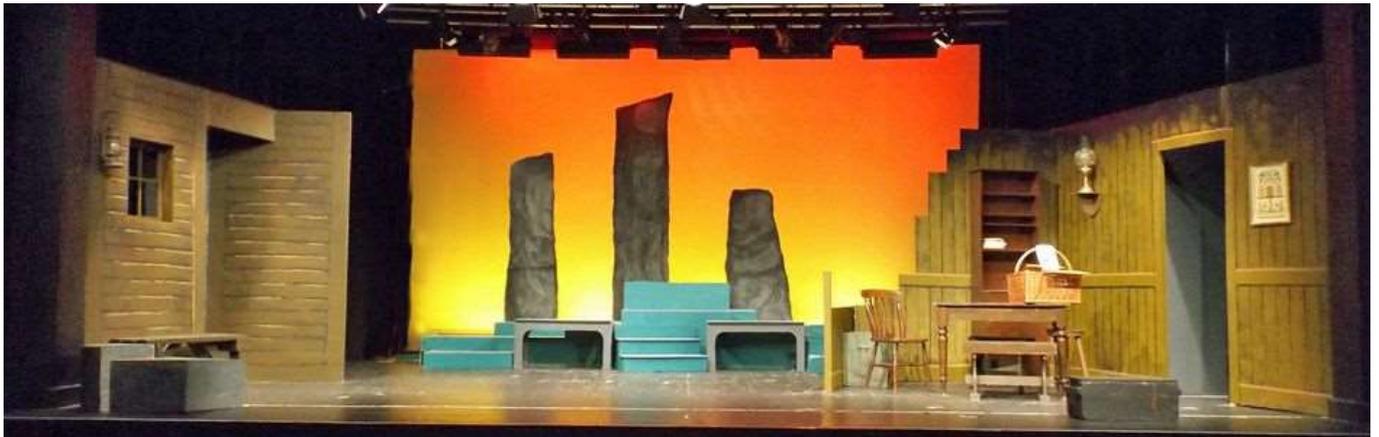
Very slowly, she sits down on the hillside and falls asleep

Blackout, followed by glimmer of dawn sky. A COCK crows. CHRIS wakes, yawns and stretches, and then comes down to the house.

CHRIS – I’ll get you some breakfast, faither.

He does not respond. She goes over and feels for a pulse. She stands back, looks at him, and then draws the sheet up over his face. She stands up, walks forward to face the audience, takes a deep breath, then gives a sigh of relief

THE SET



The play uses a composite set, representing various locations in the countryside and small towns of the Mearns

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First Performed November 2018 at the Churchhill Theatre, Edinburgh by Leitheatre with Nicole Irvine; Tim Foley; Ruth McLaren; Grant Jamieson; Dionne Wilson; Charles Jones; Martin Dick; Amber Thomson; David Reynolds; Billy Renfrew; Jennie Davidson; David Rennie; Lynne Morris; Irene Cuthbert; Ruth Murphy; Debs May; Ray Pattie; Brian Thomson; Campbell Moffat; Alan Jeffreys; Mike Paton; Don Arnott; Bob Allan

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