# Forgiveness

A 10-Minute play

By

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Version 10.19.19

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## Characters:

Major roles are indicated in boldface.

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| **Sam Dowling**: An older man, head of an academic department in the engineering college of a major university. He is dying of a brain tumor. | **John Dowling**: Sam’s deceased son, in his 30s, who appears in apparitional form. |
| **Tim**: An assistant professor, more recently mentored by Sam. | Mary: An associate professor, once mentored by Sam. |
| Physical Therapist. | Bess Dowling: Sam’s deceased wife, who appears in apparitional form. |

## Suggested casting:

**Tim**

**Sam Dowling**

Mary/Bess Dowling

Physical Therapist/**John Dowling**

# Scene 1

(Lights.)

(TIM and MARY are standing and talking.)

TIM: Can a man give himself a brain tumor? It happened so fast.

MARY: I don’t know. That *can’t* *be.* But it almost seems that way. How could anyone endure this? Maybe you *can* tell your brain, “Kill me. I need to die. Please. Find a way.” Maybe Sam found some way to make this happen, to end his grief.

TIM: I never knew of a man who had *two* family members commit suicide. That’s crazy.

MARY: Not so crazy. When John did it, Bess couldn’t stand the pain. Nothing’s worse than a child shooting himself.

TIM: Nothing except your son shoots himself and then your wife swallows pills. And now, Sam’s tumor. Like a chain reaction of tragic events. Each one sets off the next—the end of the whole family.

MARY: Maybe not. The doctors *say* they got the tumor, all of it. Sam should be OK.

TIM: You know Sam. If he gave himself the tumor, he’ll outsmart the surgeons. If he’s strong enough to make that tumor grow in his brain, he’s strong enough to bring it back.

MARY: Let’s stop talking this way.

TIM: I’m going to visit this afternoon. He’s done so much for me. And he accomplished so much . . . for the Department, for the whole discipline.

MARY: Yes, but things were never good at home. Sam didn’t have much time for Bess or their son . . . John. John didn’t go to college. That wasn’t even a possibility. He never did much in the way of work. He was on drugs for a while, he was arrested a few times.

TIM: I never met him.

MARY: Most of what I know about John I heard from Bess. But, one time, right after I joined the Department, Sam took a couple of the junior faculty out to his woodlot to section logs with his chain saw. Just a fun thing. John showed up, but there was tension from the first moment.

TIM: When Susan and I got to Seattle, he and Bess invited us to live in their house. *They* commuted every day from their summer place in Duvall until we found a place to rent. *(Laughing.)* You should have seen their LPs, original vinyl: Cathy Carr, Vic Damone. Last people in the world listening to that stuff.

MARY: This is so sad.

(MARY and TIM embrace gently. TIM exits.)

(Blackout.)

# Scene 2

(Lights.)

(TIM is visiting SAM in a facility’s physical therapy room. SAM is in hospital pajamas or something like it and has a bandage wrapped around his head. There is a walker near him. The PHYSICAL THERAPIST is coaxing SAM to bend down to the floor to pick up bright plastic rings stacked on the post of a child’s ring-sorting toy. The PHYSICAL THERAPIST is holding one of the rings in his hand.)

PHYSICAL THERAPIST: OK, Sam. We’re doin’ great. Now, can you pick up the blue one? *(Looking up at TIM.)* Come in. You must be visiting Sam. You’re very welcome to join us.

(TIM approaches.)

PHYSICAL THERAPIST: Sam, why don’t you show your friend how well we’re doing? Can you reach down—slowly now—and get the blue ring?

SAM: *We’re* not doing anything. And *I’m* sick of your damn rings. Pick it up yourself.

PHYSICAL THERAPIST: Sam, we’re not going to make much progress if we don’t work on the ring exercise. I know you want to regain your mobility.

SAM: I’m mobile enough. *(Kicks the rings and the spindle with its base across the room.)* How’s that for mobility? I’m done with this.

(The PHYSICAL THERAPIST reacts in surprise. SAM does an aimless circuit around the stage, looking at nobody and walking stiffly.)

TIM: (To PHYSICAL THERAPIST.) This man is chair of an engineering department at the University. He’s the head of Northwest Search and Rescue. Why do you think he’s going to play with children’s toys? Can’t you at least get an *adult-looking* version of that thing?

PHYSICAL THERAPIST: *(Stiffly).* I don’t purchase the equipment.

(Blackout or all exit.)

# Scene 3

(Lights.)

(TIM and MARY are standing and talking).

MARY: It’s just a matter of weeks, maybe not even that. The new place is a lot better than the old one. It isn’t fancy. It’s run by a Russian family in their home, and they are very caring. They’ll take Sam to the hospital when the time comes, but right now this place is good.

TIM: I’m going to see him tomorrow morning.

MARY: Sometimes his head is clear, sometimes it’s not. But mornings are better. I visited yesterday, and we pretty much just sat and held hands. He knew he didn’t need to say anything to me. It was just that I was there.

TIM: I’m not nearly as close to Sam as you are. I’ll see how it goes.

(They exit.)

(Blackout)

# Scene 4

(Lights.)

(SAM is in a wheel chair staring blankly into space with a blanket over him and a bandage around his head. TIM enters. After a few moments, SAM notices TIM but doesn’t recognize him. Throughout the scene, SAM speaks slowly, his energy is limited.)

SAM: (Mind wandering.) You’re from the Dean’s office.

(TIM reacts in surprise and pain. Then plays along.)

TIM: That’s right. I’m . . . Bob Wilson, the . . . new outreach coordinator. Dean Bishara asked me to talk to you about the College’s new industry partnership initiative. Normally, I’ll get on your schedule, but I dropped by just in case you had time to talk.

SAM: (Gathering energy.) Yes, I have some time. I’m pleased to meet you, Bob. Welcome aboard. You’ll like working for the College. . . I’ve been here 38 years, and I’m still going strong. This place just keeps me invigorated. . . Now, about the industry partnership initiative. . . I’m confident that you’ll find that this department is very well prepared to participate. We already have an industry advisory board that meets . . .

(JOHN enters in apparitional form, a projection of SAM’S imagination. He is dressed in untidy workingman’s clothing. He is carrying an open, half-empty bottle of whisky. The bulge in his pocket will turn out to be a pistol. TIM takes notice of JOHN. The play has become surreal. The audience is now seeing the action as filtered through SAM’s mind.)

SAM: (Dismayed and distracted by JOHN’S presence and aggressive manner.) . . . that meets . . . twice a year. Boeing, Microsoft . . . Amazon—all represented. (Faltering.) About ten . . . more tech companies. Also . . . the major public utilities—Seattle City Light, Puget . . . Power.

JOHN: (Gruffly and with sardonic, slightly threatening humor.) Bob, you forgot to introduce *me*. I’m the *other* outreach coordinator. I’m John. John . . . Dowling . . . your . . . assistant.

(Henceforth, the “TIM” we see on stage is in part a distortion of reality, a projection of SAM’S guilty imagination. This is because SAM imagines JOHN and later BESS joining in the actual conversation he is having with TIM, a conversation in which Tim is pretending to be BOB WILSON.)

TIM: Oh, that’s right. I’m sorry. Professor Dowling, this is John Dowling, he’s your son. I *think* you’ll remember him.

JOHN: That’s right.

SAM: (Focuses his attention desperately on TIM.) We have a database of departmental alumni—probably more complete . . . than the one in the Dean’s Office.

JOHN: Fuck your database, Dad. What do you think Mom thinks of your database? Hey, Bob—would you like *another* “assistant”? Shall I ask my Mom to join the party?

(As if on cue, BESS enters in apparitional form and stands impassive at the periphery. JOHN points to BESS.)

JOHN: Hey Dad. Shall I invite Mom to join the conversation? Is she going to be your wife? Is she going to be some flunky from the Dean’s office? I’m letting *you* decide.

(BESS steps forward.)

TIM: (To JOHN.) Stop!

(TIM’S next speech is both the actual TIM trying to get draw SAM out his disturbing reverie, and SAM’S attempt to free his thoughts from JOHN and BESS and return to his play-acting with the actual TIM.)

TIM: Sam, listen to me! . . . I’m Bob Wilson, the . . . new outreach coordinator. Dean Bishara asked me to talk to you about the College’s new industry partnership initiative.

JOHN: Fuck your dean. Fuck your database. Think about your life, Dad. Think about your wife—for once. Think about me—for once. You ignored us when we were alive. Now you’re trying to ignore us in your last days. Sorry, it doesn’t work like that.

TIM: (To JOHN.) For God’s sake. . . Why do you need to torture the man?

(JOHN takes a swig from the bottle.)

JOHN: Shut up. Stay out of our business.

SAM: I loved Bess. I did. When we traveled, some guys found women. I never did.

JOHN: Sorry, that’s not enough. Your brand of unfaithfulness was worse. It went on decade by decade.

TIM: (To JOHN.) Sam talked about Bess at work. He loved Bess. He did. He mentioned you. He worried about you.

BESS: (To JOHN.) He cared about us both. He was just . . . busy . . . preoccupied.

JOHN: He was always disappointed in me. Ashamed. Tell me I’m wrong, Dad. Tell me. Am I wrong?

TIM: Stop torturing the man.

SAM: Tim, I’m torturing *myself*. I know what’s happening. I *brought* John and Bess here. John is right. I have no business trying to dodge all that I did. . . Did, didn’t do, did wrong—very wrong.

JOHN: That’s right, Dad. I’m here to *enjoy* your suffering. (Drinks from the bottle.) Let’s call it a little “family time.”

SAM: OK. Say it. Say it all. I deserve it. But, in my worse moments, burying you, burying Bess, I never thought about putting a gun to my mouth like you did. I’m stronger than that. For all my faults, I had beliefs, values, the strength to persevere. You had nothing, no strength of any kind. You didn’t try to do *anything* with your life.

TIM: (To JOHN and SAM.) This has to end.

BESS: John, what are you doing this for? Does it do any good? I’ve forgiven Sam. Why can’t *you*?

JOHN: Why should I forgive him? Why did *you*? He doesn’t deserve forgiveness.

SAM: I don’t. I know that.

(BESS takes JOHN’S arm and walks him away from SAM and TIM.)

SAM: Tim, are you married? I’m having trouble remembering.

TIM: Yes, Sam. My wife is Susan. You know her.

SAM: That’s right. Of course. Very nice young woman. . . Tim, it’s important to have a rewarding career, It’s good to work hard at it. But not the way I did. Do you understand? Learn something from what you’re seeing today. Learn something.

(TIM gestures in acknowledgement. Lights focus attention on BESS and JOHN.)

BESS: Forgiveness is not about whether it’s deserved. The whole point of forgiveness is that it’s *not* deserved. This is the one thing you can still do, John. So do it. You don’t have to *love* your father. But you can *forgive* him.

JOHN: No.

BESS: Forgive him for *my* sake. You always loved me, and I loved you more than anything else in the world. Walk right over to your father and tell him you can forgive him.

JOHN: I can’t. Perhaps I should. But I can’t. That’s one of the differences between you and me.

BESS: Try.

JOHN: I’ll do what I can.

(After a few moments, JOHN walks over to SAM.)

JOHN: Dad, you can call this forgiveness if you want to. I can at least end your misery. (Pointing his gun at SAM.) Here is my gift to you.

SAM: (Looking straight up at JOHN and the barrel of the gun.) Thank you, son.

(JOHN shoots SAM at close range, but no shot is heard. SAM slumps over slowly and gently in the manner of a man dying a natural death. JOHN steps back a few paces. TIM approaches SAM in his wheelchair.)

TIM: Sam. Sam? God!

(TIM puts an arm around SAM’s head as he examines him. There is nothing like a wound. Then TIM walks hurriedly to the far side of the stage and, as though it were a corridor, calls loudly.)

TIM: We need someone here. Quickly, we need someone.

(BESS takes JOHN’s hand She seems to be thanking him and treating him with respect. She leads him slowly Offstage. After a few moments, she changes her dress in view of the audience to become MARY and she walks to Center Stage. TIM joins MARY.)

MARY: You were there . . . when he died?

TIM: Yes, when I came in, Sam was alert. We talked. Then . . . things happened. He was talking, but not exactly to me. He was very . . . emotional. Then, he just faded out and died. I got the nurses, but it was over.

MARY: Perhaps just as well. . . When you talked, what were you talking about?

TIM: Just reminiscing. Then more personal stuff. Things about his life that he regretted. I’m sorry, but I don’t want to repeat it. At least not yet.

MARY: I understand.

TIM: No one will ever know what his final moments were like, what he was thinking. But I think he found forgiveness.

(Blackout.)

**The End**