

SIDE LINES

A one-act play

by

Gerard Dunning

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Cast of Characters

(See full character relationship map from p.6)

Character:

Dave Mason	(Male, late 30s-40s) Volunteer junior rugby coach. Patient, practical and perpetually under pressure.
Tanya Wilkes	(Female, 40s) Mother of a player. Fiercely opinionated, fiercely protective and never knowingly under-reacting.
Graham Wilkes	(Male, 40s-50s) Tanya's husband. Easy-going, diplomatic and well-practised at smoothing over awkward situations.
Hēmi Rangi	(Male, 40s) A solo father originally from New Zealand. Warm, witty and passionately loyal to the All Blacks
Brett Murphy	(Male, 40s-50s) Father of a player. Thoughtful, quietly competitive and convinced he understands the game better than most.
Kylie Murphy	(Female, 40s) Brett's wife. Endearingly dishevelled, quick-witted and entirely comfortable being herself.
Maya Chen	(Female, late 30s-40s) A solo mum whose husband is frequently away for work. Organised, perceptive and unfailingly capable.
Nigel Frost	(Male, 50s-60s) A quiet, thoughtful observer who occasionally returns to the rugby sideline despite no longer having a child in the game.

Synopsis

On a freezing Saturday morning at a suburban junior rugby ground, a handful of parents gather on the touchline to cheer on their kids. But as the game unfolds, the sideline becomes a battleground of its own. Old rivalries, bruised egos, sporting loyalties and long-simmering frustrations spill out between a Wallabies tragic, a fiercely proud Kiwi dad, a sideline "expert" with too much to say, a mum surviving on cask chardonnay, an over-prepared solo parent, an eccentric stranger with a gourmet hamper, and a volunteer coach just trying to keep the whole thing from imploding.

Scene

The play takes place on the sideline of a junior rugby field on a cool Saturday morning.

The match is never seen. It exists beyond the stage through the actors' reactions, the coach's interaction with the game, and a carefully constructed soundscape. The audience should always sense a full game unfolding just out of view.

The stage is simple, with fold-up chairs, eskys and personal items brought on by the characters as they arrive. The Coach (Dave) moves freely along the touchline while the spectators naturally shift position as conversations form and dissolve. Although the setting remains constant, the stage picture should evolve throughout the play, reflecting the changing dynamics of the group.

Time

The present

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Author's Note

Side Lines is an ensemble play driven by conversation rather than action. Although set entirely on the sideline of a junior rugby match, the real drama unfolds between the spectators. The rugby itself is never seen; it exists only through the characters' reactions, allowing the audience to imagine the game while remaining focused on the lives surrounding it.

The play unfolds as a continuous flow of intersecting conversations rather than conventional scenes. Topics overlap, drift and return naturally, with humour emerging from recognisable personalities, shared routines and everyday observations. The pacing should feel relaxed but purposeful, balancing lively ensemble exchanges with quieter moments of reflection.

The coach serves a unique dramatic role. While the parents become absorbed in rivalry, gossip and social ritual, he remains focused on the children and the game, grounding the play whenever he enters.

The comedy depends on authenticity. These are ordinary people, not caricatures. Their conversations reflect the friendships, frustrations and traditions found on sporting fields across Australia and New Zealand, reminding us that sometimes the most memorable part of the game happens just beyond the touchline.

Character Relationship Map

Side Lines is an ensemble piece. The characters are a group of parents who have spent enough Saturdays together to have developed familiarity, habits and running jokes. The relationships should feel lived-in rather than explained.

DAVE

With the group: Dave is the coach and the stabilising presence. He is respected, but the parents are comfortable enough to question, tease and second-guess him. He generally lets them talk rather than getting drawn into arguments.

With Tanya: Familiar and occasionally challenged. Tanya questions his decisions because she cares about her child; Dave knows this and doesn't take it personally.

With Graham: Easy and supportive. Graham rarely challenges Dave and is generally comfortable around him.

With Brett: Respectful but occasionally exasperated. Brett thinks he understands the game; Dave knows the difference between watching rugby and coaching children.

With Kylie: Familiar and relaxed. She can tease him without creating conflict.

With Hēmi: Friendly and uncomplicated. Hēmi respects Dave's authority as coach, even when he jokes about it.

With Maya: Mutual trust. Maya is comfortable leaving Leo in Dave's care and accepts his judgement.

With Nigel: Their relationship has developed quietly. Nigel recognises what Dave is carrying because he has been through it himself. They have a genuine connection based on shared experience.

Children: Dave has no child identified in the play. His relationship is with the team as a whole. He sees the children as children first and players second.

TANYA

With Graham: Married. They have the ease and shorthand of a long-established couple. Tanya is more watchful and direct; Graham tends to smooth things over.

With Dave: Comfortable enough to question him. Her concern for her child often makes her more intense than she realises.

With Brett: Frequently challenges him. She is one of the few people completely unimpressed by his rugby commentary.

With Kylie: Close sideline friendship. They share observations, humour and an understanding of the other parents.

With Hēmi: Friendly rivalry. Their Australian/Kiwi arguments are affectionate rather than hostile.

With Maya: Warm and sympathetic. Tanya recognises how much Maya has to manage.

With Nigel: Initially cautious, then increasingly comfortable. She comes to recognise that his observations are based on experience rather than judgement.

Child - Ryan: Tanya watches Ryan closely and worries about how he is developing. She notices the small things and can sometimes read more into them than is necessary. Her concern is genuine, but she can over-monitor him.

GRAHAM

With Tanya: Married. He is the diplomatic counterbalance to Tanya. He often knows when not to argue and uses humour to keep things moving.

With Dave: Friendly and respectful. He is generally supportive rather than critical.

With Brett: Friendly, although his attempts at diplomacy can accidentally sound like agreement.

With Kylie: Comfortable friendship and easy banter.

With Hēmi: Good mates. Their relationship is relaxed and familiar.

With Maya: Friendly and supportive.

With Nigel: Quickly accepts him into the group. Graham is one of the least threatened by Nigel's presence.

Child - Ryan: Graham is more relaxed about Ryan than Tanya. He cares, but doesn't analyse every aspect of the child's performance. Together, Tanya and Graham provide two different but complementary approaches to parenting.

HĒMI

With the group: Hēmi is outgoing, confident and proudly Kiwi. He enjoys the group and is comfortable enough to provoke arguments for fun.

With Brett: Their main running rivalry. Rugby, Australia and New Zealand provide an endless source of competition. Neither genuinely wants the argument to end.

With Tanya: Affectionate banter and sporting rivalry.

With Graham: Good mates. Their friendship is easy and established.

With Kylie: Comfortable banter. She is happy to puncture his confidence.

With Maya: Warm friendship. He genuinely values her presence in the group.

With Dave: Respectful friendship. He accepts Dave as coach while still enjoying the opportunity to comment.

With Nigel: A developing rugby connection. Hēmi recognises that Nigel genuinely understands the game, even though Nigel never makes a point of demonstrating it.

Child - Tāne: Hēmi is proudly protective of his son. He notices and defends Tāne's mistakes and is openly biased in his favour. Importantly, he knows he is biased and enjoys that fact.

BRETT

With Kylie: Married. Their relationship is comfortable and well established. Kylie knows exactly how Brett operates and is not afraid to puncture his certainty.

With Dave: Brett respects Dave but believes his own observations about the game deserve consideration. Dave is usually less impressed.

With Hēmi: Sporting rivalry and friendship. Brett wants to win the argument; Hēmi enjoys making sure he doesn't.

With Tanya: Tanya regularly brings Brett back to earth when his commentary becomes excessive.

With Graham: Friendly, although Graham's diplomacy sometimes gives Brett the impression that he has support.

With Maya: Comfortable friendship. Maya tends to observe Brett's behaviour rather than take his analysis too seriously.

With Nigel: Brett initially treats Nigel as another spectator, but gradually realises Nigel has genuine experience and knowledge. Nigel never competes with him for authority, which allows Brett to accept him.

Child - Josh: Brett sees Josh as a developing rugby player and can project future potential onto him. He watches the game through the question of what Josh might become. Dave sees the child Brett sometimes forgets is still nine.

KYLIE

With Brett: Married. She knows his habits, his arguments and his tendency to take rugby too seriously. She can challenge him without undermining the relationship.

With Tanya: Close friendship. They share a similar observational humour and often understand each other without explanation.

With Graham: Friendly and familiar.

With Hēmi: Good-natured banter. She is happy to take him down a peg when necessary.

With Maya: Strong friendship. Kylie admires Maya's competence and is comfortable joking with her.

With Dave: Familiar parent/coach relationship.

With Nigel: Initially uncertain because he is new to the group, but she quickly recognises that his dry observations fit the sideline dynamic.

Child - Josh: Kylie is less focused on Josh's rugby performance than Brett. She is more grounded in the practical realities of parenting and provides a counterbalance to Brett's sporting ambitions.

MAYA

With the group: Maya is friendly, capable and observant. She is less invested in the sporting arguments than the others and often sees the absurdity of what is happening.

With Dave: Trusting and respectful. She knows Leo is safe with him.

With Tanya: Warm friendship. Tanya recognises the amount Maya has to manage.

With Kylie: Close friendship and easy humour.

With Hēmi: A warm and increasingly close friendship. Hēmi genuinely wants her to remain part of the group.

With Brett: Friendly, but she is largely amused by his analysis rather than persuaded by it.

With Graham: Comfortable friendship.

With Nigel: Maya is one of the first to make Nigel feel included. She is curious about him without interrogating him.

Child - Leo: Maya is a parent carrying much of the practical responsibility to the point of being solo. She knows Leo intimately - his moods, reactions and likely behaviour. Her parenting is affectionate but practical; she understands him without necessarily indulging him.

NIGEL

With the group: Nigel is initially an outsider, but he is not trying to become part of the group. His quiet confidence and dry observations gradually make him one of them.

He has already lived through the stage of life the others are currently experiencing. He understands the children, the parents, the driving, the weekends and the arguments because he has been there.

With Dave: The most significant relationship. Nigel recognises what coaching means beyond the game. Dave recognises that Nigel understands something about this stage of life that he has yet to experience.

With Hēmi: Shared understanding of rugby. Nigel's knowledge emerges naturally rather than through explanation.

With Brett: Nigel gently challenges Brett's certainty without trying to defeat him. Brett gradually recognises Nigel's experience.

With Tanya: He understands the anxious parent because he has seen the same behaviour many times before. He never judges her for it.

With Kylie: His dry humour fits naturally with hers, allowing her to become comfortable with him.

With Maya: She provides an early bridge into the group.

With Graham: Easy and uncomplicated. Graham accepts Nigel without needing to work him out.

Children: Nigel's children are no longer involved in junior sport. Their absence is important to his character. He represents what happens when the games, training, driving and weekends eventually stop. He misses not necessarily the sport itself, but the life and the people that surrounded it.

THE CHILDREN

The children are never seen. Their personalities and relationships with their parents are revealed entirely through the adults' behaviour.

Ryan - Tanya and Graham's child. Tanya watches closely; Graham is more relaxed.

Josh - Brett and Kylie's child. Brett sees sporting potential; Kylie is more grounded.

Tāne - Hēmi's son. Hēmi is openly proud and protective.

Leo - Maya's son. Maya understands him intimately and manages much of his life herself.

The team - Dave's responsibility as coach. He sees them collectively and focuses on their development rather than their parents' expectations.

Nigel's children - No longer part of junior sport. They represent the stage of parenthood that comes after all this.

The children may never appear, but **they are the reason every adult is here.**

Side Lines

SETTING: A suburban junior rugby ground. Winter. Early Saturday morning. The audience is, in effect, the field.

There is enough playing space on the audience side of the line for **DAVE**, the coach, to move up and down tracking the game.

Soundscape underneath and around the scene: distant whistles, kids warming up on other grounds, a PA system that doesn't quite work, boots on wet grass, crows, the thud of rugby balls, a parent somewhere yelling the wrong child's name.

AT RISE: **DAVE** is already there. Volunteer coach. Clipboard under one arm, coffee in hand, whistle around neck, placing cones and trying to get ahead of a day that has already beaten him.

He lays out cones with unnecessary precision, stops, looks at them, moves one two inches.

DAVE

Checks his phone. Mutters

No, mate, if he's still crook he doesn't play. **(beat)** No, "crook" as in vomiting. **(beat)** No, not "crook" as in a bit flat. Vomiting is generally a line in the sand.

He hangs up. Looks at the field. Looks at the sky.

Fantastic!

Enter TANYA at speed, carrying a folding chair, thermos, sideline blanket and the energy of someone who has been annoyed since six-thirty. GRAHAM follows, carrying everything else.

TANYA

I'm telling you now, if we're over on this side all morning I'll be filthy.

GRAHAM

Morning to you too.

TANYA

Look at it.

GRAHAM

I am.

TANYA

No, look at it.

GRAHAM

It's a rugby field.

TANYA

It's a swamp.

GRAHAM

It's winter.

TANYA

And whose bright idea was an eight-forty kick-off in Penrith in July?

GRAHAM

We're not in Penrith.

TANYA

Emotionally, we are.

DAVE clocks them. He knows them. He doesn't need more information than that.

DAVE

Morning, Tanya... Graham.

GRAHAM

Morning, Dave.

TANYA

Has the ref turned up?

DAVE

Morning to you too.

TANYA

I'm asking because if it's that bloke from last week I may as well just go home now.

DAVE

Different ref.

TANYA

Competent different or just different, different?

DAVE

He has a whistle and a pulse.

TANYA

So fifty-fifty.

GRAHAM starts setting down chairs.

TANYA

Not there.

GRAHAM

Why not there?

TANYA

Because from there you can't see the far touchline.

GRAHAM

Tanya, no one can see the far touchline. It's in another postcode.

TANYA

You don't get sarcastic to me before nine o'clock.

GRAHAM

Then we've got ten minutes.

She scans the field.

TANYA

Where's Ryan?

DAVE

Warm-up.

TANYA

With who?

DAVE

The team.

TANYA

No, I mean who's running them? Because last week there was no structure at all, they were just sort of... milling.

DAVE

They're eleven.

TANYA

Exactly. That's when habits form.

DAVE gives **GRAHAM** a look: *you hearing this?* **GRAHAM** gives the helpless married-man shrug.

Enter **KYLIE** and **BRETT**. **KYLIE** is in a coat over a onesie, Ugg boots, carrying a giant handbag and an esky. **BRETT** carries two camp chairs and a face that suggests he's made peace with this being the rest of his life.

KYLIE

... and if anyone judges me for what I'm wearing I'll cry and I'll make it everyone's problem.

BRETT

No one's judging you.

TANYA

I am a little bit.

KYLIE

Morning.

She dumps the esky down with a thud.

Jesus Christ its cold.

GRAHAM

Morning.

BRETT

Graham.

KYLIE

I had to scrape ice off the windscreen with my Medicare card.

TANYA

You don't own a scraper?

KYLIE

I own a child who plays rugby at stupid o'clock. That's enough responsibility for one household.

She clocks DAVE.

KYLIE

Coach.

DAVE

Kylie.

KYLIE

You look tired.

DAVE

I coach children's sport.

BRETT sets up the chairs in practical silence.

TANYA

You brought the esky.

KYLIE

I always bring the esky.

TANYA

What's in it today babe?

KYLIE

Morale.

BRETT

Cheese.

KYLIE

Shut up, Brett.

BRETT

What? It's mostly cheese.

KYLIE

It's not mostly cheese.

BRETT

There's enough cheese in there to sink a boat.

KYLIE

That's called planning.

TANYA leans in.

TANYA

Any chance there's coffee in that planning?

KYLIE

No, but there's a cask of chardy wearing a puffer jacket.

GRAHAM looks at the esky with new respect.

GRAHAM

That's one of the better things I've heard all week.

TANYA

At **(checks watch)** eight-fifty-something in the morning?

KYLIE

What, you want me sober for this?

BRETT spots something on the field.

BRETT

Where's Josh starting?

DAVE

Centres.

BRETT absorbs that.

BRETT

Right.

DAVE

Right.

BRETT

He trained at ten all week.

DAVE

He's in the centre today.

BRETT

No, I heard you. I'm just trying to understand the thinking.

KYLIE

Here we go.

BRETT

I'm asking a question.

KYLIE

You always say that like you're at a senate inquiry.

BRETT

I'm interested in the thinking.

DAVE

The thinking is we've got two tens and one of them can tackle.

A beat. KYLIE barks a laugh.

KYLIE

That is so bleak.

BRETT takes the hit, but stores it. Enter **HĒMI**, solo, carrying a chilly bin, folding chair and wearing All Blacks gear like it's a second skin. He has the warmth of a man who can walk into a group and behave as if he's been there all morning.

HĒMI

Mōrena (good morning), you miserable lot.

GRAHAM and **HĒMI** shake hands like long lost brothers.

KYLIE

Look at him. Sun's not up and he's still cheerful... Suspicious.

HĒMI

That's because I'm from a successful rugby nation.

TANYA

There it is.

HĒMI

What?

TANYA

You haven't even put your chair down and you're already carrying on like a divorced Phil Kearns.

HĒMI

That's incredibly hurtful cuz.

He plays up a hurt gesture, smiles and clocks **DAVE**.

HĒMI

Coach.

DAVE

Hēmi.

HĒMI

How are the boys looking?

DAVE

Cold.

HĒMI

Good. Builds character.

KYLIE

So does a functioning heater but apparently that's not the road we're on.

HĒMI sets up next to GRAHAM.

HĒMI

What'd I miss?

TANYA

Brett's launching an internal review into team selection.

BRETT

I'm not launching anything.

HĒMI

Who's at ten?

BRETT

Not Josh.

HĒMI

Ah. **(beat)** Well. Hard to argue with that then.

BRETT gives him a look.

BRETT

You haven't heard the argument.

HĒMI

I don't need to. It's junior rugby bro. Every parent's argument is the same argument wearing different shoes, eh.

KYLIE points at him.

KYLIE

That's annoyingly wise.

HĒMI

I'm available for podcasts. **(laughs)**

Enter MAYA, solo, carrying a sports bag, coffee, a rain jacket, a folding stool and the efficient expression of a woman who has already completed a full day before most of these people found socks.

She clocks the group, the field, the weather, the available space. Assesses everything in two seconds.

MAYA

Morning.

DAVE

Morning, Maya.

MAYA

Do we know if they're actually kicking off on time or are we all just standing in a field performing optimism?

DAVE

Ref's here.

MAYA

That's more than last round.

She spots TANYA.

MAYA

You've started early.

TANYA

I haven't started anything.

KYLIE

That's true. She arrived started.

MAYA smiles, puts her bag down, checks the field.

MAYA

Where's Leo?

DAVE

Bench to start.

MAYA

Great. **(beat)** He's going to take that really well... if by "really well" we mean "like a hostage negotiator in a tiny pair of boots."

DAVE

I'll manage him.

MAYA

No, I know. I'm just preparing the emotional paperwork.

HĒMI clocks her with a grin.

HĒMI

You're alone today?

MAYA

Simon's in Perth till Tuesday. I'm on footy duty.

KYLIE

Work?

MAYA

Apparently. Or second family. I've stopped asking for specifics.

GRAHAM

Sounds like there's a spreadsheet involved.

TANYA

I don't know how you do it on your own.

MAYA

Poorly.

She opens her bag and starts producing labelled containers like a field medic.

KYLIE

Jesus.

MAYA

Mouthguard, tape, spare socks, ventolin, bananas, Panadol, backup Panadol, wet wipes, dry wipes, phone charger, two muesli bars no one will eat, one apple they'll request and then reject, and a consent form I was apparently meant to sign in 2024.

KYLIE

Marry me.

MAYA

No.

KYLIE

Worth a try.

DAVE checks his watch. Looks to the field. Whistle in the distance. The adults all instinctively turn toward the unseen game. This is the ritual. The atmosphere shifts. DAVE steps up.

DAVE

Alright. Quick one before we kick off.

No one listens properly but they all hear him.

DAVE

Everyone stays behind the line today.

He points to the touchline.

DAVE

Not on it. Not over it... Behind it.

TANYA

Obviously.

KYLIE

That feels directed.

DAVE

It is directed. At all of you.

HĒMI

What if the ball comes out?

DAVE

Then you play on. No need to start the Haka.

GRAHAM

Give it time. The Wallabies are rebuilding.

BRETT

What if the touch judge can't see something?

KYLIE

Brett!

BRETT

I'm asking.

DAVE

Then the touch judge can't see something.

TANYA

And if the ref's missing high tackles?

DAVE

Then I'll deal with it.

TANYA

Will you though?

A beat. DAVE looks at her.

DAVE

Good chat.

He blows his whistle and jogs off down the line toward the unseen players who are getting into position. A moment. The group settles then GRAHAM notices someone approaching. He elbows BRETT.

BRETT

What?

GRAHAM

Six o'clock.

They all look. From stage-right appears NIGEL. Immaculately dressed for a suburban rugby ground. Wax jacket. Pressed chinos. Leather boots that have never knowingly encountered mud. In one hand he carries a beautifully woven picnic hamper. In the other a folded tartan rug. He smiles as though arriving at the opening day of Wimbledon.

NIGEL

Morning everyone!

General murmurs. Not unfriendly. Not enthusiastic. NIGEL surveys the ground with quiet disappointment.

NIGEL

Goodness... It's considerably softer than last week.

He kneels. Feels the grass. Nods thoughtfully.

NIGEL

Yes... Very soft.

He begins laying out the rug with extraordinary care. Every corner aligned. Every crease removed. The others watch.

MAYA

You've brought the "blanket".

NIGEL

One should never sit directly on damp ground.

HĒMI

Been doing it forty years.

NIGEL

Yes... I'm sure your chiropractor appreciates the business.

He opens the hamper. The audience expects sandwiches. Instead... Porcelain cups. A linen napkin. Actual cutlery.

BRETT

Mate... Did you rob a hotel?

NIGEL

No. The hotel used stainless steel. This is considerably nicer.

He produces a china teapot wrapped in a tea cosy. TANYA stares.

TANYA

You brought... tea?

NIGEL

Naturally.

He pours. Without irony. The whistle blows again.

DAVE

(off) Ryan! You're at halfback!

GRAHAM looks towards the field.

GRAHAM

Halfback?

DAVE

(off) Yep. Let's go, Ryan!

GRAHAM

I thought he was playing centre.

DAVE

(off) Ryan is halfback today.

GRAHAM watches the field for a moment.

GRAHAM

Right.

The moment passes. Everyone settles again. NIGEL calmly offers a cup.

NIGEL

Anyone?

Nobody moves. A beat.

MAYA

...Is it Earl Grey?

NIGEL smiles. He's found his audience.

NIGEL

Naturally.

MAYA

Of course it is.

She accepts the cup.

KYLIE

Sorry... do we know you?

NIGEL

Nigel. **(beat)** I've been coming here on and off for a while.

MAYA

Maya.

BRETT

Brett.

TANYA

Tanya.

GRAHAM

Graham.

KYLIE

Kylie.

HĒMI

Hēmi.

Nigel notices the All Blacks gear HĒMI is wearing.

NIGEL

Kiwi?

HĒMI

Organic bro. Born and raised.

A beat.

NIGEL

Still hurts... that 2007 quarter-final.

HĒMI

(with genuine pain) It was a tough day.

NIGEL

Tough day? **(beat)** That was a national tragedy.

HĒMI

Three months.

KYLIE

Three months?

HĒMI

Of mourning. The whole country was grieving.

NIGEL nods. He understands.

NIGEL

Everyone thought the All Blacks would win.

HĒMI

Everyone!

NIGEL

Then France happened.

HĒMI

Bloody Frogs.

A beat.

NIGEL

Good to meet you all.

KYLIE

You say that now.

NIGEL

Sometimes... I do bring coffee.

TANYA

That's reassuring.

NIGEL

I try to keep an open mind.

DAVE

Alright boys, bring it in! Quick water and then we're away!
Mouthguards in, let's go!

The spectators settle into position, all facing the field. The game begins. Whistle.

Shouts from kids. The soundscape sharpens. And instantly the adults become worse versions of themselves.

TANYA

Ryan's standing too deep again.

GRAHAM

They've been on the field three seconds.

TANYA

He's too deep for three seconds.

HĒMI

Nah, shape's alright.

TANYA

Whose shape?

HĒMI

Theirs.

TANYA

Which side are you talking about?

HĒMI

The side playing rugby.

KYLIE

That narrows it down beautifully.

A thud from the field. A kid yells.

DAVE

(to the field) Don't bunch!

TANYA

Jesus Ryan. He's already filthy and he hasn't touched the ball.

BRETT

Josh is too wide.

KYLIE

He's in the centres. Wide is sort of where they keep them.

BRETT

Not that wide.

DAVE

Get back! Back! Back! (sees the potential penalty)

TANYA

Penalty! That's a penalty! He was all over him!

GRAHAM

Tanya...

TANYA

What? He was.

DAVE

(to the field, resetting) Come on. Up together!

Everyone reacts to a move on the field

HĒMI

Nothing wrong with that.

TANYA

He came in from the side!

HĒMI

No he didn't.

TANYA

He absolutely did.

HĒMI

He came in legally.

TANYA

You can't possibly see from there.

DAVE

(to the field) Come on. Stay connected!

HĒMI

(following the game) I've got eyes.

TANYA

Kiwi eyes. They don't count.

HĒMI

Excuse me? We see rugby very clearly. It's one of our national strengths.

KYLIE

Along with sheep and emotional repression.

DAVE

(to the field) Talk to each other

DAVE moves to the field. **MAYA** is watching the game.

MAYA

Leo's about to ask to go on.

GRAHAM

How can you tell?

MAYA

He's doing that thing where he looks personally betrayed by rotation.

Sure enough, a kid's voice from the field:

LEO

(off) MUM!

MAYA closes her eyes.

MAYA

There it is.

TANYA

What's he want?

MAYA

To negotiate.

LEO

(off) MUM!

MAYA

No.

LEO

(off) But...

MAYA

No.

A beat.

KYLIE

That gets ya, doesn't it?

MAYA

I've got another six years of this. I'm not opening with weakness.

DAVE runs past the line following play.

DAVE

Hands out! Hands out! Reset! Good, good, stay square... square, Ryan, square!

TANYA immediately lights up.

TANYA

See? He's out of position.

GRAHAM

Or Dave's coaching.

TANYA

No, no, listen to the tone. That's concern.

KYLIE

You can hear concern in a man yelling "square"?

TANYA

Yes.

KYLIE

That's a gift.

**The play has moved downfield. Everyone subtly shifts as one, like
birds tracking a chip packet.**

HĒMI

Go on! Use it! Use it!

BRETT

He held that too long.

HĒMI

No he didn't.

BRETT

He absolutely did.

HĒMI

Mate, if you think that's holding on too long, you should've watched the Bledisloe at Eden Park in twenty-one. You blokes were clinging on for eighty straight minutes.

GRAHAM

And, there it is.

TANYA

Jesus Christ, we're six minutes in.

HĒMI

Fifty-seven twenty-two.

KYLIE

You say that like a bible verse.

HĒMI

Because it brought comfort to a troubled people.

BRETT

You know what's weird? Bringing up a Test Match while your own kid's right there dropping the ball.

A beat. They all look out. A kid has, in fact, dropped the ball.

HĒMI

Ah.

GRAHAM

Whose was that?

MAYA

Yours.

HĒMI

No, I know whose kid. I meant whose fault.

KYLIE

That's a terrible clarification.

Whistle. DAVE runs back through.

DAVE

Scrum here! Red ball! Pack in properly! No hero stuff!

TANYA

Why's it red's ball?

BRETT

Knock on.

TANYA

By who?

MAYA

Hēmi's son.

HĒMI winces, then immediately recovers.

HĒMI

Conditions.

KYLIE

You're unbelievable.

HĒMI

Moisture's a factor.

TANYA

You know what else is a factor? Catching it.

A whistle. The scrum breaks apart

DAVE

(calling) Reset! Again!

The players reset for the scrum. The adults instantly return to their own conversations.

BRETT

(observing whilst players are resetting) Tāne's offside.

HĒMI

No he isn't.

BRETT

He absolutely is.

HĒMI

Nah.

MAYA

I don't even know what offside is.

TANYA

Nobody does.

MAYA

(to **NIGEL**) So you have a child playing Nigel?

NIGEL

No. Not anymore.

HĒMI

They leave the game?

NIGEL

Eventually.

BRETT

You still follow the local comp?

NIGEL

When I can.

DAVE

It's a good way to lose your weekends.

TANYA

People don't realise how much time it takes.

KYLIE

The games are the easy part.

DAVE

Depends where you're playing.

A beat.

BRETT

Exactly.

DAVE

Home game, you're done by lunchtime.

DAVE returns to the field.

TANYA

Away game? Some of those grounds aren't even towns. They're just a postcode with a paddock.

She shakes her head.

KYLIE

Don't.

TANYA

What?

KYLIE

Don't say it.

TANYA

What?

KYLIE

Mudgee!

A collective groan.

MAYA

That was a big one.

KYLIE

Four hours there. Four hours back.

BRETT

Eight hours in the car.

KYLIE

Eight hours. **(beat)** And do you know what the worst part is?

Nobody answers.

I didn't even get to a vineyard. **(beat)** One of Australia's best wine regions and I spent the day in a car park eating a cold sausage roll.

Everyone laughs.

TANYA

That's junior sport.

KYLIE

No. That's being a parent taxi service with a boot full of sports bags.

BRETT

But they remember those trips.

KYLIE

They remember winning.

BRETT

No. They remember being together.

KYLIE looks like she might argue. She doesn't.

NIGEL

He's right.

A small pause.

KYLIE

Don't encourage him, Nigel.

NIGEL

Sorry. **(beat)** But he is.

They look at him.

You don't miss the driving. **(beat)** But you miss having somewhere to drive to.

A whistle. The dads turn as one.

BRETT

Well. **(beat)** Interesting decision.

KYLIE

Oh no.

MAYA

What?

KYLIE

(indicating to **BRETT**) He's gone into commentary mode.

BRETT

The referee has clearly identified an issue at the breakdown.

TANYA

He's watching under-12s.

BRETT

Which is exactly where discipline starts.

TANYA

He's been playing for all of forty seconds.

BRETT

And already we've seen a lack of structure.

HĒMI

You've seen a child run into another child.

BRETT

Exactly.

HĒMI

That is generally how rugby works.

GRAHAM

To be fair, there was a bit of a gap.

BRETT

Thank you, Graham.

GRAHAM

I wasn't agreeing with you.

BRETT

You sounded like you were.

GRAHAM

That's the danger of being diplomatic.

KYLIE

No, the danger is people mistake it for agreement.

A whistle. The players reset.

NIGEL

Bit early to be talking structure.

Nobody responds. NIGEL watches the field.

NIGEL

They haven't even found their positions yet.

BRETT

They should know their positions.

NIGEL

They do. **(beat)** They're under twelves.

A small pause.

MAYA

He's got a point.

BRETT

I'm not saying they should be perfect.

NIGEL

No. **(beat)** You're saying they should be better.

BRETT looks at him.

NIGEL

I know.

KYLIE

How?

NIGEL

Parents.

A small laugh.

NIGEL

Same every Saturday.

TANYA

You used to coach?

NIGEL

No. **(beat)** I watched.

Another whistle. NIGEL watches the field.

NIGEL

And refereed a bit.

BRETT

Ah.

NIGEL

You learn not to notice everything.

BRETT

That's an interesting approach to refereeing.

NIGEL

Keeps everyone alive.

KYLIE smiles despite herself. On the field, a child breaks away.

MAYA

Go, Leo!

The adults react.

NIGEL

There he goes.

MAYA

He's quick.

NIGEL

Very. **(beat)** He knows where he wants to go.

MAYA looks at him.

NIGEL

That's half the battle.

The game continues.

BRETT

Anyway. **(announcer voice)** "The Wallabies will be pleased with the intent."

HĒMI

The Wallabies?

BRETT

I'm drawing a comparison.

HĒMI

To what?

BRETT

The game.

HĒMI

Which game?

BRETT

Rugby.

A beat.

HĒMI

Excellent analysis.

MAYA

So... this happens often?

KYLIE

Every weekend.

MAYA

The commentary?

KYLIE

The confidence.

BRETT

Let's not forget, the Wallabies have beaten the All Blacks before.

HĒMI looks straight at BRETT

BRETT

(continues) Many times.

HĒMI

A few...

BRETT

Including the famous one in...

He pauses.

HĒMI

Which one? **(grinning)**

BRETT

The famous one.

NIGEL

Eden Park?

Everyone looks at him.

NIGEL

Or Sydney? **(beat)** That was a good one.

HĒMI

1991

NIGEL

That's it.

GRAHAM

Sydney Football Stadium. Bledisloe Cup. Twenty-one-twelve.

A tiny beat.

TANYA

Which one, Brett?

GRAHAM

There have been a few.

BRETT

Exactly.

TANYA

There have been a few losses too.

BRETT

That's irrelevant.

TANYA

No, it's history.

HĒMI

She's got you there bro.

BRETT

You're both biased.

HĒMI

I'm proudly biased.

BRETT

At least Australians can admit when they're wrong.

HĒMI

You just said the Wallabies had a famous victory and couldn't name it.

A beat. MAYA laughs.

MAYA

That's quite specific.

NIGEL

Rugby supporters have very selective memories.

BRETT

Not true.

NIGEL

No?

BRETT

No.

NIGEL

How many points did the 2003 World Cup semi-final finish?

BRETT

...That's different.

TANYA

That means he doesn't know.

BRETT

Everyone knows.

TANYA

Everyone except everyone currently standing here.

GRAHAM

22-10.

Everyone looks at him.

GRAHAM

What? **(beat)** I said I knew it.

KYLIE

You waited until someone else didn't.

GRAHAM

Timing is important.

DAVE

(from the field) Graham!

GRAHAM

Yes?

DAVE

Watch the game.

GRAHAM

I am.

DAVE

You're watching history from 2003.

GRAHAM

It's relevant.

DAVE

It's not.

DAVE turns back.

BRETT

Anyway, the point is...

HĒMI

There is no point.

BRETT

The point is Australia has always had the talent.

HĒMI

True.

BRETT

Thank you.

HĒMI

But talent is not the same as winning.

BRETT

Here we go.

HĒMI

The All Blacks don't win because they have better players.

BRETT

What then?

HĒMI

They win because they play together.

A beat.

NIGEL

He's right.

BRETT

Don't encourage him.

NIGEL

I'm not encouraging him. **(beat)** He's right.

KYLIE

That's twice today already.

NIGEL

I'm having a good morning.

TANYA

This is why I prefer cricket.

Everyone looks at her.

TANYA

What?

MAYA

You know nothing about cricket.

TANYA

Exactly. **(beat)** Nobody argues with me about it.

They laugh. A sudden change. A player goes down.

DAVE

Stop!

The whistle cuts through everything. The entire sideline changes. The commentators disappear. The parents return. DAVE is already moving onto the field.

DAVE

Stay there, mate. Don't move.

A silence. Everyone watches.

KYLIE

Who was that?

MAYA

I couldn't see.

TANYA

That looked bad.

BRETT

It wasn't dirty.

A beat. Everyone looks at him.

What?

KYLIE

Nobody said it was.

BRETT

I know. I'm just saying.

HĒMI

Nobody knows what happened yet mate.

TANYA

I saw the contact.

NIGEL

You saw the result.

TANYA

Excuse me?

NIGEL

I'm saying it happened quickly.

TANYA

It looked high.

BRETT

It wasn't high.

TANYA

You were watching your son.

BRETT

Yes. **(beat)** Because he's my son.

That lands.

MAYA

Who made the tackle?

Nobody answers immediately. **BRETT** looks toward the field, points.

BRETT

...Was it him?

HĒMI

Brett.

BRETT

I just want to know.

GRAHAM

Maybe we wait until Dave comes back.

TANYA

Someone should check on him.

KYLIE

Dave's there.

TANYA

I know. **(beat)** I mean someone else.

She starts to move. **KYLIE** reaches out.

KYLIE

Tanya.

TANYA stops.

KYLIE

Let him do his job.

A moment. TANYA nods. The group watches. No arguments. No opinions. Just parents. DAVE kneels beside the player (unseen). The child sits up. A small reaction from the group.

MAYA

He's moving.

Everyone exhales slightly.

HĒMI

Good.

NIGEL watches DAVE.

NIGEL

He's calm.

MAYA

Is that good?

NIGEL

Very.

BRETT

He knows what he's doing.

A beat.

NIGEL

Yes.

DAVE helps the player to his feet. The child walks toward the sideline (unseen).

DAVE

Good tackle.

The group looks at him.

BRETT

Good tackle?

DAVE

Good tackle.

TANYA

But he got hurt.

DAVE

Yes. (beat) Those two things can both be true.

Nobody responds. Because they know he's right. The injured player re-joins the sideline. The other players reset.

DAVE

(to the field) Ready?

The adults slowly return to their places. But something has shifted.

NIGEL

That's the bit you remember.

MAYA

The injuries?

NIGEL

No. **(beat)** The way everyone stopped.

The game resumes. The group watches quietly for a moment. The tension has gone. A normal Saturday morning returns. KYLIE reaches into her esky.

TANYA

Already?

KYLIE

What?

TANYA

Nothing.

KYLIE

Exactly.

She takes out her drink.

MAYA

Is that wine?

KYLIE

It's a refreshment.

MAYA

That wasn't an answer.

KYLIE

It was the answer.

She takes a sip. NIGEL watches.

NIGEL

A long-standing sideline tradition.

MAYA

The drink?

NIGEL

The negotiation.

A beat.

KYLIE

Exactly.

HĒMI

Amateurs.

Everyone looks at him.

BRETT

What?

HĒMI reaches into his chilly bin. Pulls out what appears to be a can of Coke.

BRETT

Mate!

HĒMI

Yes.

BRETT

You brought Coke?

HĒMI

No. (big grin)

HĒMI slowly turns the can. A small logo is visible. Everyone realises. Inside what looks like a Coke can is a beer.

GRAHAM

Is that...

HĒMI

Yep.

MAYA

That's a beer.

HĒMI

Correct.

BRETT

Inside a Coke can?

HĒMI

Not inside. (beat) The Coke can is the beer.

Everyone looks closer.

BRETT

You've disguised a beer as a Coke.

HĒMI

Kiwi cunning.

GRAHAM

That's bloody genius!

HĒMI

No.

GRAHAM

No?

HĒMI

Genius is building a bridge.

He holds up the can.

This is cunning.

BRETT

What's the difference?

HĒMI

Genius solves a problem. **(beat)** Cunning solves a problem you created yourself.

KYLIE

(laughing with a snort) He's not wrong.

TANYA

That's the worrying part.

DAVE returns from the field.

DAVE

What's going on?

BRETT

Hēmi has solved a problem nobody asked him to solve.

DAVE sees the can. A beat.

DAVE

Oh.

HĒMI

Want a slurp?

Dave looks at him. The temptation is real.

DAVE

I shouldn't.

HĒMI

Just a wee sip? Just enough to appreciate the craftsmanship?

DAVE looks at the can. Almost.

NIGEL

That's how it starts.

A beat.

MAYA

You know the kids can see you, right?

The group pauses. She points to HĒMI'S can. A small silence. Everyone looks at the field. Then back at the can. KYLIE lowers her drink slightly. TANYA looks at HĒMI. BRETT suddenly finds something interesting on the ground.

GRAHAM

To be fair...

Everyone looks at him.

Probably not the example we want to set.

A beat. TANYA looks at GRAHAM. Not angry. Just a look.

...Although I appreciate the engineering.

TANYA

Graham.

GRAHAM

I'm just saying.

HĒMI reaches into his bin. Offers a can to BRETT.

HĒMI

Here.

BRETT looks around. Then takes it.

BRETT

For inspection.

KYLIE

Of course.

BRETT

Quality control.

He examines it then raises the can.

Cheers.

He takes a drink. Everyone watches. MAYA shoots him a look of disapproval. TANYA looks at HEMI then back at BRETT. KYLIE takes the opportunity to have her own drink. DAVE looks thirsty. HEMI laughs. He offers another can to Graham.

GRAHAM

No.

HEMI

Why?

GRAHAM looks at TANYA. She says nothing. Just looks.

GRAHAM

Because I have chosen wisdom.

TANYA

Good.

GRAHAM

...and because I value my continued existence.

TANYA

Also good.

NIGEL

A rare example of learning before consequences.

DAVE

I need to remember that.

Everyone looks at him.

DAVE

What?

NIGEL

Nothing. **(beat)** Just progress.

The game continues. The pace has slowed. The parents settle back into their places. The morning has returned.

KYLIE

Anyone doing anything after this?

Nobody answers immediately. Which is an answer.

Right.

BRETT

We've got the dentist.

A collective reaction.

MAYA

On a Saturday?

BRETT

Only time we could get.

TANYA

That's cruel.

BRETT

Just a check-up.

TANYA

No, the timing is cruel.

GRAHAM

We had one last month.

KYLIE

You survived?

GRAHAM

Barely.

TANYA

He means the child.

GRAHAM

I meant both.

MAYA

What's wrong with dentists?

KYLIE

Nothing. **(beat)** Until they tell you your child doesn't floss.

BRETT

He says he does.

TANYA

Does he?

BRETT shrugs. A small laugh.

MAYA

I've got the usual.

KYLIE

What's usual?

MAYA

Everything. **(beat)** Homework. Food. Laundry. Finding things nobody remembers losing. More laundry... honestly my life is laundry.

TANYA

That's a full-time job.

MAYA

Apparently without pay.

A beat. The group smiles.

DAVE

(from the field) Last five!

The parents look over. Then back.

BRETT

Anyone going to the away game?

GRAHAM

Which one?

BRETT

The one in three weeks.

KYLIE

The one that requires a map and a compass?

HĒMI

It's not that far.

Everyone looks at him.

What?

KYLIE

You are from New Zealand?

HĒMI

Yes.

KYLIE

Your definition of "far" is unreliable.

HĒMI laughs

GRAHAM

We should probably organise something.

BRETT

Convoy?

TANYA

We're not invading another country.

GRAHAM

A convoy sounds organised.

KYLIE

It sounds like we'll all get lost together.

MAYA

How many cars?

BRETT

At least four.

GRAHAM

We could hire a van.

A beat. Everyone considers it.

HĒMI

Actually...

BRETT

Don't.

HĒMI

What?

BRETT

You are already thinking about a rugby van and a mix tape.

HĒMI

It has possibilities.

TANYA

No.

HĒMI

You haven't heard the possibilities.

TANYA

I don't need to.

NIGEL smiles.

NIGEL

Careful.

Everyone looks at him. DAVE returns from the field.

That's how it starts.

KYLIE

What?

NIGEL

One game. **(beat)** Then another.

He looks around.

Then suddenly you're planning travel six months in advance.

A pause.

BRETT

He's not wrong.

Everyone knows he isn't. DAVE enters the conversation.

DAVE

Away game?

BRETT

Thinking about transport.

DAVE

Already?

KYLIE

Apparently we have become that family.

DAVE looks toward the field. The players are gathering.

DAVE

You'd be surprised how quickly it happens.

A beat. Everyone starts watching again. The conversation fades. DAVE looks at the field. The final whistle. The game ends. The kids shake hands. Parents clap. Not loudly. Just enough. DAVE watches for a moment. The players disperse. Then he exhales. For the first time all morning, he is not coaching.

BRETT

Good game.

DAVE

Yeah, it was.

A beat.

BRETT

What was the score?

Everyone looks around. A pause.

GRAHAM

I think we won.

TANYA

You think?

GRAHAM

I think so, yeah.

HĒMI

I saw numbers.

Everyone looks at him.

HĒMI

I did not see what order they were in.

NIGEL

A very accurate summary of junior sport.

DAVE

We won.

A beat. Everyone reacts.

BRETT

By how much?

DAVE

Three points.

GRAHAM

Thought it was eight.

TANYA

You thought it was eight?

GRAHAM

It looked like eight.

DAVE

No-one watching the score?

BRETT

I was watching.

Everyone looks at him.

Mostly.

DAVE

You were talking about the Wallabies.

BRETT

That was relevant.

DAVE

To an under-twelve game?

BRETT

Spiritually.

HĒMI

To be fair, the Wallabies need all the support they can get.

A beat. Everyone looks at him.

What?

MAYA

There he is.

BRETT

Wondering when you'd bring that back.

HĒMI

I showed restraint.

A laugh. The kids begin returning to their parents (unseen).

BRETT

He went well though?

DAVE

Yeah.

BRETT

I think Josh should spend more time at five-eighth.

DAVE

Why?

BRETT

Because he's creative.

DAVE

He's ten.

BRETT

Exactly.

DAVE

He's also currently learning where to stand.

BRETT

That's why he needs more responsibility.

KYLIE

That logic is terrifying.

GRAHAM

When's training next week?

DAVE

Changed to Tuesday.

TANYA

Can't do Tuesday.

DAVE

Why?

TANYA

Something.

A beat.

DAVE

Well that's specific.

TANYA

It's a Tuesday thing.

MAYA

Are we doing anything before the next game?

BRETT

Away game.

Everyone groans.

HĒMI

It's not that far.

KYLIE

Don't.

HĒMI

I didn't say anything.

KYLIE

Your face did.

GRAHAM

End of season isn't far away either.

A small pause. The field is quieter now. DAVE returns from collecting the last of the equipment.

DAVE

What's this?

BRETT

Planning next year.

DAVE

Already?

KYLIE

Apparently we have become those people.

DAVE looks around at them.

DAVE

You say that like you weren't those people already.

A laugh.

HĒMI

Next year is important.

Everyone looks at him.

HĒMI

What?

MAYA

Nothing.

HĒMI

It is.

DAVE

He's right.

Everyone looks at Dave.

BRETT

Careful.

DAVE

About what?

BRETT

You're encouraging him.

DAVE

I'm talking about the kids.

That settles everyone.

DAVE

They've had a good year. **(beat)** You can see the difference.

The parents listen.

DAVE

At the start, they were all just chasing the ball.

BRETT

They still do.

DAVE

Yes. **(beat)** But now they're starting to understand where they need to be.

A small moment.

GRAHAM

So you're saying Ryan's ready for five-eighth? He's starting to see the game.

DAVE

No. **(beat)** I'm saying he knows which direction to run.

Everyone laughs.

BRETT

Small steps.

DAVE

Very small.

KYLIE

And next year?

DAVE

Depends.

Everyone waits.

DAVE

On them. **(beat)** They change a lot at this age.

MAYA

Good or bad?

DAVE

Both.

He looks toward the kids.

DAVE

That's the fun part.

A moment.

HĒMI

Maya?

MAYA looks at HĒMI

Coming back?

MAYA looks at the group. Then the field.

MAYA

I think so.

HĒMI

Good. **(beat)** Someone has to keep everyone organised.

MAYA

That is absolutely not my job.

HĒMI

No. **(beat)** But you do it anyway.

MAYA smiles. NIGEL watches DAVE.

NIGEL

That's the thing.

Everyone looks at him.

You think you're signing up for a game. Then suddenly you're signing up for everything around it.

He looks at DAVE.

The training. The driving. The weekends. And one day you realise the kids have moved on.

DAVE takes that in.

But for now...

He looks at the field.

They haven't.

BRETT

Alright.

A pause.

Who's bringing oranges next week?

Everyone laughs. The group begins packing up. Chairs fold. Bags are lifted. Parents call for their kids. The sideline slowly disappears.

HĒMI

See you next week.

MAYA

Don't forget your boots.

HĒMI

I never forget my boots.

MAYA

You forgot them last week.

HĒMI

That was one time.

They move off. HĒMI calls to his son as he leaves

Tāne. Wait up.

KYLIE

Come on.

TANYA

Where's your bag?

GRAHAM

I thought you had it.

TANYA

Why would I have it?

They disappear. The field is almost empty. DAVE remains. He looks around. The posts. The markings. The grass. NIGEL packs his basket.

NIGEL

You going to pack up?

DAVE

Eventually.

NIGEL

That's a coach answer.

DAVE

What's the referee answer?

NIGEL smiles.

NIGEL

Depends... Whether anyone's listening.

DAVE laughs. A small moment. NIGEL stands to walk off. DAVE follows.
For the first time all morning, they are standing in the same place.

DAVE

You miss it?

NIGEL knows exactly what he means.

NIGEL

The refereeing?

DAVE

The whole thing.

NIGEL looks around.

NIGEL

Sometimes. (beat) Not the decisions.

DAVE

No?

NIGEL

No.

He looks toward where the parents were.

The conversations.

A pause.

DAVE

I thought it was about the game.

NIGEL smiles.

NIGEL

When you're in it, it is. **(beat)** When you're out of it...

He looks back at the field.

It's everything around it.

DAVE takes that in. A quiet moment.

DAVE

They'll all be back next week.

NIGEL

Yeah. That's the strange part.

DAVE

What is?

NIGEL

You think you're showing up for the kids. **(a pause)** Then one day you realise they were only the reason you arrived.

DAVE looks across the empty field.

NIGEL

The people are why you stayed.

DAVE picks up the last ball. A small smile.

DAVE

I'll see you next week?

NIGEL

Yeah. See you next week.

They leave the field together.

Curtain.