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SF PERUSALS

Pizzazz

A View From The Obelisk
Roman Fever
Pizzazz

Hugh Leonard

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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ISBN 978-0-573-01641-7

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Pizzazz consists of three plays intended solely as entertainment. If they have a theme in common, it is that each one deals with travellers—in Rome, near Dublin, and on the Shannon—who are apart from their natural environment. Another quality in common is perhaps suggested by the original composite title *Scorpions*. As for the individual plays, *A View from the Obelisk* is a reworking and expansion of a 25-minute play I wrote for television sixteen years ago: only the situation and the theme are unchanged. *Roman Fever* is adapted from Edith Wharton's whiplash story; a gem which, rightly or wrongly, I thought cried out to be put on a stage. As for *Pizzazz*, I have always wanted to write the dramatic equivalent of a Chinese Box: the toy that is simple to look upon and drives one to near-madness when played with. This is my attempt, and I hope it is not as intimidating to see as it was to write.

Hugh Leonard

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A View from the Obelisk

CHARACTERS

Owen
Rosemary
The Boy, Eoghain

A VIEW FROM THE OBELISK*

A hilltop. Afternoon

We are at the base of an obelisk which is built on the summit; the upper part tapers above us out of sight. An arched alcove is set into the base, with a bench running across its width. We may assume that the other three sides of the base are identical. There are no trees, just grass and outcrops of stone. A sense of space

Owen and Rosemary come into view, he leading the way even though the climb has used up much of his strength. He is in his late forties, clothes well-cut. Rosemary is forty; she looks younger; a Londoner

Rosemary Darling, do slow down, these aren't walking shoes. (*Out of breath*) Shouldn't we turn back?
Owen Look. (*He indicates the obelisk*)
Rosemary We're here then? Clever us.
Owen And there's the view. This is the place.

Rosemary laughs

What?
Rosemary You looked as if you were going to genuflect. "This is the place."
Owen I was quoting.
Rosemary Oh, yes?
Owen Brigham Young. When he and his followers looked down on the Great Salt Lake.
Rosemary All those wives. How many did he have?
Owen God knows. One's enough for anyone.
Rosemary But not for some.
Owen Now, now.
Rosemary (*as she puts her arm through his, smiling*) Couldn't resist it.
Owen Look at the view.
Rosemary It's pretty.
Owen Is that all? Pretty?
Rosemary Impressive.
Owen Over there, Wicklow. (*Turning from right to left*) The mountains, Kattygollagher, the two Sugarloafs, Bray Head. There, the sea.
Rosemary (*clowning*) Is it? Oh, good.

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* N.B. Paragraph 3 on page ii of this Acting Edition regarding photocopying and video-recording should be carefully read.

Owen Vico, Sorrento Point, the island. On clear days you can make out Snowdonia or the Mournes to the north. Walk around here, you can see Dublin.

Rosemary Have a heart, I'm out of puff.

Owen Pretty, she says. It's terrific.

Rosemary giggles

Now what?

Rosemary "Turrific." You're getting your brogue back.

Owen A brogue is a shoe. If you mean my accent, I've always had it. Why not?

Rosemary It's thickening. I mean it. Since yesterday, since we got off the plane. Congealing by the minute.

Owen That is not true.

Rosemary "Dat is not troo." You see? I don't mind, I like it. It was what attracted me.

Owen When?

Rosemary Then. I have to sit. I'm not the hill-climber I thought I was.

Owen Who's the invalid now?

Rosemary Smug.

Owen grins and looks at the view. His attitude is of one consciously and aggressively alive

(*Without rancour*) Yes, pleased with yourself. I think I liked you better when you were ill. Well, you watch it, my lad. You're not out of the woods yet.

Owen (*unconcerned*) Mm-hmm.

Rosemary "This day will end in tears."

Owen Come again?

Rosemary When I was little and we were laughing too much, high spirits and so on, that was my grandmother's pet phrase. She had one for all occasions . . . could have made a fortune in greetings cards. And the day always did end in tears.

Owen So?

Rosemary What I'm trying to say is, slow . . . down. Please?

Owen I'm fine.

Rosemary The sort you are, you give convalescence a bad name. I hadn't unpacked last night before you were off to look up your old cronies. It could have waited.

Owen We agree there.

Rosemary It was too much for you . . . I knew.

Owen I don't mean it that way. I met them . . .

Rosemary You said.

Owen George Furlong, Charlie Duggan and Suffering God.

Rosemary Who?

Owen His name is Sean Cronin, but he used to preface every second statement with "Oh, suffering God". In our town we all had nicknames.

Rosemary What was yours?

Owen Oh, no. You're thrifty . . . you'd save it for future use. Well, I wasn't expecting a brass band or a light in anyone's window. A few maudlin reminiscences would have done.

Rosemary You said you'd had a good time.

Owen I thought I'd had. It was like walking away from an accident: it isn't until later you notice the blood. I said to George Furlong: "Do you remember above on the Burma Road during the freeze-up of forty-seven. We were tobogganing and Sergeant Lawlor stood in front of us and held his hand up as if he were stopping a motor car. We thought we'd killed him." George looked me in the eye, smiled and said: "I disremember that."

Rosemary Perhaps he did.

Owen Not he. Oh, there were salutations and "How are things in Limeyland?" and "Weren't you the wise man to get out of this kip". Charlie Duggan went home after one drink, sucking a peppermint. Suffering God stayed and got pissed. All three of them were as unchanged as a snapshot. But it was as if the past—theirs and mine—was a club, and I'd broken the rules.

Rosemary You do dramatize.

Owen No re-admission.

Rosemary A hilltop is all it takes. Put you on the summit and you're King Lear.

Owen scowls

You say yourself they were civil.

Owen Civility may be sign of friendship in Highgate. Here, it's the opposite.

Rosemary I see. If they were really your friends, they'd have killed you.

Owen (*not heavily*) Dry up.

Rosemary Charming.

Owen It was because I was the one who got away, who escaped. That's not forgiven.

Rosemary There are worse sins.

Owen Such as?

Rosemary I mean, face it, darling, you left more than just a country.

He looks at her, feigning lack of comprehension

Let's not play the innocent. What about Moira? Perhaps your friends' coolness had just a little to do with her.

Owen (*dismissive*) No.

Rosemary Why not? You're forever telling me how religious they all are. No divorce, no living in sin.

Owen That's in the past. Nowadays they pay lip-service to the rules, but it's on the surface. Around here, in the towns, they've changed.

Rosemary How would you know?

Owen I read, I stay in touch. The world finally got in at them.

Rosemary Well done, world! Where does she live?

Again, he looks at her with studied blankness

Moira.

Owen You know.
Rosemary I mean, from here.

He goes upstage, looks off, then turns his back on what he is describing

Owen Look out that way. You see the two long piers? That's Dun Laoghaire. Go inland from the far one and there's a maze of houses . . . off-white walls and red roofs.
Rosemary I see it.
Owen Funny . . . all the way from here to Dublin, nothing but roof-tops. It wasn't like this when I left . . . there were patches of green. Now they're spreading like molasses.
Rosemary Like what?
Owen W. C. Fields. "Molasses . . . spreadingest stuff I ever did see!"
Rosemary You should visit her.
Owen What for?
Rosemary I wouldn't mind.
Owen Liar.
Rosemary Really. I'm sure she's curious . . . I would be. She'll want to know that you've been ill, that you're getting better now . . .
Owen Yes, first the good news, then the bad. No, thanks.
Rosemary What you mean is, seeing her might upset you.
Owen Guilty conscience?
Rosemary *You* tell *me*.
Owen Wouldn't you say it's a bit late in the day for putting me to the test?
Rosemary How?
Owen Trial by ordeal. Like giving money to an orphan and sending him to the shops to see if he can be trusted. I thought I'd won my spurs years ago . . . came home with the change, whiter than white.
Rosemary So you have. Sorr-ee!
Owen What is there to prove? It's dead, all done with. Gone . . . yes?
Rosemary Yes. You see, I never realized we'd get this close to it . . . to her. I mean, she's down there now. And I wish it was tomorrow and we were on the train for the west.
Owen Fool.
Rosemary (*nodding, meaning herself*) Idiot.
Owen Anyway, I'm not a masochist. I don't enjoy having doors slammed in my face. And if it wasn't slammed . . . (*In a voice quivering with female outrage*) "Can you credit it, Dympna, after all these years, not caring whether a body was alive or dead, as God is me judge he had the audacity to come begging for forgiveness."

As Rosemary looks at him:

Well, I wouldn't, no fear, but she'd say I did . . . not married to an artist for nothing. "But I gave him his answer. I told that blackguard, I said——" (*He breaks off. His attempt at mockery has perhaps come too close to home*) I . . . told him——
Rosemary Leave it.

Owen (*a new tack, as if to destroy the thought*) Listen, that woman, tidy? . . . don't talk to me. On the mantelpiece . . . two vases, right? Their distance from the exact centre measured with a ha'penny ruler.

Rosemary (*laughing*) You are wicked.

Owen God's truth. And every object in between balanced for size and symmetry. Because if the ornaments were *not* symmetrical, then the walls would fly apart, the floors open up and the world collapse.

Rosemary Dreadful man.

Owen As a matter of awful fact, Moira does believe—or at least she did—that the world will end in the year Two Thousand.

Rosemary You're making this up.

Owen No, really. It's not an uncommon belief in these parts. The Irish believe that not only does God move in mysterious ways but in round numbers. That's the reason their money went metric.

Rosemary Oh, stop.

Owen I swear it. They—— (*He stops*)

Rosemary They what? Are you all right?

Owen A bit . . . light-headed. It'll pass. (*Something has happened within him. His reaction is part bewilderment, part fear*)

Rosemary You look awful. Sit by me.

Owen No . . .

Rosemary I say yes. (*She draws him to her*) Your hand is like ice. How do you feel?

Owen (*an attempt at a grin*) Not well.

Rosemary (*alarmed*) You were overdoing it . . . I told you.

Owen The damnedest feeling, as if I'd gone hollow inside. Wow.

Rosemary Have you come over faint, is that it?

He shakes his head

You're so stubborn. You turn what's supposed to be a convalescence into a holiday. You go climbing mountains.

Owen A hill. One hill.

Rosemary It was stupid.

Owen Yes, it was.

Rosemary And I'm worse. Instead of helping, I nag. Should I go for a doctor.

Owen No, wait. It's easing.

Rosemary Are you sure?

Owen Give me a minute. Do you know, I think just now I nearly died.

Rosemary (*frightened*) I never know when you're exaggerating and when you aren't.

Owen It was like going off the edge of a cliff . . . all you had to do was let go. Nothing to it. Something happened to me. I mean, something isn't the same as it was.

Rosemary Look, you wait here . . .

Owen There's no need. It's gone.

Rosemary (*sceptical*) Just like that?

Owen We'll give it a few minutes, then we can start back.

Rosemary Are you quite mad?
Owen It's downhill, and the hotel's not far.
Rosemary You're going to sit here and rest——
Owen I just said so.
Rosemary—and I'm going to walk down to the village——
Owen No doctors.
Rosemary —and telephone to the hotel for a car.
Owen There's no need.
Rosemary Meanwhile, I want you to promise me you'll stay here quietly. And if you won't, I'll leave you. I'll fly back to London, I mean it.
Owen No, you don't.

As she looks at him:

I promise.
Rosemary I'll be back in fifteen minutes. Now stay.

She turns to look at him, concerned. He nods

She goes off

Left on his own, he sits for a moment, then stands experimentally, gauging his own reaction. He feels his pulse

Eoghain appears around the corner of the obelisk. He moves slowly, engrossed in comparing his sketch of the panorama on a drawing pad with the reality. He holds up the pad, not noticing Owen. He is young, thin, poorly dressed

Owen watches him

Eoghain (*in disgust*) Ah, feck.
Owen Language!

Eoghain whirls around, startled

Afternoon.
Eoghain Sorry.
Owen What for? Like yourself, I thought I was the only one up here.
Eoghain I was just——
Owen Sketching. So I see.

Eoghain is ill at ease. He looks from the sketch pad to the view without seeing either

Nothing more embarrassing. I've been through it. You think you're alone, so you make faces or let loose a few adjectives. Then you find you're under surveillance.

Pause

Are you from around here?
Eoghain Beg pardon?
Owen I asked if you were——
Eoghain I'm from the town.

Owen Snap. I mean, I was originally. Not a bad little place.
Eoghain Suppose not.
Owen To get out of. (*Chattily*) I've been away fifteen years. I'd forgotten how magnificent the view was. Just like you, I'd come here and sit. Sometimes I'd bring a sketch pad. We all did. (*He senses that Eoghain is uncomfortable*) I'm not, by the way, the sort of gentleman who prowls around lonely places. If you know what I mean.
Eoghain (*unable to cope*) Pardon?
Owen (*hand upraised*) Word of honour.
Eoghain (*mumbling*) I don't mind.
Owen (*amused*) Don't you? . . . bravo. (*Then*) No, there was very definitely a lady wife here just now. She ran off on an errand of mercy. Aid for the afflicted.

Eoghain nods, uncomprehending. As he turns away:

I've been ill, you see. And after what happened a minute ago, I thought the old saying was about to come true . . . "Long life and . . ." You know it.
Eoghain ". . . agus bas in nEireann." Death in Ireland.
Owen That's it. Well, the latter part of it, anyway: I'm not quite your aged pensioner. (*Confidentially*) I had a bit of a fright.
Eoghain If you want me to, I could go and get——
Owen No, I'm quite recovered. My wife is fetching a car of some sort . . . out of fussiness, not necessity. Look . . . apologies. My deliverance made me talkative. First time I ever knew what *joie de vivre* meant.
Eoghain Pardon?
Owen "There's night and day, brother, both sweet things. Sun, moon and stars, brother, all sweet things." I was quoting.
Eoghain I know. "Lavengro" by George Borrow.
Owen (*surprised*) Yes.
Eoghain Nice book. Shocking anti-Catholic, but.
Owen (*blinking*) Just so. At any rate, I apologize. You press on.
Eoghain I think I'll leave it. The light's gone. (*He tears the page from his sketch pad and crumples it, throwing it away*)
Owen Don't destroy it.
Eoghain It's awful.

As Owen retrieves it:

What are you at?
Owen Really, are there no litter laws? (*Smoothing it out*) What have we here? Yes . . . Da Vinci strikes again.
Eoghain (*becoming annoyed*) Excuse me, but that's——
Owen Private. It can't be done, can it?
Eoghain What?
Owen That view of the bay. No-one has ever got the sweep of the hills and that sky and sea. I know I never could. Not bad, though . . . not an abomination. May I? (*He takes Eoghain's pencil and sketch pad*)
Eoghain Them's mine.

Owen *These are* yours. No, you've missed it . . . but everybody does: even Corot couldn't catch those lines. But you go at it like a miser.

Eoghain It's only a rough sketch.

Owen It is now . . . it didn't set out to be. (*Sketching very quickly*) For one thing, you should use a softer lead. All this is good for is ticking off winners on a racing sheet.

Eoghain I can't aff——

Owen Then steal one. And go at it like this, like a drunkard. And use the long muscle, the one from the eyes through the brain to the pencil. Hang on . . . there we are: there's your skyline.

Eoghain (*looking*) Jasus.

Owen You approve?

Eoghain It's smashin'.

Owen Don't confuse tricks with talent. It's still wrong.

Eoghain *I* couldn't do it.

Owen It's a question of rearrangement, and you can't rearrange those mountains. They don't play fair. Take your eyes off them and they move around, they change colour, they cheat.

Eoghain I bet you're an artist.

Owen Think so? And I bet you want to become one.

Eoghain I'm going to.

Owen I'm sure.

Eoghain See if I don't.

Owen No doubt of it. And if I smiled, it was at a certain familiar note of determination.

Eoghain (*defensive*) Don't see an'thin' wrong in that.

Owen Nor do I . . . bravely said. What kind of artist?

Eoghain Pardon?

Owen Apart from being a great one. Oriental ladies with purple skins? Elephant stampedes? Tiny tots with eyes like soup plates? Or perhaps you favour the far end of the spectrum . . . pictures no-one understands: "Puce Upon Puce" or "Reclining Parallelogram". Abstracts are always a hit with the critics. You see, if you confuse or bore them, they assume your intellect to be mightier than theirs, and just to be on the safe side they use words like "disturbing", "innovative" and "exuberant". Of course between that sort of art and the purple ladies there's a world of choice. Any preferences?

Eoghain simply stares at him, hardly comprehending, but aware that he is the butt of Owen's hostile wit

I say, you're hardly starved for choice.

Eoghain (*mumbling*) Don't follow you.

Owen Didn't quite hear. Say again.

Eoghain Are you pickin' on me?

Owen Pickin'?

Eoghain Makin' a jeer.

Owen Of you?

Eoghain Just . . . lay off.

Owen Have I offended?
Eoghain Too bloody full o' yourself. I'm goin' for me tea.
Owen Wait. (*Sincerely*) *Mea culpa* ... sorry, lad. Let's blame it on the altitude. At six hundred feet nerves reach breaking point. Or let's say that I was shit-scared and wanted to take it out on someone.
Eoghain No call for bein' rude.
Owen None. So go for your tea.
Eoghain What was up with you?
Owen Up?
Eoghain When you were sick.
Owen (*tapping his chest*) Heart.
Eoghain Oh, yeah.
Owen It was making queer noises. Don't be alarmed ... *strange* noises. So they fixed it. Opened me up and put a valve in.
Eoghain (*incredulous*) They what?
Owen Just like changing a spark plug.
Eoghain (*grinning*) Feck off.
Owen Sorry?
Eoghain Pull the other one.
Owen A small plastic valve. Does that strike you as comical.
Eoghain Into your ticker?
Owen Of course.
Eoghain (*his grin fading*) Are you havin' another go?
Owen How?
Eoghain At me. Hearts gettin' ... operated on!
Owen You're the most hypersensitive young man I've ever met. (*Wearily*) Oh, God. (*He takes a cautious look from left to right, then unbuttons his shirt*) This could be misinterpreted.
Eoghain What are you at?
Owen Ye of little faith.

Like Owen, Eoghain peers nervously about, then looks at Owen's chest

Eoghain Jasus.
Owen Doubting Thomas! (*Buttoning up*) Where have you been hiding yourself? These days doctors do it in their sleep. I wonder if mine did ...?
Eoghain Like a tin o' sardines, what?
Owen Pardon?
Eoghain They opened you. Bloody good.
Owen Isn't it! You did hear, didn't you, about the moon landings?

Eoghain laughs heartily

Not to mention the microchip.
Eoghain Very tasty. Oh, you're a queer harp.

He laughs again. Owen joins in, glancing at him a trifle uneasily, not sure whether Eoghain is laughing at him or with him

Owen At any rate, I'm on the mend.
Eoghain Grand.

Owen So when does it start? I mean this artistic breakthrough. Do you still live at home?
Eoghain Yes. Look, if you're——
Owen I'm interested. With your parents?
Eoghain Yeah.
Owen That's nice for them. And you work at something?
Eoghain In an office.
Owen Clerking. That's not so bad: I've done some of it in my time. And you'd be what? Twenty?
Eoghain Goin' on for.
Owen I envy you. It's a wonderful age . . . later on, I mean. As in heart surgery, distance lends enchantment. Look, I don't mean to seem a wet blanket, but try not to leave it too late.
Eoghain How?
Owen To get out. Out of here.
Eoghain I'm goin' to.
Owen When? Tomorrow? Next year?
Eoghain There's still tucks of time. Your man . . . the French fella. He was a painter. (*Uncertain*) Gogg . . .
Owen Van Gogh?
Eoghain (*shaking his head*) South Sea Islands.
Owen Gauguin. I take your point. He didn't desert his wife and children until he was in his thirties . . . but then he was a genius. Are you? Sacrificing yourself is easy: what's food, cooked and on the table, or a bed made up, ready to fall into? Trimmings, that's all . . . nets to hold us. But sacrificing other people, being thought a blackguard, that's where nerve comes in.
Eoghain I'll go, never fear.
Owen Watch out for the nets.
Eoghain I think you're at me again.
Owen Me?
Eoghain (*grumbling*) Sittin' there and actin' . . . actin' so . . .
Owen You aren't long on what they call word power, are you?
Eoghain Just . . . buzz off. I was here first. You buzz off an' leave me alone.
Owen I promised to wait.
Eoghain Fella can't even draw in peace.
Owen (*correcting him*) Sketch.
Eoghain Dry up.
Owen Perhaps it's because you touched a nerve. You said: "I bet you're an artist." Well, you lose your bet. I had ambitions once, but wouldn't it be awful if you were right, if I'd had more than just a knack. No, I doubt it. There isn't an Irishman living who doesn't believe he could be a genius if only someone would lend him a pencil. It's our strength and our frailty: we're convinced that all our cygnets are swans.
Eoghain (*grinning*) You're gas.
Owen Gas . . . *bag*, more like. You press on: don't mind me.
Eoghain I'll get there.
Owen Perhaps. But I meant what I said: delay is death.

Eoghain Yeah. It's not so easy.
Owen No.
Eoghain You see, I'm the only one at home. People bring you into the world; you can't just walk off and leave them.
Owen You will, someday.
Eoghain Oh, sure. Only it takes a kind of, I dunno ... hardness ... not caring about them. How do I know what brave is: to run off or stay here and hang on to the job? I suppose what counts is how good I am.
Owen How good *are* you?
Eoghain Dunno. What do you think?
Owen Who am I? ... a stranger. You ask yourself, and if the answer's the one you want to hear, then all it takes is the price of a mailboat ticket.

Eoghain laughs silently, shaking his head

Yes?
Eoghain Nothin'. It's just the way words come out of you. Everythin' like oil, not a lump or bubble in it. I can't stick one sentence after the other.
Owen You just did.
Eoghain You're not really from the town, are you?
Owen Born and bred.
Eoghain I know ... from outa one o' them big houses on the Vico.
Owen I lived in a corporation house off Castle Street.
Eoghain That's where I——
Owen With my parents. My accent and what you call the way words come out of me ... they aren't assumed. They were acquired.
Eoghain In England.
Owen And in America. Like you, I came up here to sketch. I went to the evening classes. A teacher bestowed on me that adjective that is the teething-ring of the arts: "promising". I was offered a scholarship, but I had my living to make and couldn't accept it. So I waited. I thought that given time, my parents would disappear. Not die ... nothing so cruel, but vanish magically, cease to exist. And I would be free: no more obligations, no ties, no guilt. The miracle refused to happen. Parents can be such obdurate creatures.
Eoghain But you got away.
Owen I met a girl: a warm, sweet-natured person named Moira.
Eoghain And she was rich.
Owen I didn't know you were a romantic. No, she wasn't rich. We went to the Tech together, or rather simultaneously. I was studying art; she favoured domestic science. A bad omen, that: even Julius Caesar would have taken heed and stayed indoors. Mind you, she encouraged me. I think that after the business of the scholarship I had become a rather tragic figure: the born genius, his hopes blighted on the bough. Anyone in that situation is a genius by common consent: there's no drama in it otherwise. Moira had faith in me: I was not to give up; talent would prevail. I was flattered: in those days I was not attractive to girls. Soap and water and I were not on intimate terms; a handkerchief was something to be purely as a decoration in one's Sunday suit. Well, the world may have been there for

the taking. I took Moira. We courted, we became engaged, we married.

Eoghain I'm not goin' to.

Owen No?

Eoghain I've nothin' against it. Maybe someday. But not till I get fixed up.

Owen You sound so incorruptible.

Eoghain Dunno. But I'll tell you one thing . . . If . . . (*He stops*)

Owen If?

Eoghain If I thought I was no good at this lark, or if I'd ever let an'thin' get in me way . . . if I thought that, I'd go over to the quarry cliff beyant an' heave meself off it. You can laugh again at me——

Owen Please.

Eoghain—but I would. So how did you . . . fix it?

Owen What?

Eoghain Get away.

Owen Oh. So we were married. Sundays were kept aside for tea with those parents of mine who had decided to live until they were a hundred. Within a month of the wedding, my father became ill. He died. My mother went off to live with a sister of hers in Scotland . . . quite cheerfully, *she* left *me*. At long last, I was free. Of them, that is; but now, instead of parents, I had a wife. Only then did it occur to me that responsibilities are links in a chain. Parents, a job with prospects, a wife, children.

Eoghain Did you have kids?

Owen Moira wanted a family. I think she was not so much a woman as a conceiving apparatus. In between miscarriages, she managed to find dabs of oil paint on the curtains and upholstery. She developed new theories on art and artists. A hobby, as she took to calling what I did, was best relegated to Sundays. Then she pointed out that a man wearing old clothes in our town on the sabbath and carrying paints and canvases was making a show of himself. "People will think you're queer," she said, not meaning it, of course, in the present-day colloquial sense.

Eoghain In the what?

Owen You know. Queer . . . being . . .

Eoghain Bein' what?

Owen (*staring at him*) Perhaps you *shouldn't* go abroad. No matter. In my innocence, it took me a while to realize that she was fighting a rival, fighting it to the death, blindly, as if it were a mistress. It wasn't my poor splashes of colour on canvas she hated—my attempts to make the muscle I spoke of between the brain and the pencil take a detour by way of the heart. It was a rival passion and she determined to destroy it. Painting was nice, but what *use* was it? The man next door had an allotment: *he* produced cabbages. Women are so energetic: men get tired and give up; they never do. I fought a losing war . . . and damn it, it wasn't fair! No; no details. You don't even have a girl-friend yet: why should I spoil what lies ahead? But even when I at last walked out and took passage for Holyhead, hers was the sincere amazement of a loving parent who has raised a brat.

Eoghain I bet there was holy stink.

Owen There was anger certainly.

Eoghain Did she folley you? To England.
Owen No. As soon as I could, I made financial arrangements, but I never saw her again.
Eoghain Never?
Owen She still lives not far from here.
Eoghain You're havin' me on.
Owen How?
Eoghain It's all a yarn. Just now you told me your wife went for a taxi.
Owen Ah. But a man may have more than one wife, may he not?
Eoghain I see . . . You mean, you and the . . . the first lady got . . .
Owen Divorced? You can say the word: no-one is listening. No, we did not. My wife invoked her religious principles . . . it's such a rare pleasure when they actually come in useful. No divorce . . . never.
Eoghain But the lady who went for the——
Owen She is my wife. Do you understand me?
Eoghain Yeah, sure.
Owen You seem shocked.
Eoghain Me? Not at all. None of my business.
Owen Marriage and wedding have less in common than you might think.
Eoghain So what happened in England?
Owen I studied for three years. I survived, worked at this and that. My wife—the lady you would call my wife—was gleefully pressing me for arrears of maintenance, so a friend wangled me a job as an illustrator. It was for a magazine serial . . . you know the sort: "Lady Elspeth, her magnificent breasts heaving with terror, shrank from the lewd gaze of the Roundhead captain". It and I were a roaring success. I did more of the same, and I came to acknowledge what I had suspected: that while I was aspiring to the more enduring kind of art, the talent was never there. The Holy Ghost had looked upon me and said: "Next"!
Eoghain You mean——
Owen Now I have my own agency. I do very little of the actual art work, it's nearly all supervision and admin.
Eoghain Then you did it all for nothin'.
Owen Pardon me?
Eoghain For nothin'. All that studyin' an' workin' and then flakin' off to England. Doin' what you did . . . all o' that, and you gev up.
Owen I found out what I could do best, and I did it.

Eoghain laughs, shaking his head

You're so bloody smug. I'm happy. I'm solvent, I enjoy my work. I've done everything worth doing, and you call that nothing.
Eoghain It has shag-all to do with me.
Owen I said, you call it nothing.
Eoghain It's not what you went after.
Owen Perhaps it isn't. But do you think I'd have got as much by staying here? You're so damned untarnished just because you haven't been out in the world and had your arse kicked. Well, if you ever get up the gumption to leave this hole, you may discover that even you are less than a

reincarnation of Rembrandt, Velasquez and Renoir rolled into one fat tube of paint.

Eoghain Maybe so, but I'll tell you this. I won't give up.

Owen No?

Eoghain You think I will?

Owen Probably not. If smugness and complacency are any qualifications, then you'll probably do very well. Nothing dents that self-approval, does it, my shabby friend?

Eoghain (*stung*) You just . . . feck off. An' if you won't, I will.

Owen No, that was uncalled for. I apolo——

Eoghain (*looking off*) Your . . . uh, (*with a sneer*) your wife is back.

He starts off

Owen No, wait. Stay and meet her. Come with us.

Eoghain is out of sight

Rosemary appears from the other direction

Rosemary (*breathless*) Twice in one day. And you promised you'd rest.

Owen I said I'd stay here, and I did.

Rosemary How do you feel?

Owen Fine. Back to normal.

Rosemary You're still not walking back. The hotel is sending a car, it'll be at the gates by the time we are. Are you ready?

Owen In a minute. I've had company.

Rosemary Here?

Owen (*looking*) See? There he—no, he's gone. Either he'd had enough of me, or he didn't relish the prospect of coming face to face with a scarlet woman.

Rosemary What are you talking about?

Owen That boy. A youth who was sketching the view. We talked. He was quite talented.

Rosemary Praise indeed, coming from you.

Owen Oh, yes. Talent to spare, heaps of it.

Rosemary Did you tell him so?

Owen He was a little too sure of himself, too incorruptible. The young can be so damn patronizing, they know it all. He's going to clear off to England and become a giant.

Rosemary Perhaps he will.

Owen I don't know. He may not be all there.

Rosemary How?

Owen I told him I'd had heart surgery, and he'd never heard of it. And I'd swear the moon landings and the microchip were mysteries to him as well. As for homosexuality . . .

Rosemary You seem to have covered everything. Well, they say that Ireland is a breeding ground for eccentrics.

Owen Not at his age. They take time to mature.

Rosemary Shall we go down?

Owen I talked to him as though I'd known him for years. A scarecrow. His nose needed blowing ... the sort of lad who thinks a handkerchief is purely a decoration for his Sunday—— (*He breaks off*)

Rosemary What is it?

Owen His face.

Rosemary Are you ill? It's come back hasn't it?

Owen No ...

Rosemary Then what's wrong?

Owen I know the face, that's all. I know it. I remember. Yes, now I remember.

Rosemary Where you've seen him.

Owen No ... no, not him.

Rosemary Then who? You are ill.

Owen How long ago? Thirty years ... not long after the war, I was sitting here, sketching the view. Didn't wash too frequently, not in the winter, because in our house you had to boil a kettle. I must have been quite scruffy to look at. A middle-aged man came up ... sleek, well-dressed: prosperity shone from him like a beacon. We talked. He told me about the life he'd led, what he'd done with it. I was disgusted. I thought him the most corrupt man I'd ever met.

Rosemary Owen ... ?

Owen That boy ... what's to become of him? Oh, my God, that poor boy.

He remains quite still, Rosemary looking at him, waiting

CURTAIN

Roman Fever

Adapted from the story by
Edith Wharton

CHARACTERS

Mrs Slade
Mrs Ansley
Head Waiter

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