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SF PERUSALS

Beckett at Greystones Bay

by Rosary Hartel O'Neill

A Samuel French Acting Edition



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CHARACTERS

SAMUEL BECKETT – a writer, 20s, smashing looking – tall and athletic, broad shoulders, angular features. Disheveled clothes, grubby trousers, dirty raincoat several sizes too large, which has a text in one pocket and a bottle of stout in the other.

Five actors play a cacophony of voices from his past, loud, soft, haunting, brash:

BROTHER – 20s

FATHER – late 40s to early 50s

MOTHER – late 40s to early 50s

EDNA – 20s

COUSIN MARGARET – 20s

SETTING

Greystones Bay, Ireland, winter 1933. Dusk. The coastline of Greystones is made of a large beach, rocky formations and a bay which hosts a small harbor. Sam's father is buried in a nearby cemetery.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The play may be performed with six actors, one actor and voices, or any combination thereof. Beckett tries to have a two-sided conversation where his opinion is heard, considered and respected. It's critical that his opponents are real and powerful whether they are personified by actors or offstage voices. The performers should be aware that Beckett is battling for his life in his fight to get the last word.

ACT ONE

Scene 1

(The action takes place in the mind of **SAMUEL BECKETT** *with offstage voices from his past. These may be portrayed electronically or by actors. We're on a bleak stony beach. Winter. 1933. Dusk. Twilight shadows soak up the tattered sand.* **SAM** *limps in, carrying a pail with stones. His index finger is bandaged in gauze. He conveys an impression of elegance, though threadbare. His short reddish-brown hair is brushed to the right, revealing an aquiline nose, and haunting eyes. He has set up camp by a weather-worn chest. It contains bandage supplies, books, cigarettes, matches, and food. He faces the audience, responding to images of people he envisions in the sea. When he does so, faces appear on the rear scrim and/or actors representing these characters stand up in the audience. He yells out.)*

SAM. Go. I need to finish my book.

(Takes out a pencil and pad, writes. A whisper like a hoarse breeze. Lights dim. His **FATHER's** *image startles him.)*

SAM. Oh! Is that...you?

*(**SOUND:** Sound of breathing.)*

SAM. It can't be, but it is. Sit. Goodness. Well.

*(**SOUND:** Sound of breeze.)*

SAM. I'm glad to see you. You look good. Your hands aren't swollen any more. Did you come because they want to psychoanalyze me?

*(**SOUND**: An eerie rustling sound.)*

SAM. What's that? When I came back from your death bed, I felt completely lost. I crawled onto this beach and lay here for hours, like a husk. I don't know who I am or what I'm doing. I'm living a dying thing. You have already cut me loose, but I refuse to let you go. Bad move. Mother's lonely. Brother's getting married. Your dog, Wolf, died. Mother cried for two days....

FATHER. *(V.O.)* You must go.

SAM. You hated psychiatrists. If I can be out here in this place that you loved, I know my mind will clear up. I'll finish the book. Say something? Anything. *(**SOUND:** A low, barely perceptible heartbeat and shallow breathing.)*

FATHER. *(V.O.)* Go.

SAM. No.

*(**SOUND:** A clanging noise like a metal door closing. Ghost disappears.)*

SAM. Don't leave. Father.

(Fading wind. **SAM** *reaches toward the sky.)*

SAM. To quote Keats: "I have clung / To nothing, loved a nothing, nothing seen / Or felt but a great dream. O I have been / Presumptuous against love—"

*(***SAM** *sees an image of his* **BROTHER**. *Screech of seagulls.)*

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* See the psychiatrist.

SAM. Oh, Brother. I can't. When you write on the beach, its majesty gives you hope. It hits the eye with possibilities. You'll find more crazy people inland where they are not challenged. *(Breathes heavily.)* I don't speak much, but I can to prove my sanity.

FATHER *(V.O.)* Fight, fight, fight, and when you're tired fight some more.

SAM. That's what Father said. He was strapped to the bed because even after that massive coronary, he tried to pull himself out. Father said I was a star and—

*(**SOUND:** Murmur of word "star" echoes on the breeze.)*

SAM. "Everyone wants to shoot a star. Pow. Pow. Pow." But Father said—

SAM and **FATHER** *(V.O.)* What you don't have, you don't need.

(Sound of "need" on the wind. **SAM** *rummages for a match. To* **BROTHER**.*)*

SAM. Smoking stiffens my courage. Other times I whistle. *(Takes out a tin whistle. Demonstrates.)* I'm a writer, for God's sake. I can't let them burn that out of me. One day my name may mean something. Now it doesn't mean I need a big-city psychiatrist. Those people are outlawed in this country. That's right.

They're forbidden to practice here. *(Angrily.)* You try to change someone; it's a big blow to his soul. I'm not sick. Artists work in solitary confinement because we fear people are completely mad. Course we could be crazy. *(Laughs.)* Time for a joke. A writer lived with his publicist until she quit doing publicity. Said *(cont.)* she was tired of being number two. "No," he said. "My writing is number one, I'm number two, and you're number three."

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* Come inside.

SAM. As you distance yourself, you see family as intrusions. Great artists have all proven to have deformities of their psychological profiles. Writers are powerful people, not group-oriented husks. A book may be beautiful but it's also gratification for control. I'm the heir to Dante, Proust, Shakespeare.

(Doubles over with a stomach cramp.)

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* You're sick.

SAM. True, I sleep with you to stop my panic, but it stops. *(Breathes quickly as if suffocating.)* Arrogance—keeps me writing through a chain of failures.

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* It's a shallow existence.

SAM. No, it's defiant. The world is watching writers. The world needs hope. The homeless need us. The hungry need us. Those in prison need us. Our calling is high and holy. *(Pause.)* What is the universe asking you to give up to follow your path? *(Pause.)* Nothing? No one's called to the easy life. Nevertheless— "There never lived a mortal man, who bent / His appetite beyond his natural sphere / But starved and died." John Keats, my mentor, died in glory at 26.

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* Stop those thoughts.

SAM. The mind's natural prey is itself. *(Takes books out of the chest.)* I take satisfaction from organizing my books. These baby steps give me pinpricks of joy. I always carry a book. It's my cross against life's vampires. *(Lifts book against the sky, paces.)* I can hold up the book and say stay away because this is the power I have. Every artwork is a prayer. The authentic poem, picture, song, they're prayers releasing hope in the onlooker like the response to a psalm. Priest: The word of the Lord. Respondent: Thanks be to God. Language lifts my soul. Words and I saved each other.

SAM. "When by my solitary heart I sit, / And hateful thoughts enwrap my soul in gloom: / Sweet Hope, ethereal balm upon me shed—"

*(**SOUND:** Rattle of breeze)*

SAM. *(To* **BROTHER***)Mother* doesn't like Keats—well, no matter. It takes a lot to kill my enthusiasm.

*(***SAM** *grinds cigarette, chews it, rummages for a match.)*

MOTHER. *(V.O.)* Your suffering is mental, son.

SAM. Night sweats, shudders, breathlessness...*(Gasps for air.)* even total paralysis, it's make-believe.

MOTHER. *(V.O.)* You should teach.

SAM. Colleagues wheeze by to have a look, offer me a yawner course. I don't want to talk to stupid people. You have to work too hard. I resigned because, because...not because I was ill. *(Catching his breath.)* I need to be around brave people. *(Gasps.)* These students, they're tombstones. Nondescript. *(Feeling an abdominal pain.)* What could be more violent than killing a part of myself for money? I have to numb myself to that ambition that propelled me through all those years of intensity. If I'm going to do that I'll put a gun to my head and shoot it. *(Grabs his chest as if having palpitations.)* Yes, Mother. I apologize. I don't want life to be about minor disputes. I took the job, didn't I? Once they had me, they bloody screwed me. There was such hatred of high standards; I walked through the campus like a target.

*(**SOUND:** Indecipherable murmurings.)*

SAM. These men talk more than they think. Tiny thoughts after each huge diatribe.

*(**SOUND:** A crescendo of mumbling.)*

SAM. I'm too overqualified. I don't mean that egotistically. I mean that factually. *(Pause.)* I'm a book on the shelf, insurance for the rare student.

MOTHER. *(V.O.)* Don't flatter yourself.

SAM. *(To* **MOTHER***)* If I give teaching time to writing—I could create something superior. "Every deep-thinking mind tries to clarify thought. This is only perfectly attained in writing."

(A clawing wind. He tightens the jacket about him. **BROTHER***'s image reappears. To* **BROTHER***.)*

SAM. I don't blame Mother. To always think alone, it hardens you. *(He gives up on the cigarette and tosses it.)* I'm not compulsive. For months, the only joy I had was my writing and part of me craves that. *(Pause.)* At some point, an artist is no longer a part of the university team, a member of the family, a half of a couple. You are ostracized or you self-ostracize. *(Pause.)* Writing became my safe *(cont.)* harbor. Paper would receive my tears. Paper would hold all for me till I could figure it out. *(Pause.)* But I gave my soul to a cause that evaporated. All my writer friends stripped off their veneer and put on a suit and tie. *(Tightens fist.)* God, my finger hurts. *(Punches the air.)*

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* You were the heavyweight champion of school.

SAM. Some things can't be fixed. If you're a psycho, they can't fix you. *(Pause.)* Time for a laugh. A minister told his congregation, "Next week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. To help you understand my sermon, I want you all to read Mark 17." The following Sunday as he prepared to deliver his sermon, the minister asked for a show of hands. He wanted to know how many had read Mark 17. Every hand went up. The minister smiled and said, "Mark has only 16 chapters. I will now proceed with my sermon on the sin of lying."

*(***SAM** *unwraps gauze and tends to a festering boil.)*

SAM. The suffering of the skin is the caustic encrustation of feelings defied. I have to inspect my body every day for ticks, for toxicity.

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* Get straightened out and you'll write again.

SAM. I haven't stopped writing. I've got a lot of attention out of being ill, so I'm always going to be doing that. *(A cold breeze. He blows on his numb fingertips. Removes a shrimp shell.)* I studied whether a crustacean can suffer in my last story. I gave Mother three copies. *(Pause. Laughs.)* Not shells, books. No, I don't want my writing to offend. I'm not mocking anyone.

(He unwinds long strips of gauze which drift in the breeze.)

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* See the psychiatrist.

SAM. Back, Brother! You're in my light. My neck's oozing, my foot's purple, I think I'm bloody dead. I even have a—bump on my bottom. I can't sit long. But I

can write standing up. *(He exposes finger, neck, and foot wounds.)* Disappointing? I know.

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* All through life you kept in shape.

SAM. Golf is still what I'm best at. Golf is not a team sport, like publishing. There's one person standing at that tee, one person lifting that club. When I swing, I imagine I'm powerful like Schopenhauer, the great pessimist. *(***SAM** *puts a shell over his nose, changes his voice.)* He said, "Art is not like science, merely concerned with reasoning, but with one's soul. Each must count for what he is in reality." Schopenhauer—who received a reply that most of his first *(cont.)* publication had been disposed of as waste paper. Later when I lance all my boils, I'll pretend I'm Keats, moving toward beauty. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty—" Surely you know that. I don't just collect quotes. I memorize books. Keats goes deep into depression, and that makes me feel better. "I have been in love with easeful Death, / Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme, / To take into the air my quiet breath—" *(Pause)* There's been a rupture of everyone I was close to. Not you, no.

(He blots a boil. Takes out a razor and fresh gauze.)

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* Mother's worried.

SAM. Yes, I've read Mother's daily notes, her copies of the "Times," with her exhortations that I might earn money by writing for the obituary section. I'm not running from responsibility. I washed and shaved Father after his coronaries, even though he found it intolerable and started to cry. I changed the bedpans, and drove Mother to the hospital. *(He blots another boil.)* In our family, she gets to hold the leash. She's the rigid one. I'm not. Oh no. This weepiness is humiliating. This panic-stricken stasis of Keats, crouched in a mossy thicket annulled, like a bee in sweetness, drowned with the fumes of poppies. *(Begins to lance finger.)* It's okay to cry as a purging tool like a spring rain. Ooh.

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* You want a pill?

SAM. No! How much rest do we need to make up for a loss?

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* A blanket?

SAM. I'm not cold. Smile, Brother. Only friends I want are...those who are profoundly happy.

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* Fresh bandages?

SAM. Not so close. I realize there are absences I've had for years and I'd made no progress in reducing them even though I'd read and thought a great deal.

*(***SAM** *lifts a stone to the light.)*

SAM. Look at that? Here, I'm back. Part of me that was empty is full again. I want to wake up every morning watching the breeze shimmering over stones. My eyes drift deep into the gray greens. I distract myself by counting the colors: the amber tans, pearl blues, gray browns. I'm falling in love with stones.

*(***SAM** *wanders off alone, stares out to sea. Tide laps in and out.)*

SAM. I take stones home; lay them into the branches of trees. It's a pre-birth nostalgia to return to the mineral state...to an untouched spring that hasn't been contaminated. When I walk through a stony landscape I study the grays, the different contours. You can be in hell among the stones and still be happy. *(Picks up stones.)*

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* Come back.

SAM. I don't want to go inside, feel a loss of beauty. Be exposed to the illogical cowardly things that go on in there. The house never was mine. It will go like the tide sliding over stones. When I look at their silver sheen, I feel peace. I'm in touch with God when I'm here.

SOUND: Wave sounds rip the water. Distant hum of a motor boat.

SAM. Father loved little boats. Once we were out on rough waves and I panicked and he crawled over and slapped me. And I calmed down because Father never hit us.

*(***SAM** *collects stones.)*

*(**SOUND:** Distant song from the church, like, "I will raise him up. I will raise him up. I will raise him up on the last day.")*

SAM. Another dirge from Saint Mary's. The man died of a heart attack. There's one more *Mater Dolorosa*.

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* Ma wants you to be a pallbearer.

SAM. I don't like being around concentrations of people. I have to be so vigilant; I consider it a waste of time. "The dark impression of that Nothing, which we fear like children, the darkness." Schopenhauer. How can I lift the casket, walk in the church, the man I knew so well, gone with no way of changing that? I'm not going to make choices, which are not in my interest. I choose to live in a gray world of low extremities.

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* Be a pallbearer.

SAM. Hang around the casket. Watch the lid close. Click. I can't walk behind the hearse.

*(**SOUND:** Sound of tolling church bells.)*

SAM. *(Recites)* "Where are the songs of spring? Aw where are they? / Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,— / While barred clouds, bloom the soft-dying day."

*(**SOUND:** Gulls caw.)*

SAM. *(To* **BROTHER***)* When the house sells, I want only the piano and the green settee.

(Looks up, sees his father.)

SAM. *(To* **FATHER***)* Father, you needn't come home? In full regalia, hat, coat, polished shoes, I don't have high fever. You don't have to keep me in place, sit by, and tell a story.

(Ghost vanishes.)

SAM. Now that's the task of the radio, the record player. The role of the storyteller has evaporated.

*(***SOUND:** *Tide laps out.)*

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* Treatment is the only hope.

SAM. I can't submit. It'll kill my inspiration.

BROTHER. *(V.O.)* It'll unleash your artistic force.

SAM. Sometimes I taste the excitement of being free. Other times...

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