

THE PAINTING HANGS

By

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FADE IN:

INT. A NON-DESCRIPT FLAT - DAY

TITLE: 1973

A c/u of FIONA's face. She is in her late 60's. She stares off into the distance, deep in thought.

FIONA (V.O.)

If you ask me, the term 'tortured artist' is overused. I once thought it was a good excuse for those who creates art to indulge themselves a little; gain some attention when they're down. Or - more often than not - hide behind it when they've run out of ideas. Of course, there are many who *can* legitimately claim that status. Hemmingway. Plath. Dear old Tennessee Williams. But you see, those great artists couldn't cope with the darkness of life and, so, it was reflected in their work. I, on the other hand, am suffering *because* of my work. The one picture that made me who I am. For better, or for worse.

EXT. A STREET IN A RUN-DOWN NEIGHBOURHOOD - DAY - 1920, FLASHBACK.

TITLE: 1920

A little girl, FIONA as a young child, is sitting on a doorstep clutching a very bedraggled teddy bear. Around her the street is busy with people going about their daily business. An apple falls from a passing horse and cart. She stands to retrieve it, but before she can, a young boy picks it up and runs away with it, the driver of the cart calling after him. Fiona sits down again.

FIONA (V.O.)

'Poverty' is a word that is most often used by people who have never, or will never live through it.

(MORE)

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
A convenient word that boxes a
sizable group of people up and
tidies them away.

A husband and wife who are dressed in fine-looking attire
hurry past the end of the street.

WIFE
Look at that poor girl. Do you
think she's hungry?

HUSBAND
Well, that's poverty for you.

They hurry on and we cut back to the girl.

FIONA (V.O.)
That kind of poverty is for the
politicians, the journalists, the
social commentators. It only ever
exists in the abstract. You might
think I sound bitter, and you'd
be right. You see, I lived in
actual poverty.

SERIES OF SHOTS:

Life around the district.

- A) An old lady alone on the floor of her bathroom, mid-coughing fit.
- B) A mother crying in her bedroom, holding her infant son who is limp in her arms.
- C) A one-armed man begging outside a pub.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
But, as awful as life could be, we
just got on with it. Most of us
didn't know any different. 'Keep
your head down and you'll see
better days' we were told. But
that was no excuse for me. I just
assumed life was awful and would
always remain so.

EXT. A FUNERAL - DAY

A handful of mourners stand around a grave. At the front stands young Fiona, her SISTER and her MOTHER

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Like many other families from around our way, our father was killed in the Great War, so what little he brought to the household coffers stopped the day he choked to death on mustard gas during his watch in the trenches.

INT. A TATTY FRONT ROOM, SCANT OF FURNITURE, FIONA'S HOUSE - DAY

Fiona's mother is standing by a washboard, but is unmoving, just staring into the distance. Fiona is standing behind her, repeatedly calling.

YOUNG FIONA

Ma? Ma?

FIONA (V.O.)

My mother, unskilled and mentally ill, was unfit to work. Of course, back then no one knew she was ill, rather just in shock and depressed at losing her husband at such a young age. But at that time she wasn't alone when it came to newly-created widows and it simply didn't do to complain about it.

The mother just drops everything and walks from the room and out of the front door, Fiona looking after her.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

'Didn't have enough spirit in her' my grandfather would say. The whole country was depressed, so 'let her get on with it' seemed to be the party line. So, no income, no money, no help: Poverty.

INT. A SQUALID BEDROOM - DAY.

The two sisters are sharing a bed. Fiona looks pale and ill, but her sister is in far worse condition. Her breathing is laboured and heavy.

LATER.

C/U on young Fiona as she sleeps. She begins to stir. O/S we hear a rustling and rodent-like squeaking. Fiona opens her eyes to see a rat crawling along her sleeping sister.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Our house felt bigger than most - I only had to share a bedroom with my sister. In fact, I shared a bed with my sister so, naturally, I was the one to find her dead body one cold morning. She had been suffering with influenza and had died in her sleep. We'd both had the illness, but I was the lucky one, although that's not what I thought at the time. Perhaps I had more of a fighter in me.

EXT. A FUNERAL - DAY

Fiona and her mother are at the graveside, replicating the funeral scene of Fiona's father from earlier.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I like to think she wanted out and went to a better place than our freezing, cramped home; our squalid life. As for the rat? It got away. A shame, really. A decent size rodent could provide a couple of decent meals. Or more, if you didn't mind the offal.

EXT. BUSY LONDON STREET - DAY

Fiona is making her way down the street, avoiding the hustle and bustle of the working day. Behind her we see her mother looking after her. C/U of mother's sad eyes.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
We lived in North London - Manor
House way.

INT. FRONT ROOM - DAY

Fiona walks into the room. The first few floorboards are missing, so she carefully balances on the beams before reaching safety.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
We shivered through the summers
and burnt barely enough fuel to
survive the winters. We became so
desperate that we began throwing
floorboards from the living room
into our tiny stove. But survive
we did. When I went out to work
aged just 11 my mother cried for
weeks on end. She wanted me to
stay in school, but deep down she
knew we had no choice.

INT. BUSY WORKING BREWERY - DAY

Fiona is rolling a barrel across the floor with her feet. One of the workers waves to her as she goes past, a friendly smile on his face.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I worked in a brewery (of all
places) in East London. I was well
liked by the men who worked there
- not in a devious way. They were
good, honest men. I just think
they took pity on me. How wretched
I must have looked. As I pushed
barrel after barrel across the
courtyard I used to daydream about
living in a better place - a
magical world where I was queen
and wanted for nothing. I think
that, perhaps, it was the
beginning of my artistic side.

INT. FIONA'S HOUSE - DAY

Fiona is scrubbing clothes in a bathtub, while her mother looks on, pale and rundown.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Still, the money wasn't enough to keep both me and mother alive and, despite my protests, everything I earned she gave back to me. Food, clothing, coal. Enough to keep me going.

INT. BATHROOM IN FIONA'S HOUSE - DAY

We see the legs of Fiona's mother as she swings back and forth. She has hung herself.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Eventually it became too much for her, but I liked to think she made sure I was going to be okay before she finally left me. By the time I left Manor House to live with my auntie Jean I had declared war on poverty.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. UNDERGROUND CARRIAGE - DAY - 1936, FLASHBACK

TITLE: 1936

FIONA, now in her 20's, is sitting on the tube carriage studying the row of people sat opposite her. She has a barely concealed sketch book and pencil.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

To everyone else on the Northern Line that day he probably looked like any other man. But, to me, he was a fascinating project.

(MORE)

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I'd managed to scrape together enough money to attend evening classes at art school and had become a struggling artist, picking up small commissions here and there - mainly from friends who wanted a portrait of a loved one or my own range of hand painted greetings cards. I'd learned to look closer at the world around me - to carefully study and interpret. It's often hard to explain to people exactly what it is that you see that they don't. I still struggle with that.

As she scans the carriage, her eyes fall upon a rugged looking man in a suit that's slightly too big for him. He is staring straight ahead. It is WILLIAM T. HIGSON.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I'd had life-models sit for me before, but rarely did I feel any emotional connection with them. I believe an artist always produces their best work if they have a relationship with their subject. This man... well this man felt so familiar to me, almost like meeting my father again; a man I didn't know, but felt an immediate attachment to.

We focus on the various features of William T. Higson. His eyes, ears, hair, hands.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

His features were... rounder than most; softer, as if his face had no bones, yet somehow still kept its definition. Almost infant-like, but with deep, weathered creases, like rings in a tree trunk, each one a memorial to another hard-fought year on earth.

Fiona begins to sketch.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

If I had selected any other face on that carriage, my life would have gone a different way. Any other portrait would have kept my world on an even keel, a life without note, without guilt but, instead, I opened my work book and began to sketch the face of William T. Higson.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. FIONA'S STUDIO - DAY

INTERCUT: SERIES OF SHOTS:

- A) Fiona painting on a large canvas - daylight streaming into the room.
- B) Fiona still at work as in the middle of the night. We see a c/u of her brush work.
- C) Fiona sitting on the floor looking up at the canvas.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

You've probably seen it, even if you weren't paying much attention. 'Northern Line' by Fiona Fewster, currently residing at the National Portrait Gallery.

INT. UNDERGROUND TRAIN CARRIAGE, FLASHBACK TO TRAIN CARRIAGE - DAY

Fiona is sketching.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The preliminary sketching of the portrait was a joy. My subject remained stock still throughout his entire journey, staring blankly toward something invisible that sat opposite to him. To me, his gaze acted as a barrier to the outside world, but instead of being put off by his obtrusive manner, I felt empathy.

On the train, Fiona looks around and checks her watch.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I remember clearly - it was 11 a.m.: the perfect time to work on the Underground - the cigarette smoke clearing from the morning commute, children safely imprisoned in school and only a handful of people idly getting through their day with no real urgency.

We look over Fiona's shoulder as her sketch progresses.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I didn't realise then that the time - the exact time - that I sketched William T. Higson was to become so important. Far more important than I (or he) could have ever dreamed. 11 a.m. March 15th, 1936. I was the only person in the world who knew for certain that William T. Higson was on that train at that time. Unless, of course, you counted his wife.

INT. FIONA'S STUDIO - DAY

Fiona is back at work. Over her shoulder we see the portrait coming to life. In a surreal moment, it seems to be painting itself.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I set to work on a canvas that blocked most of the doorway of the tiny studio I rented in Crouch End. I worked tirelessly for days on end, a little at a time. It had to be right. It needed to live, the same way that my sketch had. The sad lines around the rheumy eyes; the left eyebrow sitting ever so slightly lower than the right; the small clump of hair that had gotten away from his comb that morning. As I painted on I knew I'd captured the man. Not just his features and calm exterior, but his very soul.

EXT. CROUCH END STREET - DAY

Fiona walks down the street, a contented smile on her face.

FIONA (V.O) (CONT'D)

I rarely took a break but, on occasion I would take a walk down to Josie's Café for a cup of tea, just to force myself to interact with other human beings, albeit briefly.

INT. JOSIE'S CAFÉ - DAY

Fiona is chatting to JOSIE, the cheerful owner of a café. They share a joke with one another, before Fiona takes her seat. On the table is a discarded newspaper. She casually glances at it and her face and mood suddenly change completely.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I remember it was a particularly fine day toward the completion of the portrait when I popped into Josie's for a break. The front page of the newspaper changed everything.

EXT. TERRACED HOUSE IN LONDON - DAY - FLASHBACK

Police are banging on the front door. Eventually one of the policemen kicks the door in.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

On Thursday 15th of March at approximately 3 p.m. police were called to a dwelling in Shepherd's Bush by a distraught husband who had come home to discover the lifeless body of his dead wife. She'd been beaten to death.

INT. TERRACED HOUSE IN LONDON - DAY - FLASHBACK

Police run through the front room of the house where they see the body of a dead woman lying on the floor. Sitting next to her is a man with his head in his hands. We can't see his face.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

On arrival the police found the front room was in a state of disarray and quickly concluded that she had been a victim of a burglary that had gone wrong, speculating that she had disturbed the intruder who, in a state of panic, had viciously attacked and murdered the woman. They have named the woman as Janet Higson, wife of--

As police survey the murder scene the man looks up. It is William T. Higson.

END FLASHBACK.

INT. JOSIE'S CAFÉ - DAY

A c/u of the newspaper front page shows the face of Higson. The paper is trembling in Fiona's hands.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Although I'd been studying this very face for months now, his image still shocked me.

Fiona drops her teacup, spilling tea all over the table. Her fellow customers all turn to look at the disturbance. Fiona continues to stare at the picture, captivated. She continues to read.

INT. NEIGHBOURS HOUSE IN SHEPHERD'S BUSH - DAY - FLASHBACK

A policeman is quizzing the neighbour.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Police interviewed neighbours and, according to Emma Geraldine, 88, a spinster who had lived next door to the Higsons for as long as she could remember, she had heard shouting and a 'disturbance' emanating from their residence that morning. Furthermore, she was adamant that the shouting was between Mr. Higson and his wife, Janet.

We witness the interview with the neighbour EMMA GERALDINE, the elderly neighbour, up close.

EMMA

I can assure you officer that, although I'm 88, my hearing is impeccable.

The policeman nods, an incredulous smile on his face.

EMMA (CONT'D)

It was 11.15, you see, because I looked at the clock on the mantle over there. Yes. Then there was this banging sound, then everything went quiet. I thought nothing more of it. They were always arguing, you see, and she was always slamming doors during these rows. But maybe this time... well he does have a temper...

END FLASHBACK.

INT. JOSIE'S CAFÉ - DAY

Fiona is still studying the paper.

FIONA (V.O.)

But I knew she was wrong. It couldn't have been him.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. FIONA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Fiona is lying awake. She gets up and sits on the side of her bed.

FIONA (V.O.)

I couldn't get away from William T. Higson. We were sharing the same space. The same *life*. This was my best painting. It might even be the best painting I would ever do. It deserved to be seen.

EXT. CROUCH END STREET - NIGHT

Fiona is alone, walking the streets, gathering her thoughts. She is heading for her studio.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

If Higson was hanged for his crimes my painting would take on far more notoriety. Would it cheapen it? Not to my way of thinking. It would simply skew its power; give it a different significance. Even if people missed what I intended to convey through the portrait, they might see something else, something darker. Or maybe they would just view it so they could into the eyes of a murderer.

INT. FIONA'S STUDIO - NIGHT

Fiona removes the cloth from the portrait and stands back to examine it once more. She picks up her paint brush and goes over some fine detailing.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

But the painting was his alibi. It had the power to set him free. He would be released, forgotten and, with him, would my painting. Even if people saw merit in the work, it would lose its longevity. I had faith in the work as a stand-alone piece, of course I did, but... A Portrait Of A Killer. It was too good an opportunity to miss. The art world, the public, the critics; It would guarantee publicity and, perhaps, the chance to paint more; build the reputation I knew I had in me. I'd struggled all my life - been poor enough to almost die of famine.

(MORE)

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I'd begged on the street, used
discarded newspaper as toilet
roll, fished through bins to find
something to eat or sell. I'd
devoured cat food just to stay
alive, for Christ's sake.

She stands back once more, still deep in thought. Slowly a
smile appears on her face, as if she's made a decision.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Years of poverty can dull any
sense of right and wrong.
Everything becomes cloudy; your
moral compass shifts. When you
need to eat, you'll kick someone
else to do so. Don't tell me you
wouldn't do the same. That's what
I told myself then. Now, I'm not
so sure.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. PACKED COURTROOM - DAY

Fiona makes her way through the crowded seating to find one
empty space, which she fills. Everyone is restless as the
judge calls the court to order. Fiona is breathless as the
prisoner, Higson, is brought into the dock.

FIONA (V.O.)
The courtroom was freezing, but
packed just the same. I had to
queue from 5 in the morning just to
secure a place in the public
gallery. With no idea of the next
great conflict lurking around the
corner, the nation was desperately
looking for something horrifying to
enjoy. Nothing too close to home,
you understand - just gory enough
to gossip about. The murder of
Janet Higson was the ideal
distraction. All I could focus on
was William T. Higson - my subject.
During the opening statements the
words of the lawyers just drifted
in and out.

The PROSECUTION LAWYER, a stout, unlikeable man, parades in front of the jury.

SERIES OF SHOTS:

A time lapse sequence following the days of the trial.

A) We go in and out of the prosecution lawyer's arguments.

B) Time lapse of defence lawyer's arguments.

C) We pan across the faces of the jury, the judge, the lawyers and Fiona.

D) Higson in the dock, each day looking slightly more haggard.

PROS. LAWYER

...Mr. Higson, a self-confessed agoraphobic, claims he was travelling at the time of the murder, yet no one recalls seeing him on...

PROS. LAWYER

... when his neighbour can place him at the scene of the crime and, according to the coroner...

DEF. LAWYER

...But, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, how is it possible for my client to have murdered his wife when...

DEF. LAWYER

...and I further raise the question that, if Mr. Higson struck his wife, where is the weapon by which...

As the trial rumbles on, we see a C/U of Fiona, nervously biting her lip.

FIONA (V.O.)

I remained quiet. In fact, to my shame, I felt excitement rising in me. I could have so much power, so much influence in that courtroom, but it was my little secret.

(MORE)

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I realised that if I didn't come forward during the course of the trial, I could never tell anyone my secret. And, until today, I never did. For eight days I studied the face of William T. Higson. I watched it get thinner, sicker, older. And every day I struggled with the guilt. And what if the portrait *wasn't* as good as I thought? What if, after he'd been found guilty and sent to his death, no one ever remembered William T. Higson ever again? I pushed those thoughts aside. I'd made my play, I was going to stick to it.

INT. PACKED COURTROOM - DAY

Finally, the time-lapse reaches the point where the JURY-HEAD stands to give his verdict.

JUDGE

So, members of the jury, have you reached your verdict?

JURY

We have, Your Honour.

JUDGE

And how do you find the defendant?

JURY

Guilty, Your Honour.

As the judge passes the death sentence we stay on Higson's face, which seems emotionless.

FIONA (V.O.)

The verdict was unanimous. No one believed he was anywhere else but his home in Shepherd's Bush that day. He couldn't prove it. His lawyer couldn't prove it. Only I could prove it. But instead, I chose my career. My success. I chose *survival*.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. FIONA'S STUDIO - DAY

Fiona is showing her painting to MARGARET, an older woman in her 30's. Margaret is a friend of Fiona's, owner of her own gallery. She is very stylish, dressed impeccably in the fashions of the day. Margaret lights a cigarette.

MARGARET

Go on, love.

She motions to Fiona to remove the sheet covering the painting, which Fiona duly does. There are several moments of silence as Margaret contemplates the painting. Eventually she smiles.

MARGARET

Is that...?

FIONA

It is.

MARGARET

The man in the news? So, what, did you sketch him during the trial?

FIONA

No, before. Just by happenstance I caught him one day - long before the... 'incident'. He just happened to be on the same train as me and I was completely drawn to him.

MARGARET

Yes, yes. I can see why.
Fascinating.

FIONA

Then... well you know what happened.
He got arrested and...

MARGARET

My girl, it's... breath-taking.

FIONA

Well, I'm not sure about that.

MARGARET

Well, it's very good and don't tell me you don't know it. Fiona, this is your finest work yet. And with the subject matter...

FIONA

Yes, I am rather pleased. But...

MARGARET

What, dear?

FIONA

Well, do you think I ought to be putting it out there?

MARGARET

Why on earth not?

FIONA

Well...

MARGARET

Fiona, you must.

FIONA

Isn't it ever so slightly in bad taste?

MARGARET

Nonsense, girl.

FIONA

But won't people look at it as being perhaps a little... opportunistic?

MARGARET

Fiona, this is an amazing piece. In my view, the subject only emphasizes its strength. Its power.

Margaret leans into the painting, examining it more closely.

FIONA (V.O.)

Margo was my long-term friend and confident from the art world. Loyal, candid and dependable.

(MORE)

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

She'd been buying and selling art from her little boutique gallery in Camden Town and had the ear of many of London's leading galleries and museums.

MARGARET

Fiona, I want to hang this in my gallery and get it seen.

FIONA

Oh, don't be silly, Margo.

MARGARET

Trust me, dear girl, trust me. This is the start of something. I can feel it.

INT. DRINKS RECEPTION IN ART GALLERY - NIGHT

We follow Fiona as she flits from group to group, accepting adulation from everyone around her. She is dressed to the nines and is being toasted by all and everyone. On the back wall of the gallery is the portrait.

FIONA (V.O.)

The portrait was unveiled one month later - eight months before William T. Higson was due to be executed. Champagne reception, critical adulation (from Margo's friends, at least), even some local press coverage - the critics became especially enamoured with the dark subject matter.

SERIES OF SHOTS:

- A) Snapshots of a couple of small clippings.
- B) A shot of a local newspaper article featuring Fiona.
- C) A bigger paper clipping that has the headline 'PORTRAIT OF A KILLER.'

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

For a brief moment forgotten were the days of poverty and starvation.
(MORE)

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Forgotten were the squalid deaths of my sister and mother. And, for that one night at least, forgotten was William T. Higson, the innocent man who had set me on my way.

SERIES OF SHOTS:

We follow Fiona's life as she becomes busier. We see her painting various different portraits of a number of different people.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The work started to come in, as well as the plaudits for 'Northern Line', fuelled by the continuing interest in the imminent execution of William T. Higson and by Margo's relentless promotion. The offers came pouring in and, with them, a constant source of regular income for the first time in my life. My work started to get noticed. Margo hung several more pieces of my work, which, at this time, were simply pouring out of me. Bigger names in the art world began showing an interest and I began to grow my own small little empire.

INT. FIONA'S NEW HOME - DAY

Fiona moving into a decent sized home. She instructs moving men where to put various pieces of furniture.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I was even pencilled to become one of the royal portrait artists, with the possibility of the king himself sitting for me. My finances grew and the memory of William T. Higson faded. The rest of my portfolio overtook its notoriety. I moved from my hovel to a proper home. My stomach was full, my house was warm. I was finally living.

INT. FIONA'S HALLWAY - DAY

A letter drops through the front door, which Fiona picks up and begins to read.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Then, two weeks before his
execution, a letter arrived for me
by way of the Gallery.

C/U of a watermark which reads 'HMP WORMWOOD SCRUBS'.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
There was only one person it might
have come from. He'd found out
about the portrait.

INT. FIONA'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Fiona puts the letter, unopened behind the clock on her mantelpiece.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
It was 24 hours before I could
bring myself to open it. But I
needed to know what he wanted.

LATER

Fiona returns to the letter.

INT. PRISON CELL - DAY, FLASHBACK

Higson is at his desk, writing.

HIGSON (V.O.)
Dear Ms. Fewster, I dearly hope
that you not only receive this
letter in tact (I cannot say I
have tremendous faith in the staff
here at 'The Scrubs'), but that
you will also take the time to
read, digest and respond. If,
however, you choose to ignore me,
it is your prerogative and I will
bother you no further.

INT. PRISON COMMUNAL AREA - DAY, FLASHBACK

Higson is wandering around the room, looking very out of place and ill at ease.

HIGSON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I am writing to you for two very good reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, I wish to congratulate you on your success. You are quite clearly a hugely talented artist and, as such, deserve the recognition you are currently enjoying. Which brings me to my second point; I wish to ask a favour of you. Let me explain:

INT. PRISON CELL - DAY, FLASHBACK

A prison warden brings a package in for Higson, who duly opens it. It contains several press cuttings which feature his portrait.

HIGSON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Being detained in this squalid place, away from the outside world, I have been robbed of any form of culture. A kindly warden, who has taken pity upon me, has managed to smuggle some press cuttings in to me. Although the article in question was only a very rough facsimile, I have studied your portrait of me in great detail and, although inevitably, something is lost in newspaper print, I must say it is indeed a striking work. I'm sure I never could have imagined myself in such a light!

INT. FIONA'S FRONT ROOM - DAY

Fiona is pacing the room as she reads on.

HIGSON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Among many other regrets I have at the moment, being unable to see the painting in the flesh (as it were) is certainly one of them. This brings me to my favour: I may be being held at Her Majesty's Pleasure, but I am still allowed visitors. As audacious as it sounds, I was wondering, or rather hoping that you might take it upon yourself to visit me and, perhaps, share with me some of your preliminary sketches? Better still, I might even ask that you spend some time talking me through your thoughts and feelings toward the piece? I have many questions, which only you might answer.

INT. HIGSON'S PRISON CELL - DAY, FLASHBACK

Higson continues to write.

HIGSON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

It would mean so much to me and, although I'm not fond of the term 'bribe', as my likeness appears to be helping you make something of a name for yourself within the art world, I feel that it might be the least you could do. I know it sounds awfully presumptuous, but I hope you see things from my point of view. Obviously, given my circumstances, I quite understand why you wouldn't wish to undertake such a journey, but please consider my proposition. I only ask that you consider it with some urgency, as I fear I don't have too much longer. My appointment with fate has been booked! And, please, do not worry for your safety - I can assure I'm quite the pacifist and, naturally, innocent of any violent crime I have been accused of. I look forward to hearing from you soon, Ms. Fewster. Kind regards, William T. Higson.

END FLASHBACK

EXT. LONDON STREETS - DAY

We follow Fiona as she makes her way to the prison. She is indecisive and stops to think several times. On the bus, she is anxiously biting her nails. She pulls out several of her early drafts and sketches to re-examine them.

FIONA (V.O.)

The natural reaction was not to go.
How could I look him in the eye
knowing what I knew? But he was
right - I did owe him a lot. The
question was, what would I tell
him? I would have to tread
carefully. As I looked back at
those sketches I was instantly
taken back to that tube carriage.

FLASHBACK. INT. TUBE TRAIN CARRIAGE - DAY, FLASHBACK

Fiona is sketching Higson. We see a c/u of every stroke of her pencil. Higson, meanwhile, is minding his own business.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

All those paths, those lives that
crossed over at that moment in
time. One carriage either way and
who knows where I'd be today? Or
where William T. Higson would be.

Suddenly Higson looks up and stares at Fiona. She drops her pencil.

HIGSON

What are you doing, Fiona? You've
murdered me. Just like the person
who murdered my wife. It's in your
hands, Fiona. My life is in your
hands.

END FLASHBACK

INT. BUS - DAY

Fiona jolts awake after nodding off. She is freaked out from her daydream.

EXT. GATES OF WORMWOOD SCRUBS - DAY

Fiona walks toward the gates. She stops in her tracks.

FIONA (V.O.)

It was two weeks before the
execution. I had one last chance
to turn back. I didn't take it.

INT. VISITING ROOM IN PRISON - DAY

Fiona is shown into the room, where Higson is waiting.

HIGSON

Miss Fewster.

FIONA

Mr. Higson.

HIGSON

William, please. I must admit,
this is quite a surprise. Please,
sit down.

FIONA (V.O.)

The gentleness of his voice
surprised me - I don't know why. He
sounded different to the man I'd
listened to at the trial.
Unsurprisingly he looked older too,
but his features were still just as
striking. I was trying to remain
clam, although I was terrified.

Fiona tentatively sits down and gives Higson a polite
smile.

FIONA

Well you wrote to me, did you not?

HIGSON

Indeed, I did.

FIONA

Well, here I am

HIGSON

Yes, here you are.

Fiona shifts awkwardly in her seat as they contemplate one another.

HIGSON (CONT'D)

At the risk of repeating myself, I must say once again that your portrait is breath-taking.

FIONA

Thank you.

HIGSON

The power of the static image should never be underestimated, should it? Rarely have I seen a portrait that one can get so lost in for minutes, even hours on end. It truly moved me.

FIONA

Well, it was a pleasure to paint.

HIGSON

Well, I'm flattered. Do you recall what drew you to me, so to speak?

FIONA (V.O.)

Suddenly I wanted to tell him everything, to have it all pour out and beg for his forgiveness, so that I might be able to live with the painting and the subsequent success it had given me without the terrible burden of shame.

FIONA

Your, erm, your face... it's very distinctive.

Higson raises his eyebrows in an ironic show of surprise. As Fiona begins to ramble, Higson just sits back and smiles kindly.

FIONA (CONT'D)

It's a very 'open' face - one which allowed me to... how can I say it?... express myself through you. Does that make sense?

HIGSON

It does.

FIONA

During the painting, I felt I was understanding you... seeing things through your eyes; feeling your... I don't know... 'sorrow' perhaps? Does that sound awfully silly?

Higson gently shakes his head, but remains silent.

FIONA (CONT'D)

I don't know. It just... came together. The minute I saw you—

HIGSON

(Interrupting)

May I ask, where exactly did you manage to capture my image?

FIONA (V.O.)

And there it was. The moment. The question I'd prepared for.

Fiona, slightly flustered, begins to dig around in her bag, avoiding the question.

FIONA

I've brought some of the preliminary sketches, just as you'd asked for.

HIGSON

Oh yes. Oh my. Yes, I can see how the painting is coming together with every draft.

FIONA

I use charcoal to loosen up the lines - I find it more forgiving than pencil - then, when I'm happy to proceed--

HIGSON

Forgive me, Miss Fewster, but may I ask where you captured my likeness?

Fiona stares at Higson, who is still looking kindly, yet firmly at her.

FIONA

Yes, um, well... it was on a train,
if I remember correctly.

HIGSON

On a train?

FIONA

Yes. I think so.

HIGSON

Interesting. Do you recall which
train?

FIONA

Um, no. I can't say I do.

HIGSON

A locomotive?

FIONA

No. No, it was an underground
train if I recall correctly. Yes,
that was it.

HIGSON

I see. Do you remember which day
it might have been?

FIONA

(Quickly)
No, I'm afraid not.

HIGSON

I see.

There's more silence between the two of them. Fiona starts
to bite her lip. Higson remains staring at her.

HIGSON

Well, these are indeed fine. I wish
Janet could have seen the painting.
She would have enjoyed it.

Suddenly, from nowhere, a tear falls from Higson's eye. As
quickly as it came, he brushes it away and pulls himself
together.

HIGSON

Anyway. Enough of that.

He gathers the sketches and hands them back to Fiona.

FIONA

No. Please. Keep them.

HIGSON

But they belong in a gallery!
Surely one day there will be a
Fiona Fewster retrospective, will
there not?

FIONA

(Smiling modestly)

Well, perhaps. You do with them
what you wish, Mr. Higson. Share
them with whomever you see fit,
but, for the moment, I should be
very grateful if you kept them.
It's... it's the least I can do.

HIGSON

Well, that's very kind.

They share a genuine smile and the silence between them now
feels more comfortable.

HIGSON

I suppose I should let you go.

FIONA

Yes, I must get on.

They stand and shake hands. Surprisingly Higson places a
gentle kiss on Fiona's hand, which she seems to enjoy.

FIONA

I just wish... I mean, I hope...
everything is... okay. You know. In
the end.

HIGSON

Oh, I'm sure it will be. To be
honest with you, it's the right
thing for me now.

FIONA

Perhaps I... could visit you again?

HIGSON
I should like that immensely.

A PRISON WARDEN ushers Higson from the room, leaving Fiona looking after him.

EXT. PRISON GATES - DAY

Fiona steps outside and stops. She begins to cry.

FADE TO BLACK.

LATER. EXT. SAME PRISON GATES - EARLY MORNING.

FIONA (V.O.)
I returned to visit William T.
Higson the following day and the
day after that.

SERIES OF SHOTS:

A montage of the two of them talking as the days pass.
Fiona is dressed differently each day. There's laughing,
smiling, leaning in. They are acting like two close
friends.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
It seems odd to me now, but at the
time the friendship we formed in
those last few days felt like the
most natural thing in the world. I
think we both found it quite
cathartic. We talked about art. We
talked about London. We talked
about families, growing up,
growing old. We conversed at
length about his agoraphobia and
how he would drive his long-
suffering wife crazy by constantly
being under her feet, but that was
the extent to which he talked
about her. I never saw him cry
again after that first visit. He
would hurriedly change the subject
of his wife's death if it ever
came up. I only pushed him on it
once.

Fiona and Higson are talking.

FIONA

William, if you didn't... hurt
Janet, then who do you think did?

Higson stares at Fiona for a moment.

HIGSON

Well, that's the question, isn't
it? I really don't know. If I did,
perhaps I wouldn't find myself in
such a... peculiar situation!

FIONA

But surely there's something you
can do? Something we can do?

HIGSON

Miss Fewster, I don't think it
matters anymore. I've tried and I'm
tired. My lawyer has given it his
all but, well, without Janet...
what's the point?

FIONA

But don't you feel--

HIGSON

(Interrupting)

Miss Fewster, I don't feel
anything.

FIONA

But you're innocent! What about
the real killer? What about
justice for Janet?

HIGSON

Well, yes, there is that. But it
is beyond my control. Finding the
real killer won't give me the
peace I crave, believe me.

FIONA

(Becoming angry)

But you're going to hang for
something you didn't do!

HIGSON

Well I know that. And you know
that. Unfortunately, the real

killer aside, nobody else knows that.

FIONA (V.O.)

I stopped dead in my tracks. Had he known all along that I was his alibi? But why had he refused to challenge me further?

Flustered, Fiona begins to gather her things.

FIONA

I suppose so. William, I must go.

HIGSON

Of course. Miss Fewster, if it makes you feel any better, I'm glad that, at least, you believe I'm innocent.

Fiona stops and gives Higson a smile.

FIONA

Fiona, please. Call me Fiona.

HIGSON

Fiona. I'm sure that, if we'd met under different circumstances we might have been great friends.

FIONA

Yes, I'm sure we would.

HIGSON

You know the... event... is only two days away. I'd rather you didn't visit again. It's been a pleasure getting to know you, but I'm afraid it will be too difficult for me now.

FIONA

Yes. I understand.

WILLIAM

Well. Goodbye. And don't stop being brilliant.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. HIGSON'S CELL - DAY

Higson stands as a warden and a priest enter his cell. The priest talks to him quietly before they both follow him out of his cell.

FIONA (V.O.)

The night before Her Majesty's
Government hung William T. Higson
I didn't sleep. I didn't even
bother going to bed.

INT. FIONA'S FRONT ROOM - DAY

Fiona sits by the radio, tears in her eyes.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

At 10 a.m. the news was broadcast
that Higson had been successfully
executed. And I had done nothing
to stop it. I was guiltier than
William had ever been. I'd
betrayed a friend. I'd betrayed
myself.

INT. A NON-DESCRIPT FLAT, THE SAME ONE WE SAW AT THE
BEGINNING - DAY

The older Fiona sits at her desk, where we left her at the
beginning of the story. She is writing a letter.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

So here I sit - the tortured
artist. After the success of
'Northern Line' life was supposed
to become increasingly enjoyable,
except it wasn't. For years
afterwards I went on to paint and
sculpt, becoming one of the most
revered post war artists Britain
has ever seen. As predicted by
William, a retrospective at the
Tate became their most successful
to date and there, in pride of
place, were the sketches I'd given
him all those years ago.

INTERCUT - ART GALLERY - DAY

We zoom into the sketches of William.

INT. FIONA'S FLAT - DAY

She continues to write.

FIONA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I had conquered what I had hated
most - the poverty and squalor
that had stolen my youth - and I
had avenged it. But at what cost?
I still think about William T.
Higson every day and, finally, it
has become too much for me. I have
decided to leave this life in the
same manner as William did. I
can't ask for any more
forgiveness. I'm a fraud and a
coward and my only consolation is
that, when this note is
discovered, the world will finally
see me as I am. I'm sorry William.

Fiona Fewster. 1973

THE END.