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Edna O'Brien

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MARINER BOOKS

EDNA O'BRIEN

Wild Decembers



A NOVEL



A Mariner Book

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PROLOGUE

C LOONTHA IT IS CALLED — a locality within the bending of an arm. A few scattered houses, the old fort, lime-dank and jabbery and from the great whooshing belly of the lake between grassland and callow land a road, sluicing the little fortresses of ash and elder, a crooked road to the mouth of the mountain. Fields that mean more than fields, more than life and more than death too. In the summer months calves going suck suck suck, blue dribble threading from their black lips, their white faces stark as clowns. Hawthorn and whitethorn, boundaries of dreaming pink. Byroad and bog road. The bronze gold grasses in a tacit but unremitting sway. Listen. Shiver of wild grass and cluck of wild fowl. Quickening.

Fathoms deep the frail and rusted shards, the relics of battles of the long ago, and in the basins of limestone, quiet in death, the bone babes and the bone mothers, the fathers too. The sires. The buttee men and the long-legged men who hacked and hacked and into the torn breathing soil planted a first potato crop, the diced tubers that would be the bread of life until the fungus came.

According to the annals it happened on Our Lady's Eve. The blight came in the night and wandered over the fields, so that by morning the upright stalks were black ribbons of rot. Slow death for man and beast. A putrid pall over the landscape, hungry marching people meek and mindless, believing it had not struck elsewhere. Except that it had. Death at every turn. The dead faces

yellow as parchment, the lips a liquorice black from having gorged on the sweet poisonous stuff, the apples of death.

They say the enemy came in the night, but the enemy can come at any hour, be it dawn or twilight, because the enemy is always there and these people know it, locked in a tribal hunger that bubbles in the blood and hides out on the mountain, an old carcass waiting to rise again, waiting to roar again, to pit neighbour against neighbour and dog against dog in the crazed and phantom lust for a lip of land. Fields that mean more than fields, fields that translate into nuptials into blood; fields lost, regained, and lost again in that fickle and fractured sequence of things; the sons of Oisín, the sons of Conn and Connor, the sons of Abraham, the sons of Seth, the sons of Ruth, the sons of Delilah, the warring sons of warring sons cursed with that same irresistible thrall of madness which is the designate of living man, as though he had to walk back through time and place, back to the voiding emptiness to repossess ground gone for ever.

HERALDIC AND UNFLAGGING it chugged up the mountain road, the sound, a new sound jarring in on the profoundly pensive landscape. A new sound and a new machine, its squat front the colour of baked brick, the ridges of the big wheels scummed in muck, wet muck and dry muck, leaving their maggoty trails.

It was the first tractor on the mountain and its arrival would be remembered and relayed; the day, the hour of evening, and the way crows circled above it, blackening the sky, fringed, soundless, auguring. There were birds always; crows, magpies, thrushes, skylarks, but rarely like that, so many and so massed. It was early autumn, one of those still autumn days, several fields emptied of hay, the stubble a sullied gold, hips and haws on the briars and a wild dog rose which because of its purple hue had been named after the blood of Christ — *Sangria Jesu*.

At the top of the hill it slowed down, then swerved into a farmyard, stopping short of the cobbles and coming to rest on a grassy incline under a hawthorn tree. Bugler, the driver, ensconced inside his glass booth, waved to Breege, the young woman who, taken so by surprise, raised the tin can which she was holding in a kind of awkward salute. To her, the machine with smoke coming out of the metal chimney was like a picture of the Wild West. Already their yard was in a great commotion, their dog Goldie yelping, not knowing which part to bite first, hens and ducks

converging on it, startled and curious, and coming from an out-house her brother, Joseph, with a knife in his hand, giving him a rakish look.

"I'm stuck," Bugler said, smiling. He could have been driving it for years so assured did he seem up there, his power and prowess seeming to precede him as he stepped down and lifted his soft felt hat courteously. Might he leave it for a day or two until he got the hang of the gears. He pointed to the manual that was on the dashboard, a thin booklet, tattered and with some pages folded where a previous owner had obviously consulted it often.

"Oh, no bother . . . No bother," Joseph said, overcordial. The two men stood in such extreme contrast to one another, Joseph in old clothes like a scarecrow and Bugler in a scarlet shirt, leather gaiters over his trousers, and a belt with studs that looked lethal. He was recently home, having inherited a farm from an uncle, and the rumour spread that he was loaded with money and intended to reclaim much of his marshland. Because of having worked on a sheep station he had been nicknamed the Shepherd. A loner, he had not gone into a single house and had not invited anyone to his. The Crock, the craftiest of all the neighbours, who went from house to house every night, gleaning and passing on bits of gossip, had indeed hobbled up there, but was not let past the tumbling-down front porch. He was proud to report that it was no better than a campsite, and in sarcasm, he referred to it as the Congo. Bugler was a dark horse. When he went to a dance it was always forty or fifty miles away, but the Crock had reason to know that women threw themselves at him, and now he was in their yard, the sun causing glints of red in his black beard and sideburns. It was Breege's first sensing of him. Up to then he had been a tall fleeting figure, apparition-like, so eager to master his surroundings that he rarely used a gate or a stile, simply leapt over them. Her brother and him had had words over cattle that broke out. The families, though distantly related, had feuds that went back hundreds of years and by now had hardened into a dour sullenness. The wrong Joseph most liked to relate was of a Bugler ancestor, a Henry, trying to grab a corner of a field

which abutted onto theirs and their uncle Paddy impaling him on a road and putting a gun to his head. The upshot was that Paddy, like any common convict, had to emigrate to Australia, where he excelled himself as a boxer, got the red belts. Other feuds involved women, young wives from different provinces who could not agree and who screamed at each other like warring tinkers. Yet now both men were affable, that overaffability that seeks to hide any embarrassment. Joseph was the talkative one, expressing disbelief and wonder as each and every feature of the tractor was explained to him, the lever, the gears, the power shaft which, as Bugler said, could take the pants off a man or, worse, even an arm or a leg; then joyous whistles as Bugler recited its many uses — ploughing, rotating, foddering, making silage, and of course getting from A to B.

"It's some yoke," Joseph said, patting the side wing.

"If you ask me, she's a he," Bugler said, recalling the dangers, men in tractors to which they were unaccustomed having to be pulled out of bogholes in the dead of night, and a farmer in the Midlands driving over a travelling woman thinking he had caught a bough. Her tribespeople kept coming day after day strewing elder branches in wild lament.

They moved then to farming matters, each enquiring how many cattle the other had, although they knew well, and swapped opinions about the big new marts, the beef barons in their brown overalls and jobbers' boots.

"How times have changed," Joseph said overdramatically, and went on to quote from an article he had recently read, outlining the scientific way to breed pigs. The boar had to be kept well away from the sow so as to avoid small litters, but, nevertheless, had to be adjacent to her for the sake of smell, which of course was not the same as touch.

"Not a patch on touch . . . Nothing to beat touch," one said, and the other confirmed it.

"Would you like a go on it?" Bugler said then to each of them.

"I'll pass," Joseph said, but added that Breege would. She shrunk back from them, looked at the machine, and then climbed up on it because all she wanted was to have got up and down

again and vanish. Through the back of her thin blouse one hook of her brassiere was broken and Bugler would see that. A red colour ran up and down her cheeks as if pigment were being poured on them. It was like being up on a throne, with the fields and the low walls very insignificant, and she felt foolish.

"You're okay . . . You're okay . . . It won't run away with you," Bugler said softly, and leaned in over her. Their breaths almost merged. She thought how different he seemed now, how conciliatory, how much less abrupt and commanding. His eyes, the colour of dark treacle, were as deep as lakes, brown eyes, wounded-looking, as if a safety pin had been dragged over them in infancy. He saw her agitation, saw that she was uneasy, and to save the moment he told her brother that the bloke he bought the tractor from was a right oddball.

"How come?" Joseph said.

"He said that if I couldn't start it, I was to find a child, get the child to put its foot on the clutch, but tell it to be ready to jump the moment the engine started."

"You won't find a child around here," Joseph said, and in the silence they looked as if they were expecting something to answer back. Nothing did. It was as if they were each suspended and staring out at the fields, brown and khaki, and nondescript in the gathering dusk; fields over which many had passed, soldiers, pilgrims, journeymen, children too; fields on which their lives would leave certain traces followed by some dismay, then forgetfulness.

"You'll come in for the tea," Joseph said to lighten things.

"I won't . . . I have jobs to do," Bugler said, and turning to Breege, thinking that in some way he owed her an apology, he said, "If ever you want supplies brought from the town, you know who to ask."

MY BROTHER STAYED out there with it long after it got dark. He was talking to it, touching it, and maybe wishing, wishing. I had to call him in to his supper three times, him that's so finicky about his food, him that likes the Sunday roast and the crackling, custards put to set in a bain-marie of lukewarm water for the right consistency.

"Your supper is going cold."

"Isn't Bugler a great man," he said, barely able to tear himself away from it. You would think that it was a person and not a machine he was taking his leave of.

It began then. Or maybe it began long before. We don't know what's in us, what demons are in us, love and hate, part of the same soup. My brother, my highly strung brother, always on about the sacred fetters of land and blood. Blood strains going back to the flood. Our holding in the Domesday Book. Throwbacks. He's a great one for the throwbacks. In the winters he took to going down to the Heritage Centre, to consult books and almanacs, him and Miss Carruthers, the keeper, very tart woman, very learned, the pair of them tracing the genealogies, the radices of life before Christ. And Helen of Troy — blue seas, blue seas and a romping woman. He'd rave on about the men of Troy and the men of Argos leaving their flocks and going down to the long ships to wage a ten-year war, all over white-armed Helen, the romping woman.

"Them times, them times," he'd say when he came up home

full of mythologies and with drink taken. I had to milk and fodder. Our forebears, he said, had trudged hundreds of miles to plant themselves down in the wondrous infinity of Cloontha. According to the annals they had been evicted from the arable lands of Kildare — a man, a woman, a horde of barefoot children setting out on a cart, scavenging, begging, or maybe even stealing, and constantly being told to move on, move on, just like vermin. The cart, he reckoned, would have been their lodgings at night, a mass of bodies cleaved together like frogspawn. He always got carried away when he came to the bit of their arriving down at the low road, struck by the beauty of the lake and a big house with its gardens and rhododendron bushes, grounds to bivouac in, but that the father, the stern Moses, had the acumen to drive his haggard family up the mountain where no one could find them and hence no one could evict them. There would have been no road then, as he said, only a track thick with rushes and wild grasses, Moses having to hack his way ahead to lead his charges to safety. Nothing up the mountain in the way of a cabin or sheltering. Where would they have slept? What would they have found to eat? Berries maybe or nettles. From his prognostications he guessed that they had come on the spring well, the dark O of it scummed with weeds and cresses, and sighting it, the father would have knelt and drank from it and then ordered his family to drink — the waters of life. It he termed the baptismal moment.

He got to like telling it, memorised it, mixed it in with the Greeks, their hardships, their carnage, Ajax and Achilles and our spearmen, one race all, one language before the Flood. He practised it for the visitors who come in the summer, come — “Yoo-hoo . . . Anybody home” — into our yard looking for relatives or old sewing machines to convince themselves who they are. Out there with them till all hours. They lap it up. He orders me to bring them the tea and I put a folding table down in my little plantation, with its deep-red dahlias. I love my deep-red dahlias and I love our Lord. My brother is at his most extreme when he brings his listeners to the Field of Corpses. He asks them to ponder on it. They become very quiet then, hushed at the

thought of the scattered remains, become as reverential as they might if placed before the buried emperors of the East with their wives and artefacts and bronze horses.

"So we seem to be on talking terms with the Shepherd," I said.

"We do," he said.

"Funny your asking him in for the tea," I said.

"Why wouldn't I . . . A handsome man like that," and as he rose I saw his hand reaching behind the plate for the solicitor's letter which had stung him so much the morning it came. We knew the words, the tough words, we knew them well —

Dear Mr. Brennan:

We have instructions from your neighbour, Mr. Michael Bugler, to write to you regarding the continued trespass of your cows on his field of four acres. Your cows have entirely depastured this field. They have also knocked down the fences, thus causing further damages. The cows were either delivered to you, or shown in the act of trespass. Nevertheless, you have made no effort to contain them.

We have therefore received instructions to collect from you, within five days of this letter, the sum of £55 for damages with our costs of £25. The damages are continuing, and unless there is compliance with this demand, proceedings will be issued.

Watching it burn made him gleeful, and he announced that he owed himself a drink.

"I'm in the high mood, Breege," he said, and so he was, and after a few slugs it was on to the parable about gentle furze bushes with their golden aureoles, Yellow Dick's Bog, our dead parents, the Book of Lecan, the ancient breast-pin, the voyage of Maol Duin, the bed of Diarmid and Grainne, Brodar the Dane that slew the aged Brian Boru in his tent. Lofty things.

"I thought you told the Crock that you would never talk to that man on principle."

"I was wrong," he said, chastised.

I scooped the stewed apples onto his plate, poured cream in zigzags over it, and waited for him to taste it. He ate without

thinking, without tasting, his eyes glowing, full of a strange talkative excitement, as if the tractor had opened a friendly causeway between Bugler and ourselves.

It was a long time since I felt so lighthearted, so giddy — as if I were waltzing.

It began then.

BY MORNING the tractor looked to have settled in, snug under the hawthorn, against the low wall, the garish red paint softened in the aftermath of rain and zillions of raindrops on the bonnet. Three people had come to view it, the Crock and the saucy sisters, Reena and Rita.

"Ye came fast," the Crock said.

"And why wouldn't we?" Rita, the elder, said, and Reena concurred. A brand-new machine like that and a fine specimen of a man that owned it. Didn't they see him swimming down at the dock in his birthday suit. All hair. A caveman. Scapulars around his neck with the Agnus Dei relic, the little lamb of God.

"Mud and muscle," Reena said, and Rita giggled.

"Ye're the business," the Crock said. Their skills were legendary. Into a dance hall, study the form, a fellow coaxed out in two shakes of a duck's tail, so much for a kiss, so much more for a French kiss, so much for other favours, but never the full menu until they got him home in the house.

"You'd always be welcome to our little nest," Reena said.

"Would I now!" the Crock said, a touch of bitterness in his voice, because he knew that behind his back they called him the Iron Bedbug on account of his deformities.

They stand back from the tractor then, surpassing each other in praise of it, conjecture as to whether it is new or secondhand. The Crock reckons that it is secondhand. He hobbled across the previous night with his half-arsed flash lamp to have a deco at it,

snooping around in case Joseph of Arimathea or Ivory Breege came out. He came to the conclusion then that it was secondhand and he would stand by that.

"It looks at you like a bull," Rita said, and then lifted her short skirt and mimicked charging at it. They had arrived on horseback, Rita holding the reins and Reena sitting side-saddle on the bay mare that was tethered a few feet away, snorting to get to a fresh patch of grass. In that flurry of taffeta was a hint of her bag of tricks. How well he could picture it without ever being there — their little abode, off down a bohreen, a drawn curtain, dried flowers, candlelight, some poor eejit carried away in a miasma of warmth and smarm, the Reena one taking her plait of hair out of its rubber band to thwack his chest. Sorcery. Witchcraft. So far, their witchcraft had yielded a farm of land at the other end of the province and several little fields inside other people's big fields. That was how they got their power, their game of Monopoly, as Rita called it.

"How many fields do ye own now?" he asked, letting out a bitter laugh that was his trademark, and why not, himself with a stump of a foot, a hump, one wet field with clumps of reeds swaying uselessly and a caravan that leaked.

"We're doing okay," Rita said. She was the brains and Reena the nymphet. She made the deals, bought and sold cattle, and harangued her friendly solicitor to write letters, to make hell for this person or that who got in her way. People feared her. Even those who did not know her feared her. At discos the men shied away from her, but that did not matter. Reena could coax them out, and soon after, Rita followed to ask if they would like to come for coffee later. The bachelors, especially the visiting ones, were the easiest prey. Rita had had her gearbox taken out a few years before. Boasted of having told the pup of a surgeon that it was no use to her and that he would be in court if he didn't do it. Reena had to be watched, not the full shilling. From time to time broached the matter of love or, worse, a baby. Feck love, feck a baby.

"Isn't it marvellous . . . It'll put Cloontha on the map," Rita said.

"Engage a gear," the Crock said.

"I'd love to . . . I'd love to get it going and go up there and congratulate the caveman," Reena said.

"I wouldn't do that . . . He might have a ladyfriend," the Crock said.

"Who . . . Not the Breege one?"

"He'd want something toffier."

"Like me," Reena said, and drew her skirt up to her belly. Never wore underclothes in any of the seasons.

"A child of nature," Rita says, and recalls a day at a horse fair miles away when a Kerry man asked them a simple question and within a week was ensconced in their kitchen, the pair of them dancing attendance on him and a map of his holding on their kitchen table. She thinks of the young guard who came about a dog licence and was foolish enough to let Reena cuddle him a bit, and then her jumping up on a chair with her bush showing, shouting rape, rape, and a young simpleton summoned to be a witness. They got a good few bob out of that.

Apparition-like Bugler appeared and was greeted effusively, compliments showered on him and on the new arrival.

"Your servant," the Crock called out, and lifted his good cap in deference.

The sisters surpassed each other in praise of it, standing back from it, then close up to it, tweaking it as they might a baby. Next, they excused themselves cravenly for being so excited, but confessed that it wasn't every day such a fandango appeared in the parish. At each and every opportunity they touch it, then touch Bugler as if both were interchangeable. Bemused and a little baffled he thanks them for their kindness. They have a teeny-weeny request. Has he christened it?

"Hadn't thought of that," Bugler said.

Names were trotted out, names of famous boxers, hurley players, and eventually, with some prompting, Reena came up with Dino the Dinosaur.

"Dino the Dinosaur," Bugler said, amused.

"You must excuse her impudence at christening your child," Rita said, and shook his hand very formally, introducing herself

and her younger sister and assuring him that their father and his dear departed uncle were always on the best of terms.

"Is that so," Bugler said, tickled at their strategies, their touching the mudguard, then touching his arm, then asking if there was a name that he would have liked better, a saint's name perhaps. Reena then wondered if it might be an impudence to sit on it.

"Go ahead," he said, but did not take the little soft plump hand, with its deeking of silverish rings.

"Reet," she said in a babyish voice, and soon she was settled squarely on the seat, her strong pink thighs cleaved together, confessing that she might just burst with the excitement.

"Reen is the romantic type," Rita said.

"Oh really," from Bugler.

"Oh yeh . . . A rose on your breakfast tray."

"What colour rose?" His eyes meet Reena's as she parts her thighs a fraction and says "Guess." The invitation being quite blatant, he gives half a laugh. Then, to gloss things over, Rita says that if he has any bit of sewing or mending he knows where to come.

"A Mary and a Martha," the Crock says with a flourish.

"Which is Mary and which is Martha?" Bugler asks, looking down at a pair of legs of colossal girth from the ankle up to the knees.

"Are you going to lift me down?" Reena says. There is a strumpet gaze to her, her eyes yellow-brown, the dark tawny colour sully the whites. They are more like half-sisters. She is asking again with little gasps for him to help her.

"I will not," Bugler says.

She jumps in effrontery, then walks across and leaps onto her mare while Rita follows, unties the reins, and leads them away, Reena staring back at them, at him.

"Who are they . . . Where do they live?"

"They are the notorious sisters, and they live three miles up from the graveyard."

"They got here fast."