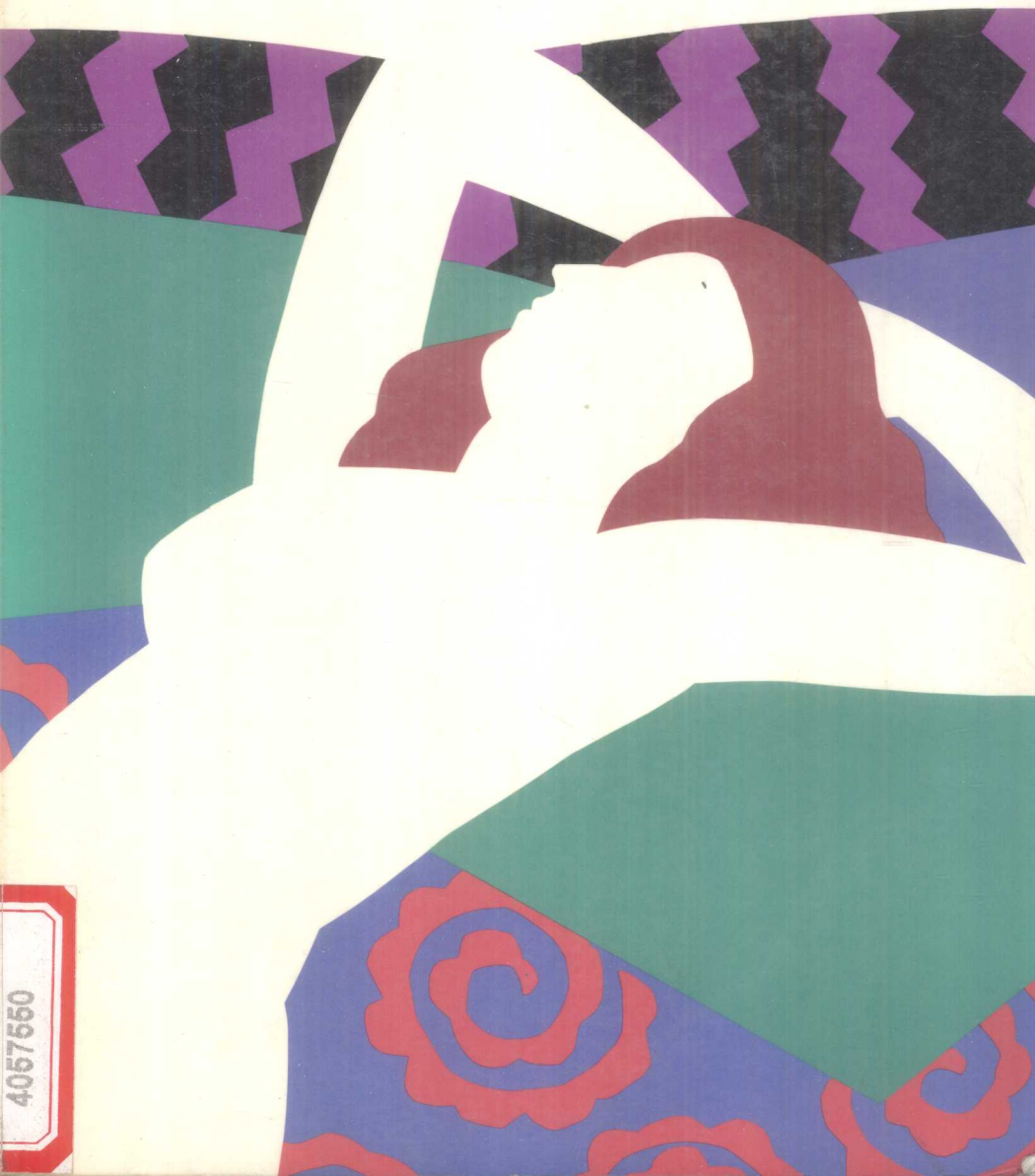




NIGHT

A NOVEL

EDNA O'BRIEN



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FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX • *New York*

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One fine day in the middle of the night, two dead men got up to fight, two blindmen looking on, two cripples running for a priest, and two dummies shouting, Hurry on. That's how it is. Topsy-turvy. Lit with blood, cloth wick, and old membrane. Milestones, tombstones, whetstones, and mirrors. Mirrors are not for seeing by, mirrors are for wondering at, and wondering into. There was a piece of glass by which we tried to catch and contain the sun's fire. It must have been called a sunglass. There is so little and so fucking much. Half a lifetime. Felt, seen, heard, not fully felt, most meagerly seen, scarcely heard at all, and still in me, rattling, like a receding footfall, or Count Dracula's swagger.

I am in a bed, a fourposter no less, satinized headboard, casters. Paws come out from underneath the well of the bed, all vying for a handshake, some gloved, some ungloved. The more I wrestle with sleep, the more it ducks me; I am beckoning to it, beseeching. There are moments when it seems imminent, but then it vanishes, like a cloud formation or someone on roller skates. I've had better times, of course—the halcyon days, rings, ringlets, ashes of roses, shit, chantilly, high teas, drop scones, serge suits, binding attachments, all that. I used to have such a penchant for feelings; now I feel as much for the woman in the train who had the flushes as for the woman, Lil, who bore me.

Outside it is blustery. In the occasional lull I think I hear an owl. Of course I always hear the cars, their drone in the distance, cars going too fast at night. There could be an owl, since we are on the outskirts of a city and there are trees to roost in. They, too, are creaking and groaning. I am counting sheep but they are tumbling into one another and I see nothing but rumps of graying fleece, ruddled at that, and as for the ploy

of counting apples, it is too playful, too strenuous. Still, one has to pass the time, the leisure hours, the resting hours, knit up the raveled sleeve of care. Jesus. Buckets of time, you put your hand into it, deep down as far as the elbow, and it is like putting your hand into the abyss. So slowly does time pass, that is if it passes at all. Still, the Christmases rip around quick enough, the giving and taking, the Yuletide grog, the guzzle beneath the parasitic mistletoe. Only the minutes are rugged.

I knew a man once that saw time as loaves of bread, feasted on it, gorged, got overbloated, lost his desire, became a toper instead. I knew another that squashed eggs in his hand, existed for that sound, that crunching sound when he squelched them in his fist, made snowballs of them, and threw them shell and all at whoever he happened to sight. A cretin. I've met them all, the cretins, the pilgrims, the scholars, and the scaly-eyed bards prating and intoning for their bit of cunt. More of them anon.

I have the curtains drawn, the old clausilium shut tight, so it ought to be safe enough, it ought. I take a tablet, break it down its central line, and swallow one half, with some of the waters of the Malvern hills. I've always had a taste for spring waters, sparkling waters, and sturgeon's eggs. I lie with my God, I lie without my God. Into the folds of sleep. Oh, Connemara, oh, sweet mauve hills, where will I go, where will I not go now?

Fucking nowhere.

I say seven and think it means something. The figure slides across the page or the blackboard or the sweet sky or the sawdust floor, and though it tells me something, like the cost of the joyride, or what filly to back, or how long more the journey, the immediate journey, that is, it does not tell me what I need to know. Not that I know what I need to know. Not that I do. I am a woman, at least I am led to believe so: I bleed,

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et cetera. And those noises, and those sighs, and those murmurs, and those innuendoes, and those emanations, and those come-hithers, and those coo-coos issue from me faithfully, like buntings. Not to mention the more bucolic sounds, the ones in sly reserve, the choice slushings of the womb which have ogled many another by means of gurgle, nuance, melody, ditty, and crass babbling supplication. A dab hand at it I was. As aforesaid, I have met bards and knackers. Along the wayside. They told me many a tale, spun me many a yarn, swindled me as often as not. I bathed their feet, had ointments, mused, groped in the dark, looked up to the constellations, identified the Plough and the Milky Way, said most lachrymose things.

There are so many waysides that one mistakes them sometimes for the real route.

— I have had unions, tête-à-têtes, ripping times, gay collisions. All sickeningly predictable, like a do-re-mi-fa. Simply did they start up the perturbations, the springtime spawn, the yea-nay, the boogie-woogie. Result, more blasted birth or more blasted arrested birth. And hark, a population problem. Solution. *Nota bene*. A hard ebony cock secure within the lassies and myriad others, that is to say, the poor male human rejects, displayed upon a clothesline, white, bloodless, jovial, obedient; twittering, hanging, maybe even fluttering, like sparrows perhaps, or socks, or sloths or clothes pegs proper. Hosannah.

We had a clothesline in Coose; in fact, we had two. One adjacent to the back kitchen, ideal for small things such as tea cloths, dribblers, and bibs; then one farther away, on a hill, open to the prevailing winds, that served for sheets, blankets, quilts, eiderdowns, pillowcases, bolster cases, and the Boss's lugubrious long johns. Quite a formidable place on account of the force of the trade winds, and the clothes that flap-flapped and the sight of Lil frequently rushing out to retrieve things at the first onslaught of the rain and the hails that were wizard for both their frequency and their velocity. A bit like the sea,

although it was green and had thickets and the different field flowers in the different field months. So lying here I think of there. God blast it. As if there was nothing else, as if there was no one else. One's kith, one's kin—Boss, Lil, Tutsie, and the inimitable Dr. Flaggler. No forgetfulness within, or without. The heart in its little swoon, in accord, sometimes in discord, and a note of solemn music, a refrain, forever being struck up within one, saying, Thy mother, thy father, thy spouse, thy son, thyself. Others, too, though never the mob, never enough of mob. I have written some nauseating letters—"You touched my heart, you touched my cunt, I touched yours," and so on and so forth. Devouring, cloying, calumnious. All of those missives I have kept in reserve, because to act as nonsensical as that, without presently dying, would be the most clownish of my many clownish actions. I have even made a written request to be buried on an island in the vicinage of Coose, a woeful place surrounded by choppy waters and presided over by a pair of unpropagating swans. Or is it geese? An affirmative involves the goodwill of the hierarchy and also of the lady butcher who has leased the grazing rights, *ad infinitum*. Its features consist of tombs, tumuli, vaults, boulders, a round tower, turds, toadstools, and bullocks all scratching and munching and chewing their cuds. No doubt on frosty mornings it is regaling to witness their vapors, the numerous vapors rising up, the flowers congealed in the ice, splendid plumes of grass, the peckled shimmer of the headstones and the thistles lording it like starched cockades. But mere postulation, to want to lie there when I am incapable of living anywhere within its precincts. Is it that I imagine death to be the apotheosis of loneliness, to do away with a lesser loneliness, the force, puniness, and shackle of which has kept me captive in towns and cities, where I have forgotten the fact that earth and running water lie somewhere underneath the vast complex of concrete and sewerage and rubble and weed and fag ends and grating and shit. In yon High

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Street the tires play havoc with the shit, especially the double tiring of lorries and pantechnicons. I often say, "Ah, to sink into it at last, to say yea instead of nay to the lambative stink and smear of it all." Goodbye to daisies and plankton, goodbye to the mavis, the missel, and the white-bodied thrush. It is the dunghill ethos, is it not. Another thing that might have influenced my decision about the island is the banishment of it. The truth is, I do not wish to lie with my own kith and kin. Another blow for King James and for the green. I do not want to lie with anyone else's kith and kin, either. One for King Billy. I have no desire, not even in deathbed slobber, to be lumped in with other people and have them flustering around me, and vice versa. Think of the tenderness we would have to purport, the subsequent niceties, the clacking of tongues, handshakes, boneshakes, in order to live, middlingly peaceably, together for a long time, forever maybe. Maybe. I want to be by myself at last and to be robbed of that stupid, suppurating malady they call hope. Not to be a member of the communion of saints or gods or demigods or fathers or mothers or grandfathers or grandmothers or brothers or sisters or brethren of any kind, germane to me through consanguinity, affinity, or any other kind of linear or genitive or collateral bond. To face the music at last. To be on one's tod. Do I mean it? Apparently not. I am still snooping around, on the lookout for pals, pen pals, pub pals, cronies of any kind, provided they know their place, keep at distance, stay on the leash, leave me my soul's crust, and my winding dirging effluvias.

There was a time when I made jam and met my son, Tutsie, as he came through the school gates. A straggler, nearly always the last, always tarrying. Big lad now, has a quarter share in a jeep, and is touring the world. Said he wanted to reach places that others hadn't percolated to. Taciturn, always was. He loved the animals, had a way of taming them. He stayed on a train once,

crouched down, just to be near a dachshund, stroking it. When at first he was tonsured and I used to be putting a bonnet on him, the crown of his head spoke to me of former massacres, his little bones used to suggest holocausts. Then sprouts like toothbrushes came standing on his head, and then it began to grow in ringlets, long flaxen curls. I have these locks, and his milk teeth, in a little chain purse, stored for his children. I am eager for them. The purse is in the blanket along with the rest of my belongings. A mother's love, like yeast, multiplying, the spores rising up over the lid of the world, too much. Grandiloquent pees he did in the municipal parks, to keep tow with the fountains. The janitors and keepers used to get us to scarper, crotchety people-keepers and janitors and those in authority. I am in authority here, but it's negligible.

One day a week I bought a lollipop for him. That was a Thursday. The Thursdays have become all one, the Thursdays of his childhood and mine, and perhaps yours? Ring a ring o' rosy, haisha haisha, we all fall down. The dye of the lollipop used to rubify the color of his lips, dribble down onto his chin, drop onto the nap of his duffel coat, and then very deftly his tongue came out to retrieve it. He even retrieved it from the coat or retrieved as much of it as hadn't soaked into the pile. Our treat was sherbet. It caught in the throat. The grains lodged in the taste buds and spread behind the nose and made all the inside of the mouth areas itch with pleasure. I suppose mouths experience it first, the resuscitation, the life thrill, and ever after a ravenous longing to relive the first murderous appeasement. There was a little wooden spatula, sturdy enough to press the tongue flat, much preferable to Dr. Rath's implement for when he got people to say Aaaah. It smelled of lemon groves, that sherbet, at least it seems so now.

I try, I try so hard to recollect—not that recollection is of any use—but to remember the then, their countenances, what they wore, what I saw of myself, mis-saw, when I looked into

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one of the many long, sad blotched mirrors that fronted the wardrobe doors in that dark rookery that was our house, our homestead. I remember nothing much except the sherbet, its airiness, crepe dresses with the creeps on them, and a rubber ball mauled by a dog so that its insides were like a frayed old brain falling about. A ball, a dog, a brain?

There weren't enough forks to go around on the days of the threshing, and some workmen, the apish ones, had to wait, malingering, while others hacked their food assiduously before passing on the ungainly utensils. Ah yes, it is trickling through. Men with caps upon the knee, cloth caps, peaked caps, nosegays in the form of sops of hay, the odd surname such as Dowling or Stack, a bit of a snortle, the numerous pisreogs, the clamorous Banshee, the bogey man, the geese already ushered to the cornfields to get the leavings, to lunge their black webbed feet into the hooks of stubble, to gorge themselves in order to be plump for Christmas. It would have been then autumn. Harvests are. That I do know.

That, and the ears of corn, gushes, pouring out of a chute, and the men busy with the pitchforks and the chaff flying, while down in the kitchen cling-clang as the washed forks were put back in the musted drawer. Those showers of corn, in some way connected with a seventh heaven, as was the silver of a chalice and the dunner silver of the one christening mug that the male issue of the family had been presented with after birth. Silver and gold, gospel and gooseberries, the snagging of same, the benefits of carragheen moss, that cold substance that was liable to wobble when tipped out of its corrugated mold. A trepidation. There were also the hens, moving in and out between the ragwort, the latter gaunt, overriding the grasses. Cock-a-doodle-doo, monarch of all he surveyed. Afternoons merging into evenings, and such a momentum of tears, and for what, and for whom? Evening light, sometimes phosphorescent, in threads, finely spun, melting, molten, like oil, like

honey, ladles of light, linking the two worlds, the one where we carried cudgels, the other to which we aspired to go and for which the whole of our living life was a frigging pilgrimage.

Somebody—that tattler Dowling—announced that a tennis court was going to be erected, a hard court of tar macadam, and that on their weekly half days the shopkeepers, the excise officer, and the bank clerks would be able to while away the time in white tuxedos, causing a ball to pass to and fro while some flunky counted up the winning and losing scores. Farmers were to be prohibited. When Boss heard that, he harangued. He hated to be slighted. His temper rose, causing him to down three of his indigestion tablets, which he cracked vehemently with his molars. The precincts smelled of magnesium. Oh, Boss, were you ever not on the edge of a cataclysmic ire, with your two brown suits and your white shins that were revealed to all at the plowing match of Glenstall, the day you got a kick. Incurred a kick from a bay mare, and since he was without benefit of leggings or gaim-beaux he was perforce to roll his trousers to look for injuries in case he had to resort to a reprisal such as fisticuffs or calling in the law. “Buggerotum to tennis,” Boss said, “a fop’s game, clerk’s stirabout.” To have known and not known, now that is a glim thing. Glim. Glauous. To have met and not met, like cyclists, in a spinney at night, cyclists going in opposite directions and passing one another without a greeting, without a snatch of conversation, without a holler; recognizable to one another only by the strength or the weakness of their flashlights, or their taillights, or, failing such properties, recognized by the sheen of the spokes or the mudguard or the handlebars in the thrall of the night. Not known. So many of our encounters are. Even the gut ones. Especially the gut ones. The seed of my father I reach out to you, as you once did to me, pitifully, passionately, idiotically, to small avail. What caused us to embark on such a maraud? Her buttocks, flaunched and ordinary, the slit, the slit of absurdity into which we

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chose to pass. The nearest we ever were. You and I? You or I? Only you, not yet I? Already I, no longer you? A trinity of yobs. In occidental damp and murk. What gave rise to your spasming? A full moon, a half-moon, no moon at all, a touch of the madman's wisp, duty, reconciliation, thirst? Anything? The crab delights in soft and unguent places. Bucking maybe and pronouncing fiendish words such as "bollocks" or "jackass" or "Oirre," upon her. Grunting. I wouldn't put it past you. You shaman you. Already I, with some cursed inkling, some predilection toward shame and calamity and stupor, already liturgicalized before entering that dark, damp, deep seasous place. No choice in the matter.

And still such a long way to go in between stopping and starting and eating Brussels sprouts.

Christmas is not long gone. It went by without too much event. I did not partake of the sacraments. I received three presents, a nightdress that will be perfect for my lascivious nights, a frothy affair; a casket; and a teacloth, which has scripted in it my character according to my astrological sign. If I am well placed, I am magnanimous, faithful, bashful, aspiring in an honorable way at high matters, a lover of fair dealings, of sweet and affable conversation, wonderfully indulgent, reverencing aged men, and fully of charity and godliness. If the stars are ill placed, then I shall waste my patrimony, suffer everyone to cozen me, am hypocritical and stiff in maintaining false tenets, am ignorant, careless, gross, of dull capacity, and schismatical.

If again I come to love a member of the opposite sex and even a member of my own sex, I shall try not to gabble. It won't be

easy for me, brought up as I was among hens and bullocks and buckets and winds and clotheslines and people, all gagging themselves to distraction. But even if I default in that, I shall spend my spirit in other things; spirit is spirit the way gut is gut and limestone limestone.

To see a door close and know that the very last person has gone out, that is a most unsettling thing. No one to call to, no one to cling to, no one. Not even Humpty-Dumpty or Old King Cole. I reach out and grip the fur, the gray fur of the ample quilt. Armenian goat, as far as I can tell from my desultory knowledge of wildlife. A blow. The hairs of this quilt are not nearly sturdy enough to bask in, to tug at, to wallow. They give way. They come off in the fingers as mere tufts. I touch the wall behind the sateen headboard. Knock knock. It is not knife-edged as I feared. Something is. Something goes whirr whirr, like the Duke's lawn mower; and snip snip, like blind Dr. Rath clipping the stitches. Big, ungainly stitches in those days, when Lil gave birth. Black herringbone stitches made out of catgut, some substance got from sheep, as in the strings of a fiddle. I resemble her, except in one particular. She had a little green floating spot on the white of an eye, a purty little spot it was, and if I am to develop any new characteristics I shall plump for one, one that moves slightly according to the curvature and gaze of the eye. Not a bright green, more or less misted. I think I perceived the bottles of syrup as being shaken while I was still in her, in her chambers. I wrote and asked if she had any inkling, any hunch, about the exact color of her innards, my earliest known abode. I thought it was very likely she would come up with suggestions, being as she had such a talent for color schemes in the linoleums, the Madeira cakes, the wallpapers, the borderings, and the wool rugs that she fashioned through the long nights. I seem to remember streaks of color, zebras, some-

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times pink, sometimes green, sometimes too green, likewise too pink. I reamed off a list, became prodigal, even resorted to shadings. I filched my ideas from nature, various spools of thread, a paint card, seed catalogues, and a luxurious sanitary shop where I sometimes go and pretend that I am contemplating buying a topaz bath. I love going there. I dress up in borrowed plumes, look like a toff. I said she might like to be extravagant, she might like to sally into inventiveness, give vent to herself, lie if need be. No sooner had I posted the letter than I realized what a debacle I had made. My mother is dead. To make matters worse, my mother is only fairly recently dead, and I realized that the postman, who is a dunce and a dunderhead, and bunioned from his peregrinations, would deliver it out of habit. I knew that his feet would conduct him there and some other part of his palsied anatomy would haul the epistle out of his big gray canvas bag, and that he would say, as he so faithfully says, at the sight of any foreign postmark, in sentimental tones, "Hands across the water." I realized that Boss would be aghast by the untowardness, by the brazenness, by the cruelty of such an action. Pleasant to know that he could not take action, that he would not be able to throw sticks and stones as they did to Dick Studdard. Water divides us, and more than the nine Dedannan waves at that. Hurray for all waters, spa waters, bog waters, lone wells, tobhairs, lakes, rivers, streams, Baptism fonts, and, of course, the oyster-breeding seas.

Her funeral was a comic event, despite the keenings and the ululations. A sizable crowd, all in sable, the mourners. Grievously stung they were by nettles that grew in abundance. We took a shortcut in order not to have to walk over the bordered paths. It was as if we couldn't get her in quick enough, into the bowels of the earth, where the moles and the sprites are reputed to be, have their intricate routes and

conduits. On the way, a bicycle was spied, propped up against a yew tree, a man's bicycle, an upstairs model, flung. Some of the men, the more loquacious ones, interpolated on whose it could be, suggested various names, Christian names and surnames and nicknames, but, having reached no conclusion, then started to wonder aloud why the owner had left it thus, what importunity had overtaken him, and they agreed that he had either gone because he got taken short, or to have a fit, or to find a well of water, or to pray to God, or to lie down for bucolic reasons with a woman or a traveling woman, or a married woman, or a beast, or no other agent at all. Then came the suggestion that the rider of the bicycle might have been a she who had gone to do any one of the aforementioned things, or to deliver herself of a bastard child. Not the most reverential thought. The clay got richer, redder, the deeper they dug. They were quick with the spade, made darty incisions; and of course there were fine manifestations of sorrow—dribbles, sniffles, tears, gulps all stifled by handkerchief or make-do handkerchief. A stripling went by, a fellow with unmatching eyes, looking for sheep of his that had strayed. Five or six. Goddamnit, a matchless-eyed man of miserable means ought to know whether he had lost five sheep or six. Seeing the coffin and the mourners, he realized what he had blundered into, and squatting to denote his sympathy, he removed his cap and asked whose funeral it was. At the crucial moment I made an ape of myself, behaved in the following manner. I jumped in, prostrated myself, bawled, and woe betide, a second, a more ludicrous disaster: I sprained my ankle. I need hardly tell you of the furor that ensued. Excitement craned its head. Maybe that is why I jumped in, to leaven the occasion. I doubt it. I lack the talent for instigating comedy. They put it down to grief. Some said a seizure, some said cracked, some said highly strung. Highly strung! I eat like a horse; the reason I eat is to encase my heart in a solid fortress of fat, so that I can at last decently and uneventfully

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