



THE HIGH ROAD

A NOVEL BY

EDNA

O'BRIEN

author of *A Fanatic Heart*
and *The Country Girls Trilogy*

PLUME CONTEMPORARY FICTION

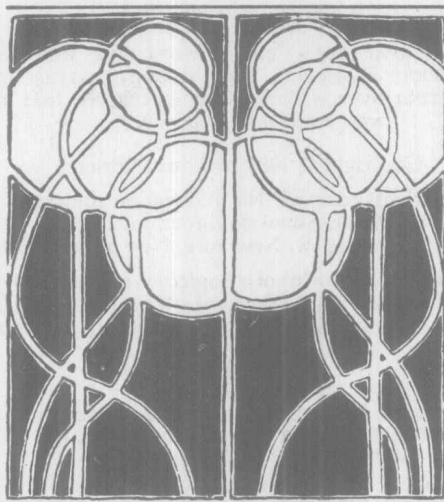
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THE HIGH ROAD



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EDNA O'BRIEN



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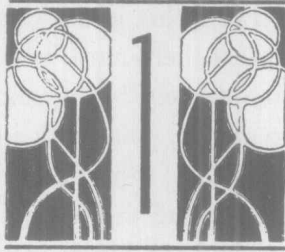
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THE HIGH ROAD



It rose, swelled, then burst and dispersed in a great clatter of sound. First it seemed to be a roar inside my head, a remembered roar, a remembered summons, but then through the warrens of sleep it became clear that it was a roar being uttered at that very moment, either in the room or on the landing outside. I thought I heard my name—Anna, Anna—being uttered with malice.

My hand went instinctively toward the bedside table only to find that there was no lamp, nor table where a lamp could be, and then slowly and unnervingly it came to me that I was not at home, that I had come to this place, this new place, and gradually I remembered my walk of the evening before, the strange town, a mountain, and now this intemperate roar while it was still dark. I prayed for it to be at least getting on toward morning, morning that would bring little respites such as bread and tea, morning that sent all crawling things and madmen back to their lairs. It was Easter Sunday, I remembered that.

I reached to the other side of the bed, where I knew the lamp to be, but as I clicked on the slack button no light came. I clicked

and clicked, thinking at first that it was the faulty button, but soon it dawned on me that there must have been a power cut. The maid who gave me the key had predicted that, and rats. She had taken me into a shed, pointed to a dark corner behind some wood shavings and bricks, and with her fingers to my throat demonstrated an attack. She had also pointed to where she lived, a few houses away, beyond the bridge, and had said through elaborate gestures that if I was in peril I was to call her. "Celestina, Celestina." She shouted her own name and laughed at her bravura.

I felt for the torch and in the wan light I staggered to the window to call, "Celestina, Celestina." Parting the shutters a fraction, I saw that outside, sitting on the low wall of the bridge, was a man in his shirt sleeves, paring his nails with a carving knife and still shouting. The shout I learned to be a series of "Nah"s that he strung together as he lashed out at life. I did not go onto the balcony but stood between the barely opened shutters, thinking that by standing there I would induce him to go away. I spoke or pretended to speak to an imaginary person in the room, the one I wished was there. He glanced up. He was without coat or jacket and had a scowl on his face. It was a thin face, like the picture of a gaunt mariner on a cigarette packet from long ago, and his hair was a fuzzy white like bog cotton. My reasoning was that he would not break into the house once he saw that I was on guard. In time he got up and sauntered off, waving the knife as if it were a little skittle.

The insect-like hands on the black-faced clock told me the worst, that it was only five; hours before the shops opened, and that maybe, it being Easter Sunday, they might not open at all. In them somehow rested my refuge. I imagined cowering there

all day, allowing time to pass, and knew now that I was sadly mistaken in coming. I opened one flap of the brown shutter, the better to see my room. There was a bed with a carved headboard, a kitchen chair, a horseshoe on the whitewashed wall, and a photograph of a girl in a leotard, sitting on a bed, apprehensive before she stood up. Somewhere in her limbs and the recesses of her frightened being she was trying to find the pluck and resolution to get up and dance, to bedazzle an unseen audience.

I recalled the rest of the house as I had seen it when I arrived late the previous evening and had in desperation gone to the hotel to find a room, only to be turned away. There was the big entrance hall, which was a wilderness of rubble and cement, a kitchen with a stone trough for a sink, on the draining board a colony of ants thick and countless as pepper, crawling ceaselessly over an orange rind. In the adjoining room the remains of a fire, as three logs staggered over a pit of cold ashes, like three faltering witches. I threw the few belongings that I had unpacked into one of the canvas bags, turned the horseshoe the way it should be, to intercede for luck, dragged the bags down the stone stairs and over the rubble, unlocked the front door, then from the outside locked it again and put the big warped key in a crevice under a large stone, where Celestina could find it. I was going home.

I waited until it got light and then set out with two of the heavy bags, meaning to bring them a little way, then return for the next two.

The wren, the wren, the king of all birds
St. Stephens day was caught in the furze.
Although he is little, his family's great.
I pray you good landlady give us a trate.

I heard the verse before I saw the speaker and for an instant I thought it must be the madman.

A sandy-haired man emerged from a path, doubling over with laughter, his bright hair like a vivid crest in the early light. He was tall and gangly and obviously amused by the sight of me carrying one bag, putting it down, then running back to get the next one, talking to myself, pacifying myself, abjuring myself.

"Top o' the morning to you," he said in a pronounced brogue and asked if by any chance he could be of some slight assistance. He waved a sailor's cap, doffed it, and came toward me, introducing himself as David Anthony Ignatius Donne, better known as D'Arcy. He had hard blue eyes, sharp features, and he wore a navy smock which was spattered with various colored paints. Between his teeth he held an amber cigarette holder and was, as he said, in dire need of a weed. As I went to get the next bag, he followed and jauntily hoisted it over his shoulder, then realizing that there were books in it, he said he hoped I was not a word peddler who had come to drink deep from the Pierian spring.

"I can't stay in there . . . It's a builder's yard," I said, quite disgruntled.

"Has Salome worsted you," he said with a twinkle, though he saw no reason for such agitation. Where was my cosmic consciousness!

"I'm going home," I said.

"Ah, a Bethlehemite," he lamented, then went on to laud the providential fact that like himself I was a descendant of the trilobed-foliaged, leprechauned folk, hence on the run from myriad forms of knackers and massacres.

"Two many swine . . . did not Giraldus Cambrensis find a similar odiousness in the twelfth century . . . never seen so many swine as in Ire-land, anger-land . . . have you thought of that . . . that little association," he said with a sort of glee.

"Is there a taxi in the town?" I asked, a bit curtly.

"'Tis like this . . . there is and there isn't, he works when he wants to . . . he's newly married . . . poor bugger."

We began to walk together along the dusty road with him spouting snatches of history—"the first conquest by King Jaime of Aragon in 1229; peasant revolt in fifteenth century, great dexterity in slinging; Archduke Louis Salvator responsible for many magnificent palaces, lover of one Catalina Homan, whom he kept imprisoned on a rocky headland, guarded day and night by wolfhounds; another Catalina stigmatist and saint . . . mark the name," he said with casual clairvoyance. "Catalina . . . the Beata whom Satan tempts with sugar."

From behind we heard someone running, and turning, I saw that the madman was trying to catch up with us. Having cadged a cigarette from him, D'Arcy pointed to me and said, "Deutsch, Deutsch . . . Heidi . . . Heidi . . ." pretending I was German. The man gave me a look of such disdain, recognizing me as the woman who had disturbed his matins, his toilette, and he turned away as if repulsed.

"Pay no heed," D'Arcy said and went on to explain that the man had been a nuclear physicist but that the chemicals had got to his brain, hence forcing him to quit, and that now he was a poet of some sort and threatened to read his verses aloud in the village bar, once the season had started.

"Agenbite of Inwit, out of his fucking mind . . ." D'Arcy said, the man still within earshot. D'Arcy paused for a minute

to light his cigarette, then fixed it daintily into the holder, while urging me to take a mouthful of my surroundings, my arcadia.

From the reservoir, nearby, there was a croak of frogs and on its surface a green weed that looked to be pulsing with life and electricity. A note on a gateway read, "Toby, we have been three times and have made ourselves lunch." It was signed, "Evangeline."

"That's how it is," D'Arcy said. "We open our doors to caliphs, murderers, and mendicants . . . a leftover trait from the potentate Sheik Bohibe, whom King Jaime routed . . . mixed bloods here . . . great for the hedge pleasure," and he winked and waited, asking himself aloud if I was a full twenty shillings to the pound or not. He took my elbow and literally plonked me on a low wall, not simply to avoid a bit of wet tar that had been randomly smeared on a patch of road, but, as he said, to see the vista in the same sort of light as Wordsworth himself, the poor intense pastoral monk, saw Westminster Bridge. The village looked idyllic, blond drowsing houses clustered together, their tiled roofs shelving one above the other to give the effect of a sprawling fortress. The church, as he said, was the seat of an Iberian moon goddess long before the fishermen—with their transubstantiation gigs—got their clutches on the needy. Terraces dropped from the mountain, terraces that the Moors had built, in perfect serration, with trees and half trees clinging to them tenaciously.

"And they're not going away," he said, with a touch of mischief.

Where would I go? I could not go home, of that I was certain. I thought, in that mindless way as one does, that I would go to a city, but I did not know which one, I would find a room and

burrow there like a Steppenwolf, eking out the days, waiting for some kind of redemption.

"Easter morning . . . Resurrexi, et adhuc tecum sum, alleluia," he said as he made rapid crosses in the air with his cigarette holder. Something about him frightened me, it was his mockery, his rasping energy, and the fact that underneath I felt all was seething—amok. As we passed a cavity of a dried stream that was filled with rubbish and punched plastic bottles, he pointed ruefully and said, "In its prime, in its winter prime it is a torrent—torrente."

As we walked on, some shutters were partly opened, or dogs bestirred themselves, and instead of one cock crow there was now a chorus of them, loud, jubilant, proclaiming the Day.

"Hosanna," he said to a woman who peered out, peeved to have her privacy invaded. She was an environmentalist, he said, but like many of that persuasion wanted the sunset and the Milky Way all to herself. The locals and the non-locals did not really mix, they parried, but when it came to the verities they were at loggerheads. He said that many strangers came for an hour and never left, the place putting its effulgent spell on them—bards, pseudo-bards, painters, potters, versifiers, all of whom could be encountered from noon onward.

"Nowhere is moonlight so strong or night so amethyst," he said in a declamatory voice as he listed the merits that nature had wrought: "Capacious and well-sheltered harbors; bays, creeks; earth bulging with fruits, herbs, pulses, and roots; vistas of olive and Aleppo pine; and such a congruence of lunatics and love swains as could not be found in Paris in its heyday, or Barcelona at the present time." I realized only then that he was

drunk. He was coming, he confessed, from an all-night séance, where to assist the levitation of "yer man" he had imbibed liberally and also partaken of the hubbly-bubbly, giving inlet to Rimbaud drifts, lilies, those pessaries of ecstasy, violets, the spittle of nymphs.

He winked and said that if I found a little plot of ground I could grow my own narcotic and not be in danger of breaking the law. Then he hiccuped to the serene king and the serene king's lady wife and I could hear his tongue clacking as he supped on his inner emptiness. Feeling the several books of mine through the thin pile of the bag, he said was it Bibles I had brought; had I come to proselytize, and this brought him without any seeming effort to his favorite topic, the denouncement and excommunication of all wandering nerds, pen-peddlers, the squeezed-out Hemingways, who were not worthy to clean that much-misunderstood man's revolver. There was one in particular that I was to beware of, one who visited on all and sundry the dilemma whether his magnum opus should be six hundred pages or the blockbuster thousand. He ranted as he thought on it, his hoary face filling with color, going from red to beetroot, so that he seemed on the brink of a seizure. This sub-Hemingway, one Scottie Jr., hailed from the Midwest of America, and was to be found from noon every day in one of the bars, poised for innocents, particularly female innocents, springing on them, offering a cosmetically induced masculine hand—"Jaysus, he sticks the hairs on"—submitting to have a cognac with them, lamenting that he would be absent for several days, closeted with the Prodigious Muse, and that they would not see him until they saw him; which as it turned out would be that very evening, because these Lolitas had got inside his head; and he was sacrificing the

cold pleasure of chiseled words for the warmth and dribbles of a well-heeled dug.

He went on to describe the other artists, many of them eunuched females who painted the sea and the mountains; excrescences, soul-less replicas of nature which they then sold in the land of the Stars and Stripes, flogged them to predatory matrons who yearned for homespun, untortured banality. One in particular got his dander up, claimed the place was no longer primitive enough, and was thinking of going to Nepal, to a remote place free of electricity or plumbing.

"Be warned, they'll invite you for footsie and cocoa," he said.

"What kind of pictures do you paint?" I asked, and he chuckled at the compliment. Turning to me almost with humility, he assured me that he had not yet elevated the bicycle chain or horse manure to the realm of art, or leading-edge art, as it was now popularly called.

"They are not yon customary batik," he said and risked the opinion that they were essentially bold, making a break with the impressionism, post-impressionism and all cliché-ridden wank.

As he went up the last set of steps he strode ahead, both to show how hale he was and to lay claim to territorial rights by shouting at some children who had huddled on the steps, where they were painting Easter eggs.

"Behold the town, in which Moorish, English, and Spanish kings, likewise dukes and archdukes, held sway, dominated by the vista of the chapel, its backside to the town, its windows rayless." Then he most chivalrously greeted a young girl who went by with an Easter cake with marzipan birds perched precariously along its edges. The sight of her induced him to recall the hackneyed poetic dream of the Spanish señorita, the Spanish

mantilla, the blood fetish, and most of all . . . the Mirada . . .
the long gaze.:

—that love ne drawe ye not to done this deed
But lust voluptuous.

Then he darted up a narrow street, in search of an inn, his hands raised in the air to show some sort of militancy.

It being Easter Sunday, the bells were ringing out, rapturous, repetitive; flooding the air with the message that Christ had risen . . . Resurrexi, et adhuc tecum sum, alleluia . . .

Little Holy Communicants in white veils, wearing white kid shoes, hitting each other with their bunches of white flowers, trailed up the hill to Mass; the little boys wore shorts and starched shirts and were the laughingstock of other little boys, obviously the children of visitors, who were not going to Mass but instead were painting on sucked-out eggs. Some they had already painted and were assiduously trying to sell—views of the mountain, the sea, the church steeple, or the big black cannon that stood there like a tarred elephant, a reminder of historic days.

It was getting warmer and the sun gave to everything a luster. D'Arcy was right. I would be mad to leave such a haven; girdled by sea and mountain, the mountain like great vastnesses, gold where the light struck in one place and rust-colored in another. The ribbon of a jet arched over the summit, at first bright and metallic, then fuzzy, and as it disappeared I thought, Goodbye outside world, goodbye all, I need never return, I can settle my accounts here.

I would grow to forget him, the him that I believed had broken my heart, but in my saner moments I recognized as being probably the last to partake with me at that fount of sensuality,

and vertigo and earthly love. As with many a thing, we had embarked on it lightly, but it caught fire, escalated, went too far, to the marrow, rekindled hopes, sparked off desires, hurting even as it satiated, creating fresh hungers and fresh fears. Its end dribbled on, an end that consumed my middle years like a terrible wasting sickness, so that I often wished to be quite old, thinking by then it would have faded completely, without a trace. At other moments I wished that it had never happened because the incision was too much. Then again I wished for vengeance, retribution, which I gave vent to only in dreams. At that moment, standing in that world of lambent light, I would have given anything to have my youth back again, for a year, a month, a week, an instant. His letters I had returned. They were in dove-gray flitters, like the pieces of a shredded jigsaw, on his desk maybe, or maybe dumped by a prudent secretary into his wastepaper basket. I would forget him a little each day and of course, in forgetting him, kill that part of myself that for all its pain is the most sacred.

“Hotting up . . . little Druidess . . .” D’Arcy said as he went down the path to an art gallery with a gaudy modern poster on the half of the door that swung open.

I climbed to the top of the town and had my first glimpse of the sea, a patch of blue between two rocks. It was of such blueness that it seemed not to be water but a potion, of magical properties, as if a flock of peacocks had been liquidized and metamorphosed to create this flagrant, saturating blueness. Between the town and the sea were the orchards—trees and foliage giving a softness to the landscape, a sigh, taking the sizzle out of the air, creating a silvery stir as the olive leaves decided to shift upward, then droop again like the wings of a butterfly, lazying. The air was

glutted with a smell of orange and lemon blossom, a smell that wafted through, as if gardenias or tuberose were being pressed, while the oranges themselves were dusk-like, mystic fruits, globes to be worshipped rather than fruits to be eaten.

"They come and grab you, don't they," a woman said, startling me. She was a blond chirpy woman, one whom D'Arcy had sent to regale me. She would have a place for me in a few weeks, an apartment, above her own. It was one of the few houses with a front gate, and a child's new bicycle lay flat on the path leading down to it, its gentian paint flashing in the sun. She had come to the place over ten years ago and never regretted it. Her name was Wanda, she said, adding that it was not her real name but one she had given herself when she moved here. I felt that like me she had come as mendicant, a mendicant from love, from disappointment. Her little boy, Sam, followed with a litter of puppies in his arms and brought them for me to see. They had been born at five that morning and he had delivered them. They were utterly still, adhered together like black-and-white fur-backed gloves in a shop window; silent save for the occasional little mewl that escaped from the thick of the fur.

"We're going to sell them tomorrow, at the market," Wanda said, at which Sam whinged and said, "Not all of them, only one or two."

"We'll see," Wanda said.

"Oh, please," he begged and promised he would look after them and clean up their messes and their dribbles. I knew that he would have his way, he was her idol, blond, round-faced, with the beauty of a child and the perkiness of a little man.

"Please, Wanda," he said. Saying her name clinched it, because he said it like a lover, and like a lover she smiled back, a