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Opening Extract from...

Night

Written by Edna O'Brien

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NIGHT

Edna O'Brien

FABER & FABER

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For the Lads

Introduction

by Andrew O'Hagan

Virginia Woolf was thirty-eight years old when she began *Jacob's Room*. She dreamt it up on her walks and it came to her full of form and speed, a novel, she told her diary, that might set out to enclose the human heart. She understood that the theme required a new style and she fought hard in her mind to discover it. And one clear morning it was there. 'I figure the approach will be entirely different this time,' she wrote. 'No scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, the humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist.' Her two previous novels are conventional, so Woolf was experiencing an awakening, a little stylistic ascendancy, and the new book announced a marriage of elegy and vision. Fifty years later, at a similar age, Edna O'Brien burst from her own room with a short stylistic masterpiece. *Night* is as beautiful and full-throated as any novel published in its decade. It brings a new and fierce and deadly honesty to the expression of a woman's sexual life. Here is a work saturated in its own language, the balladeer's native yawp and an Elizabethan gift of phrase, all passion, all mind,

with a glorious unfolding of the things we do for love.

Mary Hooligan is up in her bed in the middle of the night. It's not just any bed, but a four-poster. She takes a pill, begins to think. The curtains are closed. And so begins a journey at once into the small places of the self as well as the large open spaces of the past, a journey into the Coose of Mary's childhood, and into battle against the clacking tongues. It is a long night's journey into day, an engagement with everything that matters to her, freedom and belief, family and fucking, kin and cunt. Not since Molly Bloom has a woman in literature spoken up for the true properties of her sex. Like Molly and like Mommo, the later, bed-ridden heroine of Tom Murphy's play *Bailegangaire*, we find Mary Hooligan in a state of language where words are stepping stones over the dark. 'To face the music at last,' she says. '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.' *Night* is a search for deep connection in the small hours.

The first time I read this beauty of a novel I felt, as John Updike did, that it was a brilliant performance of the sort you don't often see. It was a prose-poem, a battle cry, a twilight hymn, and an old song. O'Brien has the guts to write her way into all the big questions using all the right words. In 1972, when the book was first published, there was many a bashful English novel, many

an American novel of trend-setting slickness, but there was nothing with the bite and spittle of *Night*. Who else but Mary Hooligan would tear at the seams of her own life? Who else could speak of a postman 'bunioned from his peregrinations'? Who could see a funeral as a comic event, and speak of the old mother Lil 'with the rosary beads swinging from her waist', who might only have coddled her daughter because she resembled her 'prize poultry'? Who lives among memory and landscape as Edna O'Brien does, or as Mary Hooligan does, coming and going in her own mind, hither and yon, in a miasma of speech and terrifying clarity about the price of intimate experience? I came to the book with a strong sense of O'Brien's gifts, the quiet immensities of her fiction and non-fiction through the years, but this small book gives a pleasant shock. For a start, it is one that only a true writer could have produced. Many a writer plumes, nowadays, on the supposed simplicity of their language, making a cult of familiarity and shallow gab. But the novel you are holding has a super-abundance of the great, gasping utterance, the basic splutter of verb and noun, such as made Samuel Beckett a master. In *Night*, too, O'Brien's ear, you will see, is for all time, for all seasons, bodying forth the Old Irish ('leum', 'stotious'), the Modern Irish ('joxer'), Victorian usage ('quim'), Middle English ('valerian', 'clysters', 'thills'), and Greek ('sphagnum'), as well as a hundred Jacobean parries and some jaunty words – in the Joycean tradition – she made up herself ('seasous', 'cremeled').

You read Edna O'Brien for the sentences, for the quick invention. You read her for the heart that's in it and the music, the sense of a people and a country discovering themselves in the light of something new. Writing as she did, the author inaugurated a new way of thinking about women and faith in Ireland, and, against the objections, she took sex out of the shadows and aired it in public. She does it with style and she does it with sentences, this unclosing of the mind, and her novel *Night* is a clarion-call to the stylist in O'Brien and the watcher in us all. She once wrote a play about Virginia Woolf and she knows the moment when a writer finds her magic. In the Circe episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, we enter with Daedalus and Bloom into Nighttown and follow them to Bella Cohen's brothel. After much chaos, it's a long way back home, to the bed of Molly Bloom and her famous soliloquy. It's nice to feel that Molly's words – her emphatic 'yes' – might have sent women out on a journey of their own. *Night* may have profited from that and it certainly salutes it, in title, hearth, and home, but it took Edna O'Brien herself to make a contemporary case for the internal life of a woman such as Mary Hooligan. Caught in that sensual music, we see her emerge from the sufferings of desire exalted and shimmering and finally herself.

2014

She is far from the land
Where her young hero sleeps
(Song)

The original Hooligans were a spirited Irish family whose proceedings enlivened the drab monotony of life in Southwark towards the end of the nineteenth century.

E. Weekley

One fine day in the middle of the night, two dead men got up to fight, two blind men 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 meagrely 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, satinised 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 rollerskates. 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 greying 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 ravelled 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 sturgeons' 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 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 doh ray me fa. Simply did they start up the perturberations, 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 the 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 clothespegs 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 teacloths, 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 both for 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, for ever being struck up within one, saying thy mother, thy father, thy spouse, thy son, thyself. Others too, though never the mob, never enough of the 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. 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 vapours, the numerous vapours rising up, the flowers congealed in the ice, splendid plumes of grass, the peckled shimmer on 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 Street the tyres play havoc with the shit, especially the double tyring 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 tendernesses 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, for ever 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 angels or gods or demi-gods or fathers or mothers or

grandfathers or grandmothers or brothers or sisters or brethren of any kind, germaine 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 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 are mine, and perhaps yours? Ring a ring o' rosy, haisha haisha, we all fall down. The dye of the lollipop used to rubify the colour of his lips, dribble down on to his chin, drop on to the nap of his dufflecoat and then very deftly his little 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 cate was sherbet. It caught in the throat. The grains lodged in the tastebuds 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. Also there was a little wooden spatula with it, sturdy enough to press the tongue flat, much preferable to Dr Rath's implement for when he got people to say Aaaah. It smelt of summer, 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 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, crêpe

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, malinger, 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 Buggie man, the geese already ushered to the cornfields to get the leavings, to lunge their black webbed feet into the rails 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 mould. A trepidation. There were also the hens, moving in and out between the ragwort, the latter gaunt, over-riding

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 tarmacadam, 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 nipper counted up the winning and the losing scores. Farmers were to be prohibited. When Boss heard that he harangued. He hated to be shunned. His temper rose, causing him to down three of his indigestion tablets which he cracked vehemently with his molars. The precincts smelt of magnesium. Oh Boss, were you ever not on the edge of a cataclasmic ire, with your two brown suits and your white shins that were revealed to all at the ploughing 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 gaimbeaux 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, clerks's stirabout." To have known and not known, now that is a glim thing. Glim. Glaucous. To have met and

not met, like cyclists, in a spinney at night, cyclists going in opposite directions and passing each other without a greeting, without a snatch of conversation, without a holler; recognisable to each other only by the strength or the weakness of their flashlights, or their tail-lights, or failing such properties, recognised 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 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 towards shame and calamity and stupor, already liturgicalised 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 honourable way at high matters, a lover of fair dealings, of sweet and affable conversation, wonderfully indulgent, reverencing aged men and full of charity and godliness. If the stars are ill-placed, then I shall waste my patrimony, suffer everyone to cozen me, am hypocritical and stiffe 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 or 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 gabbling 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 grey fur of the ample quilt. Armenian goat as far as I can tell from my desultory knowledge of wild life.

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, same 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 colour 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 colour 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 colour, zebras, sometimes 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 vanitary 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 needs be. No sooner had I posted the letter than I realised what a débâcle I had made. My mother is dead. To make matters worse, my mother is only fairly recently dead and I realised 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 grey 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 realised 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 sizeable crowd, all in sable, the mourners. Grievously stung they were by nettles that grew in

abundance. We took a short cut 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 espied, propped up against a yew tree, a man's bicycle, an upstairs model, flung. Some of21 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 travelling 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. God dammit, 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

realised 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 furore that ensued. Excitement craned its head. Maybe that is22 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 expire without much ado, to return in the end to materiam primam whate'er it be.

There were refreshments after the funeral. The catering! She would not have tolerated it. There was spotted dick and big biscuits that were damp, and had somewhere in their lifespan been neighbours to paraffin oil. On the savoury side there were chunks of ham thrown on to plates, some with a dollop of potato salad and others with a yellow piccalilli, depending on the whim of the two serving ladies. The whole event lacked finesse. Naturally there weren't enough chairs. People had to sit on the edges of chairs, which made the cutting of their ham precarious. Then the catsup was thin and scalding and restraint was not executed in the pouring of it. This was due to the seating more than to any avidity. Things were said, not too many things, her praises sung. They dis-

cussed her memoriam card, discussed what mottoes it could contain. I had always noticed her penchant for the colloquial, for things like "The early bird catches the worm," but I had to sit there and hear the adages of Saints Jerome and Bonaventure trotted out as applicable material. How little we make of what we know of anyone, how little we employ it.

Of course she did not die without a long illness, mothers never do. Fathers likewise.

I went to nurse her, grudgingly, no, not grudgingly, with pangs. Birth pangs, life pangs, death pangs – they must be cousins. She was upstairs, same bed as she had given birth in, had had her lumbago in, and numerous other afflictions. I remained out of the room as much as possible, out in the hallway, humming so that she would know I was there, doing chores. I varnished a floor but the fumes of the turpentine did not agree with her, in other words I varnished half a floor. While in the room I washed her sores, polished the mirrors and made plans for future times – Christmas, holiday, and so forth. There is nothing so offensive as hoodwinking the nearly dead. We die by degrees but there is one part of us that decidedly knows when it is all just over. There is one strand of the mind that reckons with that passing over and she was in possession of it. I could hear it, registering, like a clock and invisibly ticking. There was altar wine on the window-sill and it bore a label from the land of Spain. She declined that. It was the priests' wine, the canons'. Poor canons, their old scrotums like dust, shedding

maybe, shedding dust. Their organs, pink or whey? Poor canon, he coughed when he came, to shrive her. Not a bit standoffish. No preamble. The sacrament was always under a cloth, a cloth that had little darns in it. She swallowed with agony, to hear her swallow was to have pity for her, the stitches under her throat, jabbing like needles. Some distraction always intervened, like a cat sidled in, a kettle sang, or a bird sang, or something fell off the bed, usually her comb. Once he came with the chalice empty. After that the curate came. Poor canons, old, grey, teetering, lonely and loony, with their frock coats and their faithful housekeepers, that breed of dark warted women that do wait upon them.

I would go out on the landing again and talk in. She saw the treachery of those plans regarding Christmas and holidaying, and her eyes were as daggers, blue, cobalt blue, asking not, not to go. Ranting, raving. I heard things no one ought to hear, no one or everyone. She listened for a lorry going by, mentioned the driver, a big brute she said, bullet-headed, said he could jack it up, referred to his jockstrap, said Off with the jockstrap and fire. When the pain got less or the morphine got more she prayed. How she prayed. How she then smiled. The clouds she said, so similar to the bushes, to the bushiness of the bushes. The clouds had the ramble of bushes. She said why shouldn't she walk and talk, though not even a buzzard was contradicting her. How she grieved. She said you could put all the pleasures that had gone into her life into a little thimble, and she looked for a thimble,