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House of Splendid Isolation

Written by Edna O'Brien

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HOUSE OF SPLENDID ISOLATION

Edna O'Brien



PHOENIX

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'For St Patrick did only banish the poisonous worms, but suffered the men full of poison to inhabit the land still; but his Majesty's blessed genius will banish all those generations of vipers out of it, and make it, ere it be long, a right fortunate island . . .'

Sir John Davies
(Attorney General of Ireland)
to the Earl of Salisbury, 1606

'We have murder by the throat.'

Lloyd George
after dispatching the Black and Tans
to Ireland in 1920



THE CHILD

History is everywhere. It seeps into the soil, the sub-soil. Like rain, or hail, or snow, or blood. A house remembers. An outhouse remembers. A people ruminate. The tale differs with the teller.

It's like no place else in the world. Wild. Wildness. Things find me. I study them. Chards caked with clay. Dark things. Bright things. Stones. Stones with a density and with a transparency. I hear messages. In the wind and in the passing of the wind. Music, not always rousing, not always sad, sonorous at times. Then it dies down. A silence. I say to it, have you gone, have you gone. I hear stories. It could be myself telling them to myself or it could be these murmurs that come out of the earth. The earth so old and haunted, so hungry and replete. It talks. Things past and things yet to be. Battles, more battles, bloodshed, soft mornings, the saunter of beasts and their young. What I want is for all the battles to have been fought and done with. That's what I pray for when I pray. At times the grass is like a person breathing, a gentle breath, it hushes things. In the evening the light is a blue-black, a holy light, like a mantle over the fields. Blue would seem to be the nature of the place though the grass is green, different greens, wet green, satin green, yellowish green and so forth. There was a witch in these parts that had a dark-blue bottle which she kept cures in. She was up early, the way I am up. She gathered dew. Those that were against her had accidents or sudden deaths. Their horses slipped or their ponies shied on the hill that ran down from her house. She had five husbands. Outlived them all. I feel her around. Maybe it is that the dead do not die, but rather inhabit the place. Young men who gave their lives waiting to rise up. A girl loves a sweetheart and a sweetheart loves her back, but he loves the land more, he is hostage to it ...

Gurtaderra is the Valley of the Black Pig. The last battle will be fought there. The Orangemen will meet the Irish army at Cloonusker and Sruthaunalunacht will run blood. The Irish will be driven back through Gurtaderra and Guravrulla but the tide will turn at Aughaderreen and the Orangemen will be driven back and defeated. In the morning it would be as easy to pull an oak tree out of the ground as to knock an Orangeman off his horse but in the evening a woman in labour could knock him with her shawl.

It says that in the books.



THE PRESENT

'Bastards ... bastards ... baaas ... tards,' he says it again and again in each and every intonation available to him, says it without moving a muscle or uttering a syllable, scarcely breathing, curled up inside the hollow of a tree once struck by lightning; cradle and coffin, foetus and corpse. Bastards. English bastards, Free State bastards, all the same. Dipping, dipping. The helicopter wheeling up in a great vengeance, giving him a private message of condolence, 'We've got you mate ... We've got you now,' and the lights madly jesting on the fog-filled field. They'll not find him. Not this time. He has nine lives. A fortune-teller told his mother that. Three left. He scrunches himself more and more into the tree. Lucky not to have sprained an ankle or broken it when he jumped. Jumped from the moving van, said nothing to his comrades. They all knew. The game was up or at least that bit of the game was up. A car tailing them from the time they left the house. Someone grassed. Who. He'd know one day and then have it out. Friends turning traitor. Why. Why. Money or getting the wind up. Deserved to die they did, to die and be dumped like animals, those that informed, those that betrayed. Bastards.

The grass smells good to him and after three months cooped up in a house in a town, he's tuned to the smell of grass and the fresh smell of cow-dung, to the soft and several lisps of night. He knows his country well, McGreevy does, but only in dark. The dark is his friend. Daylight his enemy. Who set him up. Who can he trust, not trust. When the fucking Valentino pilot gets tired of his antics in the sky he'll make his way, in near the ditches, across to the pinkish haze of a town. He'll skirt it and go on South, the sunny South. This journey he will make no matter what. He is the sole player. His to do. Even if it's his last. The whirr comes near and far like sounds heard in a half-sleep. The fuckers. Wasting their dip lights and wasting their fuel. His mates in the van are protoplasm now which is why there was no time for the sweet goodbyes. War in the sky and war on the ground and war in his heart.

He says the rhyme that he knows to calm himself. It is his jingle, it sees him through except the bastards in the beetle are doing cartwheels in the sky, trying to frighten him, to get him off course.

'Daddy's home ... Daddy's home.'

What sort of mood would Daddy be in? Sometimes they can tell by the slam of the car door. Sometimes not. Rory. He walks into the hall past his wife and towards the lounge where a tea tray is laid with cups and saucers and scones.

'Did you get the fuel for the barbecue?' Sheila asks.

'I didn't.'

'I asked you.'

'I didn't,' he says and takes a bite out of one of the scones, then drops it and asks what time is dinner.

'Never anything I want, never ever, except what time is dinner.'

'You live in clover,' he says and gestures to a new carpet, the cuckoo clock, the sideboard crammed with ornaments, antiques he has paid for with his blasted sweat and his blasted arse. Women. Goods. Wardrobes. Finery. Jewellery. Lolly. There was a time when this avarice of hers was a charm in itself and never did he go for a trip or do a job without bringing back some little thing to hang on her. Once it was a golden seal that she thought was a duck and they laughed buckets over it which was how the nickname Duckie had come to her. There were lots of little things like that.

'How do I cook this thing?' Sheila says, returning and holding up in its bloodied bag the shins of the deer he had shot a month before. They were sick of eating it. Rory loved to get up early on Sunday morning and go into the woods with his rifle, to track and shoot deer. She never knew whether it was the pure sport of it or whether it was for another reason and she never

asked. There were things you do not ask a policeman that you are married to. A war of a kind was going on, though no one admitted it, a war in bursts, young men coming down from up North, coming down to rob banks and post offices, post-mistresses in lonely stations in dread of their lives, ordinary folk too in dread of these faceless men with their guns and their hoods.

One had been shot dead on a road not far away. It was in the papers, a photograph of the very spot, details of the rounds of ammunition, the nickname of the victim, his comrade who got away, who hijacked a timber lorry and held a guy at gunpoint for three hours. It was well known, well reported, discussed again and again, the number of rounds fired, the angle at which the guard shot, the type of wound, the time it took your man to die. Later the guard was awarded a medal for valour, one of the very few. They met him at a dinner dance and shook his hand. Men like him and her husband lived with that eventuality and it's what made them edgy, made them worry about a mystery caller or look under their cars when they went out. Once she had asked Rory what he would have done if he had been that policeman and he said the same, the very same, it's either them or us, him or me. For the most part of course, life was uneventful and Rory's weekly adventure was Sunday mornings, getting up at five and going off to shoot deer. It got him out of the dumps. He hated his boss and hated the other guard. The three wise men they were called. In a small barracks, bickering. The deer that he had brought home made a little trail of blood up the path and somehow she could never forget it on account of its delicacy. The children watched while he made a big show of skinning it, then cutting it, then making parcels for the deep freeze. The children wrote the labels but weren't sure which bits were which. She would be glad to see the end of it.

'I said how do you want this cooked,' Sheila said holding up the bag fuzzed with blood, and that looked gruesome to her.

'Stew it,' he said. He was in a foul mood. Manus had put the

boot in with the Superintendent, and blown his chances.

'There's no need to snap,' she said.

'I'm not snapping,' he said and looked at her with a sort of apology. At least she kept thin. Every day he battled with his damn weight and now it was his teeth, killing him.

'The abscess in my back tooth is flaring up again,' he said and tapped his tooth with his ringed finger. It was a Claddagh ring she had given him and he had said when he put it on that he would never take it off, that it would go with him, where ever, what ever, and it did, for all eternity.

'What's Manus up to now?' she said, softening a bit. There was no point in these rows, they had a nice bungalow, enough to eat, their children were hardy and all who visited commented on the beautiful view, were offered a look through the binoculars and told to veer in on the various sights on the lake – stone monasteries and oratories, the several islands, the houseboats moored on the far side, mostly white boats.

'I'm stuck ... We're stuck ... Thanks to Manus.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I read the minutes.'

'What did they say?'

'Oh, Manus talk, how I lacked vision ... Visions ... I stop people for nothing ... I am uncouth ... I am unpopular.'

'We're all right ... You love going up the country, going into the forest and shooting deer,' she said, taking his part now and going with him in imagination in the early morning to the wooded tracks under the purple mountains, a moistness in the air, young trees and old trees dripping, astonishment when two or three of these haughty creatures appeared and stood still, then the bang bangs, one of them felled, the remainder vanishing like wisps of smoke. He had described it to her once in bed and she had liked it, heard another voice altogether, softer, deeper and somehow truthful.

'Manus ... My bête noire.'

She knew what he meant. Knew that Manus had it in for him since that time that he arrested the wrong man for the

anonymous letters. Was sure it was that man, that Englishman who had come in a caravan to live. Sure it was him with his ponytail and his earring and his homemade beer. That Englishman. Pornographic letters sent to one woman after another, disgusting. He thought he had the man a dead cert, except it turned out he had the wrong man and for that he was put over the coals.

Without addressing either his mother or father Caimin crossed the room and turned on the television. A cure for dandruff featured a wife rebutting her husband's advances but some time later his dandruff-free hair made him irresistible.

'That bloody thing,' Rory said and shouted to his son to turn it off, when his whole world, the one with Manus, the one in the forest in the morning, the one with his wife when they lay down together, the one alone after she had gone out to work in the morning when he pondered, the one when he went to confession, all the worlds he had known suddenly went on revolve.

'Jay-sus ... Christ Almighty, ...' he was up and crossing over to make sure that this was not a mistake of some kind, he was listening to the announcer telling in a dry and polished voice, how a terrorist had got away, had jumped from a moving vehicle and had disappeared despite dog and helicopter search.

'Fucking imbeciles,' he said.

'Rory!' his wife said curtly.

Kneeling now, close to the set, he asked the lady announcer who was reporting war in another part of the world to tell him how the British Army, the RUC, guards and an entire operation could let a guy who had got away before, who was known to be a pimpernel, go into a field and vanish, how unless he was a fucking buccaneer. Even in his outrage he gave the fella credit and said, 'That's my boy, McGreevy, that's my baby.'

'Maybe he's a spaceman,' his little daughter Aoife pipes up.

'I hope he comes this a-way,' he said, waving his fist at the television.

'I hope he doesn't,' Sheila said, reminding him of the foreigner who had given masses of employment and who was taken hostage for almost three months and was now having to have treatment in Cologne or wherever he came from.

'We don't want him this a-way,' she said and put her arm around her little girl as a protection.

'I thought we agreed never to talk shop,' he said.

'This isn't talking shop, this is self-preservation,' she said and stormed out adding that if he wanted dinner he could cook it.

'Cúchulainn did that Daddy ... He ran the length of Ireland, kicking a ball,' Caimin said, remembering a hero from his school book.

'Don't you be getting any ideas,' Rory said and looking around at the room he saw the emblems of his youth, his proud youth, the cups and ribbons that reigned from his great athletic days and he thought of the young man leaping out of a moving car and the thrill, the thrill that was part and parcel of danger.

'Ducks,' he said through the open door. 'Don't bother with the damned shins,' adding that he'd pop down and get a takeaway and they'll have a slap-up supper by the fire.

'I don't like curry,' Caimin said and asked if he could have crisps.

'I thought we were saving for Christmas,' Sheila called in.

'What's that wine you like ... That Bulgarian?' he said and before she could answer, he was out the hall door with a stride, a stride in which he tried to imitate a young man who had sprung from a moving car and he remembered the hero he had once been, the adrenalin when he went out on the pitch, the puck of the hurley, the slithering, the crowds roaring, the goal, the goals, his wizardry and the adulation of the crowds booming in his ears.

The manure bags don't soak the wet but at least they are cover.

Three plastic bags and a manger of straw. Like Jesus. Not that he's praying. Others pray for him but he does not pray, he's seen too much and done too much and had too much done to him, to kneel down and call on a God. Some of what he's done he's blocked, he's had to, but inside in the depth of his being he feels clear and answerable and circumspect.

A few hours' sleep and the damp will have dried into him. If they took an X-ray of him he would be all water, all rain. His two mates will be being buried now, the flags, the national anthem, the salute, and that's it. Forgotten. He's had deaths in his own house so he knows what it is through and through and still they call him an animal. Well, insofar as he sleeps in a manger, he is one. A child's coffin, a wife's coffin, he's seen one but not the other. He's seen the child's, brought, handcuffed, police on every side, searching the white habit for explosives. Couldn't look at the little face, the little bundle of frozen wisdom, that played games with him in the jail on visiting day, hid under the chair when it was time to go, went missing, said she was Minnie Mouse and her daddy was Mickey Mouse and he needed her to stay all night. With the angels.

He scrapes the muck off with an end of a spade, drinks water from a pan that he found under a barrel, brackenish and tasting of galvanise and then he lies down. His hunger has gone. If they come and find him that's it. But they won't break him. They know they won't. They know that. Jumpy lads, all lip, giving statements, one statement and then another and another. Can't take the heat. He can take anything, heat, cold, even the electric wires flaring his inner temples. The certainty runs deep. It has to. It's all he has left.

Half-asleep, the fields he's crossed and the drains he's fallen into, come weaving in over him. He thinks he's eating hay, chewing it like a cow, and then chewing the cud. Who shopped him. The ones to trust and the ones not to trust? Like a terror that comes over them, as if their maker told them to balance the books. Touts. Traitors. He'll know one day and he'll settle up. Warmer now. Not the warm of a bed or her body but a

dank mineral warmth. Sleep, Jesus, sleep. Straw, streaking across his face and his mind spinning like meat on a spit.

'What the feck ... What the feck ... They're here.' He reaches for the rifle next to his chest, his finger at one with the trigger. Through the narrow slit in the stone wall of the loft he sees nothing, neither a vehicle nor a figure. It's a cow – moaning for all she's worth. All he bloody needs. Where is she. Where are you.

'Where are you Peg ... Peg?' he says. Why he calls her Peg he does not know. The sound is low, long drawn out, enough to alert the farmer, his dogs, duck squads, the lot. Peering over the ladder he sees her down below, too big gormless eyes moiling in her head and her body in spasm. She's come in to calf.

'Fuck's sake,' he says, as he stands close to her, the breathing now in laboured and hollow groans. The hooves of the calf come prodding out, then receding, then more moans as he grips her and tells her to push, in God's name to push. He tries holding her hind quarters but she buckles and thinks to make for the out-of-doors and the moment so sudden and unwieldy, makes the youngster inside go berserk. He can hear it tumbling around, desperate to escape and holding the mother now he talks to her, says things to her, to silence her moans. The racket inside is like luggage being slung about in a suitcase. It's tearing at her. Her contractions, thick and rapid and agonising make no difference at all. The calf is too big – nothing for it but rope.

He finds some and coils it around the jutting hooves, then shoves it up inside her so as to grip the shins, all the while saying these idiotic things. From the gate he uses as leverage the moans follow him, something primeval in them, the moans of the cows and cattle of ancient times, for which land and fiefdoms were fought over. She can't do it. He can't do it. The hind quarters and the hips are knifing her. He has to be tougher. He pulls the gate back a few more inches, knowing he will either break the legs or manage to haul her out and when the

clatter hits the cobbles he is unable to suppress his joy. 'She's out ... She's out.' A grey, jellyish stripling in her sack of grey. As he begins to wipe the slime off her face she gets up, staggering at first, then feels her legs, flexes herself, hardening to the wonder of her life. A brown calf with a white spot on the forehead, the shape of a V.

'You divil,' he says. The mother starts to lick, licking with a terrible assiduousness, licking then spitting out the glutinous stuff, with such relish, such happiness and he thinks after all that agony, the love, the impossible licking love of it.

They are not army boots, but a farmer's, muddy at the tops, an agitated man rushing in.

'It was a tough one,' he says. Better to speak first. The man looks at him and he knows by the look that the man has his measure but says nothing.

'She went out of the house ... We were watching but she got out ... One of the girls left the shed door open.'

'She's had a hard time.'

'You did it with the rope.'

'The only way to do it,' he says and goes up to the loft to get his rifle, knowing that the man is watching.

'You're off,' the man says as he comes down, his holdall bag folded prudently and slung over his shoulder.

'The afterbirth hasn't come yet,' he says.

'It takes at least an hour,' the man says and then, 'Far to go?'

'A fair few steps,' he says, and looks at the cow and gives her a wink as if to say 'That's a greedy child you've got.'

'Would you like to come back home and have something to eat,' the man asks in a tentative way.

'Are you sure?'

'Oh ... It'll be fine,' and the words trail away as if he has been throttled.

Except that it is not fine. The woman knows.

'This is Frank ... and he would like something to eat,' the man says to a woman who personifies greyness, grey hair, a wraparound grey apron and black-grey eyes, like a periwinkle.

'He'd like something to eat,' her voice dry and tart as she muses pitilessly on the stranger's plight.

'He delivered the calf for us ... A fine wee calf ... Isn't she, Frank?'

'A big calf,' Frank as he now is says and thinks it a good and harmless name to take with him on his journey and in his mind he tries out suitable surnames to go with it. He does not know whether to sit or stand.

'An army lorry went by, a while back', that coupled with a look of bristle confirms that there will be no feed, no anything.

Her husband follows her to the scullery where she recommences scraping the paint off a shelf with a chisel. He can see them through the open door. At first the husband whispers but soon tires of it and tells her to get the chip pan and get some eggs and be smart about it and without deferring to him she does.

She watches the stranger with a mixture of fear and terror whilst her husband asks if he is fussy about his eggs. She has left it to her husband to do the frying, all she has done is lay the stuff on the side of the stove.

'It's grand as it is,' Frank says.

What else could he say, a hungry man, a murderer, a hungry murderer. Violent emotions are battling up in her while her husband hoists the frying pan off the fire, holds it aloft, and fixes her as if he would pour the boiling fat over her feet. With some sort of grizzled smile she tells the stranger that they have children, four in all, two in South Africa and two at home and how it stands to reason that she is more worried about the ones at home, what with, what with ... She does not finish the sentence. She does not have to. Her husband ministers by filling and refilling his teacup and remarking on the size and sturdiness of the calf.

'They always manage on their own ... Cows always manage

...' she says savagely, asking both men to think for an instant on the killing instinct of man as opposed to the child-bearing instinct of womankind.

'This one would not have managed ... Except for Frank here ... He had to get ropes,' her husband says and puts the pan directly onto the tablecloth, so that Frank can dip his last bit of bread.

'Cows always manage,' she says and goes back to the scullery, making much of her task with the chisel.

After he has gone she looks at her husband with that cold, undeviating level stare of hers but does not say a word.

'If you lift that phone ...' he says, seeing her dry her hands.

'Try it,' she says, her back to him.

'I'll strike you dead,' and he gives the dresser a series of wallops with his belt so that pieces of crockery, some big, some not, fall about the floor, followed by showers of hard and clayey dust. He breaks what's there. She stands, her back still to him and after he has delivered the final blow she turns, kneels, looks at the strewn pieces and out of them all selects something she loved, a cream jug, with cornflowers on the front and like a child with a jigsaw, she starts to put the pieces together. The loss of it is the one soft thing he has seen in her, in years.

'It's you and your like that keeps them going,' she says.

'He didn't harm us – did he?'

'No ... He didn't fancy meat, it being a Friday,' and gradually the shattered pieces begin to take the form and shape that it once was, except that there is a futility to it, like putting the pieces of a dismembered corpse back together.

'I'm not for them, Julia ... I'm as opposed to them as you are,' he wants to say it, but he can't, the words stick.

* * *