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HOUSE OF SPLENDID ISOLATION

By Edna O'Brien

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Readers have long been at odds over what to make of Edna O'Brien. She seems a criss-cross of contradictions.

Some feminists accuse her of being the ultimate sell-out, creator of shattered women whose very being is both defined and destroyed by their passion to find some man to love and to guide their education, contemporary descendents of Chekhov's Darling. Others find O'Brien our most faithful painter of the female soul. Her women seem defeated yet go on trying. They could be easily self-absorbed in their pain yet are instead thoroughly absorbed in the sensuous world around them, smelling its herbs and hearing its nightingales.

Her writing invariably satisfies the head but steers straight for the heart. She focuses on the most nakedly elemental yearnings but eludes those untutored in the Irish spirit that informs her world. Her Irishness, even if the frank sexuality of her novels has often caused them to be banned in Ireland, is as central to her work as is her womanliness.

Nor should this appear odd. There is a striking parallel between being Irish and being female: a sense of invasion, of being overwhelmed, regulated and imprisoned almost since the dawn of memory by a more muscular if less intuitive and spiritual force. This parallel lies at the core of her powerful 14th novel.

After a prelude spoken by the ghost of a dead infant hovering about an old house in the Irish countryside, events race to bring McGreevy, a fleeing IRA killer, to the widowed owner of that house, Josie O'Meara. She will become McGreevy's hostage/hostess while scores of the Guard, the Black and Tans, hunt the fugitive down.

Once so attractive she was mistaken for Gloria Swanson, Josie had come home from a maid's job in Brooklyn to marry a man she scarcely knew, the prosperous, hard-drinking Jamie O'Meara. As it is for most O'Brien protagonists, Josie's marriage had been unhappy. After a wedding night of treating her body with proprietary callousness, O'Meara fled their bed before Josie even awoke, beginning their years of marriage as perpetual withdrawal from each other.

There had been moments of happiness, "All-night card games at Christmas, the dappers who lodged in the month of May, who set off in the mornings for the lake with their picnic baskets and their fishing gear, back at night for their big dinners; and Jamie and herself dancing attendance on them and united for once." And there was in Jamie a Fenian longing for Irish independence which Josie admired.

But mostly their life together consisted of mutual frustration. Jamie, who had watched his own father so devastated by the loss of Jamie's mother that he followed her to the grave and left Jamie an orphan, proves incapable of tenderness. Josie, he feels, has stripped him of all he'd loved: his brother, whom she disliked; his horses, which she hated; and her own passion, which she withholds from him but later yields to a priest in a meadow, the infidelity made visibly immediate to Jamie when a local boy brings him Josie's corset left on the grass.

Following Jamie's shooting by the Guard, in which Josie had been inadvertently complicit, Josie became unsettled and was institutionalized. Finally, she returned home where she would sleep in the kitchen and grow increasingly reclusive, waiting without hope, the "vacant, shriven years" of Death inching His cold arm farther around her numb shoulder until "the anvil of circumstances" brings McGreevy into her life.

What is Josie to make of him? Reputed to have killed over 20 people and now holding a widow hostage, this man treats her far more gently than her husband ever had. He is himself widowed, his wife slain in Irish crossfire at 30, leaving a small daughter who would also shortly die when "her heart gave out." Josie grows inexplicably drawn to him. Is it the response of a woman who lived all those years with beatings and drink and who now feels alive again after shriven years, or is it that one person's terrorist is another person's patriot? After all, McGreevy explains to her, he is not driven by hate but by the simple fact that "the British Army is in our streets and it's wrong."

McGreevy and the IRA become the touchstone by which all other characters in the novel measure their own allegiance to their country. Are the IRA, as one smug young physician says, "thugs, sickos" who "if the country were to be united in the morning [McGreevy] and his kind would be criminals out of a job," or are they, as others insist, true descendents of the heroes of Easter 1916, whose picture even the Irish police hang proudly on their walls, whose martyred names they were praised as children for reciting? IRA men compete with local law officers to see who speaks better Irish, who "is a far better keeper of the country's soul and the country's heritage." All the IRA really wants, McGreevy says, is "to get the British out of Ireland," then "peace, personal identity, racial identity."

That is far too large a goal to achieve before the novel's violent end. But O'Brien achieves artistic goals she has seldom addressed so squarely before. She moves beyond her previously narrower, if stunningly wrought, landscape of private heartbreak and haunted agony. Here she shows us the land that forged her vision, spiced and infused with the powers of Fairie. O'Brien alludes to witches, gypsies, curses and spirits, and at one point Josie is referred to as "Queen of the Munster Fairies."

O'Brien reminds us that a single green thread stitches the Irish into one people. Begun by Pictish Bronze Age sourcerers, spun by Celtic druid seers and medieval *filid* chroniclers, that thread was too strong even by Roman times to ever unravel. Nor could centuries of Norse plunder and a millennium of British occupation hide it. O'Brien shows

that you can break the Irish body but never obliterate its soul, and that those who fail to realize this can read Irish literature only as if through a veil.

If the parallel between female oppression and Irish oppression exists, then as long as we turn to only the Joyces and Synge and Yeatses to read the Irish soul, and not to this quintessentially feminine writer, we will prove her point.