

CHRISTIANE YOUNG
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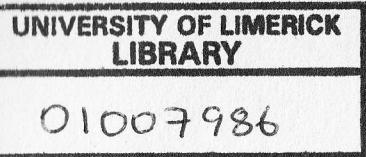
Edna O'Brien

The Love Object

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for Francis Wyndham

An Outing

The cups reminded them both of home and duty. He would have to go shortly.

By five thirty they had talked and walked for an hour. But they had said nothing. He apologized for the bad picture, she said she was sorry she couldn't bring him in.

'Still we had a grand time,' she said.

'No, we hadn't,' he said. 'I should have thought of something special.'

'What do other people do?' she asked.

'Oh, they go to the seaside, they go to hotels, they go to places,' he said. She was sorry now that she hadn't risked it and told him. He would have understood; it might have brought them closer together. She looked at him with regret, with love, she looked intently to keep his image more distinctly in her mind. She might not see him dressed-up again for ages.

They kissed and made their arrangements for the following Saturday, at their usual place.

As she walked away she did not turn round to wave, in case he might expect a smile. Anyhow he was occupied himself, with taking off his tie and rolling it up neatly. His wife had not seen him go out with it on.

She walked, deep in thought. She'd lost her chance. Her husband would live for ever. She and her friend were fated to walk up and down streets towards the railway bridge, and in the end they would grow tired of walking, and they would return, each to a make-shift home.

The Rug

I went down on my knees upon the brand-new linoleum, and smelled the strange smell. It was rich and oily. It first entered and attached itself to something in my memory when I was nine years old. I've since learned that it is the smell of linseed oil, but coming on it unexpectedly can make me both a little disturbed and sad.

I grew up in the west of Ireland, in a grey cut-stone farmhouse, which my father inherited from his father. My father came from lowland, better-off farming people, my mother from the windswept hungry hills above a great lake. As children, we played in a small forest of rhododendrons – thickened and tangled and broken under scratching cows – around the house and down the drive. The avenue up from the front gates had such great pot-holes that cars had to lurch off into the field and out again.

But though all outside was neglect, overgrown with ragwort and thistle, strangers were surprised when they entered the house; my father might fritter his life away watching the slates slip from the outhouse roofs – but, within, that safe, square, lowland house of stone was my mother's pride and joy. It was always spotless. It was stuffed with things – furniture, china dogs, Toby mugs, tall jugs, trays, tapestries and whatnots. Each of the four bedrooms had holy pictures on the walls and

a gold overmantel surmounting each fireplace. In the fireplaces there were paper fans or lids of chocolate boxes. Mantelpieces carried their own close-packed array of wax flowers, holy statues, broken alarm clocks, shells, photographs, soft rounded cushions for sticking pins in.

My father was generous, foolish, and so idle that it could only have been some sort of illness. That year in which I was nine and first experienced the wonderful smell, he sold another of the meadows to pay off some debt, and for the first time in many years my mother got a lump of money.

She went out early one morning and caught the bus to the city, and through a summer morning and afternoon she trudged around looking at linoleums. When she came home in the evening, her feet hurting from high heels, she said she had bought some beautiful light-brown linoleum, with orange squares on it.

The day came when the four rolls were delivered to the front gates, and Hickey, our farm help, got the horse and cart ready to bring it up. We all went; we were that excited. The calves followed the cart, thinking that maybe they were to be fed down by the roadside. At times they galloped away but came back again, each calf nudging the other out of the way. It was a warm, still day, the sounds of cars and neighbours' dogs carried very distinctly and the cow lats on the drive were brown and dry like flake tobacco.

My mother did most of the heaving and shoving to get the rolls on to the cart. She had early accepted that she had been born to do the work.

She may have bribed Hickey with the promise of hens to sell for himself, because that evening he stayed in to help with the floor – he usually went over to the

village and drank a pint or two of stout. Mama, of course, always saved newspapers, and she said that the more we laid down under the lino the longer it would wear. On her hands and knees, she looked up once – flushed, delighted, tired – and said, 'Mark my words, we'll see a carpet in here yet.'

There was calculation and argument before cutting the difficult bits around the door frames, the bay window, and the fireplace. Hickey said that without him my mother would have botched the whole thing. In the quick flow of argument and talk, they did not notice that it was past my bedtime. My father sat outside in the kitchen by the stove all evening while we worked. Later, he came in and said what a grand job we were doing. A grand job, he said. He'd had a headache.

The next day must have been Saturday, for I sat in the sitting-room all morning admiring the linoleum, smelling its smell, counting the orange squares. I was supposed to be dusting. Now and then I re-arranged the blinds, as the sun moved. We had to keep the sun from fading the bright colours.

The dogs barked and the postman cycled up. I ran out and met him carrying a huge parcel. Mama was away up in the yard with the hens. When the postman had gone, I went up to tell her.

'A parcel?' she said. She was cleaning the hens' trough before putting their food in it. The hens were moiling around, falling in and out of the buckets, pecking at her hands. 'It's just binding twine for the baling machine,' she said. 'Who'd be sending parcels?' She was never one to lose her head.

I said that the parcel had a Dublin postmark – the postman told me that – and that there was some black

woolly thing in it. The paper was torn at the corner, and I'd pushed a finger in, fearfully.

Coming down to the house she wiped her hands with a wad of long grass. 'Perhaps somebody in America has remembered us at last.' One of her few dreams was to be remembered by relatives who had gone to America. The farm buildings were some way from the house; we ran the last bit. But, even in her excitement, her careful nature forced her to unknot every length of string from the parcel and roll it up, for future use. She was the world's most generous woman, but was thrifty about saving twine and paper, and candle stumps, and turkey wings and empty pill boxes.

'My God,' she said reverently, folding back the last piece of paper and revealing a black sheepskin hearthrug. We opened it out. It was a half-moon shape and covered the kitchen table. She could not speak. It was real sheepskin, thick and soft and luxurious. She examined the lining, studied the maker's label in the back, searched through the folds of brown paper for a possible letter, but there was nothing at all to indicate where it had come from.

'Get me my glasses,' she said. We read the address again, and the postmark. The parcel had been sent from Dublin two days before. 'Call your father,' she said. He was in bed with rheumatic pains. Rug or no rug, he demanded a fourth cup of tea before he could get up.

We carried the big black rug into the sitting-room and laid it down upon the new linoleum, before the fireplace.

'Isn't it perfect, a perfect colour scheme?' she said. The room had suddenly become cosy. She stood back and looked at it with surprise, and a touch of suspicion.

Though she was always hoping, she never really expected things to turn out well. At nine years old, I knew enough about my mother's life to say a prayer of thanks that at last she had got something she wanted, and without having to work for it. She had a round, sallow face and a peculiarly uncertain, timid smile. The suspicion soon left her, and the smile came out. That was one of her happiest days; I remember it as I remember her unhappiest day to my knowledge – the day the bailiff came, a year later. I hoped she would sit in the newly-appointed room on Sundays for tea, without her apron, with her brown hair combed out, looking calm and beautiful. Outside, the rhododendrons, though wild and broken, would bloom red and purple and, inside, the new rug would lie upon the richly smelling linoleum. She hugged me suddenly, as if I were the one to thank for it all; the hen mash had dried on her hands and they had the mealy smell I knew so well.

For spells during the next few days, my mother racked her brain, and she racked our brains, for a clue. It had to be someone who knew something of her needs and wants – how else could he have decided upon just the thing she needed? She wrote letters here and there, to distant relations, to friends, to people she had not seen for years.

'Must be one of *your* friends,' she would say to my father.

'Oh, probably, probably. I've known a lot of decent people in my time.'

She was referring – ironically, of course – to the many strangers to whom he had offered tea. He liked nothing better than to stand down at the gates on a

fair day or a race day, engaging passers-by in conversation and finally bringing someone up to the house for tea and boiled eggs. He had a genius for making friends.

'I'd say that's it,' my father said, delighted to take credit for the rug.

In the warm evenings we sat around the fireplace – we'd never had a fire in that room throughout the whole of my childhood – and around the rug, listening to the radio. And now and then, Mama or Dada would remember someone else from whom the rug might have come. Before a week had passed, she had written to a dozen people – an acquaintance who had moved up to Dublin with a greyhound pup Dada had given him, which greyhound had turned out a winner; an unfrocked priest who had stayed in our house for a week, gathering strength from Mama to travel on home and meet his family; a magician who had stolen Dada's gold watch and never been seen since; a farmer who once sold us a tubercular cow and would not take it back.

Weeks passed. The rug was taken out on Saturdays and shaken well, the new lino polished. Once, coming home early from school, I looked in the window and saw Mama kneeling on the rug saying a prayer. I'd never seen her pray like that, in the middle of the day, before. My father was going into the next county the following day to look at a horse he thought he might get cheap; she was, of course, praying that he would keep his promise and not touch a drink. If he did, he might be off on a wild progress and would not be seen for a week.

He went the next day; he was to stay overnight with relations. While he was away, I slept with Mama, for

company, in the big brass bed. I wakened to see a candle flame, and Mama hurriedly putting on her cardigan. Dada had come home? No, she said, but she had been lying awake thinking, and there was something she had to tell Hickey or she would not get a wink of sleep. It was not yet twelve; he might be awake. I didn't want to be left in the dark, I said, but she was already hurrying along the landing. I nipped out of bed, and followed. The luminous clock said a quarter to twelve. From the first landing, I looked over and saw her turning the knob of Hickey's door.

Why should he open his door to her then? I thought; he never let anyone in at any time, keeping the door locked when he was out on the farm. Once we climbed in through the window and found things in such a muddle – his good suit laid out flat on the floor, a shirt soaking in a bucket of dirty green water, a milk can in which there was curdled buttermilk, a bicycle chain, a broken Sacred Heart and several pairs of worn, distorted, cast-off boots – that she resolved never to set foot in it again.

'What the hell is it?' Hickey said. Then there was a thud. He must have knocked something over while he searched for his flashlamp.

'If it's fine tomorrow, we'll cut the turf,' Mama said.

Hickey asked if she'd wakened him at that hour to tell him something he already knew – they discussed it at tea-time.

'Open the door,' she said. 'I have a bit of news for you, about the rug.'

He opened the door just a fraction. 'Who sent it?' he asked.

'That party from Ballinsloe,' she said.

'That party' was her phrase for her two visitors who

had come to our house years before – a young girl, and an older man who wore brown gauntlet gloves. Almost as soon as they'd arrived, my father went out with them in their motor-car. When they returned to our house an hour later, I gathered from the conversation that they had been to see our local doctor, a friend of Dad's. The girl was the sister of a nun, who was headmistress at the convent where my sisters were. She had been crying. I guessed then, or maybe later, that her tears had to do with her having a baby and that Dada had taken her to the doctor so that she could find out for certain if she were pregnant and make preparations to get married. It would have been impossible for her to go to a doctor in her own neighbourhood, and I had no doubt but that Dada was glad to do a favour for the nun, as he could not always pay the fees for my sisters' education. Mama gave them tea on a tray – not a spread with hand-embroidered cloth and bone-china cups – and shook hands with them coolly when they were leaving. She could not abide sinful people.

‘Nice of them to remember,’ Hickey said, sucking air between his teeth and making bird noises. ‘How did you find out?’

‘I just guessed,’ Mama told him.

‘Oh, Christ!’ Hickey said, closing his door with a fearful bang and getting back into bed with such vehemence that I could hear the springs revolt.

Mama carried me up the stairs, because my feet were cold, and said that Hickey had not one ounce of manners.

Next day, when Dad came home sober, she told him the story, and that night she wrote to the nun. In due course, a letter came to us – with holy medals and scapulars enclosed for me – saying that neither the nun

nor her married sister had sent a gift. I expect the girl had married the man with the gauntlet gloves.

‘ ‘Twill be one of life's mysteries,’ Mama said, as she beat the rug against the pier, closed her eyes to escape the dust and reconciled herself to never knowing.

But a knock came on our back door four weeks later, when we were upstairs changing the sheets on the beds. ‘Run down and see who it is,’ she said.

It was a namesake of Dada's from the village, a man who always came to borrow something – a donkey, or a mowing machine, or even a spade.

‘Is your mother in?’ he asked, and I went halfway up the stairs and called her down.

‘I've come for the rug,’ he said.

‘What rug?’ Mama asked. It was the nearest she ever got to lying. Her breathe caught short and she blushed a little.

‘I hear you have a new rug here. Well, 'tis our rug, because my wife's sister sent it to us months ago and we never got it.’

‘What are you talking about?’ she said in a very sarcastic voice. He was a cowardly man, and it was said that he was so ineffectual he would call his wife in from the garden to pour him a cup of tea. I suppose my mother hoped that she would frighten him off.

‘The rug the postman brought here one morning, and handed it to your youngster there.’ He nodded at me.

‘Oh, that,’ Mama said, a little stunned by the news that the postman had given information about it. Then a ray of hope, or a ray of lunacy, must have struck her, because she asked what colour of rug he was inquiring about.

‘A black sheepskin,’ he said.

The Rug

There could be no more doubt about it. Her whole being drooped – shoulders, stomach, voice, everything.

'It's here,' she said absently, and she went through the hall into the sitting-room.

'Being namesakes and that, the postman got us mixed up,' he said stupidly to me.

She had winked at me to stay there and see he did not follow her, because she did not want him to know that we had been using it.

It was rolled and had a piece of cord around the middle when she handed it to him. As she watched him go down the avenue she wept, not so much for the loss – though the loss was enormous – as for her own foolishness in thinking that someone had wanted to do her a kindness at last.

'We live and learn,' she said, as she undid her apron strings, out of habit, and then retied them slowly and methodically, making a tighter knot.

The Mouth of the Cave

There were two routes to the village. I chose the rougher one to be beside the mountain rather than the sea. It is a dusty ill-defined stretch of road littered with rocks. The rocks that have fallen from the cliff are a menacing shade of red once they have split open. On the surface the cliff appears to be grey. Here and there on its grey-and-red face there are small clumps of trees. Parched in summer, tormented by winds in winter they nevertheless survive, getting no larger or no smaller.

In one such clump of green, just underneath the cliff, I saw a girl stand up. She began to tie her suspenders slowly. She had bad balance because when drawing her knickers on she lost her footing more than once. She put her skirt on by bringing it over her head and lastly her cardigan which appeared to have several buttons. As I came closer she walked away. A young girl in a maroon cardigan and a black skirt. She was twenty or thereabouts. Suddenly and without anticipating it I turned towards home so as to give the impression that I'd simply been having a stroll. The ridiculousness of this hit me soon after and I turned round again and walked towards the scene of her secret. I was trembling, but these journeys have got to be accomplished.

What a shock to find that nothing lurked there, no man, no animal. The bushes had not risen from the