



ENGLISH HOME LANGUAGE: SOURCE MATERIAL

The Sniper by Liam O'Flaherty

The long June twilight faded into night. Dublin lay enveloped in darkness but for the dim light of the moon that shone through fleecy clouds, casting a pale light as of approaching dawn over the streets and the dark waters of the Liffey. Around the beleaguered Four Courts the heavy guns roared. Here and there through the city, machine guns and rifles broke the silence of the night, spasmodically, like dogs barking on lone farms. Republicans and Free Staters were waging civil war.

On a rooftop near O'Connell Bridge, a Republican sniper lay watching. Beside him lay his rifle and over his shoulders was slung a pair of field glasses. His face was the face of a student, thin and ascetic, but his eyes had the cold gleam of the fanatic. They were deep and thoughtful, the eyes of a man who is used to looking at death.

He was eating a sandwich hungrily. He had eaten nothing since morning. He had been too excited to eat. He finished the sandwich, and, taking a flask of whisky from his pocket, he took a short drought. Then he returned the flask to his pocket. He paused for a moment, considering whether he should risk a smoke. It was dangerous. The flash might be seen in the darkness, and there were enemies watching. He decided to take the risk.

Placing a cigarette between his lips, he struck a match, inhaled the smoke hurriedly and put out the light. Almost immediately, a bullet flattened itself against the parapet of the roof. The sniper took another whiff and put out the cigarette. Then he swore softly and crawled away to the left.

Cautiously he raised himself and peered over the parapet. There was a flash and a bullet whizzed over his head. He dropped immediately. He had seen the flash. It came from the opposite side of the street.

He rolled over the roof to a chimney stack in the rear, and slowly drew himself up behind it, until his eyes were level with the top of the parapet. There was nothing to be seen – just the dim outline of the opposite housetop against the blue sky. His enemy was under cover.

Just then an armoured car came across the bridge and advanced slowly up the street. It stopped on the opposite side of the street, fifty yards ahead. The sniper could hear the dull panting of the motor. His heart beat faster. It was an enemy car. He wanted to fire, but he knew it was useless. His bullets would never pierce the steel that covered the gray monster.

Then round the corner of a side street came an old woman, her head covered by a tattered shawl. She began to talk to the man in the turret of the car. She was pointing to the roof where the sniper lay. An informer.

The turret opened. A man's head and shoulders appeared, looking toward the sniper. The sniper raised his rifle and fired. The head fell heavily on the turret wall. The woman darted toward the side street. The sniper fired again. The woman whirled round and fell with a shriek into the gutter.

Suddenly from the opposite roof a shot rang out and the sniper dropped his rifle with a curse. The rifle clattered to the roof. The sniper thought the noise would wake the dead. He stooped to pick the rifle up. He couldn't lift it. His forearm was dead. "I'm hit," he muttered.

Dropping flat onto the roof, he crawled back to the parapet. With his left hand he felt the injured right forearm. The blood was oozing through the sleeve of his coat. There was no pain – just a deadened sensation, as if the arm had been cut off.

Quickly he drew his knife from his pocket, opened it on the breastwork of the parapet, and ripped open the sleeve. There was a small hole where the bullet had entered. On the other side there was no hole. The bullet had lodged in the bone. It must have fractured it. He bent the arm below the wound, the arm bent back easily. He ground his teeth to overcome the pain.

Then taking out his field dressing, he ripped open the packet with his knife. He broke the neck of the iodine bottle and let the bitter fluid drip into the wound. A paroxysm of pain swept through him. He placed the cotton wadding over the wound and wrapped the dressing over it. He tied the ends with his teeth.

The he lay still against the parapet, and, closing his eyes, he made an effort of will to overcome the pain.

In the street beneath all was still. The armoured car had retired speedily over the bridge, with the machine gunner's head hanging lifeless over the turret. The woman's corpse lay still in the gutter.

The sniper lay still for a long time nursing his wounded arm and planning escape. Morning must not find him wounded on the roof. The enemy on the opposite roof covered his escape. He must kill that enemy and he could not use his rifle. He had only a revolver to do it. Then he thought of a plan.

Taking off his cap, he placed it over the muzzle of his rifle. Then he pushed the rifle slowly upward over the parapet, until the cap was visible from the opposite side of the street. Almost immediately there was a report, and a bullet pierced the centre of the cap. The sniper slanted the rifle forward. The cap clipped down into the street. Then catching the rifle in the middle, the sniper dropped his left hand over the roof and let it hang, lifelessly. After a few moments he let the rifle drop to the street. Then he sank to the roof, dragging his hand with him.

Crawling quickly to his feet, he peered up at the corner of the roof. His ruse had succeeded. The other sniper, seeing the cap and rifle fall, thought that he had killed his man. He was now standing before a row of chimney pots, looking across, with his head clearly silhouetted against the western sky.

The Republican sniper smiled and lifted his revolver above the edge of the parapet. The distance was about fifty yards – a hard shot in the dim light, and his right arm was paining him like a thousand devils. He took a steady aim. His hand trembled with eagerness. Pressing his lips together, he took a deep breath through his nostrils and fired. He was almost deafened with the report and his arm shook with the recoil.

Then when the smoke cleared, he peered across and uttered a cry of joy. His enemy had been hit. He was reeling over the parapet in his death agony. He struggled to keep his feet, but he was slowly falling forward as if in a dream. The rifle fell from his grasp, hit the parapet, fell over, bounded off the pole of a barber's shop beneath and then clattered on the pavement.

Then the dying man on the roof crumpled up and fell forward. The body turned over and over in space and hit the ground with a dull thud. Then it lay still.

The sniper looked at his enemy falling and he shuddered. The lust of battle died in him. He became bitten by remorse. The sweat stood out in beads on his forehead. Weakened by his

wound and the long summer day of fasting and watching on the roof, he revolted from the sight of the shattered mass of his dead enemy. His teeth chattered, he began to gibber to himself, cursing the war, cursing himself, cursing everybody.

He looked at the smoking revolver in his hand, and with an oath he hurled it to the roof at his feet. The revolver went off with a concussion and the bullet whizzed past the sniper's head. He was frightened back to his senses by the shock. His nerves steadied. The cloud of fear scattered from his mind and he laughed.

Taking the whiskey flask from his pocket, he emptied it a drought. He felt reckless under the influence of the spirit. He decided to leave the roof now and look for his company commander, to report. Everywhere around was quiet. There was not much danger in going through the streets. He picked up his revolver and put it in his pocket. Then he crawled down through the skylight to the house underneath.

When the sniper reached the laneway on the street level, he felt a sudden curiosity as to the identity of the enemy sniper whom he had killed. He decided that he was a good shot, whoever he was. He wondered did he know him. Perhaps he had been in his own company before the split in the army. He decided to risk going over to him to have a look at him. He peered around the corner into O'Connell Street. In the upper part of the street there was heavy firing, but around here all was quiet.

The sniper darted across the street. A machine gun tore up the ground around him with a hail of bullets, but he escaped. He threw himself face downward beside the corpse. The machine gun stopped.

Then the sniper turned over the dead body and look into his brother's face.

Sheddings

There is sadness in the room.
It lies like dust on wall, and floor, and glass,
echoes in the buzzing of a fly that, caught
by one leg on a coil of sticky paper, fights
with tired plaintiveness to be loosed.
A starling, crying in the empty yard,
turns a shallow silence to profundity.
The dripping of a faulty tap
into a soap-and-grime-encrusted bath
is the final, springless clock that marks
the passing of unlived-in time.

I walk around the room and touch
a pillow, smelling still of old hair-oil,
a bathrobe with a crooked hem, a shoe,
with scuffed, sharp heel and soiled instep,
a billowing scarf of flowering, purple gauze,
hanging from a bedpost and heavy with
the scent of lacquers and stale shampoo,
and, with a sense of guilt almost,
a yellow stain on a thrown-back sheet,
a packet of condoms and one of pills
beside an emptied waterglass,
stale ash, stale butts with old lip-stains,
toothbrush still laid across the tube as though
just used, and I no right to gaze or touch.

And still the starling calls and calls
across the empty wind-lashed yard,
drawing me to the window where
I stand and stare at blowing leaves,
the long-neglected flower-beds,
the slogan-spattered, high yard-walls,
but seeing none of these, waiting for
some sound to turn me round to find
you were behind me all the time,
were never gone, I knew you then
as I know you now,
with a terrible and aching fullness from
these dumb, betraying things.

new contrast

David Medalie

The Mistresses' Dog

The night wind tugged at the house and slammed against the windows. Nola drank a glass of dry sherry, ate honey nougat and slices of camembert on poppy-seed crackers, and watched TV. The mistress's dog lay on her lap, snoring and twitching. Once he looked up, gazing at her with milky eyes. Then he lowered his head again.

At half past ten she prodded him. "It's time for final ablutions," she said. "I want to go to bed." She picked him up and put him on the floor. Then she unlocked the patio door. The mistress's dog padded behind her, his nails making clicking sounds on the tiles in the passage. The wind had died down a little, but still pushed against them as they made their way down the steps and into the garden. The smell of the sea was strong. Above them loomed the dark mass of the mountain. The mistress's dog sniffed the damp paving-stones and stumbled against a pot-plant. "Hurry up," she said to him. "It's cold." After a while he lifted his leg against a fuchsia. "Thank you," she said. A dog barked in the distance. The mistress's dog barked in response, a shrill, reedy sound. He made scratching movements in the grass with his back legs. Nola carried him indoors.

She fed him again. He spent a long time hunched over his plastic bowl, but ate little. Most of his teeth were gone. His diet, for the last five years, had consisted exclusively of soft food. He suffered from chronic halitosis – or, to be more accurate, others suffered from halitosis in him. There was nothing that could be done about it.

He slept in a basket – which had accompanied him when he flew from Johannesburg, seven years ago – at the foot of Nola's bed. He followed her to the bedroom and hopped into it. She read for twenty minutes and then switched off the light. The dog's sandpaper breath rose and fell in the darkness. Occasionally he whimpered – but whether in the gratification of a dream or the rasp of its disappointment, she could not tell.

Nola had always preferred cats to dogs.

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The mistress was considered attractive according to the fashion of that time. But for Nola there was always too much of her – too much laughing, too much heartiness, too much peroxide, too many teeth. Nola's word for her was "blousy." Sometimes she described her as "blonde and blousy" because she liked the demeaning effect of the alliteration. At other times she just said "blousy," confident that the two syllables would hold sufficient scorn.

The mistress thought of herself as bold, daring, unconventional. And in the context of the poor, religious, rural family she came from, she was. She remained single, devoted herself to what she called her "career" (she was a powerful man's secretary), and had an affair that endured for over a decade with a married man (that same powerful man). She bought a flat, bought a vermilion car, bought the advice of an interior decorator, bought elocution lessons, bought cookery lessons, bought Italian olive oil, bought crushed garlic, bought tickets to the ballet, bought the records of Callas and Caruso, bought sunglasses that resembled the ones Callas used to wear.

She severed all contact with her family. She never went to church. But in the unfettered darkness of night (the mistress was a chronic insomniac), she would sometimes weaken and, ashamed of her weakness, beg God to look indulgently upon her and at least understand her rebellions, even if He could not condone their sinfulness. She wanted God to know that she longed only to be free. She asked God to consider what it meant for a woman like her to have to live in the crimping South Africa of the 1960s.

The powerful man who was her boss and her lover saw her as spirited and strong. She excited him for seven years. She interested him for another five. Then she neither excited nor interested him. But Nola (who was married for over forty years to that same powerful man) sensed that the mistress, for all her bravado, was a fearful person. She understood that, although she presented herself as independent, flagrantly independent, she was in fact frightened of being alone, terrified – to the point of obsession – of abandonment.

Sometimes the mistress invited Nola and her husband to her flat for dinner and Nola would feel obliged to admire the food, the wine, the work of the interior decorator. She would pat the mistress's little

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dog. (There was a succession of small, yappy dogs over the years; the mistress was never without one.) But she preferred cats to dogs. And the food was always a little too oily, a little too salty, the wine too sweet, the flat too cluttered. Nola saw in the mistress the hesitation that the hearty laugh could not hide, the timorousness that was silent but present all the time, like a heart murmur. It was evident to her that the mistress had become a snob largely because she dreaded the judgement of snobs.

In everything she did and said the mistress declared her determination to be free. She was, she believed, making and remaking herself. It was very hard work. It was expensive too. But it would be worth it if, by chipping away at herself, she could set herself free forever: a complete metamorphosis.

But Nola knew that the mistress had not even begun to emancipate herself. And she suspected that she never would. For she, Nola, was not free either, except from anxieties about money. She knew what the mistress had not yet discovered, which was that nothing grew in the shadow cast by the powerful man.

But it didn't make her sympathetic to the mistress's predicament. "Blousy," she would say. "Blonde and blousy."

The next morning the sun shone, but the wind was cold. The mistress's dog, after performing successfully the first ablutions of the day, slept on a rug in the lounge, in a patch of sun. He was less wheezy than he had been during the night, but his breathing was shallow. He lay so still that whenever Nola walked past him, she bent over to see whether or not he was dead. But each time she heard the tenacious little breaths, saw the rise and fall of the scrawny belly.

She would have liked him to die like that, during his sleep – not because she wished him gone, but because she lived in dread of having to have him euthanased. The vet was prepared to do it at any time: the mistress's dog, he said, was at least eighteen years old, almost toothless, almost blind, more than a little deaf, suffering from heart failure. She need have no qualms, the vet told her. It would be perfectly appropriate; even humane. But Nola couldn't bear the responsibility. She didn't want the needle to do its work at her prompting. She

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clung still to the hope that the life of the mistress's dog would end of its own accord. She didn't want to have to choose the moment of extinction, to say "today is the day; now is the time."

Was she keeping him alive, she wondered, simply because she was too cowardly to make that choice? Wasn't avoiding that choice a choice in itself? All her life, whenever she had had to make momentous choices, she had felt the pressure to choose as a weight that lay upon her, squeezing and stifling her. Sometimes she had chosen wisely, sometimes foolishly; but, whatever the outcome, the act of choosing had been in itself an agony.

The mistress's dog was old when he came to them; he would not live long, the powerful man had assured her. But he was wrong. The dog lived on in increasing decrepitude. And now it was not only his life for which she was solely responsible, it was his death too. Near the end of her life, when the anguish of having to make choices ought to be fading at last, the mistress's dog threatened her with the choices associated with his death.

It would be much, much better, Nola thought, if death would come to him there and then; if – with all the euphemistic kindness death is reputed to be capable of – it would gather him in as he slept in a patch of sun on a cold day.

Isn't that what we all want?

But it did not happen.

NO one ever told Nola that her husband was having an affair. No one needed to. The powerful man's studied indifference towards a woman whom he so evidently admired, the excessive friendliness of that woman towards her, the gushing pretence that she desired a friendship to develop between them (it never did) – all these things told her unequivocally that the secretary had turned into the mistress.

Nola chose to say nothing. She allowed herself to be invited to the mistress's flat; occasionally, when she felt she had to, she invited the mistress to her home. But whereas the mistress would invite just the two of them, Nola and the powerful man, Nola always ensured that the mistress was invited to her home as part of a large dinner party. She selected the other guests carefully. They were always people

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it. Eventually a young woman arrived to clean it up. She was sullen, resentful. "I'm really sorry," Nola said. "I truly am."

"You mustn't bring your dog in here," the young woman said. She was big and her uniform was too tight for her. It strained against her as she bent down to clean up the mess. Her face, when she looked up, had a greasy sheen.

"You're right," said Nola. "You're absolutely right. I won't bring him here again. I promise." She was as contrite as the circumstances demanded. But something also made her want to put in a plea, to soften this thick resentment. "You know," she said, as the young woman heaved herself to her feet, "he's a very old dog. These things happen when you're old." This produced no response. "We all get old," Nola said pointedly.

The face of the supermarket employee came perilously close to Nola's as she brushed past her. "They must shoot me first," she said.

Nola knew when the affair was over, just as she knew when it had begun. The mistress continued to work for the powerful man, but now she was just a secretary, no longer a mistress. When the powerful man retired, so did she, declaring she could not work for anyone else. She was loyal to the end, even though the clandestine days were long gone. And no doubt she envisaged a continued relationship of sorts with the powerful man: the succour of reminiscences, of anecdotes of the years spent together.

But the powerful man retired with Nola to the coast, to Cape Town (his idea, not Nola's); and the mistress remained in Johannesburg. She wrote, she phoned every week (expensive as it was); she did whatever she could to wring a last drop of solicitude from him. But all he gave was money. "She's hard up," he said to Nola. "I must do what I can to help her. After all, she worked for me for over thirty years." When she moved from her flat to a retirement village, he financed the move, for the cottage in the retirement village cost far more than she received from the sale of her flat.

Nola said nothing about the money, but she protested when the powerful man spoke to her (with unwonted awkwardness) of the mistress's dog – the current one, the last of the many small, yappy dogs.

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the mistress had never met. They had old money. They had read old books. They had seen old paintings. They had visited old cities. They were soft-spoken. The mistress, in their company, became heartier than ever, as abrasive as a typewriter in a room in which people were writing on soft vellum with quills and ink. In the garrulous terror of the mistress, the resulting discomfort of the powerful man and the condescension of the soft-spoken people, Nola found a small but piquant revenge.

The mistress's dog woke up in the afternoon and went from room to room, looking for Nola. He found her in the entrance-hall, about to leave for the supermarket. "I'll see you later," she said, closing the door. He whined. Nola opened the door again and carried him to the car. "Oh, all right," she said.

In the car she rolled down the window a few inches. The mistress's dog pushed his face into the wind, his ears back and his tongue hanging out. He sneezed several times.

It was a day of clear light and cold blue skies. The supermarket was not far away; still, Nola found the trip arduous. Even when she kept to the speed limit, other motorists seemed to be annoyed with her for travelling too slowly. And when she backed into a parking space, someone hooted at her – she was doing that too slowly, too. A young man knocked against her as she walked into the shopping centre and didn't even apologise. He was talking on a cell phone.

Nola pushed the shopping-cart with one hand and held the mistress's dog in the other. He quivered against her arm. The honey nougat was on the top shelf. Nola put the dog down so that she could reach it more easily. She heard him make a little sound, almost as if he were sneezing again; but when she looked down, she saw that he had vomited on the shiny supermarket floor. The vomit was runny and yellow. "Oh, no!" she said. "Oh, no!" He looked up at her.

There was no one about – Nola could have crept away and slipped out of the supermarket, leaving the misdemeanour to be discovered later. But she did the right thing: she reported it and returned to the aisle, standing guard over the vomit, warning people not to tread in

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"She can't take it with her to the retirement village," he said. "No pets allowed. Ridiculous, isn't it? You'd think they would realise that elderly people need the company of pets."

"There must be someone else who can take it," said Nola.

"There isn't."

"Then she must ask the SPCA to find a home for it. Or have it put down."

"It's an old dog. If she takes it to the SPCA, they will put it down. That will break her heart."

"It's not my problem."

"Please, Nola. It won't be for long. As I said, he's an old dog. He's on the way out."

It was one of the few occasions in their marriage in which Nola had had the power, the absolute power, of decision. The choice was truly hers. If she had persisted in saying no, the mistress's dog would have remained in Johannesburg and, no doubt, would have been euthanased. It was an opportunity for revenge such as she had never had before.

But it had come too late. The powerful man had gout, an enlarged heart, and a flickering memory. The mistress was no longer robust. They would never see each other again. It was too late, far too late, to triumph over them.

The mistress's dog was flown to Cape Town in a crate.

"I prefer cats," Nola said when he arrived.

That night they sat once more in front of the TV. Nola drank dry sherry, ate honey nougat and slices of camembert on poppy-seed crackers. The mistress's dog lay on her lap.

"That was your last trip to the supermarket," she said to him. "Never again. No matter how much you cry."

He bent his head towards her hand and licked it.

We are the survivors, she thought, the two of us. The powerful man had died in a Cape Town hospital after weeks on a ventilator. The mistress had died in the frail-care section of the retirement village in Johannesburg. The mistress's dog had outlived them both. And so had she.

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Who would have thought that she would spend her last days with this ancient animal – with a dog that used to belong to her husband's mistress? Had she chosen him? Or had she ended up with him by default because she had not, during her life, made the wise, the adroit choices? If we are our choices, then what did it say about her that the mistress's dog was her last companion?

She sighed. He looked up at her with milky eyes. "It's time," she said, "for final ablutions."