

Joe O'Malley  
by Hugh McGovern

**Joe O'Malley**

by

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for

Mum & Dad

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## Section 1

### C1

#### #Opens

Joe O'Malley slowly opened his eyes and stared at the dark and grimy ceiling above. It was yellowed with age and cigarette smoke. Tall, narrow, windows ran almost to the ceiling and let in a profusion of morning light. Leafy trees outside brushed gently on the glass casting wavy shadows on the ceiling and the blank walls. He was lying in a hospital bed encased in a metal frame. He propped himself up on one elbow feeling his beard. There was three days growth at least.

He was a tall, thin with wild green eyed. He lay back head on the pillow, pinching a prominent nose, jabbing a yellowed thumb deep into his left nostril. He ran his free hand through curly black locks gazing vacantly into the middle distance. One hairy, muscular leg he placed outside the covers. His build was slim but not athletic. On the locker was half a packet of cigarettes and a cup beside it half full of butts. Enclosing the bed running from floor to a rail above was a curtain.

He looked up and realised there was a man sitting at the end of the bed. "I did my best Tom" he said. The man was pole like tall with veiny hands dressed in black shirt and trousers and wearing a black overcoat. He stooped, sitting on the bed, balancing himself on splayed hands. He fixed two piercing red eyes on Joe, speaking with gravel in his voice.

"I know you did, Joe" he said reassuringly, "you always do Joe."

"Don't leave. Stay and keep me company."

Tom got up. "I'll be back later."

Suddenly the curtains were drawn back revealing a petite nurse with violin shaped hips. She was dressed in blue trousers, black shoes and white top, a watch fob dangled on a chain from her blouse. She blinked deep green eyes and smoothed back black hair.

"Well Joe how are you feeling today?" She faced him placing a skinny wrist on ample hips, pinched her nose with manicured, painted nails and sniffed.

"What is this place?" he said, as she supported him to sit up in the bed. He used his hands to reposition himself, brushing back his hair. His arm was bandaged.

"You are in hospital Joe" she frowned. "You came in two nights ago and you have been very unwell."

"What's this?" He pointed at the bandage, cutting her off.

"You had to be sedated." She touched his arm. "It would be the same for anyone in your condition."

"I would like to have been consulted." He swept his arms around him, scowling.

#### #Ward

From his bed he could see he was in a long narrow, high ceilinged room. There were two rows of beds one on either side. The beds beside him were vacant. Faded flowery curtains hung down around every bed. At the back was a smoking area where some men were seated. An orderly mopped the linoleum floor in wide swathes in the aisle leaving behind a pungent smell of disinfectant.

The nurse fussed around his locker picking up the cup –and crinkling her nose. He leaned forward to allow her to plump up the pillows.

"Get up and take a walk" she smiled, moving on to the next bed. "It's a beautiful day out there."

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He got out of bed and opened his locker. There was a blue dressing gown hanging there. Putting it on he picked up the cigarettes and put them into his pocket. He walked down a long corridor to the main doorway and stepped outside.

From his vantage he could see a copse of poplars swaying gently in the wind. On the left was a blank whitewashed wall. In front was the smoking gazebo in which two men were seated wearing dressing gowns, silently smoking and staring into space. Beyond the trees was a small car park with a collection of cars.

He stepped down from the doorway and considered his options.

Tom was standing one foot propped against the whitewashed wall, balanced by long skinny elbows. "Can't beat a good smoke? Hey Joe."

"Would love to kick these somehow" said Joe frowning. He lowered his head pressing red lips tightly together.

"Well you will never do it in here."

"And I thought I would get away from this place. Not on my life." He lowered his chin onto his chest, letting his hands go limp.

After a while he looked up and walked across to the tree standing near the door. "Well old man Willow is still here."

"Joe, great to see you again - always a pleasure" said Willow in his deep, fruity voice. He swayed his boughs appreciatively in Joe's direction.

"There is talk of giving me the chop you know." Willow scowled and rolled his fleshy, jet black eyes.

"They would never. Would they?" he gasped. His gaze sought out those jet black eyes.

The nurse called out standing in the doorway. "Don't go too far, Joe, just as far as I can see you." She was gone.

Joe changed his voice to a whisper.

A young woman with long blonde shoulder length hair, startling blue eyes and perfect proportions was approaching from behind the willow. "There's my knight in shining armour." He knew the timbre well. She smiled a face splitting, frog-like smile. It was Bella. She was dressed head to toe in sequined jump suit balanced on six inch heels. Her long blonde hair was tightly secured in a ponytail. She twirled her starred baton in his direction. Her eyes were deeply covered in mascara but otherwise she was without makeup.

Joe yawned and stretched his arms out. "I should go back."

"No you don't. You are out taking a walk." She grabbed him by the arm. "And what about us, Joe? Do you love me like you said?" She let go and skipped ahead of him as he walked around the willow tree, ducking to avoid its trailing branches. They followed a pathway that led to the road and turned right towards the car park.

"I will always love you Bella. You know that." He flushed red and stared wide-eyed at her.

"My crazy Irishman" her voice quaked. She brought a shaky hand to her forehead.

"Joe you are such a romantic – a rosematic! Being here - this is just a little decoy, Joe, to get you out of trouble."

"Don't listen to her Joe" Tom called out from a distance.

Bella came up close and took Joe's arm. "Kiss me Bella" said Joe.

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"You know I can't" she cried Hot, heavy tears fell on her cheeks and her mascara started to run.

"But where are you now?" His eyes widened, "apart from here that is."

"Wouldn't you like to know?" The tears stopped, abruptly.

"I am far away on a plane of light, surfing the cosmos." She smiled and letting of Joe's arm she swung her arms gaily around her. "When the stars align and the sun and the moon then we shall be together."

"Don't be ridiculous. That makes no sense." Joe sighed and looked away.

"Now you know anything is possible." She nudged him gently in the ribs and winked.

"When I get out of here I am going to come to you." His brows drew closer together. He looked down and away.

She stood close to him and whispered into his ear. "No we tried that it didn't work out. I will come to you this time."

"You are not just saying this now. Because we tried before and it didn't work out."

"It wasn't my fault Bella. I was always there for you."

He looked around but she was gone.

"If you would take my advice" said Tom, "you wouldn't bother with her or any woman. They are no solution to the problems I bring."

"Shut up." He clenched his jaw, eyes darting.

"I am serious, Joe..." He furrowed his brow, leaning in closely.

"Just shut up." He flexed his arm muscles but Tom was gone.

"Joe, come in" the nurse was calling. "Your doctor wants to see you."

He walked back towards the door. Everyone seemed to have vanished; Tom and Bella were nowhere to be seen. Willow was just old sad dreary willow, its branches trailing to the ground.

### #Doctor

"Come in and sit down here in the hallway" the nurse indicated a seat. "The doctor will be with you in a few minutes."

After a delay of ten minutes or so the doctor came out and ushered him into his small office. He was tall, bespectacled and dressed in brown tweed suit complete with waistcoat. His beard was chiselled and manicured with precision. There were slight traces of grey. He gestured gently with his left hand holding the door open with his right. Joe followed him into the room. .

In the interior lighting was soft. A glass fronted bookcase lined the wall stuffed with old editions of psychology journals. He gestured a seat for Joe. Most of the space was taken up by a large mahogany desk where the doctor sat. It was at angles to the door and he proceeded to peruse a large manila folder on his desk. It was thick with numerous clippings and lab test results and handwritten notes from other doctors and registrars.

"Four admissions already, it says here Joe" he said after a while, looking up from over his spectacles. "What can you tell me about that?"

"You make it sound like I planned it."

The doctor started for a moment, paused continued. "Why don't you tell me what happened this time?"

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"I don't know. I suppose things got out of hand. I mean I can't really remember." He lowered his chin on his chest and looked at the floor.

"Your mother rang us here. She said you were up all night. And couldn't settle or sleep." His eyes narrowed as he lowered his brows.

"I know. I know. I feel bad about that." He slumped further into the chair, wrapping his arms around himself.

"Well don't. You are sick Joe. You are the patient, not your mother. You have to allow yourself to be sick." He pinched his nose and stroked his beard. Then he made some precise notes in the file.

"I am going to recommend a new medication for you. Now I won't promise anything. But it could change your life."

"Why does this keep happening to me? I mean I have been on the medication for ages now and still this can happen." Joe shook his head and let out a long low sigh. His gaze darted back and forth between the doctor and the floor.

"You're not out of the woods yet, Joe. I think you are still a bit high." He pursed his lips and looked at Joe closely.

When Joe looked up Bella was sitting on the edge of the doctor's desk, twirling her baton. The doctor carried on oblivious. She reached for his hand but he crossed his arms. "You don't need medication Joe." Her voice was soft and honey coated. "There is nothing wrong with you. He's the one with the problem. The system is a crock. We have said so ourselves many times."

The doctor paused and looked closely at him. "Joe, are you with me? As I was saying, we are going to try lithium. It works 70% of the time and those are the stats."

"Do you mean I would have to be on this stuff for life?" He recoiled in the chair, hands shaking.

"We prefer to say indefinitely."

"There must be some other way. What about therapy or counselling I haven't had any of that?" He fixed his eyes intently on him.

"Joe you are welcome to explore those options on your own. But the kind of therapy we offer here is drug therapy. That's the model and we don't really deviate from it." He leant in slightly across the desk. "Look all I am saying is we will think about it for now. For now the priority is to get you well." He furrowed his brow.

"What happened to me, this time?" His shoulders slumped and he bowed his head.

"Joe you were sedated when you came in. You hadn't slept for three days. Now look go back to the ward and get some rest. We will talk again."

"When do I get my clothes?" He leaned forward in his chair, eyebrows raised.

"Not for a while Joe. We need to keep you under observation for some time."

"Do you agree with this type of drug therapy? I mean what about psychotherapy? Don't you study that in medical school?"

"I am not going to have this conversation with you now, Joe. This is not a philosophical debate."

"This is a fascist regime, locking people up and sedating them and subjecting to medication. The drugs don't work."

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The doctor smiled and nodded but didn't say anything and ushered him out the door and back into the corridor.

#Pat1

He went back to the ward and sat on the bed and while he sat Bella came and sat beside him. The nurse had closed in the curtains again. The shadows grew across the floor and ceiling as the sun moved behind the building. Faint cries of children playing could be heard on the wind. A dog barked. Somewhere a house alarm droned on.

"You know there is nothing wrong with you Joe." She sat beside him, putting her hand inside his arm.

"I know Bella. I was happy with you." He sniffed and wiped his nose.

"I am always with you now Joe. I will never leave you." She played with her long shapely hands, making a steeple between the two. Her eyes flashed, gleamed and widened as she looked at him.

"I was always about you Bella." She touched his arm, the gentlest, wintry touch. "You know I never really loved anyone until I met you."

"I know." She relaxed her posture.

There was silence. Joe bowed, wrapping his arms around himself. "Do you remember the day we walked in the country and we saw the two horses in the field? How they moved up close together and stood facing us a stallion and a mare."

"I remember Joe."

"Get out of here bitch" Tom stood inside the closed curtains. He made a sweeping gesture with his arm.

"Are you going to let that animal speak to me like that?" said Bella.

"I am telling you Joe" said Tom, "that bitch is your ruination. You just can't see that. I have told you before."

"Leave me alone. Both of you" said Joe. He rummaged for a cigarette. He stood up and placed the cigarette in his mouth and walked onto the aisle.

"No smoking on the ward" said the nurse as he took out his lighter. "Down at the back Joe or outside."

He walked down the ward. Most of the men were seating at the back. There was an area with high backed chairs going around the walls and facing back up the ward. He took a free seat and sat down.

A tall man with long hair tied up in a ponytail fixed him in a searching gaze. He had a close-shaven face with high cheekbones and deep blue eyes. He was tall but skinny and

"Who are you?" He tilted his head to one side and raised his bushy eyebrows.

"I'm Joe."

"Ah, you came in last night? You did a lot of kicking and screaming. It took three nurses to get you sedated."

"Um..ah...I don't remember." He grimaced and swallowed.

"Of course you don't. How are you supposed to? And now as gentle as a lamb." He smiled a close-lipped smile, eyebrows raised.

"That's the fucking medication." He cut him off.

"I know. I know. And no doubt you were a lion without it!"

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"What about you? What's your ailment?"

"Same as yours I suppose. Banged up for bipolar. At least so they say."

"You don't agree?"

"Ah doctors are rubbish. What do they know about anything? Mr Mulligan come and join us."

He beckoned to a small sinewy man with thinning blonde hair and freckles who had just arrived at the end of the ward. He carried a brown leather satchel with him and when he sat down from it he extracted the newspaper.

"This is despatch rider Mulligan, meet Joe."

"Why does he call you that?" said Joe.

"I was in the army – motor bike corp. But mainly I think it was just this." And he held up the satchel.

"He was whizzing through the dunes of Lebanon, fleeing the Islamic horde with important state documents in his satchel." He mounted his imaginary motor bike.

"I was never in Lebanon." Mulligan looked down and away. "He likes his little joke."

"I do to be sure" the long haired man said.

"And what's your name?" said Joe.

"My name, my name" he paused as if he had forgotten it.

"Some call me Oisín<sup>1</sup> - better call me Fionn<sup>2</sup>."

"And why don't we just leave and go home."

"I wouldn't do that tiger then the full weight of mother Ireland would spring into action and put you right back. And come to think of it your mother was involved."

"Pat!" said Mulligan. He gasped and stared wide eyed.

"Your name is Pat."

"God you're quick. But you missed the best bit."

"No I think I got it. My mother was here signing me in no doubt."

"Lovely mother" said Pat. He gave a half smile and shook his head. <sup>iii</sup>

"What's wrong with her?"

"Pat and Mulligan started to laugh."

"Well if you don't know" said Pat, "there is no use us trying to tell you."

Joe finished his cigarette. Pat took off back to his bed side.

"Don't mind Pat" said Mulligan. "That's his way with everyone."

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<sup>1</sup> Oisín was regarded in legend as the greatest poet of Ireland, and is a warrior of the fianna in the Ossianic or Fenian Cycle of Irish mythology. He is the son of Fionn mac Cumhaill and of Sadhbh (daughter of Bodb Dearg), and is the narrator of much of the cycle.

<sup>2</sup> Fionn mac Cumhaill, sometimes transcribed in English as MacCool or MacCoul, was a mythical hunter-warrior of Irish mythology, occurring also in the mythologies of Scotland and the Isle of Man. The stories of Fionn and his followers the Fianna, form the Fenian Cycle (an Fhiannaíocht), much of it narrated in the voice of Fionn's son, the poet Oisín.

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**#Dad**

When he got back to his bed Dad was sitting in the chair waiting for him. He was a short, with unkempt hair and slightly limp beige jacket and trousers. His head was large and round and similarly shaped to Joe. He was mobile and his movements were quick and agile.

"Well how are you?" he said, springing up with a big smile.

"I am okay. I suppose. I suppose you were involved in the committing" he said, cutting him off.

"Well actually that was rather more your mother."

"You're a great man for passing the buck."

"Look Joe, you know I don't agree with pills and doctors. Let's not get into it, now. I brought you some more cigarettes."

"I want to get into it. Do you think I should be here or not?"

"Well.." He blinked rapidly and bit his lip.

"I am asking you a direct question and I want a direct answer."

"Joe, you're not well at the moment. But you will be. You have come through it before."

"I am tired of this shit. I don't belong here. I want to leave."

"You can't leave, Joe. Now I have spoken to the doctor and he says you can be home in a month."

"Why would I want to go home? That's where all the problems are anyway. You should be in here not me. You're the one who is fucked up."

"Joe, don't talk like that. It doesn't do any good."

"You and that cursed wife of yours have contrived the hellish environment I had to grow up with. You made a Faustian bargain?"

"What do you mean Faustian? What are you talking about?"

"I think maybe that's enough for today," intervened the nurse. "You can talk some more tomorrow."

"Yes of course" said Dad jumping to his feet.

"Yeah go on run away like you always did" said Joe.

"Joe, don't be like that." Dad stuck out his hand.

Joe turned away.

"Joe, we were always the best of friends."

"Not now we are not."

"I have only the best intentions for you, Joe. You must believe that."

"Just leave me alone."

**#Mum**

He must have fallen asleep because the shadows had lengthened considerably on the walls and ceilings when he awoke. The men at the back of the ward had dispersed and were dotted around on their respective beds.

At 5pm by the small electric clock high on the ceiling his mother arrived and he sat up in the bed.

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"What do you want?"

"That's not a very nice way to greet someone especially your mother."

"I don't care about that. No loving parent would lock their son up in a place like this."

"What were we supposed to do?"

"Don't say we. He would never have taken such a decision. It had to be all you. I know it was."

"And you were up for three days with no sleep and running from pillar to post."

"It must have been terribly inconvenient for you. Did you miss your bridge class?"

"I can see you are very worked up."

"You're damn right I am worked up."

"You two should be in here not me. You're fucked up marriage became my sole preoccupation."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going out for a smoke."

"My you are smoking a lot."

Joe came out the front door. Tom and Bella were hanging around - Tom leaning against the tree.

"Hold on" said Mum, "I will come with you."

"What do you want from me anyhow?"

"Nothing."

"You must want something. Why else would you be hanging around? Do I seem like the solution to your problems now?"

"Why don't you give your father as much grief as this?"

"He is not as to blame as you are."

"It's the relationship that's important."

"Yeah I know the kind of relationship you want."

"Perhaps I should come back later when you feel better."

"You mean when I feel more agreeable to you. Go on get lost and don't come back."

She walked off back to her car.

"I think you were just so" said Bella.

"Were you listening the whole time?"

"Maybe."

"She drives me mad Bella – literally. They both do."

"You're not mad Joe – I will let you in on a secret – they are the ones who are crazy."

He sat in in the gazebo and pulled his dressing gown around him for warmth. He bowed his head and slumped in the seat, little sobs came out of him.

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He walked back on the ward and down to the back. Mulligan and Pat were sitting there having the crack.

"Come and join us" said Pat.

Joe hesitated.

"Don't be shy. We were just talking about you."

"What did you say?"

"If it's your parents you're worried about – all our parents were assholes."

"My old man used to beat me with a stick" said Mulligan, "and I turned out alright."

"Well not really Mulligan. You are in a mental hospital." Pat burst out laughing.

"If I may surmise" continued Pat, "since there are no secrets in this place. Are you not something of a Mummy's boy?"

Joe frowned.

"And I only say this" went on Pat, "because I was something like that myself."

"All south-siders are mummy's boys" said Mulligan.

"What is this shit?" said Joe,

"It's not shit. Permit us to know a thing or too."

"We all heard you talking to your mother and your father."

"Well that was a private conversation."

"Again there is no privacy in here. You would have to go outside for that. And if you want privacy you would be better advised not to shout."

"So what do you think?"

"Your mother is an absolute bitch. That's all. And your pops is out to lunch without his sandwiches."

"Oh Pat that's good" chimed in Mulligan

"What can I do?" said Joe. "I mean how do I fix things."

"You don't really" said Pat, matter of fact. "Hence the crisis of your arrival."

"He's right you know" said Bella, sitting on the edge of the chair.

"There is no resolution" said Pat. "I know your case because it resembles my own and I am older and further along this curve than you. And soon my concubine will arrive and take me back to France."

"But you are in here for a reason" said Joe.

"I am. I stopped taking the meds and went on a bender. But I have been here two weeks already and am nearly ready to go home and fairly adjusted back to the depressing reality which I sought to escape in the first place. Mulligan on the other hand likes it here, don't you? Mulligan is just faking it."

"Oh shut it."

"But tell me more - since you are further on than me."

"You are not well enough to understand" said Pat. "There lies the pity. You want to forget all about this horrid little episode and go back to loving your mum and your dad. "

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"I don't know what you mean."

"I know. Look the doctors in here just think in terms of pills and medication. They don't know anything about the real causes of these problems."

"Here we go again"

"Shut up Mulligan. Lives are at stake. Bipolar is a lie. Mental illness is a lie. It's just a manifestation of not being able to cope with emotional issues. You're a reject from this society. But this society is fucked. It is corrupt, immoral and abusive and its non-conformists get locked away. You my friend are a dissident of Irish society and because you are a young man the only society you have ever really known is that of your parents and family."

"Oh that's deep Pat, deep."

"Well don't believe me if you don't want too. You can't believe me more to the point."

"I just want it to stop" said Joe. "I want some relief."

"The meds will take you back to "reality", what ordinary people call reality. That's reality where you can re-join the rat race – consume, work Monday to Friday - but it won't be any better than it was beforehand."

"What would you do in my situation?"

"Get yourself to Paris. That's where all the non-conformist Paddies end up. It's the only place you can feel sane. That in fact is where I live."

Silence reigned.

The three of them sat there smoking cigarettes. Mulligan drank from a pint glass of coloured sugar water. Presently the nurse came down to check.

"Alright men" she said. "You'll get diabetes Mulligan if you keep drinking that stuff."

Joe looked out through the window behind him. Night had fallen and the street lights in the carpark winked on one by one. He inspected his yellowed fingers critically. The index finger on the right hand was the most damaged.

He went back to his bed and lay down on his back looking at the yellowed ceiling. At ten o'clock a male nurse came around with a trolley and all the male patients lined up sheepishly for their medication. He stood up and joined the queue. When it came to his turn the nurse handed him his pills in a little plastic container and watched while he swallowed them all down. He went back and sat on his bed. He checked his cigarette situation – it was dangerously low.

He decided on one more smoke outside and he made for the gazebo outside. Night had fallen and there was a strong cut in the air.

"You know my reasons why I am against that floosy" It was Tom.

"I am not interested."

"First of all she broke your heart. And that is no trivial matter. It was the killer blow, you never recovered from. Now here me – you had it all confidence, charm, motivation and now look at you. You are a mess. A mess beyond recovery."

"What would you have of me, Tom" said Joe.

"Forget about her. There are plenty of girls. When you get well you will have your pick of females. But we have to cover it all up and brush it under the carpet. That's the only way."

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"I don't think I can Tom. I can't do it that way anymore."

"Maybe not right away, but it can be done. I feel sure of it. As I have told you before there is no point in women. They are not a lasting thing. They come and go."

"I am not really listening Tom. I am sorry. I don't care."

"I told you so many times. When something like this happens there is no going back. And I don't mean this." Tom gestured at the building behind him.

Joe said nothing.

"You know exactly what I mean. I could take you there now to where I live in bondage. Yes bondage for all eternity."

Joe froze and listened intently.

"That's why I say" Tom continued. "Don't make any plans when I am around."

And he was gone disappearing into the stillness of the night.

Joe got up to leave, cursing his lack of cigarettes. The ward was stillness now as the men bedded down for the night. He took his shoes off and placed them under the bed. He hung the dressing gown in the closet and curled up in the bed and tried to sleep.

## #Pat2

The next day was rainy and he sat with Mulligan and Pat at the back.

"The doctor says I have tremendous insight" said Pat, "old gobshite. What does he know about anything?"

"He knows how to pick up a six figure salary better than we do" said Mulligan.

It was too rainy to go to the gazebo so Joe stayed at the back.

"You are very quiet today, Joseph" said Pat after a while.

"I didn't sleep very well to tell the truth."

At lunchtime Dad arrived with more cigarettes. "Here's a tenner so you can buy your own." He sat on the bed panting a little.

"By the way your friends have been asking for you. I'm not sure quite what to tell them at this point,"

"Don't tell them anything. I will do the explanations when necessary."

"Listen I just wanted to say to you I'm on your side ok. We'll get through this."

"Cut the crap" said Joe. "You wouldn't say that if you were in here."

"What did you mean by Faustian bargain yesterday?"

"I meant that you bargained Tom's life away. He was always the beautiful boy – the wonder boy. But what about the rest of us? You can't just fall to pieces like that and expect us to be all okay."

"You're going to make me cry if you carry on like that. There was no such bargain. What do you mean? Tom died and we all loved him. What else can you say about it?"

"I can say whatever I like" Joe sat on the bed beside him. "I know things I have seen things you cannot imagine."

"Joe you are scaring me now."

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He picked up the cigarettes – “only ten. You should have bought twenty. I have been to hell and back a million times.”

“What do you mean hell?”

“Hell. What do you think hell is? If this isn't hell – remember hell is a place or a state of mind.”

“Jesus.”

Later they went for a walk around the grounds and past old man willow.

“I should be off to mass soon” said Dad.

“There you go again – off to do your praying. What good will it do you, do you suppose?”

“I will pray for you too” said Dad.

“God your generation was so brain washed.”

He watched him go down the driveway on his bike – a small, diminutive figure hunched against the blowing wind.

### #Pat3

Pat was sitting at the back. Mulligan was nowhere to be seen.

“Your Dad is a good and holy man?” said Pat.

“Thinks he is” said Joe.

“Nothing crueller than a pious Catholic.”

“But what I don't get is how he can believe that crap.”

“They would believe anything. Sure half the Nazis were Catholics. Let me guess he goes to mass but will never see a therapist.”

“Basically.”

“They are all the same. My Dad was the same. Religion was a prop to his dysfunctional personality. Religion kept him going when the forces of the world were arrayed against him.”

“How do you know so much about me?”

“I don't, but I can infer. Did you know we had the highest rate of mental illness in Europe at one time? The crushing weight of church and family destroyed individuality. The only solution was escape or be crushed. I suppose I was lucky. I got away to France but only after spending some time in places like this.”

Joe said nothing.

“You have your work cut out for you. You are too attached to your mum and dad and the adoration they might bring. That is your Achilles heel.”

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“Fair. Some day you will though.”

They sat in silence for a while. Mulligan came and joined them but didn't say much.

“Is he still advising you” said Mulligan to Joe.

“Yes, quite the savant.”

Joe O'Malley  
by Hugh McGovern

“Oh pay no attention. He is like this with everyone.”

“Take those doctors” said Pat. “They are educated but their hands are tied. This is after all a religious fundamentalist state. And what do you think is the driving imperative of our little emerald isle? Poverty in a word. Nothing more and nothing less. Poverty means no education – stupid, gullible people and most importantly compliant people. I guarantee you all those doctors go to mass.”

“They are not all stupid, Pat” said Mulligan.

“Not all, I grant you, but enough are and particularly those at the top. And where would these reengineered individuals go fresh from the looney bin back into society – there would be nowhere for them to go. There are no jobs and the only other option is emigration or conformity as Joe has chosen.”

Joe started. “What do you mean?”

“Well you want to find a third way. Good luck to you on that score.”

“If you mean by a third way I don't want to emigrate well you are right on that score. I don't. This is my home.”

“I mean Joe” said Pat kindly, “you are up against. “Well it is a home of tears and torment.”

“I will find a way” said Joe quietly.

“Of course you will” said Bella, perched again on the edge of her seat. She stroked his arm.

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