

# O'MALLEY'S NIGHT

A night photograph of a city skyline. In the foreground, a tall, slender tower with a bird-like top is illuminated. The background shows a city with various buildings and lights, including a large stadium with bright lights on the right. The overall scene is dark with vibrant city lights.

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The car ran over the end of the pier and fell into the sea. This was to be deemed a disaster by some, but not by everyone, because the car contained Desmond O'Malley, a Mafioso. His entry into the ranks of Cosa Nostra might seem curious, since he had been – as his name indicated – lifted straight from the port of Dun Laoghaire. Transferred almost without a blink to Little Italy, he soon fell into a life of crime. Childhood larceny – as many regarded his attempts to sell stout to persons of an Italian inclination – ushered him inevitably into the brutal and at times overwhelmingly sentimental world of organised crime. He was welcomed into the close ranks of the Italian families, perhaps because of his black hair and doey eyes, and perhaps because he too found English a tricky language to master and left its finer points to his listeners' imagination. Thus it was that a simple request for a cigarette from a stranger once led to that stranger parting with his life-savings, only twenty minutes beforehand withdrawn from the Seventy-Second National Bank; this in turn led to O'Malley's first arrest at the hands of Officer P.J. Tiptree, some six minutes later, that same stranger standing irately by. P.J. Tiptree hailed also from Dun Laoghaire, and understood well poor Desmond's tongue-tied speech, but facts were facts, and the money which Desmond had so readily stuffed into his capacious pocket did not belong to him. P.J. took the money and a half-chewed chicken sandwich (on rye) from the pocket, and returned the money to its owner. Desmond was allowed the remains of his sandwich during the course of his night in jail. This he took as an act of great friendship on the part of the straightforward police officer, and from that moment the two telephoned one another daily. It must be said at this point that P.J. had a very dear ladyfriend, with whom he had been stepping out for some fifteen years, but had still not found the right moment to ask her to share his life, and she, knowing that this continual state of possibility keeps a man in precisely the right

frame of mind, declined to provide him with the opportunity. Under these circumstances, P.J. was often damned lonely nights, and so was grateful for even the monosyllabic conversation provided by O'Malley.

There was also a spectator when O'Malley's car tipped into the water – or as described later by P.J., a witness. This was Lola, also known as Betty, and Doreen, and a host of other names, including Bella and Marie-Therese. Her real name was Lucia Sanantonio, and a fine mane of black hair testified to the fact, but we shall remain with Lola, because that is what Desmond called her on the few occasions when they weren't arguing. At the time of his demise, she was smoking a cigarette, which she found a refreshing procedure normally, and was necessary to steady her nerves. That she wasn't in the car with Desmond she owed to the fact that they had just argued, deciding (for the final, possibly fifteenth time) that it just wasn't working, he shouldn't have invested in the curtains without consulting her first, her colour sensitivity denying her prolonged contact with yellow-orange-brown co-ordinates, lest she come out in a rash. And so she stood, smoking her cigarette, blowing the smoke defiantly at the faintly wheezing street-light and waiting for Desmond to return for possibly the fifteenth time, when a skidding sound followed by a splash announced that this time the wait was going to be in vain. Lola walked, a little unsteadily, to the edge of the quay and looked over at the swirling water. A last gulp of upcoming air symbolized Desmond's end, and she threw the last six puffs of her cigarette in after him as a simple memorial. Officer P.J. Tiptree found her some two hours later, in a bar, very much the worse for drink and in no condition to have a statement taken.

P.J. called his ladyfriend that night, late, far later than he normally dared. Her voice sounded sleepy when she answered, but not un-receptive; P.J. thought he heard another voice in her apartment quickly shushed as the receiver was picked up, but – he argued, as he so often had before – that was none of his business – yet. And now he really had other things to think about.

'Moll,' said P.J. quite dramatically, 'I need you.'

'What is it, honey?'

'Desmond's been hit.'

'Oh no!'

Moll was a sensitive girl, whose contacts with criminals had in no way altered the tenderness of her heart or the downright honesty of her character. If someone had thought to ask where she obtained her jewels, she would disarmingly tell the truth, and P.J. often found himself returning such items to the stores in question, declaring that they had been 'found', and declining embarrassedly to give further information. Most importantly, according to P.J.'s lights, she was to be relied on in a crisis, keeping an ever-plentiful supply of Four Roses, a soft bosom, and a sympathetic ear. Crises were not a major part of P.J.'s life, and it was for this very reason that Moll knew to take them seriously when they came.

'Poor baby,' she said, and for a moment P.J. was unclear whether she meant him or Desmond – if she knew herself. 'Do you want to come round?'

P.J. wanted nothing more than to come round to Moll's welcome embrace, but hesitated to crowd her.

'If I don't disturb,' he said, shyly.

'You don't,' said Moll with a definitive tone.

'I'll be round after duty.'

'I'll have the Four Roses ready, honey.'

While P.J. prepared himself, a procedure requiring at least four lotions which he had invested in (one quarter of one week's wages, almost) at Macy's, Lola remained in the bar. A stranger approached her, his clothes somewhat tangled and rough-looking, as if woven by porcupines.

'You look like the Absinthe Drinker,' he said literarily. He had a novel by Hemingway sticking out of his jacket pocket, so that the title was easy for all the passers-by to read.

'Screw you,' said Lola, and she was right. The stranger moved on, sat at a different table and pulled the book out of his pocket. It was very dirty, and the pages were loose. He opened it and cracked the spine backwards in an act of calculated vandalism. Despite this, he

sat for the next half hour without once looking at the book, although he turned the pages regularly. His eyes were fixed on Lola, as if he were considering all the possible permutations. She resented this, and presently emptied her glass over his unwashed hair.

‘My fiancé died,’ she said, and walked out. The barman had scarcely raised his eyes, and the stranger knew when he had been outclassed. Now he sank his eyes into the book, looking for relief and solace, but never found it.

In the street, Lola was jumping in puddles and watching how the dirty water splashed. A long, black car swept past, to the end of the street, where it halted, then curved round suddenly, bouncing onto the pavement, knocking over a garbage can.

‘Hey!’ said Lola, with a faint sense of injustice.

The car pulled up beside her, and the window slid down.

‘I know who you are,’ she said, bending and peering in.

The well-dressed man sat in the back of the car and simply looked at her.

‘You killed my Desmond,’ she continued, leaning on the edge of the window. The man continued to look at her. ‘Why?’ There was no curiosity in the question, for she knew that that sort of question had no answer. It was, it had to be, it would always be. That was Little Italy. ‘He wasn’t one of us,’ she pleaded, as if pleading would make the man in the car change his mind, and bring O’Malley back, ‘He was from Ireland, he was good – ‘ She broke off, her voice was beginning to quaver. The man leant forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder, and the window wound up as the car moved forward, dislodging Lola from her perch, a gaudy bird flapping her tired wings.

At the docks, Desmond’s car was still beside the crane which had lifted it from the water. A small fish lay unhealthily on the passenger seat, and the whole vehicle, inside and outside, was rather cleaner than it had been for some years. The crane operators were sharing beer and sandwiches, and waiting until the pickup truck came to tow the car away.

'You got peanut-butter and jelly?' asked one.

'A Mafia job, they say,' said the other.

'Thank God I'm a Swede!' said the first.

'I got ham and some fool sauce they put in,' said the other.

'You see the guy?'

'I saw him.'

'Pretty rough.'

'Pretty rough,' the other agreed. 'Hey, guess what!'

'What?'

'I got an extra jelly! Trade it for a peanut-butter.'

'Sure!'

A black car, long and expensive, moved slowly past the two chewing workers. They watched it, their jaws working to and fro, to and fro. They could only see their reflections in the over-polished paint, in the mirror glass. And after the car had gone, and after the last sandwich and the last drop of beer had gone, they waited, by now in silence.

P.J. was with Moll. He had sat down slightly uneasily on the sofa in a place that was still warm. He had the urge to put his nose to the worn plush, to see if it smelled of Moll, or of someone else, but he repressed this urge as unworthy, as insulting to his ladyfriend, as too much like what a policeman would do. Then Moll came in, billowing, carrying his glass of Four Roses, the liquor at room temperature, but the glass cooled in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator, just how he liked it. She lowered it into his hand so that their fingers met, and then she sat by him, her thigh against his. He began to relax, but only as the Four Roses moved mellowly through his veins, seeking benevolently the shortest route to his heart, to soothe and console it. Moll had lit a cigarette, and was watching the smoke curling; he watched her watching it, and the urge to hold her, be held by her, to cry and to laugh was almost unbearable.

'Poor Desmond,' said Moll, and P.J. realised with a start that he had almost forgotten his best friend, and that his best friend, an Irishman of few words but touching sincerity, was now dead. Dead and gone, and would never answer the telephone again in that dark and uncommunicative manner. P.J. remembered the warmth of those silences they shared over the line, and a smile crept across his lips, a smile tinged with tears – the liquor, he excused himself – as he remembered his perpetual thought during those telephonic hiatuses: a listening operator would think they were mad, like two teenage lovers who don't know what to say but don't want to hang up.

'Poor Desmond,' he agreed, and swallowed a large part of the Four Roses. Moll looked at him, then stood up, so that his thigh felt suddenly cold and alone. She was back immediately, however.

'I thought you were leaving me,' he said.

'No, not me too,' she said. She had simply brought him the bottle, and he helped himself to more. It wasn't so important now that the glass be cooled. As he bent to put the bottle on the floor, he felt her warmth, and he put the glass down, too. He buried his face in her lap.

'Moll, it's terrible,' he said.

In the car, the well-dressed man watched the streets go by as if projected on the windows. He had never liked the cinema, it was too upsetting, and he hated showing his emotions in public; he glared hostilely at the screen that was his car windows, resenting all the bit-part players outside. He had the car-phone to his ear, and was talking about O'Malley.

'What should I say? He wasn't one of us. He's gone.' There was a faint, childish resentment in his tone.

'So he's gone,' he repeated, defensively. The voice at the other end was raised angrily, and the driver, ostentatiously not listening, could only make out a few words – 'Waste' and 'Shame' and 'Mistake'. He was listening for the word 'Revenge', because he knew that in hits, the driver always got it, even if the target didn't. This evening he didn't hear the word, and he felt safe again.

'So he was just another Irish bum,' said the man in the suit. 'He wasn't Family.'

In her small flat, Lola was going through the few things which Desmond had left behind, mostly mementos of the Ireland he hardly remembered. A lucky-leaf ashtray, a chip of Blarney stone. It didn't seem much. Desmond had never really achieved rank in the Family, he had never sought after diamond tie-pins or other such. Lola remembered the first time she had seen Desmond. He was helping load a truck with asparagus. Not exactly romantic, asparagus, but it could have been squash, or worse. Lola could never have lowered herself to a fish-man. She leant against a wall, and her dark eyes stared into his while he worked. When he was through, he came over with a shy smile.

'I'm O'Malley,' he said. 'What do you drink?'

Lola, more used to a roundabout approach, was impressed. She told him what she drank.

'Anything,' she said.

After the drink, she thought he'd start to kiss her, but he didn't. Later, months later, she asked him why he hadn't.

'There was plenty of time for that,' he said, with a hesitant smile.

Lola stayed with him while he climbed through the ranks. He started by loading asparagus, or fridges, or sharp, double-breasted suits, the contents of any number of warehouses throughout the area, and soon became a supervisor, and then a fixer and dealer. The Family had promotion schemes linked with incentives, and pension plans, insurance for health and for life, and even taxes. Within months, he and Lola were thinking of getting married, by a Family priest, a white wedding of course. The big man came to see Desmond. Franco.

'You want to marry our Lola,' said Franco.

'I do, sir,' said Desmond.

'Tricky, my boy. I love you dearly - ' the greatest compliment - 'but you see, you ain't one of us. And Lola, she's a cousin. A distant cousin, but a cousin.'

Desmond began to look disappointed. Franco patted him on the shoulder, consoling.



'Live in sin, just continue to live in sin,' advised Franco. He turned away, lighting a cigar.

That night, Desmond was more than usually eloquent in his conversation with P.J.

'I'm in love,' he said.

'Me too,' said P.J. ruefully.

They were silent for five minutes.

'See you,' said Desmond.

'Night,' said P.J.

Franco was on the phone still. He cursed, and he chewed his cigar. He hated waste. He hated inefficiency. He had been trained as an accountant, for some reason his father thinking he might one day need an honest trade to fall back on, and to his adolescent surprise, Franco had warmed to the study. He found the flow of numbers somehow elegant, as if obeying natural laws, beautiful and mysterious as galaxies. The sense of order appealed to him, and it was a sense he tried to instil in those who worked for him, as well as those who paid their weekly dues. He remembered with pleasure the look of enlightenment on the face of one Greek – or was he Polish? – merchant, recalcitrant with his contributions, as Franco explained his ideas in poetic terms. When his assistants let him go, the man crumpled to the ground, but Franco was sure that he would awaken with a clearer view of the natural order of the universe than the one he had hitherto held. And should he not wake up at all, then there was always the certainty that he was already experiencing this infinite magnificence from a loftier and more resplendent perspective. Franco's accounting methods often blended in his mind with religion.

And now, a promising young man was dead. Not sensible, not logical. Why was he dead when he was still useful? This was surely against the natural order of things.

If P.J. had been a maudlin type, by now he would have cried himself out; being more restrained, no tears had passed down his cheeks, but still he felt drained. A resolve swelled through his veins. He too had a strong sense of natural order, and it seemed unfair that he should be deprived of his best friend and comfort along the weary road of life. P.J. was foolishly ready to take on the Mob, single-handed if need be. He told Moll, who was steadfastly stroking his hair.

'I'm going to get the bastards,' he stated.

'Don't you go being foolish,' said Moll. 'That's just the Four Roses talking.'

'Moll, girl, have you no respect for me?' P.J. asked almost plaintively. 'I got a will outside of that bottle, and you know it.'

'Sure I know it,' she said. 'But you can't do the impossible any more than I can. It'll just get you hurt, and it won't bring him back.'

P.J. was impressed by this long speech as only the taciturn can be. He let the rich wisdom sink in, swirl with the Four Roses in his blood-stream, warm him as only the truth could warm him, even if the precise logic was not his for the grasping. He sighed.

'I got to do something,' he said.

Lilian wandered smoothly along the rain-washed street, up the rickety board stairs which led to her apartment. The door opened with a trusted click, and she was home, safe, enclosed in a world under her own control. She went to the mirror, throwing her coat onto a chair, and inspected herself. She saw what she always saw, dullish blond hair, green eyes, a darting, unsteady expression. Somehow it didn't satisfy her. She knew she was not like the others in the quarter, she didn't allow herself to be dependent on what men did or demanded – but her means didn't cover her departure from this world where women did what men expected. Consequently she had become something of a femme fatale, that unattainable other which fascinated and frightened and sent into turmoil the men around her. It was a rôle she resented, one she had allowed to get out of hand somehow – she blamed herself for it, unjustifiedly. And, looking in the mirror, she could come to no adequate explanation of the phenomenon. She examined her face for the millionth time, in

detail, like a scientist his Petri dish, or an explorer his map. The results were yet again inconclusive, and she resigned herself to another night spent with ignorance and a book.

She opened the door to the combined living-room and kitchen, and was surprised to find it already illuminated, the fridge door hanging open, the cool light spilling across the floor, glinting on glass edges. There was a crack, and she jumped, a shriek stifled on her lips.

The well-dressed man was there, a beer-can in one hand, its freshly-pulled ring in the other.

‘Sorry, Lil,’ he said, ‘Did I scare you?’

‘Shit,’ she said, relaxing a little. She switched on the door and slammed the fridge door shut. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Lonely,’ said the man, looking guilty.

‘No go,’ said Lilian. ‘I need my time alone.’

‘I had a job tonight,’ said the man.

‘I don’t want to know.’

‘Seems I goofed.’

‘Doesn’t surprise me.’

‘Ah, have a heart, Lil.’

‘For you? Get out of here.’ She was surprised to hear how hard her own voice sounded, it was something which displeased her, and it made her even harsher. What did she owe this loser? He had a chauffeur, prestige, wealth, prospects, but he was still a loser, still courting her after years of rejection. What had he ever offered? Not marriage and respectability, a share in the wealth, a share in life, but a little apartment, in a better part of the quarter, and with it dependency. She wasn’t Italian, he couldn’t marry her. And she would have said no anyway – but it would have been nice to have been given the option, to have been given the illusion of having some significance in the world.

He drained his beer, and shrugging hopelessly, still burdened by his fascination and his troubles, he left. She watched him down the stairs, his tread slow, and wondered why all the weight of the world seemed to press on her. He turned and looked up into her green eyes.

'It was O'Malley,' he said, trying to unburden himself to her. She looked at him, spun on her heel and slammed the door. He continued his journey down to his chauffeur and his sealed, smooth, air-conditioned world.

Lilian had known O'Malley, and he had known her. He had been dancing sentimentally with Lola in a bar with cheap music, one tired evening after loading a shipment, and Lilian had been sitting alone apart from a distant group of admirers, who were staring respectfully with longing in their eyes. Almost without knowing it, she had her eyes fixed on the young Irishman, and at each gyration, her look met an increasingly intense return from him. Lola's eyes were closed, she was almost asleep. Lilian and he had known at once that they had something very special between them, that they could only find true happiness with each other, that nothing mattered outside their love – it had taken about three minutes to get this far. The next three minutes brought disillusion: he was an adoptive son of the Family, he lived officially in sin with a cousin of the Family. Lilian was an outsider, an independent woman, whose life was not determined by the men around her – she proclaimed it, she knew it, everyone accepted it, but she could not link herself with the Family. There was no room for her. He turned slowly with Lola in his arms, and he and Lilian looked at one another, and their affair was signed and sealed, delivered and doomed.

Now, with Desmond gone, it felt as if her last hopes of breaking out of this world, of leaving the quarter for somewhere where she could perhaps fulfil herself, had evaporated. Her aspirations had somehow also drowned in the cold and uncaring waters of the shipyard, their last faint beatings becoming still with O'Malley's heart. How had she ever seen him as escape, she wondered. It just drew her mind to the true hopelessness of her position. An illusion had gone, simply because she had been in love with a man who was now dead.

Strangely, her mood changed and she was filled with something new as tears still fell. She felt almost relieved, and she picked up her suitcase, a small thing made from cardboard, a single Greyhound sticker bearing witness to a journey made by a previous owner. The case was always packed and by the door, like that of someone who knows it's only a matter of time before there is a marching of boots and a knock at the door. She cast a look round at her room, then left.

The night he had seen Lilian, loved her and left her, all from the dance floor of the Tropic Moon bar, O'Malley phoned P.J.

'I'm in love,' he said.

'What's new?' asked P.J.

'Someone else,' he said.

They were silent for five minutes.

'It happens,' said P.J.

Desmond thought a few moments.

'See you,' said Desmond.

'Night,' said P.J.

P.J. pulled the telephone towards him as it rang.

'Moll's place,' he said.

'That you, P.J?'' said a rough voice.

'Yeah.'

'This is Franco,' said the rough voice, and paused. 'I thought I'd find you there.'

You bastard, thought P.J. He didn't say it. 'Uhuh,' he said.

'About O'Malley,' continued Franco, and he faltered. 'It was a terrible mistake, from what I hear.'

'Yeah?'

The tone in P.J.'s answer was quite clear.

'Don't be like that, P.J. It could happen to anybody. It's the business. Anyway, the ones who did it. They'll get theirs. From what I hear.'

P.J. hung up. Moll had brought an ice-bag, and she placed it tenderly on his forehead. It wasn't shut properly, and a drop of coldest water rolled down his face. Soon he would sleep.

In the street, Lilian met Lola, who was throwing the last of Desmond's meagre belongings into the water. The ashtray and the other Irish memorabilia all sank satisfyingly, but an old felt hat was still floating ludicrously. She was now throwing stones collected from the coast of County Kerry one by one at it, in the hope that their combined weight would make the hat go down.

'Kind of a burial at sea,' said Lola, looking at Lilian, brown eyes into green. She kicked her red-shoed feet over the edge as she sat, like a little girl sitting on the wall. Lilian put down her case and sat by her. It was the first time they had talked.

'Going someplace?' asked Lola.

'Got nothing to keep me,' said Lilian. She picked up a stone, and threw it at the hat.

'Where you going, then?'

'Don't know, somewhere better, where there's no waterfront.'

'Not prying, just asking.'

'Sure, it's just I don't know.'

The crane operators had seen the two figures from a distance, two unattached women during the long, silent night, way past the time when they had found nothing more to say to one another. They moved up, with ungainly motion, wiping their clumsy hands on their overalls. They stopped some ten yards away, far enough not to endanger their flimsy dignity. One coughed, and leaned forward.

'Excuse me, miss,' he said.

Lilian threw another stone, and turned round; Lola turned too. The crane operators, the blue-eyed Swedes, were faced with brown and green eyes of startling intensity, eyes that showed love of astonishing proportions, but love that they could never know. A wave of melancholy shot through all four of them at once, and the Swedes held up their hands as if to ward it off.

'Excuse the intrusion, miss,' said the one, and they began to walk away.

'No,' said Lola, after they had retreated a few steps. 'Don't go.'

But they went, returning to their empty sandwich boxes and their long wait.

The man in the smart suit drove up to a big house, whose windows overlooked the bay. A light was on. He climbed out of the car, and leant in the chauffeur's window.

'Go on home,' he said. 'Get some rest.'

He walked moodily up the path and pulled on the doorbell as the car slipped back down the hill to the town. A woman of over forty answered the door. She was wearing a maid's uniform.

'Ain't seen you before,' said the man. 'You new?'

'And I ain't seen you before, either. You want?' She looked at him as though he was a kid who ate worms and blew his nose on his sleeve.

'Franco,' he said. 'Uncle Franco.' He produced a little badge, one of the innovations Franco had introduced to avoid confusion. The police, of course, were fully equipped with buttons of this sort, but Franco clung to the idea with the fervour of an inventor awaiting his patent.

'Not there,' said the maid, and made to close the door.

'I'll wait.' He pushed in.

'He may be gone all night.' She was making objections, but he had won. He was Family, after all, it shone out on his forehead like a mark of Cain. Or was that just the guilt for O'Malley?

'So I'll wait all night. I got the whole night.'

She acquiesced. He smiled at her. It wasn't a sincere smile, he couldn't remember the last time he smiled, perhaps it had been when Desmond had asked to marry Lola. He had had his eyes open, even then. But at least O'Malley could live with Lola – while Lilian was unattainable for everybody.

'You want a coffee?' asked the maid, softening.

'Sure,' he said, and he tried smiling again. His face felt like it was covered in plaster, which was cracking as the muscles flexed.

'You'll have to come to the kitchen,' she said. 'We got chairs there, too.'

Franco smoked a cigar as he walked along. He was allowing himself some night-time sentimentality away from his books of figures. He was remembering O'Malley.

'The son I never had,' he said, and spat. He was on the cliff-top, some way away from his house. He saw the car lights approach and leave, but chose to ignore them. The privilege of office, he thought wryly.

He had spotted Desmond as a loader, and tipped him into higher things. He had groomed the boy, and somehow admired him for his lack of ambition. It seemed that he had entered the world of organised crime modestly, not to improve his material situation, but out of consideration for others. He gave himself to the Family as a present, did his work as conscientiously as any bank clerk, went home at night to the girl who could never be his wife, and a little romance touched his heart now and again. An almost perfect life, thought Franco, and could not understand why or how it had been so suddenly cut off. He felt a great sorrow also for P.J. But a cop was a cop, and had different priorities, directed towards some notion called Society, whoever that was, which took no account of blood ties. Desmond hadn't concerned himself with such things, and if he had sometimes tried to introduce Irish practices inappropriately, then that was part of his charm. Franco remembered the time he had tried to get the boys all playing curling, their complete lack of understanding, the ensuing fight when they thought he was trying to show them up as idiots. He had drunk that terrible black beer instead of good red wine – Franco had options in several excellent vineyards in the old country – and had eaten some unmentionable things. But all in all, he had been a good boy.

Franco threw away the cigar butt, long since gone out, and scuffed his patent shoes back through the leaves towards his house. His bed called, soon it would be morning. Numbers on forms were waiting for him. Beautiful, eternal, cool, undemanding numbers, better than love, even better than Family. Serene as the moon, consoling and inhuman, thank God.

Lola and Lilian watched the dawn spread across the sky together, peaceful and perfect, sending a tired thrill through their limbs. They were sharing Lilian's overcoat for warmth. There was roar, and a pick-up truck was there. It hitched Desmond's car to the hook



at the back, and pulled it away. The Swedes sat behind the driver, and looked at the two girls together as they went. Lilian stood up, straightening her stiff knees.

‘Guess I’ll be going,’ she said.

‘Nice being with you,’ said Lola. ‘I’ll stay on a bit.’

Lilian picked up her case, and began to pick her way through the potholes of the street towards the rail station. Lola stared after her, and neither knew how much they envied each other.

P.J. awoke with his head in Moll’s lap.

‘What time is it?’ he asked.

‘Seven,’ she said, glancing at a china clock on the mantelpiece.

‘I gotta go work,’ said P.J. ‘I gotta deal with this Desmond thing.’

He pulled himself together. He didn’t feel peaceful, he just felt a great and lonely silence overwhelm him. It loomed.

‘Thanks for the Four Roses,’ he said. ‘Hope I didn’t put you out any.’

Moll looked at him. ‘Come again tonight,’ she said. As if she had studied all the possible consequences.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘If it’s OK.’

‘If I say it, it’s OK.’

‘See you, then.’

‘See you.’