

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Joseph O'Malley

by

Hugh McGovern

for

Mum & Dad

Joe O'Malley
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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.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“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.”

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.”

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by Hugh McGovern

"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.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"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.

"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.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"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?"

"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.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"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.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“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.

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.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

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.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

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

"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 Oisín¹ - better call me Fionn²."

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

¹ 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.

² 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.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"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. ⁱⁱⁱ

"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."

#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?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"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."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#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.

“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.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"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.

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."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"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.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"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. "

"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?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“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.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"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."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

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."

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.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"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."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“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.”

“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.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

C2

#Breakfast

The next morning he rose early with the rest of the inmates. Breakfast was a ritual reserved for this time of day. He followed the others across to a prefab on the site the wooden floorboards creaking beneath their tread. He sat at a round table. Cereal and toast was the first course and he made ample use of the butter available on the table.

He got up from the table early – suppressed a belch and walked out onto the concrete walkway outside the building. A light frost was lifting and he lit his first cigarette of the morning. After a while he noticed Dad was waving at him from the front of the building.

He walked over.

“What are you doing here so early?”

“I thought I would get in before class. I have a lecture after lunch.”

He followed him into the building. “How are you today? I brought you some cigarettes?”

“I’m okay I suppose. I suppose it would be foolish to ask if you remembered anything of what was said yesterday.”

“Oh let’s not row. It’s a beautiful day.”

“Consider the lilies of the field....”

“Yes, let’s consider the lilies of the field.”

Joe sat heavily on the bed.

“There is nothing more depressing than your inane optimism.”

“You used to be optimistic too, remember – can do and you betcha.”

“How could I forget how you lived vicariously off me?”

“Joe you are as free as a bird. The world is your oyster.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I don't think the world is my oyster right now."

"Well you'll get better. You'll see. You'll be out of here in no time."

"Out to what. I have no money and I will be living with you and Mum. Not a very pleasant prospect. I'm going out for a smoke."

Dad came out with him and they walked around the willow tree and down the driveway as far as he was allowed still wearing his dressing gown.

"When you get your clothes back I will take you out for lunch" said Dad.

"Lunch, lunch. I don't want to go to lunch. I want a life. Why can't you understand that? I am not eternally locked in the mode of being your son. I have a life of my own I want to lead."

"But you will always be my son."

"I think I want to be alone now."

"Ok old man. I'll come and visit you again."

He walked him to his bicycle.

He went in and sat at the back. There was no one there. Eventually the other men drifted down to the back. It had started to rain outside and even the gazebo was cold.

Mulligan came and sat beside him.

"Where's Pat?"

"In with the doctor. Looks like he might be leaving soon."

"Lucky bastard."

"We'll get our chance. Not like it used to be in the bad old days. Locked you up for life back then."

"Why do you think you are here?" asked Joe.

"My, you are direct. Straight down to the nitty gritty."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“And why not? Have we much to hide?”

“Well maybe you don't. Pat is more your man for the philosophical conversation. I'm just a shallow puddle.”

After lunch he sat on the bed. He had smoked half the cigarettes Dad had brought him already. At half past three his mother arrived. She was wearing a rain coat and carrying a dripping umbrella.

“I am out of cigarettes” said Joe.

“I didn't bring any.”

“Why not? How do you expect me to endure a dump like this without cigarettes?”

“Dad will bring you some tomorrow.”

She started organising his little bed side area.

“Stop doing that. It doesn't need organising.”

She sat in the chair facing him.

“You need to calm down Joe. You are very worked up.”

“So would you be if you had to be here.”

“The doctor says you could be out in two weeks.”

“Two weeks!”

“That's if everything goes according to plan.”

“I suppose you think me being here has nothing to do with you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean your ceaseless and relentless manipulations, your moaning and complaining constantly about your husband, my father, don't you think that has some effect on me.”

“It wasn't ideal if that's what you mean. But what is – all families are like that.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"All that you know anyhow."

"Now look this is not the time or the place to go into all this."

"I want you to take some responsibility for the mess you have made out of my life."

"You always liked talking about such things."

"You mean listening to you complain."

"You were going to sort everything out. Remember. "

"What a fool I was."

"There were always problems with Dad you know. Financial issues – things I couldn't resolve."

"You are laying this shit on me now and I am stuck in a mental hospital."

"Well you said you wanted to talk about it. I thought you coped very well especially after Tom died."

"I suppose it is too much to expect that you had an emotional reaction."

"Well if you are going to mock me I am not going to stay."

"You are a vampire just like him – only a different type of vampire, one who operates on guilt inducing statements and subtly and in a clandestine manner."

"Is this some of those psychology books you have been reading? You would be far better off moving on with your life and forgetting about your parents – only for the relationship." She paused. "I think I am going to go now and come back when you are in better humour."

He waited until she was gone and fumbled for a cigarette. "Damn" he said out loud. He wandered aimlessly to the back of the ward. Pat was sitting there smoking.

"Great news" he said, "I am off tomorrow."

"Off?"

"Free, at liberty, restored to my full rights as a citizen of this little shithole country."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Congratulations."

Joe sat down beside him. "You don't perhaps have a cigarette?"

"For you I do and here take another. I am in exceptionally good form."

"And where will you go?"

"Gay Paris. I was thinking more about your situation and I think you will find what you are looking for in the end but I think this is not the end of the pain."

"Jesus."

"Just being honest."

"Do you take pleasure out of other people's misfortune?"

"Not at all. You misjudge me, sir. I see you as a fellow traveller. It is a lonely station this mentally ill state. And there is scant sympathy for it in this society. That's all. But you know the answers are inside to be discovered."

The nurse came down to the end of the ward. "Joe there is someone here to see you."

"I have to go but I will be back"

"That's fine. I am here for a while."

When he got to the nurses station Fr Anthony was standing there. He was a tall, overweight priest dressed in black with roman collar.

"Is there somewhere we can talk?" he said. He looked down and away.

"Only outside."

They did a few circuits of willow tree and he stopped.

"You know I had a brother who ended up in hospital like this."

"What happened to him?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"He was studying to be an accountant. But he never got to finish his exams."

Joe said nothing.

"But that's not what I came here to tell you." He paused for a second. "You have to understand Joe that I think Tom is alive."

"What?"

"Tom is alive and in paradise."

"Oh God."

"You should believe it even if you don't."

"I don't know what to believe. You say it's all about my brother. You know my parents. Did it ever occur to you that they might have something to do with this plot of me?"

"I came here to try to help you. It was your brother Tom, that's why you are here isn't?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your brother – that caused you these problems. That's what I am saying."

"How do you know that?"

"You suffered a traumatic loss – your whole family was affected. I was there the night your brother died. It is my duty as a priest to be there at such times."

"Did my Dad ask you come here?"

"He told me you were in here, yes."

Fr Anthony looked down at his shoes.

"I know you think you mean well. But you are hardly unbiased in all this particularly since you are friends with my father."

"Who loves you very much."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Yeah right."

"It grieves him to see you here."

"It grieves me to see me here also. Do you really think prayer is going to do anything against a place like this – a place of broken dreams? I know what you are going to say – God's will is somehow served by me being here. Well it isn't and it couldn't ever be. Your organisation believed in exorcism and that mental illness was demonic possession."

"I will pray for you" said Fr Anthony, leaving.

"Do and pray for yourself too, while you are at it."

Joe lit another cigarette and watched Fr Anthony walk back to his car.

"Is there anyone you are not going to argue with today?" It was Bella. She leaned against the willow in her fetching jumpsuit. "You know priests and the Catholic Church is just a load of old rubbish. Who would want to believe that? I always thought your Dad was out of touch with that."

"He wasn't like that before Tom died. Why doesn't everyone leave me alone? Where can I run and where can I hide? There is nowhere to escape from me."

"Come and walk with me around the trees?" She linked her arm with his. "Tell me about when we are going to be married."

"I could come to Belgium. I would do that now. I don't care. No I don't want to live in Ireland anymore."

"Ah but you do. Ireland is your home. I love Dublin – did I ever tell you that. No I will come to you. I will make the change even though I love Bruges."

They stood by the willow again. He lit another cigarette.

"Mama loves you too. She thought you very kind and gentle."

"You will never come to me now – not like this."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Don't say that. I will and I said I would. This link between us is real. I can hear your thoughts and you can hear mine."

"I think I need to be alone now."

"I will wait by your bed."

"Don't leave. Just to hear your voice is enough for now."

But she was gone. He went back on the ward and lay down on the bed – not caring to take his shoes off. He curled up in foetal position.

"You know it's not true. I am still alive – alive to you." It was Tom. He sat in the chair.

"You're not real. Bella is not real. I know what real is."

"How can you say what's real and what isn't? Don't we make our own reality?"

"I don't believe that anymore."

"You used too. You were always saying – remember – all moments are present moments and this is my reality. Well how do you like reality now?"

"Fuck off."

In the end he gave up trying to sleep and wandered down to the end of the ward. There was no one there. At six dinner was dished out in the prefab and he wandered over with the other patients. A hot heavy tear fell into his dinner plate of meat and two veg and then another. He went back to his bed directly after.

"Are you there Bella?" he asked suddenly.

"There's nobody there, Joe" said the nurse appearing from down the ward. "The doctor says you are improving. You'll get your clothes back soon."

"When?"

"Maybe tomorrow. You will be seeing him tomorrow. You've had a lot of visitors. A lot more than most of the other patients."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

The evening drew in and dark shadows lengthened across the ceiling and walls. He walked down to the end of the ward. Pat was there with Mulligan and a few others.

“You know the French kicked out all their Jesuits in the 1870s.” said Pat.

“How did you know he was a Jesuit?”

“I’ve seen him in here before, adding to the misery the church has caused. We are a dissident of the Irish Republic. Mulligan, give this man a cigarette.”

“That’s ok. I have some.”

“They show up at times when people are vulnerable, funerals and times like this, when people are mentally ill and try to work some influence. There is one thing they don’t want you to do. You should listen to this too Mulligan.”

“What?” said Joe.

“Think for yourself Giuseppe. They fill you so full of crap that you have no idea what’s true and what isn’t. Heaven and hell. Messiahs and devils and all the while the church is your protector, your saviour.”

“I don’t think you should be talking like that” said Mulligan.

“Oh shut up Mulligan” said Pat. “You are just as brainwashed as the rest of them.”

“So what is true then, in your opinion” said Joe.

“Ah Joe, the bright one. Damned if I know to answer your question. Nothing I suppose. No paradise that’s for sure. I can see your Dad bought that line of crap and swallowed it whole. No Joe, it’s all about control. That’s what the church always wanted wherever it was based. Europe, Ireland no difference. They want people to be ignorant because they are more easily controlled. They always prospered in poor countries – agricultural countries like Ireland. Look how they are doing now, pushed out of secular countries they still make a living in the third world.”

“I am the Messiah” said Joe.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Maybe you are" Pat smiled. "But the messiah of your own life – and that is the world. Always remember it's a big dream neurosis and psychosis and then it comes to an end. It begins and ends in reality. The world is neurotic and sometimes psychotic. Always was and always will be."

"No this is not true" said Mulligan. "I am the one who is crazy. I know that much."

"You've been told that much" said Pat. "And now you are starting to believe. Is your medication kicking in?"

"What about you?"

"It's kicked in already. Like I said I have been here two weeks. Every nation has its myths and cultures – ours no less. We were beaten simply and subjugated – made into slaves ruled by the foreign oppressor."

"That's a long time ago" said Joe.

"Not in the minds of the culture."

"I want to sing my own song. I don't want to parrot someone else's tune. I thought I was getting there."

"And you were" said Pat. "But don't think for a second it will make you popular with the powers that be – the incumbents. They don't like to be contradicted. Your parents – they are your greatest enemy."

"What do you mean?"

"They want you to be the way they want you to be – supportive of them, loving of them. That's what they are hoping for."

"You don't know my parents."

"Don't you think I have parents of my own? They used to come to visit but they don't anymore. I had to separate from them for my own sanity."

"I don't know how to separate from them. They have always been there and I don't know what I would do without them."

"Ah I get it. You need them and they need you. But in different ways."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I suppose"

"Well is it or isn't it? Why would someone of your age need your parents? How old are you? Late twenties?"

"Your parents don't get on very well together but are united by their children, right?"

"I often thought so."

"Well there you are. You make it possible for them to live together and be together. They really don't like each other very much."

"What should I do then?"

"Get as far away from them as you can. Emigrate. Go live in another country. You'll never know any peace with them."

"I always needed my mum" said Mulligan. "She needed me too in her own way."

"I am telling you" said Pat. "Mental illness happens to people who are not allowed to work through their emotional problems. Now we all have emotional problems and I bet if you ask around you would find everyone in here has a story of physical or emotional abuse."

"I don't know" said Joe. "It can't be that simple and that obvious. Why wouldn't they help us then if they could?"

"They don't help because they don't believe it. They think mental illness is an illness like diabetes or cancer, curable or treatable by drugs and that's the way they approach the problem. I'll give you some advice since you are obviously looking for it. Get yourself a councillor or a psychologist of some kind to help you when you get out of here. It will be the best move you ever made. I don't think you can expect much from your nearest and dearest."

"This conversation is too over my head" said Mulligan. "I'm off to my bed."

"Look the health board have a model they employ. They treat acute distress with medication and put people on medication indefinitely. That's the way they operate. It is the cheapest way of dealing with a

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

large scale problem which is mental health in the community. How long do you talk to your doctor for anyhow?"

"About ten minutes."

"Ten minutes – he barely knows your name at this stage and he is supposed to be your primary care giver.
"

There was silence.

"They want you to fail Joe. There is nothing wrong with you that you cannot fix yourself with a little help now and again. They are quacks and charlatans – nothing more and their alchemy will go out of fashion too, eventually, not fast enough for you or I."

"How do you know so much?"

"I am telling you – I am well. I came down off a high alcohol induced and so I landed rational and with it. This is the fourth time I have been here and each time I got a little wiser. Look everyone who has been mentally ill has a story of physical or emotional abuse. That's just the way it goes. There is nothing to be ashamed about. Anyone subjected to the conditions you or I have been subjected too would be similarly compromised."

Silence resumed.

"Look you were born into an unhappy family. So was I. Nothing was right in our family. And that I gather would be the same in yours and you set yourself the task of fixing all that. Didn't you?"

"I just wanted things to be right for them and then they would be right for me."

"We can't fix other people captain. We can only fix ourselves. I go now shortly to Paris and I expect this will be the last time I will ever be here."

"Don't they have mental hospitals in France?"

"Of course, but I don't expect to be requiring their services."

"You seem very confident about all these things?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I am confident. I have worked for my peace of mind and it takes a mighty struggle and effort but it is worth it in the end."

"I don't think I am far along as you."

"You will be if you stay with it. Remember you can pick and choose the thoughts in your head. Pick and choose who and what to listen to."

#Pat leaves

"Anyway enough about all this."

A petite dark haired dark skinned woman was standing at the entrance to the hall.

"Pat, there is someone here to see you."

Pat jumped up and bounded down the hallway.

"He really is leaving, then."

"Yep. I'll miss the old bastard too. He was always good entertainment if nothing more."

They sat in silence watching as Pat embraced the woman. They were an odd couple, six foot plus and five foot nothing.

"How long are you in for?" said Joe.

"Not sure mate. Another few weeks probably."

"And what do they have on you?"

"Paranoid schizophrenia. And you?"

"Bipolar. What do you think of this whole place? Do you think it's all a load of rubbish?"

"I don't know mate. Sometimes I think I am being followed especially since my mum died."

#Dad

He smoked his last cigarette and went back to his bed. Dad was sitting there in the chair.

"Well old man, how are you today?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Don't you have even an inkling of the gravity of my situation?"

"Well what can you do? You'll be here for a few weeks. So what?"

"Did you bring cigarettes?"

Dad nodded.

"You're the reason I am in here. You and your blasted wife."

"Don't carry on like that. Look it's a medical condition. I know you want to think it is to do with psychology but really that has never really worked out for you, has it? You were always trying to find reasons, dig deep for the answers."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes you just have to accept. Don't you know the truth is too hot to handle."

"What does that mean?"

"I am telling you."

"What difference do you think going to mass every day is going to make? And praying constantly. Why don't you face up to your problems and deal with them?"

"I pray for you, you know."

"Yes well it hasn't done any good. As you can see."

"The structures of this world are not adequate to the human spirit. You know that."

"No you know that not me. That's your mantra. Tom's death affected you very badly – didn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you have been twisted ever since."

"What do you mean twisted? There is nothing wrong with me."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Nothing was ever right for you after Tom died. You managed to stay out of this place. Don't you think I went here on your behalf to at least some extent?"

"What do you mean?"

"I picked up your struggle."

"No father should ever have to bury a son."

"It was your battle I took on, your insistence on not having to lose a son. I followed that line and here it ends."

"A vale of tears this life – a valley of shadows" Dad said.

"For you, maybe, but what about me? I have a life to live – yours is at the other end. Do you think I want this for myself? You can't condemn me to this half-life. I wanted more and I still do and always will. This is unjust - the old dictating to the young. It can never be."

"This is not a fight. This is not a fight you can ever win" he said. "This is God's will."

"But surely death is the great injustice? An injustice you never accepted."

Dad was silent.

"I am going for a walk around the trees" Joe said.

Dad came too. "You need to cool down, mister" said Dad. "You are too amped up all the time."

"Yes but what about me. What about us – the family? Did you ever think that I needed you as well? And praying instead of dealing with family problems?"

"More of your mother's propaganda.."

"It's not propaganda. It happens to be my opinion. I have opinions too, you know."

Tom walked passed them and walked into the building.

"I am prepared to go along with this as much as my basic personality will allow. And that's it."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“What the hell does that mean? I tried to help both of you. I tried to do right by both of you and this is the reward I get for that. I problematized myself on your behalf.”

#Tom

After Dad left he lay on the bed again. He was tired but couldn't sleep.

“You look rough captain” it was Tom. He stood by his beside.

“If only I could sleep.”

“You know there is no escape from this. You always try but you never succeed. Love is not the answer. Romance is just a distraction. No Joe, you have to face facts. You will never escape. You will never amount to anything and I will never let you go. You made a pact with the devil Joe. You asked for more time. You are Faust not Dad – seven years of youth. in return for his soul.”

“There has to be a way. I will find a way. Get behind me Satan.”

“I am not Satan. I am Tom.”

“If you died then the devil took you. So you are Satan.”

“Now don't be so hasty Joe. Evil is not a bad thing. You could come to see the benefits.”

“Our father who art in heaven...”

“There is no need to pray” said Tom.

“There is no end to this.”

“No no end. You should have thought of this when you tried to hang on to me.”

“I didn't know what to do. I was twelve years old. How was I supposed to know it would end up here?”

“Well it did. You never grieved for me, Joe. What do they call it – complicated grief?”

“You leave him alone. He doesn't have to listen to you.” It was Bella.

“Bella I was happy with you” said Joe. His eyes glazed over.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"No you weren't" said Tom. "She drove you demented. Always demanding, always arguing and fighting, falling in and out of love. You didn't know if you were coming or going."

"I loved her though. I loved you Bella. That had to count for something."

"I know. You know I will always love you Joe. Always. You have a little piece of my heart. You get out of here Tom and leave me alone with Joe."

"Remember our walks around Bruges and the day we took the bicycles out and cycled we cycled for miles and miles."

"Of course I remember."

"Did you get all my letters? I sent quite a lot especially towards the end."

"Don't worry about that now. This is better than letters. I can be with you always."

"You won't ever leave me again, will you Bella?"

"No Joe. I will never leave you."

He curled up foetal position and closed his eyes.

#Doctor

The next morning the doctor called him into his office first thing.

"Well Joe, good news, you get your clothes back."

"I am feeling very much better."

"How are the voices?"

"I don't hear any voices."

"You told me last time you were here that you were hearing voices."

"Well maybe a little...I am not sure."

"I would be very surprised if the voices had left you already."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I want to get out of here as soon as possible. You know that."

"You need to be well first Joe. And that takes time. So look one step at a time. Now you have got your clothes and you can do a day out maybe next week if all goes well. We shall see."

"Why does this happen, doctor?"

"It can be a reaction to stress. Some people get hernias when they are stressed other people have episodes. It all depends."

"And this lithium you mentioned what will that do?"

"Well it could give you the stability you lack and it is very easy to manage and it's been around for a long time."

"What's real and what's fantasy? I don't think I can tell the difference."

"It will come back to you in time. Bipolar is very treatable and its definitely one of the better mental illnesses to get."

"But is it an illness? I mean I don't know much about psychology but shouldn't they be used to analyse someone's problems and their back ground?"

"Psychotherapy doesn't work the stage you are at. You need to be stabilised and then counselling would definitely be a good idea."

"You seem to have all the answers."

"Well I have the advantage. I am rational. And you are becoming rational."

#Clothes

When he got back to his bed a white plastic bag containing his clothes was on the bed. He dressed putting on his jeans and shirt and shoes and on top of that the dreaded dressing gown. His mother walked onto the ward.

"Oh no, what do you want?"

"That's not very nice. After I came all the way up here to see you."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

She sat on the chair and he sat on the bed.

“Do you bring any smokes?”

“No. I'll give you money if you want?”

“And how am I supposed to buy them? I can't leave. You are deliberately avoiding buying me cigarettes.”

“Well it's not good for your health.”

“Ah fuck you.”

“Don't talk to me like that?”

“I'll talk to you anyway I want.”

“I don't see why I should come here and visit you if you are going to be so uncivil to me.”

“What are you the Queen mother or something?”

“I spoke to the doctor and he thinks you are improving?”

“I don't want you speaking to him without my approval. He is my doctor, not yours.”

“I was just curious about how you were doing.”

“Always typical of you, nosing in where you are not wanted.”

“Your health is my concern, of course.”

“I wish you two would stop coming into visit me. Do you feel guilty or something? Is that what this is about?”

“I am only trying to help you.”

“No you are trying to allay your worries the whole time. Not mine. You have an anxiety disorder, don't you? You should be in here not me.”

“What do you mean? There is nothing wrong with me.”

“After Tom died your anxiety got worse didn't it?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"After Tom died. Why are you talking about Tom dying at a time like this?"

"So how many times have you committed me? This will be the third of fourth is it? And mental illness was no stranger to your family, wasn't?"

"You leave my family out of it."

"Three of your sisters have depression. One of them had ECT didn't they?"

"Who told you that?"

"You did, mostly, though you forget."

"I resent you making comments about my family."

"Your family, are they not also my family? I am related to them? And what about Uncle Tim – he was bipolar."

"He's not even a blood relative. I think you make a lot of connections at times like this Joe. Your mind is working overtime. You need to slow it down."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

C3

#Leaves asylum

On the appointed day he packed up his few belongings and his Dad came to collect him in the car and drove back to the house. He took the upstairs room and brought his few things up there. It was Tom's old room and it came to him after Tom died.

It was 4pm in the afternoon and he looked out the window onto the street below. It was shortly before lighting up time. A few cars drove past up and down the street. There were few pedestrians out.

Dad came into his room and said, "I just want you to know anything you want to talk about I am happy to listen?"

"That's what they said in the hospital."

"I am going out to get some things for the dinner. Your mother is talking a nap."

After he left he walked down the two flights of stairs to the kitchen. There was no one left in the house. It was an empty family emporium. The walls were badly in need of paint. Tim lived nearby. Tim always lived nearby. Tim was the loyal, faithful one. If only he didn't end up like Tim. If only? He sat at the kitchen table and idly thumbed through the newspaper.

Bella came in through the patio doors in a rush of colours and ribboned hair and sparkling sequins.

"It's lovely outside Joe. A bit chilly. Won't you come out?"

"No, not for me. It's too cold for me. Stay here."

"Ah, really. She sat at the table.

"Do you still think of me? I haven't seen you lately. Where have you been?"

"They want to keep us apart Joe, but don't let them. We have to fight for our love. It is vital."

He said nothing.

"I always think of you Joe. I will respond to your letters."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Why have you not done?"

"I will. We don't need letters to know how we feel do we?"

There was silence.

"But Bella, I have to have you in my life. I need you, Bella. You are lifeblood to me."

"I will come. I promise."

"And what about the other guy? What about him?"

"No one ever compared to you Joe. You know that."

"I can't hear you so well anymore. Why don't I hear you so much?"

He reached for his hand but she was gone.

The kitchen door opened. It was his mother. "Who were you talking too? I heard voices."

"Nobody. Just myself."

"I heard you talking" she came in and shut the door behind her.

"I can talk out loud if I want too. Do you always have to creep in where you are not wanted?"

"This is my house. You are a guest."

"It's Dad's house. He paid for it. I think I would prefer to be in hospital than in amongst your warring factions that you call a marriage."

"What do you mean?"

"Well it's obvious he comes in one door you go out another door. It's a sham isn't it this thing you call a marriage?"

"What would you know about it? You have never even been married."

"I will be soon."

"To who? You are not thinking of that Bella girl, are you?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Maybe."

"I don't think that is a very good idea Joe."

"What would you know about it?"

"Well you were all up in a heap about that girl. And really she was never much interested."

"Who told you that?"

"Well she didn't respond to your letters and then you were all set to go over there. But that wouldn't have been such a good idea."

"And this is a better idea? Living with the two of you in this dump?"

The front door opened and Dad came in. Tim came in behind him. He was a tall, dishevelled looking man wearing jeans, a denim jacket and trainers with a bewildered aspect. They came down to the kitchen.

"What do you get?" asked Mum.

"Chicken Kiev's"

"Not Chicken Kiev's again?" said Mum.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Bargain bucket in Tesco's."

"Well next time you can pay for them."

"How are you Joe?" said Tim, taking off his jacket. His voice was deep and flat. His hair was tangled and matted. One of his trainers had a large hole in the toe. His shirt looked like it was its second or third outing at least. When he took off his jacket there a pungent smell of body odour filled the room.

"Surviving. Been better I suppose"

They all sat around the table. Dad cooked the chicken and potatoes in the galley kitchen.

"You could have spent a bit more on dinner" said Mum.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Vegetables. Vegetables. For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly grateful."

"You don't need to say grace, do you?"

"Say your prayers mother."

"I am taking my dinner upstairs if this continues."

Silence descended on the small group."

"I am looking for nothing less than the resurrection of the body" said Dad.

"You really think God will save you. He hasn't done a very good job so far" said Joe. "Well Tim what do you think?"

"Don't involve me. I am just here for the dinner."

"And you Tim, when are you going to do something with your life? You can't live on the dole like you do forever" said mother.

"Don't harp on at him, mother."

"He's always around here – eating us out of house and home."

"You two owe me money" said Tim.

"Not this again. Tim, we paid you back."

"I always did the best I could for you, Tim. You know that" said Dad."

"You lot are driving me insane" said Joe quietly.

"I won't kick my sons out" said Dad with vehemence. "I won't do it."

"Don't be ridiculous" said mother. "Tim is thirty five. If you have offered him some guidance when he needed it he would be doing something by now."

"And if you had shown him some motherly love he wouldn't doubt himself so much."

"I am going out the back for a smoke. Coming Tim?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"They stood on the terrace even though there was an icy chill in the wind."

"You out for good now?" said Tim.

"I hope so."

"What are you going to do?"

"Get a job I suppose."

"You are not going back to America?"

"No. I am staying here now. This is my home."

"Do you have a smoke?" He took one from the box. "Ta"

"Is it always like this?"

"Always. She says white he says black. How do you stand it?"

"Well it's never been any different if that's what you mean?"

"Close the door if you are going to smoke" said Mum closing the patio door.

"Well you were going to sort everything out remember?"

"Don't remind me. It seems so stupid now."

"Maybe or maybe your heart was in the right place."

"I always thought so."

"What about you? Well are you living?"

"I have a place in Ranelagh. I suppose you would think it was a kip."

"Maybe."

He looked in through the window. Mum had obviously gone up to her room and Dad was there staring into space.

"I never want to marry if it's going to be like that."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I know exactly what you mean" said Tim.

"Is there no one for you?"

"There was. I mean I was going out with someone but not anymore."

"What happened?"

"She moved away back to be closer to her parents."

"Why not go with here? There is nothing here."

"This is home. Aren't you discovering this also?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well you didn't settle in America did you?"

"I didn't want to leave my home country, that's why."

He opened the patio door and they went back into the kitchen.

"Are you still working on your great modus?" he asked Dad.

"Do you want to hear some of the latest, come down to the office and I will read for you."

"I think I will head on" said Tim.

"Do you want a lift?"

"No that's ok. I don't mind walking."

He followed Dad down to his office in the basement. He turned on the light. The room was full of junk. Piles of books were piled in one corner. On a desk there was a computer. And to the right there was a drawing board complete with sketches and a guide rule. To the right were filing cabinets and perched precariously on top of the cabinet was a scale model of four houses.

"Come in, come in and take a seat" said Dad.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

He turned on an electric heater that was sitting in the middle of the room. And then turned on the computer. The computer beeped and clicked and after a few minutes loaded up.

Joe sat in an old executive chair that was the only other seat in the room.

“Now where are we? He put on his glasses and then read:

The social organization of the city

The assassination of the scapegoat was the beginning of the social organization of the settlement. This early violence provided for the accommodation of the tribe and established sacred space. Further sacrifice at the periphery established the boundary of the tribal territory. The sacred is defined as the connection between social organization and territory. Two acts of violence, one at the centre and the other is at the periphery were integral with the material fabric of the antique settlement. Each defined zones of exclusion. Violence established the sacred space where the altar of sacrifice was situated and a tribal ancestor (probably the victim of an earlier sacrifice) reposed under every hearthstone.

He stopped and looked up. “What do you think?”

“I am not sure I really understand it.”

“Well don't worry. I can explain.”

“No that's all right. I think I will leave it for tonight.”

“Just another paragraph or two.”

“No thanks. I think I will go to bed now. I am tired.”

He went up the stairs to the kitchen. The light was off and the room was dark. He took a glass of water and climbed the next two flights of stairs to his room. He shut the door behind him and took off his shoes and lay on the bed. The bed creaked in protest.

When he turned out the light he knew Tom was sitting on the end of the bed.

“Great to see the old place nothing has changed of course.”

“You're not real. You are just my imagination conjuring up a ghost.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Of course I am. I am just a ghost to them but not to you."

"What do you want?"

"Want? want? Nothing. It's you that wants me. Never die. Live forever" he mimicked. You can't let me go. Can you?"

"You're a bastard."

"Maybe your girl-friend will help you now."

Joe turned on the light. The room was empty.

#Mum, Dad

The next day Dad was up earlier and he headed off to mass. Joe sat at the breakfast table with his mother and all the breakfast things.

"You know you really shouldn't smoke so much" said his mother.

"I can't help it" said Joe. "I am nervously agitated."

When Dad came back from mass he came into the kitchen.

"Your friends have been emailing for you" he said.

"Which ones?"

"Derek I think and your other friend – both and separately. Should I reply?"

"Leave it with me. I will get back to them."

Dad took a seat at the table.

"Why do you bother going to mass every day?"

"I am telling you. Nothing short of the resurrection of the body is what the church offers."

"It's all a load of rubbish. And you know it."

Dad said nothing. Then he said "why do you insist on baiting me?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I am not baiting. I am trying to make a point. I believed in God too and look at me now. Religion didn't intervene to help me."

"Well I am sorry for you. Perhaps if you had said your prayers."

"Say your prayers – perhaps if you did something to help your family instead of praying the whole time something might get done."

"You know Joe is making a very good point here" said mother.

"This is the result of your propaganda mother" Dad said. "You put him up to it. This is precisely what caused all his problems. It's mixed messages from us."

"Hello" said Joe. "I am still here."

"I am more concerned about the effect of such a conversation on you Joe, than on me."

"You sanctimonious ponce" said Joe. And he went out slamming the patio doors behind him. He sat on the step leading down into the garden. The garden was in a terminal state of disrepair. Brambles snaked across where lawn used to be and behind a rotting and malodourous glass house, many of the sheets of glass broken and fallen in. Beyond there was two pear trees and beyond that the mews at the rear.

Bella was sitting a few steps below.

"Joe you are very agitated."

"I know. They drive me mad my parents. You know Bella I can't choose."

"You have to get away Joe. Fly, fly the nest. Back to America if necessary."

His mother stood out on the patio. "Would you like to come for a walk Joe. I am going around the park."

He hesitated and then acquiesced.

His jacket was hanging on the back of a kitchen chair. Dad had retreated to his office.

"You know you don't have anything to worry about. Don't worry about us" she said. "You can't change us even if you wanted too."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

They walked down the gravelled driveway and along the road. It was quiet with few cars coming and going.

“Why don't you leave if it is so bad for you?” said Joe.

“I have no money you know. Where would I go and how would I live.”

“But you just grate on each other the whole time. Where is the good in that?”

They entered the park gate from the side road.

“You don't understand. Your father got into a lot of debt with no means of paying it back and it was only through my intervention that the house was saved. He is completely abstract and lost in his world of ideas. He doesn't grasp reality at all that well. “

“It's all about control with you isn't it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well you want to control the aberrant male and get him to do what you want.”

“I am just telling you what he is like from an adult perspective.”

“I saw the overdue notices on the mortgage coming in with penalties and interest and your father just ignored them and carried on as if nothing ever happened. He has been in court numerous times over his private practise. Now he is some kind of pseudo academic. He tells everyone he is a professor. He doesn't even have a PhD yet if ever.”

“You realise of course that you are talking about my father. How is that supposed to make me feel?”

“I am just telling you the truth and I am not sugar coating anything.”

“And why do you always fight about Tim? And why is he the way he is?”

“I always tried to help Tim. You must believe me. When he said he was interested in music I supported that. Then he ended up in St Pats and since he came out he has settled at the level that he is at.”

“That's not going to happen to me” said Joe.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I am sure it won't."

They went around the duck pond a second time.

"Would you like a coffee?" said mother. "My you are chugging through those cigarettes."

"Don't start or no coffee."

They entered the lobby of the hotel and found an empty seat to sit down.

"Your father's family never liked me you know. His aunt said marriages were never happy in their family."

"But why do you think he is the way he is?"

"I don't know. Grief, maybe."

"Well, he lost his mother when he was two and his father at eighteen and his son at forty eight."

"Why aren't you distracted and crazy too?"

"I don't know. Mabel said he was never right after Tim died."

They sat there in silence for a while. A family with small children came and sat next to them.

"You act and behave as though you were outside the experiment of our family. You are very much part of it as far as I am concerned. You say you want to be friends and yet you are not free nor take the opportunity to be free – maybe you just want to complain."

"What do you mean?"

"Misery loves company. Isn't that it? I have never known you not to complain and here I am a wet day out of hospital and you want to lay more shit on me - more of your problems that you can't solve or lack the courage to face up too. Thanks a million."

"Well if you don't want to talk about it then don't." She crossed her arms and frowned.

"Don't you see I wanted to help? I was motivated to help. There was my Achilles heel. I was affected by your diatribe. I still am. I don't think he is half as bad as you say he is and I don't think even if he was the

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

man you want him to be that that would really change you or who you are. You really think your husband is going to ride in on a charger and save you from it all. You live in cloud cuckoo land with your stories of fairy tale romance. “

“I don't think you should be talking to me that way. I am after all your mother.”

“Ah yes my mother. The noble enterprise of motherhood. Mna na hEireann salutes you! Would it interest you to know that I am twenty seven and hardly in need of a mother anymore? Is there any other role you can play that might be somehow relevant to me?”

“You are being very unkind now if you mock the whole enterprise of family?”

“I am not mocking I am just saying it obviously doesn't always work out. Things go wrong. You can at least admit to that?”

“It's not all crap. You make the most of it. You should be out living your life not sparring with us at your age.”

“I am not blaming you.”

“Oh but you are blaming. You think some people have parents who kill their children or violently abuse them or worse. Nothing like that ever happened in our family, ever. I would have known if it had.”

“And yet something was very deeply wrong. You can't deny it. Behind every great psychosis is a great trauma.”

There was a pause.

“Let's talk about what you are going to do next?”

“I don't want to talk about it. I want to talk about this.”

“But there is no point.”

“Not for you maybe but there is for me. I don't intend to spend all my life entrapped to this family.”

“But you liked helping out and helping us. You enjoyed our chats too or at least you seemed too.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Joe said nothing.

On the way back through the park he smoked his last cigarette. "I have to get more" he said to his mother.

"Here take this tenner. She proffered the note from her purse."

He left her in the park and walked back in the direction of the main street. It was lunch time now and the streets were thronged with the lunchtime office crowd. He went around the corner and joined the queue which snaked out the door.

#Tom, Bella

Later when he got back to the house, he went up to his room. Tom was sitting on the bed when he came in. He shut the door.

"What do you want?"

"That's not very friendly. I think you should know that there is no escape from this arrest."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean. There is no escape. You have tried all the escape routes all ready. Remember it was your precious Bella. She was more important than life itself. You were made, heaven sent. Your words."

"Shut up."

"And before that we had California. Land of the free and home of the brave"

"Shut up."

"I am not listening."

"Well you should be listening I am saving you time and trouble. All your escape plans didn't work out that's all."

"And what would you suggest then?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Nothing. Accept it. Accept them. You are not the big cheese you thought you were. You are not going to topple the patriarch and woo your mother Oedipal style."

"Don't be obscene."

"Such things happen. Don't they? You are not going to change them by argument. They are the way they are. They were like this before you were born probably and at the rate you are going they will probably out live you."

"Just leave me alone."

Joe lay down on the bed and turned his back to door. After a while he knew Bella was there waiting.

"What is it now?" he said.

"I just came to see how you were. That horrible Tom is giving you an awful time."

"You're not real either. You are just a ghost like him."

"But I am not a ghost. You silly thing. I am real just like you."

"No you are not."

"You are just sulking now. Soon you will be laughing and joking again."

"I don't feel very much like joking and laughing." Joe sat up in the bed.

"Do you think I am crazy Bella? I need to know."

"Of course you are not crazy. You are just stressed and tired. That's all."

"I will sing to you if you like."

"That would be lovely."

Joe sang.

"I know that one."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Of course you do silly billy. You know you shouldn't fight with your mother. She is really a very intelligent woman."

"She never said much about you."

"She only met me a couple of times. I suppose."

"If all the world came to an end and there was nothing left what would you do Bella?"

"I suppose I would try to find somewhere to hide, if I could."

"I think I would want to be with you. Do you think that would be possible?"

"Oh Joe, you are such a hopeless romantic. But I will come to you and that's a promise."

"But when will you come."

"Very soon now. You will see."

#Derek

"Joe" his mother called from downstairs. "Derek is on the phone for you."

"Okay. Okay. I am coming down."

He opened the bedroom door and went down the stairs to the hallway and kitchen beyond. The phone was in the kitchen. "A bit of privacy if you don't mind" he said to his mother.

After she left he picked up the phone.

"Joe me old chum how are you?" It was Derek.

"I am okay. I suppose. You heard what happened?"

"Your Dad said you weren't well. That's all. Banged up again I suppose?"

"What's the story with you too?"

"Oh nothing. Out on the pull this Friday if you want to join up?"

"I don't know. I will have to see."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well keep me posted."

He hung up the phone.

#Dad

Later he sat on the couch in the living room idly flicking the channels on the tv one by one. He went back up to the room and counted up his change – twelve euros and fifty pence. He needed at least twenty to go out with the lads. He went down stairs. Dad was in his office in the basement.

"How are you fixed for cash?" he asked when he came in.

"Not great to be honest."

"Could you lend me a tenner? I'll give it back to you."

"Well it's all I have on me. I suppose you can have it."

He went up to the kitchen. His mother was there cooking the dinner.

"Joe I don't think you are well enough to go out this weekend. I think you should stay in and try to get better."

"What are you saying?"

"You can't drink on that medication. That's crazy to do something like that."

"What do you know about it?"

"The doctor says you need a lot of rest and no drink until you are better."

"Have you been listening to my phone conversation?"

"No."

"You were eavesdropping."

"I am telling you for your own good. You'll end up right back in there."

"Better than being here." He went out resisting the temptation to slam the door.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

He went down to see down who was hunched over his computer in his office. The electric fire gave out a feeble heat.

“Mister I must say I am buoyed up to see you looking much better.”

“I am not so sure about that.”

He sat in the executive chair and swivelled around aimlessly back and forth.

“I am going great guns on my thesis you should know.”

“Why did you even start it in the first place? And weren't you with Trinity initially.”

“That examiner was an ass.” He frowned. “I have a much better examiner in UCD.”

“And what will happen when it is finished. Have you notified CNN and the global media?”

“Ah get off.”

“Don't you think you are taking it a little bit too seriously?”

“What should I do? Go to a football match? Listen to this. This is really good stuff.”

“No. It's okay. Really. Look I can't deal with your thesis right now. I know you are very clever and everything but does my affirmation of this really matter so much?”

“What are you saying?”

“Methinks you doth protest too much.”

“Ah ass and vegetables to that.”

“Most theses take about two to three years you know. You have been at it now for ten maybe more?”

Dad said nothing.

“Ok, I am not going to say anymore. Just remember I am the fragile one here. I was in an asylum last week and now you want me to support your intellectual ambitions. I just can't do it. Sorry. I can't give you a thesis. If it was up to me I would approve it tomorrow.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#Tim

Tim came in through the side door.

“Ah Tim, take a seat wherever you like” said Dad.

“Tim what do you think of Dad’s thesis?” said Joe.

“Don’t try to draw me in on that one” said Tim. “I’m not saying anything.”

“Do you have a smoke” said Tim to Joe.

“Let’s go up to the patio” said Joe.

They went upstairs and stood out on the patio.

“You don’t like to criticise Dad, do you?” said Joe.

“I am not getting into it. He loves his thesis. What’s wrong with that? Only that witch mother of ours feels the need to attack it all the time.”

“Do you think he will ever finish it though?”

“I don’t know. What does it matter? He likes doing it. That must count for something.”

“I suppose I am just more conscious of his fallacies.”

“Maybe you are more influenced by your mother. Did you ever think of that?”

They both pulled on their cigarettes.

“Well the whole thing is a toxic soup whatever it is.”

“I am sorry I wasn’t there for you when it happened” said Tim. “I am sorry I couldn’t intervene and make it right for you. I mean I would have been prepared to take you up the Dublin Mountains and let you scream and rant and rave as much as you wanted.”

“Do you think it would have done any good?”

“Now you got smarties and doctors on your back 24/7.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"What would you do in my situation?"

"You don't have to go along with the meds and doctors solution, you know. You can do it your way."

"I think at this stage I am going to stick with the program."

"You think you will be alright living here with Mum and Dad?"

"Temporary only."

They came back into the kitchen and Mum was seated at the kitchen table reading the newspaper.

Tim went over to the fridge door and opened it.

"Don't go eating all the food in the fridge, Tim" she called out from the table.

Tim slammed the fridge door shut and went out of the room. "And don't slam my fridge door either."

Tim had gone down the stairs to Dad.

"He would eat us out of house and home. All he does is eat and eat. You've got to see my point of view on this."

"I suppose."

Joe sat at the table desultorily. "Do you have to take issue and complain about everything?"

"What do you mean?"

"What harm is it if he makes a sandwich or eats something from the fridge?"

"He should eat dinner at his own place."

"You know as well as me that his place is a dive."

"Is that my fault? What are you implying?"

"Maybe there is something wrong with you? Did you ever think that?"

"I don't know what you mean. I am only stating the facts."

"I'm going out for a smoke" said Joe. He left the kitchen through the patio doors.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

C4

#Preparing

On Friday night he started preparing early. He took out his best pair of chinos and shirt, purchased in the States. He found the old bockety ironing board that the mother kept in her room. Fortunately her room was unlocked on this occasion. He set up the iron and the board in Tom's old room and ironed the shirt and trousers. He inspected himself critically in the mirror and applied more hair gel giving his hair a slicked back look.

He sat on the bed in his glad rags. He inspected his hands. The twitching was back. His palms were sweaty and his hands trembled. The phone rang in the kitchen and he ran down stairs to intercept it.

He picked up the phone.

"Well me old son. The three musketeers ride forth again."

"I am just taking it easy tonight, Derek. Under doctor's orders."

"That's all-right me old son. No pressure. No drama."

"Who else is coming?"

"Well Jonas of course. And I will see if I can razzle up the other lads."

"Where is the venue?"

"Searsons at eight. And then maybe Howlers afterwards depending on how things are going. You know I might be able to get you fixed up."

"Who with?"

"Early days me old son. Early days. You know this crowd I work for at the moment – Silicon Microsystems."

"Yes of course."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well it's full of cute girls. It's the European call centre and they are all going to Howlers tonight. Now don't I look after the lads?" He paused letting the gravity of this news sink in.

"Well it can't be denied. You do."

"There will be enough to go around for everyone."

"You jammy bastard. That's fantastic. This is far better than just going to the nite club not knowing anyone."

"Isn't it?" There was another pause.

"To be honest I didn't expect to see you out for a while."

"I know. Anyway I better go. I'll see you at eight."

#Bouncer

After he hung up the phone he checked his watch for the umpteenth time. He debated going early but he didn't want to be spotted by any of the college crowd. At 7.45 he slipped out of the house, walked down the gravelled, weed ridden driveway and out onto the street. Turning left he walked to the end of the street. The traffic was light and few cars or people were out. He turned left at the junction which merged onto a busy, commercial street. Shops were just closing their shutters and at the crossroads he could see the pub. Lights were on inside and a warm glow was cast on the darkening street.

He crossed the road at the junction and walked up to the doorway. Up close he could hear the music from speakers attached to the outside of the pub.

A man appeared from the shadows and stopped him by placing a strong, jet black hairy hand blocking his passage as he was about to open the door. He was tall, fat and dressed in black jacket and black trousers. An ID badge with photo was attached to his jacket.

He interposed his large body between Joe and the doorway.

"Have you been drinking, sir?" he said. He shook his large round head pursing his lips as he studied him.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Joe flushed and stuttered. "No. I have just arrived."

"Are you been taking something" he asked.

"No" he flushed again. "What do you mean? Look I am just meeting a few friends in here." He darted an angry gaze in his direction.

The bouncer pinched his nose and then stroked his chin. "Now that I see you up close I can see that you are sober." He raised his eyebrows blinking. "From a distance I thought you were on something."

"Well I am not." Joe narrowed his eyes and scowled.

"Go on in" and he held the door open for him.

"Thanks for nothing" he muttered. He swallowed hard and lowered his head.

#Derek & Jonas

The pungent smell of beer and warmth hit him as he walked into the pub. To his right there was a collection of tables at the back of which was an alcove with window seats. On the walls, hung mirrors and posters for beer and pictures of Dublin in times gone by. The bar was circular and went all around the room. In the distance he could see a large seating area and at the back a dance floor separated by curtains. It was still quiet and hadn't filled up yet.

He stood at the bar and ordered a pint of beer. He fumbled the change as it got it from his pocket. A damp clammy feeling of sweat trickled down his back. He checked his armpits. They were damp.

"Shit" he said under his breath. He took off his jacket and held it under his arm.

Then he sat down at one of the high tables against the wall. There were a couple of cute girls at the next table but he looked at the floor to avoid catching their eye. They glanced over briefly from their conversation and then looked away. Too late they caught him looking over. He flushed red again and felt the clammy feel down his spine. He quickly turned away and decided to wait for the lads to arrive.

Eventually the door opened and Derek walked in, Jonas trailing behind. Despite his seniority in years Jonas was the junior party in self-direction. bewildered and confused. He looked like a captured animal.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Derek was a tall, balding, slender man. He dressed in cashmere overcoat, jeans and a shirt. He greeted Joe warmly. "Well, Joe my son. What are you having?" he said to Jonas.

"Heineken" said Jonas. He folded his coat and placed it on the seat beside him. He took out a packet of cigarettes and left them on the table.

"No chance you would ever offer me a pint" said Joe.

"But you already have one" said Derek, his mouth open.

"Only in the door and he's already stirring the shit" said Jonas, shaking his head. "Don't mind him."

He sat down beside Joe whilst Derek was at the bar.

"Can I take a smoke?" said Joe. "I'm out." He threw an empty box of twenty on the table.

Jonas sighed heavily picked up his pack and slammed it down on the table beside Joe.

"You two are a duo, all right" said Joe clearing his throat. He extracted a cigarette from the packet. He looked over at the two girls and quickly looked away.

"Eyeing up the talent I see" said Jonas smiling, grasping his hands together whilst raising his eyebrows.

"And you are not?" He leaned back and pulled and inhaled deeply on the cigarette.

Derek returned with two pints and took his seat facing Joe and Jonas.

"It might interest you to know that I scored recently" said Jonas, raising his chin up and thrusting his shoulders back.

"Is this independently verified?" Joe said, looking at Derek. He narrowed his eyes squinting.

Derek laughed.

"And how do you feel about this girl?" said Joe.

Jonas's brows drew tighter. He looked down and looked away. "I...I....She's coming down tonight. So you can get a look at her then if you must"

"She is human isn't she? Not a farm animal." said Joe.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Shut up.”

“Tell him what you told me” said Derek loudly, his eyes a glow.

The faintest flush crept across Jonas’s cheeks. “I woke up in the morning beside her and I realised I have no self-esteem.”

“I could have told you that for nothing” said Joe.

“Isn’t it a little soon for you to be out and about in light of your recent experience?” He fixed Joe in a cold, harsh stare.

“I need a break from my parentals if nothing else and a few of these to calm my agitated mind.”

“Ah yes. I know that feeling.” He pinched his nose and stroked his chin. “Still in your case I think being at home would be a safer option.”

“Well I think it’s great to see the Joe meister out and about again” said Derek. “What about those two over there? Why don’t you go over and talk to them?”

“Oh I don’t know” said Joe, he bit his lip. “Not really feeling up to it.”

“Go on. Nothing ventured. Nothing gained.” Derek leaned forward, looking him in the eye.

“You can do it” said Jonas, smiling a wide grin, eyes sparkled.

Joe stood up hesitantly. He picked a beer mat off the table and turned it over and over. He glanced over at the girls and looked away.

“Go on.” Derek gave a wide grin – eyes sparkling.

Joe walked over to the other table and interrupted their conversation.

“Excuse me, are you from around here, I mean locals?”

One girl looked up. She curled her lip and frowned. “Butt out – this is a private conversation.”

Joe froze on the spot. He turned around and went back to his seat.

“Shot down in flames” said Jonas. “To be expected really. One look at you would scare anyone.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Now then, let's keep the milling to a minimum" said Derek,

"Are you the adjudicator?" said Joe. "How is Gerry dare I ask?"

"He said he might come down" said Derek.

"Oh no, you didn't invite him too" Jonas groaned."

"I think it all works out very well" said Derek, "get all the lads out. What could be better than that?"

Joe raised his eyebrows and cleared his throat. "You like being the conduit, don't you? Pity you couldn't razzle up a group of girls. Then you are a bit afraid of the girls aren't you?"

"Now who is being milled?" said Jonas

"I have had my moments with the ladies. Tell him Jonas." said Derek.

"Just fleeting really" said Jonas. "Very shy really. I am the ladies' man around here and the dominant male."

"Ha" said Joe.

"Maybe you used to be. I heard about your moments" said Jonas, he gave a half smile and shook his head, "but based on recent track record I would have to down grade you badly."

"But Joe is our point man" stammered Derek. "He goes into combat for all of us."

"You need confidence to be a point man" said Jonas.

"Shagging fat birds would do nothing for my self-esteem. It's hardly anything to brag about. Anyway why do you tell people you have low self-esteem if you don't want them to know?" said Joe.

"Can't they tell? I think it is pretty obvious. I never think I can hide it."

"And do you get down?"

"Sometimes I want to shoot myself it's so bad. A few pints normally lifts it."

"Why didn't you ever go to a doctor?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I don't want pills. So far I have been able to get by without them."

"I have to say I never get depressed" said Derek. "I am not sure I know the feeling."

"I bet Gerry does" said Jonas.

"Why?" said Joe.

"You have to say he has it all - the hypersensitivity and the rest. He is so touchy and irascible."

"You know he is trying to make an album. It has got all this sound gear put together in his flat."

"An album about what?" said Joe.

"Some kind of techno music. He thinks he is going to make a hit record."

"What do you think of his chances, Derek?" said Jonas.

"Not good."

#Gerry

The door opened a tall heavy set man came into the bar. He was balding and his eyes darted back and forth until they settled on Derek.

"Gerry, my son, take a seat."

Gerry took off his jacket and threw it on the couch beside Jonas. Then he went up to the bar to order a drink. When he came back Jonas made room for him on the couch.

"Jonas, how are you. Joe I haven't seen you around for a while."

"I wasn't well" said Joe.

"Nothing serious I hope."

"No nothing major. I am trying to cut down on the drinking."

"I hear you. Cheers lads" and he raised his glass. They all toasted. "What's on the agenda for tonight?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"A few pints then hook up with Derek's workies. We're thinking of going to Howlers."

"Not that place" Gerry scowled.

"You might score" said Jonas.

"Like I will. It is full of gnarly country girls with big hips and red hair. Like I want to score with them."

"Well you don't get anywhere with the college girls" interjected Joe.

"I do."

"I hate to tell you that they are just not interested in you. I haven't seen you with any."

"They all secretly love me. I can see them in my mind." He closed his eyes and mediated, "waving their little punanis at me. I have five girls that fancy me right now in my yoga class"

"Ha. Yoga is for girls anyhow" said Jonas.

"So where are they?" said Joe.

"You'll see. You wait and see."

"Why don't you go to Howler and go for a real girl?" said Derek.

"Those girls are nasty."

"Yes but they are real and interested – not fantasy females" said Joe.

"What do you know about anything? You have been banging on about some Belgian bint for years" said Gerry.

"Maybe I have but at least I did go out with her. When is the last girl-friend you had?" said Joe.

"I recall he said he hoped to get laid in this decade" Jonas laughed.

"You guys are gates."

"Now, now, let's keep the milling to a minimum" said Derek.

"Derek is more in love with men than women."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"What do you mean?" said Derek.

"It's all about the lads, isn't it, Derek" said Joe.

"Why are you attacking me?" said Derek.

"It's the grenade tactic" said Gerry. "He likes to wind everyone up."

"Perverse really" said Jonas.

"Not like you don't do it yourself, Mr Dominant male."

"Who's the dominant male? Jonas?" said Gerry. "Where's the evidence for that?"

"Let's get another round in before the others arrive" said Derek.

#Toilet - Bella

Joe went into the toilet and found an empty cubicle.

"You know you really shouldn't be drinking." It was Bella she was sitting on the toilet seat. She jumped up to make room so that he could sit down. "Aren't you even a little bit worried? And no I don't think you are obsessed with me, like your friends say. You love me that is all."

"Then why can I never see you" Joe sat down on the seat without removing his trousers.

"I will come to you I told you."

"And I see you less now, why is that?"

"Maybe you are not paying attention" said Bella. "Well I must be off, catch you later."

Joe finished his business and came out of the cubicle. Gerry was standing at the urinal. "Were you talking to yourself? I could hear your voice."

"I was just talking out loud" said Joe. "Sometimes I do that."

"Normal guy" said Gerry.

"It's supposed to be a sign of mental health actually, if you must know" said Joe. He washed his hands in the basin and dried them under the dryer. "

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"It has to be in your crazy world."

Gerry followed him out of the toilet and back to the table.

"You'll be happy to hear I purchased some smokes" said Joe, putting the pack on the table beside Jonas.

"You came too late to witness Joe shot down in flames" said Jonas to Gerry. He indicated towards the two girls at the table.

"Some stud you are" said Gerry taking his seat.

"Have you ever even kissed a girl?" said Joe. Derek and Jonas laughed.

"Piss off" said Gerry.

"Come with us to Howler then. You can give yourself a chance" said Joe.

"Yeah Gerry" said Derek, "a chance."

"You guys are gates."

"Are you still sniffing after Catherine O'Neill" said Joe. He clapped his hands shaking with laughter.

"Who is that?" said Jonas raising his eyebrows.

"His flatmate I think" said Derek.

"He was in her room" said Joe. Derek and Jonas burst out laughing.

Gerry reddened slightly.

#Micro Systems

At nine o'clock promptly the door opened letting in a blast of cold air and a large group of guys and girls entered. From their accents and their dress they were clearly European. They sat down at the next seat beside Joe and his friends. Derek recognised one of them.

"Wolf, how are you?" he shouted over.

"Not too bad, Derek" Wolf smiled. He was a tall, thin, ascetic character. They sat down at taking up two tables to the left of Joe.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Now lads" said Derek in whispered tones. "Do I not provide?"

"Provide what exactly" said Joe, "access to a public bar."

"Look, are you blind? Look at the honeys over there and they are all Swedes and Italians and all over Europe. What do you think Jonas?"

"Definitely possibilities" he looked thoughtful.

"Gimme me an Irish girl any day" said Gerry.

"Ah, bullshit. You are just afraid of them that's all" said Jonas.

"It might be time to launch a probe" said Derek.

"No it's not. It is someone else's turn. What about you Derek?"

"But you are so good at it."

"Yes Joe, come on you can do it.

"They are only pushing your buttons Joe. Don't do it if you don't want too." said Gerry.

"I...I..."

Joe stood up in his chair and leaned against the table looking over every so often. Secretly he was staking out a target.

"Come on Joe. You can do it" said Derek.

Joe took one final sip of his beer and was off. He walked across to the next table. He had spied a tall, dark-haired girl who was standing there. She was dressed in black polo neck and grey jacket with a plaid skirt and black tights. Her face was freckled and she had a long angular nose.

"Excuse me" he said pausing to get her attention. "Are you with Microsystems?"

"I am" she turned around and looked him up and down. "Are you?"

"Not exactly. I know someone who works in the company. Do you know Derek?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Derek? Derek? He must be one of the Irish guys. No don't know him."

She spoke confidently and without hesitation.

"Where are you from? You're not Irish anyhow?"

"No I am from Denmark. Have you been there?"

"Never. No. What's it like?"

"Oh well. It's not too bad. I suppose."

"What do you think of the Irish guys?"

She laughed. "That's a question. I suppose I can't ask you what you think of Danish girls."

"I did know a Belgian girl once if that counts."

"So you just decided to pay me a visit?"

"We are just sitting over there." He pointed over towards the lads.

"Ah I see."

"Will you be going to Howler?"

"What is Howler?"

"It's a nite club. Also called Howl at the Moon."

"Oh maybe. I don't yet."

"So maybe I will see you there."

"Maybe" she smiled.

Joe left her and walked back over to the lads.

"Well done Joe. I have to hand it to you" said Derek.

"Yes" Jonas said, "that was well done all right."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Why didn't you stay over there" said Gerry. "She's cute and must be better talking to her than us."

"The time was not opportune for me to strike" said Joe. "Like a fox."

"Ah rubbish" said Jonas "she was about to blow you off."

"I established that she is going to Howler, maybe. And what about you slugs? Twice I have been up now and once shot down I will agree but once who knows."

"I don't find it that easy to approach girls" said Derek. "I don't have your confidence."

"Well you like talking to guys. Why don't you talk to your friend Wolf and get him to introduce you to the girls."

"Maybe I will in a while."

"What about you Gerry?" said Joe. "Are you coming to Howler?"

"Perhaps I will for a change. Maybe my luck is about to change."

"Ah Joe is in the ascendant but how long will it last?" said Jonas.

"Never you mind - perhaps I will crash and burn but it will be crash of a legend."

Jonas laughed. Gerry went up to the bar.

"You know we haven't told him anything about your situation, just in case you are wondering" said Derek. "We thought we would leave that up to you."

"Yes well I might say more about that someday. We will see" said Joe.

"I wouldn't if I were you" said Jonas. "Keep it to yourself. You don't want that getting around and who knows who Gerry would tell."

The decibels rose in the bar as more and more people arrived and soon all the empty seats were taken.

Another round was ordered and consumed. It was not long before they were all standing and mingling with the Microsystem crowd and Wolf was introducing and Joe spoke to the girl he had spoken to before and Sylvia was her name.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

He found himself standing beside Sylvia again and he caught her eye.

“Ah you again. What did you say your name was?”

“Joe. My name is Joe.”

“Yes I see Derek now and I recognise him. He works in the accounts department.”

“Would you like a drink?” said Joe.

“No I am fine thank you. Just fine. This is my friend Esther. She is from Copenhagen too.”

“Ah very good. Welcome to our little island.”

“We don't think we are going to how you say it Howler? It is very expensive and not much fun for us.”

“Oh dear. That's a pity.”

He spoke directly to Sylvia. “Do you think I could call you and maybe we could go out some time? If you like of course.”

“No I don't think that would work. You see I have a boyfriend.”

Joe flushed slightly. “Oh. I didn't realise.”

“That's ok. I don't mind being asked. I don't think you are my type anyhow.”

Joe retreated back to stand beside Gerry.

“That did not go well. I was observing.”

“It could have been worse.”

“My you are a masochist. I couldn't do it. Doesn't the rejection hurt? Even a little?”

“I suppose. I am not very good on emotions.”

“Apparently not.”

“I can't imagine you are an expert.”

“You know my situation.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Not really. Oh you mean that girl when you were in college.”

“Yes I do. That was quite a blow to the self-esteem.”

They stood back to let some girls walk past.

“I don't know Gerry. You are not the only one to have suffered setbacks.”

“I don't want some kind of pep talk.”

“Not intended. I don't care. I would just like to score and get going with someone. That's my agenda.”

Jonas came over and joined them from the Microsystems group. “Derek has gotten an introduction to all the lads – typical! What happened with that Danish one?”

“Has a boyfriend.”

“Oh, dear. Well you tried.”

#Howler

The clock neared closing time on the wall above and the crowd started to thin out. Some went to home. Others went in the direction of nite clubs near the city centre. Following the gang from Microsystems the lads came out on the street. A light drizzle was falling and a chill wind was blowing up the street scattering torn plastic bags, leaves and bits of newspapers.

Joe walked with the group behind the girls. Despite his efforts Derek had made no headway with the other girls in his company. Jonas lit up a cigarette and kept walking. Gerry followed behind.

They crossed the canal bridge and made a right turn. When they reached Mount Street the group turned left and they followed the road some distance. When they got up close they could see the night club. A large queue had formed outside and bouncers were checking ID for everyone who went inside.

“How much is it?” Gerry asked.

“I think it's a tenner” said Derek, his thinning hair slick in the rain.

They joined the queue and waited with the others.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"This is just awful" said Jonas.

"It gets better. Have you been here before" said Joe.

Jonas shook his head.

Eventually they turned arrived and they got to the front door. From inside the sound of blaring pop music could be heard. The Microsystems girls went in and they followed after. They found themselves in a large open plan space with a circle bar at the centre on the right was a narrow aisle with bar seats and tables lining the right. Beyond that was a small dancefloor on a lower level and on the other side of that was another bar. To the left was more seating and booths.

"Let's grab a seat" said Joe and he made for a few seat to his right. The others followed suit.

"We should sit with those Microsystems girls if we want to have any chance of getting to know them" said Jonas.

"I already tried that" said Gerry.

"I didn't see you trying too hard" said Jonas.

"Let's get a round in anyway" said Derek. They all agreed upon that.

Two big girls passed by on their way to the dance floor.

"You know I think I am just going to go for anything tonight" said Jonas.

"You wouldn't consider one of them" said Gerry.

"And what if I do or did. What's wrong with that?"

"Rather you than me."

"In fact I am off on a mission" said Jonas. He put down his pint and set off for the dancefloor.

"Ah the boys, what could be better" said Derek.

"Just the way you like it" said Joe. "You are not going to like growing old."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Who does?" said Gerry. "All my mum talks about is her ailments and her health issues – reading the death notices every day."

In the distance Joe could see Jonas had struck up a conversation with the two big girls. "This may not help his self-esteem" he said.

"What about you Joe? Anything?" said Derek.

"I don't know. I am thinking a nice country girl would suit me. But this is the place if nothing else."

The crowd kept piling in and soon all the empty seats were taken. He had lost count of his pint consumption. Somewhere after number five it could now be six or seven. He grasped his pint tightly in his hand.

#Aoife

It was round about this time that he saw her standing at the bar ordering a drink. She was petite with dark black hair and a nice figure. He got out of his seat.

"Back in a moment" he said to the lads and set off.

When he got up close he could see she was cute and she turned and saw his approach.

"Pretty busy in here tonight" he said.

"I suppose" she replied.

"Where's that accent from?" he said.

"I could ask you the same question."

"Well that's easy. I am from Dublin."

"You don't sound it. Oh I get it you're a south-sider."

"What's wrong with that?"

She said nothing.

"Look maybe we got off on the wrong foot. I'm Joe." He stuck out his hand.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Well that’s something – manners I mean. I’m from Kilkenny if you want to know and she smiled for the first time revealing sparkling white teeth. Her eyes sparkled.

“Look I don’t suppose you want to dance, do you?”

“Do I ever?”

They walked together passed the lads table. “Those are my friends” Joe said.

“I know. I saw you come in.”

They found a space on the dancefloor. Jonas was still working on the two big girls. He glanced over and grinned.

Under the strobe lights Joe could see she was older. Not by much, not a deal breaker. She was energetic but not a particularly choreographed dancer and after two songs they decided to stop.

“Come and sit with me” he said.

“I will sit for a bit but I have to go back to my friends.”

She was in Howler every Friday night. She didn’t know any south-siders and Joe was the first she had talked too. She wanted to buy a house in her village outside Kilkenny and near her parents and move back there was her long term plan. She would be up for meeting again, provided he wasn’t a perv or any kind of weirdo.

Joe went up to the barman and asked for a pen. He brought it back to their table. They had no paper so she wrote her number on the palm of his hand. Aoife - her name was Aoife.

After she left he re-joined the lads.

#Back to lads

“Jammy bastard” said Derek. “She’s quite cute.”

“Yes well done” said Gerry.

“What’s the story?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well maybe we will meet again. Have to see."

"Gerry, why don't you try your hand? What's the worst that can happen?"

"No really. I don't think so. I've taken a few tabs. So not really ready to meet someone."

Jonas reappeared with the big bird standing shyly behind. Joe went and got another stool and they all crammed around the small table.

"Maura, this is Gerry, Joe and Derek."

"Hi" she looked down at the table.

"So Maura what do you do?"

"I am a primary school teacher."

"You must be good with kids" said Joe.

"Yes, that's pretty important."

"That's good because Jonas is a big kid" said Gerry.

Everyone burst out laughing except Jonas.

"Very funny."

"I am going to try a sortie over to the Microsystems table" said Derek, after a lull, "see what's going on."

"What time does this place stay open until anyhow Maura" said Jonas.

"I think it closes at two."

Joe decided not to seek out Aoife again. The evening was getting late and they had an understanding they would meet again. Having succeeded in his mission being there he was beginning to feel very much more like homeward and wondering what kind of reception would await him when he got him.

#Return Home

He parted with the lads on the canal bridge. He walked down passed the pub. The rain had stopped while they were in the nite club. At the junction he took a right turn and walked up his parent's street. He checked his watch. It was 3.30am and he walked up the weedy driveway. The lawn was overgrown and full of weeds and dandelions.

Bella was sitting on the steps still dressed in her jump suit. She twirled her wand.

"I don't mind you sleeping with other girls if you want. I am okay with that."

"You're not real. You are just imaginary."

"So you say, well why am I here then if I am just a fantasy?" She got up and twirled her baton around skipping up and down the steps. "Do you like her? This new girl – E-fa."

"It's Aoife. If you must know and yes I do. And what's wrong with that?"

"I thought I was your one true love."

"Maybe in la la land."

"You just want to forget all about me, and then we will have no chance" she sat down on the steps and started to cry.

He hesitated and stood on the step above. "You already have a boyfriend. You told me in a letter."

"Not like you though. I would give him up for you." Her mascara smudged and black streaks ran down her cheeks.

"Why are you here less often? I haven't seen you in days."

"It's vitally important that you don't forget about me. Write me a letter. Do something to keep our love alive."

"Send it where?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"To my address in Bruges. You still have it. I know you do." He looked around and she was gone.

"And now I am going to bed before the sun rises."

He climbed the steps to the front door and tried his key in the lock. He got it on the second attempt.

When he came into the hallway his mother was standing on the half landing dressed in a blue terrycloth dressing gown.

"What do you think you are doing coming in at this hour and who were you talking to outside the door?"

"Mind your own business."

She advanced down the stairs. "And you have been drinking? And you barely out of hospital."

"What do you expect me to do leaving with a pair of nutcases like you too?"

"Your doctor warned me about this. He said if you don't change your lifestyle you will find yourself right back in their again. And it's now the fourth time, are you ready for a fifth?"

"You need the psychiatrist more than me. Just because you have a family circle that largely agrees with you doesn't prove you are right or know what you are talking about."

"What do you mean?"

"You know very well what I mean. You have run from every councillor that ever came near you. What makes you so fearful of them if you are squeaky clean like you like to think?"

"I am going to bed and I would advise you do the same thing."

She pulled her dressing gown tightly around her and ascended the stairs to her bedroom.

#Dad

In the morning we went down to the basement to Dad's office. He was sitting at his computer but he jumped up when Joe came in.

"Ah Joe how are you today?"

"I am alright."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Can I read you what I am working on today?"

"No please."

"Just a little" and he started to read from the computer screen.

"Subject and subjected, organized society and territory are part of the material environment of the city. Subject of a group is also human subject or a unit in the social organization that depends on the city to survive. The city is a context for social life. Subjects and objects intertwine there. It is a place where a human subject is understood and it is therefore a location for communication."

"I am going to leave if you keep that up."

Dad stopped reading. "I only wanted you to hear the latest bit."

"I don't understand your thesis. I have tried."

"Let me read you a bit more. That will make it clear."

"Look I like to organise things, to make sense of things. Can you understand that?"

"Can do, you betcha!"

"You can take the piss if you want too."

"The old patriarch needs fixing. Isn't that it? Fix Bluebeard!"³

"But the level of tension between you two is insane."

"I still love your mother, you know."

"Then why don't you address any of her concerns."

"Because I can't" He slammed his fingers down on the keyboard. "I have tried and it doesn't work.

Things are wrong for her that cannot be righted, the truth is too hot to handle. You have found that to be the case."

³ A fairy tale character from the Charles Perrault collection. The character is a monstrous villain who marries seven women in turn and warns them not to look behind a certain door of his castle. Inside the room are the corpses of his former wives.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“And what about Tim? He’s never worked or done anything really. He just floats around in your orbit.”

“I am telling you I always tried to help Tim. He was the eldest. She didn’t want to hold him when he was born. I was there in the hospital.”

“What does that mean?”

“Draw your own conclusions. Tim never got any mother love. You got more, much more.”

“It doesn’t seem like I got much of anything at the moment.”

“You were always searching and asking deeper questions. Maybe the biggest joke of all was played on you.”

“What’s the joke?”

“You became your mother’s little man – the man of the house. And so were inspired to fix all her wrongs and issues which with her were always legion. Fixing me was your agenda. I would be more concerned about the effect that has on you rather than me.”

“Get lost. I am not the one with the problem.”

“Somewhat ironic that you became the most problematized.”

#Computer

“How’s your new computer?” he said, changing the subject.

“Great. Flies along.”

“Was she always so vigilant?” he asked.

“You mean Mum” said Dad. “She always had her anxieties. Of course after Tom died she got worse.”

“Why do I need to be an expert on the pair of you? It’s not like I have nothing better to be doing with my life?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You like it, don't you – Oedipus⁴."

"You seem to like also. Do I make you feel like you get on with your wife? It's a heavy burden for me you know. You are living vicariously through me."

"You are as free as a bird. I have always said that. The world is your oyster."

"Free with a diagnosis of bipolar? I don't think so. The furthest I got was back to my parent's house – where I started really."

"You know I don't believe in pills and doctors. Not for you or for Tim either."

"That's easy for you to say. You know that drives me mad. And your wife believes in pills and doctors, don't you know?" There was a pause and then Joe said, "You never did think of seeing a councillor yourself?"

"There is nothing wrong with me, dammit. That's your mother's propaganda."

"And what's all this" He picked up a sheaf of bills and other documents. "These are bills unpaid and overdue notices, bank statements from twenty years ago. Why is all this here? I'll organise them for you."

"No! Don't touch them. I will do them myself sometime."

"It looks like they have been here for a long time. And how long have you been working on your great thesis? It's been ten years at least. Don't you think you should be finished by now?"

"Oh get off. I am going to finish it. I just need more time."

"I am trying to help you, encourage you. I just think you procrastinate."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you don't get things done or finished. You put them on the long finger."

"Every day I am down here working on this."

⁴ Oedipus was a king in Greek mythology, ruling over the city of Thebes. He was the son of King Laius and Queen Jocasta. Not knowing, he married his mother and had four children with her, Polynices, Eteocles, Antigone, and Ismene.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“And why did you leave Trinity. What happened there?”

“Never mind.”

“Random jottings – isn't that what the examiner called it?”

“Malone is a bloody ass and a queen's man to boot, like all those Trinity people. Doubtless he took the soup.”

“But are things really much different in UCD.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have been with them four years now. That's an awfully long time for a thesis.”

“You would be better off tending your own garden rather than monitoring my progress” said Dad.

“Like I say, you like the support. So long as it is the kind of support you want.”

“Ah get off.”

#Lunch

At lunchtime Dad and Joe came up the stairs to the kitchen. Mum was sitting at the table with some cups laid out and a pot of tea made.

“Joe I will pour you a cup of tea” she said.

She said nothing to Dad. He sat down at his usual seat. “Are you going to pour the tea or do I have to do it” he said.

Mum went over to the sink and clattered some plates. She put a sandwich on each plate and then she brought them over. Joe got his sandwich first and finally Dad.

She brought a piece of paper over to the table. “The electricity bill is overdue again and the phone bill” she said.

“I can't pay it” said Dad. “I haven't got it this month.”

“They are threatening to cut off the supply.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Why don't you pay it?" said Dad.

"How much is it?" said Joe. "I have some money in my bank account from the states."

"No. Joe. We won't take your money."

There was silence.

"You know we have an agreement" said Mum to Dad. "You are supposed to take these bills and pay them. I buy the groceries and other bills."

"Very convenient."

"I see you bought a new computer recently. Is that why you can't afford to pay the bills?"

"Oh get off. Mum I am not going to deal with you if you are going to be like this."

Dad got up from the table and walked out of the kitchen and down the stairs back to the basement.

"Why can't you ever work it out?" said Joe after Mum shut the kitchen door.

"What do you mean?"

"All my life all I have known is fights, arguments and disagreements with the two of you."

"You want to live in on utopian planet, Joe, where there are no disagreements or arguments, go right ahead."

"Oh believe me I will never live like you two."

"Well I hope you don't."

"Why do you even stay together if you hate it so much?"

"Where would I go Joe? I had no money."

"You have a job now."

Tim appeared at the kitchen door and came into the room.

"Oh, it's you" said Mum.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

He opened the fridge door.

“Stop eating food out of the fridge. This is not a pit stop for you.”

Tim slammed the fridge door shut. The whole fridge rocked. Then he left the kitchen slamming the kitchen door behind him.

“I am going to move out as soon as I get a job” said Joe.

“You can stay here as long as you like” said Mum. “As you can see we are not any different.”

“It couldn't always have been like this. You must have been in love once, no?”

“Never you mind what we were or weren't. It's what we are now that we have to deal with. I have urged your father time and again to stop wasting his time on these vanity projects he is so obsessed with and to focus on something more realistic and predictable. But he won't listen. We could rent out that basement as an apartment if he wasn't so determined to use up all that space. But he won't even consider it. We could have an nice lifestyle but instead he wants to prove he is some kind of great academic. Do you know he goes around telling everyone he is Professor O'Malley? He hasn't even got his thesis approved yet.”

Joe listened.

“All through the lean years this house could have been repossessed. The bank added interest and penalties on the arrears and it was only through my intervention that I got them to waive the charges. He sat down in that office with a pile of unopened bills and overdue notices. The bailiff would have been knocking on the door. You can't say I didn't try. Every step of the way I thought about the common good the interest of the family. And that's why I stayed and made sure that the house was not repossessed.”

“Quite the heroic martyr, aren't we?”

“You think it's a bit of a joke. And maybe it is to you. But he would have let everything fall to pieces after Tom died. But I knew practicalities had to be attended too.”

“Surely there is a better way than this permanent state of hostilities.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"He won't listen to reason. Why don't you talk to him?"

"Don't try to involve me in this mess. I don't understand either of you. You have two salaries, two incomes coming into the house; there is nothing new in the house. I can't see why you can't afford to pay the electricity and telephone bills. How is that possible?"

"Dad is always in debt. That's how. He runs up huge phone bills talking to his academic buddies abroad and buying things he can't afford on credit. It was always like this. He was always borrowing. He makes me out to be the bad guy when all I am trying to do is inject a little sense into the domestic situation."

Joe listened.

"I never wanted to buy this house because we couldn't afford it. And now it is not probably done up and furnished with junk furniture we brought from the other house. He insisted on moving in in the last few years. We should have sold this house and invested the money."

"You should like the helpless woman the whole time."

"Ah, what's the use talking to you about it. The day we moved he did nothing. He just sat on his computer the whole time. I had to pack everything and Tim helped a bit. You were in America. He was never right since Tom died and his mother died when he was very young. He never had a mother, you know."

"What about his aunt? She raised him, didn't see."

"Well she tried."

#Tim & Joe

She stopped. Tim was standing at the kitchen door.

"Do you want some lunch, Tim?" she said.

"Okay" said Tim. He came in and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Don't lean back on the seats."

"How's Tim?" said Joe.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Getting by, you look like you had a skinful."

"You can talk - permanent skinful in your case. Why don't you get a job instead of hanging around here the whole time? That's what I am going to do anyhow. I can help you with your CV if you want."

Tim flushed on the back of his neck. "Are you offering a job?"

"I'm good at getting jobs. Was in the states anyhow? I could help you."

"There's your sandwich." Mum plonked the sandwich down on the table.

"Ta" said Tim.

"You could get a job in an office maybe in facilities or something. You don't need any background for that."

"I don't want to work in some stupid office" said Tim.

"Well what do you want to do?"

"Something in music" said Tim between mouthfuls of sandwich. A morsel of food flew out of his mouth and landed on the table.

"I always said Tim" said Mum, resuming her seat "that I would help you with getting into music. Why don't you reenrol in the college of music?"

"Don't start at me now. I am very busy you know."

"Busy doing what" said Mum.

Tim said nothing but continued eating.

Afterwards he went outside and had a smoke. Tim followed him out. Mum stayed in the kitchen cleaning up plates and things.

"I didn't know she wouldn't hold you as a baby" said Joe when the door was closed.

"A soothsayer told me that" said Tim.

"Looks like you got the rough end of the stick."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I was the black sheep."

"More like the scapegoat. She blamed you for everything that went wrong. Why would you want to keep coming around here anyhow? What good is it?"

"He says come over. She says get out. That's the story."

"Mixed messages" said Joe.

Tim said nothing.

"I am sorry, I didn't mean to pressurise you back there. It's just you never really had a job."

"Yes I have. I am too busy to have a job."

"But what do you do. I mean you have been unemployed since your twenties."

"I am writing songs and a song book if you must know."

"Why didn't you say so? You know I wanted to write novels."

"Ah yes. We have the creative gene" said Tim.

"Well Dad definitely has it with his thesis and his painting."

"You know you always were her favourite. Being the youngest and everything."

"But I don't understand why."

"You do what she wants. It's the simple. She approves of you for that reason. Now you are going to take a job you don't like because she wants you too. And then where will your writing be?"

"I...I..I can still write."

"But you need to embrace your creativity – not temporise with it."

"I don't see you being creative."

"Well she always put me down for trying to be myself. I don't expect you will be any different."

"Why didn't you go away? Get away? What about Australia or the states or something?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“What difference would it make? Look at you. You didn't escape their clutches even though you struggled mightily.”

“It's not over yet.”

“There is no escape really. Not from them.”

#The Agency

The following Monday he sat in the dining room at the table sitting on one of the dining room chairs. On the mantelpiece were arrayed a selection of her mother's favourite pictures. There was Joe in his academic robes graduating from Trinity College. There was an old faded picture of Tom framed from the airport. He was wearing a jumper wrapped around his shoulders and one hand nonchalantly in his picture. Pictures of Tim or wedding photos were conspicuous by their absence.

He picked up the phone and dialled the number on the newspaper ad in front of him. The line rang briefly then a chirpy girl came on the line.

“Joe, are you in there?” his mother's voice called from the hallway.

“I am on bloody phone. Can I have some privacy?”

“I am just calling about the ad looking for finance people. Can I speak to a recruitment consultant?” he said.

“Hold on.”

While he was on hold music played. He hummed the melody.

“My love has got no money, he's got his strong beliefs

My love has got no power, he's got his strong beliefs

My love has got no fame, he's got his strong beliefs

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

My love has got no money, he's got his strong beliefs"⁵

"Ah Joe O'Malley" a man's voice came on the line. "Yes we received your CV by email. I have it here. Ok so you worked over in a America. Yes that's good. Our clients are looking for just this type of experience."

"That's great" said Joe.

"Could you come in and meet with me? I can't recommend you without meeting you in person?"

"Would tomorrow suit you?"

"Tomorrow, is good? Eleven?"

Eleven works." He hung up the phone.

#Mother

The following day he got up early and donned his suit, tie and a fresh shirt which his mother had ironed for him the night before.

"Let me see the tin of fruit⁶" she clamoured as he came downstairs to the kitchen.

"There" he said, doing a twirl, "satisfied."

He took off his jacket and sat at the table. Mum poured him a cup of coffee and made him some toast.

"You are due back with the doctor, soon" she said sitting down.

"I know. Don't remind me."

"You seem to be doing better with things."

"What do you mean?"

"Well the last thing you want is a relapse. Now you are looking for a job and everything."

⁵ Gala: Freed From Desire

⁶ Suit – Cockney rhyming slang

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by Hugh McGovern

“And you like that, don't you?”

“Well I think you are better off with a job, than like Tim, you don't want to be like Tim.”

“You never stop scapegoating him, do you?”

“Well I just think he could work or do something.”

“You know I was writing a book in America, did you know about that.”

“Sure you told me do you not remember? There's no profit in that you know. Dad has been writing for years and he hasn't got a penny out of it.”

“He likes doing it though. Don't you think it's hypocritical of you to say that when you went on a writing course yourself.”

“What business is that of yours?”

“You condemn and satirise creativity in all of us – including Tim. Did you ever think of being supportive?”

“You can do what you want” she said. “It's the relationship that matters.”

“I know what you mean by a relationship.”

#Recruiter

After breakfast he set off into town. The office was located on the green and he opted to walk instead of wait for the bus. The day was bright and clear and the sun shone broadly breaking through the clouds. He passed the pub where they had met the night before. The pavement was thronged with people going this way and that. Women with prams, others with shopping carts on wheels a group of school children led from the front and back by their teachers.

At the canal bridge he waited for the traffic signals to change and when the light changed to green he walked with the other pedestrians.

At precisely ten forty five he entered the offices of Ellis and Mahon employment consultants and took a seat in the waiting room. The room was in a converted Georgian house. He was seated on plush brown

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

leather couch on a coffee table in the middle of the room; a selection of business newspapers was laid out. On the other couch facing him a pale, heavily made up girl in glasses, straight hair and grey business suit, scowled in his direction when he smiled.

At a circular counter in the corner of the room the receptionist sat.

“Ellis and Mahon, can you hold please? Ellis and Mahon, can you hold please?”

In the lulls between phone calls the clicking sound of her fingers on a computer keyboard could be heard. She was bottle blonde and heavily painted. After a while she looked and said “Joe O'Malley, you can go through now. David will see you. Down the corridor, second room on the left.”

He followed her directions and knocked on the door. A man in his mid-twenties dressed, immaculately sparkling white shirt, tie and trousers welcomed him.

“Joe, come on in. Take a seat. I am Brian.”

The office was small and bare, with just enough room for Brian's desk and a chair for the candidates to sit on. The walls were covered in motivational pictures; one of a man climbing a mountain, the caption read endurance. Another showed a women swimming through a fast flowing river, the caption read stamina.

Brian smiled and resumed his seat. “Ah yes people like those” he nodded towards the pictures. “What do you think?”

“Well I think it's all about corporate exploitation, isn't it?”

Brian gave him a funny look.

“Yes well it says here you were working in America, Chicago – isn't that right?”

“That's it.”

“Wow, product marketing experience. Yes we could definitely place you with that.”

“Well basically I am looking for a job. Something on the southside would suit best.”

“Well would you consider roles outside the Southside area.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I suppose."

"I see there are some big gaps here on your CV. What about this six month period in America? Weren't you working at that point?"

Joe looked over. "Oh that. Yes I was travelling around the US."

Brian put down the CV he was holding. There was a pause. "Look Joe I will be honest with you. Our clients don't warm to candidates who go off on six month holidays, or maybe have issues with the corporate world. If you want to get a job with us you would need to assure me that you are fully committed. I mean how old is that shirt you are wearing?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"Well it looks pretty frayed. Look it my job to be devil's advocate here because if I don't ask you they surely will. Those HR⁷ girls in big corporations are ferocious. Look you seem like a pretty smart guy and well-travelled and all the rest but what they want is guys who will show up every day on time for the rest of their lives and be loyal and productive. Do you need time to think about it?"

"I don't see what a six month holiday three years ago has to do with anything."

"It does. It indicates your attitude and they will pick up on that. Trust me I used to be a CV screener before I got this job. My job was to go through CVs and one pile was the rejects and other was the accepted ones."

"Why would you tell me all of this?"

"I am telling you because I need you to succeed for both of us. If I send you out to my clients I want you to do a good job. You are representing me as well as yourself."

"Isn't that a given?"

"Maybe today it is or this month or these six months, but what about in two years' time? Won't you be itching to go travelling again? Our candidates don't go travelling. Or at least we try to avoid the ones who

⁷ Human resources

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

want too. Because they are bad news for us and they are not happy in the roles they get and far hills are always green for them.”

“Well if I put your name forward you need to think in terms of at least four years. That would be the minimum given the holes in your CV.”

“I am serious. I need a job and I want a job. Can you get me a job?”

He leaned down and reached into a drawer in his desk and took out a piece of paper.

“Have a read of this” he said.

“Reporting to the Head of Demand Planning and part of a team of Demand Planners, the Planning Analyst has a unique role with two core aspects. Firstly responsible for the high level reporting of the Demand Planning team into the core business leadership teams and secondly to provide relief and leave cover for the 5 Demand Planning Managers.”

Joe said nothing for a moment. Then he said “look’s great. I think I could do that.”

“Well alright then. I can see that you are. I will try. Stay in touch with us and give me your mobile number”

Joe shook his hand and left the office. He walked through the waiting area and nodded at the receptionist on his way out.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

C6

#Gerry

A fresh breeze was blowing as he stood on the steps of Ellis and Mahon outside the front door. He paused unsure. There was five euro in his pocket and there was no use ringing Jonas or Derek, they both had jobs. They were more the people who didn't take six month holidays. In the end he took out his phone and rang Gerry.

It rang for an age and he finally picked up.

"Fancy a swift?"

"You interrupted a very nice dream" said Gerry.

"Well, what about it?"

"Where are you?"

"Town."

"Fancy jumping on the dart?"

"I could. Where to?"

"Wicked Wolf."

"Bit of a trek but I could go for it."

"Do. I'll see you there in an hour."

He sat on the train in his tin of fruit and watched as the stops flashed by. A voluptuous, dark haired girl in a black business suit - heavily made up got on at Booterstown and flashed him a second, hurried look, as she passed by. Despite it he felt his horizons sinking away as the winter sun disappeared behind grey clouds.

At Blackrock he got off the train and walked on the walkway to cross over the platform. The girl disappeared clapping quickly down the metal stairs and out into the street. When he got to the pub there

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

was no sign of Gerry so he sat at the bar and ordered a drink. When the drink arrived he took it over a booth near the door where he could see out. Eventually he could see Gerry coming up the street. He was a tall, overweight man with thinning hair and an abstract aspect. He came in through the double doors and Joe waved at him.

“What’s with the suit?” he asked.

“Job interview, agency anyway.”

Gerry got his pint and sat down.

“How can you stand it? Living with your mum?”

“I can’t stand it” said Gerry. He took a deep gulp of his pint. “You know I have to accept that the best job for me is probably security.”

“Security? That’s a moron’s job.”

“I can’t see anything else working out.”

“You need to get laid, that’s your problem. All that sexual frustration, not good for a human.”

“I am very close to closing the deal now with one of the girls at yoga. Anyway what about you? Do you really think some dumb job in a multinational is going to work out for you. Surely it will all end in disillusionment.”

“Don’t say that.”

“But it’s true. Be realistic. You don’t like the corporate world any more than I do.”

“What happened in Commerzbank?”

“I just didn’t get on with my manager. He said black and I said white. We were ever going to agree or get along.”

“I hate the corporate world. But what can I do? I need money to move out and get a place Hell I need money just to have a few pints. There is no money in being creative and being a writer. The whole thing is fucked. I can’t work it out.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Now you're talking."

"Are you deriving some satisfaction from this?" said Joe.

"Somewhat."

"Misery loves company."

"By the by a little rumour tells me you were not well recently."

"Who told you that?"

"I just worked it out. That's all. What's the story?"

"Well I suppose I can say you know what clinical depression is, don't you?"

"I do. That what you got?"

Joe nodded.

"What does it mean?"

"It means that leading a normal life is pretty fucking challenging. It means that everything you ever believed in or thought was normal is just a load of shit. It means you have to teach yourself how to tie your shoe laces all over again and smile!"

Gerry was silent for a moment. "Well I won't tell anyone, don't worry."

"How did you end up living with your mum anyhow?"

"I don't know. After dad died I just quit my job and moved back in. It is just so convenient. And now I have been there two years. I get the scratch you know. But don't tell anyone."

"But you can't bring anyone back. I know if she is anything like my parents."

"My brothers don't want me living there. They say I am freeloading but I don't care. Fuck them. What do they know?"

"I think you should move out. You are never going to get any action living with your mother."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Not until I finish my album. Then I will be ready. Anyway what will I do for money. I am not going back to financial services."

"It does appear to be a bit of a bind."

"Anyway my back is killing me at the moment. I can't be thinking of moving and the stress of it. Are you going to call that one from the weekend?"

"Plan to."

"She looked cute enough from a distance anyhow."

They ordered another round. Gerry paid. "Tell me you have enough to get the DART back."

"Just barely" Joe put his hand in his pocket. "You know it was never supposed to be like this. I had such high expectations. Perhaps I was doomed to disappointment."

"No I think we are underachievers, really" said Gerry. "Best university in the land and we ended up being very yellow pack."

"I am not done trying."

"It won't work out" said Gerry. "Trust me I have tried."

"You're creative too. Like me. What's this about an album?"

"Who told you that?"

"I have my sources."

"Those guys are gates. Why did I say anything? It's in process. And it will be mega."

"Will you be on Top of the pops?"

"Very funny. When I do my album then I will have all the punanis I want and all the cash I want. Then I can say adios to my mother and move into my own pad."

"I am aiming more for the half and half model."

"What's that?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Office worker by day and writer by night. Don't you have any fight left in you?"

"Don't give me that high moral tone. You should know I have had my setbacks too."

"Like what?"

"I was engaged. Did you know that?"

"To who?"

"Ah it was a long time ago. We were very young. Too young I suppose. I thought she was the only woman in the world for me. Then she dumped me. For another guy. Thank you very much. Then I put on a lot of weight and let myself go, generally."

"I didn't know."

"Not many do. I don't spread it around. I keep these things to myself. My mother never liked her. But I didn't care."

"Another?" he tilted his glass in Joes direction.

"Ain't gots."

"I can spot you."

Joe nodded. "Thanks."

Gerry came back with the drinks. "Do you know the feeling that you have already met the woman of your dreams and lost her?" he said, sitting down. "You were mad keen on the Belgian girl, what was her name?"

"Bella."

"Yes Bella. I bet you would have married her in an instant."

"I suppose. She wasn't from my culture, you know. That would probably have caused some issues."

"Ah, you are speaking with the head and not the heart. The heart makes those kinds of decisions not the head. You would. I remember the way you talked about her."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“What does it matter now? It didn't work out.”

“But it is like a death for me anyhow. I don't care about the girls I met now. I only think they don't compare to Hilary. And they don't.”

“I think you are going to have to get over it. I am going to have to get over it.”

The shadows lengthened on the street as the traffic started to build through the village. They fell silent and watched the people going back and forth.

“I best get back for dinner” said Gerry breaking the silence.

Joe nodded.

#Tom

He left him at the doorway of the pub and declined the lift home. He needed to think and be alone for a while before the inevitable reunion with his parents. He walked back to the railway station. Tom was standing outside the station and followed him in step as he bought his ticket.

“Oh no” said Joe, in his head.

“Come on is that anyway to greet me. It's been a while now.”

“You are not real.” He sat down on a bench on the platform.

“You wouldn't get far without me. I power your idiotic flight, if you will forgive the metaphor.”

“I don't know what you are talking about.”

“I am talking about why I am here and I mean to you. That slut Bella can never provide you with the kind of reassurance you need from me.”

“Just leave me alone.”

“It doesn't work like that. I will leave you alone when you don't need me. You know it is true.”

“I am just not ready yet.”

“Well you are a long time getting ready. You better hurry up.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Tom was gone just as soon as he arrived. A train screeched into the station in a shower of sparks and Joe boarded.

He gazed out the window as the train rattled back into Dublin. The lights winked and flashed on the Pidgeon House towers.

#Dinner

By the time he got home his mother was laying out the table for dinner. Dad was below in his lair. He went upstairs and changed out of his suit and came back down.

“How did you get on?” she said.

“Not bad. He said he might have something for me.”

“Oh that’s great Joe. Really you are much better off with a job.”

He sat at the table. “Can I smoke inside?”

“Really I would much rather you didn’t. Oh go ahead this once.”

When the dinner was ready she called Dad and then called him again.

“What’s keeping him?”

“I’ll go down.”

Dad was sitting in front of his computer typing away. “Give me a moment. This stuff is really good.”

“Your dinner is ready.”

“Don’t go at me, tell her. I’ll be up in a second.”

#Dad - Creativity

He stood at the doorway and said “why do you struggle so much with your thesis?”

Dad stopped typing and looked around. “My father never wanted me to be creative. He hated that side of me. When I was ready to leave school I wanted to be a painter. Did you know that?”

“I never heard that story.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"The compromise I reached with my father is that I would study architecture. And now here I am all these years later doing what I want to do."

"It takes a long time for an artist to find himself" said Joe.

"That's true Joe – very true. I forbade creativity to myself with my father's approval. I would have lost that approval if I had done what I wanted. So I compromised, I read French literature and philosophy in college in my spare time when I was supposed to be studying for my exams."

Joe listened.

"Don't ever forbid your creative nature, Joe. I know you have it. You will spend a lifetime hating the dichotomy you create for yourself."

"Why did you wait so long then if what you say is true?"

"I had you, didn't I, And Tim to feed and educate? How was I supposed to be a painter then and not to mention an unsupportive wife? There was a lot of pressure on me to be a person I never wanted to be - my aunt and my sisters too. They had an unrelenting vision of a wonderfully uncreative success story. Success for me has always been finding that creative side and keeping it directly in my sights."

"Why would people bully you into something you don't want?"

"Same reason your mother is the enemy of your creative self. She doesn't want you exploring that. It's poverty in a word. All those people come from relentless driving poverty. There were no artists and painters and writers from peasant stock – at least not without a monumental internal struggle. I was the one who got the college education in my family – I was the man of the house. My sisters came second but the expectations came to me. Art is the luxury of the rich – the aristocracy – not that we have one in this country or the bourgeois that we do have – an artist could emerge from that background but not the peasantry. No it's all about potatoes and money to them. They are the true materialists."

"We are tormented souls then."

"Now you have got it."

"Don't look so happy about it."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You sprung from a pratai⁸." They both laughed out loud.

He turned around and went back to his computer.

#Dinner

Joe went upstairs.

"You were back quite late this evening" Mum said.

"I met Gerry."

"Ah yes. How is he?"

"Much the same, really."

Dad came in.

"Why do you insist on being late all the time for dinner? Specifically when I have prepared something for all of us."

"Ah Jesus" said Dad, as he took his seat. "What would you know? You don't appreciate anything I am trying to do. It's all rubbish to you."

"Why don't you focus on something that is going to get you paid?"

"Vegetables Mum, vegetables, Mum. I know the Queen of England approves of good business acumen."

She served Joe first and then finally put down a plate for Dad. "Did you pay the electricity?"

"Am I going to be able to eat my dinner in peace? You always hated my creativity. Admit it."

"I don't know what you are talking about. All I am saying is we could have a nice income if we did up and let that basement. You don't really need all that space. It's full of junk anyhow."

"It's not junk. I need those files for my business."

"You haven't had any private work in years. Joe what do you think? Joe is looking for a job."

"It's not a job he needs" said Dad.

⁸ Gaelic for potatoe

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"What do you mean?" said Mum.

"Can I speak? I do have an opinion" said Joe. "Dad is discovering his creative side. And that takes time."

"Don't you think he is a bit old to be discovering anything about himself? I hope you are not going to go down that road."

"I don't see anything wrong with that road but I also recognise the need for money. I am adopting a two speed approach if you want to know- office worker by day and writer by night."

"Well I suppose that is something."

"Thanks very much I don't think. And why are you so obsessed about money. You don't want for anything. You live in a posh neighbourhood."

"It was the cow Joe – ask her about the cow."

"What's the story with the cow?"

"Her Dad had to bring his cow back from market unsold during the economic war⁹ with the Brits. There was no bread on the table that day."

"What do you mean?" she said. "You are betraying a confidence."

"Filthy lucre Mum - filthy lucre."

"But I don't understand – things are not like that now" said Joe.

"Ah Joe you were never poor. You never knew poverty. That was what she saw growing up and that ever since affected her."

"Well neither did you know poverty. The O'Malley's thought they were a cut above the rest. Teachers, that's all they were from a primary school in Kildare - nothing more - but oh how they fancied themselves – a total ponce really. They thought they were country gentry, hob-knobbing with the parish priest and the doctor. It all came down to the fact that they thought there was money in their background – coursing through their veins."

⁹ British embargo of Irish cattle imports during the 1930s.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Who are you taking about?”

“Your father’s grandmother hailed from money. Her mother owed shops – one in Naas and one in Longford. Her mistake was to marry beneath her station but she brought her pretensions with her. You can see it in Dad’s sisters anytime.”

“I am leaving the table if this goes on.”

“I am not just talking about you, you know. Joe what’s the name of that snobby girl you were so taken with – from Belgium.”

“Bella?”

“Ah yes Bella, well there is history repeating itself.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I make my own choices.”

Dad was silent. After that and they all ate quietly.

#Aoife

After dinner he went into the drawing room and closed the door behind him. Mum was under strict instructions not to enter. Before he went to bed on Friday night he had carefully transcribed the number from his hand into his phone. He picked up the house phone and dialled Aoife’s number.

The phone rang for a while and a woman’s voice answered.

“Yes?”

“Is Aoife there?”

“Hang on. Aoife there is someone on the phone for you.”

He bit his lip and waited.

“Hello.”

“Aoife, it’s Joe from Howler.”

“Oh.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"How are you?"

"Joe, oh Joe I remember you – the south-sider."

"That's me. Joe - the south-sider."

"Well how are you?" Her voice warmed up.

"It seems like a long time now since last Friday night" said Joe.

"It does. What have you been up too?"

"Hmmm..." he stuttered slightly, leaning back in the chair. "Oh, this and that. I am just back from the states. Did I mention that last time?"

"No."

"Actually, I am looking for a job. That's the plan anyhow." He tilted his head back and stretched out his legs under the table.

"You don't have a job?" Her tone raised a pitch.

"Not right now. I will have, I mean I plan to very soon." He shook his head.

"How long have you been back?"

"Just a few weeks. That's all." He scribbled his name and crossed it out several times, etching the point of the pen deeply into the pad.

"Oh."

"Listen, do you still want to meet up?"

She didn't hesitate. "Ok. What do you want to do?"

"How's about dinner? There's this place on Dawson Street."

"Oh yeah, I know the place. Dinner is a nice idea."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

They arranged to meet at eight on Thursday. He hung up the phone, silently pumping a clenched fist up in the air.

#Bella & Tom

He went upstairs saying nothing to his parents and lay down on the bed in his room. He tried to rest his mind was churning. He opened his eyes and Bella was sitting at the end of the bed.

"This is the last time I will speak to you" she said.

"Why do you say that?"

"You are leaving me now and you don't care for me anymore. You have found someone else."

"You are not real Bella. I know that now. I figured it out."

"You always figure it out. And then you rush to the future and where does it get you? Then you meet me again because you can't forget."

"We had our chance - -our moment. It was not to be I suppose."

"You will never forget about me. You won't be able to."

"Who are you talking to?" said Mum through the door.

"Go away and leave me alone" her footsteps retreated downstairs.

"You won't forget me" said Bella. "I don't think you are able to. We have been here before, Joe, you forget."

"You need us, Joe" said Tom, standing by the door.

"I thought you hated each other."

"We are part of you Joe. We can never be separated."

"I will let you in on a secret Joe" said Tom, "Bella and I are friends. We always have been."

"What do you mean?" said Joe.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Remember how you couldn't feel - couldn't feel anything and no matter who you were involved with nothing really mattered?"

"So. That was before Bella."

"Yes Joe it was before Bella. It was love for me, Joe, not for her. That cast a shadow over your heart. Bella saw that. She realised that was why you couldn't feel. Remember how she helped you step into the emotion of what you felt. She was the only person you knew you realised that you held me very close to your chest."

"That can't be true."

"Why all the obsessive love and the demanding letters you wrote to Bella? Why the inability to let go? It was grief, Joe. It was always grief."

"Bella you wanted me to send those letters. You even asked me too."

"Joe you weren't well when you wrote them. You couldn't let go. You know the best love letters are written with a broken heart."

"But you said forever and you meant it when you said it. Remember the letters you wrote me, how you loved me more than the moon and the stars and the sun. We were going to have a family and spend our lives together. You told me everything and I told you everything."

"I was nineteen Joe. You were twenty two, what do you think? What were the chances? You didn't even live in Belgium. I never wanted to leave Bruges. I moved on Joe. I am just a fantasy now to keep you company when you go crazy and come off your medication. There is nothing between us now. I have a boyfriend now and someday I probably will marry him."

He closed his eyes and repeated to himself. "Just a figment of my imagination" he said to himself. "I have been wrong all this time. Bella isn't real. Tom isn't real. They really are gone and gone for good."

"You can say that all you want, but you have never been able to get rid of us yet. And why now would be any different?"

"It will be."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Keep taking your medication that’s what we say unless you want to see us again.”

Bella stood up and took Tom’s hand.

He looked up and around. The room was empty. He took a long time coming down from the room.

Tears welled up and poured down his cheeks. He sniffed and wiped his running nose. He stared into space a distant empty stare.

#Brian

The next day he got up late and his mother shouted up the stairs to him. “Joe there is someone on the phone for you.”

“Take a message.”

“I think it’s a recruitment agency.”

Joe jumped out of bed and ran downstairs to the dining room.

“Hello” he said picking up the phone. “This is Joe.”

“Joe, it’s Brian, from Ellis and Mahon.”

“Brian, how are you?”

“Good, listen I have good news for you, one the clients liked your CV. They are an American multinational – you’ve heard of Zyprex of course. They like people who have experience stateside. They are based in Loughlinstown” He paused. “Is that a problem?”

“No, Loughlinstown is fine. I would get a car for the right job, you know.”

“Exactly, well it’s on the Southside like you wanted. Now remember what we talked about. You interview well, I’ll give you that, so hopefully you shouldn’t have too much trouble charming them. It’s in product marketing and I am sending you the spec so you can review it. They are particularly interested in your experience in Chicago so make sure to prepare plenty of examples for them. I am setting you up for Thursday at eleven. I have placed two other people in there already and they both loved it. They work hard but the company pays well and it looks really good on the CV when you finish, which in your case should be four years.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh yes and get a new shirt. The suit is okay but that shirt has had it.”

“I will.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Let me know how you get on. We will talk on Thursday."

"Right." He hung up the phone.

He went down to the kitchen. Mum was sitting at the kitchen table.

"I got a job interview in Loughlinstown" he said, w huge smile on his face.

"Oh Joe, that's great news. I am delighted. Doing what?"

"It's for an American company. You probably don't know the name. The salary is pretty good."

"How much?"

He mentioned a figure.

"Oh Joe, that's brilliant. Just brilliant."

"We have to celebrate. How about lunch?"

"Well I don't know. Shouldn't you save your money?"

"I think I will take you and Dad out for a nice lunch. If I get this my money problems will be over."

He went down to talk to Dad. "Can I borrow your car on Thursday?"

"Why?"

"I have a job interview."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

"Why?"

"Well it could be stressful."

"Being here with no money is stressful."

"What about the creative stuff? I mean is it even creative?"

"Don't be going on about that."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well. You do seem rather enthusiastic."

#Jonas

That evening the phone rang and it was Joas.

"Joe, I am recruiting for pints."

"Oh well, okay."

"Where?"

"Searsons."

"It's a school night, you know."

"I know. Derek is coming too but won't be joining us for a while."

"Just you and me then. Is this a date?"

Jonas laughed.

At eight o'clock precisely he walked through the doors of the pub and saw Jonas sitting at a table by himself, a half pint already drunk. He had successfully extracted another twenty from Mum. Now that he had a job interview he was the golden boy once. He purchased a pint and came over.

"My, you have a spring in your step" Jonas commented.

"Perhaps I do" he said sitting down.

"Ah that one from Howler. I heard about that."

"Perhaps in part but not in gold."

He told him briefly about the job interview.

"I have heard about that company" said Jonas, pulling deeply on his cigarette. "They are supposed to be absolute slave drivers. People are trying to get out of there not get in."

"Man, you really know how to put a negative spin on things."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Sorry. Just thinking out loud."

"What about you and the big bird?"

"Maura? I have decided to be much coyer about these things. Mainly because I don't want to give you ammunition to hang me by."

"Is it always me?"

"Mainly - you are the champion slagger."

"You have been known to toss the odd grenade, yourself."

"Perhaps I do. Man – my old man is driving me nuts."

"He is very generous, no?"

"Perhaps he is. But there is always a catch with him."

"Well I suppose eventually the money has to run out."

"It's my compensation for all the emotional abuse I have suffered."

"Well I don't know how I feel about my parents. Sometimes I think that I like them and then other times I just can't stand them. You know my father is a bit of a bounder with the money."

"You told me before. Well my Dad was always good with the money; problem is he expects me to be like him that way. I am just not very materialistic I suppose."

"Neither am I. I want to be a writer."

"And you are going to work for that company in Loughlinstown? – good luck."

The door opened and Derek walked in. Jonas waved. "We are talking about parents" he said, as Derek took his seat.

"Parents, why?"

"Just because" said Joe.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"That's private business" said Derek. "I am not talking about that."

"Your father is a bit of a bollox – didn't you say that once."

"Leave it, Joe. I am not talking about it."

"Well I have no problem talking about my parents" said Jonas. "I never saw my father growing up. He was always working. My childhood I spent with my mother mostly."

"My father is an artist or wants to be. That's his bent. So there were always money problems. He was never focused on the family finances."

"I can't imagine what that was like."

"Major ongoing stress - that's what it is like."

"You guys are gates. I am getting a pint." Derek left to go to the bar.

"Why can't he talk about it?" said Joe.

"His father is a complete bully. That's why. They don't get on at all."

"He should talk about it."

"That's not his way. He clams up on these topics. That's how he rolls. He always presents a good face to the world."

Derek returned with his pint.

"I think its hardest being the eldest. My brother always struggled."

"You mean Tim" Jonas started smiling.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing, nothing. Anyone could tell Tim was going no place. It's obvious."

"Now, now" said Derek, "that's Joe's brother you are talking about."

"I thought we were having a frank conversation."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well, what about your brother if it comes to that. He is much more successful than you."

"He's a knob" said Jonas. "Anyway he got a ton of cash from the father to begin with."

"I told you both. It all ends in tears. Better not to start it" said Derek.

"Shouldn't you be making your own money Jonas rather than relying on handouts from the old man?
And Derek, didn't your Dad buy you a car recently?"

"Well at least I don't live at home with my parents."

"I can't believe you are saying this to me given my circumstances."

"Well people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

"He's right Joe; you are always stirring the pot. And then you don't like it when it comes your way."

"The two of you ganging up on me now."

"Everyone relies on everyone else. That's how I see it."

"What about being independent?" said Joe. "When does that come into it?"

"You are as independent as us too – if you want to be" said Derek.

"I never said I wasn't."

"I don't know. I just want to meet a nice bird and that will do me" said Jonas.

"Love isn't the answer, you know" said Joe.

"What do you mean?"

"Well I thought that girl Bella was the bees knees in the cats pjaymas. But what difference did it make in the end. She just wasn't interested and that was it."

"It was strange though" said Derek, "that it came up years later for you. I mean you never mentioned her in the states at all really."

"Well I didn't feel like it. And you had your bust up with Barbara. That never worked out in the end."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"The depression got to her in the end. She could never get over that. You see the thing of it was I wasn't depressed when we met. That came later. I hated that job I had over there. It was so boring and mundane."

"What would you do if you had your choice of job?" said Derek.

"Pornstar" said Jonas. Jonas and Joe laughed.

"No be serious."

"I don't know. I don't want to work. Who would? Maybe something artistic like Joe here. Joe is my Muse."

"Oh God" said Derek.

"What's wrong with that?" said Joe.

"I don't get it though" said Derek, "why else wouldn't the two of you work. It's easy. It's well paid."

"It's the miscreant creative gene, I suppose" said Joe. "Perhaps you are lucky not to have it."

"Believe me he has other problems"

"You sound like him now" said Derek. "What other problems?"

"Well you are very shy for one. Not comfortable around people you don't know. You love the one on one; always have to be in control."

"You arranged tonight" said Joe to Jonas.

"Ah yes, but it was his idea."

"I don't see a problem" said Derek. "It works out pretty well for everyone most of the time."

"But you would never get roped in to other people's plans – or rarely. Why don't you just admit you are a control freak and be done with it."

"Ah, for God's sake! Always someone to blame Jonas, except you of course."

"I don't see why that had to result in an argument. I am just making an observation."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Jonas if you going to make a lot of personal remarks you can't expect me not to respond."

"Well I am just enjoying my pint" said Joe.

"We don't get on that well really, do we?" said Jonas.

"Who does get on well with who" said Derek. "You can't expect utopia you know. People are people."

"I would hate to be on my own. I know that much."

"Come on. It's not that bad – is it?" said Joe. "Being on your own is cathartic – character building. You have never really been on your own much, Jonas have you?"

"I never liked it. I wouldn't go to a pub by myself, - not in a month of Sundays."

"I used to over in the states. It's nice. Just sit there with the paper and a pint for an hour or too" said Derek.

"I need to meet someone, that's the ticket. Someone I am into" said Jonas.

"You can fall out with a girl just as easily as a guy, Jonas" said Derek.

#Aoife

On Thursday night he left himself plenty of time to walk into town. He made a reservation before he left and the woman on the phone assured him it would be quiet. He checked his wallet – Dad had lent him fifty euros on the grounds he was buying a new shirt with the money. Money worries had left him entirely as the new job was as good as in the bag. He arrived early and was shown to his table.

"Are you ready to order?" asked the waiter.

"No, I am still waiting for someone" he nodded and left. From his seat he could see some way down the street and he imagined she would be walking up from Nassau Street. He checked his watch for the second time. It was only five after. After that he stopped looking and pretended to develop a great interest in the menu. After a while he heard the front door open and a gust of cold air entered the restaurant. He glanced over – it was her. He pretended not to see.

"Is this seat taken" she stood at his table, smiling.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"No, I mean yes. I mean I am only joking" he blushed but it quickly faded.

"My, this is a swanky place."

"It's not too bad. What do you think? The food is supposed to be good."

"It looks like it would be. I got the bus to College Green and walked."

"Where do you live anyhow?"

"Oh out in the boonies. I had to get two buses to be here tonight. I hope you appreciate the sacrifice I am making here."

"I am glad you came. Really meeting strangers can be so hit and miss."

"So you live with your parents and you are unemployed. My you are a catch" she smiled.

"You are taking the piss."

"Just a little, curious really."

"Well I came back from the states two weeks ago."

"I thought you told me in Howler you were back a year."

"I thought you would prefer someone who was acclimated."

"Oh I see - economical with the truth."

"What about a drink before you interrogate me some more?"

"Excellent idea."

"Bottle of wine?"

"Even better."

"So what do you do?"

"I am a teacher – primary school. What about you?"

"I work in the corporate sector."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Tell me you are a manager or something. Those jobs are just awful."

"What's wrong with them?"

"A computer could do it or something. They have absolutely no vocational value."

Joe said nothing.

"Sorry" she said after a moment. "I tend to blurt out what I am thinking."

"It's okay."

"No it's not. That's what you do. Or want to do."

"I was going to say that is the day job."

"Yes."

"Night time I want to be a writer – there is an artist trapped inside me screaming to be released."

"Much better. Tell me about the writing."

"You don't think it's impractical."

"Whoever told you that?"

"Just about everyone I know."

"Well don't listen. Listen to yourself."

"Well I have done two."

"Two what?"

"Novels. But I can't get them published."

"Well publishing is hard. I have a friend who spent years at it and gave up in the end."

"Another glass of this indifferent Shiraz?" he raised the bottle.

"Works for me."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“And what about you? Now that I have been dissected. Teaching enough to float your boat?”

“For now, anyhow. Maybe kids someday. I don't know. If I meet the right guy of course.”

“And will you?”

“One must hope I suppose. But there is a lot of gobshites out there.”

“Like who?”

“Guys looking for a one night stand and nothing else but they play along until they get it and guys who are no hoppers – duds – and guys who have mental problems – you really have to watch out for them.”

“How can you tell?”

“It's not as easy as you might think. Fucked up people can be very well disguised you know.”

“I don't think there are any really bad people just confused and lost people. That's all.”

“Well you are naïve. They are there alright. It pays to be alert.”

“What about your people? What are they like?”

“Well my parents were teachers too. Retired now. Dad was principal of a small school in Bennettsbridge, if that means anything to you.”

“I don't know it but keep talking.”

“There is not much to tell really. Just me and my sister and my parents growing up. Dad had a coronary a few years back but he is ok, now.”

“What about you?”

“I think my parents are insane. They fight all the time. I have a brother who is a professional layabout. That about sums them up really.”

She looked at him in amazement for a moment and then started to laugh. “Why do you think your parents are insane?”

“Because they are. My dad is the artist that never was.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"That's you."

"And my mum is a gold digger from Cavan who backed the wrong horse."

"I have figured it out. You haven't grown up yet, have you?"

"Well I would like to try."

"I think you need to do a little more than that."

"Does that mean you are going to leave? Because I really hope you might stay."

"Because you don't like your parents? You are neglecting to ask me if I like mine."

"Well do you?"

"I suppose they are ok. I don't think I could live with them though." She thought for a moment. "I suppose in your case it is short lived."

"Exactly."

"And you lived in America."

"Exactly."

"Then there is hope for you yet."

"Let us drink to that."

The mains arrived late. They had opted for no starter letting the wine do its work.

"How old are you anyhow?"

"How old do you think?"

"Just tell me."

"Thirty."

"Well I am thirty two. Does that bother you?"

"No not at all. It makes you sound maternal."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“And you like that, don't you?”

“I need someone who is together because I suppose I am not very together.”

She smiled. “You know it's all very funny and everything but when I met a guy I try to visualise them hold a baby. Somehow I think you might be ok.”

Joe said nothing.

“Sorry I should explain. I speak my mind. My friends tell me not too. I get into trouble for that.”

“That's ok” said Joe. “I like your candour. Life is too short.”

After the meal he walked her down to her bus stop on college green. A quick peck on the cheek was all that was permissible. After about ten minutes her bus arrived.

“Call me” she said, as she boarded.

#Killiney - Dad

The next day Dad came into his room early.

“How about you and I take a walk” he said.

“You want to go for a walk now. What about your thesis?”

“It can wait for a change. What do you say?”

Later they both got into Dad's car and soon they were speeding out of Dublin.

“I must say I am pleasantly surprised” said Joe.

“Why?”

“You are deviating from your usual pattern.”

“I don't want to make Mum jealous” said Dad.

“Are you serious?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"There are many things about your mother you don't know." He parked the car in the car park overlooking Killiney strand. "Let's walk along the beach."

Their feet crunched along on the gravel beach. The whooping cries of seagulls were around them as they circled above.

"Let's walk on the hard sand" said Joe.

Dad was quiet. "When I first met your mother" he said, "she wasn't sure who the father was of Tim."

"What? Who did she think was the father?"

"Her father, your grandfather was a violent and abusive man. He abused all his daughters. So she thought her Dad was Tim's father but I knew he was my son. He used to hit them all too and his wife."

"But was nothing done. Why wasn't it reported?"

"Things weren't reported back then. Are you mad? It was the family or the psychiatric hospital for anyone making those kinds of allegations.

"And what if I say it to her?"

"She'll never admit it. You are wasting your time. You have to understand that for a young girl of your mother's age back then if that secret got out her reputation would be ruined no-one would want to marry her. But I didn't care a curse. I loved your mother. Still do in fact. But I knew I was loved. She never did.
"

"Then when I was babbling about sexual abuse in my ravings I was really talking about her. That explains my fixation on Bella; I thought it was always to do with Tom's death."

"She knew the whole time that she was abused, she just never told you or anyone else apart from me."

"And why are you telling me then?"

Dad stopped and looked closely at Joe. "You always looked more deeply than Tim. You always wanted the truth. Her family allowed her to pretend to be the woman she is not. She never loved Tim the way she loved you."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“And yet I don't feel loved by her either.”

“Incest is a terrible crime. But it can also be a manifestation of love.”

“I don't think I could make that connection.”

“You never had too. I told you before the truth is too hot to handle. You take a tremendous risk in pursuing it. That's why I find refuge in art. The world doesn't make sense Joe. It never has and it never will.”

“Maybe not for you. But for me it is essential that I make sense of it.”

They walked on crunching up the beach.

#Doctor

He walked back up the winding driveway to the hospital. It was two weeks since he had left. He walked in through the main door and sat down in the waiting area. His appointment was at ten and he was early as usual. The nurse spied sitting there.

“Joe you are back.”

“Just visiting.”

“My you look so well.”

“I am well.”

“Did you find a cure or something?”

“I wish – not so lucky.”

The doctor stuck his head out of his office.

“Better go” he said to the nurse.

“Joe I'll see you now.”

Joe came in and sat down.

“Well how have you been?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Good very good."

"You always have these rapid recoveries."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. I wouldn't like you to forget where you were a fortnight ago."

"I don't hang around doctor" said Joe. "I get on with things."

"Just be careful Joe. It seems to me that in the short term you appreciate your condition and look after it but in the long term you seem to think you don't need medication or that you even have a condition."

"Maybe it's the lithium kicking in."

"Maybe But we can't be too careful Joe. The more times you relapse the more the probability increases that you will again."

"I have never felt better."

"I know and you never felt better before. How are things at home?"

"So, so. I am planning to move out actually."

"Already?"

"Well I have to get a job first."

"That's a lot of stress— new job — move out. You are very nonchalant about things that are very stressful."

"What do you suggest?"

"Slow it down. Don't run to standstill."

"And my long term prognosis?"

"I am not sure if you have grasped your condition. Bipolar is for life, not a week or a month or even a year. There is no cure for manic depression only treatments."

"So you say."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well in your determination to find one you will make yourself unwell again."

"There is more to mental illness than just pills. You have met my parents."

"Come on Joe."

"Didn't you even study psychology in medical school – Freud and Jung are they even part of the curriculum for a modern psychiatrist?"

"Of course they are. But the model we have here is medically based. You know that. We don't engage in talk therapy – we don't have the resources. My session with you should not last more than ten minutes. We have a psychologist. Would you like me to put your name down for the psychologist?"

"Yes I would very much."

"I am sorry to tell you it's a very long waiting list."

"People are dying while they are waiting on that list."

The doctor said nothing and then he said. "And let me ask you – the voices have they become thoughts?"

"I don't hear them anymore."

"That's good. Last time you were here I thought you were a bit high."

"Maybe I was."

"Well good. That's settled."

"I will see you in another two weeks." He wrote out a script and handed it to Joe.

"One other thing. You are interested in psychology – read up on the false self."

"What's that?"

"Have a look. See what you think."

#Mum

On Thursday he got up early. He dressed himself in the new shirt that Brian had requested and donned his one and only suit.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"What do you think?" he asked his mother when he came down to the kitchen.

"You look great" she said.

He sat down at the breakfast table, taking off his jacket. She poured him a cup of coffee.

"I was talking to Dad yesterday."

"Oh yes."

"He said your father was an abusive man, is that true?"

"Why does he tell such lies about me?"

"Well is it true or not?"

"It's not true" she slammed the coffee pot back into its holder. There was silence for a while. "You know you would be much better off getting on with your life instead of believing lies. He says those things to make him look good."

"And why wouldn't you hold Tim when he was a baby?"

"What do you know about that? More lies I am sure."

"Well what was granddad like?"

"He was a tough father but times were very tough back then. There wasn't much to go around."

"I don't know what to believe."

"You have all your theories about me and this family. I am telling you it's a complete waste of time. You are thirty years old – I had four children by the time I was your age."

"Denial is not a river in Egypt."

"Very funny."

"I have to go and get this job."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

[#Interview - HDME](#)

The drive out to Loughlinstown was uneventful and he had left a lot of time anyway. He parked in the car park and ran over his experience to help with the nerves. He knew every time after an episode was like the first time and he had to overcome his fears and get into it. At the appropriate time he went into the reception area and sat down.

"I am here for the interview" he told the receptionist. She nodded. Half an hour later the door opened and a man came out and called out his name.

"Joe O'Malley?"

They shook hands. "I'm Ian. Come on I'll take you back."

He followed him through double doors into a vast open plan space. There must have been hundreds of people in the room which hummed with barely audible conversations. Signs hung from the ceiling. They seemed to relate to the teams or groups that worked underneath.

Ian stopped and explained. "That's the European sales team" he said pointing to one area. "This is UK sales and across there is Middle East and Africa."

He brought him into a small interview room in the corner of the room.

"So Joe, what can you tell me about HDM?"

"Well I know they make desktops and laptops. They make the Nixon 4000 series, one of their best sellers."

"That's true. Made right here in Dublin as it happens."

"Well I imagine that getting the pricing right is very important selling to computer suppliers across the world. And even though I was in a different industry, it's still product marketing at the end of the day."

"Exactly."

"When I worked in Chicago I was working in a retail sales company but getting the pricing right was essential. We had a catalogue we circulated twelve times a year."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I'll be honest with you. It's not really your experience that concerns me. In fact it's probably more than enough for the job, but really six months off – what's that all about?"

"Well I was moving back home and I had to put my affairs in order. It takes a bit of time."

"I suppose. And now are you ready for work – committed to work, because let me tell you we work hard in this company. We pay well but we work hard too."

"I am not afraid of hard work, if that's what you are asking."

"And then I have to ask myself would you fit into the H.D.M.E. culture. Would you be a good family member?"

"Well I have worked for an American company."

"Three years it says here."

"That's right."

"If I rang them on the phone what would they say about you?"

"Well, positive things I hope. I worked a lot with the president and prepared reports for him. I created a new sales reporting system and implemented it for the whole team."

"Just like it says here."

"Just like the resume."

Afterwards Ian walked him out to the reception. "Well Joe we will be in touch."

They shook hands.

#Jonas

"Jonas is on the phone" his mother shouted up the stairs when he returned from his interview.

He came downstairs to the dining room and picked up the phone.

"I have a proposal for you" said Jonas.

"What do you mean?" Joe laughed.

"There is a new kind of dating hot from the states."

"What is it?"

"It's called speed dating. Interested?"

"Oh I heard about this where you have twenty five minute dates or something like that."

"That's it."

"Anyway I have just started dating this girl I met in Howler."

"Well you are hardly a couple just yet."

"No but I am not much interested in talking to twenty girls."

"Look it just increases your statistical chances. That's the way to look at it."

"I suppose."

"Come on it will be fun. You don't have to do anything if you don't want too."

"Why don't you ask Derek?"

"You and I both know it would not be his cup of tea."

Joe laughed. "Ok when."

"Tomorrow night, temple bar."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"By the way, what about Gerry?"

"God no."

"You never really did like Gerry, did you?"

They hung up.

#Mum

"So how did you get on, I am dying to know."

He came into the kitchen. "Oh fine. They liked my American experience."

"Joe I think this is definitely the right move for you."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of the money and you can have your own apartment and independence."

"I see you have it all worked out."

"Now don't get nasty, I am just trying to be supportive."

"Do you know in Chicago I swore that would be my last office job?"

They both sat down at the kitchen table.

"And what would replace it? Be realistic. I worked all my life as a teacher."

"Yeah I know and you suffered and struggled and were unappreciated."

"Well I was."

"Did you know that I was babbling about sexual abuse the whole time my first episode and I sent you a theory document about – I sent it to everyone."

"Let's not take about that now."

"I always thought Dad was to blame for everything. It never occurred me that you are equally to blame."

"And how am I equally to blame?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You don't think you are responsible for anything. That's your problem."

"And how am I to blame? I always tried to help Dad. I rang all the banks, negotiated with creditors. I kept the family together when we would have been out on the street. What do you think of that?"

"I think it is part of own personal mythology to think you saved everybody else when really it was a collaborative effort if anything. I am not your little man of the house anymore."

"What are you taking about?"

"All the favouritism you showed me."

"But you were never any trouble and Tim was always acting up."

"Don't you think a mother is supposed to love all her sons equally?"

"What do you mean? I do love Tim. What are you saying?"

"You can't have favourites. You turned me against him too."

"I see your thesis is quite simple. You are blaming me. Well it won't do you any favours. I am not your whipping boy."

"And it begs the question what makes you so competitive in love? Why isn't your husband enough for you? He could hardly be as bad as you make him out to be."

"You need to get over this bipolar thig and stop trying to find culprits people to blame You have to find something positive in all this to be free of it."

"What could be positive? I was going someplace before this happened to me>"

"And you can be again. But first you have to accept it."

#Dad

Dad came into the kitchen. They stopped talking.

"Well Joe, how did you get on?"

"Good I think."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Still positive about it?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"No that's fine. Just asking."

There was a ring on the front door.

"That will be Tim" said Dad.

#Tim

Tim came into the kitchen and stood beside Dad.

"Do you have a smoke, Joe" he said.

"Again! I suppose I do. I will come out with you."

They went out through the double doors and Joe shut the doors behind him.

"How's life?"

"Oh so so. I hear you are going for a job."

"That's the plan."

"Sounds like a lot of bread."

"It's not bad. They pay well."

"Look, I know as an older brother you are supposed to look out for your younger brother."

"Don't worry about that."

"But I do, just here me out. I am sorry I didn't have an apartment and a car and I could have taken you up the Dublin Mountains when you had your episode and if you wanted to scream your head off at the world I was prepared for that."

"It doesn't make any difference now."

"Well it does to me. I wanted to say that."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Joe nodded. "Not sure it would have changed anything."

"I used to think Mum and Dad took Tom's death the hardest but now I think it was you."

"It was – no doubt about it"

"And you? How did it affect you?"

"Well I was older than Tom – just a year. But you were only twelve. You really looked up to Tom and idealised him I suppose. You know there was that sense that we were going to make it as a family before. Mum and Dad were better. There was less fighting. I just suppose they were happier that's all."

"It was a terrible affliction all-right. But you think other people had to contend with worse."

"But isn't that it" said Tim, "we never contended with it. However bad it was – we never dealt with it. And then on top of that there is an incompatibility between us and our parents." He pulled on his cigarette.

"Well I side with Dad and you side with Mum. But we have been betrayed by each one of them."

"Betrayed?"

"They are not on our side. That's what I mean. Parents are supposed to be parents allowing children to be children but in our case our parents were children squabbling about priorities, finances and whether they loved each other or not. They could never figure it out. Our role has always been to support them and that's why I freaked out and had a meltdown and why you had so many too."

"I thought it had more to do with Tom."

"Tom was your escape. He was going to make it all right for you."

#Dad

Later he went down to the office. Dad was typing away at his computer.

"Well are you excited about the new job?"

"I haven't got it yet."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"But things are on the up, aren't they Joe?"

"I wish you wouldn't live vicariously through me."

There was silence then Joe spoke. "Why do you and Mum stick together? I mean what is the point? Who is it for?"

"What do you mean? Because we are married of course."

"Separate beds and separate lives in the same house."

"It wasn't always that way."

"Since Tom died, it's been like that. Can't you see how his death has dominated your lives ever since?"

"What about you? You were badly affected."

"Of course I was. But I want to live. I want to have a life. This is your life, living in a basement churning out prose that no one can understand."

"If you are going to be like that you can just go."

"Oh this is useless. I am going upstairs."

#Brian

Before he could his mother shouted down the stairs to him. "Joe you have a phone call."

He walked up the stairs and went into the dining room. "You can hang up the phone now" he shouted to his mother.

He picked up the receiver. "This is Joe."

"Joe its Brian from Ellis, how are you?"

"Good. Good."

"Well H.D.M.E. got back to me. They liked you at least you have made it through the first round. Ian was impressed."

"Good, good."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"They were wondering if you would be available for another interview – 2nd round on Friday."

"Friday, yes I can do Friday. 11am?"

"I'll have to check. I'll call you back."

He hung up the phone and sit in silence for a few minutes. Eventually he went down to the kitchen.

"I'll be going out this evening. Can you lend me another fifty?"

"What's this for?" said his mother, crossly.

"Not you concern. I will pay you back. I have money in the bank; it's too late in the day to go down to the back."

#Jonas – Speed dating

At eight precisely he set off to meet Jonas. He was wearing his best shirt and casual trousers. In the end he opted to walk into town and he crossed over Baggot Street Bridge and continued down towards the green. The streets were quiet and traffic was light. Dark black clouds scudded overhead but no rain. A low lying plane festooned in flashing red lights circled above waiting for permission to land. He stood at the cross walk waiting for the green man to appear on the signal across. He unwrapped a fresh box of twenty and lit one up while he was waiting. The lights changed. A group of drunken students passed him heading the opposite way.

When he arrived at the venue he was early and the staff were busy setting up the tables, adding name cards for the girls and a few men were dotted along the bar sitting on stools. The room was low ceilinged with open glass windows and tables along the walls and in the centre also. Up a few steps there was a bar and a number of men were sitting, dotted along it. They sat in silence not speaking to each other. Joe sat down beside one of them and ordered a drink. The man looked over, eyes blinking rapidly, biting his lip. He was tall and balding wearing a crisp white shirt and chinos.

"First time" said Joe, smiling.

The other man nodded. "I thought I would give it another try." He turned his pint glass round and around.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"It's very popular" said Joe.

"I know. In America probably. Like all these things."

"To be honest I'm just not sure about it. It seems so weird – 25 dates in an evening."

"I didn't meet anyone the last time I did it, even though I checked a few boxes. Girls just don't seem to like me. I don't know why exactly."

Joe said nothing for a moment. "Well maybe you just haven't met the right one, yet."

He turned around and saw Jonas coming in the door. He waved over.

"Just missed the rain coming in."

He came up and stood at the bar. He was dressed in a grey overcoat and wearing jeans and white shirt.

"Who's this?"

"Do you know I don't know your name? I am Joe and this is Jonas."

"Jerome."

"So what's the story?" said Jonas.

"I think they are setting up over there."

"Let's move down the bar a little. There is more room down this end."

"You didn't like talking to that geezer?"

"Well who is he? I don't like talking to people I don't know."

They both sat on the bar stools.

"Do you really think you will meet a nice girl here – speed dating?"

"Well don't jinx it" said Jonas. "It's worth a try."

"I just feel bad in a way. I have already met a nice girl."

"You mean that one from Howler."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Yes. I mean I really felt I had a connection with her. I shouldn't even be here until I see that thing through.”

“Well you know it is very early days. I mean anything could happen. It may not work out. You can't just assume everything is going to be perfect and drop everything and focus on one girl who you don't know and have just met.”

“I know. But there has to be something to integrity and honesty. What if I meet someone here tonight and end up getting involved with them, what then?”

“Well two is better than one.”

“No it isn't. It really isn't. The right one is what is worth it. I know you agree. There is something spiritual at work here when two people come together. It is special. It is important. It's not just throwaway. This is potentially the girl I want to spend the rest of my life with. I can't take chances with that.

Jonas said nothing.

“All this the way we go on is just pushing that possibility further away. Girls aren't stupid. They know the good guys from the bad too. They can tell. “

“So you are saying we're bad guys?”

“From their point of view – yes I am. They want a guy who is serious about them and serious about settling down – a real life partner.” Joe paused for a moment and then said – “maybe I am starting to detect a note of serious intent from Jonas? – a desire to settle down perhaps?”

“As you know I have had my ups and downs with women. I was engaged before I knew you. Very nearly married, too”

“What happened?”

“Oh a lot of things, principally I got depressed and she didn't want to deal with that. She wanted a hero instead. I could be the hero but only in short bursts – not all the time.”

“Is this the Australian bird?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Ah you know then."

"No. Not really. Derek mentioned that you were engaged. Women are very intuitive about emotional problems."

"Tell me about it."

"It doesn't seem very brave or principled of her, does it? To bail on such a problem. Shouldn't she have stood by you?"

"That's what I expected. We had a place together and all kinds of plans but in the end it wasn't worth it. It wasn't working. .She wasn't happy."

"But why do you get depressed?"

"Why? How much time have you got?" he smiled. "My Dad for one. Well you have met my father – he was a company man and a workaholic. Of course I was entirely different sort. But that just made things even more complicated. He just assumed I would follow his example and then he derided me for every mistake I made. Not a very nice guy. But that's not the whole of it. There is something that just came over me with Catherine, we had a comfortable bourgeois life, she was planning children. I had my boring job in the corporation. It looked perfect on paper – but only on paper. Something in my gut told me it was all wrong. What about you?"

"I don't know – family problems – problems growing up and traumas. I was supposed to be the hero of my family - my mother's little man and consort. I was going to fix everything for everyone. I suppose you could call me the caretaker of my family. I knew my mother's every move and whim and responded accordingly. "

"And how come it was all down to you?"

"Well my father is a nice guy but he is a bit feet off the ground if youo know the expression."

"Sometimes I feel a bit like that myself" said Jonas. "Derek is the grounded one."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Yes Derek is very grounded. Anyway something happened to my father when Tom died. Before he was a delicate enough character but after he really lost touch with reality. I think that had a really bad effect on me. My father was basically out to lunch on most serious matters."

"Strangely it was the opposite in my case. My father was very grounded and focused on work and his career but that was not what I needed from him. He was never there when I was growing up. We were always waiting for my father my mum and I."

"My father was there but not there. Either way it smacks of dysfunctionality."

"And what can be the parallel between your upbringing and mine?"

"Well I suppose both resulted in dysfunctional adults."

"And what about your brother?"

"You know about that?"

"Well I could hardly not. You were talking a lot about your brother before you got sick?"

"Ah."

"You don't remember?"

"Not really. I mean I remember some things in clear detail and other bigger things I forget. I never thought I could be depressed and be in hospital and have to put up and go through all of that."

"One of your traumas?"

"Exactly."

"Everyone has their wounds Joe" said Jonas.

"But do we have to remain our whole lives wounded? Surely there is a way out."

"Good luck finding it. I have had no luck."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Meantime the bar was filling up for the event. Groups of girls were arriving in threes and fours. They were all roughly of the same age group. The men tended either to be on their own or in twos. The bar area was getting crowded.

“Any lookers?” asked Jonas.

“I can't really tell” said Joe turning around.

A man stood out of the crowd and explained all the rules to the new arrivals. The system was simple. There were 25 girls and 25 guys. The girls took a seat at one of the tables and remained in the same position during the event. The guys moved from one seat to the next everything the organiser rang a bell. Joe and Jonas had already registered when they came in.

Everyone took their seats. Jonas was on Joe's left. In front of Joe as a girl called Maura. The organiser rung his bell and suddenly the room came alive and animated.

“Where are you from, Maura?” She was an overweight blonde girl with dyed blonde hair, a large mole on her cheek and freckles.

“Dublin. You sound like you are from America?”

“No. I lived over there for a while. That's all.”

“You managed to lose your accent in a few years? I don't like Americans. They all want to be in a movie or something.”

“Oh they are not all bad. Some nice ones in fact.”

“And they are always trying to pick up girls too. So what do you do?”

“I work for a multinational. But I write. In fact I have written two books but nothing published so far.”

“Two books and nothing published? That can't be good.”

He sighed heavily and crossed his arms on the table. “I suppose you are some kind of secretary.”

“I am an event co-ordinator actually.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Is that your career for life?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well it's basically administration isn't it."

She fell silent.

"Great. I can't wait for the bell."

"Me too."

The next date was not much better. And it was when he was on his third that he saw her from a distance.

#Fiona

She was petite and dressed in business attire. When he got in front of her she never smiled.

"I'm Joe." He shook her hand across the table. It was a frosty handshake. "How's your evening going?"

"Oh so so. Not as bad as I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"Twenty five strangers trying to chat me up."

"First time for this?"

She nodded.

"I mean it's not too bad. At least it is quick. You have to look on the bright side" he said.

"Do you always look on the bright side?"

"Try too. You could say I am blue sky¹⁰."

"I am more of a gritty realist really."

"How's that going for you?"

¹⁰ An optimist

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

She paused for a second and a fleeting smile passed across her face. "It goes ok most of the time.

Occasionally I may miss something due to my scepticism."

"I feel if I was completely practical then I would rob myself of my creative factor."

"Ah the creative gene - do you possess it?"

"I like to think so. I write you know."

"Books."

"Books, short stories all that kind of thing."

"I read a lot. I never met a writer though. You must be bright."

"Oh well, you know. I try."

"And now you are trying to be modest – unsuccessfully I might add. I am in HR. I am a recruitment coordinator."

"Is that difficult?"

"Not really. Quite routine in fact. I like routine. I like things being predictable. Did I mention that already?"

"No I think I get that. I have a predictable side too. I have a day job."

She smiled. "Oh, what do you do?"

"I work for a multinational on the Southside."

"Which one?"

"H.D.M.E."

"They're a good company. We have recruited a few people from there. How long have you been with them?"

"Since I came back from the states."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Oh you are only just back.”

“Three months.”

The bell interrupted any further conversation.

#Interval

At the interval he compared notes with Jonas.

“Bloody waste of time. That’s what I say” said Jonas.

“I am not so sure. There could be diamonds in the rough.”

“I am not optimistic based on the first round. Bunch of mingers¹¹ is all I can see. And that bell is driving me mad.”

The second round ended without any clear indications and after it was over they both filled out their preference cards and handed them to the organiser. Joe made sure to tick his preferences and even Jonas did the same.

#Jonas - Pint

Afterwards they walked through the cobbled streets of Temple Bar, the stones slick with rain. There were few people about. The crowd at the event had quickly dispersed.

“How about a quick one?” said Jonas.

Joe nodded. They stopped in to a bar in a side street. The place was deserted.

“I’ll buy this one” said Jonas. “After all I dragged you out. Sorry it wasn’t a great success.”

“Well we tried. I suppose it is a bizarre way to meet people. So tell me why you came back from London then. Surely options would have been greater there than in Dublin.”

“I don’t know. I missed Dublin – after all I grew up here.”

“More females?”

¹¹ Unattractive women

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You would think, but they are all into money and materialism and anyway the English can be quite racist – some of them don't like the Irish."

"I suppose you would have to assimilate – become English too – how about Sir Jonas the first."

"Exactly. It's no small thing to abandon your own culture and identity to blend into someone else's."

"What is the story with Derek? His family background mustn't be great."

"Why?"

"Well birds of a feather stick together – we have dysfunctional backgrounds and he is a friend of ours – so must he."

"Well I do know his dad was a hard man, much worse than my Dad. Derek got a lot of slugging growing up. Don't ever tease him about that. He really can't bear it."

"I see it in how he has to control everything. He never does anything that doesn't suit him. He makes all the arrangements for all of us. But if I ever ring him and try to suggest something he doesn't want too and he has a fear of strangers and practically no comfort zone."

"Whereas everything is our comfort zone."

"The world is my comfort zone" said Joe "and everything in it."

"And anyway" said Jonas, "aren't we all controlling. I mean I always try to get my own way. I am subtle about it. So do you if it comes to that."

"We do it by being nice – or trying too. He manipulates."

"I don't see that it gets you anywhere – all this analysis. What exactly are you trying to figure out? If you want me to say I am fucked up I agree I am."

"It is just my contention that lots of people are not – there are healthy happy people in the world but they don't need to become alcoholics or serial womanisers or utterly depressed. They are just happy. They have found it all on the inside."

They fell silent for a while. Then Jonas said "he's very loyal."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“As long as you play by his rules.”

“True.”

#Mum

On Friday he got up early and prepared for his interview. He carefully ironed his new shirt and took the suit out of its plastic wrapper. He went down to the kitchen. His mother was sitting at the kitchen table.

“You have been out a lot lately.”

“So.”

“Don’t you think you need your rest now you have this big interview?”

“Don’t harp on. I am well aware that I have an interview.”

“I think you are doing very well in the last few weeks. Just be careful not to spoil anything.”

“I thought you might say that since you approve of jobs and boring materialism.”

“So do you. You don’t like having no money Joe. You said so yourself.”

He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat at the table. “These jobs are just so boring. I am not sure I can really do this for a long time and that’s what they want from me - a minimum four year commitment.”

“Don’t think of it that way. Just one day at a time. Isn’t that the way to do it?”

“Where’s Dad?”

“He’s gone to mass.”

“Look I will pay you back all the money when I get this job.”

“Don’t worry about the money. I want to see you set-up and established and then you can have all the freedom in the world. I mean, how would you ever buy an apartment or a house without a job, or get married even? There are a lot of things you can’t do without money.”

“But you don’t understand creativity is like a universe – a cosmos all in my head all of itself. My job is to create not be an employee.”

“Have you been talking to Dad?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Never mind that. Can't you see I am looking for your support to pursue this – I want your blessing.”

She pressed her lips together and rolled her eyes. “To pursue what – to live on the dole like Tim and fart around Dublin finding yourself. Well I am not going to support that. You had a good education Joe. I see no reason why you can't do well like your peers – many of whom are doing well. I only met Angela Byrne in the supermarket last week and she said Seamus is a Director of Finance already - at his age.””

“Do you have any idea how that makes me feel when you talk like that? Do you know for once I knew exactly what you were going to say?”

“I want the best for you Joe.”

“You are living in la la land. Do you not remember where I was three weeks ago?”

#Interview – H.D.M.E.

At 10:30am precisely he turned into H.D.M.E.'s car park, parked near the reception and turned off the engine. He suppressed a strong urge to go to the bathroom and nervously flicked through his notes. What if they figured out he was mental or followed up on some of the references. They could easily ascertain that he left his last employ under a cloud.

At 11am he walked into the reception and spoke with the receptionist.

“Ah yes, Joe O'Malley. Just sign in please name and car registration. Someone will be out to you shortly.”

He felt a dull churning in his stomach and his desire to go to the bathroom returned. Eventually Ian came out and walked him in to the back of the office.

“Good to see you again, Joe.”

“Thanks. I guess I made the cut.”

Ian smiled but said nothing. He brought him into a small interview room near the product marketing group. There was an overweight woman crammed into a tight business jacket and a skinny balding man in open necked shirt and cream trousers he stood up and extended his hand.

“Dylan Moore, I'm head of product marketing and this is Alison Dyer our HR director.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Joe sat down in the seat indicated.

“Well Joe” said Alison looking at his CV, “you are certainly a well-travelled man.”

“Well not really, just Chicago and Dublin if that’s what you mean.”

“We just have a number of things about your CV we would like to ask you, if that’s ok” said Dylan.

Joe nodded.

“I mean first off what is this six month gap in your CV. How do you account for that?”

“I had just finished my job in America and took some time to go travelling.”

“It’s not really very typical for someone to take six months off in our business” said Alison.

“I am sure a lot of things are not typical” said Joe.

Alison raised her head and gave him a glassy stare.

“Aside from that we think you are the best man for the job” said Dylan. “If we were to extend you an offer how soon would you be able to start?”

“Right away” said Joe. “I am keen to get working again.”

“I have to come back to this point” said Alison. “People work very hard in our business and we expect a big commitment from them. The worst thing that can happen is that someone would start for a year and then want to go travelling. Does that make sense? We need to be confident that all our candidates are committed to the duration of their working here.”

“Of course I understand but I intend a minimum four year commitment.”

Alison and Dylan relaxed. “Well that’s perfect” said Dylan. “Now one other thing is remuneration. We pay thirty thousand euros annually for this position.”

“I am more at the thirty five K mark” said Joe.

There was a sudden intake of breath. Alison frowned.

“That’s outside our pay scale for that position” said Alison. “We can’t pay you that much.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Ok, let's meet in the middle" said Joe. "How about thirty three?"

"We are not accustom to this kind of negotiating" said Alison. She narrowed her eyes arms crossed.

"Well you'll have to think about it."

At the end Dylan walked him out to reception. "Ok, Joe, we will be in touch." They shook hands and Joe walked out to the car.

#Brian

When he got into the car and checked his phone he noticed he had a missed call. It was Brian. He rang him back. His tone was sombre.

"Joe what happened?"

"Nothing. What do you mean what happened?"

"I am not sure if it's going to work out. Their HR director is a touchy woman but I think you rubbed her up the wrong way."

"I was just defending my position. Why, is the whole thing in jeopardy?"

"To early to say. And then the salary - you don't negotiate for salary like you are betting on a horse."

"Well how do you do it?"

"Gently, with subtlety. That's the way to do it."

"She's a bit of a cow anyhow."

"Joe you can't say these things. She is the HR director. She is very senior in there and you need to play ball with her and then if you want the job. Now I will see what I can do. I will try the line things are a bit different in the states. I'll call you back."

Joe started up the engine of the car and drove back to Dublin. When he got back to the house Tim and Dad were sitting at the breakfast table. It was covered with cups and plates and nothing had been cleared away even though it was past one o'clock.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#Dad & Tim

“How did it go?” asked Dad.

“Bureaucratic gob shites” said Joe. “They don’t just want your time they want your soul too.”

“That’s a lot of bread” said Tim.

“Maybe it is. But I just think of doing that every day and I feel sick.” He sat down at the table.

“Well it’s a beautiful day outside. Why don’t you just relax and we’ll have another cup of coffee.”

“Do you have a fag, Tim?”

They went outside and stood on the steps.

“Maybe I should get a job in an office” said Tim.

“It might not suit you, you know” Joe pulled deeply on his cigarette. “Not sure it really suits me.”

“Why do it then?”

“Societal pressures, pressures from our mother, Mna na hEireann¹². They think a man without a job is a useless creature. If I could just find some way to make artistry pay, but it never has. I just don’t get it – it’s so complicated.”

“I think they are probably all a bunch of arseholes. I wouldn’t work for them if you don’t feel like it.”

“But I don’t want to live with mum and dad and I don’t want to be on the dole. What other option do I have?”

“What’s wrong with being on the dole. I am on the dole if it comes to that.”

“Now don’t get offended. It’s just not for me, that’s all.”

They went back inside and sat down at the table with Dad.

“Who would like to come out for a cup of coffee?” he said.

“Are you going to talk about your thesis?” said Joe.

¹² Women of Ireland

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Damn and blast it. Must you reduce everything down to pounds and pennies?"

"I suppose I could go for a cup of coffee? What about you Tim?"

"Ok. I'll come. But I don't have any money."

Dad put on his coat and Joe ran upstairs and changed and they set off in the direction of Baggot Street.

In the end they found themselves in Searsons and they sat in the seat near the window."

"Buy us a pint" said Tim.

"Now Tim I am not sure that's a very good idea." Dad frowned, biting his lip.

"I could use a pint" said Joe.

"It's lunchtime" Dad protested.

"We need some compensation for the day that is in it."

Reluctantly Dad went to the bar and purchased two pints and a plain tonic for himself.

"Cheers" said Joe holding up his glass.

"I have to say Joe I am delighted. I haven't seen you looking so well in ages" said Dad.

"I am envious of you. I wish I had your set up. You know academic jobs are the lowest stress jobs in the world, they say."

"I had my stresses and strains with work when I was a younger man. I remember walking out of a few jobs. I had three sons and a wife to support, remember. That's when I went into private practise for myself."

"Would you not have been better off in employment?"

"Jesus Joe. That's your mother's propaganda." Dad narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms.

"But it was an uphill struggle with the money and everything. Wasn't it?"

"Why do you always have to pick up on Mum's agenda?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I do have my own opinions. You seem to forget that. You consistently made losses in your private practise. That's what you told me anyhow."

Tim said nothing and stared at his pint.

"If you carry on like this I am leaving."

"Well what do you want to talk about?"

"It's not good for you to talk that way to your father, you know."

"Is this some textbook Freud you are quoting?"

"Ah Jesus."

"Tim what do you think?"

"Don't try and get me involved" said Tim. He shook his hand shifting in his chair.

"There has to be objective truths."

"Ah yes Yankee can do – you betcha."

"You say I take the piss. What are you doing now? You want me to believe you made money when you didn't. Why is your ego so tied up with this conclusion?"

"Ah damn and blast it. Vegetables and filthy lucre" said Dad.

Silence descended on the three of them.

#Brian

When he got back to the house Mum was back. "Someone from that agency was calling for you."

He went into the dining room and dialled Brian's number.

"Joe I don't know how you did it – they want to offer you the job."

"How much?"

"Just what you asked for - thirty three K."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I can't believe it."

"Neither can I. Whatever you said to them worked. They want to know when you want to start."

"How about Monday week?"

"I'll have to check. I'll be in touch."

Joe hung up the phone, clenched his fist above his head. "Yes" was the only word he uttered.

#Aoife

In the late afternoon he came down again to the dining room. He paced around the room, rapidly blinking, and biting his lip. Eventually he sat at the table and picked up the phone and dialled Aoife's number. The phone rang and rang and then a girl answered.

"Hi is Aoife there?"

"Let me check. Who is it? It's Joe."

After what seemed like an age she came on the phone.

"Joe this is a surprise. I had nearly written you off."

"Sorry I had a lot going on the last week or so."

"So it would appear. A secret girlfriend perhaps?"

"Now that's not funny."

"I thought it was. Well how are you?"

"I am fine. I was wondering if you would like to meet up again."

"I could do that. But no more fancy restaurants. You don't have to try to impress me and anyway I can't afford to pay my share. How about a few drinks and go from there?"

"That sounds just perfect."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

[#Aoife – Date 2](#)

The next day at the appointed time he made his way into town to meet Aoife. The streets were busy and there was a steady stream of pedestrians walking into town since the rain had held off.

He was early as usual and ordered himself a drink and sat down in the bar. It was a gaudily ornate place with marble archways a Parisian style bar at the centre and beyond three floors around an atrium. He sipped and noticed with dismay that his hand was shaking. He put his hands under the table.

Exactly fifteen minutes late he saw her come in the main door. She came right up to his table.

“Joe.” They didn’t shake hands or embrace.

“Let me get you a drink.”

When he came back she was seated with her coat off. She was wearing makeup unlike the previous time and her delicate features were offset by bright red lipstick and mascara.

“Do you like my new look? I don’t normally wear makeup you know.”

“Tonight was a special occasion.”

“Now don’t let it go to your head. I have been thinking a lot about you.”

“Oh dear.”

“Well I just don’t understand how a guy like you who is obviously bright could be so....”

“Childlike.”

“Yes childlike. Is that mean?”

“No it’s okay. I don’t want to be childlike. I mean I am a work in progress.”

“And then there is that job that you do. I don’t know how you are going to stick that. In fact I don’t think you will be able.”

“Why not focus on the here and now?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“No Joe. This is important. These questions have to be answered. You can't go through life dodging all the big issues, if for nothing else; for your own sake.”

“What should I do?”

“You have to learn how to feel Joe. Feelings are very hard for you I can sense that. You are all bluff and bluster on the surface but deep down you are a mess emotionally.”

“I think you are being very hard on me.”

“Look, I am sorry. It's only because I am trying to get through to you. I'll be honest with you there is something about you I like but you have so much unfinished business with you I don't think I can take it on. I don't want someone who is trying to find themselves. I want someone who has found themselves or at least enough of themselves so they can be there for me.”

“What is so different about you and me?”

“For one thing I get the feeling that you spend a lot of time with your parents in addition to living with them.”

“Well I am moving out.”

“Yes but Joe you are thirty!”

“I stayed with them when I came back from America. It seemed like the obvious place. You don't understand Aoife. Thirty is average for Dubliners – obviously you left home at a much younger age.”

#Aoife & Joe

“You could help me.”

“I don't think I can, Joe. You have to find your own way. We all do. I know you have had your troubles, but everyone has. Adults learn to cope and find the best accommodation with life they can find.”

“What makes you an authority?”

“I was a teenager too” said Aoife. “I hated my parents. I wanted to be independent when I was too young to be. Every adult has been through it – only the process did not complete for you.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Are you saying I am some kind of man-child?”

“Yes basically. You just never grew up. It happens. A lot of Irish men have this problem. Their women tend to become very controlling to compensate and then they control their man but I never wanted that. I always wanted a partner, an equal.”

“Was that what happened in your family?”

Aoife nodded. “My mum basically looked after my Dad. We all did. I helped out too. But that wasn't good enough and it's not good enough for me. I don't want to hold anyone's hand.”

“But can't you see everyone is dysfunctional, every family is dysfunctional.”

“No Joe. It's a question of degree. There is a spectrum and one must be somewhere away from the extremes to lead a normal life. There are healthy, happy people in the world and you should strive to be one of them – not ruminate over the past and past mistakes.”

“And what's so extreme about me?”

“Even this conversation – you are so dead pan and even keel it makes me wonder what is on the inside and what is just waiting to come out. There are no emotions Joe and there has to be. You show an anodyne face to the world. It is without feeling.”

“You don't know me.”

“I am right though aren't I?”

“Maybe or maybe you just think you are.” He signed heavily narrowing his eyes.

“I think I have offended you now.”

“Maybe.”

“I think Joe we will leave it there. I am sorry to say you are just not ready and you are pretty old not to be ready – but there it is. It's not my place to lecture you. Maybe you will change. Maybe you will stay the same.”

“I can change.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I am sure you can and I hope you will. But change takes time Joe. Lots of time and time is not really on my side. So I can't wait. Good luck Joe it was nice meeting you."

She stood up and put out her hand. He shook her hand and she was gone. He sat down and finished off his pint. His shoulders drooped and he lowered his head.

#Brian – Gets the job

He woke the next morning to the sound of his mother calling him.

"Joe, there is someone on the phone for you."

He pulled on his jeans and came down stairs and into the dining room.

"This is Joe."

"Joe, it's Brian - good news."

"Well."

"Well it's all arranged. They want you to start as soon as possible."

"That's great. Well how about next week."

"Next week it is. I'll send you an email - and once again congratulations."

He hung up the phone and went down to the kitchen. His mother was sitting at the kitchen table.

"I got the job."

"Oh Joe, that's great news. That really cheers me up now. Well done."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

C10

#Fiona

The next day he was up early and Dad was out. He logged into his email and noticed there was an email from the speed daters. It read:

Joe:

Thank you for participating in our event last week. Here are your matches from the event.

Fiona Hurley.

He was stunned. Fiona must have checked his box. He had no idea that she liked him and she was pretty cute too.

Later that day he replied to the email and sent her a note.

“Hi Fiona, I was great to meet up at the event. I hope the twenty-five dates wasn't too taxing. Let me know if you would want to meet up again some time.

Cheers

Joe.

#Derek, Jonas & Gerry

At 8pm that evening he walked down to Baggot Street. He had arranged to meet the lads in Searsons and as usual he was the first to arrive. He found a seat near the window. It was a school night¹³ so he wasn't expecting a big crowd. Derek arrived first and ordered a drink.

“Well Joe, how's the form?”

“Good and bad I suppose.”

“How do you mean?”

¹³ Work night

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Well I have been dumped and would you believe another girl I meet at the speed dater is showing interest.”

“It didn't take long for you to get dumped.”

“Second date. She is one of these psycho analysing birds.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well she had me all figured out after two dates. I don't how that would be possible?”

“Well you do tend to wear your heart on your sleeve – you give it all away.”

“Get out.”

“Well I have noticed that you will drop anything for a date. You can fall out with a girl as easily as a guy, you know.”

Jonas came in through the side door.

“Jonas how's the form?” said Derek.

“Ok. Is Joe telling you about his romantic battles?”

“Just a little” said Derek.

“I don't see the problem” said Jonas. “You win some and you lose some.”

“It's not that simple” said Joe. “I liked Aoife and I don't know Fiona and I don't think I really like her all that much.”

“Just do her anyway” said Jonas. Derek burst out laughing.

“Jonas, you are such a cynic.”

“Well maybe I am a cynic” said Jonas. “But I have been hurt too. I just don't plan on getting hurt again.”

“If you don't care how are you ever going to be in a relationship?”

“It's all about the pleasure principle where I am concerned.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You are not really any different to us, Joe" said Derek. "You may think you are but you aren't."

"I want a romance. I want to meet someone I can spend the rest of my life with."

Gerry came in the side door and came up to the table - "pints anyone?"

"No we're fine" said Derek.

"I don't know why you can't buy a round like normal people" said Gerry.

"I am just having one pint" said Derek. "I don't want to get into rounds."

"You wouldn't be ripped off, you know" said Joe.

"You are such a cheap skate" said Gerry and he went off to the bar.

"You really are a cheap skate though" said Joe.

"Why do you guys keep saying that?" He glared at Joe, nostrils flaring.

Gerry returned with his pint. "That bargirl is pretty cute."

"That's as close as you're going to get" said Jonas.

"Now don't start" said Derek.

"I just don't understand how I meet someone really nice and then after two dates she decides she doesn't like me" said Joe.

"I could give you a few pointers" said Gerry. The group dissolved into laughter.

"Fuck you all" said Joe.

"Ah Joe we are only joking" said Jonas. "That's happened a million times to me. The only solution is to move on like you are doing. Try the other girl. That's the way forward."

"I don't know" said Joe. "There was something special about her. She got me in a way the others did not. She liked me initially too. I am sure of it. There must be something wrong with me. It's the only conclusion."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Never a woman better than the rest" said Gerry.

"Where did you get that?"

"My Dad used to quote it. I think it's from the Bible."

"I completely disagree with that" said Joe. "What do you think Derek?"

Derek thought for a while. "It's simple really. We all have an indifference curve."

"What's that?"

"It's economic theory. Look it up. At the top of the curve is the most beautiful woman in the world and at the bottom is the ugliest. We all have to move down our indifference curves until the supply of women becomes plentiful. Then we have reached our optimal point."

"You really have zero emotional intelligence" said Joe.

"I'll take that as a compliment" said Derek.

"I wouldn't if I were you" said Jonas.

"It's all about emotions and touchy feeling with the girls" said Gerry. "That's how they evaluate people and situations particularly men."

"You know Joe you might meet her again. She obviously took a lot of time thinking about you. There is always serendipity."

"You believe in that?" said Joe.

"Of course. It is central to my life philosophy."

"When you don't do anything and let it all happen to you – then you are fated" said Gerry.

"Well I think we all are" said Jonas. "We are all adrift on an ocean of events. Joe and this girl were meant to meet for a reason."

"She thinks I am not ready."

"Well there you are. Maybe you are not" said Jonas.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I don't know about any of this touchy feeling blarney but I think looks are a big part of it" said Derek.

"The android speaks" said Gerry.

"Is that a slag on me?" said Derek.

"Women are a beautiful enigma" said Jonas.

"Wait till one gets their hooks into you. Then you will know all about it" said Derek.

"Are you talking about that Italian bird you were into?" said Joe

"What's this" said Gerry.

"He will tell you if he wants too" said Joe.

"I will admit I had a brief affair with an Italian bird in the states. She left and I left. It was not meant to be."

"But you still love her."

"Maybe. What about your beloved Bella?"

"You know the story there."

"I don't know the story" said Gerry.

"Well it is simple I fell in love with her but it didn't work out and I never forgot her. Nor could I seem able too. And then when I was leaving the states I contacted her again and then the shit hit the fan."

"What happened?"

"Depression happened. And she had a boyfriend and there was no way we were getting back together. So much for true love eh?"

"Well maybe that's not the right way to look at it" said Jonas. "She wasn't the right one. That's all. It doesn't mean you won't meet the right one sooner or later."

"I know. Thanks though. I don't expect any supportiveness from the lads."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"At least you have women in your life" said Gerry, "I haven't been on a date in a long time."

#Meets Fiona

The next day he replied to Fiona's email and suggested they meet in town. He deliberately picked a Friday night since they could both stay up late.

He was early in the bar and choose a table where he could have full view of the door. She was on time and dressed immaculately in navy blazer, blouse and skirt. Her dyed blonde hair was neatly pulled back into a pony tail and she came up immediately to the table.

"Hi" she said, "are you okay for a drink?"

"Got one thanks."

"I think I will go to the bar so."

When she left he sneaked a look at her derriere. She was well proportioned and looked well from behind too. Eventually she returned.

"So the super doper technology says we are a match."

"I know" said Joe. "Can you believe it?"

"Well like I said. It is my first time. So I am just going with the flow."

"Serendipity."

"Yes I suppose. I have never been speed dating before. Have you?"

"No. Never. You mentioned you like reading books."

"I do. I am an intellectual kind of girl."

"In between human resources."

She frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. We all have to make a living."

"Well no one is going to pay me to read books you know."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

He nodded. "Do you come into town much?"

"Not much. I live in Kilester. My party days are behind me. And you are just back from America and working in H.D.M.E. if I remember correctly."

"That's it."

"Do you like it?"

"Well it's much the same. I am used to American companies."

"My boss is very good at lining up work for me. He keeps me busy with projects."

"You have your own house you mentioned."

"I do. Last year I bought my house."

"Do you like the dating game" he said suddenly. "I am not sure I like being evaluated. It's like a job interview."

"I am not mad about it" she said, "but how are you supposed to meet anyone if you don't date? I mean at our age - most of my friends are married and have children. Who would I even go out with? They have no interest. What about you?"

"Well strangely none of my friends are married, yet anyhow."

"Interesting" she said.

"Are you recording facts" he said.

"Maybe."

"You're thirty."

"How did you know?"

"You told me last time."

"Oh. Don't you have a romantic vision of how it ought to be?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Not really. I suspect being with the same person your whole life could be pretty boring. It is more like having a shadow really. That’s why I bought my own house. I didn’t want to share a mortgage with someone and be dependent on them in anyway.”

“Ah you are very independent.”

“I like to be. So there are no complications. I meet my opposite number on equal terms.”

“Don’t you want kids or anything?”

“I don’t know. Kind of hard to be independent when you have a clatter of kids. Maybe one would be ok. What do you think?”

“Oh well I am always thinking at least two or so.”

She took off her jacket and took a sip from her glass of wine. “I never have much luck in the dating world” she said.

“I am surprised to hear that. You look very well presented.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“It is actually. I would have thought you’d have your pick of guys.”

“It’s easy to attract guys I find. Finding the right guy however is much harder.”

“What’s your longest relationship?”

“Well I am just out of a relationship as it happens. I moved in with someone and it was going fine for a few months. Then he just started to grate on me and after six months I just couldn’t take it anymore. I ended up moving out. I had to pack up my little car and go home.”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

“My, you are sympathetic – what about you what’s your longest?”

“I was going out with someone in Chicago. It lasted about a year.”

“And why did it end?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"My fault really - I had this romantic vision."

"Ah - a romantic."

"I was. I don't know about now. I suppose I believe there is someone for everyone."

"I don't know about that" said Fiona. "Some people remain single their whole lives. I have two maiden aunts for example. There are no guarantees."

"Anyway I always believed there was someone out there special for me."

"And did you meet that someone?"

"I did but then it didn't work out."

"Well you are here now. I wouldn't worry about it. Things don't work out the whole time. We can't expect life always to go our way."

"I know. Weren't you ever in love?"

"Love" she snorted, "don't you mean infatuation."

"Didn't you ever even like anyone you dated?"

"I am not sure exactly what you mean. We were dating. We were involved. That's all there was to it."

"How did you feel about them?"

"Don't ask me about feelings. I don't do feelings."

"You don't do feelings."

"Well I don't know much about feelings."

"Are you trying to tell me that people are all the same? That you have no emotional reaction to other people?"

There was silence for a long moment. "What say we get another round in?" said Joe.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

She nodded. When he returned the alcohol was beginning to coast through his veins and he felt more expansive.

He looked shyly at her. "Maybe next time, if there is a next time. I could take you out to dinner?"

She nodded, sipping her wine. "That would be lovely."

#H.D.M.E. – Day 1

On Monday morning at precisely 8.:30 am he drove Dad's car into the company parking lot and found a parking space. Special spaces were reserved for the head of marketing and product sales. He took care not to park in any of the reserved spaces.

8:45am found him seated in the reception area and at nine Ian came out to meet him.

"Well congratulations" he said shaking his hand, "your first day."

"I know" said Joe following him back through the double doors.

The door led on to a large open plan space. Cubicles spread out as far as the eye could see. There were banners and titles hanging from the ceiling on cardboard cards. UK Home sales proudly declared one such banner - another ROI Business sales. Ian led him to the desk of a bespectacled curly headed man who stood up to shake his hand. He was tall and skinny and wore a short sleeved white shirt and black trousers.

"This is our circulation manager Eamon" said Ian.

"Hi. I'm Joe." They shook hands.

"Eamon looks after the catalogue of our products which is distributed all over the UK and Ireland."

"And over here we have his team – Melanie and Barbara." They both waved and nodded but quickly were drawn back into the enchantment of their computers.

They walked on to the next set of cubicles.

"And here is your desk" said Ian. "Your computer is all set up and should be up and running. And this is the person you will be working most closely with. Joe this is Stephen."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Ian was called away into a meeting and Joe put down his bag and hung his jacket on the back of his chair.

“Seems very busy around here” he said leaning over in Stephens’s direction.”

“I will be with you in a moment, Joe” called out Stephen without turning around.

He logged into his terminal and into his email for the first time. Already he had a number of messages.

There was a greeting from HR. He clicked to open it.

“Dear Joe,

Welcome to the HDME family. We hope your working with us with be productive and mutually beneficial. Should you have any questions at all don't hesitate to send us an email or come visit us on the first floor right beside reception.

Your HR team.

A long leggy brunette walked down the aisle between the cubicles on her way to the printer.

“Joe you're staring” Stephen interrupted.

She was gone. “Sorry who was that?”

“That's Rachel – she's on the laptops team?”

“She's gorgeous.”

“Joe, you can't talk like that about a co-worker. Keep it on the inside.”

“You're right of course. Sorry, sorry. Do you want me to come sit with you or are you coming over to my desk.”

“I'll come over to you.”

Stephen stood up and wheeled his chair over to Joe's station.. He was a short, chubby man with an immaculately trimmed goatee which he stroked often. He put a printout on the desk.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“So here is your log in details and password. You will have internet access but I would advise you only to use it for work related things. They do check from time to time.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“About three years, since I came back from the UK.”

“Are you married?”

“I think this is getting a little personal. Yes I am married if you want to know.”

“Sorry I didn't mean to pry.”

“Anyway this is your log in. Your email is set up and later on today I will show the reports we do here for the marketing group.”

He went back to his computer pushing back his chair. After a while, Joe got up and locked his work station and went for a walk in the direction of the canteen. He walked down a long narrow corridor which opened out into a wider space. In the centre of the room there were three checkout stations. Along the walls on either side tall fridges contained soft drinks and water and other beverages. Along the back wall was a deli counter serving sandwiches and wraps. Through an archway he could see a coffee and tea station. He went up to get his coffee. He looked behind him and Rachel was queuing along with a number of others for coffee.

He turned around. “You must be Rachel. I 'm Joe.” He extended his hand.

She stopped mid stride. “Oh, hi.”

“Just started today. In fact today is my first day.”

“Oh.”

“I am working with Stephen on Ian's team.”

“Oh you are the new guy.”

“That's me.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Anyway you better get your coffee." The queue had lengthened considerably.

"Well see you round" said Joe.

She smiled.

He made it back to his desk. Stephen looked up "Ian was looking for you. Anyway where did you go?"

"Just to get this." He put his coffee on the desk.

#The Meeting

"Better bring it with you. Ian wants you in the meeting."

Stephen pointed in the direction of one of the meeting rooms and Joe following carrying a notepad and pen. When he opened the door a room full of people looked up as he entered. He took a seat beside Ian and put his pad and pen on the table. He recognised Eamon, Melanie and Barbara. At the far end of the table he could see Rachel sitting beside another girl.

A few moments later Stephen joined the meeting with some printouts.

"Ah Stephen, are you ready to do your analysis" said Ian. "By the way everyone I would like to introduce Joe O'Malley. He has just started and will be working with Stephen. Joe perhaps you'd like to say a few words. Stand up and introduce yourself."

Joe reddened. He stood and spoke. "Thanks for that introduction Ian. well as you all can see I am new and it will take me some time to get my bearings. So you will have to be patient with me as I find my way around. Anyway I am just back from the states where I worked for a direct mail company in Chicago. So some of this ought to be familiar that's what I am hoping."

Joe sat down.

"I just don't understand why we need another tariff analyst."

"Eamon" said Ian.

"Well I mean Stephen you are not exactly rushed off your feet and now there is two of you."

"If there are two of us we can do twice as much" Stephen retorted.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Anyway let's move on. Who's taking the minutes?"

"I will" said Rachel.

"Great, Stephen your report."

"Joe, pass those around" he said handing Joe a sheaf of printouts.

"Ok, I am going to start with UK business call report. This week as compared to forecast we were up 5% on calls."

"Only 5% why so little. This was a big retail week in the UK. Eamon when did the UK BSD catalog drop?"

"Monday."

"There should have been a spike in sales on Tuesday – a significant spike" said Ian. "Joe maybe this is something you can look into."

"Will do."

"ROI business sales next" said Stephen.

"That's a minnow. I told you before Stephen. Don't give it as much time. I want you to be all over the UK numbers. That's the main deliverable."

#Stephen

At lunch he took a walk with Stephen outside the building.

"Is it true there isn't a lot of work?" he asked.

"Dylan has a tendency to hire a big team. He hires double of everything."

"So that makes me superfluous."

"We can divide the work. You can start out by doing the Ireland reports and then we can alternate. Ian is only really interested in the UK numbers."

After lunch Stephen copied over the Ireland reports onto Joe's PC.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Stephen is this the way you update the report. If we add formulas it can be simplified greatly and updated much faster.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well I can put all the data in one tab and then link it through to the reports using formulas.”

“I don't know. That report is working at the moment and everyone is used to it. If you start changing things around it will throw them for a loop.”

“But you said yourself it takes a whole day to update the Ireland and UK report suite and I am guessing the UK report is constructed in exactly the same way.”

“It is.”

At three o'clock he locked his work station and walked down to the canteen where he purchased a newspaper which he brought back to his desk. He circled a few ads in the classified section and rang the first number.

“Hi I am calling about the apartment to rent in Rathmines. Is it still available?”

“Yes it is.”

“Can I see it tonight?”

“We are showing at 7pm.”

“Ok, thanks” He hung up.

Joe, Stephen interrupted “You can't make personal phone calls here. Get yourself a mobile and take it outside. That's what most people do if they need to call someone.”

“Who put you in charge?”

“It's company policy. I am just telling you. Everything is monitored here. For your own sake don't do it.”

“Ok thanks.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

At five o'clock he was out the door like a shot. And he drove Dad's car back onto the dual carriageway. A woman in a Mini cut across him at the intersection and he let rip with the horn as she passed. When he passed her by at the next junction he could see she was quite elderly. He tore off up the carriageway ten kilometres faster than the speed limit.

#Mum

When he got back to the house Mum was sitting in the kitchen. She smiled an upturned face.

"How was it?"

"It's fine. It's okay. It's very corporate."

"You can get your own place now and move out."

"I know."

"Look I had to do a job I didn't like my whole life. I never wanted to go back to teaching."

"Is that supposed to encourage me?" He sat down at the table.

"You can't expect everything to be the way you want it. Now they are a very good company and they pay very well from what you say."

"There is more to it than you know."

"You'll manage. I know you will."

"I need something creative. I have to have something creative and now I am committed to this boring job."

"Would you ever stop complaining! You are young. You are good looking. Now you have a good job,, what more could you want?"

#Dad

Later on he went down to the basement to talk to Dad.

"How did you get on?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well it's okay. Typical multinational I suppose. I don't think I am going to be inspired working there.

Plus it turns out they have over hired or something. They have duplicated my role, so now I will be struggling to find things to do."

"I told you about my struggles in the office. And I had four mouths to feed at the time."

"Can I hang onto your car a bit this evening? I want to look at a flat."

Dad nodded.

"Don't worry. I am going to buy my own just as soon as I get some time to do it."

"You know you don't have to swallow your mother's propaganda entirely."

"What do you mean?"

"Well she is obsessed with financial security. So she approves of you when you make prudent sensible choices."

"You mean she would disapprove of me strongly if I didn't."

"Try it and see if you want."

"You think I am her pet or something."

"Well you always were her favourite Joe, until you became broken down. Something she never accepted any responsibility for."

"And you think she should?"

"Well I don't know. She piled the expectations very high on you. It was an impossible task really."

"You are just as bad as she is if you think playing me off against her is going to achieve anything."

He went back upstairs. "I am going to look at an apartment. I will be back in a while" he shouted into the kitchen.

#Jonas & Derek

He drove the car over to Jonas and Derek's place. They were waiting outside.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

They both piled into the car. "This is exciting" said Jonas. "Where are we going?"

"I'm looking at a flat."

"Where is it" said Derek, putting on his seatbelt.

"It's in Rathmines."

"Slow down tiger. You are only one day in the job" said Jonas.

"I know. I can't stand living with my parents. That's all."

"How did it go anyhow?"

"Bunch of bureaucrats and sycophants."

"Not well then" said Derek, smiling.

"Oh I don't know what to do. I think I hate it already and yet I have no choice. How am I ever going to move out without an income? And who is going to respect me if I am unemployed and living on the dole. And really what I should be doing is taking a big holiday after the experience I have been through. What would you do in my situation?"

"How about a pint after the flat? That's my solution to most problems" said Jonas.

"I have to be up at 6:45 tomorrow but yeah I am in. What about you Derek?"

"I'll go for one and that's it. School nite you know."

"Ah here is the place." He parked the car and they all got out. They walked passed a late shopper and down an alley way. Joe rang the bell. After a few minutes the door opened and a man came out into the patio. "Come on in" He was tall and slightly rotund and he led them up a long narrow staircase. The top of the staircase revealed a tastefully decorated sitting room with beige couch and matching chairs. To the right was a kitchen area with dining room table and a window that overlooked the street. The master bedroom led off to the right of the kitchen area.

"But this is a two bed" blurted out Jonas.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“So which one of you lads interested?” said the man.

“It’s for me. I will be taking on the whole place.”

“You know how much the rent is.”

“I do.”

“Are you working?”

“Just started a full time position but I can give you all the documentation if you need it.”

“No that’s ok. You can give it to me tomorrow. This is a first letting so I am a bit precious about the place. Put a lot of work into it.”

“I’ll come back to you tomorrow with the deposit and all the other paperwork.”

“Great.”

They shook hands.

When they were outside Derek said “Jesus Joe this place is expensive. That’s a big wedge to be paying in rent. Are you sure you know what you are doing?”

“I need a nice place Derek, that’s all.”

They got into the car and he did a U-turn and drove down Rathmines Road.

“Murphy’s ok for everyone?”

The others nodded. He parked outside the pub and they went inside enveloped in the warm, beery smell.

The pub as empty only the regulars lined the horseshoe shaped bar. Inside the oval Vincent and his daughter kept the punters supplied with stout and lager.

“This calls for a celebration” said Joe. “What’s everyone having?”

“Well if you are buying I’ll have a lager.”

“Me too” said Jonas.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

The lounge boy came and brought their order.

“So here to Joe’s new job” said Jonas, raising a glass. They all raised their glasses. “I don’t know whether to commiserate or congratulate”.

“Well you don’t like your job either. So you said” retorted Joe.

“I just don’t think it’s a very good class of job.”

“Well it is something similar to my own.”

“It depends on how you look at it” said Derek. “That’s a pretty decent wedge you are on.”

“I know but it’s so boring.”

“And if you left you would have Joe’s dilemma. You would be brokity broke.”

“My father thinks I should stay on. Not that he would know anything.”

“Ah he was the worker bee.”

Jonas nodded.

“I don’t understand” said Derek. “What else would you be doing except working? I mean who wants to be on the dole?”

“I am creative that’s the issue for me. Corporate jobs – I only do it because my mother thinks I should. That’s the honest truth.”

“And what would happen if you didn’t do it?”

“I don’t know. I suppose she would withdraw her approval.”

“Why not go on the dole, get your own flat and write full time” said Derek. “You would get a lot done I would imagine. If that’s what you want.”

“I have been always operating a two speed approach” said Joe. “You know office worker by day and writer by night.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well maybe that's what you need to become – the writer. Perhaps that's the life you prefer. I wish I knew what I preferred doing. There is nothing worse than being in a state of near constant doubt."

"I have to say I don't relate to this state of anguish" said Derek. "Keep it simple that's what I say."

"You are lucky. But I am not sure I really believe you" said Joe. "Birds of a feather after all flock together."

"I am no emotional basket case" said Derek.

"I see I have offended you."

Derek said nothing.

"I can't see a way out that's the problem" said Joe. "There is no way out for me."

"Except when you go crazy. That's your way out isn't it" said Jonas.

"And yours."

"What makes you the rock?" said Jonas to Derek.

"He gets off on controlling the people around him. That's he's reward."

"I don't know what you are talking about" said Derek.

"How about another?" said Jonas.

"I could do one more but that's it."

"Derek, what about you?"

"Ok – a half then."

Jonas waved over the lounge boy. "I don't know Joe. You can do it for a few years. It doesn't sound too hard. You might have to put in a couple of late nights here and there and the odd weekend. You know American companies what they are like."

"I committed to four years."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Jesus, what did you do that for" said Derek.

"It was verbal. I didn't sign anything."

"It doesn't matter – those kind of verbal commitments don't mean anything" said Jonas. "Tell us about this girl, Fiona?"

"Well she is dead cute. She is very corporate and kind of prissy."

"When are you going to close the deal?" said Derek, smiling.

"Not anytime soon. There is also a honey at work, Rachel."

"Bad idea Joe, don't shit where you eat, certainly not in the same department."

"Where did you leave it with Fiona?"

"Well we are going out again soon. In fact I am taking her out to dinner. That's classy isn't it?"

"Are you over that Aoife one yet?"

"Aoife, oh yes Aoife. I don't know I haven't thought about her in a while."

"You didn't even remember do you?" said Derek. "Jesus look at the time, I have to get home."

They all downed their drinks and got into the car. Joe dropped them to their door and then made his own way home. It was eleven pm by the time he was parked and outside the front door.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

C11

#Dad

When he came in the front door he noticed that the basement light was on even though the kitchen was in darkness. He went downstairs and saw that Dad was still on his computer.

“Burning the midnight oil?”

“Not quite midnight old man” said Dad. He swivelled in his computer chair.

“How long did you last in office job?”

“I don't know, maybe a year or so. I was very relieved to be out of it. Mum has got you all riled up and into this job. You know you might be more popular with yourself if you were less popular with her.”

“So you keep saying, I can't live on fresh air don't you know.”

“Where's Mum?”

“Bed with her bedroom door locked.”

“What's she so afraid of?”

“Oh well she has a lot of demons.”

“Such as?”

“Well you remember what I told you in Killiney.”

“I remember.”

“Well that can give you a lot of terrors and fears. You have your own demons too. We all do.”

“You make it sound rather medieval.”

“Don't think for a second that fear isn't real. It is.”

“I always hoped I would be different. I never wanted to live in fear.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“There is no escape. The difference between the young and old is the young people think they are going to get away with it.”

There was silence in the room. He looked at the post piled high on the drawing board. There was a twenty year old check stub and overdue electricity notices.

“How about a cup of tea?” said Dad.

“No I better go to bed, early start in the morning.”

#Joe in Bed

When he lay down in bed he tossed and turned. He tried focusing on the ceiling and the light that played out from the passing cars. He rolled over and the clock said quarter past one. At half one he sat up in the bed and repositioned the pillows and decided to lay on his back.

Sleep was a long time coming but eventually he drifted into dark and stormy seas on a small open topped boat.

#H.D.M. – Day 2

He pulled the car into the parking lot early on Tuesday morning. The other workers were filing into work through a few doorways. Stephen was already at his work station when he arrived.

“My, you are in early.”

“Trying to get ahead of the posse you know.”

“Stephen I was just thinking about those reports. I think I can simplify them a lot by using formulas. Why don't you let me have a go at it? I won't change anything. I will just make copies.”

“I don't Joe. These are very sensitive reports. If you get it wrong we will both be in a lot of trouble.”

“But Stephen I can make copies and anyway it takes you the whole of Monday just to update the reports. If we do it my way we should be able to update all the reports in a few hours.”

“And then what would we do – if indeed that is true?”

“Let me try on the Ireland reports and then I will show it to you and you will see for yourself.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Ian came over to their corner. "Just seeing how the two jokers are doing."

"That's not very nice" said Joe.

"Only joking Joe. Come on. It doesn't pay to be too sensitive around here. Dylan wants to see you, now that you are all settled in."

He followed Ian past the cubicles and through the open plan office to another section under the sign saying UK Home and business sales. Dylan was on the phone leaning back in his chair – one arm wrapped around his blonde head. He gestured Joe to an empty seat. Ian left.

Eventually he hung up the phone.

"So Joe, how are things going?"

"Good I am starting to get my bearings."

"Good. Good. You will be working with Stephen mostly for now. Unless there are any additional projects that come up. What do you think of our little facility here?"

"Very good. I mean it seems like a great place to work."

"Oh it is. Now I have been here ten years – most of my working life to tell the truth. And the career opportunities here are just immense – sky is the limit actually. You play your cards right you could do very well. Very well indeed."

"I am keen to get involved as much as I can. I think I would have a good contribution to make."

"That's the spirit. I will tell Ian to keep an eye on you."

Joe returned to his desk. On his way he passed Eamon.

"Well tiger, how's it going?"

"Why does everyone call me that?" said Joe.

"Probably because you have an American accent and seem quite Americanised."

"You are jumping to a lot of conclusions."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Ah just pulling your chain as they say in America. Have you met Jennifer yet? She looks after all the publishing."

"No I haven't."

"Hold on I will bring you over."

He followed Eamon over to another desk. Jennifer was a tall thin elegantly dressed woman with several pairs of high heels under her chair.

"What is it Eamon? Cant you see I am busy?"

"Just want to introduce to a new started Joe."

"Joe the jaffa?"

"I am right behind you" said Joe.

She swung around suddenly in her chair. Eamon burst out laughing.

"What's a Jaffa anyway?" said Joe.

"An Orangeman" said Eamon.

"No not me. A south-sider with an American twang, I suppose."

"Welcome on board then" Jennifer said roughly and turned back to her computer.

At lunch Stephen turned around in his chair. "Do you want to come to lunch?"

"Sure. Why not?"

They walked down the corridor to the canteen. Beside the deli was the hot food counter. They loaded up their trays with food and found in a free table in the seating area through the alcove beyond the deli counter. After a while the room started to fill up and Eamon and his group arrived and sat beside them.

"How's the call model going?" said Eamon.

"So so" said Stephen. "Joe is helping me out on that."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"It must be nice to have a little helper."

Jennifer plonked her tray down on the table with a crash.

"What kind of humour are you in" said Eamon.

"Don't start" said Jennifer stirring her stew around and around. "I am not in the mood." She put her potatoes into her stew and mashed the whole lot together.

"That looks appetising" said Joe, smiling.

"Never you mind either. And you are new. You don't get to make comments."

Stephen finished up his lunch. "Joe, fancy a walk around the car park?"

"Why not?"

They excused themselves from the group and returned their trays to the cleaning area.

"Is she always this...?"

"Mercurial" said Stephen. "That's the best way I can describe it."

#Fiona

On Friday evening after work he rang Fiona on his mobile from the car. The phone rang and rang and eventually she picked up.

"Joe is that you? What a pleasant surprise."

"Well you know I did promise dinner out. What do you think?"

"When did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking of tomorrow night. Is that too soon?"

"Are you driving? You know you really shouldn't talk on the phone while you are driving."

"Hang on I will pull in." He turned into a cul-de-sac off the main road. "Now that's better."

"Saturday night sounds fine. Whereabouts?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"How is about Il Divo on Dawson Street?"

"Lovely. I know it."

"Eight o'clock."

"Ok. I will see you then."

#Il Divo - Fiona

He was early for the restaurant so he slipped into the bar next door and had a swift pint. He noticed again that his hands were shaking when he lifted the glass - the damned medication. He kept an eye on the clock on made sure to be back and seated by eight. And precisely ten past she walked into the restaurant and he gave her a cheery wave. She was dressed seductively in stripy polo top and blue jeans.

"Well you made it."

"Have you been here before?"

"Sit down" the waitress took her coat and she held onto her bag.

"Well this is a nice place" she said. "I approve."

"Always keen to win the approval."

"Keep going. You are scoring brownie points. How's the new job going?"

"Oh it's going well. It's very corporate you know."

"Well what do you expect it is a corporation? Anyway what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing I suppose."

"I suppose it doesn't gel with your creative juices?" she smiled a wintry impish grin.

"Don't you ever want to do something different?"

"Like what. We must be practical."

"I don't know. Escape. Get away from it all. Live in the jungle. I don't know."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"We do live in a jungle - the human jungle."

"Would you like to see the wine list?" The waitress returned holding a menu in her hand. She was dressed in white shirt and black tie with a black apron wrapped around her waist. She had dark black hair braided into a shoulder length pony tail and heavy white makeup on her face and blue mascara.

"Definitely" said Fiona. "Can I pick?"

"Of course."

The waitress left taking the order.

"I mean why are we put here anyway? Just to exist and work and consume and then die. It seems like a poor destiny."

"What were you expecting?"

"I don't know. Anyway don't let me ramble on. What about you?"

"Oh I don't know. I am just a simple gal, really. Nothing complicated about me."

The conversation lulled as the food arrived. He took care to order a date friendly dish.

"So how old are you if I may be so bold to ask?"

"Never ask a woman her age – especially not on a first date."

"But this is our second date!"

"Oh so it is. Silly me. I am in my prime and that's all I am willing to say."

"That sounds good."

The main course came and went and eventually the waitress returned with the bill.

"My shout" said Joe.

"If you like."

"How about a nite cap afterwards?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Excellent suggestion."

They went into the pub next door. The ground floor was heaving with drinkers and the volume was high. Nevertheless they managed to find a quiet corner. After a while a table became free and they sat down.

It was at this point in the light and the haze that he moved in for the kill and he found himself kissing her on the lips and her responding with enthusiasm.

"Do you smoke?" she asked when they finished.

"Just a little. Can you tell?"

"I can always tell."

They sat in a rather awkward embrace of arms across the table. Eventually she relinquished her grip and he did likewise.

"What are you smiling at?" she asked.

"Nothing." He suppressed his smile.

Afterwards he walked her to the taxi rank in Stephens Green and they kissed again a long, lingering time.

"Call me" she said and then she was gone into a little red taxi.

#Mum & Tim

The next day he got up and came down to the kitchen and his mother was sitting there reading the paper. He sat down beside her and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"You will need your rest now that you are working again."

"I know. You don't have to tell me."

"No drinking sessions during the week. It interferes with the medication."

"Just like you interfere with my life."

"I only want the best for you."

"Look I don't want to talk about it."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“And when are you going to give Dad back his car.”

“I am buying a car just as soon as I get my accommodation sorted.”

The front door opened and Tim came in. He walked down to the kitchen.

“Any smokes Joe?” His hair was unkempt and he recognised the same shirt that he been wearing since the last time he saw him. His trainers were grubby and streaked in dirt and a large hole existed where the big toe on his left foot resided.

“Well Tim, what have you been up too?” said Mum.

“I am very busy in case you don't know” said Tim. He stepped back crossing his arms across his chest.

“Well Joe has got himself a new job this last week” said Mum. “What do you think of that?”

“I only hope he likes it.” Tim stood at the French doors one hand on the handle.

“Joe is practical.”

“Excuse me I am here – present in the room. You can ask me what I think. And yes I do have a smoke.”

He went outside with Tim shutting the door behind him.

“That woman is a witch” said Tim. “She is doing my nut in. Ta.” Joe handed him a cigarette. “He says come over she says stay away.”

“You could get a job though, couldn't you?”

“Don't you start.”

“I mean she is fairly easily impressed – job, car, apartment.”

“Dad lost all my money. That's what really happened. I trusted him and of course he had to turn it into some kind of masterpiece.”

“You mean the house?”

“Yes I mean the house. All my money from the insurance claim went into it. And he managed to blow the whole lot by turning it into his pet project.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You were going a fair way though that money yourself. I mean I saw your bank receipts. You spent 1200 pounds one Paddy's weekend on drink."

"I told you that depression is an incompatibility between the labelled patient and one or both parents. Why do you think I have struggled so long with them? There is an incompatibility between both of them and me and you have it too."

Joe pulled heavily on his cigarette. "This family stuff is wrecking my head. I can seem to get above water on this."

"I never could" said Tim.

Later they went back into the kitchen. "I am going out for a while" said Joe. "Gerry is coming to pick me up."

"Don't be too late" said Mum, "and no drinking."

#The Lads

Ten minutes later there was a ring on the door. Gerry stood there when he opened it. "Are you ready?"

"Yep."

"We have to get Jonas and Derek too."

"Where are we going?"

"Lamb Doyle's, I think."

Joe pulled on his jacket and followed him down the driveway.

"De boys" he said, when he saw Jonas and Derek in the car.

"Well who is in a good mood?" said Jonas as he climbed in.

"It would appear" said Joe, "that I am the dominant male."

"How did you work that one out?" said Derek.

"Could it be my proven prowess with the females perhaps?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Gerry started up the engine and they headed off down the road.

“He’s talking about that one he met at the speed dating” Jonas said to Derek.

“Speed dating” said Gerry, “Jesus, you guys are nuts. Who would ever go speed dating except someone really desperate?”

“Someone like you maybe” said Jonas.

“Ah bollox. Speed dating is for weirdos and freaks. These are people who are so hard up its not even funny.”

“Maybe you should try it before you knock” said Joe.

“How did you get on with Fiona, is it?” asked Derek.

“Good, not too bad. I think she likes me and we are going out again. This will be our third time.”

After a drive of about twenty minutes Gerry pulled the car into a car park and stopped the engine. “Here we are” he announced.

Joe followed the others into the pub. They found a free table and sat around. The room was full and a large TV screen blared a sporting event in the background. The heavy meaty smell of carvery pervaded the air.

“This place is crap” said Gerry. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

“We have just ordered now” said Jonas. “By the way did I happen to mention that one of the Microsystems girls likes me? Derek has it on good authority.”

“Not the Danish one” said Joe. “She’s really cute.”

“You seem surprised. You might have competition yet.”

“Do you ever talk about anything other than girls? You guys are such horn dogs.”

“Ah the noble Gerry. To gentle to kiss a girl!” said Joe.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Very funny. But seriously lads we should go away for the weekend. How about Amsterdam? They have a red-light district.”

“I don't know Gerry, what would we be doing in Amsterdam? It would be the same as here really” said Jonas.

“Those hookers carry all kinds of diseases. I wouldn't be into that at all” said Derek. “Why don't you make some kind of an effort, Gerry? I am sure you would meet someone.”

“Gerry is afraid of girls” said Jonas.

“Would you ever lay off of me?” said Gerry. “I haven't been well if you must know.”

“Is this that tennis injury?” said Joe.

“And what about it?”

“Relax. I am not on your case.”

“As it turns out I might have a bird of my own too” said Derek.

“Really” said Joe. “Prey tell.”

“Well it's tricky because we work together.”

“Did I tell you there is a fox working in the marketing department at HDME? Sorry I cut you off.”

“Yes you did. Anyway I will have to tread carefully. The boss does not like such liaisons to develop.”

“Surely it's between you and the girl, no.”

“You would think. But it's a very small office. And well we are all on top of each other.”

“Sounds a wee bit Orwellian to me. I mean you are all adults.”

“I know but what can I do. Tony is the boss and I really don't want to piss him off. He said it as a joke but he really wasn't joking.”

“I don't know about your place but there is shagging going on all over the place in mine. We have a lot of work couples. I mean it stands to reason you spend so much time there.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I think it must be quite depressing to work with someone who is your partner also" said Joe.

"You wouldn't object if it was that little honey you were talking about" said Derek.

"Maybe not. Still what if you had a fight or fell out? You would have to leave wouldn't you?"

"There is nothing going on in my place" said Gerry. "At least not that I know about."

"And what about that Aoife one?" asked Jonas. "Are you over her already?"

"No I am not" said Joe. "But what am I supposed to do. All my hopes are pinned on Fiona now. Though I am not sure I even like her all that much."

"How about a hate fuck?" said Derek.

"Jesus I don't want to know what that is. Fiona is just the kind of girl I always try for. She reminds me of my mother actually – materialistic, superficial – and all the rest."

"What does it matter?" said Derek. "It's just billies at the end of the day."

"You are such an android" said Gerry.

"I never met anyone like Aoife. That's all. And of course I didn't last with her either truth be told."

"Maybe is Don Juanism with Fiona" said Jonas.

"Something feels very familiar, very right, but very wrong at the same time" said Joe.

"What else can you do?" said Jonas. "Go with the flow – serendipity."

"Surely there is some scope for positive action. We are the choices we make are we not? Aoife said I wasn't ready. Well she must be right. I am not ready. That's the problem."

"Look its simple" said Gerry, "she is not interested. There is nothing you can do about it."

"I want to change. I want to be better."

"So do I" said Jonas. "But change is hard."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I don't see the problem" said Derek. "Life is good and with a plentiful supply of birds what more could you ask for?"

"Well life isn't good for me" said Gerry. "I got a lot of problems."

"I told you before you got to move out. You can't live with your mother wrecking your head every day. How is anyone supposed to be contented and feel normal with that?"

"She has no one since Dad died. I feel I need to be there for her. The rest of my siblings all have their own lives and families. I am stuck at home."

"Why don't you live with Joe? Joe is getting a place."

"Now just hang on a second" said Joe.

"I know" said Gerry. "You don't want to live with me. That figures."

"That's not it" said Joe. "I don't want to live with anyone. I want my own place."

"Well if you are getting a two bed you will have to share with someone."

"Yes but I get to be the master tenant. That's all."

Silence descended on the group. The lounge boy came around again and they ordered one final round.

"You want to be careful, Gerry" said Derek. "This will be your third."

"I know. The guards never check anyhow."

#Back Home Again

Gerry dropped him to his door and he let himself in without ringing the bell. Mum was in the kitchen.

"Joe will you have some dinner" she called out.

He came down to the kitchen.

"You look flushed. How much did you have to drink?"

"Don't start or you will be having dinner alone."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I made you a nice stew."

"Where's Dad?"

"Where else."

"I will go down and get him to come up."

He went down the stairs into the basement. Tim and Dad was chatting in the basement office but they immediately stopped talking when he came in.

"Is this a private conversation?"

"Don't worry about it" said Tim.

"Dinner is ready. By the by would you be free at all this week to help me move a few bits over to the new place."

"I suppose I could" said Tim.

"Well how's the new corporate executive – full of can do – you betcha."

"If you are not going to support me at least don't mock me" said Joe.

"Sorry. I was only joking" said Dad.

They all went upstairs to the kitchen. The table was set for four places and they sat down while Mum served the dinner. She served Joe first then Dad and finally Tim.

"Why do you always do that?" said Joe.

"What?"

"Serve Tim last."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

The others said nothing. Everyone started eating as soon as they got their food.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#Tim

Later he went outside with Tim.

“It’s nice of you to stick up for me, but it doesn’t do any good.”

“She is putting you under a very negative trip. No wonder your self-esteem is in the crapper with her as your mother.”

“People have told me. You are right.”

“And I am the favourite. Well I am not any better off than you” he laughed. “I would have been better off adopted. Why do you orbit around them? It is such a heavy trip. I am getting out or at least trying.”

“I used to think like you. You know in my 20s I had more get up and go. I had a band and was writing songs.”

“What happened? Where did it all go wrong?”

“Bipolar happened. I suppose that was part of it. She never supported or encouraged anything I wanted to do. I suppose she undermined my confidence with her constant criticising and negativity.”

“You need to get away from this. It’s toxic.”

“It’s too late for me Joe. But not too late for you.”

“You need to watch it however. Bipolar is a terrible affliction – stray one inch in the wrong direction and you are sunk.”

“Don’t I know!”

“But you could try Tim. At least you could try. It is important to try.”

“I could I suppose. But it never works for me. At least you have some successes to your credit. No life is a hard and lonely station. I am from the University of Hard Knocks and trying again just makes me knocked down again.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#Apartment

On Monday evening after work he drove over to Rathmines to meet the landlord of the apartment. He found parking easily outside the late shop and he walked down the alleyway and rang the doorbell. After a few minutes to heard steps coming down the wooden staircase.

“Joe, how are you?”

“Not bad at all.”

“Come right up.”

He followed him up the staircase. On the kitchen table he had laid out a lease and other pieces of paper.

“So Joe, you know, it’s a two bedroom apartment?”

“That’s fine. I understand that.”

“It’s a lot of rent for one person.”

“That’s okay. I might get someone to help me with that.”

“Ah I see. Well the place is yours provided you have the deposit and the right documentation.”

“Well here is the letter from my employer you wanted. And here is the deposit. And I have a reference from my landlord in America. You see I have been staying with my parents.”

“That’s okay. I understand. You haven’t rented here in Dublin before.”

Joe shook his head.

“Well this is great.” He took the deposit draft and the letter and put them in his file.

“Well the place is yours Joe. You can move in whenever you want. Here are your keys. You will need to get the electricity put in your own name. But you don’t have to do that tonight – as soon as you can.”

They shook hands and the landlord left, leaving him with the keys and a signed copy of the lease. Joe walked around the sitting room and threw himself on the couch. He clenched both hands above his head and pumped his fists in the air.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#Doctor

On Tuesday he took time off work and drove into Ballsbridge. He had an appointment with the doctor. The old smell of disinfectant hit him as he walked into the hospital building. Plaques on the wall describe bequests from benefactors long dead. The caretaker looked up from his newspaper and nodded as he passed his station by. The psychiatric clinic was at the rear of the building in a post war extension.

He pressed the buzzer and was admitted to the waiting area. He sat down and picked up a magazine to peruse while waiting. Its pages detailed the lives of the rich and famous. Glowing portraits of their lives and superhuman achievements were fawningly contained in each article. He threw down the magazine in disgust.

Eventually the doctor finished with his patient and stuck his head out of the consulting room. "Ah Joe I am ready now."

Joe followed into the room and shut the door. The office was tiny – barely big enough for the desk and a small filing cabinet. He took the free chair.

"Well Joe, how are you?" He was dressed in tweeds again as per usual, looking more like a country vet than a psychiatrist. He stroked his beard. "It's been nearly a month. How are you keeping?"

"I am alright. I started a new job."

"Wow, already. That was quick."

"Well I want to move out – away from my parents."

"I understand why you are doing that Joe and that's good but don't rush things. I mean it's not that long since you were very unwell. You can't just brush all that under the carpet. you know."

"I know. But I don't it's good for me to live with my parents."

"Not long term, Joe but you have just been in hospital barely a month ago. And you still weren't right when you got out. Do you still think about Tom or Bella?"

Joe shook his head.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Well good. That at least is an improvement. But stress can bring on another episode. We must be very careful. Now that you are working you must monitor yourself very closely and make sure you don't put yourself under too much pressure.”

“I am not a china doll, doctor.”

“Joe this is not all going to go away just because it doesn't suit you. As we have said before bipolar is for life not for a day or a week.”

“But surely there is something I can do. I mean I know it is partly genetic and I am already taking care of that part but what about the psychological basis. Can't I do something about that?”

“I can put you on a waiting list to see the clinical psychologist if you want. It is a very long waiting list. But at least you would be on it.”

“Please do.”

“I still think you are denying your condition somewhat. I am not sure you really accept it.”

“I just want it all to go away. This bipolar has ruined my life and someone is to blame and its not me.”

“And who exactly do you think is to blame?”

“I don't know. My parents, my upbringing. Something like that.”

“Well you wouldn't be here if they weren't your parents. But seriously Joe this gets you nowhere. The blame game is not the answer. You have to think about the steps you can take now to keep you well. That's being practical and sensible.”

#HDME

After the session he drove back to HDME for the afternoon. Stephen was not at his desk so he continued to work away on the Ireland reports as they had agreed.

#Calls Fiona

Since there was no one around he decided to give Fiona a quick call on her mobile. The phone rang and rang and eventually she picked.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Is that Joe?"

"It's me."

"Joe you shouldn't call me at work, neither should you be calling people from work especially if you are new."

"Ah don't worry about it. There is no one around."

"Anyway I did want to talk to you so it's good that you called. Do you want to come over on Friday night? I am cooking dinner and I thought you might like to come."

"That would be great. When and where?"

"Take the Dart to Kilester and it's a five minute walk from the station. I will text you the directions. About eight?"

"Great. I will see you there." He hung up the phone.

#Stephen

"Is that another personal call?" Stephen was standing directly behind him.

"Ah Stephen would you ever give over?"

Stephen sat down in his chair. "It's not just someone seeing you make these calls. It's the phone logs as well. HR check them for none HDME numbers. Just looking out for your interest, that's all."

"Thanks I suppose."

"How was your doctor's appointment?"

"Oh fine. Routine actually - nothing major."

For the afternoon he busied himself with putting formulas into the Ireland reports. At a certain stage he brought Stephen over to look. "See here all you have to do is change the date and the spreadsheet recalculates. Not bad eh?"

"That's actually pretty cool" said Stephen. "You must shoe me how to do that some time."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“You used a lot of link but they didn't update dynamically when new campaigns or special offers were added.”

“I know it was always a big problem and very time consuming.”

C12

#Moves into flat

That evening he went over in Dad's car to Tim's place to pick him up. When he arrived at the front door he could smell the cooking smells from the first flat in the hallway. The porch was dilapidated and white paint was peeling from the door frame and the window frames. He rang the bell and could barely make out Tim's skinny frame through the frosted glass.

“Do you want to come in for a bit?” he asked.

“Just a short while. I haven't got the car for that long.”

He followed Tim down a flight of stairs to his flat at the rear. The carpet was filthy and slightly clingy to his shoes. He followed into a small room. Books in wooden boxes were piled from the floor to the ceiling. A small leather two seater couch was positioned against the back wall. There was a black plastic bag on the floor filled to overflowing with empty beer cans.

“Do you want a can?” Tim said, sitting on the couch.

“Ok. I suppose I can have one. I am driving though.”

He sat down on a wooden chair facing him. The back of the chair was broken off and missing so he had to lean forward as he sat. “So this is the place. Is that mould on the ceiling?”

“Yep.”

“Can't be very healthy living with that?”

“It's all I can afford on the roller.”

“But they got to give you decent accommodation, no?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"It's not too bad."

"Maybe if you shared with someone else - you could get to live in a house."

Tim said nothing for a second. "I wouldn't like that. I need my own place."

Tim finished his can and added the two empty cans to the bag on the floor.

"Why do you collect the cans?" said Joe.

"I need to keep tabs on how much I am drinking."

They drove back to the parents' house and collected Joe's stuff. He had already packed his few possessions into some cardboard boxes his mother gave him. Tim helped him with the computer.

They loaded all the boxes and the computer into the boot of Dad's car and he took off in the direction of the flat. It was dark when they arrived outside and Joe parked up outside the shop.

"I am just going to run in for some fags" he said to Tim.

"Ok. I'll wait."

Later he helped Joe move the belongings up the stairs and into the top bedroom. When they were finished moving they sat on the couch and Joe sat in one of the chairs. From the fridge he took out a six pack of beer. "Do you want one?" he asked Tim.

"Sure. Why not?"

They sat there drinking in silence. "Pity we don't have some music. I forgot the stereo."

"It doesn't matter. I like your flat though. The exposed brick looks really good."

"It's nice isn't it?"

#Flatmates

After Tim left he got out a piece of paper and wrote down the details of an ad. It read as follows

Bedroom available in modern two bedroom apartment. All mod cons. Rathmines area. Call and view only by appointment only.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

He called the newspaper and gave the details of his ad for the next day's print run. Afterwards he lay down on the bed and looked at the ceiling. Without the heaters on the apartment was freezing. He undressed slowly throwing his clothes on the chair in the corner. He hung out a fresh shirt and trousers for the next day. Then he lay down under the covers. The hum of traffic on the road outside was unusual to his ears. A crowd of rowdy students talking loud from a pub down the street passed by his window.

#Fiona's Dinner

On Friday night he hailed a taxi outside his apartment and opened the door and jumped in.

"Where to?" said the cabbie.

"Kilester."

Seconds later they were speeding away through Rathmines and down Rathmines Road towards the canal.

"Big night tonight?" said the cabbie.

"You could say that. Not sure yet."

He stopped at the off-license and bought a bottle of red and white for the dinner as instructed.

"Someone is going on a romantic dinner date?" said the cabbie.

Joe just smiled and nodded.

At 7:45pm the cabbie dropped him off outside Kilester Dart Station. Following her directions he crossed the road and walked down a side street and into an alley way that led out on another street. He recognized the pub on the corner from her directions and followed on down three doors on the right. He rang the doorbell and moments later could hear footsteps coming down the stairs.

"Joe, you are early. I wasn't expecting you so soon."

"Sorry – force of habit. I am a bit OCD about punctuality. Anyway its only five minutes. I brought wine."

He held up the two bottles.

"Come in. Come in. I am just cooking the dinner."

He hung up his jacket in the hallway and came into the living room.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I am in the kitchen in the back" she called.

"This is an nice place. You own the whole house?"

"I do for my sins."

He reached out and tried to grab and kiss her but she deftly side stepped his move.

"Sit down at the table" she said.

"I am cutting vegetables."

He sat down where he was put and she handed him a bottle of beer. "There that should keep you quiet."

"So tell me more about this guy you were living with."

"None of your business" she retorted sharply.

"Do you want some help?"

"No. You are fine. Just sit there and drink your beer."

"What are you making?"

"Shepherd's pie according to my special recipe."

"Will I open one of the wine bottles? Maybe you would prefer a glass of wine."

"That would be lovely."

"Are those all books in the hallway and going up the stairs yours. My you must be an avid reader."

"I am very much so."

"Did I mention that I wrote a book?"

"Really."

"In America. I couldn't get it published. Put about eighteen months into it though."

"That's some achievement. What's your book about?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"It's supposed to be a thriller."

"You must find HDME very boring then if you are able to write a whole book."

"I know. But it pays the bills. Doesn't it?"

"I wish I was talented that way."

While the pie was cooking in the oven they both sat in the living room. She sipped her wine and Joe launched into his second beer.

"Look if you want to know what happened to my last boyfriend we were just very different. That's all. He was balding on top too and tried to hide it. I suppose it was a shot in the dark. I had never lived with someone before. Had boyfriends of course but not actually moved in. Well I thought now is the time. I am not getting any younger. And it was like having a shadow. Anywhere I turned he was standing there. If I wanted to go into a room and be alone he would come in after me. And then he was so demanding. I like the bedroom activities to be confined to once a week – maybe twice. Well that didn't suit him at all. He wanted it all the time. I just couldn't handle him at all in the end. I had to get away."

"Sounds like it was very painful."

"It was. Believe me it was. Anyway enough about me. Your turn! Tell me about that girl in Chicago, was she American?"

"She was. She was from there. And I wasn't. So that was an immediate problem. I always wanted to come back to Ireland. But I knew she would never be happy here. She was used to the lifestyle she had over there. She was nice but she put me on a pedestal and I never wanted to be deified in that way."

"Oh come off it Joe. You love being the centre of attention. I can see you have an endless appetite for female attention and approval."

"Do you think? That's hardly a good thing."

"Women can tell you know. I knew from the moment I met you that you were a Mummy's boy."

"Aren't you the Dr Freud of the moment?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Irish men are like that anyhow."

"You are just broadening this generalisation."

"I have a brother too Joe, don't you know. Ah, shit the pie." She leapt up and ran into the kitchen.

"Saved in the nick of time."

They resumed their conversation in the kitchen. Joe sat at one of the two kitchen chairs and she served out the pie.

"No complaints now. I only want compliments."

"It actually is very nice" said Joe.

"You sound surprised."

"Ah Jesus."

"Delete the 'actually'"

"Maybe people aren't meant to be together" said Joe, on his fourth beer, apropos of nothing. "I mean the institution of marriage is in free fall all over the world. I have a theory about that."

"And what would that be?"

"It would be just the rise of women's rights and individualism. People don't want to be saddled with a string of kids and responsibilities. Now they have the choice. They can get out of it."

"What's so great about marriage? My parents fought the whole time we were growing up. And when we finally moved out they still fought anyway. So it was really nothing to do with me or my brother even though they tried to blame us and involve us as much as they could. "

"But don't you think there is something to romance and love and they are things to be cherished?"

"Ah you are a romantic Joe." She poured herself another glass of wine. "There is a hopeless idealism to you. It's quite touching."

"Is that your version of a compliment?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Take it. It might be all you are going to get. Why don't you come over and sit here beside me?" She patted the cushion beside her.

He came and sat beside her and moments later they were kissing. She tasted of red wine and shepherd's pie and lip balm. After a while they stopped and she leaned back and rested her head on the head rest. He glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall. It read 11:30pm.

"Should I call a taxi?"

"My you are a good boy. Well tonight I thought you might stay with me."

They finished their drinks and she led him by the hand up the narrow windy staircase to the bedrooms above. She brought him into her bedroom and he quickly kicked off his shoes and they lay on the bed kissing. Then it was all hands and gentle caresses as they disrobed each other. When they got down to the undergarments she sneaked a quick peek.

"My, you are well endowed."

He gently removed her undies.

"Do you have a condom?"

He shook his hand.

"Joe you are really hopeless. There are condoms in the drawer of the dresser. Bring over the pack."

He rolled one quickly on his erect penis and wasted no time in entering her. She gave a soft sigh and they moved rhythmically together. He was concentrating hard on anything that would prevent him from coming to soon at this critical moment. He pulled out to dampen his arousal and then went back in.

"Is everything ok?"

"Just fine."

"Don't stop. Faster."

He couldn't hold on any longer and he let loose with all the pent up frustration of nearly a year's celibacy. After wards he lay beside her. "I am all sweaty" he said apologetically.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"It's supposed to be like that."

Later they tried again and he was able to hold on for her to have her moment which she did with a series of heightened cries. When they lay side by side the condom fell off and she slid down and took his flaccid member in her mouth. He was struggling and willing himself to have another erection and eventually after much effort on both their parts he managed to come but his penis was sore and sensitive at this point.

She swallowed it all down and came back up to lay beside him.

He woke with first light of dawn and it all came flooding back. She was curled up in foetal position beside him and somehow the covers had been thrown off during the night. Her skin was pale and flawless and all that he could see of her face was hidden beneath a thatch of mousey blonde hair. Part of the condom wrapper was stuck to his leg. There was a strong smell of latex and sweat in the air.

She rolled over and opened her eyes. "You are in my bed" She wrinkled her nose and flinched. "I am going to have a shower." She sprang out of bed and grabbed a towel from the closet and wrapped herself in it. "And you're out of shape" she said. She pressed her lips tightly together.

Joe got dressed slowly and found his underwear and socks wrapped up in the duvet. By the time she came out of the shower he was sitting on the end of the bed fully dressed.

"Hey. I have an idea" he said. "Why don't we go down to Dollymount Strand and go for a walk. It's a nice sunny day."

She nodded. "Ok. Let me get dressed and throw on some makeup first."

They drove down to the strand in her beat up car and parked on the beach. There were few people about and despite the sun it was a chilly day. They walked hand in hand along the shoreline. He threw stones into the water trying to skim them across the waves.

"I think I am going to go home now" she said eventually. "I'll drop you to the bus stop."

"Ok."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#Chinese Girls

The following evening he was driving home from work when the phone rang. He just got to it in time and picked it up.

“Hello.”

“Hello we are calling about the ad – the room for rent. Is it still there?”

“Yes it’s still available.”

“We can come tonight. We are in a hurry.”

“Just one second. How many are you?”

“Just two.”

“Two girls I hope.”

“Yes we are two girls. We are from China.”

“Ok.” He gave them the address and details and arranged to meet them at 7pm.

He dropped into his parents’ house on his way home. His Dad opened the door and looked grave. “Joe we really have to talk.”

“What about?”

“The car - that’s what. You have it nearly the whole time and I need it too.”

“Just another few days - I am going to buy my own car. I have a place in Ballyfermot lined up. He deals in second hand cars.”

“Well I suppose another few days would be ok.”

“Great thanks. I have to run I am showing the flat.”

He parked the car outside the late shop and walked down the alleyway. He could see two Chinese girls standing outside the gate. As he got closer he could see they were in their early twenties – possibly even teens.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Did you come about the room?" he asked.

"Yes we did" said the taller of the two. "My name is Susan – my English and this is Audrey." He shook both their hands. Then he opened the gate and ushered them into the patio and then unlocked the front door. The second bedroom opened immediately onto the porch and he let them have a good look around.

"Come upstairs when you are finished looking."

He sat on the couch in the living room and waited for them to come up.

"Wow this is lovely up here" said Susan coming up first. She wore black shoulder length hair and jeans and a sweater. Her face was rounded and she had dark brown eyes that sparkled in the light. Her features were symmetrical and her companion by comparison had her hair tied up in a ponytail – slight traces of acne spotted her cheeks.

"Can we come up here too" asked Susan.

"Yes of course we share the same living space. This is your living room too."

"And where is your room" asked Audrey.

"Just there beside the kitchen" he pointed to the closed door.

"Now look it is for just the two of you. I don't want anyone else staying in your room. Is that clear?"

"Yes of course" said Susan. She smiled. "We have the money now if you want."

"Ok – let me get my receipt book. Sit down. Do you want some tea or something?"

"No we are okay" said Susan. "No TV?"

"No not yet. It's on the list of things to do."

"What do you do?" said Susan. Audrey mostly looked at the floor or her nails.

"I work for HDME."

"What's that?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"It's an American company."

"Oh yes we have that in China too."

"What brings you to Dublin?"

"We are learning English and we have student visas. So we can work here" said Susan.

Joe counted out the money Susan handed him in a manila envelope. "Well look the money is all here.

That's fine then the room is yours. You can move in tomorrow night if you want."

"That would be great" said Susan. Her eyes sparkled. Audrey sported a wide grin.

"You should see the place we are in" said Susan. "It has damp and mould and this is so much better!"

He escorted them down the stairs and out to the gate.

#Lads Come Out to Get a Goo

On Friday night he arranged to meet Fiona in Café En Seine. He also arranged to meet the lads a half hour earlier ostensibly to get seats. When he arrived Jonas and Gerry were already seated in a booth on the first floor.

"This is the best we could get" said Gerry. "We came to see the bird."

"That's the only reason" said Jonas. "You know I hate this place."

Joe sat down beside them and ordered a pint. "It's the best pub in the city centre. She is coming from the Northside, probably getting a DART."

A few moments later Derek came up the stairs and joined them. "Joe's bird can't wait to see her."

"Well she's not here yet. She will be soon however."

"I bet she's a minger" said Gerry.

"I don't think so" said Jonas. "If that were true he would never tell us about her."

"Well what are we doing tonight?" said Derek.

"Well I will probably head on with Fiona. Grab a bite or something" said Joe.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Grab a bite! You are such a ponce."

"What I want to know" said Derek, "is has the eagle landed?"

"Yes" said Jonas, "did you close the deal?"

"Never mind that."

"I think we are seeing a new found confidence in the Joe-meister."

"Congratulations from the lads!" said Derek.

At eight forty Fiona came up the stairs. She was dressed in curve hugging sequined jeans and brown leather boots – on top she wore a commodious Aran sweater over a black lace top.

"Fiona over here" Joe waved. "You look fantastic!"

"Where were you?" she said, "I was waiting for ages downstairs."

"Sorry I didn't hear my phone. There is too much background noise."

She sat on a stool beside Joe.

"Fiona this is Gerry, Jonas and Derek."

After a while Jonas said, "do you have any friends Fiona?"

"Of course who doesn't have friends?"

"I mean single friends."

"Oh well, you want me to fix you up is it?"

"Could you ring them tonight?"

"Well no, not really. It's a bit short notice. Maybe some other time. I remember you. You were at the speed dater."

"I was" said Jonas. "Maybe I met one of your friends that night?"

"Do you remember Amanda?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"It's such a blur. I can't say that I do."

"Well she was sitting beside me."

"Let's get another round in" said Joe.

"Jesus you downed that pretty sharpish" said Derek.

"Fiona, what are you having?"

"I'm okay. I think I will skip this one."

"Ah, why?"

"No thank you. You go ahead."

Eventually the lads purchased another round. Joe put one arm affectionately around Fiona's shoulder but she politely and gently returned his arm. He gasped but said nothing.

"What are we doing later?" he whispered, conspiratorially.

"Nothing. At least nothing planned."

"But don't you want to go out to dinner?"

"I am feeling really tired Joe. Maybe you should stay with your friends tonight. Would that not be best?"

Joe said nothing and took a deep swig from his pint. "Have you decided what you are all doing, yet?" he said to the lads.

"Not really" said Jonas. "There is some debate on the topic. It's a bit early for a night club. We might try another pub. Would that be alright if we left the two of you here?"

"That's fine" said Joe. "You do what you have to do."

The lads finished up their drinks and said their goodbyes and headed downstairs.

"Keep your mobile handy" said Joe, "just in case."

Jonas nodded.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Back in a second" said Joe, to Fiona. He disappeared downstairs and returned with another pint for himself and a glass of red wine for Fiona.

"Is that for me?" said Fiona. "I told you I don't feel like it."

"Ah drink some of it. Sip it."

#Fight with Fiona

"I don't want it Joe. Are you trying to get me drunk?"

"I thought we could relax and have a few drinks. What is so bad about that?"

"Joe I think I am going to go home. The last train leaves in an hour anyway."

"Are you not even going to invite me to stay the night?"

"God no. I don't feel like that tonight."

"After all we have been through last time."

"Oh Jesus." She was half standing reaching for her coat.

"You are just a complete control freak. Only when you want it I suppose."

"Oh God. Why am I in trouble? I cooked you dinner and let you stay over."

"You can't just turn it on and off like a tap. I have feelings too you know. It's not just about your feelings.

And when I we supposed to meet again. When you feel like it I suppose."

"Joe I am very tired."

"No you listen to me."

"Joe you are shouting. People are listening. A few heads turned at the next table beside theirs.

He tried to block her as she made for the stairs.

"Get out of my way, you psycho."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

When she had gone he sat there staring into space. He drank his pint now and left his phone on the table in the vain hope that she might call to apologise and forgive. He felt flat and a dull throbbing pain engulfed the region of his heart. He tore his beer mat into a thousand pieces before eventually decided to leave. He decided not to bother with the lads and he was no longer in form for their banter and rivalry. He walked down to Nassau Street and caught the last bus back to Rathmines.

#Sends Fiona Flowers

The next day he woke with a hangover and he had an appointment at eleven to see some cars in Ballyfermot. Before he sat off he went into the florist in Rathmines and picked out a bouquet of flowers. He attached a note saying "sorry for being such a jerk" and sent it off to Fiona's address.

That evening the phone rang and he answered. It was Fiona.

"Joe, I got the flowers."

"Did you like them?"

"Look it wasn't necessary to send them in the first place."

"I thought maybe we could start over at the beginning again. Would that be possible?"

"I don't think so Joe. I don't want to go through another experience like last night."

"So then this is good-bye."

"I think it is for the best Joe. Good-bye and good luck."

He hung up the phone and threw it down on the couch.

#Chinese Girls Move In

They arrived at 6:30pm with all their belongings on their backs. Joe stayed upstairs listening to music on the stereo. After a while Susan came up and looked over the bannister.

"Is it ok to come up?" She stood at the bottom of the stairwell, looking up.

He leaned over the bannister. "Yes of course. Come on up."

"You look very sad today, Joe" she said.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I feel sad. That is why."

"What happened?" Susan sat on one of the chairs.

"I had a big fight with a girl I was seeing." He ran his hands through his hair, knees rested on his knees.

"Well maybe you can fix things up."

"I don't think so. I think this is the end." He was silent for a moment. "What is Audrey doing?"

"She is reading a book in the room. I think she is too shy to come up."

"Oh. I see."

"Your music is very sad. I like it though."

"Will you go back to China when you are finished with your studies?"

"Oh yes. I always plan to go back. You know China will be superpower someday."

"You are probably right at the rate she is growing."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

C13

#HDME

On Monday morning he was fifteen minutes late for work. He dropped his bag beside his desk. Stephen was already at his desk working furiously away. “Where have you been? Ian is going mad for the reports and I can’t make any sense of these formulas you put into the reports. You are going to have to help me.”

He pulled his chair over beside Stephen and sat down.

“Joe I need you 100% for this. What’s wrong with you anyhow? Are you okay?”

“I am okay. Just give me a minute that’s all.”

Ian came up to their desks and leaned over the cubicle wall. “Where are my reports guys? We are meeting in 45 minutes. Dylan and the SMT are going to be there. I need those reports. And I need to look them over beforehand too.”

“We’ll get there Ian. We just need a few minutes here to get it straight.”

“Well hurry up. You don’t have much time.”

Ian left.

“You have landed me in a bloody pickle with these damn formulas. I am going to have to put all the numbers manually.”

“Why don’t you update last week’s report if that is easier for you?”

“I can’t. I have added all the new campaigns to this report. There isn’t enough time.”

“Let’s just check the numbers. Slow down a bit you are panicking.”

“Ok. The total for UK home sales is 2.5 million, right. So the formula is right. Now what about Ireland business sales – 300K. That seems to be slightly off.”

“Probably because it is not including internet sales.”

“Ok so we add internet sales in using the formula.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Ok, ok” said Stephen. “I am starting to feel a bit more comfortable. But we can't send out something that is wrong to the SMT. We would be crucified. Either I need to learn how to use these formulas, or we stick with the old method. For now I can say crisis averted. Thank God you came in when you did. I would not have figured out that by myself. Now I am sending this to the printer – make 5 copies and drop one into Ian.”

Joe went off to find the printer which was in the next cubicle by the corridor which led down to the canteen. When he got there Jennifer was standing over the printer watching as the printouts came out.

“Are you printing a lot” he said.

“Come back later. It will take a while” she said without turning around.

“I can't come back. I have a meeting in thirty minutes. I have to get those printouts.”

“That's not my problem” she said. “Anyway I was here before you and you are only new.”

On the display he could see Stephen's print job queued behind Jennifer's. He reached over her and hit the delete button. The printer stopped immediately and went onto the next print job.

Jennifer gasped and froze suddenly. She grabbed her printouts and stormed out of the cubicle. “You will regret this” she said as she left.

He collected all the printouts from Stephen's print job and returned to his desk.

“Ian was back again. Better run that up to him first” said Stephen.

“I think I may have pissed Jennifer off” he said.

“What happened?”

“I deleted her print job. I had too. She wouldn't let me use the printer.”

“Well you can make it up to her later. Quick now run these to Ian.”

He found Ian's cubicle and handed him the report.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Finally. Well good. Now look Joe. Timeliness is very important here at HDME. I noticed you were fifteen minutes late this morning. Try not to let that happen again."

He went back to his desk.

"Now why don't you bring Jennifer a cup of coffee" said Stephen.

"Are you serious?"

Stephen nodded.

"Where does she sit again?"

"She is over beside Eamon and the girls."

He went down to the canteen and bought a cup of coffee from the deli counter and walked back up the corridor towards the main room. He passed by the printer cubicle but it was empty and then down the aisle between the two sets of cubicles. He could see Jennifer sitting at her desk. He came in behind her and put the coffee on the desk.

"Sorry about earlier. We were both very stressed. Here is a peace offering."

She looked up taking a double take. "Oh well thanks."

He found his way back to Stephen. He had tidied up his work station and even got himself a cup of coffee. "The meeting is on now. Nothing we can do. How did you get on with Jennifer?"

"It worked. Just like you said it would."

"Now we can relax. I am not against your formulas in principle. But we have to have the reports ready for management or there will be hell to pay."

"I know. I understand."

#Buys a car

On Monday evening he drove out to Ballyfermot. He followed a long, narrow winding tree lined road to a cross roads and using the direction he had been given he came across a bungalow house with a large paved front driveway filled with used cars. He had pre- arranged a time with the owner of the dealership.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

A man in a black woollen jumper and dark trousers answered the door to his ring.

"I called earlier, Joe O'Malley about the Civic."

"Oh yes. Joe, come on outside I will show it to you. I am Danny Morris." They shook hands.

He led him across the forecourt and into a shed at the back where more vehicles were parked. "Here she is" he said, banging the bonnet. "Only 60K on the clock."

"I was wondering if I could take it for a test drive" said Joe.

"No problem" said Danny. "Let me get the keys and we can take it out on the main road for a spin."

He came back with a canister of petrol and proceeded to top up the tank. Then he got into the passenger seat and Joe got into the driver's seat and they set off.

"Take a left at the main entrance" said Danny as they came out of the driveway.

"She handles quite well."

"Now you would need to get the wheels rebalanced and it needs a good service."

"What's the engine size?"

"1300cc – same for all the Civics."

Joe drove around the housing estate nearby and then out onto the dual carriageway. "How much did you say it was?"

"Four thousand."

"And can I buy it tonight?"

"We would have to do some paper work. Let's go back to the office and see if we can."

He drove the car back into the driveway and parked it beside the other vehicles.

"Do you have all your documentation and the money?"

"I have a banker's draft. Will that do?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Bankers draft is fine. How did you know the amount on the draft?"

"You had the civic advertised as 4K in the paper."

"Ah, a man who knows what he wants."

They went into the house and he brought him into the kitchen.

"I will transfer ownership of the car to you, but that can't be done until tomorrow. The office is closed now. The draft is fine. And I have a photo copy of your license - all that seems to be in order. So here are the keys. I expect you will come around tomorrow night then to pick up the car."

Joe nodded.

They shook hands again and he escorted Joe to the door. "Oh you might need to fill up on petrol, by the way."

Joe reversed the car out of the driveway and headed off back to Rathmines. Later he parked the car outside the apartment and opened the front door and went in. The two girls were in their room so he did not disturb and climbed the stairs to the living room above. He checked his phone and there was a message from Jonas but it was already too late for tonight. He stretched out on the couch tried to relax. He resisted a wild impulse to call Fiona and after a while he fell asleep.

He woke with a start, cold and stiff. His watch read 2am and he picked himself up off the couch and stumbled into bed.

#HDME

He arrived early to work and sat down in his chair. For once he was in before Stephen. He logged into his computer and read his email for a while. Eventually Stephen arrived.

"Now who's late?" said Joe.

"You still don't know how things work around here" said Stephen.

"Prey tell."

"Well everyone is in for the SMT meeting. There is only one a fortnight but they are absolutely critical."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“So you kick back after the meeting?”

“Just a little and don't admit to it. That's the key.”

“Office politics!”

Jennifer came around and leaned over the partition on Stephen's side. “Well if it isn't Beavis and Butthead.”

“Don't say anything, Joe” Stephen cut across him.

“What can I do for you Jennifer?”

“Nothing. Just came by to check on the analyst monkeys.”

“Now you know that's not very nice” said Stephen.

“Ah I am only pulling your chains. No need to take it personally.”

“So what exactly do you do in marketing” said Joe.

“Graphic design for the catalogues if you must know.”

“Just curious - that's all.”

She turned on her heel and walked down the corridor in the direction of the canteen.

“Believe me it's much easier if you just humour her. That's what I do.”

“That would appear to be your strategy in all situations.”

“Works for me. What's yours? Pissing people off when you hardly know them. Not such a good idea in a place like this.”

“She is pretty easy to piss off. If you mean Jennifer, that is?”

After lunch Jennifer came up to his desk and said right out. “Did you delete my print job?”

“No I didn't” said Joe.

“Where is it then? I have sent it to printer several times and it keeps disappearing.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I have had enough of this shit. Would you ever just piss off?"

She stumped off in the direction of her desk.

"What did you say that for?"

"Well I didn't delete her print job."

"But you did delete it yesterday morning. I knew that would come back to bite you in the arse."

"God you are such a girl's blouse." Stephen turned his chair around and kept his back to Joe for the rest of the afternoon.

#Jonas & Derek

That evening Dad drove him out to Ballyfermot to collect his new car. After he picked up the car he drove down to Jonas and Derek's place. They lived together in Sandymount in a two bed.

"What do you think of the new motor?" he said, when they came out to inspect the car.

"That's a nice little run around, all right" said Derek.

"Where's Gerry tonight?"

"Oh, he is not coming out. He has to do some work for his brother or something."

"Searsons for a couple?"

"Just one for me" said Derek.

"We know, you are very responsible and tonight is a school night."

They piled into the car and drove up to Searsons. It looked bright and inviting from the outside but inside there was very few people inside when they parked and came in the side door.

When they were seated Jonas had a million questions.

"So what happened with Fiona?"

"I don't know. I don't think she was ever that into me."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I have to say dude" said Derek, "that's the way it looked to me. Last Friday night she wanted to get away as soon as possible."

"What happened?" asked Jonas.

"Well I just assumed we would go back to her place. I thought sex was on the menu on a permanent basis. But she had other ideas."

"Oh one of those" said Jonas. "They make sex a weapon of control. That would really wreck anyone's head."

"It has wrecked my head. I mean that was the same thing with Bella. First she was into it. Then she wasn't. Then she just wanted to be friends."

"Who the hell is Bella?"

"Oh you remember Bella. Don't you?"

"Oh that Belgian girl - I suppose I remember but why are you bringing her up now?" said Derek.

"Only because Fiona reminded me of Bella - they were alike." He took a sip from his pint. "I don't know. I am back to square one again on all this. It's very disheartening. I think I go after women like my mother – only I really don't want too because I don't want to get involved with anyone like my mother."

"Did you put pressure on her or something?" said Jonas.

"Not a lot."

"I think it would have turned out that way sooner or later" said Jonas. "I mean who is going to put up with that."

"It just seems like I am acclimatised to dating one type of girl. And it is precisely the type that I don't want end up with. I don't want a fight everything about sex and who is in control in the bedroom. "

"Well I have some dating news of my own" said Jonas. "I have been out with the Danish girl a couple of times from Microsystems and I can report that is going very well indeed."

"There you see. You must be her type and she is your type. That's why it's working."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I think you over think these things, Joe" said Derek. "So it was a bad date. That's nothing usual. Go for a nice girl next time. She didn't really strike me as a very nice girl anyhow."

"She did seem very corporate and prissy all most."

"So tell me about the Danish girl."

"Well we meet up with them the same night we all met Fiona and went to Howler again. She just came on very strongly to me. And I was delighted. She is a bit younger but she's grown up for her age."

"She has stayed the night for the last three nights and they have been banging away every night" said Derek.

Joe burst out laughing. "Well that's one who is sorted anyhow."

"What about your one at work?" he said to Derek.

"Ah she's a slow burner."

"I just don't know where I go wrong. I mean this is bad. I really liked Fiona and now she is probably afraid of me. If I can't make it work with a female then I am rightly pickled."

"Surely it's not that bad" said Jonas.

"You don't understand" said Joe. "This is a cul-de-sac with no way out. How can I meet someone and despite my best efforts it doesn't work out?"

Silence descended on the trio as they supped their beers.

"There is something wrong with me. That's the reality" said Joe.

"Joe everyone has their ups and downs with dating. It's nothing usual. She wasn't right for you. She wasn't even a particularly nice girl."

"I know. But I don't even know what to do now and where to turn."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

[#HDME](#)

He parked his civic in the car park at HDME. He was early but he went in anyway. Stephen was already at his desk.

“Hi Stephen” he said, but Stephen didn't turn around. He sat down at his computer and logged in. He picked up his cup of coffee and noticed that his hand was shaking slightly. He quickly put down the cup.

Eventually Stephen turned around. “Ian wants to see you.”

“Oh now you are talking to me.”

Stephen rolled his eyes.

Joe went off in search for Ian and found in his cubicle staring into his monitor.

“You wanted to see me.”

“Ah Joe. Sit down. So how is everything going?”

“Well not too bad. Still finding my feet so to speak.”

“Well that's to be expected. Listen I want you to take over Stephen's reports for a few weeks. He is going to be on annual leave anyhow starting next week. So you can update his reports every Monday for the Tuesday meeting. Think you can do that?”

“I think so. Yes I have had a good look at the reports.”

“Now, no mistakes. Everything needs to be perfect. Those reports are read by a lot of people.”

“Ok, I understand.”

At lunchtime he went down to the canteen by himself. Stephen was still being unresponsive. He picked up a tray at the deli counter and got a hot plate of food. He walked into the seating area and noticed Jennifer and Barbara sitting at a table.

He went over. “Mind if I join you?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"We were just leaving" said Jennifer. Barbara hesitated. "Come on Barbara." She got up and followed Jennifer. Joe sat at the table by himself.

#Rachel

A few minutes later Rachel came into the room carrying a tray of food.

"Rachel, Rachel over here" he waved. She hesitated looking around her but after a few moments she came over. Up close she had long black shoulder length hair, crystal green eyes and a perfectly symmetrical face. She was dressed in brown corduroy trousers and black polo neck with black waistcoat. A silver cross hung from a chain around her neck. She wore a heavy foundation on her face concealing slight traces of acne on her chin and her cheek bones.

"Sorry the table is a bit of a mess."

"That's okay." She sat down and started unloaded her tray.

"My, the healthy option" She gave a quick fleeting smile.

"Well how is it going? Two weeks now is it?"

"Three weeks actually. It's going okay. Say where are you from? Where is that accent?"

"I am from Clare - Lahinch actually."

"Oh, I know Lahinch I was there once on summer holidays. So how come the big smoke?"

She opened the top of her yogurt carton and stuck a spoon in it. "Well its where all the jobs are for one thing. And I like it. Lahinch well let's just say nobody stays – they all either emigrate or migrate to Dublin. There is nothing there. Nothing to do and no jobs. Plus it rains a lot."

"Sounds grim."

"Well it's ok to visit – like you did for a holiday but not somewhere to live."

"What do you think of HDME?" A morsel of food flew out of his mouth and did an arc landing on her polo neck. She brushed it away. "Oops sorry!" He reddened slightly.

"That's okay. It's a job. It's okay for now. I wouldn't be staying here forever though."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Where is there to go?”

“Oh there are lots of other places – London, maybe New York.”

She started to put her plate and cutlery back on her tray. “I have to go” she said, “see you around no doubt.”

“Rachel before you go” he paused, swallowing hard, “would you like to go out some time?”

She gasped and her mouth fell open. “Are you asking me out?”

Joe nodded. “What do you think?”

“I don't date people I work with for one thing. And anyway I you are not my type. How old are you anyhow?”

She stood up snatched up her tray and stomped off. The items on her tray rattled with each step.

#Dinner with parents

That night he drove his car back to Dublin and parked outside his parents' house. A celebratory dinner was planned for the new job and Tim was coming too. When he went inside Mum was preparing the meal in the kitchen.

“It will be ready in a few minutes. Go down and tell Dad its ready.”

He went downstairs into the basement. Dad was hunched over his computer.

“Ah Joe, how are you?”

“Glad to have your car back finally.”

“Of course. You don't need it do you?”

“No. I have my own now so that should be okay. How's the thesis coming along?”

“Oh it's great. Every day there is a new addition or new content to be added.”

“Are you still up in UCD?”

“Still up there for now anyhow.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

He followed Joe upstairs to the kitchen. Tim had arrived and was seated at the table.

"I think Joe's new job calls for something of a celebration" said Mum.

"Don't you think that's premature" said Joe. "I am not sure that I like it yet or not."

"Of course you do" said Mum. "Tim you could learn something from Joe's experience you know."

She sat the table slowly. She was dressed wearing blue tracksuit bottoms a blue and white stripy top and her hair was all standing up as if she had just got out of bed.

"We are all here to celebrate Joe" said Dad.

"I don't really feel like being celebrated."

"What have you made there, Mum?" asked Dad.

"I cooked a nice lasagne for all of us."

"If it's going to be a few minutes I will slip out for a smoke" said Tim.

Mum nodded. Joe joined him closing the patio door behind him.

"Still like your job" said Tim, smiling.

"It's not too bad. Why do you ask?"

"I just thought by now you would be climbing up the walls."

"Are you some kind of clairvoyant? Why don't you get a job instead of knocking me for getting one?"

Tim said nothing.

"Look I a bit sensitive about the job. It's not going as well as I initially thought."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. I am just not very good at getting on with people in work. I think I piss people off."

"Why don't you just tell them to fuck off?"

"Oh Jesus, you can't do that. Why am I even telling you about it?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Joe went inside and sat down at the table.

"Tim dinner is ready." Mum banged on the window.

"Let's have some wine" said Dad, appearing from the dining room with a bottle already uncorked. "Joe you will have a glass, it's an indifferent but drinkable red."

"Ok."

"Nothing for me" said Tim.

"Mum what about you."

"Just a half glass for me."

"You encouraged me to take this job" said Joe to Mum.

"Don't talk like that Joe. It will be fine. You just need to settle in."

"I am thirty years old. I don't need a nanny or a mummy to tell me what to do."

"Why did you listen then Joe?" said Dad.

"I don't know why. I know now that I shouldn't have. You two masquerade as my best friends and you just aren't. You don't have my interests at heart."

"Eat your lasagne Joe before it goes cold. I don't know what you are blaming us for. We didn't tell you to do anything."

"Never accountable as per usual" said Tim.

They all started eating.

"The world is your oyster, Joe. I have told you before." said Dad.

"So you keep telling me."

"Can't we just all have a nice dinner without any arguments for a change?" said Mum, her spoon paused in mid-air before her mouth.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Don't look at me. I didn't start anything."

"If you don't want to work there don't" said Dad.

"Dad, that is a terrible thing to say."

"Well I am serious. If he doesn't like it, he doesn't like it. End of story."

"Well I am serious too. Joe is far better off with a job then loafing around like this creature here."

"This creature to refer to happens to be your first born son" said Dad.

"And didn't I cook him lasagne?"

"Oh Jesus, will you both stop. At least for as long as I am here." said Joe.

#Gerry

At nine o'clock he met Gerry for a swift pint at Searsons. He came in through the side door and Gerry was already seated at a table with two pints in front of him.

"What took you so long?" he laughed.

"What are you talking about? I am on time. I couldn't wait to get away from the parentals. They are truly wrecking my head."

"At least you don't live with them anymore. I must take a look at your place sometime. I hear you have Chinese girls for roommates."

"Jonas told you?"

"Derek actually - neither of whom can join us tonight incidentally."

"I don't know Gerry. This job is already wrecking my head."

"I know how you feel and I have been there. Believe me. When I worked for Zion Capital it turned out to be the most horrendous experience of my life. Peter and Paul – that was me and my manager. We could never agree about anything. Then I was out sick for two weeks and the owner of the company rang me and demanded that I come in and explain my absences. I was sick for God's sake."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"But how do you cope now with no money? I suppose you are on the rock and roll."

"I have a few irons in the fire. But yeah mostly it's the doler."

"But like how do you manage and then there is the respect thing. Chicks don't like the dole – no offence or anything."

"I am way ahead of you man."

"When my album comes out I will have all the chicks I can handle and more."

"You don't really think it will be a hit. Do you?"

"Why not? Why couldn't it be? I just finished the demo tape."

"Maybe it works out for you. I just couldn't live with my mother. She is such a virago."

"So is mine - we get along somehow."

"I only ever wanted to escape."

"You can't escape your parents."

"Why is everything so hard? Why am I only confronted by hard choices the whole time? There must be an easier way but there isn't, at least not one that I know."

There was silence as they both sipped on their pints.

"I think I put my foot in it today" said Joe.

"How?"

"I asked the hottie out on a date. She was not impressed."

"Oh dear, bad idea. You will no doubt cross paths with her again. And that's going to be embarrassing."

"You should see her Gerry. She is gorgeous."

"That's the whole point Joe. Just because she works with you doesn't mean she wants to be around you.

You are mixing up two very different things."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I think there is something very wrong with me. It is my interpersonal style. You accept me. But I have known you for years and then when I meet someone new they almost immediately dislike me. There is an initial hiatus but then it quickly turns to dislike."

"I don't know. It can't always be your fault. You seem to be blaming yourself exclusively. Do you think you are a bad guy or something?"

"I am starting too. Honestly I am. I mean I totally lost the plot over that girl Bella. I was ringing her constantly and sending her numerous letters. And she told me to fuck off. I just wouldn't listen. What do you make of that?"

#Day of Big Report

He came in early and logged into his computer. Stephen was out on annual leave. He downloaded the call data from the switch and imported it into the UK and Ireland reports. He had added formulas to the UK report the day before and he waited until the spreadsheets recalculated before he checked the totals against the printout from the switch. The totals didn't match. He felt a cold chill along his spine. He checked the clock. There was still 45 minutes before the meeting started and he was presenting.

He decided the best thing to do would be to download the data again and try a refresh. However that would take fifteen minutes. He ran the download but the download fell over and only half the data came through.

He saw Ian walking along the aisle coming towards him.

"Joe, how is it going? How are those reports doing?"

"Just having a slight technical problem. Should make the deadline."

"Joe you have to make the deadline. The SMT are attending."

"I will bring it straight to you as soon as it is ready."

Ian nodded and turned around and walked off.

"What's it like being on your own?" Jennifer stood looking over the wall of Stephen's cubicle.

"Not now I am busy" he snapped."

"Jesus" she walked off.

He ran the download another time. This time all the data downloaded correctly. He pasted the results into the report. There was still a discrepancy. It was too late to run it again and it was too late to hunt around for the problem. He sent the two reports to the printer and now it was five to the hour. He gathered up his note pad and collected his printouts.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

When he got to the meeting room he could see the three heads of the SMT seated there looking at their watches. All the marketing group were present also. Ian flashed him a dirty look as he distributed the reports around the room.

He started off. "UK Business and home sales for last week were 4% higher than the previous week. And 8% higher than the comparable period from last year."

He noticed the head of finance was doing some calculations on her calculator. "Joe is it" she looked up. "These figures don't add up."

"I admit there is a slight discrepancy between the two reports."

"It's not slight. It's way out. I am sorry I can't rely on these numbers." She turned the page to the graphs. "And all the graphs are blank." She held up the offending page to show everyone. "Ian, will you take care of this? We will have to reconvene."

The SMT got up and left the room. Ian turned to the marketing group and said, "ok you guys can leave." They filed out passed Joe and shut the door behind them.

"Now Joe what the hell was that? That was a disaster."

"It's the report. The formulas didn't work."

"Is this that formula driven report Stephen was telling me about?"

"Joe nodded.

"Look we can't go onto these new reports if they are unreliable. You need to go back to the old reports and understand them. Can you do that?"

Joe nodded.

"Joe you can't keep making mistakes like that and expect there to be no consequences."

"It's not my bloody fault. Why am I being blamed?"

"You're responsible for the call reports. It is your fault."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I don't understand this atmosphere of blame."

"It's not blame. Its accountability. Jesus, Joe you are acting like a two year old."

"Now you are being personal."

"You need to focus on an area of control and master it. But look for now just use the old reports. When you understand them then you can try building new ones. We need this information to be rock solid. You can see you can't get anything past the SMT."

Joe went back to his desk. After a while Ian came over. "Ok Joe the meeting is rescheduled for 4pm this afternoon. I want to see those reports on my desk at 3pm to give me a chance to look them over."

"Ok.

He opened up the old reports and refreshed the data using the information downloaded from the switch. At 2:30pm he went over to Ian's desk and handed him the reports. "I thought I would get a head start on the reports and get them to you early in case there are any issues."

"Good idea" said Ian.

"I will look them over and come down to you."

Joe went back to his desk.

Ian came over. "Ok Joe these look fine. Listen I will present these results to the SMT. It is just going to be a short meeting to check results."

"Oh."

"Don't worry about it. You'll get your chance soon enough." And he was gone.

#Leaves Early

At 4.30pm he slipped out through the side door, leaving his computer turned on and a jacket on the back of his chair. The car park was full and he managed to get away without anyone seeing him. When he got back to the flat he could tell the Chinese girls were in their room. He went up the stairs without saying anything and lay down on the couch with his feet up.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Susan stuck her head up the stairs. "Is that you up there Joe?"

"It is me."

"I will come up."

She came and sat in the other chair. "Ah Joe you look sad again."

"I am okay."

"Can I tell Audrey to come up?"

"Yes of course - if you want."

She called down to Audrey in Chinese.

"Ah you are stressed Joe. What is upsetting you?" said Susan.

"Oh work I suppose. I don't know. I have so many stresses and strains."

"You struggle Joe. All the time you struggle. You have to give in and not fight. Then you will have peace."

Audrey came up the stairs and sat in the other chair.

"You are right you know" said Joe. "I am always fighting myself."

"Would you like some tea?" said Susan. "I will make some."

"Yes that would be nice."

"We have an expression in our country" said Susan, "the way of struggle, it only brings sorrow."

"You are very wise for someone so young" said Joe.

"I am not so young, I am twenty one."

"What do you think Audrey?" Joe asked.

"Her English is not so good. I will ask her in Chinese."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Audrey smiled and nodded. "She thinks you struggle" Susan translated. "You are all about struggle that maybe you have been very hurt. Do you know what she means?"

"I think I know. Yes I think I do."

Later he went into his room and turned on his computer. He inserted a flash drive into the computer with the intention of doing some work. But when he saw the reports again he found himself gazing out the window and thinking about Rachel.

He decided to write her a letter and opened a new document on his computer.

#Rachel - Letter

"Dear Rachel,

I hope this finds you well. I am sorry if I put my foot in it last time we met. I didn't mean to scare you off and I really would like to be your friend. I don't know you very well and you don't know me. But I think we have some things in common. If you are up for it I would like to take you out to dinner just as friends and maybe get to know you a bit better.

Your colleague,

Joe."

He saved the letter onto his flash drive and lay down on the bed. Outside in the living room he could hear his roommates jabbering away in Chinese. Sleep was a long time coming and he didn't even have a clean shirt for the morning.

#HDME

He arrived early hoping to get a glimpse of Rachel. And he was not disappointed. He came in the side door and collected his coffee from the machine. Rachel was standing there making a cup of tea. She had her long black hair tied up in a ponytail and was wearing a lace blouse and dark black trousers.

"Rachel, hi, how are you?"

"Hi" she said giving Joe a fleeting glance.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"How was your weekend?" He struggled to keep up with her and she was gone accelerating down the corridor. He slowed down just in time to prevent his coffee from slopping over.

When he got to his desk there was a post tip sticking to his computer screen. It read "Come and see me when you get this, Ian."

He slumped into the chair, just remembering to put his coffee on the desk. He pulled himself together and walked over to Ian's cubicle. Ian looked up from his terminal.

"Come in Joe."

Joe came in and sat down.

"Look I will come right to it. Where were you yesterday?"

"What do you mean? I was here."

"I was looking for you at four forty five, Jennifer said you had left."

"Jennifer said..well I may have left a little early."

"I checked with security. Your car left the car park at four thirty."

"This is beginning to sound like Big Brother is watching me."

"Look Joe we have policies about time keeping. If you want to leave early for whatever you have to run it past your manager first. That would be me in this case. These are policies may I remind you that you signed up too when you joined HDME."

Joe said nothing.

"Look Joe. I know you had a rough day yesterday. But if you want a good reputation you have to earn it and win the trust of the people around you. Then they will say you are the numbers guy and trust your output. You won't get it by leaving early and cutting corners."

Joe was silent.

"Well that's it. If you want to leave early come and see me, and you will need to have a good reason."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Joe went back to his work station. He sipped his coffee and it was cold. With Stephen on holidays he decided to postpone his report maintenance until the afternoon anyhow.

#Mortgage

At lunchtime he went locked his work station and went looking for the HR department which was located on a floor above the reception. He went into their office and came up to the desk. A heavily made up, overweight dark haired girl looked up from her computer.

“Hi, I’m Joe O’Malley. I sent you an email.”

“Oh yes I have your reference here just like you asked for it.”

“Thanks.”

“Also I should mention most people don’t apply for mortgages until they have been in the job a year or two at least. They just wait until they are settled. Anyway it is up to you.”

“Thanks again.”

He went back down to his workstation. At lunchtime he drove into Cabinteely village and parked his car on the main street. He had an appointment with a mortgage advisor in the bank and he arrived a few minutes early.

When he got there the man ushered into a screened area behind which there was a desk and two chairs and a computer.

“Ah Joe thanks for coming in. So you are interested in a mortgage?”

“I am just enquiring at this point. I have a apartment I just rented but I was thinking that I could save a lot of money by moving into my own property. Anyway it is dead money.”

“And how long are you in the job?”

He handed him the document.

“Well I can certainly put in an application for you but you are not very long in your current position plus also I assume you signed a one year lease. That’s another issue potentially.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Why?”

“Well only because people like to look at those things as a sign of stability and predictability so broken leases do not impress mortgage approvers. It reduces your score basically. The other thing I would ask is are you looking in this area?”

“I am thinking about it.”

“Well most houses or apartments in this area run for 300K and the most I would see you getting based on your salary would be approval for 250K. You would need to have a deposit too of 10K. Do you have that?”

“I do” said Joe, nodding.

#Dad & Mum

After work he dropped into his parents' house, parking his car outside. Dad was busy at work in the basement. He came down the stairs and into the room.

“Can I talk to you for a few minutes?” he said.

“Certainly. Come in and take a seat? What's on your mind?”

“I have been thinking about my next move and I want to buy my own place.”

“That's certainly a good idea. But aren't you just after moving into an apartment?”

“I know. But I am thinking I could get a better deal having my own place. Plus if it is a house I could rent a room and help pay the mortgage that way. So I was wondering if you could act as guarantor for the deposit and an surplus that would be required?”

“Absolutely. You know we are behind you 100%”

“Brilliant.”

He went upstairs and told his mother. She was sitting at the table with her reading glasses on reading the death notices.

“Oh Joe, I don't know. It's so soon. Everything is happening so fast.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I am just looking at this stage."

"But you have a nice apartment."

"Look I am not doing anything at the minute. This is somewhere down the road. I am tied into a lease as it stands."

"Of course we would like to help in any way we can."

"Well good. That's mainly what I am asking at the moment."

"But don't you think you need to slow it down. Maybe next year would be a better time."

"There isn't any time" said Joe. "Don't you know I am so behind my peer group already? Most of them are married and own their own homes too. I am lagging very much behind. I have to make a big effort to catch up and stretch to get to their level. I have to get married and settled down and find a girl and get all that organised as soon as possible. Time is running out for me."

"Will you stay for dinner?"

"Are you even listening to me? No, I am going out to meet Jonas and Derek."

"And don't be drinking too much. You know that makes everything worse."

"Oh, go to hell."

#Jonas & Derek

He left closing the front door behind him. He walked down the weedy driveway and took a left at the gate and walked to the end of the street. There were few cars around and a light drizzle began to descend. He turned the collars of his jacket up to give some added protection. When he got to the pub it was five to eight and no one was there yet. He ordered a pint and sat at their usual table. There were few people about.

He took out his phone and checked for messages – nothing. At about five past Derek and Jonas rolled in together. The rain must have intensified because their hair was damp and matted from the rain.

"Well Joe, how's it cutting?" said Jonas, sitting down and letting off an atmosphere of damp outdoors.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Alright I suppose."

"Just alright. I thought everything was going well. I will have a pint" he said to Derek. Derek went up to the bar.

"Do you think we drink a lot?" said Joe. "I mean we are in the pub a lot."

"Well what's wrong with that? It's fun isn't?"

"I suppose."

"How's HDM going?"

"HDME – it's going ok I suppose. I think I really cocked up in a very public way."

"What happened?" Derek returned with the drinks. "What's this about a cockup?"

"Oh I was presenting some reports in front of the SMT and all the numbers were wrong. My manager even had to take it off me and present it himself. How embarrassing is that?"

"Well you are still new" said Derek.

"Yes, but there is no "you are new" for HDME. They want you to be perfect from day one – hit the ground running – you know all this American bullshit. And I asked the honey out."

"You did what?" Derek burst out laughing. "That's our Joe."

"Joe, now look; I don't mean to tell you your business but you can't ask girls in your department out. It's okay in a pub or a nightclub, you will never have to see them again but at work, well you have to live with that indefinitely" said Jonas.

"What's wrong with asking her out? She might have said yes. You said yourself that there are loads of work couples in your place."

"That's true but did she give you any indication?"

"What do you mean indication?"

"Like showing any special interest in you or doing something special for you."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well no. But I thought if I got to know her things would be different."

"And how has she been since you asked?"

"Well she won't even talk to me or look at me now."

"You see that's what I mean. She has realised that you are into her – is not interested – and now she is determined not to show any sign of interest in you."

"Normally girls give you their undivided attention if they like you" said Derek.

"What is this - a tag team? Anyway I have a plan to fix all of this."

"Do tell" said Jonas.

"I am going to write her a letter in which I tell her how I am feeling."

"What?" said Jonas. "Now wait a second. I think that is a really bad idea. She has already more or less told you she is not interested."

"You are setting yourself up for further rejection" said Derek.

"I don't care. I have feelings for her."

"Feelings aren't always right" said Jonas. "They can be wrong too. You must know that. Tell him Derek."

"I think it is kind of something you need to experience for yourself."

"Anyway that's only part of it. I am looking to get a mortgage."

"But you have only just got your job and apartment" said Derek.

"I know. I know. You don't have to tell me, but I am only looking."

"And where are you looking?" asked Jonas.

"Somewhere out in Cabinteely direction."

"I don't know Joe" said Derek. "Maybe you can pull it off. It seems very quick however."

There was silence for a moment. "How are things with the Danish girl? What is her name again?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Sylvia.”

“Sylvia – that girl from Microsystems - but she told me she had a boyfriend.”

“She did have a boyfriend but they were in the final stages when I appeared on the scene – a knight in shining armour.”

“So she dumped him for you. Well I guess it happens.”

“She has practically moved in at this stage” said Derek. “I have to share a bathroom now with two other people.”

“It’s only temporary” said Jonas. “And she has promised to fix you up with her friend who is quite cute. I think you will agree.”

“So this is looking like a girlfriend scenario” said Joe.

“Maybe too early to tell but I wouldn’t object” said Jonas.

“And the girl from work?” said Joe to Derek.

“No that actually didn’t work out and for the same reasons I said to you. Too much of a risk and then if you fight well you have to live with that.”

“I don’t know about either of you too but I want to settle down and have something serious. I am not going to go for just any girl – just the ones I am attracted too.”

“But Joe you have to pick girls who are interested” said Jonas. “That’s the only way this is going to work.”

“I can win her over. Faint heart never won fair lady.”

“You have to understand that this is different Joe” said Derek, “Fiona was into you - at least at the start anyhow. But this girl, Rachel, she has already told you she is not interested. Anymore now would be pestering. And that is certainly not something you want to do at work.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#Rachel

The next day at work he waited until Rachel had gone to lunch and then he left the letter on her chair. He also included his phone number as well in case she wanted to call him.

It was not until he got back in the apartment later that day that the phone rang. It was Rachel.

“Joe I got your note.”

“What do you think?”

“Joe I am very disturbed that you left me this note on my chair. I wanted to ring you to get the message across to you. I am not interested, Joe. I am sorry if that hurts your feelings but that’s just the way it is. If I get anymore contact from you that is not work related then I am going to HR. This is harassment Joe and it has to stop.”

“Now Rachel, just hang on a second. I have feelings for you. If you just let me explain. You don’t understand.”

She hung up the phone.

The dull throbbing feeling in his chest intensified. He lay back on the couch and threw down the phone. Outside the sounds of traffic rumbled up and down the street. A church bell rang in the distance and the muffled roar of a jet passing over head. The front door opened downstairs and Susan and Audrey came in.

#Susan

“Joe, are you up there?” said Susan.

“Yes come on up if you want.” He heard the sound of her gentle footsteps as she came up the stairs.

“Where is Audrey?”

“She is reading in the room.”

Susan sat in the chair facing him.

“How are you today?” said Susan smiling.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Not good. Truth be told."

"I like a girl at work but she doesn't like me."

"Ah yes you told me before."

"I think I love her. It's crazy I know. She doesn't even like me."

"But love surely takes time to grow. You don't know this girl at all really. Do you?"

"No - not at all - really."

"Do you like me?" said Susan.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Would you like me to be your girl-friend?"

Joe's mouth fell open. "But I don't know. There is a big gap in age between us. And we are not the same culture. I have to think about it."

"Ok" she smiled, "you think about it. I like you Joe, but you are so sad, I think."

"I think maybe you are right."

"Audrey likes you too. She told me."

"That's nice."

"I think I go downstairs now."

#Diary

He pulled himself off the couch a few minutes later and walked into the bedroom. The bare floorboards creaked under the weight of his feet. He shut the door and turned on the computer. It beeped as it booted up and once he had logged in. He opened up his diary file and wrote.

"October 12th, 2001

Dear Diary:

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

I don't know what is happening to me. Everything is going wrong and it just gets worse and worse and yet I have never felt better and feel better and better. I have never felt more confidence. I think I can win Rachel over and I know if I get near her I can make her like me. Everyone says slow down, wait and bind your time, but this is my hour and this is my moment. I can feel all my problems very soon disappearing and that's a fact.

HDME is only the start for me. I now think I can apply for better jobs and based on my experience here and in the states I can get those jobs.

Rachel and I are meant to be together and we will travel the world together before settling down in Dublin or maybe her native Clare I don't care. I am happy to go with her recommendation. She is beautiful and I love her and I know she feels the same way.

Women everywhere love me. Even Susan my flatmate loves me – but she is too young and inexperienced. Rachel is a real woman. She will learn to love me and I see in her initial rejections only the signs of a hidden love.

As soon as I get my mortgage I am buying a house and the Chinese girls can move with me if they want too. And that is only the beginning.”

C15

HDME

On Monday morning Stephen had returned from his holiday and he was already busy at work when Joe arrived in with his coffee.

“How was your holiday?” he asked as he settled down and switched on his computer.

“Not too bad. Listen I heard about what happened in the meeting. I wish I could have been there to help out.”

“Oh well. I don't really care about that.”

“But it had to be pretty crushing – in front of the SMT and everything?”

“I know but I have put that behind me now.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Now look, don't be annoyed. Ian wants me to take the lead. You are still kind of new and everything and you can help update the reports in the background. We will have to leave your formula solution for a while yet.”

“I am not annoyed. Why should I be annoyed?”

“Are you okay? You seem a little off.”

“I am fine. Just a bit tired that's all.”

“Well you start with the Ireland reports as per usual. And I will do the UK reports.”

“Ok.”

There was silence for the next forty five minutes. Then Joe leaned over. “Well is it ready?”

“Do you want to take a look?”

Stephen came over. “Joe this is bang on. Well done. Yes it all checks out. That's perfect. I will bring the printouts over to Ian before the meeting.”

#The Meeting

The all filed into the meeting room at eleven am. Joe brought his notepad and Stephen had a stack of printouts. Ian was already seated beside Eamon and Barbara. At the far end Joe could see Rachel seated beside Jennifer. She flashed him a daggers look in response to his friendly look. He smiled and looked away.

Stephen launched into his reports and when he finished Ian spoke.

“Thanks Stephen for that. Now let's move on to the circulation strategy for this week and also Jennifer has a few things to say also.”

“Ian before you go on there. I would like to say a couple of things.” Stephen stared at him.

“Ok. But be brief.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Joe stood. "I just want to say that even though I have only been here a few short weeks it is just such a privilege to work with such a talented bunch of people. I hope I will continue to get to know all of you better during the coming weeks as we work together more closer."

"Ok, Joe. Thanks for that" Ian said. "Not sure why you felt compelled to say that but anyway."

"And another thing."

"That's enough Joe" said Ian, cutting across him. Joe fell silent and sat down.

He looked across the table and Jennifer was trying desperately to control her laughter.

"Maybe you should be a politician Joe" said Jennifer. "You are a bit lost on this place." The whole room dissolved into laughter.

"Ok, enough already" said Ian. "We are trying to have a meeting here!"

The meeting came to an end after Eamon and Jennifer said their piece. Everyone filed out. Ian gave Joe a curious look but said nothing. Only Stephen remained.

"What was all that about?" he said. "Are you taking the piss?"

"No. Why can't I say something like that?"

"I don't know Joe. I don't know where your head is at at all – not at all."

They went back to their cubicle.

A while later Jennifer leaned over Stephen's partition wall. "How's the stateman analyst?"

"I think we got off on the wrong foot" said Joe.

"I think it's a bit late for that. I know who he fancies" she said to Stephen.

"I know you are going to tell me anyway. Ok who then?"

"Rachel."

"Look Jennifer we are really busy and so are you I am sure."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Just going."

"If I were you Joe I would keep a very low profile for the next while. Very low."

"Well fortunately you are not me. Or I am not you. Or whatever."

#Big Fart

At lunch time Joe went by himself to the canteen and bought a sandwich. In the seating area he could see Jennifer and Rachel sitting together. They both looked over when he walked in but he thought the better of sitting with them. He went to the back and sat by himself. He wasn't really hungry but he wolfed down his sandwich roll. When he got back to his desk Ian and Stephen were sitting looking at the computer screen.

He went off to find another computer chair and when he came back he sat down and pretended to be busy whilst Ian was talking to Stephen.

After a few minutes he farted. It was a silent but slow and deadly emission.

"Jesus Christ" said Ian, "that was you, Joe" he said. "I know it was."

"Joe, that is obnoxious whatever it is" said Stephen.

"We'll do the reports later. In fact bring your stuff and come into my cubicle" Ian said to Stephen.

#Viewing the property

After work he drove down to Loughlinstown in his car. He had seen a property that caught his fancy. He drove into a housing estate and parked his car outside a small semi-detached red brick house. The realtor was waiting outside for him.

"Joe O'Malley – a pleasure to meet you. David Moore" They shook hands.

"Come inside and I will show you around."

He opened the door and they went inside. The hall carpet was a faded floral pattern and there was a damp, musty smell especially in the kitchen. The stair carpet was of similar design.

"No furniture?" said Joe, looking into the living room.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"No. To be honest it was not in very good state. The owner threw most of it out. It has been a rental property for a long time."

"What's out the back?"

"Come and look." They stood in the kitchen looking out over an overgrown garden with a crooked clothes line nearly consumed by ivy.

"I see what you mean."

"So you said you were interested. What stage are you at?"

"Mortgage approved and ready to go."

"Well we have a lot of interest in this property."

"And the owners won't go any lower?"

"No, they have been getting a lot of interest like I say. If you want to go for it it would have to be now."

"I see."

"Two thousand will take it off the market."

"Cheque?"

"Cheque is fine."

Joe took out his cheque book and wrote him out a check.

"Congratulations. You have just bought yourself a new home."

#Jonas & Derek

He was early down in the pub and he ordered himself a pint and grabbed the window seat looking out on the street. It was a chilly night and dusk descended with a suddenness whilst his attention was distracted by a tall blonde girl who stood at the bar waiting to order. He put a beer mat on his pint and walked up to the bar.

"I haven't seen you around here before." She turned and looked surprised.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Is that a line?"

"Not necessarily."

"I have to go. I am with my boyfriend." Joe went back to his seat but inside he marvelled at his increased confidence.

Jonas was the first to arrive and he ordered a pint from the lounge boy. "Bloody freezing outside."

"Guess what?"

"What now?"

"I bought a house."

"What? You did what. I thought you were joking about the mortgage. You actually went ahead and bought a house."

"Paid the deposit anyway."

"Joe you need to so down. You are making me worried."

"What are you - my dad or something?"

"No. I am just concern that's all. You seem to be getting very riled up."

Derek arrived bringing a gust of cold air with him. He went up to the bar and came back with a pint.

"Joe bought a house" said Jonas.

"What? You bought a house?"

"Paid the deposit at least."

"Joe, are you out of your mind? You're only in the door of this job, which by your own account you don't like very much. You just signed a 12 month lease. Are you even noticing anything odd about this?"

"Where there is a will there is a way. Look I have never felt better. "

Derek sat down after taking off his jacket and slinging it on another chair.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Joe this is how you get before, remember – larger than life – could do anything."

"It is definitely the start of something Joe" said Jonas. "You need to be careful."

"What would either of you know about anything? You just want to hold me back. Well maybe I am going someplace and you are not."

"Joe maybe you should think about seeing your doctor."

"I can't believe the confidence I have. I just walked up to that beautiful girl. See that one over there and spoke to her. No hesitation and no doubts."

"You do seem to be very confident about things" said Derek.

"You guys are so pedestrian and mediocre. Look at all I have accomplished in the last 3 months. What have you done? Nothing."

"Excuse me. I don't think putting a deposit on a house you can't afford is doing something."

"Yeah well what would you know about anything?"

"It's pretty obvious you are on the edge here, Joe. Only you can't see it."

"That's a load of bollox. There is nothing wrong with me. Never felt better."

"Joe, I have to agree with Derek. Something is happening to you. You need to realise that."

Joe stood up and pulled on his coat.

"I don't need to realise anything if I don't want to. If that's what you both think then fuck you both. You can wallow in your pathetic miserable little lives." Joe downed his pint and walked out the door of the pub.

#Susan

He walked back to his parents' house where his car was parked but decided not to go in. It was getting late. He drove his car back to Rathmines and parked outside the shop near his apartment. The off-license next door was still open and he ran in and bought a six pack of beer and was about to leave when he turned around and spoke to the sales assistant.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"What's your best cigar?"

"We have Cuban. They are also our most expensive."

"I'll take three."

He walked down the alleyway carrying the six pack and unlocked the front door. He could hear Susan and Audrey talking in their room. He climbed the stairs and put the beer on the coffee table. Then he found an ashtray in the kitchen and brought it into the living room. Then he stretched out on the couch putting his feet up on the coffee table and opened up a bottle of beer.

He lit the cigar and coughed suddenly as he inhaled too much smoke. Using the remote he put on some music low in the background.

After a while he heard the girls door open and Susan's voice.

"Can I come up Joe?"

"Yes of course. Audrey too."

"No she is going to bed." She came up the stairs. "Ah the room is very smoky" she said, coughing. She sat on the chair facing him.

"It's a cigar." He held it out. "Wanna to try?"

"Ok I try." She took a big pull and then dissolved in a fit of coughing.

"No you don't inhale. That's not how to do it."

"Joe you seem so happy today."

"I am happy" said Joe. "Never been happier actually, Susan."

"And why all of a sudden. Last time you were so sad."

"Well now I am not and this is for good. You know I was thinking about what you said."

"What's that?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"That you wanted to be my girl-friend. I think there is too much of a gap between us. I am more than ten years older than you. Anyway I am in love with Rachel. It can't be helped."

"Ah she does like you."

"Of course she does. She hasn't told me in so many words. But I know she is just playing hard to get."

"You think she is pretending?"

"Of course, it is a game we are playing between the two of us. She wants me to court her and do more acts of kindness for her."

"But surely she must do some act of kindness for you now."

"It's different with Irish women. They have strong personalities. They need a strong man."

Susan said nothing.

"Would you like a beer? I have plenty."

"Maybe I try one."

#Wakes alone – Bella & Tom

He woke suddenly with a start. Susan was gone and the cigar had burned down in the ashtray to nothing but ashes. The music still played in the background. He looked at his watch. It was 3am. There was a furry, beery after taste in his mouth. He got up off the couch and walked into the bedroom closing the door behind him. He lay on the bed.

Bella was sitting on the bed in her sequinned jump suit.

"Ah Joe you are surprised to see me."

"Not you again. I thought I had gotten away from you."

"Well you know that will never happen. And I understand you have a new girl."

"I love her Bella and I don't love you anymore. That is simple. That part of my life is closed now."

"Don't fool yourself Joe. We are meant to be together. Feted to be together."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I did miss you Bella though."

"And I thought I had lost you forever. We were to be Kings and Queens, you and I. Can you believe it?"

He rested his head on the pillow and closed his eyes. "Stay with me Bella."

"Always."

A few moments later he opened his eyes. Bella was gone but Tom was standing there staring. His eyes were red rimmed and his skin a ghastly pallor.

"This is very bad, Joe. Very bad. You stand to lose everything."

"What do you mean?"

"Call in sick Joe. Don't go in today. You are in no fit state."

"But I have to. I will be fired if I don't."

"Everything you have worked for Joe and it was going so well. Did you take your medication?"

"I took my medication."

#HDME

He dozed fitfully for an hour or so only to be awakened by his alarm. He got up and pulled himself out of bed. He took a fresh shirt from the wardrobe and quickly shaved and showered. Fifteen minutes later saw him driving his car along the dual carriageway. When he drove into the car park he parked his car in the usual space and made his way in through the side door.

When he got to his desk Stephen was already busily working away, typing on his keyboard.

"Stephen how are you my old mate?"

He sat on the edge of the desk and slapped him on the back.

"Jesus, hi I think."

"Well how are you today?"

"I am fine Joe. Sit down Joe and lower your voice." Heads bobbed up from the cubicles around them.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“I want to talk to you about this place, Stephen” said Joe in a lower tone. “I think it’s the biggest load of bull shit I have ever seen.”

“Joe shut up. I don’t want to have this conversation with you.”

“Well we are having it. I think Ian and Dylan are gobshites. And you know why? They are weak, pitifully weak. They are just yes men Stephen. That’s all. Well I am no sycophant, I can tell you.”

“Be quiet Joe. Just do your work. I will talk to you at lunchtime.”

And now he could hear their thoughts and as he sat staring vacantly into his terminal he realised that the marketing department was a set up – a front. It had been organised by the CIA and Ian was actually in the secret service. Rachel had been chosen to be his girlfriend and then encouraged to reject his advances.

Their sole purpose was to keep him trapped in this job and this office. But he had a higher purpose that was only now becoming apparent to him. He had to save everyone and only he could do it.

He got up and took his jacket off the back of his chair and whilst Stephen’s back was turned he walked along the aisle and out towards reception at the front desk. He passed Ian’s desk and buzzed himself out using his swipe card. The receptionist did not look up. Once outside he took his mobile phone, id card and car keys and threw them in a bush. That way no one would be able to follow him. He walked passed the security hut and out onto the main road.

#Walks to Ballsbridge

He crossed the dual carriageway and walked in the direction of the coast. Ian walked along side.

“Come back to work, Joe. Things will be different. I promise. We will make you a manager.” Then he laughed.

”I always knew you were a risk” said Alison Dyer. “I warned you, Dylan. Look now he has mental problems. We should never have hired him and now he is a permanent staff member.”

“Just a minute, Alison” said Dylan. “Now Joe, you should come back to work. We can help you Joe.”

“No I am not coming back” Joe shouted out loud.

An elderly lady walking her dog coming in his direction started but thought better of getting involved.

He sat at a park bench and put one arm on one side. Bella came and sat beside him. “Be strong Joe. Only you can find a way. Find a way for both of us.”

“Joe, it’s Rachel. Now listen Joe, you can have it all. You can have me. And you like me don’t you Joe? I have seen the way you look at me. I will be yours Joe but you must come back. The world is not a safe place for you Joe. You know too much. You have to be contained. You need this fictive reality as you call it. There needs to be something to keep you in place.”

“She’s right Joe, its Jonas. You are not getting any younger. What are you now – thirty? And now another breakdown. How will you pick up the pieces? You are reduced to rubble every time Joe. There is no way out for you now. You will go where it is safe, so you think. Are you going back to your parents’ house?”

“This has all happened before” said Derek. “I told you not to fly so high, like Icarus into the sun. And now what are you left with?”

“Rachel” said Joe, quietly and decisively, “you can have me and I know you love me but you must leave that job and come and meet me.”

“Where will we meet?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Do you know the park in Ballsbridge? Meet me there this afternoon. You will have to come to me now.

I can take no further rejection."

"I will come."

"Joe, its Bella. Now I have prior claim. My claim is justified."

"Joe you can't be out in public" said Tom. "It is not safe for you. You have to go where it is safe. Go to the parent's house Joe. You will be safe there."

"I am very tired" said Joe.

"You have to go now. Start walking – one foot after another foot."

Joe got up from the park bench and set off north along the coast. A trawler was fishing in Scotsman's Bay and a flock of seagulls hovered above its nets. The sun broke through some lingering cloud and scattered rays caught the top of the waves. He stopped and stared for a long time out to sea.

"Waiting for the aliens" said Bella, leaning against the railing as the wind whipped up her blonde locks.

"How did you know?" he said, quietly.

"I always know. I know you. I am part of you, you know."

"I wish you weren't."

"And what is this great saving you must do? How are you the saviour?"

"I have to save the family. A terrible evil has beset the family and I must fight and defend against that evil."

"What evil?" said Bella.

"The evil of death for one and of course sexual abuse too. I have a higher purpose. I am of noble birth."

"You are a prince" said Rachel. "You are my prince and I love you with all my heart."

He walked slowly on down the walk way, pausing briefly at the bathhouse, long disused.

"I was born for this destiny" he repeated, "born for it. I am the saviour of the western world."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You are a nothing" said Ian, "if you leave now. You were a waste of everyone's time."

"Do not speak to me in this way! Do you know who I am?"

He walked on past the bath house and down past the pier, passing the train station. He stopped at the traffic lights and waiting for the green signal to cross. Two guards walked past headed in the opposite direction. He smiled. They were there for his protection now that he was of vital importance.

He was probably the greatest man that ever lived. Certainly he was the greatest Irishman. Foreign dignitaries came and spoke to him with reverence and respect as he walked through Monkstown. The president of the United States congratulated him on his newly found role and significance. But dark clouds scudded over this blue horizon.

"Joe you are not safe walking through Dublin" said Tom with urgency. "It's not like it used to be. Get a taxi or take a bus."

"I will walk as I always have done. Gandhi and Martin Luther King were not afraid to be amongst the people."

By the time he reached Blackrock he was footsore but triumphant. Hollywood wanted to make a movie about him and they wanted him and Rachel to star in the leading roles.

"What do you think love?" he asked.

"I'll do it if you do it" said Rachel. "I just want to be with you, Joe."

#Mum

At 1pm roughly he rang the front door of his parent's house. After a few moments his mother answered.

"Joe, what are you doing here? Why aren't you at work?"

"I quit the job" said Joe quietly.

"What? Oh no Joe, you didn't."

"I hated that place. I hated it from the start."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Are you okay? You look very pale."

"I haven't been sleeping very well."

"Come in, come in. I will make you a cup of tea."

He followed her down to the kitchen.

"Where is your car?"

"I left it out there."

He sat down at the table. He examined his shoes, they were all pitted or cracked from the walk he had just done.

"How did you get here?" She filled the kettle with water from the tap in the sink.

"I walked."

"You walked from Cabinteely to Ballsbridge?"

Joe nodded. "Listen Mum and it's very important I am going to write a letter to Bella, you remember Bella."

"Oh Joe, not that girl in Belgium?"

"No it's not what you think. I am going to tell her I am finished with her. I met someone else. She is beautiful and you will really like her. Her name is Rachel."

"Oh Joe you know what happens when you get like this."

"Like what. There is nothing wrong with me."

She poured him a cup of tea and sat down at the table. "Joe I think you should see your doctor."

"Doctor, what doctor. I am not going to see any doctor."

"Don't let her send you to the doctor" said Rachel. "It will be the end of us Joe. I don't want a broken down man. I want a strong man to protect me."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Will you just send the letter as I asked you?" said Joe.

"Joe you know you were writing to that girl before, and always like this. Always when you are like this."

"What do you know about anything?"

"I am your mother. I know a lot about your condition."

"I don't have any condition. It is a lie and that's the end of it."

#Dad and Tim

The front door opened and Dad and Tim came in.

"Joe this is a surprise to see you here" said Dad, coming into the kitchen. Tim followed.

"Joe I think you should ring your company and let them know you are okay. If you tell them you are sick they could maybe hold the job for you."

"I am not going back I hate that place."

"What happened?" said Dad.

"I quit my job. That's what happened."

"Well Joe that is your decision. Not ours to make for you."

"Joe I knew it" said Tim. "That place sounded awful."

"What would you know about it?" said Mum viciously to Tim.

"Fancy a smoke."

"Do I ever?"

They both went outside and for once Tim had smokes.

"How did you leave it?"

"I just walked out. And didn't say good-bye."

They puffed away on their cigarettes.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You know Tim I might be able to get you on Top of the Pops."

"What do you mean?"

"I just mean I have been making some very interesting connections lately with some very high profile people."

"Are you taking the piss?"

"No but you must have a few songs ready to go - now that you have a famous brother."

"We would be delighted to have your brother on Top of the Pop" said the BBC.

"Did you hear that?" said Joe.

"No, I didn't hear anything."

"Yes you did. You can pretend all you want."

They went back into the kitchen. Mum and Dad were seated at the table in silence. Joe and Tim sat down also.

"What are you two looking so glum about?" said Joe.

"Exactly" said Dad, "now that you are here Joe I want you to know that I always respect your autonomy. You are as free as a bird in my book – free as a bird."

"Joe I think you should ring your company and let them know you left and you are alright."

"Would you ever give over? I am going to ring them."

#Ian

He made his way up to the dining room and sat down at the dining room table. There was a pile of newspapers and magazines at one end and the surface was polished mahogany. He picked up the phone and dialled the reception at HDME.

"HDME, how may I direct your call?" chirped the receptionist.

"Ian Carney, please."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

The phone rang for a moment and then answered.

"Ian Carney."

"Ian its Joe O'Malley."

"We were just wondering what happened to you."

"Ian I am quitting my job."

"You don't want some time to think about it, do you?"

"No. I have made up my mind. I am resigning."

"Well I can't say I am too surprised. HDME is not for everyone, you know. By the way the security guard found your badge and phone outside in the bushes."

"There will be someone up to collect that today if possible."

"Well good luck then. We will be in touch for formalise things in due course."

Joe hung up the phone.

#Mum & Dad

"Oh Joe you are so brave" said Bella. "I could never have done what you did."

"Joe you need to be careful now. They attack most at night. That is when you are at your weakest" said Tom.

"I will stay with HDME" said Rachel. "You never knew but Ian and are lovers."

"Oh no" said Joe.

"Just joking of course" said Rachel. "You are the only one for me."

He started to feel very hungry and he realised he had eaten nothing all day. He went down to the kitchen.

Dad had gone down stairs and Tim was sitting at the table. His mother was sitting, reading the newspaper. She looked up. "How did it go?"

"Well its fine. I told him. He understood. Is there anything to eat?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I could make you a sandwich."

Joe sat at the table. An overwhelming feeling of tiredness was coming over him.

"Why don't you go up to the sitting room and lie down? I will bring you up a sandwich and a cup of tea."

"That would be great."

He closed the kitchen door after him as he went up to the sitting room. He lay down on the couch.

"Be careful, don't stand at an open window" said Tom, "a sniper could have you in a second. There are marksmen posted on all the roofs out there."

"You could have had me Joe" said Rachel, "but you weren't strong enough. You crumbled and broke down. Very sad."

Tired as he was he couldn't sleep and he couldn't settle. It had been decided that he would speak at the UN general council and give his views on all matters spiritual, political and be available for questions as well. He was very nervous but he resolved he would do this for Ireland and for humanity too.

After a while his mother came in with the sandwich. "Dad and Tim are going to Loughlinstown to collect your car and phone etc. Tim can drive it back."

"Oh great, thanks."

"How are you feeling?"

"I am feeling a bit rested."

"Look don't overreact I made an appointment with the doctor to see you. You can go tomorrow and it won't be too early."

He was too tired to say anything. And just lay his head back on the cushion. He lay there and no longer resisted the rival factions that laid claim to his mind. HDME were demanding the return of the best employee they had ever had. The Irish president got involved and made a sterling defence of Joe O'Malley's human rights and his right to be left alone. At least that was how things were done in Ireland.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

The American president wondered if Joe would be at all interested in a job in Washington. And so it went on.

#Tim

Later he heard the front door close and Tim came into the living room. "I got you some smokes. You looked like you needed them. We got your car back and your phone and stuff. We couldn't find your wallet, however. I am afraid someone pinched that."

"Oh."

"Do you want to come out for a smoke?"

He nodded. They walked down to the kitchen and he put on his jacket before he went outside.

"How do you do it?" said Joe.

"Do what?"

"Stay well in the face of them and all this."

"You put yourself in the line of fire, Joe. I never do that."

"You stay inside your comfort zone, I have noticed."

"I suppose I do."

"I couldn't live inside that comfort zone."

#Dad

Later on he went downstairs. Dad was tapping away at his computer. "Ah Joe, how are you feeling now?"

"Not great, as you can imagine. Why do you bother with all the catholic bullshit?"

"What bullshit?"

"The church and all its hideous hypocrisy and platitudes."

"I don't see it that way."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“It is a bizarre mythology of salvation and damnation. Didn't you ever think God was a forgiving God who wouldn't condemn people to damnation? That your spiritual interpretation is that of a choir boy. Evil isn't just grief and loss. You have made your life's work a study in grief. Grief and loss are watershed's after which there is new life and new realisation.”

“Ah Joe you always had such wonderful ideas. Quite impractical though you know. No Joe, nothing short of resurrection of the body is what I pray for. I pray for you too.”

“And yet you would never see a psychiatrist? Hypocrite.”

“They have a lot to answer for – this company that you were working for. You were fine before you went into that place.”

“We were never fine. This family was never fine. Can't you see the whole thing was fucked since Tom died? Nothing was ever right after that for you or me.”

“It is a vale of tears Joe. Nothing more or less this life.”

#Sleeping Pills

He turned around. Mum was standing in the doorway. “Joe can I talk to you for a minute?”

Joe came out of the room and followed her upstairs and into the kitchen. “Now listen Joe I think you should try and sleep a little and I got some sleeping pills and I want you to take a couple and go to bed for a while. It would do you the world of good and tomorrow you might be a little bit better because you are not good today. Now I know you have had a stressful day with the job and everything.”

“You want to poison me. That's why you want to give me pills.”

“Now Joe, don't get all paranoid. Just take one. There a compromise and go lie down for a while.”

Eventually Joe took one sleeping pill and went up to his old room and lay down on the bed. He dozed fitfully.

“Joe you could have had me” said Rachel.

“And what about me” said Bella. “Destiny brought us together. And we can still be together.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"All you ever got was a broken heart" said Tom. "Better not have any woman. They are all liars and cheats."

"You are a great disappointment" said Ian. "And you cost us a lot of time."

"You are altogether bad, Joe O'Malley. A bad egg. A loser, a failure a drop out, great education and his poor parents what he has put them through. It would be better if you never existed."

"But Rachel, you still love me."

"No Joe. It is clear now that you are a mistake. It would be better if you just killed yourself. You are no use to anyone."

#Overdose

He turned over and open the top drawer of his bedside locker. It was full of medication. He grabbed a box of pills and swallowed down a fistful and that was the last thing he remembered until he was woken suddenly by a bright shining light in his eye.

A burly man in a yellow luminescent jacket was leaning over him, shining a torch into his eyes. "Joe, Joe O'Malley" he said a loud, commanding voice. "Can you hear me?"

Joe nodded.

"Get up, get up. Help him up" he said to another man standing beside him dressed in the same uniform.

"Is he going to be okay?" said Mum.

"Go out of the room, Mrs O'Malley. Let us do our job. He is conscious that is good. Very good. We have to take him in for observation, ok. You of course you can come and visit him in there. Look he has been very lucky. If he had been left too long like this then he would not have survived. Yes I know you are very upset but we got here in time. That's the main thing."

#Back in hospital

When he awoke he was in familiar but dreaded surroundings. Morning sunlight streamed in to the vaulted windows. His bed was surrounded on all sides by curtains and outside the curtains he could hear

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

the sound of voices and footsteps going up and down the aisle. When he turned on his side his arm pulled on a trailing cable. He was attached to a drip.

The curtains were drawn back suddenly and the nurse appeared. "Well Joe how are you feeling now?"

"Like a double decker bus ran over me."

"You are very lucky to be alive, Joe"

"How did I get here?"

"You came in two days ago and you have been asleep that long. Your parents have been in a few times. I am sure you will see them now that you are up and awake. Also the doctor wants to see you but I will tell him maybe in the afternoon."

"But this is a mistake I shouldn't be here."

She removed the syringe from his arm and bandaged the pin prick and slight bruise it left behind. "No Joe I think this is definitely the best place for you right now. Still you can discuss it with the doctor later. Your Dad left in some cigarettes for you. Why don't you down the back and have a smoke? It's a lovely morning."

She opened the curtains fully and continued on her rounds. "Just so you know Joe, I will be keeping a special eye on you in the coming days. Just until we are sure everything is settled with you."

"What about my clothes?" he shouted after her.

"Not for a while, Joe - doctor's orders."

#Doctor

In the afternoon the nurse came and told him that the doctor wanted to see him. He followed through the ward and sat where she indicated. After a while he stuck his head out the door and beckoned Joe to come in.

Joe sat down.

"Well Joe I am sorry to see you here again. How are you feeling now?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"How do you think I feel? I feel like a complete failure and everything I was trying to do has turned to dust and I have no idea who I am or what I want to do with my life."

"Well Joe, you are not alone. Lot's of people feel that way and they manage to pull through and get on with their lives. We are going to have to keep you under close examination for a while yet. You were very lucky to be found in time. Do you still feel like doing something like that?"

"No. Not at the moment anyhow. I feel better now than I did two days ago. Can you understand that I am just not like that? That is not the real me."

"I know Joe but we have to be sure before we take you off watch if you like."

"Did you stop your medication at some point?"

"I can't remember. Probably. I don't know."

"Well you are back on a high dose of the meds. I will reduce down as we go forwards. I think as well as your doctor I would advise you not to get into high stress situations like demanding jobs or even situations where you are under a lot of pressure."

"I am not a vegetable you know. I want to make a contribution."

"And there is no reason that you shouldn't. But first you need to get really well. Your pattern seems to be to forget about your condition once you are a few months away from it. It's for life Joe. Not a few months. If you grasp that fact you have come a long way towards getting on top of it."

"But why does this keep happening to me?"

"I think if you think about Joe. You will know the answer to that question. You seem quite lucid today but you are still quite high too I think. We will talk again in a few days."

"Ok." Joe got up and opened the door and walked out into the corridor.

#Dad

When he got back to his bed Dad was sitting in the armchair. "Ah Joe it's great to see you up and back to something of your health."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I wouldn't say that exactly." He sat on the bed. "Did you bring more smokes?"

"I did. I got you a pack of twenty this time."

Joe lay back on the bed. "So how long have you worked for British intelligence?"

"What? I never worked for British intelligence."

"You are a free mason. There is no sense denying it. You're a dirty Queens man, that's what you are."

"Joe you shouldn't be talking like this. Let me take you for a walk outside. The nurse said it's okay if you are accompanied."

Joe followed Dad out of the ward and outside the building. "Hang on while I light a smoke?"

It was clear as day what was happening. He was a western dissident and he was being locked up to contain him and his discovery of the truth. The British were behind this clearly. And Dad worked for them.

They walked passed the willow tree and down the roadway towards the car park.

"Why don't you admit to me you made a Faustian bargain?"

"I don't understand what you are talking about" said Dad.

"Tom's life in return for me to be the Messiah."

"The messiah, Joe I don't understand you."

"My DNA was spliced with that of the messiah in London. You knew about that."

"Joe that is just not true, any of it. You are not making any sense."

"You traded Tom's life for mine. Didn't you?"

"Now you know the truth" said Rachel, "can you forgive us humans? We needed our Messiah, Joe. You have done very well by all of us and I do love you and will be with you soon."

"Well it is all very well and good" said Joe, "since I got what I wanted." He lit another cigarette. "Did I ever tell you about Rachel?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Who is Rachel?" said Dad.

"You know of course who I worked for" said Bella, "I am a secret agent for the European Union and my mission was to seduce you of course which I did. You do remember don't you Joe?"

"Oh yes I remember."

"Remember what? Who are you talking to" said Dad.

"Never mind. All will be revealed."

"I have to remember that you are not well" said Dad.

"No it is you who is not well" said Joe, pulling heavily on his cigarette. "All of this is a cover up and you are a willing participant."

They walked down as far as the car park and turned around and walked back up.

"I'll come and see you again tomorrow, Joe" said Dad. "And I will pray for you."

"Don't bother. Catholicism can't help me, never did me any good anyhow."

"Don't talk like that. We all need God in our lives, nothing but the resurrection of the body Joe. That is what we need."

"Oh Jesus."

Dad walked him to the door. He went back in and lay back down on the bed. He drifted in and out of a medicated sleep, and in and out of periods of mental lucidity.

#Hospital

Eventually the call for dinner came and he got up and followed the other patients through the ward to a prefabricated building at the rear of the site. The floor creaked and sagged ominously at each step they made going down a narrow musty hall way. In the dining area there were five or six round tables and he sat at one making no effort to make conversation with the other people at the table.

After a while two nurses came out carrying plates of food and each plate was put down in front of a patient. A plate of mash and sausages was plonked down in front of him.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Do you want toast?" said the male nurse.

"What?"

"Do you want toast?"

"Oh, yes, please."

He disappeared into another room at the back.

He picked up his fork and dug into the mash. When the toast arrived he used the sausages to make sandwiches using a generous helping of butter. Butter dripped from his makeshift sandwich onto his fingers and the plate. Ten minutes later it was all gone. He signalled to the nurse that he was ready to leave and she walked him back to the ward.

Section 2

C1

#Doctor

Three weeks later to the day he was ushered into the doctor's office and he sat down in his usual seat facing the doctor.

"Well Joe, you seem to be settling down quite nicely. You will be able to go home tomorrow."

"Already?"

"Well yes the altered thoughts have left you and you seem much calmer than you have been yet. How do you feel?"

"I feel okay, depressed really. I feel like nothing really matters and everything I tried to do was a complete flop."

"Well that's natural. Anyway I don't think you are depressed. I have reduced down your medication quite a bit in the last two weeks. Hopefully what you are on now will be a long term stabilisation dose."

Joe said nothing.

"Also your appointment with the psychologist has come up, are you interested?"

"Yes yes I am, very interested."

"Well you need to ring this number." He handed him a card. "And make an appointment. They will handle all the other details."

#Back to flat - Chinese girls

He let himself into the flat. There was no one home and climbed up the creaky wooden staircase to the living room. He dropped his bag on the floor and lay down on the couch and closed his eyes. After while he heard the front door open and the sound of voices.

"Susan is that you?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Ah Joe you are back. I wasn't sure what day." She came up the stairs and stood at the top leaning on the banister. "Ah Joe your spirit what has happened to you?"

"I've been in hospital and now I am back. Sit down I have something to tell you and maybe tell Audrey to come up too because it concerns her.

Audrey came up and sat on the edge of Susan's chair.

"I am sorry to say we are all going to have to move out. I can't afford the rent anymore. You see I have lost my job."

"Lost your job. Oh no, Joe" said Susan.

"When do we have to move out" said Audrey.

"At the end of the month. Sorry about this but there is nothing I can do about it."

#Deposit

He picked up his phone and dialled a number from his contacts. The phone rang for a few moments.

"Sweeney Property Partners how can I help you?"

"David Moore please."

A voice came on the line. "David Moore speaking."

"David, its Joe O'Malley here."

"Joe, Oh yes Joe, I was wondering what happened to you."

"David I haven't been well. That is the reason I haven't contacted you. Is there any possibility of getting my deposit back?"

"Sorry Joe – your deposit was non-refundable. I can't give you your money back. I don't even have the money in our account any longer."

"Well okay thanks anyway." Joe hung up the phone.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#Move Out

On the appointed day he packed up the car with all his stuff and also Susan and Audrey's backpacks and leaving the keys on the kitchen table as by agreement with the landlord he closed the front door behind him for the last time. He walked to the car and closed the boot. Susan and Audrey were already seated inside.

"Thanks for giving us a lift" said Susan smiling.

"That's ok. Least I could do after you having to move out so suddenly."

"We have a place to stay with our friends for now anyhow" said Susan.

They drove across town and crossed the Liffey at Tara Street. Gardiner Street was heavy with traffic but after a delay they were on their way. He pulled in at Mountjoy Square and helped them both with their bags. They said goodbye and Susan gave him a hug.

#Mum

He drove back through the city centre and parked his car outside the parent's house. He got of the car and opened the boot. There were three big suitcases and one on the back seat also. He carried them two at time up the steps to the front door and went back to lock the car. He opened the door with his key and brought the cases inside. Mum came up from the kitchen.

"Joe I didn't expect you so soon."

"I had to drop the girls."

"I see. Do you want a cup of tea?"

"Ok." He nodded and closed the front door coming down to the kitchen.

"I am going to have to sell my car" he said.

"Oh no."

"You need a job to have car."

"You'll get another job" she said pouring the tea.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Not like that one and not anytime soon."

"Sure I was just reading in the paper that they are crying out for staff in all areas. With your education.."

"Don't go on about it. I don't want to talk about it,"

"I will be moving out as soon as I get my act together."

"Joe you really have to stay on the medication now. All the medication and no drinking or very little drinking. It's the only way."

"I don't know what you are talking about but my doctor says drink has nothing to do with it."

"Oh that man. I have been making my own enquiries."

"Of course you have."

"Don't mock me Joe. You know I don't like it."

"I you are in no way accountable for your actions and omissions over the years. Isn't it impression how you managed to convince yourself and me that you are an innocent."

"Blaming me is not going to help you, Joe. I think you know that."

"Do you think I want to be here, broke with a serious medical condition, no job no apartment nothing. And every time I get to meet you again and again."

"Now you stop this, Joe. You are young. You are good looking. Stop this pitiful attempt to feel sorry for yourself."

"You really are some bitch. When they made you they broke the mould."

He got up from the table and went outside to have a smoke. As he pulled on his cigarette he noticed his hand was shaking. Mum left the kitchen and shut the door behind her.

[#Niamh - Overview](#)

The following day he went down to the hospital on Baggot Street. He had an appointment for 11am and he was early. He sat in the waiting area and breathed in the powerful smell of disinfectant. A TV attached

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

to the wall put out some toxic radiation of news. A mother and a small child sat at some distance on the narrow, wooden uncomfortable seats. The room was brightly lit with sky lights and fluorescent lamps hanging from the ceiling. Rows of wooden chairs arranged in lines covered the open floor space.

At 11am a mousey haired girl wearing black shoes, tights a grey plaid skirt and jacket came through one of the open corridors that led off the room.

“Joe” she said.

“That’s me.”

“I’m Dr Niamh Gallagher.” She stuck out her hand.

He followed back down the corridor and into her office. There was a small electric fire in the centre of the room which barely generated enough heat. She sat down in a office chair and gestured the other available seat to him.

“So you were referred by Dr Robinson.”

“That’s right. He put that in ages ago. Why does it take so long?”

“We just don’t have the staff, Joe. Can I call you Joe?”

“That’s okay. So its funding then, is it?”

“Basically.”

“And how does this whole process work? I mean, what do I have to do?”

“Well we decide a certain number of sessions for you and then we meet and discuss as we go. Usually we need people in therapy to commit to twenty sessions.”

“Is that what this is? Therapy – because I am not sure I am keen with that. I mean I know what I am doing. I just have a medical condition that’s all.”

“Well I know that’s what you have been told. But do you find that to be an empowering state of mind?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“No” said Joe. “It’s disastrous. I mean it has taken over my whole life and I can’t do anything now. I live in the orbit of my parents who I can’t stand and everything I try to break away I just fall apart. What do you think?”

“Well first of all will you commit to twenty sessions?”

“No I couldn’t possibly and I need to find a job and anyway if I am working full-time I can’t come during the day. How would ever find the time to meet?”

“Joe, you will have to find time for this in your schedule. You need this and I can meet you at lunch, so you can come on your lunch break if you want.”

“Where do we start? I don’t know where to begin.”

“Why don’t you begin at the start and tell me why you are here today and tell me your story?”

“My story – where to begin - well for starters the reason I am here is I can’t take anymore. And I realise now that it is all my fault. I am doing something wrong. There is no other explanation.”

“When you say you are doing something wrong what do you mean?”

“There is no stability in my world and it must mean there is no stability in me. That’s the only explanation.”

“Go on.”

“My relationships don’t last. I have been through five jobs in five years. I try to make things permanent but they always fall apart. People of my own age don’t like me. They get to know me and then they don’t like me. I spend all my time with my parents who I can’t stand but are the only people who accept me and I have some friends but I am not sure how much I like them.”

“And how would you like things to be?”

“Well for example I met this girl Aoife and I really liked her but after two dates she was gone. She couldn’t get away from me fast enough. Is it possible to have zero emotional intelligence?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well we have to work out what you are doing that may be contributing. I think first and foremost you are looking for stability. You have a diagnosis I see from your file."

"Bipolar."

"Well I am not going to say too much about it. You attend Dr Robinson's clinic so that part is covered."

"Tell me one thing I never understood - why does Robinson never talk to me. I mean our sessions last ten minutes if even that. He was very off hand in his suggestion to see a psychologist."

"In the sixties psychiatry and psychology were one in the same discipline but then they split and psychiatry became very drug oriented which incidentally I don't agree with and psychology kept the talking cure that Freud pioneered along with Jung and others. So the compromise I have worked out is I don't comment on the psychiatry part of things. I am here to act as a facilitator and to guide you to a new understanding of your situation in a non-judgemental way of course."

"So you are more nurture and the psychiatrists are more nature, truth be told."

"Exactly."

"Well how long does it take?"

"Well that depends on you. There is no time line with therapy. You need to ask yourself how much are you willing to put into it."

"I don't have any other options. This is it."

"Recognise that whatever is motivating you at the moment to be the way is not necessarily in your interest, nor is giving you the outcome you desire."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's leave it until we get into it. Let's just say therapy will change you. You may come in one type of person and come out another."

"Is that bad? It sounds harmful."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“It is not meant too. The point is the problems you are having now pertain to your misunderstanding of yourself and the people around you. When that is improved and resolved hopefully then the problems will start to recede and reduce in severity. This is with particular reference to your bipolar. It is after all an emotional disorder.”

“But how can you say that? Do you think psychosis is an emotional disorder?”

“I do. But many psychiatrists would not agree. Depression is your body's warning that you need to address issues in your life. Since you denied you had problems despite experiencing trauma, the 'warning' of depression was a warning of events yet to come.”

“But why isn't every one of the right point of view.”

“The world doesn't work like that Joe. People have adversarial views and vested interests. The Health board finds medication and medicating patients a far easy way of managing the problem of mental illness that talking about it. Talking may or may not work, it depends on the patient, and maybe the truth is too painful. Or at very least it takes a long time. Medication works and represses the drama of mental illness. It results in a compliant patient population.”

“But that is sinister and at the very least immoral.”

“Some people choose the easy option, Joe. Therapy is painful and it means change for core relationships. Change or maybe even an end to those relationships. It takes strength of character to face your own demons. Anyway we are getting off topic. Let's stay firmly focussed on you.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Well for today I have some homework for you. Just some questionnaires you can fill out at your leisure.”

“What are they about?”

“Just trying to get a handle on you and how you feel and react in certain situations.”

“And what is your methodology? I mean what do you think happened to me?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Well I will be interested in looking at your childhood, particularly your relationship with your parents as your primary care-givers; their impact on you has been most significant.”

“How do you mean significant?”

“Well quite literally your relationship with your parents shapes the way you relate. It shapes the way you relate to your parents obviously but more significantly it shapes the way you relate to people now. You basically are employing the same interpersonal style that you developed in your formative environment. Children are vulnerable and at their most dependent when they are young. They are heavily dependent on their primary care-givers so they develop strategies in order to get on with their parents. They try to give their parents what they think their parents want from them. They distort and contort their personalities in order to relate to them.”

“Why do they do that?”

“It can be survival. From the child’s perspective they are utterly dependent on their parents for survival. Every tactic must be employed to ensure the success of those primary relationships. From what you are telling me it was bad for you – bad enough for you to be here today and to feel like a failure in your interpersonal relationships.”

She looked more closely at him. “Remember Joe this is not about blame. No one is to blame. Healthy people don’t blame other people for their problems.”

“Are you suggesting I blame my parents?”

“I am not suggesting anything. But this is an avenue, a way forward for you from an impossible dead end where nothing is going right. And keep in mind too that mores change. What the last generation put up with this generation can cavalierly dismiss. It is the way of the world.”

“You are saying children were chattels.”

“Well they were the property of their parents. And their parents could do what they wanted with them.”

She paused and then continued. “It’s not that the older generation were necessarily cruel Joe. The mores of their time differed. Driving poverty was the reality of most people’s lives then. They thought that if

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

they solved that conundrum as parents they had done a pretty good job. They are mystified and hurt by the ingratitude of our generation.”

“What do they want from me?”

“Material success is what they want from you. Poor people are obsessed with money and money is way out of poverty. Irish people were peasants and there was practically no middle class. So the poor fought tooth and nail to get into the middle class and certainly to stay there. You are a bad son if you don't deliver the money.”

“So I am a bad son.”

“What matters is your opinion of yourself. I am getting a good sense of your mother's opinion of you. And you have absorbed that to gain her approval and affection. To uncover your opinion of yourself you need to come with me on this journey. Let's see that the tests say but it may be an entirely different destiny awaits you at the end of this.”

“But what do I want then? Who am I really?”

“You want to be free to explore that for yourself and not be arrested by your parents or to owe them a lifelong obligation as they might expect or have rendered to their parents. Though I note you mentioned that your father's parents died by the time he was a young man. You want to be free to become yourself and it is your entitlement and your right though you may have to do it without your parent's approval. But yet again we digress.”

“But parents are the nature of things. How is it problematic?”

“Most of the time it isn't but then with depression and mental illness the evidence points to a troubled childhood. That at least is the methodology I employ here.”

“Do you think I am complicated?”

“I think you are complexed. You have the same basic needs, Joe, as I do, as everyone else does. We need to be loved and esteemed for who we are and have people around us who appreciate and value us.

Anyone would struggle when those things are not forthcoming.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“So I am starved of the oxygen of affirmation?”

“Not perhaps exactly as you see it now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the goals you are reaching for, the success you struggled for might just be the absence of self-love. With therapy you can accord yourself that love. Then you don't need to externalise it. All the answers are on the inside Joe, waiting to be discovered. Always remember that.”

“But it's about worldly things, money, fame, celebrity – that's what success is.”

“Perhaps we will leave that one for another day.”

“Can I ask you one thing before I go? I suppose it's a personal question.”

“Ok.”

“Are you a catholic?”

“I was brought up a catholic if that's what you mean.”

“But do you believe?”

“Well no. I am more a believer in the Eastern religions. I would say I am spiritual but not religious.”

“The reason I am asking is my father is very religious and well he managed to dodge therapy his whole life. Well he goes to mass every day and it's his solution to everything. Ever since my brother Tom died he has been going on a daily basis.”

“Well like we have been saying your parents and of course your father had a big impact on your development.”

“It is that just try as I may; I could never find any real comfort in religion. You see the thing of it is it seems to work for him. He never had any pills or hospitals or any such thing. He just went to mass every day and then everything was like water off a ducks back.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Religion will not resolve a mental illness, Joe. If anything it may only perpetuate it. And remember your father was an adult when Tom died. In fact he was grown up before Tom died. He didn't ever face your developmental disadvantages. So you don't have to follow in your father's footsteps you know. Even in respect of his religious affiliation. You do it for yourself.”

She paused for a moment.

“Again I refer back to the last generation and their view of mental illness. It was harsh Joe and there wasn't much of a future for the mentally ill. We had the biggest psychiatric population in all of Europe. Something was seriously wrong in the state of Ireland then. And the catholic church offered a solution perhaps better to call it a coping strategy one that the last generation could be comfortable with.”

“So prayer instead of Freud and Jung?”

“These were people who were barely educated. They lived in a state of fear manipulated by the church. It was the way things were. ”

“And my father would be ashamed to see a therapist?”

“Worse than ashamed. He probably fears it.”

“Why?”

“Because it would change him and make him very vulnerable. There could be adverse consequences. As I said there were societal pressures not to admit to mental illness. Anyway I only comment on your parents just to cast some light on the situation for you. You are the one who is here in therapy not them. If they have avoided it this long then they probably always will. Now I think that brings us just about to the end of today's session.”

“But I feel there is something wrong with them and not with me.”

“No Joe we talked about that – that is not a helpful way for you to think. It translates better that you don't see eye to eye with your parents on some fundamental level – there is an incompatibility. But you have your own life and you have your own lights we need to make them clear and for you to know clearly

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

what they are. There are plenty of religious zealots in the world and there always will be probably but the one you care about happens to be your father.”

“But my father is an educated man. He loves books and philosophy and culture. I don’t understand how he can be so fundamentally gullible and naïve.”

“Fear has a very powerful way of blinding people to the reality of themselves. I would say the church got to him long before the education and the books and culture did. Maybe that was how he coped, or maybe at one stage he sought answers through all the books. ”

“Is that what I have been doing – looking for answers the whole time?”

“Again the answers are not outside, Joe. They are inside. You don’t have to go anywhere or do anything to find them.”

“So when do we meet again?”

“Same time next week.”

She handed him an envelope containing the questionnaire and then they shook hands and he went out closing the door behind him.

#Mum & Dad

He walked back to his parents’ house slowly not wanting to arrive and smoking a cigarette. He paused at the entrance. Dad’s car was gone and Mum’s was parked in her usual place. He climbed the steps and let himself in the door.

“Joe I am down here in the kitchen” his mother called up.

“Would you ever be anywhere else” he muttered and he went down.

“How would you like a cup of tea? So where were you this morning?”

“Just taking a walk. That’s all. Are you spying on me? I’ll be moving out soon.”

“Hang on Joe, there is no mad rush. You know what you have just been through.”

“And I have to put an ad in the paper to sell my car.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I was talking to Louise Crowley.."

"I am not interested in what your doctor friend has to say. If pills and medication worked I wouldn't be sitting here looking at you. Don't you know?"

"Why don't you ring her?"

"I don't want to ring her. Are you going to keep this up or do I have to leave the room?"

"Give it a try."

"Look – pills are not the answer. Not for me anyhow. I have tried the medication route and it doesn't lead anywhere."

"You haven't stopped taking your medication."

"Jesus. No I haven't."

"Oh thank God. Because Joe it's our only hope now."

"Hope for what. A millionaire son?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your gross materialism that's what I am talking about."

"I never said you had to make millions. I just thought a career in business would be more stable and better paid and you agreed with that."

"You never encouraged me to be myself."

"And who would you be if you were being yourself?"

"I don't know - an artist for example."

"An artist like your father I suppose."

"And what would be wrong with that?"

"I can tell you quite simply – bills unpaid, arrears on the mortgage – utilities being cut off."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Ah it really is all about the money with you."

"Well maybe it is."

"But I don't understand we have never been poor."

"That's because I have been vigilant always."

"God I thought I had a complex." Joe got up and walked out onto the veranda closing the door behind him.

His mother came and opened the door and stood there. "Why does it have to be always a row?" she said.

"You tell me." He lit up a cigarette.

"I still love you Joe. I am your mother."

"Oh God, tell that to Tim or even Dad maybe."

"What do you mean?" Why do you keep saying I don't love Tim or I love you more? It is just not true."

"What is the use" said Joe, puffing on his cigarette. "Did I really make up for all that was wrong with your husband? I certainly don't feel that I did. You engineered a monster in your determination to escape a catholic marriage. Don't try to put all your insecurities into me."

"I don't know what you are talking about. I am going inside. I will speak to you when you are more reasonable."

#Jonas & Derek

He went down to Searsons early to get away from his mother. He found a table and sat down. The pub was getting ready for the weekend and the voices rose an octave on the beery, perfume laden air. He looked around but for a change there were no lookers and he didn't feel up to the challenge of chatting anyone up. Jonas and Derek arrived together and stood by the table looking around.

"Well, well, well, look who is back from the dead" said Derek.

"Are you talking about me?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well the last time we met you, you stormed off. Don't you remember? But seriously though I heard you haven't been well."

"Well I wasn't. Still am not possibly. Are you getting a drink or not?"

Derek went to the bar.

"It's cool if you don't want to talk about it" said Jonas, lighting up.

"Well what is there to say? My condition has a capacity to turn everything to shit."

Derek returned with two pints of lager. He pulled up a seat and sat down at the table. "So how have you been?"

"We already covered that."

"Now listen I had an idea."

"What?"

"One you might like. You know how you like the hot weather. Well why don't we all go on a sun holiday? We can get killer tans and drink lots of beer and chill out. I just was looking at flights. There are really cheap deals to Turkey at the moment."

"I am not sure I can afford it."

"Oh of course you are not working" said Derek.

"How did you know that?"

"I met your Dad on Baggot Street."

"Jesus that man is pourous."

"I think a holiday is just what you need after all you have been through."

"There must be loads of English slappers in those resorts" said Jonas.

"I don't know. Do we get on all that well? You two are like twins or something and I am the odd man out."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Jeez you try to do a guy a good turn.." said Derek. Jonas nodded.

"I am not ruling it out mind."

"Well don't do us any favours."

"How's Sylvia?"

"Back in Denmark leaving me free to explore my options."

"It's not like she is gone forever or something. Don't you think you might consider waiting for her?"

"Nonsense. I am in my prime."

"They chat on the internet all hours" said Derek.

"What do you talk about?" said Joe.

"Never mind. Private stuff."

"At least you have a private life. I don't appear to have one."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I'll have to move out again. And I have to sell my car. And I suppose I will have to get a job but I really don't want too."

"Why don't you write?" said Derek. "You have all the time in the world."

"I am really not in the mood at the moment. I keep a diary however."

"What do you write about?"

"Oh anything and everything. Ideas I have for stories and such like."

"Here's a plan for you. Forget the job. Go on the dole, get your own place and write like no tomorrow. That's really what you always wanted" said Derek.

"Have you seen those places you get on rent allowance? You would house animals in some of them."

"Come down to Howler, the Microsystems girls are meeting this Friday. I can introduce you."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"No I think I will give it a miss. Not really from my culture you know."

"What does that matter?"

"Well it makes a difference."

"You've changed" said Jonas and burst out laughing.

"Not enough, not enough yet. Who is for another round?"

"I will" said Jonas.

"Not for me" said Derek.

#Niamh - Tom

The following week he arrived early and sat in the waiting area outside Niamh Gallagher's office. In his hand he had a brown manila envelope containing the completed forms. At precisely 11am she came out and greeted him warmly.

"Joe how are you?"

"Not too bad" he said standing up. He followed her down the corridor and into the office.

"Too hot for you?" She gestured at the electric fire.

"No. It's okay."

"Well sit down and tell me how you are today?"

"Well not great truth be told."

"Well ok. Maybe we can get started. Do you have the forms from last time?"

He nodded handing her the envelope.

"One of the things you mentioned last time that had a big impact on you was your brother's death, Tom right? I purposefully didn't go into it last time because I wanted to devote a whole session to it. Are you familiar with PTSD?"

"Post-traumatic stress disorder?"

"Yes exactly. Soldiers get it on the battlefield. In fact just about anyone can have it if they experience and very sudden and unexpected traumatic event. You might get it because of the sudden death of your brother. It is a dysfunctional grief process; one so over-burdened that the normal grief process gets interrupted and blocked. Normal 'emotional processing' is suspended."

"But what does it mean?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“It means you keep reliving the painful memories long after the event has passed and it could manifest as bipolar also which is a recurring cycle of painful memories. You relive the trauma related memories which never stop being overwhelming and paralyzing. You can't cope with the intrusive traumatic memories pushing you towards extreme ways of avoiding them; alcohol to dull the pain, prolonged avoidance of intimacy.”

“But why does it happen?”

“There are possible explanations. One is the just world hypothesis which is the belief that human actions eventually yield morally fair and fitting consequences, so that, ultimately, noble actions are duly rewarded and evil actions are duly punished.”

“But I would have had that belief as a child. I am sure of it. Before Tom died I was class captain, great student and rugby player.”

“And everything went horribly wrong afterwards.”

“It was as though the world came to an end. Nothing could be the same afterwards.”

“And what were you like after he died.”

“Well we never talked about it. No-one ever talked about it. My father went into a dark place I feel sure too, but we never communicated and my mother and think she just buried the memory.”

“So feelings were not shared. No feelings were never shared in our family. The family was never a forum of support for how I felt or any of us felt.”

“So the other possibility or cause of PTSD is a phenomenon called dissociation.”

“What is that?”

“Dissociation is something children do. They store experiences in their unconscious until such time as they are able to process them. After all you were a child when Tom died.”

“So I dissociated?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well it's another explanation for PTSD. The experience of Tom's death was so painful that it could never be successfully integrated into your conscious mind. So it remains stuck in the unconscious."

"So there is no solution."

"Until you develop the adult resources to integrate the memories and feelings."

"How?"

"Therapy, journaling, self-reflection – emotional maturity."

"So it wasn't a conscious decision on my part to dissociate and experience PTSD?"

"No of course not. It was unconscious. You could consider it akin to mental survival. If you had tried to take on board those feelings at the time you would have experienced a complete collapse."

"Just as I do in the episodes or breakdowns."

"Episode is a better word. Yes exactly."

"So I bought time to cope later."

"You could look at it that way. But I think the just world hypothesis fits also. Your world was shattered – rugby, class captain, and scholar – all the rest was lost – so that world had to be put back together. That at least was your agenda as dictated by Tom's memory. But you could put it another way and say that Tom did not die for you. He might have died in reality but for you since you had not processed the loss the grieving process did not complete for you."

Joe nodded. "Go on."

"This leads me on to another scenario – that you suffer from complicated grief. The normal cycle of bereavement did not finish for you because the memories were too painful and trapped in your unconscious."

"I don't agree with any of this" said Joe. "This is all bullshit."

"Now Joe you are getting agitated."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You don't know what you are talking about. I got over Tom a long time ago. Why are you bringing all this up now? I know what I am talking about."

"How do you feel, Joe – tell me how you feel."

"I want to destroy the whole world and everyone in it."

"Is this because your world was destroyed?"

"Yes my world was destroyed" he said more calmly. "It was an injustice I could never forgive. It destroyed the family. Did you know that? – destroyed the family. God was to blame for this."

"You mentioned God. Do you believe in God?"

"I did. I mean I did until the great disaster."

"Tom's death."

"Yes Tom's death. Nothing was the same after that."

"Why was that God's fault?"

"Well isn't he supposed to prevent such outcomes? Can't he do anything? Bring people back to life?"

"Your just world hypothesis? God should have intervened to prevent Tom's death."

"Well shouldn't he? Don't you think? He was nineteen and he had a heart attack. That isn't right. How can that be right?"

"But it needs to become right, doesn't it? Since after all it happened."

"I was always opposed to this. Always. To my core in fact."

"Just some things cannot be forgiven."

"And yet you want to live Joe. You want at the very least to be free. That is why you are here isn't it?"

"Pain isn't some intellectual argument - some psychological truism."

"It might be if it never ends."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"My father called it a vale of tears – this life."

"Do you believe that?"

"I never believed it. I thought it was about having fun and enjoying life and yet it all ends in shit."

"But you don't want it to end in shit?"

"Can you help me?"

"I think I can but mainly in showing you how to help yourself."

"But that is just a cliché."

"It might also be true."

Joe was silent.

"Have you ever thought why Tom was so important to you? What did he represent?"

"He was further on. The older brother you know. I thought there was nothing he couldn't handle."

"Did he stand between you and your parents?"

"I often thought that."

"Like a surrogate father."

"He was nothing like my real father. Tom was together and motivated and successful."

"You think your father is unsuccessful."

"Well he had some successes but after Tom died he just became consumed by his own intellectualism."

"Looking for a way out."

"Does he have complicated grief?"

"Why not? You have."

"But it doesn't look like he is going to find it."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"That's his struggle, not yours."

"I always wanted Dad to find the way though. Because then I could find it. We all could find it. Things would be okay again."

"So you focused on your Dad and focused your critique on him."

"Well that's what my mother did. And that seemed like the way forward for all us. So what should I do?"

"Well I would suggest you write some letters to Tom and express how you feel. Just like we discussed. It is cathartic to express these feelings in writing."

"Who do I send them too?"

"Don't send them to anyone. Just keep them on your computer. Try to unravel how you felt about Tom and how you feel now?"

"Is this normal? I always said I was over this."

"That was what you pretended, Joe. You pretended that you had dealt with it and wouldn't be coming back. This is what your parents expected of you and you complied very well with their expectation."

"But they did the same thing. I really only copied their example."

"Emotional expression was forbidden in your family Joe. Mental illnesses happen to people who are not allowed to work through their emotional issues. Change is all about emotions. We have to make sense of those feelings that so terrify you. A chemical straitjacket will not change anything."

"These are my feelings?"

"Yes Joe, your feelings, but it is possibly unlikely that you accept that yet."

"But psychosis to me is different people in my head. How can you say they are me? That can't be possible."

"They are factions in your mind, Joe, fighting for control. You mentioned how you believed in aliens when you were psychotic."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"All the time."

"Well what else can that be except your alienated self?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this highly enlightened being that you were so fearful of in your episodes was you. It was a pseudonym for your true self."

"This makes no sense whatsoever."

"Still we are making progress. And now I think we will pick it up next time then."

#Dad

He walked back slowly from the hospital after their session ended. He lit up a cigarette as he was walking and turned right onto his parent's road. He climbed the steps leading to the hall doorway and put his key into the lock. He let himself in and closed the door and went down to the kitchen. Mum was out but he could tell Dad was in the basement. He went downstairs.

"Ah Joe, how are you?"

"I'm okay I suppose. What are you up too?"

"Just working on this section of my thesis, powerful stuff, Joe, powerful stuff."

"Do you honestly think you will ever finish it?"

"Of course I will. I hope I will."

"You lost your mother very young didn't you? And your father when you were a teenager."

"Did you ever feel resolved about any of those losses? And then Tom died when you were in your forties."

"Are you trying to make me cry?"

"That's not my intention."

"No father should have to bury a son. Can you understand that?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“And what about me? Did you ever stop to think that I needed you as well? That it wasn't acceptable that you couldn't give yourself over to a lifetime of grief.”

“You needed me for what?”

“I needed you to be there. I needed you to be a father, to know what to do, to make the right decisions for everyone. I needed to be able to reach you. Not have you lost in intellectual babble and philosophical nonsense.”

“If I could only finish what I am working on, then I think I could make it.”

“Oh what's the use?”

“You are very unforgiving, Joe. It is unbecoming.”

“You lost a son. I lost a brother. Does that not mean we have something in common?”

“You can never know a parent's anguish – at least I hope you never do.”

“If I even ever get married?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because for me Dad it is survival. You have your books and your relations and all the rest. You have had your life and this is the life you have chosen with at least some deliberation. But I have nothing and nothing begets nothing. The stakes are very much higher where I am concerned.”

“What would you have of me?”

“I don't know - a glimmer the slightest chance of a connection but I very much have the sinking feeling that in a second you are going to ask me to have some tea.”

“Well there you are. Would you like some tea?”

“I am going out for a smoke.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#Tim

He stood out on the veranda his hands shaking as he lit his cigarette. While he was there Tim came into the kitchen and started peering into the fridge. When he was finished he went inside and sat down at the table.

“How did you feel about Tom’s death” he said after a while.

“Jesus I don’t think I am ready for a conversation like that.”

“But just suppose you were. Humour me.”

“He was the only one in the family talking to me at one stage.”

“What did you do?”

“Oh I was wild in my twenties – you remember – drinking and car accidents and the rest. Tom was always fair and always open to me, you know. He treated me like everyone else.”

Tim came and sat at the table.

“Did you find anything in the fridge?”

“Just some of yesterday’s dinner.”

“She is probably keeping that.”

“I don’t care.”

“Are we just a family in grief I wonder?”

“The world is not a fair place. You should remember that.”

“But I don’t agree or I wouldn’t want to agree. Isn’t that just going to make you cynical and miserable?”

“The point is you do agree deep down inside.”

“Can you see into my soul?”

“What good are all your struggles? They will never amount to anything.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Who is ready for tea then?" Dad appeared in the doorway.

"I don't really feel like it anymore" said Joe.

"Oh come on. I brought up an excerpt from my thesis for you both to hear."

#New Job

The following morning he got up early and made his way down to the dining room. Dad was already out but Mum was still in bed. He picked up the phone and dialled the number in the newspaper ad in front of him.

"Executive Recruitment" a sing song voice answered.

"Hi, I was calling about the ad – the database analyst contract."

"Oh yes, that will be Donal, hang on a second." The phone clicked and beeped. "Donal here."

"Hi, my name is Joe O'Malley. I was calling about the database analyst."

"Oh yes. That job requires some experience."

"Well I have used databases quite a bit in past jobs. Just back from the states actually."

"That's good. American experience is highly regarded."

"Have you been working since you came back?"

"No, just back really."

"Oh. Well you would have to come in and register before we can send your CV out to the client."

"That's okay. You are in Merrion Square?"

"That's right."

"Well any time this week is fine."

"How about Friday at 11am?"

"That's fine." He hung up the phone.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#Mum

He went down to the kitchen. Mum was up and dressed in her dressing gown making her porridge.

"I might have job don't you know."

"Oh Joe, not already. The doctor says you have to learn to take things slow and so does Louise."

"Don't talk to me about your friend who is the great psychiatrist. Pity she never analysed you. Like most psychiatrists she probably needs therapy."

Mum stirred her porridge.

"Anyway I am not looking for a big job. Probably wouldn't get one anyway if they did any serious checking. No my best option now is a contract and then I can move out and have an income, and most of these contracts keep rolling over anyhow."

"Where is it?"

"I don't know yet. Probably in the city centre. Anyway I have been meaning to ask, how did you feel about Tom's death?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's a simple question."

She sat down at the table. "It was wrong. That's what it was. What could ever be right about it?"

"But you didn't change like Dad? Why was that?"

"Well I just had to get on with things? He gave into his grief. We had children. Life had to go on. You can understand that."

"I think I can. But for the family time seems to have stopped."

"You were too young to cope. And Tom was like a hero to you. I should have brought you to see someone. But you seemed to be coping and well you just got on with things."

"Dad didn't fare so well."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"No he didn't. He was never right after Tom died. It just pushed him over an edge. It disconnected him from other people. I don't know any better way of describing it."

"But there is a way back from that abyss. There has to be."

"For you maybe. I think you will find it Joe. I really do. But some people don't want to get over things and for them living with the pain is the better way."

"But why?"

"Maybe it's a reminder, I don't know, that the person is still there, still with them."

#Bedsit

The following night he went to see a bed sit in Lower Rathmines. It was situated near the canal bridge in a Georgian house that had long since lost its elegance. Paint was peeling off the railings and the front door. He rang the bell and a bespectacled country gent with wiry hair and aesthetic features answered.

"Hi I called about the flat."

"Oh yes come on in." He pulled the door wide to allow Joe to enter. The hallway reeked of boiled potatoes and cabbage, the carpet was of indeterminate age but thread bare and covered in splashes and dark blotches.

"This is it" he said unlocked a door that led off the hallway.

The bed was immediately obvious tucked up against the wall with barely room for the door to open. In the middle of the room were two chairs and an ancient brown carpet. At the back was a malodorous galley kitchen. The bathroom was a tiny cubicle barely large enough to contain a shower and toilet.

"Does it ever get cleaned?" Joe asked.

"That's your job if you want the place."

"Ok. I will take it."

"First you need to pay the deposit."

"Cheque ok?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"How do I know it's a good cheque?"

"I suppose you will have to trust me" he said, smiling. "Who do I make it out too?"

"Seamus O'Reilly."

He wrote out the cheque. "When can I move in?"

"Now if you like." He handed him the keys and took the cheque. Seamus left and closed the door behind him.

Joe sat on the bed. He listened to the traffic noises of vehicles trundling up Rathmines Road. The sound of footsteps coming down the stairs and the front door opening and then slamming shut. A man walked past his window on the footpath – singing - drunk. The clock tower struck six bells. He checked his watch. His parking was set to expire in twenty minutes. He stared out through the decrepit lace curtains.

#Gerry- Fallout

The next day he was up bright and early. Dad was at mass and Mum was out shopping. Tim was nowhere to be seen.

He packed his few belongings into his car and drove over to his new home. He set up his computer and stereo in the middle of the room and his few clothes he hung up in the wardrobe. Ten minutes later his phone rang. It was Gerry.

"What up J man?"

"What do you want?"

"That's not very nice. I was only going to propose a drive and a walk down the pier if you are game."

"I suppose I could do that."

"Pick you up in thirty minutes."

"Why don't I pick you up? I've got wheels."

"Even better."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Joe jumped up and threw up on coat. He locked the door of the flat behind him and let the front door slam as he went. Thirty minutes later he was outside Gerry's mother's house in Blackrock. He rang the doorbell and Gerry appeared moments later.

"Nice car" he said inspecting Joe's car in the driveway.

"When did you get this?"

"A while ago."

"Of course now that you have this big job in HDME?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

They got in and set off in the direction of the pier.

"Derek is talking about going to Turkey for a week. Would you be interested?"

"No. I don't think so. They are your friends really, not mine."

"Really?"

"Well you spend a lot more time with them."

"I thought we were all friends."

"No, not really. Those two are like brothers and then they always gang up on you."

Joe reddened slightly a scarlet tinge came to his cheeks. "I haven't noticed."

"They are basically one person. They agree about everything."

Joe parked beside the train station and they walked passed on the yacht club and down onto the pier.

There were few pedestrians about. A chill wind was blowing in from the bay and the flags at pennants of the boats moored in the waters below fluttered and then hung limp as the gusts swirled and eddied.

"I don't know why you want to live with your mum. How can you ever have any kind of normal life doing that?"

"It's no business of yours either way."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I am just thinking for your own benefit."

"Like you'd know what is for my benefit anyhow."

"You have to fight Gerry. You have to struggle. You will find your way out of this."

"You know what you are doing? You are using the same technique you use on yourself. I don't need a pep talk. I know very well what I am doing."

Joe fell silent for a moment. "Don't you even want to meet someone?"

"It is not like you don't have problems. Screw you Joe I will call you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well everyone knows you're a little bit crazy."

"Who said that?"

"Nobody - I am not mentioning any names."

"You have access to confidential information. You should keep that to yourself."

"I didn't tell anyone. Word gets around. Dublin is a small place. Everyone knows someone who knows someone."

"It drives me mad that people can't mind their own business."

"People like knowing other people's business. It's the voyeuristic gene in all of us."

"In you maybe, not me. I don't need to know anyone's business except my own."

"Tell you what - let's go for a pint."

"I can only have a couple. I am driving after all."

They left the pier and walked back in the direction of the yacht club. They crossed the road at the crosswalk and climbed the steps that led to the bar. Seagulls circled above and out in the bay the ferry from Wales was approaching, its enormous bulk cleaving a deep white furrow ahead and a frothy wake to the

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

rear. On the deck tiny black dots of people were visible taking the view. He followed Gerry into the bar and they climbed the steps to the first floor.

“View is much better from up here” said Gerry. They found a vacant seat. The bar was unusually sparse; behind the bar a TV spewed some idiocy of news and current affairs.

“I wouldn’t go to Turkey with those guys, if I were you.”

“Why not?”

“Too up close and personal, nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.”

“What’s the worst that can happen?”

“You’ll have a shit week and you will have spent a load of money to have a bad time.”

Their pints arrived and they sat there sipping away watching the ferry come in.

“Why don’t you even get a job or something? Why are you on the dole?”

“I told you about that” he snapped. “I had a job but it didn’t work out. I can’t go back to that.”

“But if you are an artist like you say, why don’t you do your artistry?”

“I have doubts Joe, mega doubts. I fear I am no good and no one will want my album. That it will all flop terribly and I am just a big loser. I mean only yesterday Mossie from college told me he sold his house. He made 200K of profit on the deal. Imagine 200K – I will never have that Joe. I will never get close to that kind of money.”

“But it’s not too late. It’s never too late to have a dream.”

“You mean a fantasy don’t you. No it’s too late for me. I will never be successful. I know that now.”

“I don’t understand. What about your album and scoring all those chicks?”

“I am just fooling myself. I am just a dead beat.”

“Now Gerry you have to stop feeling sorry yourself. You can do this. You just need to get motivated.”

“You need to get a woman in your life.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I don't see you with anyone."

"Well maybe I will have soon."

"You are doing it again. You are giving me a pep talk. This is the pep talk you try to give yourself the whole time."

"A fuck you" said Joe, suddenly. "I am not going to waste my time on a negator like you. You are a lost cause Gerry. You just like the misery don't you."

"Fuck you."

"Well fuck you back with interest. You can walk home." Joe got up and walked down the stairs and out of the pub.

#Niamh – Mother

Niamh came out to collect him from the waiting area. He followed her into her office closing the door behind him. They both sat down.

“You seem bright and breezy today, Joe” said Niamh.

“I can’t deny I am in something of a good mood. I mean I shouldn’t be. I have no job. I had a terminal fight with a friend and nothing is going right in the obvious way and yet I feel some optimism, more than I have felt in a long time.”

“Hope, Joe is an infectious commodity, regardless of the circumstances.”

“That must be it. Yes you give me hope that things will be better.”

“I am just a mentor Joe. You give yourself hope. You have to make the painful choices, not me. That takes courage. Tell me about your friend.”

“Oh I don’t know. I have known him for years since college really. I suppose we both sank to the bottom at round about the same time.”

“Why do you think now is the time you choose to be rid of him and not before?”

“I don’t know. I mean he is so negative and always moaning and complaining and he is so embittered. I can’t relate to that. At least I can’t anymore.”

“This sounds to me more like a positive than a negative development. You need to choose your friends with care Joe. Not everyone is a friend at least not a good friend. But it sounds like you didn’t want to be associated with him any longer.”

There was silence. “Thanks for filling out the questionnaire and I had a read.”

“What did it tell you?”

“Well a number of things. From what it says you fall into the fear of hurting others trap. You want to get on with other people, even to the extent of letting them take advantage of you.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I don't agree with that."

"Just hear me out and then we can discuss. Also it suggests that you have difficulty asserting yourself and so you leave this out in most cases. As a result other people can easily take advantage of you because you let them and then you become very angry."

"Give me an example."

"Well I am sure we can think of examples. But anyway let's not get bogged down in the questionnaire. What I wanted to do today is talk about your mother and the impact she has had on your emotional development."

"My mother, well I don't know. She was always very control and she was never warm or supportive. I think she wanted things her way the whole time and if she didn't get it she would withdraw her approval."

"That had a devastating effect on you."

"It did. I wanted that approval. Needed it even. You see I was the last boy maybe even her favourite and Tim and Tom came before."

"Was there anything about her that made her different?"

"Well my father says she was abused."

"Abused? By whom."

"By her father - my grandfather."

"Did she tell you this?"

"No. My father told me. He thought it might help me."

"That's a very serious thing if it is true. I see no reason to say it wasn't. Incest causes huge psychological damage. Does she ever admit it or tell you?"

"I put it to her. She vehemently denied it."

"So your mother was herself wounded or emotionally damaged from prior trauma."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Joe nodded.

“You became her ‘little man’ and for you this led to a high sex drive, with a need for immediate gratification and Don Juanism.”

“Bella?”

“Exactly in addition, being the recipient of this kind of attention by your mother tremendously inflated you making you think you were ‘extraordinarily special’ and leading to neurotic vanity and grandiosity. Inflation and grandiosity never come without the opposite pole, deflation and depression.”

“The bipolar cycle.”

“Just another interpretation for you to consider.”

“In this scenario you are grandiose and needy by turns. Delusions of superiority are followed by feelings of inferiority. And you are left with a dilemma – you desperately pursue women, as your self-esteem is dependent on their adoration, yet no woman can be trusted.”

“I don’t know what to say. So my mother is a key element of my bipolar.”

“Very much. Tom’s death was only part of the story.”

“Why did she never protest or accuse her abuser?”

“For a woman of her generation there was no escape from an abusive father. There was nowhere to run and no one to call. If she had kicked up she would probably have been locked up in a mental hospital. And then there was the question of her honour. Who would want to marry a woman who had been raped by her father? No one would take their part. The shame would have been too much.”

“I did have an aunt who had bi-polar.”

“Probably rebelled against a horrendous environment.”

“But what did it mean for me?”

“It might be the case that your mother has NPD.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“What’s that?”

“Narcissistic personality disorder – it’s a type of emotional disorder.”

“What type of emotional disorder?”

“It is an inflated sense of self-importance, fantasies of power and beauty, coupled with severe feelings of inferiority, shame and emptiness and a tendency to over idealise and devalue people.”

“She over idealised me?”

“Provided you play the game. Otherwise she would devalue you.”

“The job in the bank and the hostility to my father and so on?”

“Possibly. The other possibility since she is your mother is that in relating to her you too became a narcissist.”

“I did.”

“Well you really wouldn’t have had any choice. Your mother’s approval and the withdrawal of that approval would dictate your childhood development.”

“So I am a narcissist too.”

“Well I would use the term co-narcissist, and this is how I was able to make an educated guess at your mother. You grew up in relation to a narcissistic mother and from the sounds of it a narcissistic father also.”

“There is just so much to take in.”

“Well we will take it step by step. Your parents play a huge role in your life and that is also because you spend so much time around them and with them.”

“But being in America didn’t seem to make any difference.”

“Again that would be that you were motivated by family matters and you wanted to come home and save your mother and rescue your father.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Was that wrong?”

“Yes Joe it was wrong. First of all they are not in need of rescue, you are. And secondly you would have to separate your life from theirs. And this is something that is very hard for you. Another term for co-narcissism is co-dependency. You gained something from your association with your parents. Something you would be very reluctant to give up.”

“I suppose I got to be the centre of their attention and got their approval.”

“Exactly, you would have to trade that for freedom. But they also they had a vested interest in you. Maybe you helped keep their unstable marriage together. Maybe they felt forever young in your company. Maybe your father invested his emotional well-being in his family which he could never let slip away. It is not entirely clear. But you are entitled to your freedom but don't think for one minute there won't be pain on the way. There will.”

There was silence for a while and then Niamh went on. “The further caveat here is the environment you grew up in was dysfunctional. This environment was shaped by your parents as the creators of the family but also by key family events that unfolded. Obviously Tom's death was the biggest of these. Since your father became incapacitated through grief your mother became what we call the enabler spouse. This meant she kept the family together and tried to manage and mitigate his behaviour. In dysfunctional families children take on specialised roles to cope with their living conditions. It sounds like Tom was the hero son – the scholar, the sportsman and the all-rounder. Tim became the scapegoat – blamed by your mother for everything that brought shame to the family and you were the caretaker.”

“What is a caretaker?”

“I mean an emotional caretaker. You took responsibility for your parent's feelings and tried to manage their feelings.”

“Why?”

“It was your way of getting close to your parents. And your way of trying to deal with the pain you were feeling.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“So what do I do?”

“Well you try to take care of people as a means of control. If that doesn't work you get angry and withdraw. Does that sound familiar?”

Joe nodded.

“It sounds like your mother's family background was highly dysfunctional. Certainly your family environment was dysfunctional. What about your father?”

“Well he was raised by his aunt. His mother, my grandmother, died in childbirth and he never really accepted his aunt as his caregiver. His father remarried and left the family home only to return after a number of years. Then his father died. I suppose that could be regarded as dysfunctional. I don't know.”

“Certainly far from ideal and but not what your mother had to contend with. But the research shows that people from dysfunctional families tend to marry into another dysfunctional family.”

“Why is that?”

“Well when you grow up with dysfunction you are not repelled by a partner who is similar dysfunctional. It is the norm. It is what they are used too and what they consider normal.”

“But I don't get it.”

“But I think you do. You came from your family environment and to you it was normal. But when you started working you were surrounded by all kinds of different people and most of them reacted differently to you or didn't get you at all, even though you thought initially that they would or they were initially friendly.”

“They weren't dysfunctional?”

“Exactly.”

“So most people are not.”

“Exactly – otherwise the whole world would be in therapy and even I would regard that as a bad thing” she laughed.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“But what about the so-called dysfunctional people who manage to avoid the therapy situation? What about my parents? They buried their son. They didn't crack up. At least not that I know about.”

“They are not really under the spotlight. We are only talking about them because we are talking about you and how they impacted you. This is for you Joe and what you want out of life and to improve your quality of life.”

“So I am a co-narcissistic caretaker?”

“Exactly. You can't change other people Joe, that's where you always go wrong. You can only change yourself. But that is enough. And then it won't matter what your parents or anyone else thinks. You will have your own mind on it. Get the balance to self right and then all else will come into balance.”

“What about my father? Is he a narcissist?”

“From what you tell me he is obsessed with fantasies of brilliance and genius. It is a common narcissistic trait. And whereas in reality he is an unproven, undiscovered talent.”

“It all seems so laughable, pathetic really.”

“Well narcissists don't know what they are like. It is their signal weakness – a lack of objectivity.”

“And Tim?”

“Co-narcissist to your parents – ever the object of your mother's contempt. Isn't that when he had his breakdown?”

“I suppose it fits.”

“Nothing is perfect – no therapy – nothing. One universal narcissistic characteristic is the drive and need for perfection.”

“I suppose I have that too?”

“All narcissists have that.”

“And what do you think is at the heart of all this?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"The need to be loved Joe, something we all need to be. You can think of it as a question of degree or severity if you want. We all exist on a spectrum from healthy to neurotic to psychotic."

"I think I have had all three."

"It doesn't mean you can't make it back."

"God you are a positive lady!"

"She laughed. "Okay that will do us for today."

#New Job – Contract

The next day he got up early and put on his only suit and said good-bye to his mother. She wished him good luck and he walked out the front door and taking a left he walked down the street. At the intersection he turned left onto Baggot Street and walked over the canal bridge on his way to town. At the junction of Fitzwilliam Place he turned left and right onto Merrion Square. From there he could see the company sign – Executive Recruitment. He walked up the steps and buzzed the front door. The latch clicked and he pushed the door. Inside he was in an ornate Georgian hallway. A small couch was on the side and the reception desk was on his left. He went up to the girl sitting at the desk. She looked up.

"I am here to see Mr Hegarty."

"Your name please."

"Joe O'Malley."

"Take a seat Joe. Paul will be out in a few minutes."

After a few minutes Paul came out. He was short, balding man wearing a blue stripy shirt and grey trousers. He ushered him into a small office at the back of the building.

Joe sat down. He read his CV which was on his desk. "Wow, worked in Chicago. First in Economics. This is impressive experience and education."

"Thanks."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Well the job is a contract and it is for a database analyst. Seems to me you are over-qualified for the position. You get paid by the hour and you have time cards. Here is our policy on annual leave and holiday time.”

“Just one thing I have a week’s holiday coming up.”

“That’s no problem. We will just start you off from when you come back. I’ll email the client this afternoon”

They shook hands and Joe left.

#Niamh – Career Choices

“Since you are going away for a week I suggested we have a second session this week.”

Joe sat down in his chair facing her. “I got a new job – just a contract.”

“That may not be the best thing for right now, Joe. Is it vitally important that you take a job right away?”

“It doesn’t feel right to be doing nothing.”

“We’ll have to come back to it. I wanted to talk you about the impact your parents had on your career choices.”

“I think we have established that my mother made me opt for financial security and doing the sensible rational thing.”

“We did. I also want to comment on the effect your father had on you in terms of career choices.”

“But I never followed his example.”

“But that doesn’t mean you didn’t want too.”

“Are you suggesting I would want to sit in a basement office full of junk for twenty years?”

“In a way yes I am if you thought it would bring your father’s approval. Your father never showed any interest in your commercial career.”

“True.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"The only face you are comfortable showing to the world is the commercial sensible face. This is the face your mother approves of."

"But how can you tell?"

"You told me. Your conscious self is the sensible, practical, can do corporate executive. It may be a false self but it is your conscious self."

"So you are saying I am a complete fraud?"

"You are not a fraud but the side you show to the world is a fraud, Joe because it is not you. The side you secretly prefer is the artistic, rebel but this is the side you can never consciously admit too. This is the side you must hide from your mother because you know she strongly disapproves."

"What can she do?"

"It is not what she can do now, it is what she could do when you were a child – disapproval was very serious. And because your conscious false self is aspiring to your mother's approval your creative self fights for recognition even from yourself."

"What must I do?"

"We have to draw out the creative side of you. Now this ties back to the PTSD we talked about because you are a very creative guy, so you used your creative imagination to cope with the biggest challenge of your life – the loss of your brother. Everything you had read up to that point – aliens, fantasy, science fiction was all brought into the mix to explain and account for the experience. Unfortunately for you however it could not integrate and you were left with a mish mash of childhood coping strategies."

"So I suppressed my creative side also because it contains painful memories of my brother's loss."

"Well when was the last time you wrote something? You say you are a writer by night and office worker by day but you are not writing at all at the moment."

"Not currently."

"Joe it may be true to say that you are an artist and yet could never admit it."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well it is not easy to be an artist – no money, no mortgage, no house, no salary, no family, no wife."

"These are all your mother's arguments."

"But she is right isn't she?"

"Well maybe you become an artist. Maybe it chooses you. Did you think of that?"

"So I would just write full-time and everything else I did would be part time or incidental."

"Exactly."

"I could live with that."

"Of course you could because it is what you want. It takes a long time for an artist to find themselves."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because you secretly prefer it and because also you have never shown this side of yourself to the world.

Perhaps the world would embrace and accept Joe the artist."

"Perhaps it would."

"Well you can't expect the world to know about it if you keep hiding it even from yourself."

"I always wondered why I got nowhere in business. I thought I have intelligence and motivation but I knew I never had the interest."

"That's plausibly why. You were never interested in a career in business or indeed a career of any conventional kind. You already had artistic talents."

"This makes me feel a whole lot better."

"Good."

"So what now?"

"Well you need to explore your creative side and place it first in your interests and in how you spend your time. Your mother will probably disparage you for doing this. But I think you can handle that. So that

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

leads me on to the fact that you have taken another job. It is probably not going to work out any better than the job in HDME.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes Joe I am. The consequences are serious for you. Your health is on the line here not to mention your peace and contentment.”

“Should I leave?”

“You must decide that for yourself. Perhaps you will approach the whole matter of change in a more gradual manner. Or perhaps you need to be convinced of all this. It is necessarily a lot to take in over a few months. You must decide.”

There was silence. She resumed. “I wanted to touch on two other issues that I think are real problems for you. And you will need to address.”

“What are they?”

“The first is alcohol. For someone with your disposition heavy drinking or any kind of drinking is a very bad idea. Now I know the doctors don't emphasis it. But they should. They would have a lot fewer admissions to hospital and re-admissions.”

“You think I drink too much.”

“I think if you think about it you are using alcohol as a prop or a crutch. I can give you all the most wonderful advice in the world but when you have an addiction problem it's not going to make any difference. You have been drinking since you were a teenager and by the sound of it more heavily since you got bipolar. So my advice is to stop. Give it up. It will be hard but you are doing this for you.”

“You said there were two things.”

“The second thing is with respect to the bipolar. Take your medication and only make changes in discussion with your doctor. According to what you have told me a lot of your admissions have been due to coming off the meds.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I thought the thrust of this is that I don't need meds."

"No, that's not it. You said yourself at the start there is a genetic component and there is a psychological component and it is impossible to say how much of either is at work here. But just so you have the full picture. And have everything working to your advantage. Let's put the genetic component to bed for all time so we can concentrate fully on the psychological."

Joe was silent.

"I know this feels like failure for you. You wanted a cure for your bipolar. Isn't that what you were seeking?"

Joe nodded.

"Well you don't need a cure Joe, you need peace. And you need to be able to look into your heart and find nothing wrong there."

"Peace. What must that be like?"

"Perhaps not as far out of reach as you think, provided you are prepared to make the changes necessary to allow for it."

"And how will I know if I have done enough?"

"You will know when you are satisfied with your current conditions."

"I feel like I am a very long way from that."

"You have made the most important step in embracing therapy."

#Lads go to Turkey

On Sunday Dad dropped him to the airport. He was carrying his small red suitcase. In it was five pairs of underwear, four shorts and six t-shirts. He had also packed shirts and jeans for night time attire. He said good-bye to Dad at the set down area as he really didn't want him coming to meet the lads. When he came into the check in area he could see Jonas immediately standing in the queue near the desk.

"Joe, perfect timing."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Where's Derek?"

"Oh he is just getting a trolley."

"Got your passport and tickets."

He nodded.

Derek returned and they swiftly passed through the check in. At the departure gates they presented their boarding passes and were quickly directed through the security scanners and into the departure area.

"How about a pint" said Jonas, with a big smile.

"Sure why not? I suppose we are officially on holidays."

They found a quiet corner in the departures bar and Derek went up to buy the drinks.

"Oh now you are buying rounds" said Joe, when he returned.

"Don't start" said Derek.

"Things are a bit different on hoidays" said Jonas.

"Seemingly so. Still I won't complain."

"What happened with you and Gerry? He said you had a mega bust-up?"

"Oh I really want to get into it."

"I don't know how you ever put up with him" said Jonas. "He never inspired in me the feeling of friendship."

"Look he is just so negative and such a drain on my positive energy. I really couldn't take it anymore. All he does is complain and moan and bemoan his fallen status."

"I think possibly you got too much exposure" said Derek.

"I did. You are right and now I am not going to have any exposure."

"Does that mean you can be out with the group when he is out?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I don't know. I am not going to worry about it."

"Well I don't think you should invite him out Derek" said Jonas. "That would put a stop to all of this."

"I do think you were always a little hard on Gerry, though" said Derek.

"Anyway English slappers, what do you think?" said Joe, perking up.

"Bodrum is crawling with them I hear" said Jonas.

"That's the call for boarding" said Joe, listening to the announcement over the PA system.

They downed their pints and headed for the departure gate. They queued up with all the other holidaymakers. Behind them two girls joined the queue.

"Joe look, what about it?" said Derek.

"You talk to them if you want too."

"But you are much better as an ice-breaker."

Joe turned around. "Going to Bodrum" he said to the first girl. She was medium height with long dyed blonde hair and pale skin. She was dressed in shorts, sandals and a colourful t-shirt.

"Well obviously. This is the queue for Bodrum."

"We three are going too. Maybe we will see you over there."

"You might be that lucky." And she smiled,

"Ah you are just busting my chops."

"Are you American or something?"

"No."

"You have an accent from there."

"I lived over there. This is Jonas here and Derek too. What are your names?"

"I'm Eleanor and this is Anne."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Just travelling by yourselves."

"We are very grown up girls." She smiled again.

The two groups got separated in the queue to board. "We should have paid for priority boarding."

"It's an extra five euros."

"You are such a skinflint, Derek. And now we can't even sit together."

"I just don't see the point in wasting good money. Save it for the holiday that's what I say."

When they arrived in Bodrum a bus took them and the other tourists to their apartment near the centre of town. They lugged their cases up two flights of a marble staircase in the oppressive heat of late afternoon. The apartment was cool and spacious but only a one bed. Fans from the ceiling kept the air circulating. They tossed a coin for who got the bedroom and Jonas won.

"Anyone who gets lucky can have the bedroom, unless of course that person is me."

Derek and Joe were on the pull out sofa bed. After they got unpacked they sat around for a while and then decided to go out for dinner. There was a restaurant in the ground floor of their apartment building. So they went in there. They got seated and Jonas ordered three pints from the bar.

"Ah this is the life" he laughed. "Joe you must be loosening up a bit at this stage."

"I would like to think so."

"Well organised Derek. That's what I say."

"Oh it was nothing" said Derek, secretly pleased.

"Sylvia wants to move in with me" Jonas announced. "I am not sure how I feel about it."

"Well do you want too?" said Joe.

"It's not that simple. It's the end of my freedom. I can't do anything with her there the whole time."

"And you want to do something and yet have her as a girlfriend."

"Now don't go all moral and Christian on me."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You can't have it both ways Jonas."

"Stall her. That's what I say" said Derek. "Just tell her you have to think about it."

"You are worried she will dump you if you say that" said Joe.

Two girls walked by on their way down towards the shopping arcade. Jonas waved.

"Who was that?" said Joe.

"You should know. That's the two girls from the airport."

"Oh."

"She likes you" said Derek to Jonas. "What's her name again?"

"Eleanor" said Jonas.

"That's the cute one" said Joe, giving Jonas a sullen look.

"Now, now. She has a friend too, Joe."

"I was the one who spoke to them."

After dinner they walked through the shopping district and passing a mosque they came to Bar Street.

Music blared from every one of the on street cafes. There were few punters around. Walking down the street they came across the Irish pub and went inside.

"Ah look who it is" said Jonas, "Eleanor and Anne. He went over to talk to them. After a few minutes he waved Joe and Derek to come over. Joe sat down beside Anne and Jonas kept talking to Eleanor.

"I am surprised" he apropos of nothing. "The whole place seems really quiet."

"It's just Sunday night I suppose" said Anne swirling the contents of her drink. "I saw you on the plane at the back. I thought you looked like the biggest weirdo. But now that I am talking to you I am not so sure."

"Why would say that?"

"Oh you were reading the paper and looking very grumpy or something."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well I am not normally like that."

"Don't worry you don't have to impress me. I have a boyfriend anyhow."

"Strange place to come on holidays if you are in a relationship."

"Eleanor is the single one. But I think she likes your friend. Sorry you missed the boat."

"I don't want to talk to you anymore." Joe got up and went around the table and sat with Derek. "Don't bother with that one" he whispered to Derek, "she's got a boyfriend."

"I might take a run at the other girl, myself" said Derek. He was back after five minutes. "That one is a horrible girl."

"Didn't I tell you?"

"What are we going to do now? Jonas will be talking to the other one, all night"

"I think I am going to go back to the apartment to be honest. I am not really up for a whole night of this banality."

"What are you talking about? It's fun."

"The truth is it used to be fun. And then it went on too long and then it got very old and now I just feel pathetic at my age. I am never going to meet anyone decent in a place like this. This is for teenyboppers and the like."

"Well if you want to go, go. But I am disappointed."

"Don't try guilt-tripping me. I am not interested. I am going and that's it. You can talk to that horrible girl if you want." Joe got up and left the bar.

#Next Day

He woke early to sun streaming in through the open blinds of the window. Unfamiliar voices and sounds came from the street below. He rolled over. Derek was snoring mouth open dressed only in shorts and one sock on his left foot. He sat up and then recalled where he was and last night. There was a furry taste

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

again in his mouth. He got up and walked to the bathroom. The tiled floor was cool to his naked feet. He closed the door and peed in bowl.

When he came out Derek was awake and propped himself up on one elbow.

“Ah the moralist is up I see.”

“It doesn't look like you achieved anything last night, except a hangover. How did Jonas get on?”

“Oh he struck out in the end. He was trying to get her back here but no dice.”

“What's the plan for today?”

“Well I think we should take a tour. I have a booklet here all about it.”

“Where did you get that?”

“From the guy downstairs yesterday.”

“Suits you to be in control.”

“It normally works out pretty well.”

“So you say.”

“Well do you want to do it?”

“The thing is you only want to follow your plan.” He sat down on the couch. “You are not interested in what anyone else wants.”

“You two would stay in a pub for the whole week, if you were allowed.”

There was some rustling from the bedroom and Jonas emerged complete with morning hair.

“I think you have developed a natural mullet” said Joe.

“Ah piss off.”

“My you look a bit ropey, and I thought I was bad” said Derek.

“This conversation is asinine” said Joe.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“What does that mean?” said Derek. “Is that a slag on me?”

“Do you want to go on a tour” said Joe, “Derek our director wants to know.”

“I need some breakfast first” said Jonas.

“What happened with Eleanor in the end?”

“Ah she had her rags in. She said we might meet again.”

“A date on Bar Street?”

“I know. It sounds implausible.”

After they had some breakfast they crammed into a small mini bus along with five other tourists. The seats were very tight and there wasn't a lot of leg room.

“I feel sick” said Jonas after about twenty minutes. “I am not sure I am going to survive this.”

“Ah you will survive all-right” said Derek. “Just grin and bear it. We can't go back now.”

Eventually after winding through dusty mountainous where the only signs of life was scrub and desert goats who scaled the ridges they arrived at a Roman settlement which their guide informed them cheerfully was the city of the dead. They all clambered out and followed the guide in the blistering sun of midday.

“I am going to go and sit in the bus” said Jonas.

“Ah Jonas come on” said Derek.

“No you go on with it. I don't feel well again.”

Eventually the tour was over and they all got back in the bus and headed back on the same mountainous roads to Bodrum. When they got back to the apartment Jonas insisted on going to bed for an hour and having a nap.

“Do you want to go down to the bar for a pint?” said Derek.

Joe nodded.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You are sure I am not controlling you now."

"You know what you are you the bad influence. I shouldn't be drinking at all."

"Why not?"

"I have medical condition like you don't know."

"Oh that."

"Yes that."

They walked down the marble staircase and into the bar restaurant and sat at the bar. The bartender smiled at them. "Ah English what will you have?"

"Irish" said Joe, "we are Irish."

"Ah much better."

"They ordered their drinks.

"Don't you ever want to meet someone and settle down" said Joe.

"I am sure it will happen when it's supposed to."

"Well you are thirty one."

"So are you almost."

"Yes but I am asking the question."

"I don't know Joe. You like to think you are different from us. Maybe better even. But I am not sure that really holds water."

"And what is the obsession with lad's company? Surely mixed company would be better if you can get it."

"You can fall out with a girl just as easily as a guy."

"So you keep saying."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"And why don't you initiate something if you don't like what I am doing. Why are you so passive? You used not to be."

"I guess I don't care that much anymore."

"Indifference equals submission."

"Not if the rules of the game are stacked against you. Then you need a new set of rules and a new playing field."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"You always were quite dumb, Derek."

"Fuck you, that's personal."

There was silence for a while.

Jonas came into the bar and sat down beside them. "What did I miss?"

"Not much" said Derek. "Feeling better?"

"Much better. I could murder a pint. Hair of the dog and all that. How about I buy a round?"

The others nodded. "So what is on the agenda for tonight? Did you ladies have a row or something?"

"It's nothing, right Joe" said Derek.

Joe nodded.

"Eleanor said she would be on bar street tonight."

"I don't think you should invest another evening in trying to woo her anyway I am sure Sylvia wouldn't appreciate what you were up too" said Joe.

"Ah would you ever give over. What happens in Turkey stays in Turkey! Right? Anyway do you have to be such a sanctimonious ass? As if you wouldn't do the same thing in my situation."

"That's the thing Jonas. I wouldn't. I am looking for a serious relationship."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Aren't you in the wrong place for that?" said Derek, smiling.

"The problem with these monogamous types is they expect the whole world to follow suit."

"No I don't. You think I am judging you."

"You are judging me. And I would ask you not too."

"Well I think there is plenty of time to be a boring old fart when you are older. This is our moment now and we should take full advantage" said Derek.

"I'll buy the next round" said Joe.

"Are you sure it won't affect your principles?" said Derek.

"Very funny."

"I don't know Joe you could give up drinking join the priesthood or live in a cave in Glendalough."

"You think I am the aberration. Most guys of our age are settled down. They take their holidays with their partners. These kinds of holiday are for younger people usually. Did you ever feel you might be a little old for all of this?"

"I think I do okay."

#Rest of trip

The week sped by and they made it down to the beach during the day. Joe didn't use enough sun cream and got badly burned on his back so he had to wear his t-shirt most of the time. The other two had sallow complexions and were more resistant to the sun's rays. By night they frequented bar street but never saw Eleanor or Anne again.

For their last night they sat in the bar on the ground floor of their apartment building.

"Joe you have hardly said anything the whole week" said Jonas. "I have been meaning to ask for days, is there something wrong?"

"Nothing you would understand, either of you."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Joe you are being a wet blanket. You are ruining it for everyone" said Derek.

"You will have to supply your own entertainment from now on. I am checking out."

"But you were always the life and soul of the party, that's our Joe – party man."

"Don't our Joe me. You might be able to manipulate Jonas and Gerry but it isn't going to work on me anymore."

"Oh Jesus Christ" said Jonas in disgust.

"You don't realise he is controlling you Jonas. Us three we are all depressives and Derek likes to be in control. He masquerades as a friend but in reality we are not friends, any of us and we have nothing in common whatsoever."

"What are you talking about?" said Derek.

"He will deny it until he is blue in the face but that's the reality. What's in it for Derek? He just gets the feeling of control – and feeling that he is at the centre of other people's lives."

"You are full of shit, Joe" said Derek.

"I am going for a walk" said Joe and he got up and left the bar.

The next day going back to Dublin there was minimal conversation on the flight and Dad came to pick him up from the airport. "How was your trip?" he asked."

"Don't ask" was the response.

#Niamh – Shame & Boundaries

“Ah Joe you are always right on time for our sessions” said Niamh as she came out smiling to greet him.

He followed her back into her office. The electric fire was switched off and stowed in a free corner.

Joe sat down.

“How was your trip?”

“Terrible. I didn’t get on with them at all. I mean I thought I would.”

“Maybe it was your false self that got on with them. You know the tough, independent unemotional man, macho maybe?”

“I suppose.”

“Well were you ever so honest with them as this time?”

“Never that is true. So I was being for real.”

Niamh nodded. “And that is a very hard thing to do and you were very brave to do it.”

“I don’t think I am going to see either of them again.”

“Well consider Joe that you can spend a lot of time in someone’s company and yet that person may be no good for you. They saw your public face and were only interested in and related to that face. When you started to show your true self they didn’t like it at all. I suppose you were drinking on the trip.”

“I was.”

“Just remember alcohol is a trap for you. You won’t make much progress on emotional issues while you are drinking. You need to give it up altogether in my opinion.”

“I know. I am working on that.”

“Today I want to talk about shame and boundaries, but firstly shame.”

“Why shame?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well some analysts feel that shame is at the root cause of dysfunction in families."

"You must be talking about my mother."

"Yes, her sense of shame must be very strong over all the family."

"And what does it do?"

"Well, all extravagant behaviours which are so consistent with mental illness are linked to it."

"You're talking about me."

"Some of your behaviour was extravagant in the episodes. Shame tends to direct people into destructive behaviours. When we focus on what we did wrong, we can correct it; but when we're convinced that we are wrong as a result of shame, our whole sense of self is eroded."

"What are the consequences for me though?"

"Well they say that men act out and women act in. So men become violent and women become introverted and self-hate."

"That could be true of my mother – introversion and self-hate."

"I am just putting it out there for you. You should really read up on some of these things yourself."

"I know. I intend too."

"Well if your mother's background was shameful – even in her mind – though indeed it was not her fault – then she brought her sense of shame to her own family – the family you were born into."

"I don't see how this relates to me."

"Well this is yet another mechanism by which you may have first developed your narcissistic false self."

"How so?"

"Well since emotional expression was forbidden in your family, you developed a false self that was unemotional. You had to survive at that time. However your false self was not equipped to deal with the major life events – which are of course all of an emotional nature."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Like love?"

"Yes love. How you struggled with that girl?"

"Bella. Yes Bella."

"But other emotions like you couldn't express anger. Your family environment would not permit it so your anger became an alienated part of yourself. You experienced toxic shame every time you felt angry. So you disowned or severed the emotional part of you. The most devastating aspect of this neurotic shame was the rejection of your emotional self by you by your conscious self."

"I made up a construct – that my emotional self was not me – when in truth these were always my emotions."

"Exactly – in this scenario I would say that shame was behind it. And that the maternal pressure to be unemotional existed before Tom died. When Tom died all the feelings of loss and sadness got put into your disowned and hidden emotional self. But you were already primed for it."

"I always thought that my bipolar was mainly linked to Tom's death."

"Not without good reason. But no I think the fault lines run deeper. There was a predisposition there already and interestingly your parents also hid their emotions for the most part. So it was an emotionless family environment."

"And the other thing you wanted to discuss today?"

"That would be boundaries. Again boundaries are very problematic in dysfunctional families. I just mean the way you relate to other people. They would tend to be either too rigid or too loose. Those are the normal responses in a dysfunctional family."

"And what about me?"

"Well based on your responses in the questionnaire you try to get on with everyone so therefore your boundaries would have to be too loose but as you finding out more recently you don't get on with everyone in fact the true you might be very particular about who you call friend."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I am starting to feel that way."

"Rigid boundaries would be the opposite. Not really able to make friends with anyone and too particular about friends. Not really your problem."

"Joe smiled.

"So we set our personal boundaries to protect ourselves from being manipulated by, or enmeshed with, emotionally needy others. Healthy boundaries are flexible, they allow us to get close to others when it is appropriate and to maintain our distance when we might be harmed by getting too close."

"Are you suggesting I do not have healthy boundaries?"

"Well you went on holidays with two people who you fundamentally don't have much in common with and don't really get along with. But I suspect you will not go on holidays with them again."

"Certainly not. Just getting back to shame again? Do you think that would be enough to make my mother a narcissistic mother?"

"Absolutely. But looked at another way she came from a physically abusive family background herself so I would expect she would carry with her a profound sense of shame."

"Which she put into all of us."

"Exactly."

"So what is a healthy relationship?"

"One where both people are important to each party it's an interaction where each person is able to act on his needs and experience as well as being able to respond to the experience of the other party."

"Kind of like to fully self-aware individuals."

"Exactly but in a narcissistic interaction the narcissist is the one on stage performing and the co-narcissist is providing the attention, support and approval."

"You said I was a caretaking co-narcissist last time."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Well as we have discussed your job was to provide support, praise and approval to you parents and you did. Only their experience mattered and you were wholly preoccupied with their experience. Your experience and your life didn't come into it.”

“I am feeling quite angry thinking of this.”

“How do you feel?”

“Like I want to kill them or something.”

“Well you were reliant on them – but you are not any longer. You can and should break away even though they may reject and disapprove of you if you do. Some of the things narcissistic parents demand from their children are that their children represent them in a way that fits their emotional needs. You mentioned how your father always demands you listen to his thesis – he wants you to share in the fantasy of his genius.”

“So I help him believe he is a genius by listening to him.”

“Well it doesn't sound like anyone else is. For your mother you make her feel loved and cherished and valued. These are things she should be able to do for herself but you do it for her.”

“How?”

“You do it by listening to her. By giving up your personal time when she should have her own friends. If you don't comply you are punished. You become the bad son. And she will be very dismissive.”

Joe nodded.

“For an engulfing narcissist mother like yours she does not regard you as an independent entity. She only sees you as an extension of herself. She is not aware that you exist as an independent human being.”

“How can you say that?”

“The process of individuation was thwarted for you Joe. You got stuck. You didn't individuate in the gradual manner that most people do. You have to do it all now which is very difficult. But it can be done.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You think my mother blocked my emotional development."

"She never individuated herself Joe. How can she possibly pass along those traits of how to be an individual? What I am doing here Joe is giving you factors. No one scenario is necessarily the right answer. These are just things that you have to be mindful of."

"But I don't think I want to fully withdraw from family involvement. I mean I could if I wanted to break the connection. But I am not sure that I want too."

"Well if they appreciate you then they will accept you changing things around to suit you better. But seriously Joe people do break all contact with their family. It is not unheard of. I am not advising that you do but I am encouraging to consider the possibility."

"It is something I will have to think about."

#Starts New Job

The next day he cycled his Dad's bank across the canal bridge and into Merrion Square. He was starting his first day in his new job and he didn't want to be late. He found the office and locked his bike to the railings outside. A security guard stuck his head out from the front door above.

"Hey you, you can't lock your bike there."

"I am starting work here today."

"Bring your bike around the back. I will let you in."

He went around the back and the guard opened up a shutter and he put Dad's bike into the garage space.

"Do I need to lock it?"

"No harm." said the guard. "You need to go around the front and register with reception."

"Ok."

He stood at reception watching as the girl behind the desk fielded call after call. Eventually there was a lull. "Hi, Joe O'Malley. I am here about the job."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Oh yes. They are expecting you. Here is your swipe card and some paper work, you can fill it out at your leisure and go through the back there. And Malcolm will come out and bring you in.”

Malcolm came out to meet him. “So you are the relief database analyst.”

“What’s relief?”

“Catriona is on maternity leave. Any good on SQL?”

“Oh yeah. Not too bad at all.”

“Good good. Well here is her desk I mean now your desk. Coffee and tea over there. I will come back just rushing to a meeting. Log in details are all on the printout on your chair.” And he was gone.

Joe sat in Catriona’s chair. And then it hit him like a ton of bricks. He had to get out, leave and escape from this awful place. A woman walked by his desk and smiled.

“Don’t do it Joe.” It was Tom. “You don’t need this shit anymore.”

“Just leave now” said Bella. “Just say you have a sore back, a sprained ankle, a spinal injury. Anything. They can’t stop you. It’s your life.”

“I don’t want to leave” said Joe under his breath. “I need this job.”

“Like a hole in in the head” said Bella.

Malcolm was standing at his desk with a sheaf of papers. “Everything all right.”

“Oh yes. Everything is fine. Just getting organised.”

“Did you log in?”

“I did. I saw the database.”

“Do you think you can update it?”

“Yes, I think I can.”

“Well that’s great. Exactly what we need – someone to hit the ground running.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Listen Malcolm, I am feeling a little under the weather at the moment. Would it be all right if I left early today?"

"What time were you thinking of?"

"Maybe around 4pm."

"4pm is okay. I just really want to show you around the database today and how to download the source files."

"Okay."

When he left at four he rang Executive Recruitment right away. "Donal, it's Joe O'Malley listen Donal I am sorry to say I have put my back out. It's an old injury and it has come back to haunt me. I won't be able to work on contract for you. I am sorry."

"Ok. I am sorry to hear that. How did you leave it with the client?"

"I just said I wasn't feeling well."

"Ok. I will ring them. Thanks."

He hung up. Tom and Bella were nowhere to be seen.

#Dad

He cycled back to his parents' house and brought the bike down to the basement. He knocked on the glass and Dad opened the side door. "Joe back so soon."

"Oh well I wasn't feeling well."

"Come in come in."

He came in and on the free chair. "Who's here? No one just you and me at present."

"Did you ever want to be an artist?"

"I did. I wanted to be a painter when I was younger. My Dad wouldn't have it though."

"So architecture was the compromise."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Exactly. It has some creative elements."

"Why didn't you just strike out anyway and become the artist?"

"Well then you arrived among others so it was a bit late at that stage."

"Don't say anything to anyone but I think I am an artist. Or at the very least I am becoming an artist."

"Well that sounds wonderful."

"Don't tell Mum. You know what she is like."

"Oh I do. Can you do anything for Tim?"

"You mean help him to find his artistry? Maybe. I don't know. Doesn't everyone have to find their own way?"

"Well I think I am still exploring myself."

"Even now."

"Yes even still – still under interpretation."

#Flat – Writing

"Can I hang onto your bike?"

"I suppose."

"Just until tomorrow."

"Okay."

He left Dad with his books and computer and cycled over to Rathmines. He passed a pub on Lesson Street and resisted the temptation to go inside and have a drink.

When he got to the house he locked the bike outside to the railings. The rush hour crowd was beginning to grow and more and more people were crossing the canal bridge. He unlocked the front door and let it swing shut behind. Then he opened his door and went into the flat.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

He sat on the bed as the traffic trundled by. After a while he sat in the chair and turned on his computer.

It beeped and clicked and loaded up the screen. He opened up the word processor and started to type.

After about twenty minutes he stopped and saved his work and read it back.

Next he browsed his hard drive looking over past writing he had done. There was a long and tortuous love story loosely based around his time with Bella. There was short story about Tom's death and how he felt about it. Outside the front door rattled open and then slammed shut. Footsteps creaked across the hall floor and then faded into the distance upstairs.

He put down the laptop and he looked idly out the window. Office workers trekked up Rathmines Road. Buses chock full of people, snailed up the road to far flung destinations like Tenenure, Rathfarnham and Church town. Seagulls hovered above coasting on gusts of wind that channelled down the road between dilapidated Georgian houses.

The phone rang startling him out of the silence of an empty room. It was Executive Recruitment. He let it ring and ring off.

#Aoife

He returned to his people watching and sat in the chair. Suddenly he saw her. she walking up in the direction of Rathmines. It was the same dark black hair and petite figure, on her back she had a back pack – brightly coloured and of her own design. He felt the urge to rush out and catch up with her but when he looked again she was gone, lost in a sea of faces and people. Aoife it had to be.

#Niamh – Dad

“Joe, we are approaching the end of our sessions” Niamh came out to bring him in.

He followed her in to her small office.

“You are not too cold are you? I can put on the heater.”

“No it's okay.”

“So how are you today?”

“I quit the job.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Already."

"Well I had an experience."

"Go on."

"All the psychotic friends came back when I took the job. They were urging me to quit."

"These are parts of you, emotional parts."

"I know. And when I left and rang the agency and quit. They all went away."

"And then you felt better?"

"I did. Very much better. I spoke to my father about being an artist, you know. He felt the same way, though he never became one. I don't know. I haven't told my mother yet."

"Oh that will be hard. I did want to talk to you more about father today. I know we have touched on it before."

"What do you want to cover?"

"Well eternal adolescence is normally as a result of a father being partially or completely absent."

"You are saying my father was not with it."

"Well from what you say his feet were not on the ground. This has an impact on all his sons you included. Your father should have helped you as a young man to negotiate the world and intervene to assist in that process. But it sounds like he never did."

"He was too self-obsessed really to get involved. After Tom died he didn't really get involved anymore."

"Also I want to cover his religious beliefs and how that may have affected you. You see you were a child really when Tom died and children tend to have a child's view of death and dying."

"So it differs from the adult view."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Very much. Adults can comprehend finality, children find that very difficult. They have what we call magical thinking. They believe in fairy tales and unlikely interventions. A child might think that someone had gone away when they died and that they might come back. Does any of this sound familiar?”

“That’s how I thought about Tom! I thought he would come back some day and yet I feared and dreaded that day.”

“What does this have to do with my Dad?”

“Well if he lost his mother very young he would have that childish view that rescue from death is possible. And of course he could have passed it on to you. When his son died he seemed to have become very religious, is that right.”

“Completely – he was in church every day. But I on the other hand was tormented by my religious beliefs.

“How were you tormented?”

“Well I thought death was evil, and that when people died they were taken by the devil.”

“Why the devil?”

“Well I suppose I always believed that from the youngest age.”

“So you believed that if you died the devil was going to come and get you. This then was your complicated grief. It was a child’s attempt to rationalise an event that made no sense and know no parallel. And now?”

“It is strange since we started talking. Since I have met you I am no longer afraid. I mean I know I have a long way to travel but everything we have discussed makes perfect sense.”

“I know how badly you want this Joe and also how much you need it. Really what happened to you is you developed a false self to cope with all the pain you felt. And then in your twenties this false self you created unravelled. But you were never a man who felt no pain. We all feel pain depending on our circumstances. For you your world was shattered when your brother died and you never recovered from that blow. Your parents were not much use to you. They were barely coping themselves. But they at least were more grown up.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I never stopped praying when I was mentally ill. Even though I see now it did no good."

"The problem, Joe was your personal philosophy did not equip you for the problems you faced in life. It was not strong enough. And so when an unprecedented event occurred you couldn't cope."

"But I do feel my personal philosophy is stronger now."

"I am very encouraged by how you handled your work situation and how you stood up for yourself despite your mother's wishes. Also you now question your father's coping strategy which was prayer and mass because it doesn't work for you."

"Baby steps?"

"Yes Joe baby steps but they add up in time to big steps."

"And the trigger factor?"

"Life, Joe, life is always the great teacher. Always remember life strikes at the weakest link because that is what needs improving. It is like an injured knee. Apply a little pressure and the leg will always buckle. As a young adult you could not get away from scenarios involving death and the older you got the more likely you were to encounter them. There is also the existential side of things to consider. You were confronted with these difficult questions early in life. You did your best to cope but no one knows the answer to these questions."

"I was afraid of dying."

"Lots of people fear dying, most people in fact. In our Western culture we try to stay forever young with surgery and banality. We flee from death."

"Banality?"

"I use that word with intent. Most people are fully preoccupied with the superficial all of the time."

"How do you mean?"

"It's their job, their kids, their marriage their car, what they watch on TV. It is very banal and ephemeral. You found out very young that that's how life really is."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"It's crap."

"No it's not crap and it's not devoid of meaning either but you will never find it in the superficial."

"Such as?"

"Money, career, fame, celebrity it is all very much passing. You found out very young that none of that mattered very much. But then the challenge for you was to find something that did matter despite what had happened and find reasons to live again."

"Live again?"

"Yes after that we need to be reborn and fashion a new world without the lost loved one."

"I never did that."

"Well you are starting too."

"But what meaning is there in the face of death?"

"Well everyone dies Joe. You, me everyone we know they will all die."

"Is that supposed to be uplifting?"

"Life isn't about dying. It's about living. We live in the now and in grief we stray from the now."

"But you are saying something very harsh to the grief stricken."

"But is that what God intended for us to live in grief?"

"Ah you mentioned God" Joe smiled.

"I never said I didn't believe in God but I don't believe God is a catholic."

"What religion then?"

"God has no religion, Joe. In your grief you strayed into the past and you lived there in a world of what might have been."

"He is still around."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"You mean Tom."

Joe nodded.

"This is not the end Joe of your self-discovery and because of your bipolar or PTSD your discoveries will be piecemeal."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you will again and again confront the demons of the past and in the end each time will be easier."

"And when will there be an end?"

"Maybe there will be never an end but someday you might wake up and it will all be past tense."

"You have given me hope. I don't know what else to say."

"Well hope is the most valuable gift of all. But seriously you are starting to accept the mitigating factors."

"Which are?"

"For one thing you stay on your medication and don't play around with it. For another you are resisting the temptation to drink."

"Barely."

"Well you will have to do better than that. And you are now embracing the psychological roots of your condition. Don't you feel lighter?"

"And I am discovering my artistic side."

"That is a big one for you Joe. You have chosen a pursuit out of the ordinary and out of the mundane."

"Why do you put it like that?"

"It is always harder not to run with the herd. It is easier to conform and do what is expected of you. It can take a long time for an artist to find himself."

"I was just terrified that success would never find me."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"It will when you let it, but can't very well expect to be a successful writer if you work in an office full-time."

"True. But I have so many doubts and misgivings and fears."

"But as you embrace and uncover more of the truth of your situation your confidence will grow. You are in a state of doubt because your reality does not conform to how you feel."

"But it never did."

"Hence the false self Joe – you pretended reality was a certain way which it never was. People don't live forever and there are consequences to actions always and omissions."

There was silence.

"I think we will leave it there for today."

Niamh – Dreams

“Well Joe” said Niamh opening the door of her office in response to his knock. “Come on in and sit down.”

“You did say to knock on the door.”

“Yes I did. That’s fine. I have another client who tends to run on a bit. But anyway sad to say this will be our last session.”

“Oh, I didn’t realise that.”

“Now I am not saying everything is resolved and fixed and perfect, because I know this just isn’t true. This is a stepping stone for you and from this stepping stone you still need to work hard on your mental health and improving it. Because let’s be honest here for a moment Joe, you can relapse and you can lapse into old bad habits very easily. But with time I think that is less and less likely.”

“Can I book an appointment with you again?”

“We don’t have the resources, Joe. You will have one follow up session in a few months just to see how things are going. Of course you could go privately if you wanted, but you would have to pay for that. And it wouldn’t be me.”

“What are we discussing today?”

“I wanted to talk about dreams.”

“Dreams?”

“Dreams are the super highway to the unconscious.”

“You mean our dreams are messages from our unconscious.”

“Exactly and dreams are expressed symbolically and allegorically. They tend to be stories and anecdotes and even little messages.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"But I had such terrible dreams – the whole world laid to waste and nuclear bombs falling on all the cities. I was terrified but I never knew what it meant."

"And it was a recurrent dream?"

"Yes I had it often. Do you think the episodes are waking dreams?"

"Some people believe that. But you remember that your world was destroyed when Tom died. So in the drama of your episode you had to save the world. But there was always that threat of destruction. It could be nuclear holocaust, it could be alien invasion but you had to save the world, or save humanity. That threat was always death but it assumed many identities – this was the new experience of the role play – death ended all arguments and levelled all cities."

"So the world I had to save was the world that I knew aged twelve."

"You were fighting to defend that world and prevent it from being taken away. It was complex role play but if you break it down you can see the logic to it."

"So death manifested as the devil amongst other evil characters."

"Yes and when this happened you were very much at your worst. The truth is Joe that your dreams have meaning for you and your community. It is definitely a story you should tell. Perhaps the writer in you will find a way to express it in art. I think in your madness you saw a world of superficiality, a world of delusion and illusion and you were right. That is the world according to some."

"And what do you think?"

"Ah" she smiled, "then I would be telling your story! But seriously though, every generation needs its prophets and savants and sages. You could see it also as an intergenerational thing. Our ancestors believed mental illness was demonic possession. We have come a long way since then. You in conversation with your father also subscribed to the view that to be mentally ill was to be demonically possessed. You were your own judge, jury and executioner."

"I feel I was really cut adrift."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Maybe but equipped with the resources to find your own way, and anyway there was no way out of this problem without a change in your thinking and outlook which you have now started. You can't solve problems using the same thinking that created them in the first place. So this is why I focus and you are now focusing on changing that thinking, changing that philosophy and replacing it with a more empowered life philosophy.”

“What will I become?”

“You will become who you are supposed to be and no-one can dictate that, least of all I.”

“One thing I never mentioned was my parents fought incessantly.”

“That created a lot of uncertainty for you Joe. You were placed in the impossible situation of having to choose between your two parents. Your rational side favoured your mother and that became your conscious self and your emotional side and your creative side favoured your father and that became largely your unconscious self. But in reality you never wanted to choose.”

“Of course. How could I?”

“And since divorce or separation was not an option – not usually for Catholics of that generation – the effect was ongoing, grinding conflict, biting satire and all the rest.”

“It would have been better if they split.”

“Well they were never going to if they are still together. They were co-dependent on each other. Your father relied on your mother to bail him out of financial problems and she needed always to have someone who cared about her or at least said he did – a role you picked up as the favourite son.”

“Did they ever love each other?”

“Oh yes, why not? After all aren't you the proof! But we are just talking about the emotional damage this meant for you.”

“What is love?”

“You are asking a psychologist. Find that girl you were talking about and then you will know.”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I see her only a day ago."

"Why didn't you speak to her?"

"I could have. I should have. She was gone in an instant."

"Therapy doesn't answer all questions Joe. It just leaves you free to lead a life that is better and healthier. Life can still be hard and things can go very wrong. You need to work on your empowered personal philosophy and to develop your spiritual side as much as you can. It will be a very real possession."

#Aoife

The next day he was by the window early to get a clear view. He focused his attention on the people crossing the canal bridge. He had a vague idea what time he saw her but he left plenty of time for deviations from that schedule. At about five he was just about to give up when he saw that unmistakable bob of black hair and that strong featured defiant face. He didn't think for two seconds. He grabbed his jacket and cursed the fumbling of the keys. He looked his door and was out the front door in a flash.

She had already passed the house and was making her way up the street.

"Aoife" he called. There was no response. He caught up with her and noticed she was wearing head phones. He tapped her gently on the shoulder. She stopped walking and turned around taking out the head phones.

"Joe is that you?"

"Remember me."

"I do remember. So what are you doing here?"

"I live on this road, just down there."

"You live in there?"

"I know it's a bit of kip. But at least it is my kip."

"But I thought you worked for HDME?"

"Used to..tell you what if you let me buy you a cup of coffee I will tell you all about it."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I don't know I stand by the things I said to you on our last meeting."

"And I wouldn't expect you not too. But give me an hour. I can promise you it won't be boring."

They walked together up to the coffee shop. They went inside ordered some coffee and found some comfy chairs.

"Well here I am" said Aoife, sinking into her armchair. "I can only stay a little while."

"I quit my job in HDME."

"What? Why?"

"Because it was a shit job and I hated it and you were right about jobs like that."

"But I thought you liked it."

"I pretended to like it. Part of my ego trip if you like."

"Why would anyone do that?"

"I did a lot of things I didn't like doing in fact I was the biggest phony. I am not saying I am not a phony any longer but I am definitely less of a phony."

"But what is going on with you? Are you gay or something? Is that what this is about?"

Joe laughed. "No I am not gay, I am bipolar."

"Bipolar you mean manic depressive. But you didn't just suddenly contract it."

"No I have had it for fifteen years and it's been the bane of my life and I had a false self and I lived a false life detached and shorn of emotion and you strike me as the one person I have met recently who could take that on board."

"What's a false self?"

"It's a psychological term – it's when you pretend to be something that you are not but on a very fundamental level."

There was silence. "I don't know Joe. It's a big ask. I don't want some kind of broken down man."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"There is more."

"Go on."

"Well I went to a therapist after I knew you and she laid it all out for me. All the problems I was having and she offered solutions and things that never made sense she made sense of it."

"Wait a minute were you hospitalised?"

"Quite a few times."

"And do you take medication?"

"For life."

"Oh Joe this is heavy, very heavy."

"Will I continue?"

She nodded.

"Well I got some therapy and now I feel resolved."

"There is that something about you" said Aoife. "It's very intangible and it has nothing to do with all this crap about bipolar. I don't know. I feel I can trust you. I always felt safe with you."

"I'll take that as a positive sign. Look Aoife, I know people with bipolar should be avoided. God knows I tried to avoid myself often enough. But character comes into it, right? And it should matter what has happened to someone, should it? Did I just make an argument for you to finish your coffee?"

"I think you did." She paused. "Look Joe, I know this is good for you, I know by you. But I am not a gal who likes to rush into anything. How would you like to be friends?"

"I'd like more but friends is better than nothing. That came out a bit weird."

"And no pressure Joe. Now that you are starting to make sense to me I don't want to be pressurised. Anyway I do have to go I am meeting a friend."

"Are you seeing anyone?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"No Joe. I am not seeing anyone at the moment. But you will note I don't bother to ask you the same question."

"Because it is currently an inappropriate question."

"God you are learning. Got to run. Call me and stay well."

"Did I mention I am an artist?"

"Save it for next time" And she was out the door.

#Dad

While he was sitting in the coffee shop the phone rang. It was Dad. "Are you bringing my bike back anytime soon?"

"I will if you need it."

"I need to go to the supermarket and get something for the dinner. Are you coming for dinner?"

"No. I will just drop back the bike."

"Oh. I thought you would come over. I have a nice piece of fish in mind."

"Not for me."

"A man called about the car. I told him to come around at four to look at it."

"I'm coming over for that definitely."

He walked back to the flat and unlocked the bike. Seamus came out of the house. "Is that your bike?"

Joe nodded.

"You can't lock it there."

"Where am I supposed to lock it?"

"Most people bring their bikes into the room. Anyway it wouldn't be safe overnight."

"Don't worry it's not mine. It won't be here again." Seamus went back inside.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#Ali

He cycled down the canal towards Ballsbridge. On the other side of the road he saw Derek walking up, but he didn't stop or say anything to him, just kept going. There was a man standing inspecting the car when he arrived outside his parent's house.

"Hi I'm Joe. I am the owner."

"Ah, Ali" they shook hands."

"Where are you from?" said Joe.

"Originally from Egypt."

"Do you want to sit in and take a test drive?"

"Ok." They both got in the car and Joe sat in the passenger seat. They drove down the round and took a right and headed down towards the embassy and took another right to come back. He drove back to the parents' house and parked the car.

"She is nice - a nice car. CD player included?"

"Sure" Joe nodded.

"I like it. And 65K on the clock. And the price?"

"5000 euros."

"Ok. I like it."

"Do you have cash?"

"I can get you a banker's draft."

"Bankers draft is fine. If you come back with the draft the car is yours."

Ali went off to get his banker's draft and Joe wheeled the bicycle up the driveway.

#Dad

"Ah finally there is my bike" said Dad coming to the basement door.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"I sold the car" said Joe.

"A what a pity. You liked that car."

"Can't afford it nevertheless."

"Tim and Mum are upstairs will you come up."

"Just for a little while."

#Mum & Tim

He walked up the stairs to the kitchen. Tim and Mum were sitting at the table drinking tea.

"Will you have some tea, Joe" said Mum, "I heard you quit that job you had."

"I did and happy too."

"What are you going to do now?"

"It's not what I am going to do. It's what I am becoming."

"What are you becoming then?"

"An artist of course."

"Just like Dad."

"Just like Dad."

"And are you going to live on the dole like Tim here?"

"For a while."

"And what are you going to do?"

"I am going to write and develop myself artistically."

"I am very disappointed Joe."

"I don't care. You can say whatever you want. I would be dead if I followed your advice, nearly was in fact."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Don't blame me for you taking an overdose."

"I think I am going to go. I am not interested in arguing with you."

"Don't go. Stay a while."

"Why should I? Are you going to be civil?"

"Let's talk about other things."

"What shall we talk about" said Joe, sitting down.

"I don't know – how about politics, what do you think of the election?"

"Oh I don't think it makes much material difference really. One right wing party replaces another."

"Do you want a smoke?" said Tim.

"Have you got some?"

Tim nodded. They went outside and Tim handed on to Joe and they both lit up.

"I think it great that you left the crappy job. And the other crowd didn't sound any better either."

"They weren't. I have reached a new understanding on all that."

"I don't think Mum knows how to react to you at all."

"Well good. She will darken my mind no more."

"How did she get to be such an influence?"

"I don't know. A lot of things – Tom's death for one, Dad being such a head in the clouds father, she at least being rational, any or both of those reasons could be enough."

"It was always Dad for me."

"I know. Dr Robinson said you had your feet off the ground."

"What would he know about anything?"

"Well he is a psychiatrist."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"What did he say about Dad?"

"Same really."

"And you?"

"He said when I was well I was really well and when I was not well I was a huge disaster."

"And Mum?"

"Never commented on her mental health but then it was not really necessary was it?"

"What do you mean?"

"She is the full shilling I suppose."

"Just because she is stable?"

"Well isn't that the index? In the land of the blind the one eyed man is king."

"Dad used to say that."

"Only the one eyed man is Mum. One stable person in a room with three emotionally unstable people will always have the advantage."

"So that's the glue that keeps us hovering around her."

"What else? Loath as I am to admit it, it is her part of the co-dependent contract."

He paused for a moment. "You see Tim, you need to work on and improve your own stability. That's the only way to be free. Otherwise you will always be in bondage to someone else. Dad was feet off the ground when he married our mother and her principal contribution to the relationship was to keep him grounded. But he should have known how to ground himself. Only he didn't."

They went back inside.

"You will stay for dinner" said Mum.

"No I won't I am going back to my own kippy flat and I will have beans on toast for dinner."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Oh Joe at least let me give you something to take with you.”

“I will be back for dinner but not as often as I used to be. There is a new kid in town.”

He picked up his coat from the back of the chair and threw it on.

“But what will you even do over there” she said, as a parting shot.

“You wouldn't understand.”

There was a ring on the front door. Mum went up to open it. “Joe there is someone here for you about your car.”

He went to the door. Ali was standing there. “Hi Joe, I have the draft.”

“Brilliant, can I see.”

He handed him an envelope. Joe checked the contents. “Well Ali you have just bought yourself a car?”

They shook hands. “Hold on, I'll get the keys and come out with you.”

“Oh Joe are you sure.” His mother whispered to him in the hallway.

“It's a banker's draft. It's a good as cash.”

He went out to join Ali and they walked down the driveway together.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

Section 3

C1

#Aoife

They arranged by text to meet in the same coffee shop and he got there early and picked out two comfortable chairs. It was a rainy blustery Monday and newspapers and leaves swirled down the street. A woman's umbrella turned inside out and eventually she arrived. She was dressed in plaid skirt, tights and a turtle neck. She folded her umbrella and took the seat indicated.

"Would you like a coffee?" said Joe, standing up.

"No it's okay. I can get my own". He sat down again.

Eventually she returned with her coffee. "Well how are you? The last time we meet you were transformed into a new being."

"Still am in fact. Revelling in my new found freedom."

"What was this about you becoming an artist?"

"Just what I said really. I always was a writer you know, but it was in secret."

"Why? What's so bad about it?"

"Well my mother didn't approve."

"You did strike me as a mummy's boy."

"How?"

"Women can always tell, Joe."

"There's that female intuition."

"But seriously though why don't you write about all your experiences. They sound pretty hellish. I am sure a lot of people would be interested in that."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Oh I don't know. And then everyone would know what happened to me."

"Does that really matter? And anyway who is everybody?"

"I suppose there isn't anyone anymore. I fell out with all my boozy chums."

"You did" she smiled.

"You are pleased."

"Yes Joe they were no good for you and anyway you are better than that."

"Still it makes me feel alone."

"Welcome to the adult world Joe. You are alone. I am alone. Adults face life on their own. You never really made that connection did you? That's principally what I saw in you, Joe – a nice guy – but a guy who never grew up and now you seem to be growing up all of a sudden."

"Well I need too."

"You do."

"They do say write about what you know. Well I know a lot about bipolar and psychiatric hospitals."

"Well there you go. That's settled then."

"And what about you – what are you going to do?"

"Me going to do? I am doing it already. Nothing has changed. Primary school teacher remember."

"It's coming back to me."

"Does the bipolar affect your memory?"

"A little, sometimes. Not the long term memory but the short term."

"I suppose it is a couple of months ago. Been doing any dating since then?"

"Maybe."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“Ah Joe you can't lie. That is one of your endearing traits. Well I didn't worry because I didn't think you would settle into a relationship.”

“I suppose I was all about fast love.”

“Fast love was all you had time for really.”

“Emotional intelligence?”

“Yes Joe I could tell you were a fast guy. Sure you came up and spoke to me. I never would have approached you.”

“Maybe it is not so bad being fast then?”

“It is when it comes to being in a relationship. Fast people are always searching. They are always looking for the next conquest. It is part of their emotional instability.”

“What are they searching for?”

“Just themselves – their mother probably” she laughed. “Sorry I didn't mean to offend you.”

“No that's okay. I am interested in what you think.”

“Well I suppose us women always hope that we can be the one to capture the man but if that man is already captured by his mother then his heart is not free and so he really isn't available to anyone. The other caveat I would add is that you can't change anyone. That's why I gave up on you so easily and why you now give me hope. I could see there wasn't really any point in getting involved with you. But I gave you a chance and we did talk for a whole evening. “

“I had no idea I was so dissected.”

“Well I do have a brain.”

“But so completely different to a male brain, at least the ones I know.”

“If you are referring to your former friends I am not surprised. Well your father married your mother. He was loyal wasn't he?”

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by Hugh McGovern

"He was. Yes of course."

"And now when I met you in Rathmines that time I could tell things had changed with you. It wasn't the end of change by any means but it was changing. But I did want to tell you something about my Dad."

"What?"

"He suffered from depression all his life. It was never anything serious or extreme. But I just wanted you to know that."

"Are you replicating from your experience?"

"You mean with you?" she laughed. "Early days, Joe, early days. I am his daughter."

"What was it like?"

"Oh you know he would take to his bed for weeks when it got bad. Mum had to make all kinds of excuses for him."

"What type of depression was it?"

"Well they called it unipolar. It got better when the medication got better."

"But you were put off me by finding out I was bipolar."

"Well I didn't want a crock in my life, sorry you did ask."

"That's ok. I like your candour. And now?"

"Now I don't know. Isn't this what we are here to explore. Maybe this change is lasting."

Joe nodded. "Hey why don't we take the bus up to Enniskerry this weekend and go for a walk? Oh I forget I sold my car."

"You forget I have a car."

"Would you want to drive?"

"I think I can trust you to get into my car" she laughed. "But seriously you know what I was thinking that might suit you?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

“What?”

“Have you ever thought about teaching?”

“But I don't have the qualifications.”

“But you could teach computers. You know a lot about computers don't you from your jobs.”

Joe nodded. “That is a good idea.”

#Teaching

He got out the phone book in the morning and looked up computer teaching in the directory. There were two pages of companies involved. He circled one company in particular. They were based on Merrion Square. He got out his phone and rang their number.

When the receptionist answered he said, “I am just calling about the computer teaching – do you have any vacancies at the present?”

“I am not sure” said the girl. “But you can send us in a CV. You have our address?”

“I do. I will send one in.”

“Ok.” They hung up.

#Aoife - Enniskerry

On Sunday they arranged that Aoife would come and pick him up in her car. Joe was watching from the window in his flat and saw her pull into the driveway in her small car. He locked up and came out to meet her. “So these are your wheels?”

“Something wrong?” she said as he got in.

“No nothing.”

“Gets me from A to B. That's all I care about. Which way am I going now?”

“Well best to head down the canal to Lesson Street and pick up the dual carriageway unless you fancy the more scenic route?”

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"More scenic route please."

"Well then best to take the road for Dundrum."

"So that's the house you live in?"

"Yep."

"Drug addicts have nicer places."

"I am a kind of drug addict – a legal one at that."

"What's the plan?"

"Well the weather looks good so we can go for a walk and after maybe some dinner in the pub. My shout of course."

There was silence. "Did I tell you I gave up drinking?"

"My, Joe I am impressed."

"It hasn't been easy but I haven't had anything since Turkey."

"Oh that is where you fell out with the lads."

"Basically."

"Why do you think all this bipolar happened to you? I mean it seems you got it bad. I know someone else who had bipolar and then only had it once."

"It was a combination of things – factors – mainly it was down to my parents and my brother's death."

"You must have been very close to him."

"I was."

He observed her closely in the sunlight as she drove – taking in the deep green eyes, white pale makeup set against her dark hair. She kept her eyes resolutely on the road, smiling but not glancing over at him in the passenger seat.

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by Hugh McGovern

“Do you think we just copy our parents though?” said Aoife. “That’s what I always wondered. I mean the times are different but what else.”

“I still think we can be ourselves regardless. Maybe it is easier for most people just to conform to the expectations of their parents, or become their parents without realising it.”

“I would certainly like to be my own woman” said Aoife.

“After rebellion comes conformity but it doesn’t have too.”

They arrived in Enniskerry. “Where shall I park?” she asked.”

“Anywhere around here is good. Look there is a space.”

They got out of the car. “When I think about it my father was always very non-conformist?”

“He was a rebel?”

Joe nodded.

“Where are we going?”

“I thought we would walk along the road towards the waterfall.”

“Isn’t that very busy with cars?”

He reached for her hand as they walked. She didn’t object.

“I don’t know Joe. I think you are an incurable romantic. It must be your mother’s influence.”

“No, I think I will take that one. But I was lost in fast love.”

“Don’t remind me, you shite” she nearly pulled her hand away. “And what will become of us do you suppose?”

“Who you and me?”

“You, me everybody.”

“All humans?”

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"I suppose."

"Well we are around in some numbers at the moment. I don't know. Perhaps we will go on to new things and explore."

"You don't sound so sure."

"Because nothing is certain that's why. There is change for sure but I am not so sure there is improvement."

"You mean war."

"Sure war, environment destruction. There are a lot of possibilities."

"I can't walk on this road, Joe. There is too much traffic."

"Let's go back to the village then and have a coffee."

She nodded.

They found a quiet corner in the pub. Aoife had a glass of wine and Joe had a coffee. "Do you think you will keep it up?" she asked.

"With the booze?"

She nodded.

"Have to. Part of my plan for the future."

"I have never dated someone who didn't drink."

"First for everything."

"Joe you really have found your mojo. I think it is quite beautiful."

"It was a long time coming but here it is."

"My first impression of you was you were projecting positivity – trying to convince yourself."

"The false self."

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"Now you feel much more authentic."

There was silence for a while.

"I get depressed sometimes – I mean nothing mega – but I can get down from now and again. I don't normally admit that" she said.

When they left the pub he put his arm around and she didn't mind. "You will be patient with me Joe. I can be slow to warm up to someone."

#Tom's Grave

Two weeks later at the weekend they drove out in Aoife's little car to the cemetery and they parked in the car park.

"I know where it is" said Joe, "but I only know by landmarks."

She followed behind passing by decrepit tomb stones and overgrown graves. The pathway between the graves was pitted and potholed. "Is it much further?" she asked. She carried a small bouquet of roses.

"Not far now" said Joe. And suddenly he stopped and saw it. "Tom O'Malley Died 1979" – read the inscription. Aoife came up behind him. Her hand sought his.

"So this is it. How does it feel?"

"I don't know. I have been here so many times hoping for a reaction from myself."

"Do you want to put the flowers on the grave? Maybe we should say a prayer or something."

"Do you pray?"

"Isn't there a time for praying?"

"Ok. You start."

"God, may Tom O'Malley rest in peace Amen."

"Amen." He arranged the flowers on the grave. "Look someone has been here." He pointed at a decayed bunch of roses. "It must be Mum."

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by Hugh McGovern

"I'll put them in the bin" said Aoife.

#Aoife - Dinner

They walked back in silence to the car. When they got in Aoife said "what are you doing for dinner?"

"No plans."

"Do you want to come over? I can cook for both of us."

"Okay."

They drove from the cemetery across the city and crossed the Liffey. At Christchurch she took a right and drove on down past the hospital. She parked on the street outside an imposing group of apartments in Kilmainham. He followed her into the lobby where she checked her post and then opened the front door. Inside the hallway was warm and heated. Her apartment was the first door on the left and she opened the door and they both went inside. She turned on the lights. The room was a large open plan with a couch and two chairs. On the right was a small circular table with four chairs.

"Can I help at all?"

"No you are fine just sit down and I will get started."

When she had all the pots on the hob and everything cooking she came over and sat beside him. "I am going to have some wine. I know you don't want any."

"So how does someone like you end up being single?"

"I suppose I could ask you the same question but since I already know the answer and I suppose I was going out with someone but it didn't work out. He went off to Australia and I didn't want to go. Too attached to my parents I suppose. So this is my compromise – a one bed in Kilmainham. Still think I am a role model."

"Well not everyone wants to emigrate to Australia."

"But the truth is I did but I was scared. Scared of being that far away."

"And then?"

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“No then really. A few flings here and there. Nothing to really brag about. I was kind of giving up on guys really. I have been single for some time you so.”

“So have I. Well I never really had a serious girlfriend since I was in the states.”

“What happened to her?”

“She just I don't know, we broke up and got back together a million times. It was my fault really. She didn't want to break up. I had a romantic vision of a goddess fixated in my head.”

“Something like your mother?”

“I think so. I would endure any amount of rejection for a pretty face. And girls who were actually interested in me I gave short shrift too. A bad situation – bad for them and bad for me.”

“Well you are doing very much better in my book, Joe.”

She put her smaller hand inside his. “Oh my God the dinner.”

She rescued the chicken that was frying on the hob then they sat at the small table and she put out two place settings.

After dinner they sat back on the couch and he put his arm around her and next they were kissing and it all happened very fast.

“Do you want to stay the night?” she asked.

Joe nodded.

“Just remember I am not promising anything.”

After they cleared up the dishes she brought him into the bedroom and he undressed but kept his underwear on. Aoife undressed down to her underwear too. Then she turned out the lights in the main room, locked the front door and came back in.

“You're staring at my boobs” she said.

“Sorry. I didn't mean too.”

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by Hugh McGovern

"That's okay. I don't mind."

They snuggled up in the bed together.

"If you want too I don't mind. I trust you, Joe. Would you like too?"

"If that's okay."

"It's okay. I am an adult. And so are you. Do you have a condom?"

He nodded.

"Well put it on then."

He rummaged in his jeans pocket and turned around. "Now you are staring at my willy!"

"Fair is fair."

He put on the condom and slipped down her underwear. When he entered her she gave out a low gasp and he thrust back and forth gently waiting for her to reach her climax before he had is. When he deflated he lay down beside her and she placed her head on his shoulder.

#Mum, Dad, Tim & Aoife

A week later Aoife parked her little car outside the parents place and Joe and Aoife got out. "Are you sure this is a good idea?" said Aoife, looking up at the house, biting her lip.

"Don't worry they will be on their best behaviour once you are here."

They climbed the steps and Joe rung the front door. Mum answered.

"Ah hello. You must be Aoife, how are you?"

"I am not too bad, Mrs O'Malley."

"Call me Patricia. Come in both of you. I will take your coats."

"This is a lovely house, Patricia."

"Thank you."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

They went down to the kitchen. Tim was sitting at the table already. "This is my brother Tim, Aoife."

"Hello" said Aoife.

"Hi" said Tim.

"Dad, come up for your dinner. The visitors are here" Mum shouted from the top of the stairs. A few moments later Dad appeared. "Ah Aoife how are you?"

"Not too bad."

"Won't you both sit at the table?"

They sat down.

"I'll open a bottle of wine" said Dad.

"So Aoife you are a teacher is that right?" said Mum.

"Just primary."

"Never thought to go on to secondary?"

"No never did. Happy where I am at, I suppose."

"I suppose not everyone has the aptitude for secondary. Joe's doing some teaching I hear. Bit late in the day but there it is."

"Oh I don't think so" said Aoife. "Once you find something you like you hang onto it, don't you Joe?"

"Exactly. Don't mind my mother she has an uncanny knack of saying the wrong thing."

"You can count on it" said Tim.

"So Tim what do you do" said Aoife.

"I am in between jobs" said Tim.

"He has been in between for as long as anyone can remember" said Mum.

"Jesus, Mum. Lay off there is a visitor."

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"No secrets in the family."

"So who's for wine? Joe how about you?"

"No really no. "

"Ah go on you know you want to."

"Joe doesn't drink Mr O'Malley but I will take a glass" said Aoife.

"Joe doesn't drink. Since when?"

"Joe I think that is very good of you" said Mum, "if it is true. I hardly believe it. Believe it when I see it that's what the Americans say."

"What about you Tim?"

"Have you got any beer?"

"I might have something left from Christmas."

"So Aoife what do your parents do" said Dad sitting down.

"Both teachers" said Aoife.

"Teaching yes – a noble profession, better than growing vegetables, isn't that right Mum" said Dad.

"Dad's family were teachers. They had airs and graces as a result. Permeated the whole family. They styled themselves as country gentry, if such a thing exists in Ireland."

"Oh I see" said Aoife, "I think."

"Got any sisters?" said Tim.

"I do actually."

"That's just Tim trying to be funny."

"What is funny about that?" said Aoife.

"Now dinner is served" said Mum coming to the table with two plates at a time.

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

#Afterwards

"I think that went okay" said Aoife starting the engine.

"That's because you were a saint. I really regretted putting you through that."

"Oh well I was curious anyhow."

"What did you think?"

"Bonkers. No wonder you were too."

"Let's get out of here."

"Joe I have been thinking why don't you move in with me? That place in Rathmines is a kip. It is not even healthy to be living there. And it is a waste of money, since you are over in mine every second night, anyhow. What do you think?"

"Are you asking me to live with you? I have never lived with anyone before."

"Well?"

"I accept. When should I move in?"

"Whenever you like."

#Niamh – Final

"Well Joe it is good to see your smiling face."

"Well I am happy does it show."

"Come in and take your usual seat. So how have you been?"

"Well I caught up with that girl I mentioned."

"Aoife?"

"That's her. And things are going rather well. In fact we are moving in together."

"That's great. I am delighted to hear that. So how are things with your parents now?"

Joe O'Malley
by Hugh McGovern

"Well they don't bother me as much. In fact I don't really think about them that much. I have Aoife now and I looking for teaching work."

"Teaching – that's a bit different to corporate employee."

"Very different."

"And Aoife?"

"Oh she's great. She is accepting of my condition – has to be really. She is a very resourceful woman. Of course my parents still annoy me – they are very annoying people – but somehow – that intangible I sought from them is gone. They don't have any answers for me anymore. I am not reliant on their sense of direction."

"So what's the plan?"

"I am thinking of writing a book about my experiences. I am not sure it will come off or indeed be easy to write but I feel that I need to tell it. It is bursting to get out of me. After that nothing major – just keep writing a few more books, teach and take it as it comes. The drama of discovery has left. I found Joe O'Malley in the end. It took a while but it was worth it."

"What's he like?"

"Well you are looking at him – what you see is what you get."

"Joe I am so delighted for you. I don't expect I will see you again but best of luck with everything."

"Likewise."

They shook hands and he left her office closing the door behind him.

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