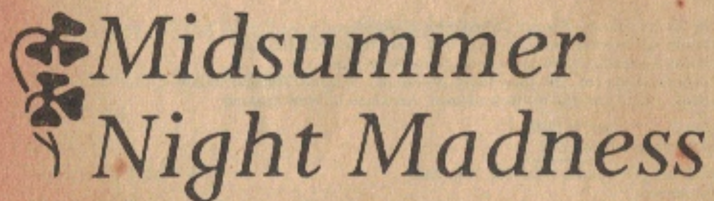
Sean O'Faolain



Midsummer Night Madness

Collected Short Stories

Vol. 1

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fallen now and nothing showed beyond but the eyes of green or red on mast and poop. The mountains had vanished. The far woods were gone. They barely heard the lapping of the bay. As by one thought they moved quietly out through the cheering crowd into the darkness. But, shyly, they did not go back directly to their hotel. Wrapped in their own silence and the silence of the night they wandered about the quays or in and out among the lanes as if prolonging the night to the very last moment. The meeting was over before they returned to their hotel, and the lights of the houses in that street, and doubtless of every street in the town, were gone up to the second storey. When they entered their room they saw that the pale light of the gas lamp outside the window fell on the high old-fashioned ceiling and from there glimmered down on the wide, carved bridal-bed, and needing no other light they used none. Across the street was another row of sleeping houses, and beyond that the bay, widening to the ocean, and when they stood without stirring they could hear the low boom of the waves on the cliffs and across the bar. As they undressed the faint hum of a motor rose in the distance and approached along the street.

'Bernard,' she whispered.

Over his shoulder he could see her pale form in the dim light, but where he stood by the window with one hand raised to the blind his eyes fell on the passing car. He saw the white hair of their orator-friend, the old bachelor, the patriot, driving out of the town into the country and the dark night. The hedges would race past him; the rabbits skip before his headlights on the road; the moths in the cool wind would fly round his flushed face and his trembling hands. But that wind would not for many miles cool the passion in him to which he had given his life.

'Bernard,' she whispered again, and her voice trembled a little.

He drew the blind down slowly, the lamp shadowing the framework of the window on it, and slowly he turned to her where she smiled to him in the dark.

A Broken World

I

'That's a lonely place!' said the priest suddenly. He was rubbing the carriage-window with his little finger. He pointed with the stem of his pipe through the window, and the flutter of snow and the blown steam of the engine, at the mountainy farm to his right. He might have been talking to himself, for he did not stir his head or remove his elbow from its rest. He was a skeleton of a man, and the veins of his temples bulged out like nerves. Peering I could barely see, below the pine-forest of 'The Department,' through the fog of the storm, a lone chapel and a farm-house, now a tangle of black and white. Although it was the middle of the day a light shone yellow in a byre. Then the buildings swivelled and were left behind. The land was blinding.

'Aye!' I said. 'It is lonely. But,' I said easily, 'sure every parish is a world in itself.'

He grunted and pulled at his cherrywood pipe and kept looking out the window at the whirling dots of white.

Then, without looking at me – looking down at the flap of my trousers, instead – he leaned forward, one bony hand gripping his left knee, and his elbow resting on the other knee so that he might still hold and smoke his pipe in comfort. I could see that he spoke less for the sake of conversation than from a desire to instruct me, for he seemed to get no other pleasure out of his talk.

'That used to be a credo with me, too,' he said, 'that every parish is a world in itself. But where there is no moral unity there is no life.'

'Moral unity?'

There were ten notes in the wind, boom and whistle and groan and sigh. Listening to them I hardly heard him. The snow had stopped.

'Yes.' He was cock-assuredly positive. 'Life is a moral unity with a common thought. The *compositum* of one's being, emerg-

ing from the Divine Essence, which is harmony itself, cannot, unless it abdicates its own intelligence and lives in chaos, that is to say, in sin, be in disunity with itself. Since society, however, is an entity composed of many members, life becomes a moral unity with a common thought. You can see that?'

'Yes.'

He went on, while I wondered if he was a professor in some seminary trying out something he had been studying. He enunciated his ideas with indrawn lips. That gave him a hellish, pedagogic look. The glare outside turned him into marble.

'In places like that – you have a broken world, and there is no unity.'

In spite of this abstract way of talk the next thing he said showed me that he was not a professor.

'Let me give you an example of what life is like in those isolated places,' jerking his head. 'When I was ordained my first parish was a lonely parish in the County Wicklow. From my presbytery window I could see the entire coast, a long straight beach, miles to the north, miles to the south, with a headland at each end stuck out into the sea. By the sea it is marsh. Then comes the first wave of high land around villages like Newtownmountkennedy. The land isn't bad on those hills, though it isn't what you would call really good land. They grow good turnips and potatoes and mangolds; the greens are not bad; but they cannot grow wheat. You need a good marl bottom for wheat. I was a young man then, and keen, so I studied these questions.'

(Whatever else you were, I said to myself, you must have been a bloody bore.)

'Look!' he said, pointing through the opposite window.

A vast, white plain, level as a sea, mapped with black hedgerows, all diminishing in size, spread away and away, maybe twenty miles, to a much lower range of mountains.

'My parish was in the same relation to that good land as these mountains here (nodding over his shoulder) in relation to that plain. That is to say, it was mountain bog, reclaimed by much labour, but always badly drained. Last of all, beyond me, was the utterly, miserably,' – his voice was almost oratorical here – 'wretched moor. Miles and miles of it on the plateau of the mountain-tops. The native tribes lived as freebooters up there as late as the end

of the eighteenth century. It was wooded then, and untouched by any road. Then, in Ninety-eight, two so-called Military Roads cut it across and across like a scissors. They were fifty miles long, and straight as rulers. By the way,' he asked suddenly, catching me looking idly out through the window, 'were you ever in County Wicklow?'

'Oh, no, father,' I replied, as suddenly. I forced myself to attend. Just then my eyes caught the eye of an old farmer seated opposite me in the carriage; he was midway on the same seat as the priest, and, so, near enough to hear everything. A pool of water had gathered around each boot. Spits starred the dry patch between. Seeing me look at him he took from his mouth, with his entire fist, a bit of a cigarette he was smoking, and winked at me. Then he put back the cigarette and contemplated the priest's face with an air of childlike wonderment. At that wink I began to listen more carefully. Evidently my priest was a local 'character.'

'They are remarkable roads,' went on the priest. 'Well, the people of my parish were all poor. The interesting thing about them is that there were two sets of names – either the old tribal names, like O'Toole or O'Byrne or Doyle, or foreign names like Ryder, Nash, Greene, Pugh, Spink, Empie, Gascon, Latour.'

A little smile took the corners of his mouth as he said those names; but he never raised his eyes.

'The Greenes and Ryders and Pughs, and the rest of them, were soldiers who long ago trickled down into the houses of the poor, intermarried there, and became poor themselves as a result. However, they brought the people respect for law and order. Or; if you like, they knocked the last bit of rebel spirit out of them.'

'Interesting!' I said, politely. I was beginning to enjoy the joke, for I could see the old farmer getting cross, and at the end of that last bit he had spat out his butt-end of cigarette.

'But the middle land, the good land, remained in the possession of the big people who never intermarried. When I went there to take over my duties I looked up the history of those wealthy people in *Debrett* and *Who's Who*, and *Burke's Landed Gentry*.'

His palm became an imaginary book, and with his pipe-stem he followed the lines and pretended to read:

' "Lord Blank, family name of Baron Blank. Fifth baron. Created in eighteen hundred and one. Lieutenant of the Seventeenth Hussars.

Married Dorothy, oldest daughter of, let's say something like James Whipple Teaman of Grange House, Dilworth, Dorsetshire, you know the kind of thing. Succeeded his father in nineteen-eighteen. Educated at Eton and Sandhurst. Address, Grosvenor Square, London. Club – Travellers' or Brooks's. Recreations? Oh, as usual, hunting, shooting, fishing, racquets, riding." '

Again the thin smile. The farmer was gob-open.

'My parishioners were their stable-boys, gate-lodge keepers, woodmen, beaters, farmhands, lady's-maids, etcetera. *They* were always intermarrying. *Their* bits of farms, reclaimed from the furze, were always being divided. I've seen people live on a bit of land about twice the size of this carriage.'

The farmer leaned forward, listening now with great interest. Our three heads nodded with the jolt of the train.

'Then there was emigration. In the five years I spent there I had one solitary marriage. I had sixty schoolchildren on roll when I went there. I had thirty-five when I left. Last year I heard they were reduced to eleven, and five of those were all one family. No wonder the county is full of ruins. You come on them in scores on scores, with, maybe, a tree growing out of the hearth, and the marks of the ridges they ploughed, still there, now smooth with grass.'

'Begobs, then, they're here too, father,' said the old farmer. The priest nodded sideways to him and proceeded:

'I liked the people. They were clean; hard-working; respectful. Too respectful – tipping their hats to everybody. They were always making what we call "the poor mouth" – a mendicant habit of centuries, I suppose. They gave me no trouble, except for two things. They had a habit of writing anonymous letters, and I couldn't stop it. They were at it all the time. They wrote them to one another.'

He paused. I prompted him. The farmer leaned closer and closer.

'The other thing?' I asked.

'The other thing?' he said irritably to his pipe-bowl. 'In every one of these cabins they earned money by taking in boarded-out children – children unwanted by poor parents, or simply illegitimates. There was hardly a cottage without one, two, or three of these stranger children. They were well looked after, and the people often grew so fond of them they wouldn't part with them; and, I suppose, that was a nice trait too. But the point is that the

only fresh blood coming into the county was . . . Well . . . a curious county, as you can see, and the morals were a bit curious too. However, that's enough about them.'

And he had at least enough sense to go no further with that.

'Well, there you are. That was my parish, and you can't say it was a world in itself. It was too incomplete. Too many things left out. The human dignity of men is always impaired when, like that, they're depending on other people who can make or break them. They weren't men. They were servants. That's the whole of it.'

'But did that make their lives lonely? You said they were lonely?'

For the first time he looked up at me. The veins on his temples, swollen from holding his head down, throbbed with relief.

'I didn't say *they* were lonely.'

His eyes wavered sideways to the farmer. I easily followed him over the hiatus when he jumped to –

'One day, after three years without stepping out of the parish, I decided to see if the neighbouring parish was any better.' (When I heard the personal note come into his voice I wished the farmer was not there; as it was he kept to his cold, factual description.)

'Do you know, the contrast was amazing! When I climbed down to the valley and the good land! And it was the trees that made me realize it. Beeches instead of pines. Great, old beeches with roots like claws on the double ditches. The farm-houses, too. They were large and prosperous with everything you might expect to find in a sturdy English farm – barns, ducks in the pond, thick-packed granaries, airy lofts, a pigeon-croft, a seat under an arbour, fruit-gardens.

'All that was good. But it was those beeches that really impressed me. They were so clean and old, not like the quick-growing pines of the mountains – dirty trees that scatter their needles into the shoots of the houses and block them up three times every winter.'

'Oh, they're buggurs, father!' agreed the farmer earnestly.

'I climbed lower still and came to the gates of the houses where the gentry used to live.'

'Used to?'

'Used to. I should have expected it, but somehow it hadn't occurred to me. It's funny how we all forget how time passes. But there they were – the gate-posts falling. The lodges boarded up.

Notices, *For Sale.* Fifteen years of grass on the avenues. You see? "Owns ten thousand acres in Ireland. Address, Grosvenor Square, London." '

The pipe-stem travelled across the palm.

'I met an old man who took me down one of those avenues to see the ruins of a big house burned out during the troubled times. It was a lovely spring evening. The sky was like milk. The rooks were cawing about the roofless chimneys just like the flakes of soot come to life again. I spotted a queer little building at the end of a cypress avenue. The old man called it "the oftaphone." He meant octagon. It was a kind of peristyle. He said, "The Lord" – just like that, "The Lord used to have tea-parties and dances there long ago." I went into it and it had a magnificent view, a powerful view, across the valley over at my mountainy parish, yes, and beyond it to the ridges of the mountains, and even beyond that again to the very moors behind with their last little flecks and drifts of snow. They could have sat there and drunk their tea and seen my people – the poor Ryders, and Greenes, and O'Tooles, making little brown lines in the far-off fields in the ploughing time.'

'They could! Oh, begobs, father, so they could!' – and a mighty spit.

'Or at night, of summer evenings, they could have sipped their brandy and coffee and seen the little yellow lights of our cabin windows, and said, "How pretty it is!" '

'Begobs, yes! That's true!'

If anyone entered the carriage then he would have taken us for three friends, we were huddled together so eagerly. The priest went on:

' "They must have had good times here, once?" I said to the man who was with me. "The best, father!" says he. "Oh, the best out. The best while they lasted. And there were never any times like the old times. But they're scattered now, father," says he, "to the four winds. And they'll never come back." "Who owns the land, now?" I asked him. "They own it always, but who wants it?" says he. "The people here don't want it. They'd rather live in the towns and cities and work for wages." '

'That's right,' said the farmer, as if we were really discussing his own county. 'Begobs, you're talking sense now, father!'

' "The land was kept from them too long," says he. "And now

they have lost the knack of it. I have two grown sons of my own," says he, "and they're after joining the British Army." '

'Begobs, yes!' said the farmer, leaning to catch every word; but the priest stopped and leaned back.

The white, cold fields were singing by us. The cabins so still they might be rocks clung to the earth. The priest was looking at them and we were all looking at them, and at the flooded and frozen pools of water divided by the hedgerows. By his talk he had evoked a most powerful sense of comradeship in that carriage, whether he meant to or not: we felt one. Then, as quickly, he proceeded to break it.

'Well!' I asked eagerly. 'Well?'

'Why, that's all!' said the priest. 'I came back from my voyage of exploration, much refreshed. Much improved in spirits. You see, I had extended the pattern of life of my own poor parish. I saw how, how – I mean, how the whole thing had worked, hung together, made up a real unity. It was like putting two halves of a broken plate together. As I walked up another one of those hill-roads on my way home I passed more prosperous houses – smaller houses this time, what you would call private houses. They had neat, green curtains with fine, polished brassware inside on the polished mahogany. And through another window three aluminium hot-water bottles shining on a dark hall-table, signs of comfort as you might say . . . Yes! I had completed the pattern. That parish and my parish made up a world, as neither did by itself, rich and poor, culture and . . .'

'But,' I cried angrily, 'where's your moral unity? Your common thought? It's absurd.'

'Oh, yes! I realized that even before I got home. I just tell you the thing as it happened. But they in their octagon and we in our lighted cabins, I mean to say, it was two halves of a world . . .'

The farmer was looking at us both with dull, stupid eyes. He had lost the thread of the talk.

'Yes, I suppose so,' I agreed, just as lightly. 'But now that the gentry are gone, won't the people, the mountainy people, and so on, begin to make a complete world of their own?'

He shook his head. The farmer listened again.

'I refuse to believe they won't,' I said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'And is there no possible solution, then?' I asked him.

He was looking out of the window, his poll to the farmer. He rolled up his eyes under his brows – a warning look, and faintly indicated the man behind him. Then he actually began to laugh, a cold, cackling laugh, an extraordinary, inhuman, kind of laugh that ended in a noise like a little groan.

The train slowed up, and we were in a station, and he was gathering his bags. He got out without even saying 'Good day' to us, and his face was coldly composed. A manservant, touching his cap, took the bags. The station-master touched his cap to him. The porter receiving the tickets touched his cap to him. The jarvey, who was waiting for him, bowed as he received the bags from the manservant. Black, tall, thin, and straight as a lamp-post, he left the lit, snow-bright station with every down-looking lounger there bowing and hat-touching as he passed. When I turned away the train was moving out, and the old farmer, in his own place, had lit another cigarette.

2

'Do you know his reverence?' I asked – as irritated as somebody from whom a book has been snatched before the end of the tale.

'Oh, aye!' said the old man, and he added, without interest: 'He's silenced.'

There was a touch of dread in that word, 'silenced.'

'What did they silence him for?'

'Politics.'

'Oh? He was too extreme?'

'Aye!' Still without interest.

'A clever man?'

No answer. His mind had gone to sleep. I looked at him in annoyance.

'What kind of ideas had he? I mean, what did he want?'

'Begobs, I dunno.'

Then he added, as if it was a matter of no importance –

'He wanted the people to have the land.'

'What land?'

'The land. The gentry's land.'

I leaned to him eagerly –

'But isn't that what ye want? Isn't that what the whole trouble is? Isn't that what the Government wants?'

'Aye. I suppose it is, you know? But he wanted it to be a sudden business.'

'They didn't silence him for that?'

'Maybe they didn't. Ach, he's odd. Sure, he took ten or twenty foolish young lads and, one night, he thrun down the walls of Lord Milltown's estate. He started some sort of a League, too. He's odd. God help him.'

'What did he want to do with this League of his?'

'I dunno. It was some kind of faddy business. He wanted halls . . . and . . . some kind of halls he wanted. Halls. I dunno what he wanted 'em for. Ah, he's a decent poor man.'

I tried another line.

'I suppose it's true for his reverence – ye have a hard time of it up here on the poor land?'

Puffing at his ease he was looking idly at the passing fields. A woman and two small boys, crushed into the doorway of a cabin, waved to us. He looked, and when they were gone his eyes were still fixed, seeing whatever passed beneath them with equal interest – or disinterest?

He tilted his head, but he said nothing. I made one last effort to shake him from his lethargic mood – possibly, most likely indeed, the mood in which he spent the greater part of his life.

'You know,' I said, warmly, 'I think I'd die in this lonely place. That priest is right!'

He looked at it, and scratched his ear, and said:

'Aye!' And then, suddenly, he added a second 'Aye!' – and then, when I thought he was finished, he actually added – 'I suppose 'tis quiet,' and relapsed into indifference.

Angrily I burst out at him –

'But damn it all, don't you mind, or is it that ye don't want to stir, ye're too damn lazy to stir?'

He took the butt-end from his mouth, and he looked at me, and by the way he looked up and down at me, I was hoping he would say something bitter and strong. But his stare was childish, and the eyes wavered, as if he was very tired. He just dropped one last, vast spit on the wet floor, snuggled into his corner, and went to sleep under his hat.

In his sleep he was as motionless as a rock; but you could not say he was 'like a rock' because he was like nothing on earth but himself, everything about him was so personal to him. Unless, because he was so much a random accumulation of work and season and all that belongs to the first human that was ever made, I chose to say, as I glared at him snoring in his corner, that time and nature had engendered something no more human than a rock. So I thought, as the dusk drew down, and the wind moaned in many keys, and the snow blew horizontally and stuck to the edges of the window. It was as if we two might have been jolting into a blank beyond either sleep or night, and I wanted to get up and kick him. I felt that if I did he would only moo.

We halted at several stations, with their one or two silent white-shouldered figures. He slept on. I was just wondering if I should wake him when suddenly, at a station, identical with every other station, as if some animal magnetism in the place stirred him, he rose and stumbled out. He did not speak. He did not raise his head to see if it was his station. He saluted no one. Anyway, there was no one there but a muffled porter who silently waved a lantern over his head. As we moved off he was trudging in the middle of a road that glimmered with its own strange afterglow, passing between a row of pines whose sheltered sides were red and raw as with the cold. He was exactly like an old black mongrel loping home.

3

So I was left with the pool of water on the floor, dark under the carriage-light, and the snow crumbling into the corners of the windows outside, and beyond that only the light leaping and falling along the hedges. And in another two hours or so, when I got out, the carriage would be racing along, empty, through the night – three bits of separateness, the priest and the farmer and myself, flung off it like bits of the *disjecta membra* of the wheel of life.

For those two hours I tried to refute the talk of that priest, thinking that he had merely spoken out of the snowy landscape, which above all other conditions of nature is so powerful to make life seem lonely, and all work futile, and time itself a form of decay; or thinking that, had it been the green-dripping spring or the hot summer, we might all have shown different and more happy sides of our worlds; or thinking that the thin cheeks and the throbbing nerve of the man were nothing but the sign of twenty years of self-corrosion, and that even when he was a young man in his first parish, his heart must have been so bitter and vain that, like a leech, it began to destroy everything to preserve itself; or thinking that because of it he had joined us for a few moments until we seemed to crouch over a fire, and then deliberately scattered us and left us with his pox. But, though that might be all true, I could not deny to the wintry moment its own truth, and that under that white shroud, covering the whole of Ireland, life was lying broken and hardly breathing. His impress remained even when the train swished slowly into the city, where the arc-lamps sizzled in the snow, and the sounds were muffled, and through every street a sharp, pure wind blew down from the Wicklow hills. Once their distant convex gleamed, far away, beyond the vista of a street. There were few people abroad, and as they walked against the wind with huddled backs they, too, seemed to be shrouding something within them that slept, and barely palpitated, and was hurt by the cold. What image, I wondered, as I passed through them, could warm them as the Wicklow priest had warmed us for a few minutes in that carriage now chugging around the edge of the city to the sea? What image of life that would fire and fuse us all, what music bursting like the spring, what triumph, what engendering love, so that those breasting mountains that now looked cold should appear brilliant and gay, the white land that seemed to sleep should appear to smile, and these people who huddled over the embers of their lives should become like the peasants who held the hand of Faust with their singing one Easter morning? Perhaps it was foolish to wish for such an image – so magnificent that it would have the power of a resurrection call? Yet, there are times, as when we hear the percussion of some great music, or when we feel the shrivelling effect of the cold wind and snow, that leave us no other choice but to live splendidly, or gather up at least enough grace for a quick remove.

The train could be heard easily, in the rarefied air, chugging across the bridges that span the city, bearing with it an empty coach. In the morning, Ireland, under its snow, would be silent as a perpetual dawn.

fire, learning off bits from his favourite book, *Who's Who*, or he sits gazing into the dancing devils of flame. The sky outside is lurid with the lights of Dublin. And in the little curtained window, the pigeon looks with two glassy eyes out over the damp market gardens, and the heavy, odorous night-fields, at the bloody sky.

Passion

Dearest Love. When will we meet again? It is only a few hours since I left you, and I am already full of melancholy thoughts.

Why on earth did I think tonight, after I had left you, of Conny Hourigan, and of that soft, wet night when the lights of Cork down in the valley were weeping through the haze, and everything as still as before dawn; and not a sound but the jolt of an old tram over the worn points, or the drip of the rain on the old tin shed in the backyard?

I think it was because I went to my window and saw the far away lights of Dublin, and at once I was again listening to that silence of twenty years ago drumming in my ears. I was waiting for my aunt to play the next card, and looking across the cosy eye of the fire in the kitchen-range at Conny breathing contentedly over his evening paper and stroking his Moses beard.

He suddenly lifts his eyes to look over his spectacles at the tiny window, and he says – 'Them bastards of slugs will be out in their marching orders tonight.' And he is just about to heave himself up and go out to his beloved patch of a garden to kill some of them when we hear a ratatatat at the hall-door. With a look over his glasses at my auntie, and a look at the clock, and a 'Who on earth can that be?' he goes shuffling out along the little hall. My aunt suspends her card. We turn our heads when we hear the voices rising sharply and Conny shouting, 'No!' And again, 'I tell you, no!' – and then more loud voices and the slam of the door.

He came back, flushed; gave a hitch to his belly, sat down, growled, 'Bloody cheek!' and tried to resume his reading.

'Who's that, Conny?' said the auntie, still holding up her card.

'Three buckos from Blarney Lane. Asking me to give 'um me six Easter lilies.'

'Oh, law! And why so?'

'Some kid that's dead up in Barrett's Buildings. Name of Delurey.

Molly Delurey. Died up in the Fever Hospital. The best I ever heard. God Almighty! Asking me to cut me six Easter lilies for some wan I never heard of in me life before. Did you ever hear the beat of that?'

His sister, of course, wanted to know all about it. Cork may call itself a city, but it is really a big town made up of a lot of little villages, and in each 'village' everybody wants to know everything about everybody else.

'Delurey?' she says. 'I don't know any wan now of that name. To be sure, we had a little apple-woman used to come here . . . Ah, but she was a Minny Delaney. And how did they come to know that you have the lilies?'

'You may ask. Your brave milkman. Spotted 'um every morning coming in with the milk. I knew that fellow had his eye on me garden. I always said that fellow's too sweet to be wholesome. "Oh, Mister Hourigan, haven't you the grand geraniums! Oh, isn't the verbena massive, Mister Hourigan!" Making a big man out of himself. "Flowers? I'll get ye the flowers. Go up to Mister Hourigan and tell him I sent you. Ask him for his lilies." The cheek of him! The cool, bloody pig's cheek of him!'

My auntie played her card without looking at it. She forgot to take her trick. I suppose she was seeing the little deal coffin, or the child laid out on the bed in the back bedroom. The rain played its harp strings in the yard. The fire purred.

'What they usually do,' she ventured, 'is to make up a collection for to buy the flowers.'

'That's what I said to 'um.' – Over his spectacles. 'They wanted to blind me that there's none in the shops. I don't believe wan word of it. And if there isn't,' his voice kept rising and rising, 'why did they come up to *me* for *my* poor little flowers? How fair they wouldn't go down to Bolster has a glasshouse full of 'um? Oh, no! Up to the foola! Me poor little six Easter lilies that I reared, that I looked after as if they were me own children, that I . . . But these buckos have no consideration. "Go up to Mister Hourigan and tell him I sent you." The . . . But what . . . Me poor little lilies. Who ever . . . God Almighty, I . . .'

He choked off into incoherence.

I said, 'Your trick, auntie?'

She gently swept the cards aside with her hand and breathed rather than whispered, 'The poor child.'

Down with his paper, off with his specs.

'That's all very fine, woman, but am I going to give me six Easter lilies because . . . And aren't they me own property? Or aren't they? Amn't I entitled to do what I like with 'um? Or amn't I? And if I don't want to give 'um to 'um what right have them cafflers to be coming up to me own hall-door giving me lip?'

'Conny, I hope you didn't have *words*.'

'And am I going to let a pack of Blarney Lane cafflers tell me up to me puss that there won't be luck nor grace about the house if I don't give me flowers to 'um?'

'Conny! Conny! Conny! You refused the dead.'

He dashed down the paper and tore out of the kitchen. We heard the front door opening. I could imagine the dark and the haze and the smudgy lights down in the valley. He shuffled into the bedroom and struck a match. That was for the candle. I saw how the lilies outside the window would be pale against the smudgy lights of the city.

The wind wailed down from the convent grounds behind the backyard. My auntie was slowly putting the cards back into the old cigar-box. The candle clattered against the basin and ewer and then he came shuffling in along the linoleum of the hall. He blew out the candle, took up his paper firmly, and began to read it. The aunt closed the cigar-box and folded her arms about her and turning to the fire was lost in the little fluttering puffs coming out of the coal.

'The loveliest funeral I ever seen was the time of Lord Mayor MacSwiney. All the bands of the city. And the pipers. And the boys marching. And the Dead marching Saul. And the flag on the coffin. And all the flowers. And people in every window crying down salt tears.' Conversationally she inquired of him: 'Isn't Packey Cassidy buried up there with the Lord Mayor?'

'How do I know where he's buried?'

'Sure aren't they all together up in the one plot?'

'I dunno who you're talking about, let me read me paper, woman.'

'Yerrah is it pretending you don't know Packey Cassidy from the Glen worked with you down in the gas-house? Oh then many the night he brought you home when you had a sup taken. Didn't the two of us stand outside there in the garden and the pipers playing him up the Western Road to the Republican Plot?'

Conny pretended to read. The wind brought us the soft broken tolling of the nuns' bell. Conny looked over his specs again at the window and gave a poke to the cosy fire.

'That's a nor'-wester. There'll be a flood in the river tomorrow.'

'Ah, God look down on us. 'Tis no harm to say it – once we're dead we're soon forgotten.'

'You'd betther be beatin' your way home, boy, the last tram is gone.'

I hated to leave the warm kitchen. Somehow this talk of processions and bands and floods in the river and the nuns' bell and the squeaks of the last tram had wrapped me into a cosy nest of Time and Memory, and I remembered with pleasure how somebody had said that 'All Cork is out of the wan eggshell', and I understood for the first time what that meant. I wanted desperately that Conny should give the lilies to the dead child, and I felt bitter of him that he wouldn't do it. Timidly I said, 'Wouldn't you give her three of them, Uncle Conny?' He roared at me, 'No, nor wan nor half a wan.' The aunt's face got pale and venomous and miserable and she stabbed at him:

'No nor I don't think you'd give them to meself if it was a thing that I was stretched in the next room!'

After a moment he said, quietly,

'Go home, boy.'

As I left his patch of a garden – it was about as big as a table – I saw the six lilies, calm as sleep, by the pale light of the hall. The dead child's face would be just as pale. Down in its hollow the little city seemed to have locked every door and window against the storm and the rain. There were few lights.

That was twenty years ago. Why did that wet night flash on me when I walked into my bedroom tonight and saw the land under the full moon?

The sky is bleached, the fields are white, the lights of Dublin are bright as youth. They drained me so that I had to lean on the window-sill and let it all pour over me as if I were a stone under a river. It was like hearing an old, old tune on a brass-band; or the sound of church-bells on a wet Sunday morning; or the hoot of a ship's siren on Christmas Day. Frightening shadows under everything – under the gooseberry bushes, under the cabbages, under an

old ash-can. And nothing between those shadows and that high moon but those lights of the city, low down, and poised over them, one long narrow cloud stretched from east to west like a scythe about to sweep the sky. It is the sort of night that might make a man ache for love, and I was suffused with you, dear heart, and should have been full of joy and content.

That night, so long ago, was very different to this serene moon. All through that stormy night the drums of the rain beat on the roofs of Cork. In the morning the river was in flood. Rafts of branches and wrack and reeds torn up by the storm sailed on the muddy water through the city. And Conny's lovely white lilies were battered into the mud. When he saw them he just went back to bed and he stayed there for three days. The aunt didn't say one word to him. But outside his window he could hear everybody who came into the little garden – including the milkman – loud in commiseration. After that I no longer envied him his hobby, as I once used to. I began vaguely to understand that his garden was a sort of torment to him.

Or is it, dearest one, that all passion is an unhappiness? Are we always looking forward to our joy, or thinking back on it, or so drunk with it that we cannot realize it?

The night is nearly finished. The moon is going down. The lights of Dublin are still bright. The shadows are long and pale. You are asleep, with your dear red hair spread on your pillow. I hear a little wind creeping up from the north-west.

Dear Love, when will we meet again? Let it be soon, Dear Love, let it be soon!