

BUTTE,
MONTANA

1891

ONE

The First Encounter

On Wyoming Street in the evening a patent Irish stumbled by, some crazy old meathead in a motley of rags and filthy buckskin, wild tufts of hair sticking out the ears, the eyes burning now like hot stars, now clamped shut in a kind of ecstasy, and he lurched and tottered on broken boots like a nightmare overgrown child, like some massive obliterated eejit child, and he sang out his wares in a sweet clear lilting –

Pot-ay-toes?

Hot po-tay-toes?

Hot pot-ah-toes a pe-nny?

His verse swung across the raw naked street and back again, and was musical, but he had no potatoes at all. Tom Rourke turned and looked after the man with great feeling. To be old

and mad and forgotten on the mountain – was it all laid out the fuck ahead of him?

It was the October again. Rourke himself approached the street at this hour in suave array and manic tatters. He was nine years climbing the slow hill of Wyoming Street and there was not a single medal pinned to his chest for it. In the evening sun the East Ridge glowed sombre and gold and an ignorant wind brought news of the winter. He was appalled at the charismatic light. He marched into the cold wind. He gave out yards to himself. He rejected once more the possibility of God. His body was tense and his mind abroad. He was turned first one way, now the other. He walked as calamity. He walked under Libra. He was living all this bullshit from the inside out. Oh, he scathed himself and harangued and to his own feet flung down fresh charges. But there were dreams of escape, too – one day you could ride south on a fine horse for the Monida Pass.

In truth he was often a bit shaky at the hour of dusk and switchable of mood but there was more to it this evening. Somehow his dreams were taking on contour and heft, and the odd stirrings that he felt were deep and premonitory, as at the approach of a dangerous fate.

Now a train eerily whistled as it entered the yards of the Union Pacific and he was twitching like a motherfucker out of control.

By Park and Main the darkness had fallen. He looked in at the Board of Trade for a consultation. He took a glass of whiskey and a beer chaser. He slapped the one and sipped the other. The bad nerves fell away on a quick grade to calmness and resolve. He gathered himself beautifully. He took out a pad and a length of pencil. He looked to the long mirror above the bar and spoke without turning to Patrick Holohan, of Eyeries, County Cork, a miner of the Whistler pit –

Object matrimony, he said.

Holohan in turn considered the mirror warily –

Go again, Tom?

It's what we say early on. It's cards on the fucken table time. Show that you're not playing games with the girl. What's it her name is anyhow?

Holohan with native shyness slid a letter along the bartop. The wet papery flutters of his breath meant a lunger in the long run. Tom Rourke unfolded the letter and briefly read – you'd need a heart of stone in this line – and he began fluently at once to write.

This'll only be a rough go at it, he said. See if we can strike some manner of tone. Reassure the girl.

Moments passed by in the calm of composition. Looking up, briefly, in search of a word, he saw Pat Holohan in the mirror observing the work with guilt. There was terror in the man's eyes that he might have a measure of happiness due.

Dear Miss Stapleton – Rourke spoke it now as he read over the words – or Margaret, if I may be so bold. It is my enormous good fortune to have the opportunity today to write to you, and if the marks on the page are not my own, you will know that the words are, and that they are full in earnest.

Oh, that's lovely, Tom, Holohan said, his face unclenching. More of it, boy.

I write to you in the hope, Margaret, as desperate as it may be, that you will consider a path west from your present situation in Boston and come join me here in the most prosperous town to be found upon the high plateau.

Upon the fucken what?

Mountain, Pat.

He finished the beer and signalled for a shot. Slapped it as it landed. He spun the pencil urbanely in his hand –

How's the health, Patrick?

Holohan considered the dreary slopes of himself and jawed on his bottom lip and laid a hand to his swollen gut –

Jesus, he said.

Tom Rourke put pencil to the page again –

My object, Margaret, is matrimony, and I wish to state here that I am in as hale and eager a condition as any man might be, at least given the usual reverses a hard working life can bestow.

He had it within himself to help others. He made no more than his dope and drink money from it. He had helped to marry off some wretched cases already. The halt and the lame, the mute and the hare-lipped, the wall-eyed men who heard voices in the night – they could all be brought up nicely enough against the white field of the page. Discretion, imagination and the careful edit were all that were required.

Do you think she might come, Tom?

Every possibility.

But do you think she'll know what kind I am?

Hard to from a few letters. She might know enough to chance it. We just have to make sure you come across as genuine and not out for the one thing only.

Holohan blushed like a boy and drank up his beer. He signalled to the keep and a brace of shots appeared. The men slapped them and considered first wordlessly and then with a sense of growing warmth their ludicrous situation.

On Galena Street he walked the stations of the cross again. The lamps burned a mournful electric yellow above the drifting crowd and the girls of the line cribs called out in brash and intricate detail the index of their arrangements. They did so in seven languages. It had grown still colder and

their words rang high on the brittle air. Tom Rourke picked his way along the street avoiding the muddier stretches in favour of his tan Colchester boots. He was this season denying himself the bodily release of the cribs and he ignored with a disdain almost priestly the flashing thighs and moaning lips of the commerce. He was anyhow distracted again on the nerves front. Crossing onto Broadway he carried that weight of weird knowledge or clairvoyance. There was the whisper of a foretelling but he could not make out the words of it. He believed in messages, signs, uncanny harbingers, and as he passed by the Southern Hotel the supper room lights sputtered and went dark and then flicked to life again, as if the joint was winking at him.

There was no fucking way he was going out tonight. He looked in briefly at the Pay Day but only for a straightener. He stood at the brass rail and was consoled by his boots, which were cut stylishly to the ankle length. He engaged a small whiskey and judiciously let it down with a splash of water. He thought fuck it and took to the bar mirrors again for a quiet inspection –

He wore the felt slouch hat at a wistful angle and the reefer jacket of mossgreen tweed and a black canvas shirt and in his eyes dimly gleaming the lyric poetry of an early grave and he

was satisfied with the inspection. He felt for the Barlow jack-knife of teardrop handle in the one pocket and for his dope tin in the other and was reassured.

All he wanted from life was quiet and stillness. There was hope of neither in this place. The pit shifts changed and the night heaved and the Pay Day shouldered its way to a condition of full abandon but Tom Rourke huddled into his thin frame at the bar and he was set apart from the hoarse and laughing crowd. He was at a distance of artistic remove from it was what he felt.

He looked in at the Collar & Elbow and sold an eighth of dope to Jeremiah The Chin Murphy there. He looked in at the Graveyard and slapped a shot with Danny the Dog-Boy who was dying of the chest, it was confided, though Dog-Boy had by now been some-and-twenty years in the dying. He was halfway down a glass of strong brown German beer at the Alley Cat and thinking about death and the poetic impulse in youth when he was informed that he was no longer tolerated on the premises on account of misdemeanours incalculable and here once more was a miscarriage of fucking justice.

He walked now on Granite Street – the stations – and the boards of the shanties moaned and creaked in the mountain night and you could not blame them. Even in the present moment there was a great hauntedness to it all. The city was only this short while confected but it was already strung with a legion of ghosts and Tom Rourke could make them out among the rooftops and he saluted them.

Midnight kind of direction he had his knife taken off him by a volcanic Mancunian named Shovel Burgess at the Big Stope bar and he took a blow to the nose which bled theatrically. Next he was turned away by a Celestial from a smoky roost of the Chicken Flats on account of dope money that was owed and had been spent instead on tan Colchester boots. He took a smoke of what meagre dope he had left in supply in a backroom full of gleaming Portuguesers on Nanny Goat Hill and he experienced the truth and glory of God the Almighty in the here and now of the opiate night.

Once he had a zealot belief that love would save him but now he had doubts. He didn't even know of her existence yet, never mind that she was off the train already, had left the supper

room at the Southern Hotel, and was established in a fresh new house on the uptown reaches.

He looked in at the Board of Trade again. He took a slow recuperative bottle of stout. He was dissatisfied with the ambience. Too many Irish. There were by now ten thousand Hibernian to the town and they had the place fucking destroyed. A fellow Corkman drinking at his westerly elbow leaned in with an accent from the rim of Bantry originally –

Hear about Two-Bit Billy?

Shot his own toes off, Tom Rourke recited, at the Alley Cat bar.

Not the way I heard it. Happen at the Big Stope. I seen eye witnesses describin. Two-Bit barred out of the Alley Cat since March. Mostly he been drinkin with the Finns down the Helsinki bar.

When did that all start?

March! They was drinkin for Saint Urho. The cunt what chase the grasshoppers out of Finland.

Two-Bit fell in?

Two-Bit fell in. Man's companionable.

And where the grasshoppers head to?

We're gettin off the track of it, boy. The right or the left toes the way you heard it?

Does it matter, friend?

All I'm sayin is you're a honest workin man stood there tryin to have a peaceful drink and there's toes all over the fucken floor? That's lettin the place down something shocken and I don't care what bar.

He looked in at the Southern Hotel. He looked in at the Cesspool. He gave a broad berth to the Bucket of Blood which was for newspapermen and touristic types only was his opinion. He denied himself once more the line cribs though he considered briefly a proposal of marriage to Greta of Bavaria at the Black Feather. It was three in the morning. He drank and smoked and moved his feet. Then the black haze descended. Then the music all stopped. Then he felt himself aloft suddenly. He was at an elevation. He was upon the fucking air. He was carried from the Open-All-Night and deposited arseward to the street. He crawled the breadth of the street on his fours. There was little dignity to it. He rose with grave uncertainty and stumbled away into the night and he carried yet the great burden of youth.

He lost his faith in God again around half four in the morning. Now he believed in everything else instead. He believed in

spells and enchantments. He believed for sure he could put a spell on the horse. He clamped one eye shut to keep her in focus but she danced about madly before him. A nervous animal, of golden aura, it was mostly palomino in her. She kicked at the frozen hard ground and a petulance of tiny stars flew up in sparks.

Ah go handy, he said, wouldn't you? My head is fucken openin here.

The moon was near and pale at three-quarters. It showed over the East Ridge wanly. There was a witching in its blue milky light. The horse kicked and whined and her eyes flared with violence –

No call for that business, he said.

He tried to get on his feet for the stance of authority but failed it and slid the wall of some old shanty onto the bone of his butt again. Jesus Christ, the cold would go through you these nights. He looked up at the horse and the horse looked down at him. She was beautiful and high-bred and her every muscle shone –

Who the fuck's are you anyhow? he said.

The horse quieted at this and relaxed her head to the one side and stared at him as if she was certain now that she had seen him before but couldn't place him.

Tom Rourke, he said.

The horse stilled herself utterly and fixed the lashes of the

long stare on him and he was bound. There was a wretched pain in her someplace.

He rose and wavered on woozy legs. He was operated by an inept puppeteer. He opened a hand to the horse. She flinched a little and stepped back but only by a few dancing steps. He was flirting with her now. He felt he might need a horse one day soon. She lowered her stare again and he put a hand before her face and he felt the hot sick breath on his palm and he locked onto the lash-wide stare.

Closer, he said, and he began tunelessly to sing, working out the words of it as he went –

Oh palomino palomino
Sing a song for me
Oh pal-o-mee sweet pal-o-mino
Nothin comes for free

And fall, he said.

At that the horse buckled onto her knees as if gunshot and rolled onto her side and onto her spine and kicked at the air and showed her crazy teeth and the pain was no more or at least not so she could feel it.

I'll be seein you, he said.

He was on Wyoming Street again in the pre-dawn dim. He was a bit drunk still and pretending not to be. He was also a little high. His member was somewhat on fire. The rooftops of Dublin Gulch leaned into each other as though to confide. The gallows frames above the pits were the mountain sentinels and these were elegant, he felt. The prospect of death was a glamorous comfort but it did not hold for long – *oh this brick and mud Calvary my Wyoming Street*. All around him now the inanimate enlivened. There were faces recessed in the shanty walls. He was rattled at this hour certainly. He would never go out of an evening no more. But left alone at night he grew afraid of the dark.

Vows, resolutions: he was twenty-nine years to heaven and must never feel this old again.

Breath of dawnsmoke. Park and Broadway. The winter it came slowly west. He spoke to God again as he stood at that section and looked down on the world – can we see him there yet?

He told God that he was very proud of Him.

The calamity that was Tom Rourke proceeded to Quartz and Main. Despite it all his words tumbled forth and ran freely. Put them to fucken profit, why don't you? He worked up a chorus for a new song about the Orphan Girl pit –

*Workin down the Orphan
All the hours I get
Girls up on Galena
Got me drownin in debt*

He was in his own right a great scholar of debt. He owed for dope to Bud McIntyre the mock Celestial; he owed for dope also to the true-born Celestials; he owed on tabs at the Board of Trade, the Southern Hotel, the Open-All-Night, the Pay Day and the Alley Cat; he owed on his room at the Zagreb Boarding House, with awesome arrears. He would not live among his own kind. The Irish bastards were sentimental pigfuckers to a man. The Croats knew at least they were bound for hell and they had a knacky way with boot leather.

Ghosts of the night shift drifted by.

The pithead bells rang out.

The girls from the crib windows cried gaily yet and waved.

Vows, resolutions: no more the bottle, no more the pipe, and no more the rips of Galena Street.

Estuarine was a word that could be used. As for a salty tang on the air. The tip of his tongue moved and she responded with a hot switching movement, as of a small bird trapped. Though locked in place between the clasp and clenching of her

thighs, and subjugated purely to his task, he felt light-headed and fleet – he felt actually that he was flowing. *Riverine* was also a word, and lovely – the slow meander of it. Greta's scent teased the air and Tom Rourke lay at the foot of a crib in the Black Feather and lapped diligently in . . .

The salty reed beds of her love?

Jesus Christ there was no stopping him when he got going.

The sea field of her love?

Better again.

Tom, she said, you go much too fast today. You have some troubles now, I think?

He ignored the interruption. He pressed on with diligence. It was better anyhow not to speak. The girls made more of you that way. Silence and manliness equated. He had sworn himself against words. Above him Greta writhed now and encouragingly cooed. Put her on the fucken stage altogether. She twisted a slender Bavarian thigh and locked it tightly around his jaw and squeezed and upwards he gazed with mild dismay across the lid of her cunt.

You have me choked, he said.

And you pay for it, she said.

A familiar of the premises he was allowed afterwards to linger. He felt clean and honest in the wake of his selfless lovemaking. For weeks now he had denied himself the proletarian release of climax. It was better to keep that stuff tamped down was

his new line of thinking. The power of denial gave vigour and erotic glow. The painful heat in his groin was good heat, was good pain. It would feed strength to him naturally as it built up. It would give him bass tones and bottom. He had not come in six weeks bar a lone nocturnal emission beyond his responsibility. He had dreamt of a green-eyed woman from Adrigole. He hated to be wistful for home. He hated the sentimental bastards singing through the streets of the small hours about the hellholes that had vomited them out.

The fine blonde hairs on Greta's forearm were lovely as she arranged the long pipe. He set the dope tin down pleasantly. She unhooked the scratcher and applied it to the ball of dope. She lit a long taper and put it to the bowl of the pipe and heated it and raising himself onto an elbow Tom Rourke drew deeply into his lungs the beautiful chaudul. He glazed into the good light. He saw himself there as he exhaled. Very handsome when high. Face on him like a tortured saint. He watched as Greta repeated the steps and took her own fill. A tear rolled down his cheekbone sweetly –

Will you marry me? he said.

Greta laughed quietly as she drifted slowly backwards into the stretch and waking arms of the cot.

I'm not the one for you, Tom, she said.

Through the haze of bloodshot eyes he aimed for the M&M on North Main Street. There was something honest and reasonable about an eating house at half seven in the morning. There was something maternal and forgiving somehow. We are after coming through another one alive so to speak. He pushed through the doors of the place. Taint of rank bacon, sweat, smoke –

Good mornin?

A half-dozen sets of shoulders groaned from the high stools. He joined their number and took a load-bearing glance from Fat Con Sullivan beyond the counter –

Were you on Galena Street, Tom?

I was not.

You've the waft of it all the same, boy. Mercury Street?

Nor there.

The great Sullivan belly slid the counter like some class of pup seal and arranged itself complacently. In a damp whisper –

Did you walk the line, Rourke?

Indeed and I did fucken not.

A tin mug was poured to fill with the purgatorial coffee of the house. He sugared it heavily and blew on its surface. What the fuck was a sea field? Sullivan plated up a mess of fried eggs and set them before him with a mime of delicate care, as if fearful of disturbing a customer's equilibrium. Tom Rourke

salted the eggs unambiguously. He tried to ignore the feeling that he was being watched in the room. A handful of hard rain was flung against the window and now he felt the strangest thing, a thought almost beyond words, that the winter would have purpose for him yet.

Fat Con was in his realm and glory. He paraded the counter at the M&M in sacramental mode. He bestowed forgiveness with his greasy plates. He lacked only the thurible. He leaned in again to confer –

How's that old London boy treatin you?

It's a job, Con.

He let you work the camera box at all?

Sometimes.

An' he's puttin money in your pocket?

The odd time.

Ye're doin business then?

There's a few coming into us.

But is he right in the head, do you think?

There's none of us great in the rack around here, Con.

The eggs went down controversially. The coffee began to straighten the affair. He rolled a smoke to find the hands were passable steady by this stage. Once more and gauntly he considered his situation. He wrote songs for the bars and letters for

the lonesome. He was assistant to the photographer Loney Crane, a lunatic, of Leytonstone, East London, originally. His days had been passing with no weight to them but he knew now that fate would soon arrest him. He may have moaned a little at this but such moans were not unknown in the M&M at that hour of the morning.

Con Sullivan laid his belly to the counter again. It was a separate entity almost. You could give its own name to it and put it on a leash. The counterman spoke discreetly now –

Was it yourself arranged the wife for Harrington?

Which Harrington?

Long Ant'ny, the captain.

Anaconda company?

Same.

Didn't know he took a wife even.

Reports are circulatin. A girleen out of Chicago hey. Tom Rourke will be the last poor Irishman without a legal lay to his name.

He walked on Main Street in the rawness of its changing weather. There was snow on the mountains already. There was the feeling of All Souls. A familiar from home lurched into the light – Ned Sheedy, of Allihies, County Cork, a miner of

the Lexington pit, and of perpetually startled mien. Sheedy dropped his workpail to the ground, hoicked loudly to resituate an amount of phlegm, and leaned in to whisper –

Clearin six dollar a day and I still got the devil in me bollocks.

This is the way, Ned.

The miner jerked a thumb to the Galena Street cribs –

They have me a slave to the fucken gowl in that place.

Ah I know it, boy.

Sheedy's face had an oddness to its set that gave away the buried charge of epilepsy. If the lungs didn't get him the shaking would. Now he took Tom Rourke's hand in his and examined it like a palmister –

Can't see the work in it, Tom, he said. See more in a little priest's.

He picked up the pail to move on but hesitated –

Tormented by fucken gowl, he said. Were we as well off when we didn't have the price of it?

Do you want me to write a letter for you, Ned?

Well, the miner said, and looked away to the mountain wall east, as though spiritual advisors were in seat there.

On the chance of a wife, I mean.

Would you do that for me, Tom?

Look in at the Board of Trade some evening. Five-ish.
