

Midnight Folk

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“Bukowski made me write letters to dead people. “You do what you have to do”, he said, “and I will do her”; he pointed at the heavy woman in the corner of the bar and lit a cigarette. We got drunk with Ginsberg in Paris, and passed out under stars burned out like dripping candles. “You do what you have to do,” Ginsberg said, “and I will do a little of this acid.” Burroughs was already shooting at the tourists with his shotgun. He saved the rocket launcher for special occasions, and was understandably upset when the police confiscated it. “Pigs”, said Bukowski, smoothing down the betting slip on the table, like a bookmark for a chequered account of his life. Imaginary conversations, imaginary lives; only the deaths were real.”

MY NAME IS SAL PARADISE, and I’m a private investigator.

The skies outside my shoe-sized apartment’s windows were like a dull grey numbing pain that perforated through the urban landscape like a burrowing worm, eating away at the rows upon rows of identical brick houses. It was winter, and I was alone.

I wasn’t always a private investigator. I used to be on the road. I’ll tell you about it later.

I arrived in London, England, one rain-drenched evening in November, looking for nothing more than a refuge, a safe-house, a place where I could be alone and where my past could be safely filed away in the great sweaty tumbling reams of paper that were left behind me in New York when I fled my old life.

I took the train to town, in turns sweating and freezing as the aftershocks of Benzedrine hit me repeatedly. I was a washed-out boxer getting pummelled on the ring of life, and the punches were coming in like a pile-up of cars on the Golden Gate bridge, fast and painful and without an end in sight. The people on the train, gentle Englishmen and delicate girls with pale, beautiful faces, looked at me in alarm but left me to my thoughts. I came to learn England is a place where the mad are—not revered, no, but allowed a quiet respect, a space around them like a shield of protection and comfort.

I’m sorry, I’m not making much sense, am I. My therapist says I’m getting better. Making progress, he says, and laughs like a big ol’ Texan cowboy, stroking his great big white beard all the while. He so reminds me of Carlo Marx sometimes I want to jump up and hug him and dance around the room with him and talk about

poetry.

But I don't, anymore. I'm getting off Speed, and Carlo Marx is dead and besides, this is London, not New York.

So I was sitting in my tiny apartment counting the bricks and watching soaps on the box and thinking of a drink. It was cold. When I first arrived in London I stayed with a girl I knew, an American flower transplanted without much success in this ancient metropolis, held hands and shivered like a madman and dreamed of the road, and the trip to Italy with my one true love that I've never taken and now never will, and of the secret byways of the world.

"Sal," my friend said to me one night. We were sitting on her small brown sofa without our clothes and with the ancient heater working overtime by our side, eating curry from little silver packets. I dipped a large chunk of Naan bread into my chicken Madras and bit it and felt warmth flood me for the fraction of a second like a remote gun shot.

"Yes, darling?" I was affecting a British accent in those days, the kind bad actors use in Hollywood movies, all upper-class and superior, as if one's nose is full of snot through which the words ooze out with difficulty.

"It's time you got yourself your own place," she said, her sweet voice vaporizing in the heat of the room. "And a job, too." She put her hand on mine, tenderness in her eyes like the bite of a snake. I was suddenly angry. I wanted to shout at the moon, berate the unfairness of this life I found myself in, cry for the road and for friends left behind. I got ready to stand up and leave, as I was, to step blissfully into the cold calm arms of night, naked and unbowed and unafraid.

But she was right, and I didn't.

I told you I was getting better, didn't I.

Instead, I finished my curry in silence, and in the small hours of the night made love to that strange undemanding creature for the last time. The next day I packed my bag and left and in a moment of sheer exhaustion walking around Mungo Park, which never fails to evoke in me thoughts of Old Bull Lee in Tangiers, found this place and paid for it there and then and moved in.

And found employment the next day as a private investigator.

It wasn't a bad job, really. I worked for a guy called Little Mo Cohen, a big barrel of a man, a Jew of the old East End, a former gangster with a love of black and white movies, a mountain of muscle with the heart of a child.

I did divorces, mainly.

“Para-dise!” Little Mo would shout from his office, a small cramped space in the basement of a building on Harley Street that did not officially exist and which the doctors and nurses who worked there treated with a kind of silent horror, that such an *undignified* thing as a private dick could so clutter such a fastidious establishment in such a dignified setting. But Little Mo didn’t give a damn.

“Para-dise!” he’d call me, and when I walked in he’d thrust a hand full of papers in my face and tell me to get on with it, and oh-by-the way did I watch the Casablanca re-run last night and wasn’t Ingrid Bergman wonderful? Listening to Mo, you’d easily have thought Casablanca was showing on the box every night of the week.

I don’t know. Maybe, for him, it did.

The papers would almost always turn out to be names, and places, and photographs: men and women who were married to other men and women who suspected they were cheating on them, who were coming home later and later every night, who stayed at the office overnight, who had appointments with their hair-dresser at strange hours, who came back with a foreign scent on their clothes and foreign shades of lipstick on their collars.

The usual.

I’d be told where they lived and when they left, and I would follow them around, a cheap automatic camera in one coat pocket, boxes of cigarettes in the other.

It was a living.

I got used to standing in the cold, smoking cigarette after cigarette, a mound of butts gathering by my side like a tombstone for Old Bull Lee’s wife, who he one day killed when they were both trippin’ the light fantastic, shooting the apple on her head like he was William Tell and of course missing the apple but not her. He was a big one for guns, was Old Bull Lee. Everything that made a loud bang and could cause lots of big, noisy damage delighted him.

So I’d stand there, watching the Jills and the Johns come and go and do their stuff, and I’d photograph them in the compromising position and get the hell out of there, and hand the camera over to Mo and get my money. “Make sure you get them in the *compromising position*, Para-dise,” Little Mo would say. I kept hoping he would take up smoking, I pictured him every day with a small cheap cigar in his mouth, chewed and chewed and never lit, but Mo was against smoking. Wouldn’t even touch sweets. “Rot your teeth, they do,” he’d say to me confidentially, paging through the latest Kojak paperback and scratching his own bald head with his big meaty fingers that were like five iron bars welded together. “Trust me.”

I did. I worked the old beat up hopeless divorce route at night, slept in my little cell during the day, and smoked. It was a job.

It's how I met Lola.

I was hanging out at the Purple Rose, a dingy strip joint in the back of Shaftesbury Avenue, a black hole for hustlers and whores and the wrong kind of tourist, where businessmen with no business chilled to the tune of canned music and wet their pants over the angels of the night who rubbed thighs against crotches for a minor fee.

Her name was Lola and she was a dancer, sliding up and down gleaming metal poles in sweat-drenched, smoke-filled underground rooms in which the stale scent of beer and premature ejaculations intermingled with the furtive smell of Algerian hash. Pushers would stand in the broken toilets and offer you juice in a veiled language that had more signs in it than the Highway Code. They always latched on to me, smelling in their rat-like way my desperation and desire, the convulsions of my soul for the sweet ol' death they were offering so cheaply.

I'll get back to that.

So I was sitting at my apartment counting bricks and waiting for the sunset. It was business as usual. Or rather, no business, as usual.

One day Little Mo disappeared. His office was left like an insipid cocoon devoid of its occupant. I doubted Little Mo has become a butterfly, however. I made a quick search for money, found none, and got the hell out. A large corpse was found some weeks later drowned in the Thames, discovered strangled in the reeds by an old couple out for a walk. It could have been his.

I didn't care. By the time Big Ben chimed twelve for the fourth time, I was in business for myself.

Sal Paradise, Private Investigator. It sounded good. Real good. The kind of good you only get after spending a mad night in the Mexican wilderness smoking tea and whoring and drinking booze in the baking hot sun, and running amok in a whorehouse with the beautiful young girls with the dark enchanting skin and the eyes that hide the depths of the desert in them while the cops outside smile and nod and dig everything. I had a fifth in the drawer, my name on the door, and there was still hope for a flashing neon light outside the window.

I was waiting for the clock to chime, and turning in my mind the thing Lola said to me the night before.

"Friend of yours came by earlier," she shouted to me over the din of the

crowd. We were at the bar of the Purple Rose. It was about three o'clock, and just as busy as if it were midday in Oxford Street. "Didn't know you had any!"

Neither did I. I'd left my old friends behind me when I left the States, and now they were either respectable or dead, and a long way away in any case.

"Did he give a name?" I had to repeat myself twice before the words travelled through the noise, like bees between lonely flowers, and settled at Lola's ear.

"No." she leaned forward and spoke directly into my ear, her breath warm and sexy on my skin. "Funny bloke, he was. Yank, like you, and fancied himself a bit of a lady's man I reckon. Gave me a right once over, I could feel his eyes slithering all over my body." But she smiled when she said it, and my heart suddenly beat with an urgency I thought I had lost forever.

"Did you see his thumb?" I asked, trying to contain my mounting excitement.

"Thumb? No, I didn't. Anyway, he said he'll be back tomorrow night." She moved away from me with a languid grace, her dark hair streaming behind her like an oil slick.

"Did he say when?" I finally thought to ask, mouthing the words silently across the room as Lola worked her expert body in the lap of an aging derelict whose eyes, rheumy and sad and full of a dying wisdom, looked up at her in hushed admiration and his fingers played a nervous staccato on the table-top surface, in time to a tune only he could hear.

"Funny thing, Sal," she said to me later. "He showed up midnight on the dot. Said you should *expect* him tomorrow night at the *witching hour*." She grimaced. "*Sal knows time*, he kept saying. *Sal knows time*." She blew me a kiss and began walking away again, unconcerned. "Fucking weirdo," were her parting words to me that night.

So I sat, and I waited, my mind thinking nervously and doing loops of excitement that fell into valleys of wonder and chasms of despair, like a roller coaster ride on Coney Island.

Could it really be him?

I gathered my coat, bouncing on the balls of my feet with a kind of uneasy excitement, and headed for the door.

Outside was cold, a wet, clammy iciness that clang to clothes and burrowed under flesh, a feeling of frosty fingers tickling numb skin, of an arctic mouth blowing fog-encrusted kisses on my disused mouth.

I lit a cigarette.

It had become dark, and as I began to follow the wet street lights along the street I thought of Dean Moriarty, the only man I'd ever truly loved, whose madness and joy inspired me and driven me and compelled me along on those wild and unruly adventures so long ago on the road, criss-crossing America and the West, high on drink and Speed and being young and immortal. Could it really be him?

I don't know why, but I unconsciously decided to avoid the Purple Rose that night. My feet led me in random directions, through unknown streets and alleyways, a strange invisible tour through the dark city. There were few people on the streets, and I was not disturbed.

I stood for a long moment on the Embankment, watching the shadowy, choppy water of the Thames flow unsteadily underneath my feet. I was deep in thought, confused and angry and delirious with happiness in turn. I didn't know what I wanted, didn't know what to do. Through the hazy cloud of my thoughts I could hear deep, bass chimes as Big Ben momentarily awoke, announcing itself to the sleeping city. It was late, and my breathing came ragged and profound in little clouds of fog that diminished around me like the fading of angels.

Big Ben struck twelve.

As the last grave notes of the ancient clock dissipated in the cold air a great bellowing horn sounded at my back and made me jump. I turned and saw two huge beams of light cutting through the darkness like the flaming wings of an angel, and the sound of a powerful motor being gunned down rushed toward me like a sonic boom, threatening to shatter my body and my mind both.

I strained against the blinding light as the most magnificent vehicle advanced towards me along the Embankment and screeched to a shuddering halt. In the sudden gloom I could make out the contours of the car, as sleek and as powerful as a jungle cat, and in its arrival I recognised what I have both dreaded and longed for for what seemed like an eternity.

A man jumped out of the car, bellowing a great whoop! of laughter as he hit the concrete with his feet. He did a little jig, there and then, spread his arms and shouted joy to the silent skies. "You know *time!*" he shouted. He turned around, facing me, his hands held toward me in a welcoming embrace. "You *know* time!" I stood there as he walked towards me, his moves like those of an aging dancer, the moves of a con-man and a teenage hustler who has never abandoned that great big insanity of being alive.

"Hi Sal," he said in a slow, quiet voice. We stood there, facing each other, unspeaking for a long moment.

“Dean?” I finally asked, my eyes all the time working rapidly over his face, his stand, his loose shirt and the belly that was, as ever, hanging out from above his trousers. I couldn’t think of anything else to say. “Is that really you?”

He grinned at me and waved his hand in the air. The flesh, about half an inch, was missing under the nail of his thumb.

“I’m a class-A substance in a third-rate burg,” said this glowing apparition with the utmost sincerity. “I’ve come to dig this crazy place you’ve made for yourself, this make-believe London spread in front of us like a rippled broken shattered mirror, this fantastic metamorphic fanciful dream of yours. Sal,” his voice once again took on the sweet and dreamy tones of utter self-belief of this conman madman hustler lover that I knew so well and have ached for so much. “Show me your city.”

There were fine lines like cobwebs at the corners of his eyes and his gaze rested on me, concerned, and I didn’t understand it.

It didn’t matter.

It *was* him. It was Dean, Dean Moriarty, my companion all those years ago, my burning angel, my unrequited love. I felt the structures of control that I have imposed on myself dissolving and melting away and my inner self being drawn like a moth to the all-consuming light that was Dean Moriarty.

“Here,” he said, opening his hand like a magician and throwing me a small twisted packet of paper. “Got these for you at the Purple Rose earlier.”

I opened it up. It was full of benny tubes. Maybe I could resist the pushers, but I couldn’t resist Dean. Never could, and that’s a fact.

I popped the pills silently, ravenously, feeling as they slid down my throat energy returning to my body, felt my soul expanding and like a stable of horses running in all directions at once, their wild and free nature guiding them across the vast expanses of the mind.

“Yee-ha!” Dean shouted with glee in his eyes when he saw me downing the tea. “You know time, Sal Paradise, you know *time!*”

He ran to the car, jumped inside and in seconds the mighty engine was roaring again, screaming joy at the murky waters of the Thames. Then in a flash and before I had the chance to jump in with him he was out of the car again and pointing at the river, waving and shouting and talking to me all at once. “Look at them sweet Jesus babies!” he cried. “See them little blue-bodied angels playing in the water like unruly dolphins, listen to their pure holy voices singing like a parliament of bluebottles—oh Sal, can you see the children?” He seemed to me to be burning before my eyes, a

soft glow of light suffusing him, and I knew then I was giving in once more to the madness of the road, and didn't know, as I never did know, if he was man or angel sent down to Earth.

Now that he had pointed them to me, I could indeed see them. It was as if a giant magnifying glass had been laid on to the water's surface, turning it into a clear blue window into the underwater world below. There *were* children there, tens, maybe hundreds of children, babies with pale lips and soft bodies, toddlers and kids of indeterminable ages all swimming and playing games and chasing the tails of shiny trout who swam below and above and through them, teasing.

"Water babies," I whispered, the voice caught in my throat. "I never knew!"

Dean looked at me with an incomprehensible look on his face. "You don't let yourself know, ol' buddy," he said in a soft voice. "you let yourself loose in a dream and yet you refuse to look it in the face. Oh Sal," there was real compassion in his voice, "how did you get so lost?"

I didn't know what he was talking about. We stood and stared at the swimming babies for a long time, not speaking. Then, "where to now?" I asked.

Dean was all of a sudden in a flutter of excitement again, as if my question had reanimated him back into frenetic life. He grabbed me and we ran to the car, jumping into low leather seats, and the car roared into life and with Dean behind the wheel we spun around and shot away in a cloud of dust. "Yee-ha!"

On the horizon, the round clock face that was Big Ben had changed, now looking like a fat, pedantic moon, with a carved mouth that smiled genially down at Dean and myself as we drove like devils through the narrow streets of the city. "Dig that clock!" Dean cried, waving crazily at that venerable old timepiece, and by God if Big Ben didn't wink at us in a friendly, conspiratory fashion.

It was a wild night, a night of hallucinatory wanderings and mad holy visions as we raced around the city. In Gerard Street, Chinese dragons danced regally in the streets, oily scales glinting in the moonlight, fires bursting out of their bellies like deadly fireworks, leaving sooty stains on the pavement and the walls of buildings. There were no people there, only the dragons, large and threatening and beautiful beyond words and worlds and time, waddling on lizard's feet and spreading their big bejewelled wings, silent and dark like ancient poetry.

A street urchin, his big round eyes looking up at us with a kind of intimate sorrow, stood on a corner of the Strand and sold us an ounce from the back of cart on which melons and oranges and grapes, tomatoes and cucumbers and peppers, life and death and love lay rotting surrounded by a cold damp fog. Dean had taken his shirt off at this stage and we ditched the car, which Dean had hot-wired earlier, rolled up two massive cones and ran again, shouting joy and defiance at the sky.

“Oh Sal,” Dean said to me; there was a moment of solitude between us, a moment of calm where he held me close, so close I could smell his scent, almost taste the folds of his flesh. “I want...” He looked suddenly lost. “I want you to choose, my friend,” he said at last. I looked at him, not comprehending, and he sighed and the cobwebs in the corners of his eyes widened, like cracked glass. “Will you choose right, Sal Paradise?”

We wandered into Soho and Ronnie Scott’s at the small hours of the night. Dawn was still some distance away, but its hand seemed to grope for dominance in the skies, leaving faint marks like fingers trailing against an icy glass. The bouncers took one look at us and decided we were obviously mad. “Now you must understand,” Dean said in his most earnest voice, “that it is only at these places of worship that our souls are completely free from their earthly burden, for jazz is the word and the god is *jazz!*” He slammed the words at the bouncers like an expert marksman and they waved us through, thinking perhaps we were part of the show.

We got drinks, and Dean began scouring the room for girls when the light on the small dark stage was turned on and we turned in awe and astonishment to gaze upon the face of the gentleman who stood there, looking nothing less than a biblical prophet incarnated.

“It’s Sweeney,” I said, my voice so soft it seemed to drop to the floor at the moment of its utterance.

“It’s God,” Dean said reverently, as he often did when the mood took him and we sat around in a dark smoky club in the dead of night and listened to Slim Gaillard or Dizzy Gillespie or Thelonius Monk. “It’s God.”

It was Apeneck Sweeney, the mad poet, and as he began reciting poetry in a querulous voice Dean began to rock in his seat, scratching his belly and wiping the sweat that was pouring out of him in droves with a dotted handkerchief. “It’s Carlo Marx,” he whispered, not taking his eyes of the poet as he rocked back and forth, back and forth. “Look Sal. *Look.*”

And it almost was as if Carlo Marx has appeared again before us, ranting his awesome strange compelling poetry to us in his small flat on the Lower East Side, majestic beard jiggling to a silent beat, cymbals clashing as his voice rose and fell like the tides.

The hour before dawn found us on the South Bank, swigging red wine from a shared bottle and watching the fog cling gently to the brown waters of the Thames.

“It was a wonderful night,” I said to Dean, my soul swelling with the sweetness of his presence there by my side, my mind rejecting thoughts of divorce work, or Lola, or my therapist. I have seen the secret byways of this city and my love was by my side again at last, just as he was when we drove down to Mexico all

those years ago on the road.

Dean turned and looked at me, his eyes searching my face mutely. He took my hand in his—and oh! how much have I longed for that moment—and in a soft, quiet, serious voice said “you’re dead, you know.”

“What?” I thought he wanted to enter another one of those late night philosophical discussions, like he used to with Carlo Marx back in New York when they were sleeping together.

“Wake up, *Jack!*” he cried suddenly, springing up from his seat in one smooth motion. He startled me. “Look at yourself. Look at this, this *London* you created for yourself. You’re *dead*. *I’m* dead. *Ginsberg* is dead. *Burroughs* is dead. *Fucking Kesey* is dead. We’re *all* dead, but you won’t *fucking admit it.*” Each emphasis was to me like a punch in the face.

I didn’t know what to say. Had he gone truly crazy at last? “I never liked Kesey,” I said. My voice sounded hollow in the cold air.

“That’s not the *point*, Jack.” Dean Moriarty raised me to my feet, his hands warm against my skin. In the dim light of the approaching dawn his body truly burned, and great big wings of flame unfurled from his back, blazing across my field of vision ready to soar. “You’ve never let yourself understand,” he said. “You never *acted*. Only followed. And now you won’t even do that.” His body seemed to shimmer, become less substantial as the sky slowly grew brighter. “You think you live in a real place?” There was anger in his voice. “I showed you the underbelly of where your desolate soul lives, the ripped gashes of dreams and hallucinations that crowd your little construct of reality. Don’t you *understand?*” His voice grew weak as his body faded with the coming of the sun. He never seemed more beautiful to me than that day, the last day I ever saw Dean Moriarty.

“Cross over, Sal Paradise,” his voice whispered.

And, so faintly I may have imagined it, “Hit the road, Jack...” as the sun rose and Dean disappeared.

“Oh, Dean.” Tears stung my skin. Bellow the water I could just make out the figures of three small children waving at me with angelic smiles before they, too, disappeared. Memory rose inside me, faint as the tendrils of smoke from unused chimneys, and I said, “Oh, Neal.”

I got drunk.

What else can you do when everything you have ever believed in turns out to be an illusion? I got roaringly drunk, passed out shouting obscenities at the bar and woke up in a cell the next morning, feeling as if a storm had passed and left me

unscathed and strong.

My name is Sal Paradise, and I'm a private investigator. I do the old beat up hopeless divorce route at night, sleep in my little apartment during the day, and smoke. It's a job.

At night, I sometimes talk to the water babies in the Thames. Sometimes I listen to Sweeney reciting poetry in small badly-lit cafes. I hang out at the Purple Rose with my girl and in the early hours of the day we make slow and dreamy love and talk.

Sometimes I even see the dragons again, flying high above the city, their scales sparkling in a multitude of rainbows.

I may have been someone called Jack once. I may be dreaming all this. I may even be dead. I've made my peace with that now, and with the ghosts that have hunted me and haunted me and would not let me rest, and I am better for it.

So in London when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down Embankment watching the foggy narrow skies over the city and feel the material of my dreams taking hold and shaping the land and the people and I know the water babies may have drowned but here they're happy and whoever says God is Pooh Bear is full of shit. The stars are strewn on the horizon like precious stones hoarded away and then scattered in small, sparing throws across the endless dark and I will never grow old and nobody really knows where we go when we die and I never did like Kesey but sometimes I sit here by the pier and I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty, the father he's never found, I think of Neal Cassady.