

## In Search of Hallowed Ground

—Address of stay?

145 Banbury Road. Oxford, UK. OX2 7AN.

—Reason for stay?

Reason?

—Business? Leisure?

Study.

—Length of stay?

Nine months. The length of gestation.

Oxford is a dream of my mother's, a Chinese immigrant for whom the Gothic architecture, the cobblestones, the Oxford *aura*, holds a certain prestige. When she talks about me to her friends she brags that I attend Oxford. I suspected she was prouder that I studied abroad at Oxford than that I studied at all at Williams.

I remind her that the British introduced opium to China. Ravaged a millennia-old nation, cut Shanghai up into enclaves like a pig at the butcher's. You know. She doesn't want to talk about that. She wants to talk about the Thames, the libraries. "The Dreaming Spires," she says, dreamily. I don't insist. Almost everything I know about China I read in a book anyway.

The "Dreaming Spires," to me, is a pdf passively sent along by our program director months after our class had already pirated a version. It's riddled with typos, and fails to mention a number of essential things. The first week I'm here, somebody loses a wallet, and then a bike. I spend an inordinate amount of money on daily bus passes before I realize that, without a bike, I'll need to bus every day. On the ride back from the bike shop, my first time in years, shaky, sweaty, I'm ditched on a roundabout, and my chain pops off my bike. I can't understand the Slavic-accented British English of the cafeteria ladies, or the Cockney accent of the bus drivers.

Meanwhile, I miss Williams, miss my boyfriend, miss my friends. When I tell my mother I want to come home for break she's quiet but

upset. She wants me to travel, to spend my time, her money, wisely. I take it badly, thinking she doesn't miss me. She takes my taking it badly badly, saying that Oxford, that Europe, was her dream at my age. I understand what she says but I can't feel it, not really. My mother worked hard so that I would have the luxury of never having to daydream.

Every day, I check the weather in Tokyo. My boyfriend is there for the semester, and it makes him feel closer. In bed, I imagine him late to class under a partly cloudy sky, seventy-six degrees and temperate. Slaving over an essay, I imagine him under the covers as rain lashed against his windows—typhoon season. My boyfriend and I, on opposite ends of the hands of a clock: him at the center and I, vainly following, around and around. He slept when I woke, drank while I worked. Sleeping at four, waking at noon, I am out of sync with the sun, the clock, the world. I feel myself spread thin across the globe, across time, pulled back and forth, five hours here, nine hours there.

In Oxford, humiliations abate but do not cease. I win small victories. I am reprimanded for cutting across the quad at Exeter, but I successfully bike into town for the first time. I show up to the wrong building for class, but I renew my bus pass correctly. My professor loathes my first paper, but I understand what a cafeteria lady says to me.

Sometimes, walking around Oxford, I'll catch a glimmer of the magic that so transfixes my mother. It really is beautiful here—有山有水, but not quite. It's quaint; cobblestones and English churches and gables and eaves. Because it rains so much, there are rainbows often. Sometimes in the libraries I feel a sense of awe at those who have studied in the same spaces before me, and I feel privileged to be the next in line.

But here, in Oxford, I am not who I think I am. The "hyphen American" part of me is met with confusion; I look Chinese, so I must be from China. I get stopped walking into Exeter, my own college, because tourists aren't allowed in colleges. The Chinese restaurant here is called The Opium Den. In the class picture, I am not named—the other Asian is, twice. I take a tutorial on Chinese art, but I learn only about its decimation. I can't escape it—the sun never sets here. And I am here as if on vacation; I don't belong, not really.

One day, carefully skirting the grass at Exeter under the watchful eye of the porter, I spot Jeri Johnson, wearing all black, smoking a cigarette. She puts her cigarette out on the grass. I decide I want a class with her.

Jeri teaches Joyce. And in the grips of *Ulysses*, everything is suddenly illuminated, pulsing with meaning, nearly psychedelic in its intensity. Flushed with the pleasure of good art, I see symbols in everything. The world is alight with fine, gossamer strings: in *Ulysses*, Bloom brings home a dog (breed unknown) with an injured paw; outside Sainsbury's, I feed and pet a dog with three paws. "Every word is so deep," Molly says, and I feel it.

But I can't get that feeling to stay. Reading "Ithaca," the second to last episode of *Ulysses*, my favorite, I can't get through more than a couple lines at a time. Knowing that I should love the work makes it worse. I do nothing else, and yet seem to accomplish nothing at all. I don't sleep enough. I'm burnt out. I dream in *Ulysses*. Late morning, half-waking, I think of the lines I read half-sleeping the night before. Looking upon two flies trapped in a pane of glass, Bloom thinks:

Softly she gave me in my mouth the seedcake warm and chewed. Mawkish pulp her mouth had mumbled sweetsour of her spittle. Joy: I ate it: joy. Young life, her lips that gave me pouting. Soft warm sticky gumjelly lips. Flowers her eyes were, take me, willing eyes. Pebbles fell. She lay still. A goat. No-one. High on Ben Howth rhododendrons a nannygoat walking surefooted, dropping currants. Screened under ferns she laughed warmfolded. Wildly I lay on her, kissed her: eyes, her lips, her stretched neck beating, woman's breasts full in her blouse of nun's veiling, fat nipples upright. Hot I tongued her. She kissed me. I was kissed. All yielding she tossed my hair. Kissed, she kissed me.

A gorgeous scene, filled with love, brimming with sunlight, color, adoration, the smell of flowers, Bloom, flowerbloom—

I wake to a large wasp-like thing slamming itself vehemently against the glass of my window, buzzing frantically, trying to get out. Panicking, rolling out of bed, I'm met with the sight of my roommate's boyfriend, wet

from the shower, trying to cover himself. I resolve to leave Oxford for a little, thinking maybe it'll help.

Shadow of my mother, I go to Dublin.

Joyce once proudly declared that if Dublin “one day suddenly disappeared from the Earth it could be reconstructed out of [his] book.” But, on my way from the airport, walking past Thai massage parlors and Bánh Mì shops, I feel that he might've been wrong—Dublin can't be just sex shops and Asian stuff. This Dublin is alien to me, alien to *Ulysses*. Where Barney Kiernan's pub should be there is instead a something called “Escape Room.” I stand back, squint at the building, try to summon a sense of awe. I want to take a picture, to at least complete the ritual of worship. But seeing a woman on the sidewalk, smoking a cigarette, looking at me, I leave instead, cheeks burning, the New Yorker's perennial shame of seeming a tourist.

Walking Dublin, there are flashes of familiarity, some more founded than others. I spot the giant department store Clery's, or at least a plaque that declares that it once existed. I visit the newspaper offices, a proud but abandoned building. I see a couple familiar names, pasted on random establishments: Kennedy Coaches, a store called McDowell's, a place called Citizens Information. I sense, despondently, that whatever I feel I do largely because of an urgent desire to do so. But I persist, searching for *Ulysses*. The bar where the Sirens sang in bass and baritone, the text itself transposed to score, is gone, but Ormond Quay is still there, Bachelor's Walk is still there, the Liffey, of course, is still there. Joyce embraced serendipity—when Martha Clifford writes in a dirty letter to Bloom, “I do not like that other word,” his editor, a Frenchman who did not speak English, printed instead: “I do not like that other world.” I, who hung on to every word, felt that now: another world, bristling beneath this one, the real world of *Ulysses*.

But at Sweny's, something is wrong. Sweny's, the Chemist's, is preserved to be exactly as Joyce saw it, or so says the very old lady behind the counter, reading *Finnegans Wake*. Dusty tinctures sit on dusty shelves. The tile is cracked. On the counter are stacks of lemon soap. The old lady tells me, in a book called *Ulysses*, the main character, Bloom, buys a bar for his wife.

“Yes!” I say, excited. “I'm reading it.”

She's interested. “Oh, are you?” she says. “Are you in school then? What school? I read it in school, too.” She speaks quickly and quietly, in a qua-

vering voice. “I went to Trinity College, it’s right down there around the corner. We had the most amazing lectures, but back then we didn’t have guidebooks. Right now I’m reading *Finnegans Wake*, and I’m using this guidebook, by Don Gifford, it’s very helpful.”

“I’m using Gifford too, actually!” I interject. “He was actually a professor at my college.”

“Oh!” she says. “Where are you from? Which university do you go to?”

“I’m from the US,” I say, “I study at a place called Williams College. But right now I’m studying abroad in the UK.”

“Oh,” she says, nodding. “So where are you from?”

“I’m from New York,” I say.

“So your university... So you’re from...”

This would be confusing for anybody, but I think I know what she’s asking. “My parents are from China,” I say. “My school is in the US, but right now I’m studying at Oxford.”

“Oh,” she says. Then, suddenly: “What the British did to us was really bad. Really really bad. You know—”

“I know,” I say.

The store sells postcards, totes, books. I buy a postcard for €5 even though I’ll never send it, and don’t particularly like it, because she tells me she made them herself. She tells me, ringing up my money, that they do readings there most days, if I want to come today or tomorrow, before I leave. I check the schedule; today’s reading is in German, tomorrow’s in Portuguese, and I understand neither. I thank her and leave.

The next morning, I resolve to bike to Sandymount Strand, where Stephen, miserable, angsty, feeling usurped, looks upon the water to meditate on life and death and art. At the bike sharing station, I stand behind a guy in an orange jacket who is taking a very long time. I feel a great desire to stay out of it but a great desire also to get a bike. The bike racks are full; there are two people, with bikes, waiting for us. One of them shoots me a meaningful look. I go up to orange jacket guy. He apologizes and says the machine isn’t working. I tap the buttons for him; he inserts his card. It’s declined. “If I pay for it with my card,” I say, “will you pay me back?” He agrees and I pay. The terminal tells me that an unreturned bike will charge a credit card €150.

“Return it,” I tell him, menacingly.

“I will,” he promises. “Also—where are you going? Can I come with you?”

And so he comes with me.

At first, before I concede, I try to talk him out of it. It’s way outside of Dublin, I say. I’m doing a thing, I say, you wouldn’t get it.

But after we’re here, I do the opposite. I tell him about *Ulysses*. How it plays with *The Odyssey*, makes it its own. How its premise is one of extreme arrogance: here is a masterpiece—but I can do it better. And how *Ulysses*, at the same time, in its inception and its execution, is a portrait of incredible kindness.

In 1904, I tell him, Joyce, young, talented, but down on his luck, becomes drunk and belligerent at a pub and gets in a fight. A near stranger, a man named Alfred Hunter, rescues him, feeds him, brings him home, tends to him. Joyce, it is believed, based the protagonist of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, on that stranger, raised him to the stature of a mythical hero. Bloom, on the surface, is not quite Odyssean—belittled, cuckolded, and above all, Jewish. But he’s a Joycean kind of hero:

“What is your nation if I may ask?” says the citizen, all of them in Barney Kiernan’s pub.

“Ireland,” Bloom responds. “I was born here. Ireland.”

He’s ignored. When this happens, more often than not, Bloom stands down. He is not Odysseus, skilled in all ways of contending. He seeks peace. But this time, he interjects:

“And I belong to a race too,” he says, “that is hated and persecuted. Also now. This very moment. This very instant.”

“Are you talking about the new Jerusalem?” the citizen asks. You can almost feel the mockery, the derision in his voice—especially if you’ve heard it before.

“I’m talking about injustice,” says Bloom. “It’s no use. Force, history, all that. That’s not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it’s the very opposite of that that is really life. Love.”

I tell him why we're here, on this beach, about Proteus, the third episode of *Ulysses*. How the prose is stream-of-conscious, changing shape, hard to hold—Protean, like water, like the tide. I had pictured myself sitting in the sand, looking to the sea, being moody. But the water's all gone, all dried up, and there's a person with me now. We talk about music, about coding, about Guatemala, the conversation ebbing and flowing.

"By the way," he says, now, hours after we've met. "What's your name?"

I tell him, "Lisa," and I tell him why, that it's a name my parents chose because they could pronounce it.

He tells me his is "Holman," and he tells me why, that his parents had looked for the closest English equivalent of his real name, how it was only later that they realized their son's first name was a surname.

Later, we go to the Temple Bar district, not anywhere Bloom sets foot. "This is where all the music is," Holman says. He's right: there's music leaking out of windows; music muffled and released by doors, shutting and opening; music quivering in the puddles. Joyce's Dublin, transposed. Inside, we drink whiskey, listen to an Irish man sing about California, sing in Gaelic, sing *The Black Keys*, *The White Stripes* (upholding the lid he (who?) gazed into the coffin (coffin?) at the oblique triple (piano!) wires). A Siren song, a swan song to close the day.

The next day, my final day, hungover at the National Library of Ireland, I'm stopped on my way in.

"Hey! You can't go in there," says a man with a heavy Irish accent, standing up from behind a counter.

"Why not?" I say, rudely. By now, I'm wary of men behind counters, behind a pair of glasses, a sliding window, asking, aloud or not, whether I belong.

"What are you here to do?" he asks me.

"To study," I say, curtly, wearily.

"Where are you from?" he asks me, curious.

"The US," I say, hungover, wary, weary of being wary. "My parents are from China."

"Oh," he says. He leans forward, conspiratorially. "I ask, you know, because my son, he's from Korea," he says. He's leaning over and showing me a

picture and talking to me in a low, fierce whisper, before I realize, suddenly, stricken, what's happening. He's being kind to me—showing me a picture of his son, tapping the photo with his finger, talking about the way his cheeks flush when they drink, both his and his son's. He's laughing, a loud, wheezy laugh that bounces through the marble lobby. Then he's back to leaning over the counter, whispering intensely at me, shaking his head. "This idea of every nation for itself," he says, passionately, "this focus on borders—this idea is too powerful, now." He sighs. "Up there on the second floor," he says, pointing vigorously upward, "we have an entire room, an entire floor, for visitors to trace their ancestry." His speech is fractured to me, difficult to follow through its accent, its pitch, its passion, but I register a ferocity and a sincerity in what he says. "We need equality, we need peace," he says, sighing. "Anyway—" he adds, abruptly. "I won't hold you back. Good luck with your studies."

Inside the National Library of Ireland, green lamps glow like incubators; beneath are fed and feeding brains. This is where Joyce worked, more than a century ago, young, bristling with ambition, waiting to take flight. "Welcome, O life," he wrote. "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."

My phone buzzes. It's a Venmo payment from Holman. "thanks for letting me tag along for your Ulysses adventure!" it says. "it's awesome how when traveling, a fortuitous encounter can turn into a special day. best of luck with school and your thesis!"

Joyce fancied himself to be Daedalus, famous artificer, Greek hero, labyrinth-maker, naming himself "Stephen Dedalus" in his works, writing a novel called "Stephen Hero." But I thought, then, reflecting, that the real hero in the midst might be Ariadne, who came years after. Ariadne, who held the string and led Theseus, slowly, lovingly, out of that same labyrinth. It's one thing to build a labyrinth, something complex and dense and mysterious. "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries," Joyce wrote. It's another thing entirely to leave a labyrinth.

At the end of *Ulysses*, Bloom, "the childman weary, the manchild in the womb," in his own bed, finally, sleeps. "He rests," writes Joyce. "He has travelled."