

Bruce Guernsey

Nobody's Home

“So, you ask me the name I’m known by, Cyclops?
I will tell you. . .
Nobody—that’s my name. Nobody—”

—*The Odyssey*

“**G**uernsey—that’s an odd name to have,” said the bespectacled teller, squinting at my passport. And so it is back in the United States where there are not many of us, but it shouldn’t be too strange a name here, I thought—not here on Guernsey Island. I’d already seen it half-a-dozen times on the ride in from the airport, branded on service trucks and buildings, and now again on the very bank where I was counting my pound notes. Why, even *they* had “Guernsey” on them because, as I was discovering, this independent little island near the English Channel has its own currency.

“Odd” or not, at least they spell it right, I said to myself, a relief from home where “like the cows” is what I’ve always told those trying to write my name. *Our* name, I should say, because I’d come to Guernsey Island to represent my family and to find out where we’d come from, the search for roots an American pursuit no matter the color of skin.

This trip and its timing were also of special importance to my four siblings and me. A decade ago our father had disappeared from a VA hospital in rural Pennsylvania. His acute Parkinson’s Disease led him to wander off, and he did so for good one day in May. My brother, our sisters, and I took part in a massive search to find him but he’d simply vanished. Though his remains were found a few years later by some hikers, I know deep inside that I’m still searching, and what better place to do so on the tenth anniversary of his disappearance than the island that bears our father’s name?

And what a place it is, too: twenty-six square miles of granite coastline and lush green valleys off the coast of France where roughly 65,000 people live and work

or have retired. “The happiest people on earth,” according to a survey reported in *The New York Times* a few years back, and as impossible as such a survey might seem, the “Guernseyman” and woman have every right to be so happy: the taxes they pay at the flat rate of twenty percent go directly to the island’s own government, the “states” of Guernsey (taxation *with* representation, that is); the weather is always temperate, kept so by the Gulf Stream—it stayed around 65 the week in May I was there; and most people live on locally caught fish and homegrown vegetables while breathing sea-fresh air scented by over sixty varieties of wildflowers that paint the island in yellows, pinks, and blues.

Such travel-poster facts alone would be enough to attract anyone to this paradise, but I’d come for reasons far less defined, ones I hoped to discover. I jokingly sought to find some long-lost and very wealthy uncle—heirless, of course—but found to my confusion not a single Guernsey in the phone book. It occurred to me later that a name is more important when we leave a place than when we’re there. It’s the little bit of soil we carry with us as Leonardo did “da Vinci,” or college students do with a decal of their alma mater on the rear windshield of the family car.

According to an article by Gregory Stevens-Cox supplied to me by the island’s archivist, the earliest known Guernsey in the New World probably sailed with Jacques Cartier in 1535 on his second voyage when he discovered the St. Lawrence River. One “Guillaume de Guerneze” is listed on that voyage’s manifest. “Guillaume,” as the archivist, Dr. Ogier, informed me, was frequently a name associated with bastard children, so maybe that sixteenth-century uncle of mine was searching like me for more than just a place to spend a week one spring. Maybe he was looking for his father, too.

Ideally, sailing to the island, instead of flying, would have been my choice, coming back to this imagined home the way others like “Guillaume” had left it centuries ago. I wanted the excitement of seeing its coastline from a distance on the horizon: the island rising and falling in front of me, but *there*, green and rooted. I wanted to be Odysseus, I guess, home after so many years, but stepping from the noisy, two-engine plane onto the island’s small runway, I was just me. No mythic hero, just me and my memories.

“That smell,” I said to myself, stretching from the cramped plane and breathing in the Guernsey air. “I know that smell,” and I was suddenly back in the dairy farms of upstate New York where my father grew up. I was greeted not by the usual fumes of fossil fuels but by the rich and fertile smell of cow manure. While not ambrosia to everyone’s nostrils, the smell of something organic, of grass and growth, and at an airport no less, would suggest to anyone that they’d arrived in a different kind of world. For me, it was one much like my father’s private Ithaca:

Schoharie County in the Catskills where we went each spring to reconnect the family ties and where I learned which end of a cow to milk.

Incredibly, out on that tarmac, I had quickly traveled back to my father's world before he'd moved downstate to the hurried pace of turnpikes and his life of sales. I stood there elated, then suddenly depressed: the closest my father ever came to this special place were the beaches of Normandy, thirty miles away, around June 6, 1944. I was born that year, although my father never saw his first son for many months after. He went to shore in the second wave of troops, and the many German gun emplacements on this peaceful island suggest how terrifying that must have been.

The next morning, with a camera, not a gun, in hand, I set out on my first full day on Guernsey to make a Christmas scrapbook for my siblings and my kids, and for their many new cousins. Snapping close-ups of purple foxglove and panoramas of endless white daisies, I found myself stepping down into a ditch—for irrigation, I figured, but it was far deeper than that, chest-high. Entangled in vines, I fought my way along the rock-edged trench until in front of me there was a hollow, a hidden opening in concrete, and I climbed in.

Whew! Talk about smells! The stench of a thousand *pissoirs* practically blinded me. Gone was the bouquet of the endless flowers outside. Gone, too, that rich fertile fullness I smelled at the airport. Now I was indeed Odysseus, but in the Cyclops' cave where the one-eyed giant hadn't stopped peeing since classical Greece, so it seemed. Or more accurately, six decades ago when the Nazi gunners who once stood in this same battery could have blown away a man just like my father had he come ashore fifty yards below.

Remnants of war like that emplacement are everywhere on Guernsey. They are as hidden, too, just as they were in my father's imagination. In the five years the island was occupied, using captured Belgians and Poles as labor, the Nazis constructed an underground hospital and tunneled through the island's Precambrian granite to make dormitories and fuel depots. Some of these locations remained a secret until well after the war. One such tunnel goes under St. Saviour, a small and lovely church nestled in a wooded valley. Cynically, the Germans figured no one would bomb a church and so such tunnels would be safe. They also posted sentinels in St. Saviour's picturesque steeple for the same reason.

Keeping his war-time memories in his own kind of underground, my father never talked about the war other than to say it was over, but I believe his experiences in it drove him to work as hard as he did. Both running to and running from, he set out on his own to sell life insurance and was a financial success. He'd been hollowed out inside, however, and those trips back to the farmland were meant to make him whole. The war had displaced my father just as it did the people

of his namesake island and, as it did, of course, around the world. When the Germans took Guernsey—they could do so because of the island's proximity to France, and they wanted to as a symbol of taking something British—many of the women and children were evacuated to Great Britain and the deep fabric of this island was forever torn.

In a country pub one day for lunch, I couldn't help but notice the accent of a gentleman near me who didn't sound the least bit "Guernsey," a distinct, non-English dialect that's tinged with remnants of Norman patois. He sounded more Scots, like Sean Connery. Discovering more in pubs than I did in books, I learned of his separation from his homeland at three years old and of his formative years spent in northern England. "It was tough to come back," he said, "and my brother didn't." Just as our Civil War displaced New Englanders and Southerners alike, so too did the young of this island go to the mainland because of war, dividing families, making new voices.

Or making you question your old way of speaking, as happened to my father. Despite the many self-improvement courses he'd rise before dawn to study, "haywire," "hogwash," and "happy as a heifer in heat" remained his favorite expressions. In the suburbs of northern New Jersey, a long cultural way from where he grew up, such language didn't help him get into the fancy golf clubs to make important financial connections. He never went to college yet wanted people to think he had. His words, however, were not the educated ones from Princeton or Yale but from the farm, his metaphors from some place like Guernsey Island. In suburbia such poetry gets you nowhere, and so he struggled even harder to succeed. Like the mythic Willy Loman, my father was best a carpenter and planter; like the late Doug Guernsey, Willy would have been happy here, too.

They would have loved the hundreds of greenhouses where for generations the island has produced most of the tomatoes, especially the cherry, for the United Kingdom. Those little broiled rubies that accompany the Royalty's bacon and egg each morning probably came from under these buildings of glass. Though fragile, they are powerful symbols when set against the Nazis' cold bunkers which, like the Cyclops' monomaniacal gaze, are blank and pitiless, waiting to feast on human flesh. In number and spirit, however, the greenhouses win: they are everywhere, gathering light. So many times, when looking across a valley, I could see a sheen like water: each long glass house, the pool of a river.

And, yes, there are cows, colored golden russet with patches of cream, ruminating on it all. I remember as a kid trying to milk one, but I went on to do other things better: a child, like many Americans in the year 2000, of the suburbs and college. But I was back now on one of those week-long trips to our family farm. On a green, green island, "Nobody's" first son had landed. I'd hiked this little world of

war and peace without a map in a symbolic search for my father and found what I didn't know I was looking for: me.

The last night on Guernsey I walked a few blocks from my hotel down to a point along the beach. I climbed up on some rocks that looked curiously organized, a large flat piece of granite horizontal to some huge verticals that balanced it. From there I could look east toward Normandy better than from any of the German bunkers near it, and there were several. Little did I know until I uncovered a vine-tangled sign that I was perched upon a Druid dolmen. Having, alas, no flask to lift a toast to eternity, I took a piece of gum from my pocket instead and sat there chewing like my bovine cousins. "Like the island," I'll say from now on, knowing truly how to spell my name.

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