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The Place Where You Are

Gabriel O'Malley

We moved to 21 Sparks Street in Cambridge in 1974. A bright yellow triple decker with a red door, it stood at the head of a dead end populated by worker cottages that had once been home to servants who worked up the road on Brattle Street. It housed three women. The oldest, Mrs. Crowley, ancient even then, lived on the third floor. Her daughter, Louise, known to me forever as Mrs. Sughrue, lived on the second floor with her adult daughter, Cathy. Before renting the first floor apartment to my parents, Mrs. Sughrue invited them up to her place. My father played the piano and recited some lines of Gaelic poetry to Mrs. Crowley. That sealed it. They were in.

Three years after we arrived, Cathy gave birth to a round-faced, red-haired girl she named Danielle, whose existence made it four generations of women under one roof. Over the next twenty years, only one man ever visited them. He came when Mrs. Crowley died. He came when Cathy died of a heart attack in her forties. I do not know, but I am sure that he came, too, in the 1950s, when Mrs. Sughrue's husband, a Cambridge police officer, died prematurely. When they were just two, grandmother and granddaughter, living together with the pain of loss, he came on Sundays for short visits.

When he rang Mrs. Sughrue's doorbell, I would rush to our front door and place my eye at the peep hole. The vestibule was always dark, but the man's figure—slow moving and hunched—was distinct, as was his starched, white collar, which stood out against the blackness. I knew from my father that the man was not from St. Peter, up the road and where Mrs. Sughrue was a regular attendee at Sunday Mass. I came to learn that he traveled from what seemed like far away—North Easton, where he was a priest at Stonehill College.

Shortly after he disappeared from view, I would hear Mrs. Sughrue open her door and welcome him into her living room and then listen as her heavily carpeted floor boards creaked under their movements. I knew from my own experience that she would offer him cookies and a beverage—soda, juice, or tea—and that he would sit on her plastic-covered couch under whatever dim light filtered through the mostly shuttered windows. What they discussed remained a mystery.

A mere ceiling between us, and with ethnicity as a bond, our worlds could not have been more different. On the first floor, our living room was flooded with light, with books lining the walls, and a pull-out couch that was too cumbersome to unpack but that still slept what seemed like a constant stream of visitors—many intellectual, some Irish, none priests.

The dead end 21 Sparks fronted was also divided between worlds. Alice, another working-class Irish American woman whose husband had died, would often join Mrs. Sughrue to sit in white plastic chairs on the cement under the late afternoon summer sun. Millie, an African American woman whose husband's habit of wearing a white tank top reminded me of Fred Sanford, lived across the driveway, and she would sometimes pull up a chair and join them after working in her small garden. They were a discerning crew, tough until you broke through, but warm and loyal after that.

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The others were different: a Boston University professor whose parents had been missionaries in China when World War II broke out, a renowned Goya expert, a Jewish criminologist who played jazz in his free time, and the owner of a high-end fish market. They were worldly, had experienced money, even though some no longer had much of it, and had attained professional success. They never sat outside, and sometimes they butted heads with the others (Mrs. Sughrue was horrified by the BU professor's unwillingness to regularly wash his car), but, by and large, everyone got on, and some drew closer over the years.

My parents stood between these groups. Our last name, my father's brogue, my mother's religiosity, her presence at home during the day while I was growing up, her unaffected warmth, and the fact that we had little income were all markers for acceptance by Mrs. Sughrue, Mrs. Cowley, Cathy, Alice, and Millie. Those with education and professional success saw their own points of connection with my parents. My mother, a writer, and father, a composer who founded a literary magazine, were comfortable in their milieu. They had lived elsewhere and attended college. They were interested in ideas as much as people.

The neighborly juxtaposition in and around 21 Sparks was hardly rare in Cambridge in the 1970s. Large areas beyond Harvard Square, where the Red Line ended, were relatively isolated and heavily influenced by ethnicity or race—the Irish dominated patches of North Cambridge, the Portuguese parts of East Cambridge, African Americans had a foothold in Central Square. But cheap rents, the long shadows of Harvard and MIT, and the city's reputation as a countercultural capital ensured a constant flow of new people into established neighborhoods, resulting in a landscape that continuously balanced old and new.

By the late 1990s, when rent control was a memory and the local and regional economy was pumping money into the city at an unprecedented rate, that balance had begun to fade. But the city has retained its personality even as it heaves with a different energy; despite its population boom, the continued cleaving of rich and poor, and runaway technology and biotech economies that have altered entire neighborhoods, Harvard and MIT remain, and, at bottom, the city is still a small town with big ambitions that tightly packs a mad array of cultural difference within its seven-square-mile limit.

It has always felt different elsewhere. I felt unmoored when I moved to Philadelphia for college, New York for law school, and, more recently, Washington, DC for work. In the morning now, when I listen to the radio while shaving, I hear reports of towns I cannot place, roadways I have never traveled, and metro stations I have not passed. Of course, there is excitement in this, too. It has been said that travel expands the mind. The newness puts our senses on high alert. And there is always a rush when one stumbles onto a wonderful place for the first time. If one is curious, and adventurous, one begins to see past the surface apparent to any pedestrian and form connections to the new place. But that takes time, commitment, and, finally, a decision to embrace change and alter one's definition of the word *home*.

Many do it. My wife emigrated here. So did my father. Like so many others, they came for school and stayed to follow their dreams. For my wife, that meant becoming a philosophy professor. In eleven years, that journey has taken her from Atlanta to Boston to South Carolina to Washington, DC. It has not always been easy. With each year here, her understanding of this country deepens, but so does her sense of alienation. Not fully American, and no longer fully French, she occupies a netherworld inhabited by immigrants who remain between. Still, even as she tells me stories of her childhood in Nice—the little house in which she grew up, the back garden with lemon trees, the pet turtle whose shell once cracked and left him exposed—it is clear that she has moved on from that place and embraced the newness that surrounds her.

My father, too, has moved on. He follows the news in Ireland and travels there every few years, but he has been in Cambridge for two-thirds of his life now and it is home. The stories of his youth—tending to his uncle’s farm in County Mayo, playing cowboys and Indians on Old County Road in Dublin—hang in memory, but the immediate connection—the land on which the memories were built—has been lost. When he and I were in Ireland a few years ago, a cousin of mine asked him whether he ever regretted leaving for America. “It was the best decision of my life,” he responded, and it became immediately clear that as much as he may have missed aspects of his homeland when he came here, he came ready to embrace this country as his own and as his home. Now, when we walk the streets of Cambridge, a house or a person passing by will send him into a layered recitation of place and person. The immediate object is linked to a person or event, which itself is linked to a person or event. A successful retracing leads him back more than three generations to someone’s long-lost relative who committed a shocking crime or ended up in a mental institution. Better yet, both. His interest is undiminished by the fact that neither he nor his ancestors were here then.

For others, like me, who are less courageous and more narrow-minded, childhood memories and one’s own family history drive a sense of place. In Cambridge, it seems that every street corner holds a memory, or a key to my personal history. The elementary school my mother attended, the bar my father and his brother opened, where my parents met, the past apartments of uncles—they are the backdrop to the normal to and fro of life, as are the places of my own formation. The basketball courts where I spent hours playing, the pizza shop where my mother spoke in Italian to the owner, the “big store,” as I called it as a child, to which my mother and I took the 71 or 73 bus what seemed like every afternoon when I was little to shop for dinner and where I bagged groceries one summer during high school, have all changed, but they still exist. The memories pass beyond the city’s borders, of course, to Boston, the suburbs, and down the Mass. Pike to the more rural part of the state, where, past the Cummington town fairgrounds, up a steep hill, and across from a dairy farm, my grandfather still lives with woods on two sides and a cow pasture before him.

This spring, my wife was offered a faculty position at Northeastern. Soon, we’ll be moving back with our two young boys. My wife is excited to start her new job and ready to re-embrace Boston. I am happy to be coming back to the only place I have ever considered home. But we have already been formed by our own experiences; for us, the return is welcome but not transformative. The move matters more to our boys, who are still too young to have the imprint of a geographic home on their memory. Like my parents did with me, I will tell them stories of the past as we pass people and places, and their existence will become embedded in the history of this place. By dint of exposure, they will come to understand not only the topography of their own family history but the broader cultural currents of the region. In time, they will become New Englanders.

They will carry this badge with them wherever they go, but it may not become an anchor that moors them here for life. They are, after all, their mother’s offspring. I will encourage them to explore the world as she has and to settle wherever they are happiest. But the status quo is strong. Like so many New England–raised children, with their parents here, and friends and family around, they may end up, like their father, right back where they started, even if they leave for a time, their sense of place defined by where they began. And, one day, forty years from now, they may pass 21 Sparks during the routine of their adult lives and recall that their father used to tell them stories as they passed by, about how the structure once had a red door, how a police officer’s death marked the beginning of a lonely era of loss within its walls, and

how a priest from Stonehill used to pass through its vestibule on his way to comfort a widow and an orphaned girl while a little boy looked on with one wide eye from the other side of his family's front door.