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## Ulysses of Embra

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### Abstract

A critical day in the life of Leonard Rose, an Edinburgh (Embra) criminal with undertones of Homer's Odysseus and James Joyce's Leopold Bloom. He thinks of his son, Stevie, whom he has not seen for fifteen years. After his morning ablutions he attends the cremation service of a notable lawyer, who had ties to local crime kingpin, Big Sam. Leonard is shaken by visions of the people he murdered for Big Sam. Stevie is waiting outside, accompanied by two detectives. Leonard is told that his ex-wife, Penny, is setting up Glasgow gang boss Boy 'The Boiler' Boyle. Leonard takes the police to his bar, the End of the World, aware that Big Sam's number two, Nessie, is following. After knocking the policemen out and overpowering Nessie and his men, Leonard and Stevie go to Big Sam's palatial home. When he understands that Penny intended to betray Big Sam as well, Leonard deserts his son and goes home, free of emotional and professional ties. He decides to leave Edinburgh and go inland, where no one knows him. But before that he will knock on his female neighbour's door, hoping she will give his attentions a positive reception.

**Keywords:** Ulysses, Embra, Leonard, Rose, Stevie, Big Sam, Penny, Nessie, Boyle

Dawn's not very early rosy-fingered light. Leonard Rose knows he's dreaming but still reaches out for his son. Fifteen years since he's seen him, Stevie eight at the time, crying head down. They never speak on the phone, the wee lad wouldn't and now it's too late. His mother, trained as a seamstress but keen so very keen on bettering herself, took him abroad. Last heard they were in Greece on the island of Crete. That was no use. Leonard's passport expired years ago and he can't get another, his name long reeking of carrion. The only travelling for him is mental, aye mental.

Draws the curtain. Sands stretching to the firth, mucky brown and seagull-shit-spattered, oil tanker low in the water heading for Hound Point

to warm the citizen cockles of Scotia's capital. He cocks an ear and hears the howls of dogs on the loose, galloping over the beach and tearing up the streets. Dogs of Warriston, bitches of Wardie! He laughs. Wit, man, you're full of it, an educated man, you are, even did Latin at the school.

He empties his bladder pish plit and washes the detritus out of his eyes, walks unsteadily to the kitchenette. And how will you break your fast, sir? We have oatcakes, two. We have eggs. Egg. And a packet of kidneys, how many days out of...fifteenth of March, one, two...thirteen days past their sell by. Unlucky for some, but my luck's the Devil's, patronus sanctus of criminal bodies.

Leonard Rose loves the smell but even more the taste of pigs' kidneys in the morning. He doesn't care for any other offal, refused to eat it when he was a lad and they had little else. Offal, off-fall, except it doesn't. It's sliced out by a laddie in an off-white coat with all the other unmentionables unspeakables uneatables. Strange to be squeamish considering how he earns his bread. Or oatcakes, two.

Fries the wee beauties, leaves them a little bit pink, laps up juices he shouldn't, Leonard Rose connoisseur of the dirty. So said his employer, who knows plenty about dirt, who's in it up to his oxters and savours the aroma through both nostrils of his eagle's beak. Sam Deavish, a man grant you but not gentle, no very far from gentle more like raging bullish under his pelt of striped wool and silk. Large though, eighteen stones testicular at least. Big Sam loves his Scotland, loudly proclaims the Nats while taking every man woman Scot for slave or victim. They're burying one this morning what's the time? Nine-thirty, Christ the supposed Saviour, only an hour and a half to get to the crematorium and I haven't shaved for days, will be scraping away with the duller than Dunsinane razor. Better use the switchblade, I keep that one well honed no never. It's for the job the precious profession. Shall I take it? For shame, to a place of cremation? No blood there, everything desiccated and dry brush.

Leonard Rose manages to get most of his stubble off though the razor's finished full-stopped fuckt. He does what he has to in the toilet bowl, breathing only through his mouth, nothing worse than effluent nothing worse than your own. Dresses, brushing cat hairs, must be from the stairs, silly heifer on the ground floor with her long-haired what is it,

Persian? Eurus and sou'wester blowing them up bang boom. And the shirt salmon king of fish pink, Big Sam will glower at it even with the black tie. Too bad. The only other's flowery pink yellow blue swirls and splotches nice but no way hosey at a funeral. And the shoes black all right but scuffed have I got any polish no fuck it spit then.

Two buses he needs. Runs out the house, legs screaming too old for this racket several marathons too old but guys like me can't retire, work till we drop dead aye or someone drops us. Come on the bastard bus is round the corner I'm waving like a loon ah he's stopping. She. Morning lassie, all smiles is Leonard Rose. Not returned. What is it with the young women? Wish I could drive a bus. There's adverts all over the sides, Come and Give Us a Test Drive. Like anybody's going to let me loose with a double-decker lethal weapon. Morning son, move over. He's not saying anything either. Sniff my armpits no I'm fresh. The youthfuls of today yoof they call themselves. Punch them in the moof aye.

Change chariot in Leith. Where are they, the ladies of the mid-morning? There's she blows but I wouldn't. Well maybe. How're ye doin darlin, I say, going local. High as a kite I suppose that makes it bearable. The laddie down below is interested but that's just the black straps and tight jeans. She's no goddess, no port in fair weather never mind a storm. What's the time? Walk on by, aye. At least the rain's keeping off. And this bus driver's a man. Still no smiling though. Show him teeth, shit forgot to brush them.

Leonard Rose gets to the pyre house in time. Strolls down the road looking at the motors, eyeing up the men and women in fancy dark clothes. Pillars of society, representatives of auncient livings, members of one or other parliaments, councillors, ministers. Zeus above it's a hypocrites' ball, all simpering and sad-faced pretending they don't know what Big Sam and the dearly deceased got up to, forgetting what they get up to themselves. None of them know me. Some of their wives did once, more than once, but they're forgetting that. Come on there's a time and a place. Aye, usually the kitchen table before the kids returned from school college academy institution expensive the lot of them.

Aye aye, says Big Sam, leading us in to the chapel. Took your time, Liquid Len. I hope you haven't partaken.

No, boss, no. Besides I'm early am I not, Nessie?

Sidekick numerus unus, what they call the consigliere in the Godfather and he's bald like the older Robert Duvall, giving us the eye but not deigning to speak. I smile, making a synaptic note to tickle his Bentley's tyres with my trusty blade not that blood-dimmed razor.

In the third row chests out like pigeons on parade, we listen to the funerary orations. Alistair MacTavish-Smith late of these lanes and links was, we hear, a fine upstanding character, a lawyer of the highest calibre, a generous donor to charity, a loving husband and father. Right enough where are his offspring? The only one in evidence is Peter on day release from Peterhead ha with his right wrist cuffed to an officer. The others, two girls and a boy by his first marriage and three boys from his second how did he keep up, are otherwise engaged, translation they hate their old man's guts, lights and liver. Kidneys too, for sure. He spent his time anointing Big Sam's ego not theirs, which is why they off-sprang being like Zebedee far over the sea to where there's no extradition treatate. Which Big Sam liked hugely as he became unchallenged king of the Edinburgh underworld. Had ease in Hades ha ha.

Leonard Rose looks to his right. The widow swathed in sombre shades is sniffing in a scrunched hankie. Big Sam's been into her for years, she being years younger than Ali Tav-Smith and fresh as a shower in summer. She was worth putting the moves, I was besotted and lust-blinded five years back. But Nessie got wind and warned me off just as well. He's got that on me if I ever get above myself, ambition fading like snowdrops in spring.

Then he sees them filing out behind the minister, faces wet and crimson, wounds still open and pumping. They speak to him, no one else hears or sees, only Leonard Rose. Their killer.

You did for me Robert Dalrymple in the shadow of the Tron though I was a loyal servant of our shared master. You smiled as you took my life. I will have recompense.

Will you indeed in your pale winding clothes? Leonard Rose not smiling now.

Two others step closer. Consigned us to the wave-mothering firth you did and laughed. You'll remember our names.

Joe Tennant and Adam Younger, mouths gaping for precious air, how can they speak? Traitors they almost brought Big Sam down, deserved everything they got. So why am I shaking why am I frit?

You owe us a life, they say in unison, monotone tuneless duet.

Then the fourth comes close, the siren Fiona Ferguson red hair tangled, lips I devoured now bleeding and broken, head drooping dead flowery on her shoulder.

I didn't deserve what you forced on me, Lenny Rose. I gave you everything and you broke my neck. You owe me.

What is it, Big Sam whispers, elbow big in my ribs. Keep the peace.

Must have been making a noise, fool that I am. Get the breathing in order, watch as the coffin disappears behind the green curtain green meaning decay degeneration demeaned not holy fire. Walk out as dignified as Dignam with the crowd of shades. Shake the widow's hand and exit into the sun.

Two polis, I know them, detectives on our case for years, waiting across the yard. No way they'll try something here. Wait who's that with them?

Leonard Rose blinks and stares. Looks at the young man between the policemen. Your typical not smiling yoof. But the line of his jaw and the shape of his nose, the curl of his hair and shape of his shoulders – like looking in a full-length mirror.

Stevie.

Behind the gorgeous boy, ramparts of the castle grey stone frowning. And Big Sam not too happy himself, nudging Nessie who gives me the glance of what the halls of Pluto is going on, licking his lips like Cerberus with three bones. And I'm

Stevie, lad, is that you, what a surprise you could have told us you were coming

And polis number one is

Your son's been helping us with our enquiries, Mr Rose. Which is more than anyone could ever say about you.

They're laughing, full aware that the clotted cream of Embra society is curious but too wary to intervene never mind interfere. Big

Sam's barrelling to his car without paying me any more heed.

I catch my laddie's blue oculus. You done something son?

Shakes his head.

He's cooperating, Len, says the other polis. Why don't you?

Leonard Rose is thinking don't you Len me son I've done mortal things to bodies who said less.

Will you come with us, Lennie?

Staring at the coppers like they're bog men I am and Stevie's begging though he doesn't speak. He's jammed up so I take his hand feel the warmth of my blood but young it's good.

Why did you come back son, I say, smiling at the Calypsos and Circes who pretend they've never met me never mind the rest me.

It's Mum, he says, looking in the other direction. She's

Mrs Rose is a person of interest, says the polis behind the wheel.

She took up with Boy Boyle, says Stevie.

The Boiler? Can't be true.

She did, confirms the other polis, a grinning demon enjoying his sin too much even for Mephistopheles. We're using her to nail him, coffin and all.

Stevie innocent as a lamb, I'm wondering. Songs of innocence and

I'm using my experience, thinking quickly clear. Boy Boyle, Glasgow's Napoleon before Elba never mind St Helena of Crime with the private number of everyone who counts on Scotia's stony shores, he's Teflon-plated triple thick.

Speaking aloud, I have a thirst on me laddies and I could do with a bite.

We have orders, Mr Rose, we

If you want our corporation – looking at Stevie and smiling – you'll make sure we're well fed and dranked.

They give each other bulging bullock eyes and comply.

Where to then, Lennie? You're paying mind we don't get expenses any more.

So up the hill and past the stone facades that keep the ripest secrets, not that the owners ever admit the purveyors of pain and pestilence to their enemies. No burgundy wine for us none of the finest cheeses

fermented in la belle France but rather

The End of the World, I say. Where they will all go down in gulfs of blaze and brimstone. Adding

Are you well, Stevie? How long have you been back in the homeland? Days, weeks, surely not months? And never an email, text or pretty carrier pigeon.

Boy wouldn't let me out of his sight, I mean his heavies' sight.

Who are in the car behind us I don't say and Nessie's boys are two behind them suitors all for my humble throne of dogsbody and disposer of unwanted bodies souls and minds, service included aye.

Dismount the polis wagon, no shame paid or displayed for transgressing the double yellow. Inside at speed Leonard Rose is raising three fingers to the elderly barmaid. Time to string the bow.

Mine's a double, says one polis.

Mine too, says the other.

Mr Rose's pleasure. He brings their heads together in a cyclopean dunt. They drop, drinkers moving out the way and the pistol comes across the counter.

Dad! Stevie like a wee boy taking years off his father, pulling him up short

As the Boiler's men come in like a herd of quadrupeds panting and globe-eyed. And Nessie close behind tight-sphinctered with a view to a kill.

Up goes the big gun, they know its missile goes through two heads or more if not the full twelve.

Where is she, bonnie boy? says Leonard Rose, nodding and knowing.

The Glasgow oxen lowing mournfully, sunstruck in Embra.

The crack of doom across the front one's flattened nose, blood spitterspattering Nessie's chaste white shirt.

Jesus, Len, he starts then stops when the dead metallic eye peers at him.

Ask again.

The lead ox tries to step back, quivering and sodden when the hammer pulls. Yelps, fuck he's got her Big Sam has.

Crack once more and crimson avalanche.

No lower deck language in my pub, says Leonard Rose, believing now. There being a lady present.

The barmaid weird maid cackles handing him the rope.

Check their pockets, Stevie, get it round their necks, tight as you can.

The place clears of drinkers, doors snibbed and bolted.

Good sweet nurse, says the King Leonard of the End of the etc, keep them a while. So my once and definitely not future Queen Penny is at Sam's, Nessie? You wanted rid of me you told the emperor of dirty money I'm a traitor knave of course you did. But did you know she's working with the polis too?

I did, says the traitor true.

You have another rope do you not, sweet nurse? Put it round this one's neck and haul away till his eyes snap crackle and swivel.

Sister Ure as was, surgeon's helpmate in her salad crème days, nods agreement, knowing not to terminate the vital spark as well as crush all mobile phones beneath a heavy hoof.

To Stevie, come, take Nessie's car and pedal to the metal so the lord of lies and flies doesn't suspect who's coming.

They thunder Zeus-like over setts and tar.

Pleasant here says Leonard Rose, do you not think Stevie? Green go the grassy slopes, birds in bushes, salt water view all the way to the hills over the water. Are you not missing your anfractuous Aegean isle?

She won't talk to you.

Doesn't call me Father, fair uncomfortable with it, don't blame him. Decade and a half since he called me Daddy. Epiphany in a sunbeam. He's gone for good bad and everything in between.

Let me get this straighter than the gate, son, look at that idiot nearly hit us with his silver Mercedes sleek as a shark. Your mother's with Big Sam and she's helping him bring down the Boiler yes?

He looks away but nods.

And the polis thought she was going to bring them Boy's head on a plate, apple between gravy-train-stained jaws, before they lost faith and



picked you up to make her sweat?

What? Aye.

Left up here past the sentry box, army here when we had one, colonel of the regiment brigadiers generals all the king's donkeys. To Big Sam's palatial pad. Nudging him – and she was to bring them Big Sam too?

Till you woke up. She flew more drugs in and out of Crete than Daedalus could have.

Good they give you the classical education over there. Stop the car.

He does but only when he hears the words twice.

Out you get, go on with you.

Watches the angry son in the mirror after doing a volte face appropriate enough and drives away. Calms down as he sails back into Embra central. Ditches the wagon in the car park opposite the St James Centre, demolition not before time eyes still sore.

Slopes down Leith Walk like the sailor home from the sea who's had enough of home and is going back to his sea home. Sailors don't stay still can't abide the land. Same with the juvenated Leonard Rose, yoof re-embraced. Embra finished Stevie sundered he's old enough to make a life she'll help him. Nothing I can do for his lost soul he's Penelope's now and forever. Fare well fair face.

Decides – go inland and be a shore man no more, to hills and lochs to peat and sweet water. Plant an oar where they've never seen one, commune with his land and his bottle, bonnie Scotchia.

But knock up the nymph downstairs knock first on her door, ask if she wants heroic company pay no heed to the white-haired cat. She said no no when he tried a month ago but hope infernal springs eternal

And aye she'll say aye I will Aye.