

Due to Planned Works

by Andrew LONGHOFER

Rachel's first trip to England didn't go as planned.

First, her credit card was declined when she tried to buy her Oyster card. An email later explained that her lunch in the Heathrow terminal had triggered a fraud alert in spite of her call to the company before she left home.

Then, on the way into town, scheduled works forced her off of the Piccadilly line and back onto the surface to take a bus from Acton Town to Hammersmith; the five-minute trip by Tube took forty-five in surface traffic.

Ellen greeted her at the corner across from the Gloucester Road station. Rachel had never been as adventurous as her sister; where Ellen had struck out after college and moved to London on a whim, she longed for certainty and security. Ellen's confidence had served her well: within days, she had a job and an apartment; within weeks she had found friends; and within a year, she was living with her boyfriend Mark in Kensington. Rachel's reserve, by contrast, left her lonely and bored with her job producing local morning news. But she wasn't bored any longer. The station was in financial trouble and let Ellen go because she "wasn't a bulldog."

Ellen tried for days to get Rachel out of the house. There was so much to see! The Tower, the War Rooms, the Eye, Westminster, the West End, the Globe: Rachel had read about them, and wanted to go, but her frustration kept her in the garden. She knew that Ellen's life was exciting from her pictures and their phone calls. Seeing it, though, she slipped into jealous depression.

Until, that is, she picked up Mark's copy of *Finnigan's Wake*. Her favorite professor had written his dissertation over the book; and though it seemed hopelessly dense, Rachel kept a copy on her desk at the station, swearing to attempt it someday.

"Oh, I've never read it. I tried once, but never got past the first page." Mark reached for the book and examined the cover. "But try

it. Ellen has always envied your brains. Maybe you'll have better luck."

She took to riding the Circle line for hours reading and re-reading each page, baffled by Joyce's triple-meanings. After five days, ten pages had exhausted her. *Finnigans Wake* went back on the shelf.

It was Friday. Rachel's flight back home was Sunday. Ellen had asked her to join her for lunch near her office: Rachel would take the Piccadilly line, change to the Northern line at King's Cross, and meet Ellen outside of Mornington Crescent.

She climbed down the stair at Gloucester Road to the Piccadilly platform just as the train arrived. The compartment was nearly empty; an old Pakistani woman clutched her purse and examined her warily as she took the seat nearest to the door. Then, just as the buzzer sounded and the doors slid closed, a man slipped through.

He took his place opposite Rachel and positioned himself against a railing. He was young, late twenties. His chestnut hair lay unkempt but easily across his forehead. His steel-blue eyes narrowed as he dug for something in his leather briefcase.

The squeal of brakes made Rachel jump; the train lurched forward; the windows darkened.

He stood there, barely leaning against the handrail, swaying with the train. He held a copy of *Finnigans Wake*. She studied his face for any sign of confusion: furrowed brow, slight grimace, glazed eyes, any evidence of the struggle Joyce demanded. Nothing. He understood it, as she never had done.

For two stops they were frozen, he reading Joyce, she reading him.

Then, the train stopped. The doors opened. He looked up from the book, craning to see where they had stopped.

"Covent Garden." Rachel blanched; the name of the station betrayed the attention she paid him.

He looked at her for just a moment, his face blank and eyes clear. After a moment, he flashed a grin, clapped the book closed and stuffed it into his bag, and made for the way out.

She was stunned. She expected confusion. Suspicion. But a smile?

She should stay. Ellen was, after all, waiting for her. That was, after all, the plan, and after all, Rachel had always tried to live according to plan.

But this hadn't gone as planned.

As she stood to follow him, the doors shut, and the train pulled away from the platform.

