

"How pure, how dear their dwelling-place"

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An extract from the Portora years. First months of 1886.

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"May I open my eyes now?"

"Be brave, be strong, in the name of your God. We are almost, almost there, I promise."

"Jack, do you have even the slightest notion of how difficult it is, navigating cobblestones and whatever dirty road you are leading me down, with one's eyes closed?"

"Well, that's soon fixed" he counters easily, with a finality that feels like just-made honey, and grabs me by my sleeve.

As soon as he touches me, I never want him to let me go again. A pit yawns open right under my heart, and I know that I'll plunge to my death if he lets go.

So, obviously, I have no choice but to jerk my arm away from his gentle fingers.

I can hear him inhale, hesitation so brief it almost wasn't there at all. He grabs me again, this time circling my elbow.

Well, then. This round goes to him.

(Again.)

Pavement, people, stairs.

He navigates the world with such ease... Like a stray dog, proud and sure in his total lack of constraints.

We go through a double door, I think.

(The whorls of his pads against the thin cotton of my jacket.)

(What if that jacket weren't there at all?)

"Here we are. Now you can open them."

His hand travels to my shoulder, almost and never touching, in perfect accord with my lids lifting.

Oh.

"Is this Heaven?" I hear myself whispering from a distance. "Was there St. Peter at those doors we just crossed, and I didn't notice?"

He laughs; his bone-white fingers tighten around me. Both expressions of a joy so pure, because born of the simple desire to just *please* another.

I hang onto threads of feelings unknown, unprecedented, gossamer lines weaving a web that, impossibly, feels like shelter rather than prison.

To say it is a library we are in is very close to be, I suspect, the understatement of the entire century.

It would be like using the words "Oh well, you know... They are blue," to describe the waves eagerly lapping at the ship carrying you to the embracing shores of Zakynthos.

It opens, nay, it *sprawls* before us, unashamed and powerful in its welcome, and I am shattered.

I turn to Jack, just in time to be graced with one of his typical, full-toothed smiles.

(A smile that un-shadows the moon of my every black mood.)

The fact he is so generous about giving them to me does not diminish their preciousness in the least.

Wait, is he...

... is he *wooing me*?

(And here you are, Patrick.

Swooning.

Swept away.)

"Come on", he says, stepping aside, letting me lead the way now. "Let's go exploring."

We do, too.

We get lost in those transmuted forests, leaves turned into dog-ears and branches turned into shelves.

Rivers of tables and words, dormant spirits just waiting to be conjured again by a hand turning a page, a finger sliding down an enticing spine.

A ribcage made of sinuous stairs, the thud of a pulse replaced by the quiet tattoo of the visitors' steps.

Right at the centre of it all there is us, the beating heart.

Our hands touching, dancing, mating over the covers.

His thigh pressed against mine, a contact so casual it feels almost distracted.

(It is not. Oh, it is *not*.)

His breath, my breath, mingling together to infuse life again to the stories we read, shoulder to shoulder.

At some point, my lips found themselves almost kissing his ear.

(Do not think about the fact that you practically have to stand on your tiptoes to accomplish this. Do. Not!)

The books protect us from prying eyes.

"Thank you," I whisper.

He turns, so close that all I see is the black of his eyes.

(... *He walks in beauty, like the night...*)

He kisses my cheek.

(I do not blush. Really, I don't.)

He winks.

(He is perfect. Like cloudless climes and starry skies.)

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He's so easy to please.

He may act finicky, jaded, superior to the facile enthusiasm of the common people-- but he denied himself so much, for so long, that every small discovery takes him by surprise and fills him with joy. The trick is to ambush him into it, and this is why I demanded that he keep his eyes closed along the way.

After all, I am not like him. I have learned early and well how to flush out my pleasures wherever I could find them, or who else would have given them to me? Therefore I ambush him into pleasure whenever I can, because I want for myself the pleasure of watching him be pleased.

This spring morning rose among broken clouds, bucking and playing on a western breeze, turning the world into black and white and then suddenly lighting up the colours in full brilliance.

I thought of my favourite place in Dublin, the place I had not yet shown him, and felt this was the perfect day.

So I collected him at his door, next to mine on the landing of the cheap, clean guesthouse we found for our first holiday together, and didn't ask so much as request him to follow me.

He stared at me wide-eyed for a moment or two, considering, and I watched curiosity and contrariness in silent debate all over his features. But when he decides on a course, he gives himself completely, as though he plunged feet first in the chilled deep waters of a lake.

He would complain, of course he would. He is keen on keeping appearances. But he came, and I was sure he wouldn't cheat as he followed me blindly through the tortuous path I made along byways and alleys, trying to confound his too-sharp senses.

I am not ashamed to admit that I also had completely selfish reasons to prolong the walk. His anticipation, mine, and the ...the feel and warmth of his arm, his elbow, that he trusts me to hold.

He trusts me to take care of him against the dangers of the roads he cannot see, and those of others' eyes which could see too much.

I am becoming addicted to his trust, and this is a danger against which I can't, won't protect myself.

What can I say? One only lives once.

When we were finally there, I felt him inhale even before I told him he could open his eyes. I believe he could already sense where we were, the quiet, heady scent giving the place away like fallen leaves in a forest or incense and beeswax in a cathedral.

And this place is both forest and cathedral, as solemn as the one and more sacred than the other, because more than one voice is speaking here in ancient whispers.

We explore, separately but never far from each other, down the Long Room with its double row of silent busts. The books seem to come alive under his gaze, the spines a-shiver under his fingertips. Watching him is exquisite.

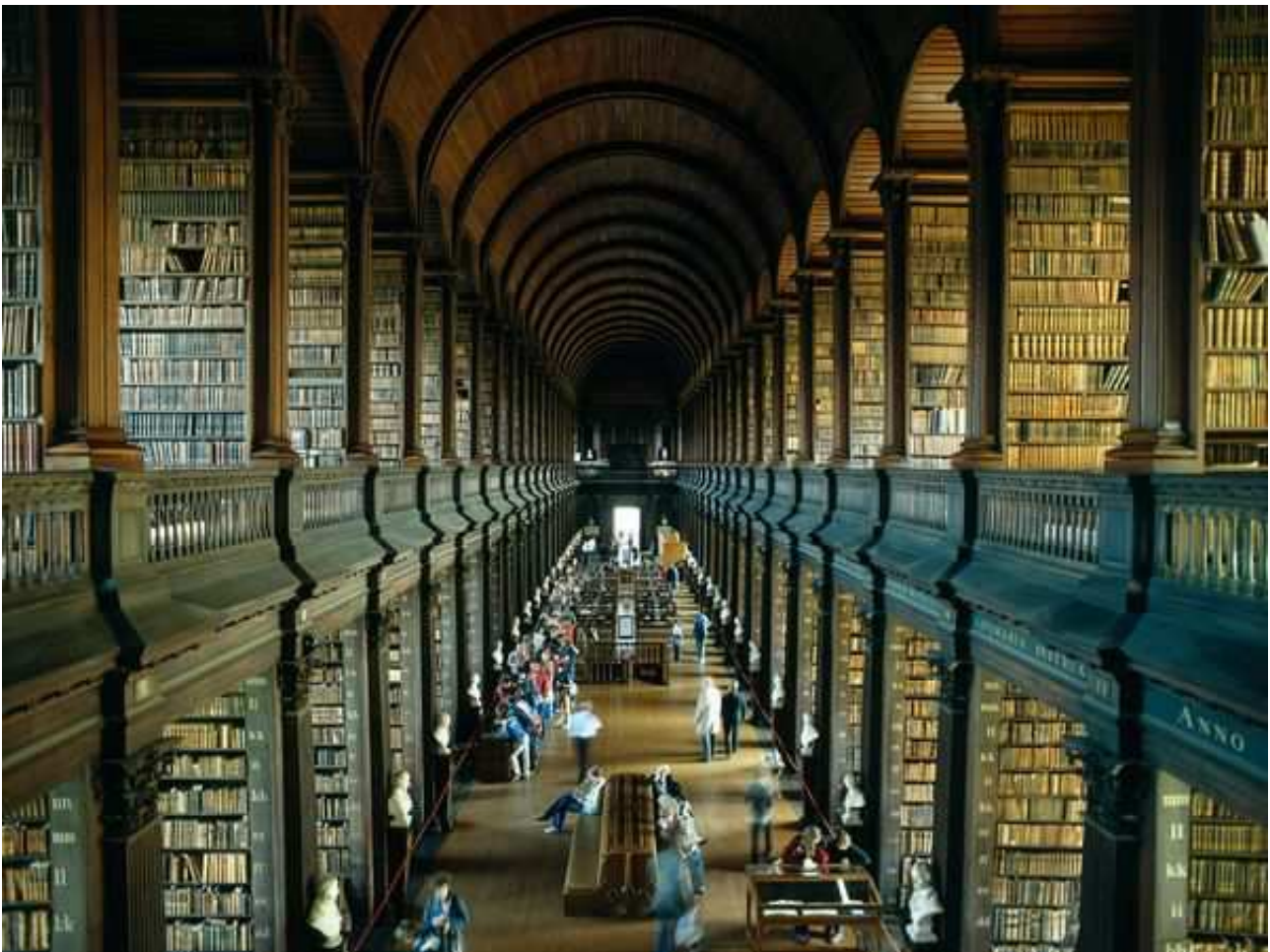
So much so, that I must find some distraction, lest my body betrays me. I stretch upwards to read the title of a book in the KK row... *Tables to be used in calculating nativities*, by Richard James Morrison, captain of the Royal Navy.

I am startled by *his* breath, warm in my ear.

"Thank you," he whispers.

Quickly, I kiss his cheek.

Marcus Aurelius looks on, a half-smile on his lips.



The Long Room in the Old Library of the Trinity College, Dublin
at <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com>

Title and quote from *She walks in beauty, like the night* by George Gordon, Lord Byron, 1814

No explicit reference was made by the authors to *Silence in the Library* and *Forest of the Dead*, epp. 8-9 of *Dr. Who*, series 4, 2008, written by Steven Moffat and directed by Euros Lyn, nor to *Cielo d'Irlanda*, written by Massimo Bubola and sung by Fiorella Mannoia, 1992, but if you have been feeling that insinuating sense of *déjà-vu*, well, this is the reason why.