

Summers at Dalnabreac

“A moment of sheer unconditional delight.” Why only a moment? Why not a day, or a week or even a whole summer unfettered by worry? A summer filled with stifled giggles and sticky fingers reaching out for sun-drenched berries. A summer seen through childhood naivety and the light filtered by trees that scrape the sky. A summer smelt through the musty pages of books and felt through blades of dew speckled grass brushing fingers. A summer truly lived.

During the summer my younger sister and I would often visit our grandparents out on the West coast. They resided in an old cottage surrounded by fields, and every summer they would whisk us away in their large blue van to stay with them over the holidays. As the collections of quaint houses blurred into the rugged coast of Scotland, my younger sister and I would stare open-mouthed at the sweeping expanse of moorland - alerting one another when a deer was spotted, or a buzzard seen soaring above with its watchful eyes. To the little children that we were, this trip (no matter how many times traversed) was always exhilarating, and still I can remember the anticipation. The delighted tapping of hiking boots on a sandy van floor, the twisting of baggy fleece sleeves and constant smoothing out of the black rubber lining the bottom of the window. We just couldn't wait.

The house itself was wonderful, looking back now. To younger me it was a treasure trove of stories and had everything to keep me occupied. Seashells of varying sizes sat by the door, some even glued to the wall, and an old caravan from the 70's stood in the driveway, with brightly patterned curtains, thick velvety seats, and a mildewy scent I now always associate with that era. The back garden accommodated a small pond, its murky waters host to slimy newts and lumpy frogs - none of which were very happy when scooped up in empty mayonnaise jars (we always returned them). If we weren't exploring the pond then we were eating our fill from the plum bushes lining the fence, our teeth tearing through purple skin into yellow flesh, juice dribbling down our chins. Our grandparents would call us inside when the sun began to dip low in the sky, and we would play with an old plastic teapot while dinner was prepared.

After dinner, we would be ushered into the avocado bathtub to wash before bed, a tiny ocean accompanied by a collection of toys that over the summers had grown familiar to us. A spiky crocodile whose jaw could be open and shut, a broad turtle that when squeezed would shoot water out its mouth and a plastic Yoshi. Our games often involved the crocodile fighting the turtle, the poor thing's only form of defence being a weak spurt of water. When squeezed under the bath water it would release a jet of bubbles for a dramatic death. Afterward we would clamber excitedly into our bunk beds, curtains drawn and floral covers pulled tightly up to our chins. Granny

would sit below me, beside my sister, and sing us old lullabies that though I can remember I can't seem to find their names. They were from a different time.

Our nights were filled with songs but our days were spent wandering the woods. No path was left unexplored, no stone left unturned and no Loch left undisturbed. We would lug our bicycles into the boot of the blue van, and stuff our little rucksacks with food and drink. The summer sun was a white hot orb that baked the stone ridden paths, the sky a hazy blue streaked by wisps of puffy clouds. We found ourselves grateful for any breeze, seeking solace under copses of trees, where we could rest on cool earth or search for a gurgling stream. My sister and I would roll down grassy knolls or play on tire swings, the frayed rope digging into our palms while we swung. I recall her tying daisies that she'd discovered into her hair, and they had hung, woven loosely in her thick tresses - as if she were Anne of Green Gables. Often, after running through the woods, we would stumble across a Loch, a sweet respite from the heat. Without hesitation we would roll up our trousers, wading through bracing water, our feet struggling to gain purchase on the slippery pebbles.

Our legs still wet, we would perch by the loch for lunch, untying the blue plastic bags Granny would always wrap our sandwiches in, and digging our toes in the coarse sand of the tiny beach. We might have then got hold of a stick, carrying our shoes in one hand while lazily drawing images in the Loch's shore - drowsy and full in the afternoon heat.

Then of course we would make the trek back in the trusty blue van, lulled to sleep by its rhythm, curled up in the sandy seats, still muddy and with our trousers rolled up. Those were the days when I truly felt free. The Loch had washed away any obligations, in the woods a sense of childish adventure had captured our minds, and while standing proudly atop a hill we had conquered - all that could be felt was euphoria.

It may sound simple or silly, but these were the moments where everything seemed so much more enchanting. When trees were giants, rock pools our witches cauldrons, every hedgerow hid a secret garden and each seashell sang its own song. When anything could be magic. These were the moments that brought me sheer unconditional delight.

Word count: 935