

Sgalpaigh na Hearadh

The road wound like twisted ribbons, swerving between boulders and shallow peat bogs, the Old Woman of the Moors stared up at her ever-grey sky, a heather scarf concealing her coarse stone-grey hair. We drove the long queasy roads that swing your stomach to and fro, travelling south from Stornoway. My mother spoke words I couldn't understand to women in smocks and long skirts. Their dark hair, hidden by scarves woven in seaside blues and cool maroons. With them, men in tweed and caps, heavy canes sweeping at eager collies who crept among the heather, brushing their bellies through the damp purple-brown grasses, turning soft white paws tough, and filthy. It was different here.

The smells of smokey peat, old houses and clean wool lingered between houses and shops as we passed through Tarbert. Later, we came towards fish farms, roads scarred with potholes and weathered fences which clung to the damp earth on either side. The surrounding hills held crags and quarries, sheep peppered among rocks. Over the final hill we saw the warm lights, simmering within a lace curtained house.

My grandparents' house.

Inside, I would stare at the ceiling, swaying plaster waves. I could paint in my mind the blue waves of Luskentyre, where the sun would pass under the water's surface, spreading a hymn of beautiful hues over the white sand. The room lay nearly still, the fire humming and snapping below the mantelpiece, delicate china cats and candles crowding the mantelpiece. The large armchairs stood in front of the rosewood piano and the smooth maple harp, golden embellishments catching the twinkling flames.

Brea, the little striped cat, sat on the windowsill, peering at the moonlit sea, where small rocky islands broke the line of the horizon. My grandpa read through the bible, the golden lining on each page carefully sifted by his steady hands,

slowly and carefully, his Gaelic accent swinging English like the gentle bell of a church... *Amen.*

In the morning, the air was thick with the smells of breakfast. Brea lay on top of the Rayburn, purring against the warm, thick cast iron back. Outside, the clouds opened, revealing a fresh blue sky, illuminating the Scalpay bridge. I found myself drawn to find what lay beyond the bridge that joined Scalpay to Harris, beyond the wall of hills and the rocky coast guarding it.

Closing the door behind me, the shed beside the house stood hollow. I expected a collie's eager brown eyes, but only faint muddy prints and rusted bowls remained on the cold concrete floor, his navy collar sat on top of the piano, brown with filth, but the shimmering gold tag still firmly engraved, *Prince.*

I walked along the splintered roads which dove among dips in the hills. A bright red roof caught my eye, only just balancing itself on cobbles of blackened, lichen-covered rock. It appeared to be a shed or a crofter's house of kind, but, my memories brought life to that rubble, stories from my mum when she was a child, of visits and the days with the children. In winter, the warm meals, films on the black and white telly, hot fires and warm woollen beds, and sickly summers in the boats, down at the pier. All lay as a ghost, as just a red roof and a shuddery wall of stone, sinking into the soft sweet earth.

Walking over the bridge, my face stung in the cold gale, the kind of pulling wind trying to take me like a kelpie, down into the crystal, icy waters. I peered over the edge of the bridge, the sun now above me, seals shimmered and rippled below the waters. The heather finally brushed my legs, its pink flowers like small lightbulbs in the gentle sun. I walked along the verge of the road, it was cracked without lines or a pavement to walk, checking signs in front of me, with words I couldn't read, feeling like a foreigner in my homeland.

Soon, English began to appear, 'Hirta House' then 'New Haven' lay either side, but this isn't a new haven, I thought. It's been cradled for centuries by church goers,

crofters and fishers. These big, garish white houses with wide windows, sat like ugly ducklings between weather beaten tin roof houses, and oddly shaped slate ones too, huffing out a smooth, peaty smoke.

I remember walking here, people would open their doors to you, wave and smile, ask how my family were, everyone knew you. But now I am a stranger to foreign faces, who shuffle away behind umbrellas. I found myself at a familiar dirt road 'Heritage walk to Eilean Glas' scratched and roughly painted into a wooden sign. There was a strange silence, children used to run to the loch, chatting eagerly, braiding weeds and singing songs. A strange silence which sat now like a dark fog. I stood on the pier, a blue and white wooden fishing boat bobbed in dusky brown water, the seats weathered away, her white gloss paint peeling, well loved once. I sat there and listened to silence, wondering about the stories told of Scalpay, traditions forgotten, culture lost.

I continued along the hills, straying from the path, against my shins brushed bog cotton, welcoming and soft, the sun caressed my face between the gusts of wind. Some rocks broke out of the top of a hill, bathed in the sun, which now balanced itself across the Scalpay bridge, laying beams of light, across the smooth water. A small boat soared under the grand arches, leaving a large fin of gleaming, glittery waves. As I sat, unbothered by the curious insects crawling up my filthy boots, I appreciated the silence, but at the same time, missed the noise. I sat patiently expecting. But this was Autumn, when the heather began to shift, sheep's wool thickened, and shiny white houses became dusty, cold and lonely, on sweet, silent, Scalpay.