

Memories

During winter, I loved it when a storm rolled in. Angry and inky black, the sky threatened us: a dark expanse shattered occasionally by intermittent cracks of lightning.

I remember being nine or ten – sat cross-legged with his heavy head in my lap, watching the rain stream down the windows and the fields gradually flooding just beyond the garden's edge. Chat about festivities and upcoming skiing holidays would fade as the day grew tired, the dark of evening trickling in through the curtains, like treacle off a spoon. His ears would prick at every clap of thunder; alert to the dangers of that unfamiliar sound, heard a thousand times before. The silence between the flashes would lengthen- filled by the steady *thump thump* of his tail against the threadbare rug and the sleepy *tick, tock* of the grandfather clock in the hall. A photo still sits on the mantelpiece, of us on one such an evening - curled up, asleep, in front of a dying fire.

The morning after, we would pull on our thick socks and Wellies, then fly down to the shoreline, where we'd peer amongst the rockpools for Neptune's trinkets, and kick at the kelp littering the sand. The glossy curl of a seashell- placed carefully into our bucket, alongside a small, serrated claw – was missing a tenant, but of no less value to us. Once bright brick-red, its hue had faded- much like my earliest memories of those days spent in the sand. After lunch, perhaps a crab shell – the most delicate of armour – would join our collection. Then later, in the heavy air of another pre-storm evening, we'd continue to add to our cluster of treasures. Precious pieces: amassed to be marvelled at for a moment, then discarded in a bowl on the sideboard. I still remember the best shell we ever found – a perfect spiral, uncracked and shining. It, too, made it onto the mantle.

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When Springtime came around, and the trees began to shrug off the last of the frost, we would awaken early to join the sunrise in its steady ascent into day. Though socks remained a welcome protection from the cold wooden floors in the *Big House*, when venturing into the garden, a layer or two could be shucked off - in favour of only a singular jumper, rather than three. Cherishing its final performance before the hotter months of May and June, the fire still popped and spat. But we no longer worshipped the hearth, at last risking a step away from its warmth.

My grandmother would commence Spring Cleaning – a war waged annually against the mocking cobwebs; always hidden safe in high corners, just out of a broom's reach. Skirtings were swept and windows shone, until right on cue, soiled paws would track caked mud through a spotless kitchen - past the stove and up the stairs – and she'd give up, like every year. Pursued by a pair of ever-despairing hands, the chase would finally conclude with a begrudging bark and a bubble bath. I've never liked cleaning. Instead, I'd accompany the men to the furthest-flung fields, in search of every last new lamb.

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Summer would soon emerge, having dressed herself in azure skies and sunshine. Long days spent lazing in hazy fields gave way to warm August showers, when we'd retreat inside and brew homemade jam in a stiflingly hot kitchen. The *Aga*, usually left to rest in such searing warmth, was roused just long enough to boil down the sugary concoction, then left to hibernate once again. Windows were flung open to release the heat and, after the rain, we'd join it back outside. We'd pick brambles off the bushes and sit amongst wheat stalks with lips stained crimson and teeth reddened like pomegranate seeds. Deliciously vicious, the taste tainted our tongues with striking indecision. Tart? Or sweet? I could hardly tell.

In those summer months, the tide at the sea loch receded like an aging hairline and the water was low enough that you could walk to its island, right out in the middle. I was an avid Enid Blyton fan - still am - and every year somehow managed to convince my older cousins to wade out to that unassuming outcrop of trees with me. There, we'd be pirates. Peter Pan. Ponies or princesses. Away from grown-ups and hidden from view, nothing was off-limits on Our Island. As I got older, my friends and I would throw parties. Half-swimming, half-drowning, we'd flounder- drunk- onto its sandy shores in the early hours and start a raging bonfire. Deliberately, of course.

When older still, we'd flirt and kiss - cheap spirits and Dutch courage galvanising our provocative advances like some kind of puckish cheerleader. We'd fraternise all night, until the anonymity of dark gave way to the audience of day and we'd fall asleep, entwined on the sand. In the cool air of morning, we'd rewrap ourselves in picnic blankets and sluggishly try to rekindle the expiring embers, sat in silent regret. Although, with every hour endured, our headaches would lessen, and a repeat performance became ever more likely. We'd wait until the moon smirked down at us from a star speckled sky and the constellations came out to play. Then, we'd pile the fire high and begin the dance again.

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Around September time, Summer would pack her bags and vacate the garden, her suitcase stuffed to almost bursting – full of sunshine and warmth. Autumn would appear, dutifully hauling in the colder winds and premature evenings. Brilliant, but lacking warmth; glacial shards of tired sunlight shone dancing patterns through a kaleidoscope of leaves. Auburn. Chestnut. Copper. Rust. An inferno of colour, crowning the trees in gilded splendour. Brazen Northern winds swept in around October time to caress your face with arctic fingers, painting your nose with aggressive blush. We'd retreat inside again. Outside, quilted fields were fringed by frost and glistened under sleeping skies. The hulking form of a combine harvester would disturb the dew, desperate to finish the job before winter reared its weary head. I remember the milk bottles- lined up along the stone doorstep like pale little soldiers- sitting patiently until frozen fingers moved them, one by one, to the unforgiving cold of the fridge.

My pace when walking the dogs hastened, becoming brisk; necessity, rather than enjoyment. Sometimes, not even my thick scarf could protect me from the relentless assault of bitter air. I remember one night, awakening to the wind, so loud and ferocious, I'm sure it was intent on prying open my window and stealing me away in one almighty gust. Luckily, the glass held - a final frontier before the biting cold. With Christmas just around the corner, the leaves would drop and begin to decay – wrung of their colour, they were trampled underfoot. Their fading grandeur was ignored by older eyes, in favour of the artificial glow strung around a proud Norway Spruce in every living room. You'd think their brilliant colours vulgar in comparison to the mocking parody of string lights. Their curtain had finally fallen.

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Looking back, I can't help but wonder when life shifted from the miraculous to the mundane? When did magic become a memory? Why must wonder be childlike – confined to the minds of those who are young?

All throughout my youth, the rain meant amusement. Adventure. Excitement, even! Canary yellow Wellingtons and an anorak were all the defence needed when defying any pesky puddles in your path. Or better yet, when conquering snow drifts like Ann Bancroft – the fearless (and first) woman to cross the Arctic ice to the North Pole. Now, drab slate pavements are slick with sleet – even the weather has seemingly given up on providing pristine powder. Nothing but a nuisance, black ice lies in wait to topple us like bowling pins, as we rush from the train station towards a thankless boss and menial salary. A damp dog on a morning train elicits a collective groan from the worn-out workforce, instead of a giggle - as he shakes his golden coat of a day in the slush.

There's no longer enchantment as every fat drop of rain pelts the roof. Instead it's *Shit, I forgot my umbrella again*. Or another ruined pair of leather shoes because *someone* forgot to check the weather the night before. It's problems and conflicts, and deadlines. It's *per my last email* or *I can't make it tonight* – not because you *can't*, but because you don't want to. But nobody says that.

It's something else too. It's *when I was young* or *back in the good old days*. These are the good old days – or at least, they will be. We shouldn't care whether or not the grass is greener on the other side because we should be fine with where we're standing. Looking back in ten, twenty or even fifty years I want to see things as they were, not tinted rosy. Instead, I demand they are shining, splendid and magnificent - right here and now. As I've come to a crucial realisation. *Grow up* is outlined in jealousy, in the same way that *childishness*, though flung about as a flaw, is really the epitome of the dazzling relationship we have with the world before losing it, and becoming boring. Instead, I implore we give up on perfection – or even a likeness of it.

Because what many don't realise is that we've already encountered it. Experienced it, during those cosy evenings lounging beside a fire, with a mug of hot cocoa and a chocolate Labrador. Or in amongst the flaxen wheat stalks of a warm July field, rubbing blackberry juice into denim overalls – hoping mum won't spot the stain. It was in the blanket of white that would lull the land into quiet submission and chronicle the hop of a robin across a fallen branch each December. And it was in the perfect corkscrew of that cerulean seashell. We've all seen bliss; we must only look to our memories to find it.

During winter, I love it when a storm rolls in. Angry and inky black, the sky threatens us: a dark expanse shattered occasionally by intermittent cracks of lightning. Starless and menacing – it should scare me, but it doesn't. It's not a patch on the shock of adulthood, or the fear of losing awe.