

Truth is a Cabin on the Isle of Skye

I'm sitting up late here, on the top of the world with my daughter. We are staying in a cabin, let out on the Isle of Skye. The nights are cold, the days each an equal mix of euphoric sunshine and moody overcast. And rain. There is something in the rain, perhaps in the way it rains here, that makes you feel well and truly soaked, as the saying goes, to the bone. You can feel the water seeping into your marrow. Your skeleton starts to feel like wet cardboard.

The cabin is small: built for two, or three. Its sits halfway up a small hill. A *small* hill is something hard to find on this craggy island, so I congratulate the architects. Driving up, I feel like Captain Ahab riding a mighty storm. No, it's more like riding the white whale as it breaches the surface and dives perilously back into the depths. My daughter enjoys the whole ride. Even the sudden stops followed by breathy curses as I humbly back up into passing place time and time again.

Finally, we make it to the cabin where it sits snugly amongst the heather and peat. The elderly caretaker has obviously spruced up the shabby little thing in a whirlwind of activity before we arrive, and small glaring things poke up through the organized rubble. Grit from split stones sweep around furniture pieces. Yellowed corners of geological maps peek from under bread bins. Curiously it always seems to be the same jaundiced map of the area, as if someone has lost confidence in their position on earth in this idyllic place, and continually seeks affirmation of his existence with a steady stream of maps. My daughter doesn't mind.

Instead, I watch her eyes dart to the dusty low-lipped table with a suspicious clean patch where a television would have sat snugly. Disdain. The look transforms into curiosity as she follows a suspicious curly telephone cable back to the receiver. A real corded telephone. A harrowing reminder from my past. A vintage novelty for her future.

Before we can locate the bedrooms or breach the prospect of an Internet-less world, the hurricane caretaker pokes her aged head through the door we have absently left slightly ajar.

"Hullooo," she cheerily whistles to us, "How is everything, so far?"

"Errrrmmmm," I remember to put my bags down and extend a hand in greeting, "Lovely, everything is lovely so far." Does it count as lying? She has caught us off-guard. It appears as if she is a generous, cheery landlady, but a sly one all the same. Probably owns binoculars. Probably cares about what time we decide to wake up. Oh well, it won't kill us to have some pressure to act like decent human beings. We are on vacation, but that doesn't warrant complete lethargy. "Missus Ha---

"Harrow, yes. Mrs. Harrow. Charmed to meet you, Richard." Already on a first name basis. Ah. "And you must be little Eilidh." She bends ever so slightly to pet my daughter's head. My daughter, for a second, scrunches up her little nose petulantly before I shoot her dagger looks; at which point, she grudgingly dons a toothy smile and nods vigorously, if only to avoid the overbearing hand.

"You'll be a careful little girl, won't you Eilidh? You won't be running about in the cabin or chasing the sheep about, no." All good careful instructions, though I wish I could've offered them to my daughter, myself. In the exact condescending manner I

choose, not the stock one the landlady now turns on me. “You don’t smoke, right? You said you didn’t, and just as well because no smoking in or around the cabins.”

Email correspondence made this whole escape possible. I, bored out of my wits from vague and taxing emails, may have glossed over some of the information exchanged over the Internet. It was email, though. Does it count as lying? I said what was needed like any father would to ensure a nice, tranquil vacation with his daughter.

The conversation between landlady and I continues unhealthily on, refusing to die, as my daughter stands boxed in by our dropped bags. The landlady continues on in her gracious, but sickeningly overwrought tone, admonishing us for crimes we have yet to commit. My daughter looks like she might need to use the loo. At this point, I’m pretty sure I do, too. I am just figuring out how to beat her to it when the landlady leaves abruptly and I find myself alone in the kitchen, surrounded by luggage. It must not have been an abrupt end to the conversation because my daughter has already located the single water closet and locked herself in it in the time it takes me to realize the banter is finally drawing to a close. The beginning of the battle for the bathroom.

“See, you can only travel so far before your cord runs out. It’s stretchy, though, see? So it springs back when you return to the base.”

She still looks puzzled.

Day one on this beautiful island, and we both refuse to stir until well into the afternoon. When I awake, I hear the rain roaring outside my cracked window. I lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, listening to the patter of raindrops. There is little other noise: no motors, horns, or noisy neighbors. And very little light. It is almost two o’clock in the afternoon and my room sits in comfortable grayness. The rain clouds must have strangled what little sunlight would have seeped in through my East-facing window. It is...nice.

I lay like this, too tired to move, but too awake to drift back to slumber. There is another noise, poignantly set against the leaky tones of the deluge. My daughter is stirring upstairs in the room above me. I imagine her sitting in her own grey space, testing her eyes after just waking, then recognizing the sound of water against the windowpane. The original tensions of consciousness must have been soothed by the realization that the day has been put on hold. Rain check.

Or, perhaps, the disappointment of a day spoiled has made her even tenser. She could be sitting under her covers clenching and unclenching her tiny fists while fighting back tears. No, she’s too old for that. Sighing, she would be sighing and kicking the covers about.

Perhaps she’s not disappointed, though. She could just be full of young energy. Straining to hear any life from downstairs, she’ll be testing her own patience. After all, what’s good about getting up if your dad isn’t awake to make breakfast? Now, it’s only a matter of time...

I hear my daughter’s feet, one by one, swing over the side of the bed and plant on the floor above my head. One tug, two, three and a rewarding squawk signifies the opening of the jammed door to her bedroom. Softly padding, she descends the stairs, hanging off of the banisters, letting the wood squeak ever so slightly under her miniscule weight. Then into the bathroom next to my room. Damn, I should have beaten her to it. I really have to pee.

I hear a flush, then a hesitation as she contemplates returning to the grayness of her room or turning off in the hallway to wake me. It must be good fun waking a parent. Sure enough, my door cracks open and my daughter tentatively tiptoes into my grey world. She's old enough to request I knock before entering her room, but young enough to disregard any notion that I might wish the same. Silently she slips into my vision as I squint, one-eye closed in mock reverie. It must be good fun waking a parent. I wonder, though, whether I get the better end of the deal: it's also good fun seeing that simple amusement on her face. She's almost too old for the simply amusing things: socks on your ears, breakfast faces. I try to remember what to look like when I wake up before she pounces. She pounces.

"Yaaarrghhh..."

"..."

"Good morning, Eilidh."

I begin to feel bad about all my mental badmouthing, yesterday, in conversation with Mrs. Harrow. If she comes off a bit pompous, she does make it up in near tidiness and basically stocked fridges. I had worried that breakfast might be the remaining packets of crisps from the car journey, but lo and behold, eggs! And bacon! The top shelf of the fridge is neatly packed with breakfast waiting to be fried.

Maybe it's not too late. Eilidh apes the smiling plate I set before her. She then looks to see what face my plate is making. It's as if she doesn't look to me as the breakfast faces' creator, but rather looks to the other plate to catch some inside joke passed between tight-lipped bacon and happily squinting eye-eggs.

"Why isn't yours smiling?"

It is very hard to make proper bacon smile. The feeble American stuff is thin enough to make into a recognizable smiley face. True bacon, the salty kind that actually looks and tastes like meat, is exactly that. Meat. Much harder to sculpt into iconic and easily recognized emotions. I confess I cheated by using two pieces for Eilidh's.

"Errrrmm." I paraphrase. "He is happy! Hold on, what do we have here?" I point with my fork to some invisible oddity slightly behind Eilidh's left ear. Gullibly, she swivels in her seat to catch the interruption, and sneakily, I direct the fork downwards and nick a piece of her bacon. Good, now mine really is smiling.

"I don't see anything..." Eilidh swivels back around and looks, puzzled, at my guilty grin. She looks down to see whether I have picked up on that juicy breakfast gossip between meals, and spots the difference.

It takes a while for her to speak to me again; which turns out to be just until the end of the meal, but it's pretty long for her. It wasn't so much the betrayal of trust or theft that wounded her so. More of the embarrassment of a dad with such simple taste in jokes. Inevitably, the washing up is left to me. I don't mind.

Nothing is planned for the day, except perhaps a bit of exploring. I dig around the ancient stereo system for some form of aux cable. Ah. Here it is. Now for some music while I wash. I'm secretly glad Eilidh has scurried off to enjoy the cabin. It leaves me the privacy I enjoy to whistle while I work. Well, dance while I wash. Whatever floats your boat.

My daughter comes racing back in and I have just enough time to carefully replace the glasses I had been juggling moments before in time to the beat. Her nose is

scrunched up again, despite finding me in my respectful dadly posture. I wonder what's—

“I'm bored. This place is tiny.”

Well that was easy enough.

“Here, I'm almost finished.” I give some final twists to the last tumbler with my drying rag, “Then let's put some wellies on and go for a walk?”

Her eyes narrowed.

“I mean, errr, explore the place.” Eyes widen again. “Come, let's find some wellies.”

Proper wellies are hard to pack. They take up a lot of space, and you don't want to break the rubber by folding them. It means the water seeps in when you least expect it. No, our wellies are safe at home. These all would have been good arguments to protect the fact that I downright forgot to pack them. I didn't realize there would be so much peat. Luckily, Eilidh doesn't know to blame me, yet, whenever something goes wrong on holiday. Surely, though there must be some wellies about in this Scottish cabin.

We go rooting around the single cupboard, which is stuffed full of pointless, broken things. Three vacuum cleaners lay dormant under paint thinner and old lanterns. And then...luckily, two, three, hold on. More rooting around ensues, mostly by me because there are some dangerous things knocking about in here. Four. Effectively two pairs of wellies I root out from the inevitable mess.

Eyeing them, I take the larger pair and tug them on over my jean-clad legs and wooly socks. Eilidh watches curiously, spooked by the clattering of the closet and mud-green of the boots before her. My maniacal, hopping dance to pull up my own boots puts her at ease, though. Good. Soon after snorting at my show she turns back to her own newfound pair of old Wellingtons. She steps into them and it's my turn to snort. They swallow up her little legs, much too big for her. When she tries to walk in them, she has to wade and waddle. She pulls a face.

“Well, there's nothing to do about it.” Glares. “Really, it's awfully muddy out there... And you don't want to stay cooped up in here, do you?” I see her peer, intrigued, into the sticking darkness of the closet, a thought forming in her mind. It dawns on me she may just turn this place upside-down before she goes tripping out in those boots.

“Alright hold on, hold on.” I improvise. I lift her easily out of the boots and plop her on the stairs. “Wait for me here.” I then scoop up the boots and proceed back into the kitchen. I whip out a pair of cooking scissors, the really short and scary ones. I proceed to cut down the tops of the wellies. Once one is done, I take a few steps back and squint at it with one eye; and, with the other boot braced against my leg, I begin to shear it down.

When I'm done, they are roughly the same height, and torn to hell at the top with my hacked scissor job. Oh well, they should be a better height, now. With another stroke of inspiration, I run to my designated room and reach into my opened suitcase. After rooting around, I yank out a wad of thick, woolen socks. Finally, I return back to Eilidh as she perches on the stairs.

“Here,” I offer her the wooly socks, “Put a couple pairs of these on.... Good, now,” at this point I pulled the new, shortened pair of old Wellingtons out for her perusal, “How about trying these, now? Custom made, especially for you. Seven-league boots.”

She says they look natty. I venture that they look punk. Post-modern, I try. Very cool.

Eventually, she puts them on over her two layers of wooly dad-socks. It was more to humor me and get out of the house, I think. Anyway, they follow her feet as she lifts them: she no longer has to wade, but they do catch on the ground, every now and then making her trip. We finally make it out of the cabin; clad in our boots, newfound or custom made, and crinkly Macs in case it rained.

It does rain. All the way up the hill we trudge and it pours the whole way. In fact, it's all uphill and wet. I marvel at the size of the cow pies, explaining to my daughter why we shouldn't crouch so close to the interesting lumps on the road. She takes the new information surprisingly well, and slowly stretches back to full height, a bit green at the gills.

"Hey," I console her, "At least there means there are cows about. Perhaps proper Highland coo." I'm getting excited, myself at meeting these shaggy fellows. My traveling companion lightens up at this prospect.

"What are those?"

"The greatest coo that exist," I embellish, "are the Highland coo. Massive beasts, they are."

"Massive? Bigger than you?"

"Much bigger. With great curved horns larger than both of my arms. Their eyes are like saucers, but they're hidden by the thickest, warmest, rusty-brown fur. But don't worry," I assure her, "They're the friendliest monsters alive."

We spend the rest of the afternoon on a coo hunt. On more than one occasion, I think I see one off on a hillside, but it turns out that it's just a lip of reddish mud peaking out through the heather. Alas, we don't even meet a regular, non-monstrous cow. Cow Road the yokels call it and not one bloody cow. So many bloody sheep, though.

Eilidh finds them fascinating. They do not boast wicked horns or shaggy pelt, but they deter her for a short while from her serious hunt. Every time she sees one close by, she races after it, hand outstretched hoping to feel their puffy vests.

"Real cloud," I remark.

She snorts, but I can see she's believed it a little. Her fingers stretch just that much more as she trips over her ill-fitting boots.

We return to the house soggy and covered in mud.

"I'll draw a bath, shall I?" Eilidh nods vigorously as she peels back the layers of sock.

"Look!" She points proudly to her foot. "It's still dry!"

I grin at the little dry patch on the arch of her wool-clad foot.

"Mine, too, see?" I stand precariously on one foot, bending the other up to my down-reaching hand. I whip off the sodden sock and plant my foot back on the ground. Eilidh hasn't seen how wet it is until it's too late and I'm wringing it out over her partially dry accomplishment.

Squealing, she knocks the weapon out of my hand and slips and slides through the hallway back up the stairs, leaving a puddle of water in her tracks. Meanwhile, my wet sock lands with a solid squelch on the ground.

The rest of the day progresses at snail's pace. I get to take a tepid bath after Eilidh uses up all the hot water, cook lunch, and then conjure up nonsensical card games to entertain my daughter for the rest of the afternoon. I spend some time investigating the nooks and crannies of the cabin while Eilidh draws in her sketchbook. Sure enough I come across some very satisfying contraband: an old television set hastily hidden before we arrived, and a similarly hidden pack of French beers.

It's a hard decision, but I leave the television where it is. It'll be better for the both of us I reassure myself. The beers, though, I smuggle down to fridge with only a couple of side-glances from Eilidh at the kitchen table. It's a very small cabin, with very few people about. On our way looping around the top of the hill we didn't meet a single person.

Mrs. Harrow comes in unannounced at four making both Eilidh and me jump. My daughter knows to retreat into her bedroom. I do not have such a luxury. Good does come of it, though, and Mrs. Harrow-still-calls-me-Richard provides us with dinner: fresh fish. Salmon. She also provides the knowledge that a van carrying a very kind fisherman and his wares comes down the hill on Fridays. Good fish. In fact, he's the provider of dinner tonight.

"It's my idea, of course." Mrs. Harrow-looks-like-a-sparrow asserts.

"Thank you very much," I grovel, not one to bite the hand that feed me. As it turns out it is very good fish when we finally get to eat it a couple hours later. I wrap up the two steaks in tinfoil after lashing them with butter, garlic, and whatever smelly-herb things I could find about the kitchen. Alongside the fish I take pleasure in cooking up some buttery rice. It's a simple meal, but we're both full by the end.

Not too full for a bit of chocolate, though, saved from the journey here. I make sure we don't eat too much, saving a couple morsels for another day: save them perhaps to smooth over some inevitable dispute or tantrum. I don't tell her this; just squirrel the packet away while Eilidh is noshing on her bit. A couple more card games and I'm tempted to teach her Texas Hold'em. It's going to be a long holiday.

Around eight I suggest we should turn in for the night. The girl looks like she's about to pout, but in the end she'll end up in her room, anyway. I hope she's pretty tired out from the walk earlier, and I didn't share too much chocolate with her. I'm a little bit wired myself for some reason. The image of the beers cooling in the fridge crops up in my head.

We're almost ready for bed when Eilidh comes back down the stairs.

"Read me a story?"

"Of course. Here, let me find one. I'll be right up."

I send my daughter off to Nod with a short story from a collection she loves full of valiant boy-princes and courageous girl-heroes. I'm sure the story tonight takes place off amongst the heather, hills, and gloom we didn't have the time to explore. Tonight, a little girl quits her abusive family and lives off on the forested mountainside. She meets various tricksters and friends along the way: a horrific Baba Yaga, who entices the girl into her stewpot; a giant newt, coiled at the bottom of the pot, that saves the girl from the witch, taking her to his home at the bottom of a pond forgetting his ward can't breathe underwater; and, at the end, a massive firefly that keeps her company through the dark night.

Little snores rise up from the lump of covers beside me just after the girl washes up on the shore of the pond, but I keep reading to the end of the story just in case. Am I eager to see how the plot resolves? Appeased by the ending, I softly shut the book, pad softly out of the room, and descend back down the stairs.

The windows are still light when I turn off to the kitchen and sit down at the table. A black etching of the Cuillins grins under a bluey horizon. I see lights blinking over on the other shore, visible from all the way across the Loch. A few minutes pass. I think about great shaggy beasts and long car rides. Old Baba Yaga landladies and paying rent. The warm spark over there across the water could be a giant firefly. I can just make out the filaments of the wings and the silhouette of its spindly legs. A few minutes pass.

I stand up and wander to the tiny fridge. I pull open the minute door and the lamp clicks on inside, light pooling on the floor in front of me and seeping up my shins. I crouch, reach in, and pull out one of the small French beers. It takes me some time to find an opener, and when I finally pry the cap free I see the subtle threads of a screw on cap. Sheepishly, the cap lies puckering in my palm, all twisted up. I close the chilly fridge door, sit down, and sip from the bottle. My chapped lips stick to the cold glass a bit when I bring it up to my lips. A few minutes pass and it's already well past midnight. Still, a glowing sky seeps up from the west.

I don't know how long she's been up, but I hear Eilidh pacing in her room. It's long past her bedtime. A small voice inside me wants to just let her work through her nightmare herself. A part of me doesn't want to get up. I do, though. Dutifully, I make my way up the stairs. The top two steps announce my presence, so I can't hesitate on the threshold. I remember my manners, though, and knock. The girl on the other side of the door stops pacing and mumbles. I take it as my cue to enter. The door squeals horribly, and I have to push my whole weight into it to force it open.

Eilidh stands silhouetted against the open window. I can see some of her hair flying loose and frizzy from where she must've pushed her head into the pillow. The room is cold and the wind murmurs from time to time over the windowsill. I don't like the way it sounds. Perhaps the wind is scaring her?

"Eilidh," I gently place my hand on her shoulder, "that wind is giving me the heebie-jeebies." I look down. The window sheds enough light on her face from this angle, and I can see her little eyes stretched as wide as they go.

"Eilidh, what's wrong?" She seems to be searching for something out there.

Silence. I can feel my daughter tense under my hand. I can see the hair on the back of her neck raised. In the horizon-glow the fine down lights up and it looks like a pale penumbra around her. Finally, she speaks.

"Can't you...?" She gulps in a mouthful of cool air, her muscles trembling in the sudden intake. "Can't you hear them? Oh, I don't like that."

"Who's singing, Dad?"

It's my turn to tense up. I can't hear anything. Sometimes the winds growl against the pane. Far off the sea gurgles. I strain my ears. I can't hear anything else.

"Dad?"

I can't hear anything but Nature. The wind isn't strong enough. I strain my eyes, trying to pick out human shapes. What I thought was ample illumination before suddenly fails me. The small twisty trees and bracken all dance in the sea breeze. Who's out there? Who's singing?

I think of the long road back to civilization. All the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tales come back to me; however, each one ends more explicitly, written to keep children in at night.

Something moves in the twilight. It rustles the bracken. My eyes snap to.
RomangoreaccursedhagsseamonstersselkiesGrendel.

Two eyes stare benignly, picked out amongst the shadows.

“Sheep.”

“...”

I feel Eilidh’s shoulders slacken the tiniest amount.

“Sheep?” She doesn’t tear her vision away from the white muzzle in the bracken.

“The sheep can’t be singing.”

“Can they?”

My own body starts to relax. Something about the irony lets me calm down.

I think.

“Sure they can.” What am I doing? “In fact, Scottish sheep are amazing singers.”

This is enough to tempt Eilidh from staring out into the night. She shoots me her quizzical look.

“They can play the fiddle, too.”

For a second I think I’ve gone too far. I think she might be old enough to see my fear through this ridiculous story.

“...”

“Really?”

Her response isn’t as sarcastic as I think it expect it to be. She seems doubtful.
Keep going.

“Who do you think taught the first Celts to play?” Her eyes light up. “Here.” I know it’s very late, but I scoop her up into my arms and head for the door. I know she’s gazing back out the window over my shoulder. I wonder if the sheep is looking back as I descend the stairs. I wonder if she still hears singing.

We finally make it to the bottom of the stairs and I set her carefully down on the couch. I don’t want to leave her alone in the dark, so I shed my wooly jumper and tuck her in before I take a couple steps and, pulling an iPod from my pocket, plug in the speakers on the other side of the small room. A couple flicks of my thumb and the timbre of a fiddle fills the chalet. The sound soothes me and, grinning, I return to my child who is waiting all swaddled up on the couch. Her shoulders slope down in comfort and as I put my arm around her I can feel her head gently nodding to the tune.

“The first fiddle tune was taught to the first lady in Scotland,” I begin, “by the Golden Fleeced Ram. You see, long before man ever settled on the island, sheep covered the hills and valleys. Every night, ceilidhs would be held across Scotland. The sheep would sing and play their fiddles of heather and wool. By far, though, the Golden Fleeced Ram was the best player. Sheep of all different colors would gather at the Ram’s ceilidh. They’d dance and sing along to his wonderful music.

One day, a great storm flooded the valley of the Ram. The wind blew and trees were wrenched into the sky. The rain poured for ages and ages causing the sea to rise. When it was all over, a ship lay, washed up at the bottom of the valley. From the wreckage climbed a lady: the first human to ever set foot in Scotland.

The sheep had never seen a lady before, much less a human being. They approached her cautiously, and when she spoke in a foreign tongue requesting food and shelter, they were completely oblivious to her needs. As the sky finally started to darken, after hours of miscommunication and energetic gesturing between the lady and the sheep, the lady heard the sound of a fiddle somewhere off in the valley.

No human had ever heard a fiddle before this, and the lady had grown up listening to powerful drum songs. The sound of a stringed instrument so intrigued her that she left the befuddled sheep that had gathered around her and went to track down the odd noises, leading her to the Ram. She reached the Ram just as he began his new set. Hidden amongst the die-hard fans of the Golden Fleeced Ram, the lady listened, finding herself caught up in the melodies of the instrument. Soon enough, the sheep around her started to sing along to the new songs. They danced, too, kicking their legs out and stomping around in the heather. The lady joined in, first with the dancing, then adding her own voice to the mix.

The Golden Fleeced Ram, normally so wrapped up in his playing, was struck by this new voice accompanying his song. As the lady had never heard a Gaelic fiddle, neither had the sheep heard the singing voice of a lady. With renewed vigor the Golden Fleeced Ram dove into a new song, and then another, until the light of the sky was finally extinguished. All that remained in the night was the lady's voice weaving in and out of the Ram's melodies and the age old sound of a thousand sheep singing themselves hoarse and stomping their feet. This continued until the sun burned the other horizon and many of the sheep collapsed in exhaustion. Never had a ceilidh burst with such energy, even when called by the Golden Fleeced Ram.

In the aftermath, the Lady tracked down the Ram. He recognized her voice immediately, and she his shining wool. After many awkward attempts at communicating, they had so much to talk about and so few ways to say it, the two finally sat in silence. Frustrated, the lady pointed energetically to the instrument tied about the Ram, questioning how such a funny looking object could create such a wonderful sound. In a never before seen gesture by the Ram, the instrument was pushed into the lady's hands. The lady was startled but soon explored the intricate device crafted from heather and wool. She plucked its strings and tried all manners of angles with the bow. The Golden Fleeced Ram was confused by her hesitance to play. After all, all sheep know how to play the fiddle from their childhood as wee lambs. Then it struck him. The lady did not know how to play. What creature does not know how to play, it thought, how absurd! The Golden Fleeced Ram, in an act of sheepish benevolence, then taught the lady her first ever song on the fiddle.

The first lady in Scotland was the first ever human to learn a reel on the fiddle. She of course taught it to the next group when they inevitably discovered the Highlands, and they taught it to their sons and daughters, and those sons and daughters to their own..."

My daughter breathes softly beside me. Her eyes are shut and her mouth is slightly agape. I know she fell asleep a while back. She was out long before I reached the resolution of my little story. Oh well. I never heard the voices singing. I never have.