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CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS IN SCOTLAND

12/31/12

Christmas is a time for family. Sadly, this year for the first time I was not able to be with my family this Christmas. Instead I was in Edinburgh, and I was lucky enough to be invited over by a friend to spend it with her family and friends. Thus, on Christmas Eve I was picked up and



FIGURE 1: QUINN DECIDED TO TRY HIS HAND AT PLAYING THE PIANO

taken to a beautiful old country estate which was shared by McAreaveys and the Parnells who lived upstairs. Christmas Eve was spent listening to Christmas music and trying to put together a 1,000 piece puzzle. I was introduced to Genevieve's mum, her older sister, Rhiannon (which made things slightly confusing at times), her younger brother, Quinn (a five year old with a ridiculous amount of energy) and her cousin, John.

Christmas morning dawned and I was woken up by the pounding of small feet running down the corridor to the living room where the Christmas tree and the presents were. There is something extra special about Christmas when a five year old is in the house. There is a renewed sense of magic, something that can sometimes be lost as we get older. Anyway, we separated out everyone's presents and the paper started flying. The McAreavey's filled a stocking for me and I also received a beautiful plaid scarf. Then Genevieve, John, and I went for a walk down to and along the shore of the North Sea.

When we got back, Genevieve began cooking the vegetables for Christmas dinner and I volunteered to be her sous chef. On finishing the cooking, we wandered our way upstairs. The house is amazing. The Parnells have been restoring it to its former glory. Beautiful paintings line the walls and a few are on the ceiling framed in elaborate plasterwork. I felt like I had stepped back in time.

For dinner there were a total of ten people sitting around a beautiful table setting. The plates had gold leaf on the edges and candles sat merrily burning in silver candlesticks surrounded by flowers, chocolate, and crystals. Dinner was a delicious traditional Scottish Christmas meal: turkey, roast ham, sautéed brussel sprouts, leeks, and onion, roast potatoes and sweet potatoes, and red currant jelly. For dessert, there was Christmas pudding, trifle, and chocolate. Christmas pudding is a semi-dense cake with sultanas, currants, and cranberries running through it, then covered with brandy and flambéed, and finally served with custard. Trifle is absolutely delicious, and I desperately want to find a good recipe to make at home. At the bottom are various fresh berries, then on top of that is a layer of sponge cake, then on top of

that is a layer of custard and whipped cream on top. The entire thing is chilled to set the custard. It was amazing.

After dinner, we did a variety of things. I called my family and was able to speak with my mom, dad, sister, and godmother. Quinn watched movies and played games with Anas, Emily Parnell's boyfriend. All of us played charades for a while before Quinn grabbed his mother's iPad and began dancing to Gangnam Style. Afterwards John played the piano while the others chatted and then the members of the younger generation began a game of Cranium. It was a wonderful night. We wandered downstairs around midnight and went to bed.

The next day was Boxing Day. Genevieve drove me back to my hostel so I could pick up a few things and then I went down the road to catch the Hairy Coo coach. The Hairy Coo is a Scottish tour company that do tips-only tours into the Scottish Highlands. It was so much fun! Our first stop was to South Queens Ferry, a small town that used to (surprise) ferry the Queen across the river so she could make the pilgrimage to St. Andrews. We then stopped by Stirling Castle, which was sadly closed because it was Boxing Day, but had gorgeous views of Stirling. Next up was Doune Castle. Doune actually means 'castle' in Gaelic, funnily enough; however, that is not why it was such an interesting stop. Doune Castle housed Mary, Queen of Scots, at one time and it was also the castle used by the cast of Monty Python in Monty Python and the Holy Grail. We then stopped for lunch in a small Highland town before moving on to Loch Katrin. Loch Katrin is absolutely beautiful. The lake's surface was smooth and reflected the snow-topped mountains in the distance. We then rode up and around a mountain in order to get a good view of Loch Drunkie, which was used to smuggle whisky down from the Highlands into the Lowlands and England. After that, we stopped to see some actual Hairy Coos, also known as the Highland hairy cow. We were given bread to feed the coos and were able to take pictures with them. One of the coos was a baby, not yet a year old. He was so cute!

That was the final stop in my tour of the Highlands. Afterwards, we were taken back to the Royal Mile and I got dinner and packed to leave, for the next morning I was heading down to York. My Christmas and Boxing Day in Scotland were amazing. Though I missed my family terribly, I am beyond lucky to have had such a wonderful experience.

Rhianna Bennett