

What is home? Is it a place? Is it a feeling? Is it the people? I'm still looking for answers. I must have some Gypsy blood as my suitcase never gathers dust...I've heard that some people are homesick all their lives. Sitting on the train, going pretty much nowhere, with my diploma in my pocket, I was nervously biting my nails and looking around, I realised that life was not in good health. My life. The professional and the romantic. It was to be the end of the world according to Mayan prophecies, but it seemed like it was only the end of my preconceived ideals of success; the great job, the flat by the river and all the urban pleasures.

Remembering something from an American literature lecture, I went in search of Emerson's 'Nature' as a remedy; I felt in need of a soul-cleanse and a break from consumerism, (because even if we do not want to be, we are all products of our commercial environment). A nature where 'standing on the bare ground'; 'all mean egotism vanishes', and we become 'part and parcel of God', truly able to meet ourselves. A nature in which 'nothing can befall [one] in life...which nature cannot repair'.¹ I feel that we need to go back to basics as a culture in order to keep our cultural heritage in the shared psyche, so that we remember how to live from the land, repair old socks and very importantly, how to make vodka!

I cannot say for certain which happened first...the recognition of the desire to try a different life, or the way my partner and I kind of stumbled into each other's lives. I was fresh out of university, and still religiously wore a hat whenever I didn't see the need to wash my hair. I hadn't more than my collection of English literature books to my name and was famed for carting about my worldly possessions in my silver suitcase which accompanied me on all adventures. At exactly this moment of precipices, crossroads, indecision and endless possibilities, I encountered a towering, handsome and much older Scotsman. The attraction was immediate...chemistry led the way. So the 'one' finally arrived in my life! I was travelling on cloud nine and painting rainbows in the sky. The euphoria I was feeling defied all logic, the world was suddenly a much friendlier place, strangers were beautiful and spring appeared in the middle of winter! We each had what the other wanted. We were in love.

I like to think that our home found us. My partner's father told us about an old cottage he had watched for years with a view to moving into, but it never seemed the right time. It had been standing empty for a year in a tiny hamlet that time forgot. We went to view 'Ladyholm' on a bleak and chilly winter's day. The house seemed to reflect the milieu outside and did not inspire us. The ceilings felt low and constricting, the house felt dark and damp, as though it existed in permanent dusk – not to mention it's state of disrepair. Nature had begun to claim the garden back for herself and the key to open the door could serve as a hefty weapon. Old, musky furniture solemnly adorned the inside, outdated and unused. We both left with a similar impression.

However, over the next days I noticed that Ladyholm became a presence in my thoughts, my dreams. I wanted to reanimate the house; to paint it and fill it with laughter and fresh flowers, it seemed such a shame for it to stand empty, falling deeper into neglect. Initially I did not share my thoughts with William, but slowly it emerged that the house had captured his imagination also. We decided to commit ourselves to one-year of (each other) and the country-side (to start with). Suddenly, I am filled with a deep respect for all those people who slave away at their dream home for years like the unsung heroes in the programme 'Grand Designs'. Our project was only to make the house habitable, which took a couple of weeks. I was in my creative element, I was building a nest. Our daily mantra over coffee was: Make the place you live the place you love, whilst admiring our twig-spun heart hanging over the table.

Although my partner William is a Scotsman who has lived 'nearly' in the country his whole life and is far more practical than myself, he has never attempted total immersion before! Naturally, being a London girl (much as I hate to admit it), I find myself also without a clue as to when one should plant vegetables or how to sand floors. As I walk through the meadows, I think of Thomas Hardy's rural England and expect to see Tess of the d'Urbervilles coming round the corner. The state of the house means that the rent is within our budget and having put so much effort into making it a home, we actually arrived into the space long before the furniture did. I sit writing at William's grandfather's bureau by the window and although I am typing rather than scratching with a feather, history surrounds me. Our home sits on a river and is leased by an old lady who lives in Australia (the perfect landlady – no surprise home visits likely!) The name Ladyholm dates back to the Knights Templars of the 14th

¹ <http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/Philosophy/Sui-Generis/Emerson/quotes.htm>

Century; a religious military order which protected pilgrims. The ladies, presumably nuns, who attended to the Knights would sleep at our house whilst on pilgrimages around the sacred wells in the area.

William's dog Caine, a nine-year-old-chocolate coloured Doberman was enjoying life in the wilderness as much as we were at first, he could at last stretch his legs in the back garden. Yet, as time went on, we felt that he may desire a companion. Each night we closed the kitchen door on a lonely looking Caine. He had been walked for his nine years round a busy loch each day where he could socialise with friends, but out here, there was only us and rabbits. And so began the quest for Caine's girlfriend. We found what we thought would be a suitable match in age and truth be told, colour, on the internet. The bitch was of the rare 'Isabella' colour, which is a sandy grey, so named after Isabella Archduchess of Austria who vowed not to change her underwear until her father Phillip II of Spain had taken Ostend in 1601. As the story goes, the Siege lasted some three years and Isabella emerged with sandy coloured petticoats and under-garments, not to mention a rancid perfume!

We packed Caine into the car and set off on the long drive south into England. Something of a collector's item in the dog world, 'Pepper' was definitely for the connoisseur, as she did not look like a Doberman, lacking the characteristic markings. The brief courtship seemed to go well – no teeth were shown as mutual sniffing took place. Caine seemed satisfied and William was pleased with this rarity.

The drive was long and the day hot, so we decided to let the dogs out of the car at a service stop along the motorway. Before we could grab her, the bitch shot out of the boot and along the motorway out of sight. Caine stood looking in bemusement between his fleeing future and us. What could we do? Poor Caine, she would rather run the gauntlet, criss-crossing a five lane motorway than be with him. I thought of the legendary Wanda, daughter of King Krakus who chose death over marrying a German, (Caine's illustrious pedigree traces back into European bloodlines), perhaps Pepper preferred to sacrifice herself rather than join with Caine? I remember being sat down by my Ciocia² when I was dating a German man, as she recounted the legend in a distinctly serious manner, reminding me that Wanda would not have thrown herself into the Wisła³ for nothing and that we should learn from history. (It turned out that my romance was indeed short-lived, but thankfully with less dramatic consequences!) Disheartened with the loss of the dog, we continued into Scotland. Things did not look good for Caine.

We pondered on why she chose such a drastic measure – had he not been to her liking? We had not thought to wash him before the date, maybe that was the problem – but so much so that she felt the need to bolt up the motorway?! Perhaps she just did not see herself as a Scottish 'lass', knowing what a long history of bloodshed existed between the English and the Scots and fearing a frosty reception of blue-painted dogs screaming "Freedom!"?! Thankfully the dog was found by her previous owner a week later.

(Needless to say he did not want to deliver her into our care again.)

Much of the joy seems to have left Caine's walks. He is inconsolable, as are we. The full impact of the incident has settled on the occupants of Ladyholm and the house no longer rings out with laughter and barking. Walks are carried out perfunctorily and dinners eaten for subsistence rather than pleasure. We need a 'lonely hearts' column for pets: mature male with gentle nature seeks companion who must share pastimes which include long woodland walks, hunting game and relaxing by the fire.

Caine remains a bachelor as yet and in the meantime we are distracting ourselves with jobs in the garden. We are aiming for as much self-sufficiency as we can manage with the resources we have. A section of the garden was designated for vegetables and rotavated with a prehistoric looking machine which ran William round the garden! When one is new at something, life sometimes throws in some luck as encouragement in the new undertaking. I decided to visit my father, who lives two hours away from us. William was in garden when I left. I later received a phone call to say that the entire vegetable patch was sown with potatoes, or 'tatties' as he calls them. The patch is approximately ten square metres – I am not an expert, but I was worried by this news – by my calculations this would be a serious amount of potatoes and I know of no way to preserve them... I estimated it would be about five potatoes to a plant, but I have since been told that it could be more like ten. In a patch that size, there could be anything up to twenty-fur plants, yielding a crop of 240 – what were we going to do with all those potatoes?! It turns out that this was the best thing William could have done.

² Aunty

³ Vistula River, the largest in Poland

Potatoes clean the soil and should always be planted during the first year on new land. They are of course fine to eat as well. If you want to grow other things there is the option of grow bags which could not be simpler, just lay the bag on a flat surface, cut a hole in the plastic and plant seeds of your choice. Oh yes, and then the waiting with dirt-stained stained nails, (always the way to tell a true green-fingered compatriot as it is impossible to clean it all out!).

Caine waits for love, we wait for something, anything to rise out of the soil and the grow bags. Our life here resembles the 'Good Life' (the television programme), about a couple who are trying to be self-sufficient much to the amusement of their ridiculing friends. Many friends have been surprised by our sudden commitment to Ladyholm, wondering if we will feel isolated or bored – some even fear they have lost us to lunacy or hippy-dom. Not yet anyway.