

Solace in Scotland

Far from home and feeling lost, comfort comes in neon.

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DARUMA IS A TRADITIONAL JAPANESE DOLL MADE OUT OF PAPIER-mâché. These red and rotund figures are initially devoid of expression, their eyes empty, vacant spheres. The owner grants them vision, painting a single pupil as they set an intention or goal; a second pupil is added upon achieving it.

I purchased my daruma in Tokyo, 2008. It was the first time in a long time I knew exactly what I wanted: To live life on my own terms, to put my dreams and myself first. Armed with a Sharpie pen, I gave that dream a name: to live and work in another country.

Today I am living in Scotland, home of my ancestors and the city that captured my heart: Edinburgh, rich in history, beauty and character. The cobblestone streets of the Royal Mile, the imposing fortress of Edinburgh Castle, the medieval buildings of the Old Town and the stone precision of the Georgian New Town all conspire to hold me here for the duration of my two-year work visa.

I was fortunate to spend my first few weeks living with a Scottish family. They took me in and shared with me their perspectives on Scottish life and culture. They brought me to family gatherings, where I was humbled to participate in the simplest of things: an afternoon of kitchen table conversation. I am indebted to them for their hospitality and their friendship.

I've since struck out on my own, sharing an apartment with two Scots in the gritty but gentrified neighbourhood of Leith. My bedroom window overlooks a busy thoroughfare, alive with the sights and sounds of the city: the rumble of double-decker buses, the muddled din from the local pub, shopkeepers, grocers and fishmongers hocking their wares alongside glassed betting offices and charity shops. Overlooking the scene is a statue of Queen Victoria, commemorating her inaugural visit in 1842.

But the dream hasn't turned out quite the way I thought they would. Instead of a career in my chosen field of communications and public relations, I work part-time at a pub for minimum wage. I count every pence and budget every pound, to make sure I have enough to pay my rent. And there are days — more than I would

care to admit — when I'm overwhelmed by feelings of homesickness, depression and loneliness.

I saw this state of affairs as an indicator of failure. I would lie awake at night itemizing where I went wrong, then spend the day sulking about what couldn't be changed. These thoughts consumed me, casting a shadow over what was supposed to be the experience of a lifetime.

Travel was the only escape; miles of road underneath my feet seemed to make this predicament easier to handle. I wandered the

quiet corners of the rural countryside, explored the contours of Scotland's biggest cities. I spoke to locals and foreigners, everyone and no one, trying to make sense of this journey.

In the end, it was Edinburgh that saved my sanity.

It was an unseasonably warm day in May when I went in search of the National Gallery of Modern Art, deep in the city's West End. I missed the bus, forgot my map and got completely and utterly lost. By the time I finally got to the gallery, I was tired, grumpy and in no mood for fine art.

As the museum came into view, I stopped dead in my tracks. There, above the neo-classical stone façade, was the

message I'd so desperately needed to hear — spelled out in bright blue, humming neon.

"Everything Is Going to Be Alright," it declared.

For the first time since I'd arrived, I could see things clearly: The journey isn't about measuring up to expectations, not even my own. It's about putting one foot in front of the other — one day, one choice at a time — and knowing no matter what direction I set out in, I will arrive exactly where I need to be.

The daruma sits on my nightstand, its two knowing eyes watching over my small Scottish corner of the world. I keep it close as a reminder of what this journey is all about. I hope it will continue to grant me the vision to see my surroundings clearly, the courage to follow my dreams, and the confidence to grasp the opportunities that lie ahead.

Breathe. Everything is going to be alright. †



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