

Author's Note

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This manuscript, for many years, was like the son I never had, an inscrutable, difficult son, who went away under sad circumstances only to show up later in life.

I wrote the story, divided into a pair of books, in my thirties, during nights and weekends when I had nothing better to do. Life, especially work and then marriage, became too consuming; so it got tucked away in a desk drawer.

Circumstances change. The prodigal child, after a manner, returns. In main, I have tried to pare it down while staying true to who I was then.

If you wish to inflict a heartless and malignant punishment upon a young person, pledge him to keep a journal a year.

– Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*

Introduction

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It was snowing all over New York that night, the kind of whiteout swirl which blanks out everything in sight, including the lay of the city, the geometry of blocks, and the long muffled avenues stretched out below. Gusts of wind rattled the large, shrunken windows in their frames eight stories up, pushing them in and out like thin membranes over a breathing soul. Had it not been for the letter which arrived that day, it would have been like any other hollow night of the week, only bleaker.

The apartment itself was empty, save for a few possessions brought down the last trip, including an old foam mattress, which had soared like a magic carpet over the borrowed VW Rabbit's roof, and assorted boxes of clothes, kitchenware, and books. In the largeness of the off-white living room, kitchen, and bedroom, they looked insubstantial, as if the first gust of wind would brush them away.

But then I, too, was only in transit, for in lieu of paying rent I bartered services by fixing up the barren condo for the new owner, a recent boss. Like most other weeknights, and weekends, I would have busied myself with mundane tasks, such as scraping off layers of paint from kitchen cabinets or glass doorknobs, and recorded time spent on each activity in a small journal, but not tonight. The snowstorm lent a festive air to doing nothing –

But watch.

Looking inside, I harbored doubts whether I could withstand the elements, my first year out of college and after repeated family tempests. For despite seventeen straight years of schooling, including kindergarten

twice after I failed sandbox, my career and other prospects appeared hazy. A series of low-paying jobs had led nowhere the last year and, alone in Manhattan, I had no family and, in practice, no friends. Which was just as well, as contacts with these distant tribes were treated with great care, as if I, or they, carried communicable diseases.

So when I opened Mira's invitation to a week-long house party in Scotland that coming summer, I wondered if this could be the answer to my diminished dreams. The heavens were parting, at least temporarily, to show me a way out from the long slog and deep canyons of my pinched New York existence.

Once I accepted the invitation and dragged myself across the Atlantic, why bother coming back? It would be much easier, better for all perhaps, to continue traveling cheaply across Europe, and then east and farther eastward, until the ends of the world if need be. I felt giddy at the thought of a fresh start.

Sleeping on the floor-mattress with an extra blanket that night, I woke to a cold sweat. But the storm had passed, sugarcoating everything in sight, while I had uncovered a mission: to lose myself in foreign parts.

Over the following months, as winter gave way to spring and spring to summer, my consuming task was to save every penny. This included brown-bagging lunch, walking the twenty blocks along Broadway to and from work, no matter the weather, and eating in every night. I allowed myself only five dollars in cash a day, mostly for food, which led me to keep a detailed list of grocery prices at several dingy Upper West Side markets and to always seek out the cheapest price, even if it meant walking blocks out of the way, burdened by hag-bags, to save cents.

When, by early summer, my well-guarded bank account reached six thousand dollars, I gave notice at work and flew back to Boston on a no-frills shuttle to surprise family with the news. I arranged the weekend like a steeplechase: a dinner with one parent, a step-lunch, followed by a meal with grandparents, saving the most difficult hurdle, my skeptical father, for last. The worried looks on their faces were

worth the airfare.

In July I left the ever-barren and still heavily painted condo and moved back to my mother's house on Highland Avenue in Cambridge. When departure day finally arrived at month's end, I plucked up enough courage to tell Mum I would never return to Boston again, or anywhere near it, until the home situation improved dramatically. She cried. I held firm. New York had not been far enough away, so now it was time to put some serious distance between myself and the places where I had, after a fashion, grown up.

Travel Items

- 1 internal frame MEI backpack
- 1 pair lightweight Merrell Gore-Tex hiking boots
- 1 two-pound one-man Sierra Design tent
- 1 loose-weave wool jacket and tie, for border crossings
- assorted underwear, socks, shirts, and pants
- 1 tin with aluminum lid, for boiling water
- assorted drugs, including anti-malarials, aspirin,
water purification pills, and diarrhea-pluggers
- 1 Lands End sleeping bag, down to 20 degrees Fahrenheit
- 1 regulation-size Youth Hostel sleeping sack
- 1 large hunting and 1 small Swiss Army knife
- assorted books
- 1 smallish American flag

1. Islay

*A*irborne, I wrote in the cold embrace of high altitude, in the first of many travel journals which would sustain me. Rushing over the dark Atlantic, I felt light with expectation, gliding on mysterious currents of air from the world over. I had written several diaries before, starting as early as age twelve, but these would be different, more urgent. We traveled alone, for one thing, so in no time my black-binded journals became my trusty companions in ink. With some trepidation, I mailed each from a faraway place, wondering if it would reach Cambridge safely. Reunited, they now stand on a low shelf in my bedroom, frayed at the edges and upright, in quiet testimony to an unreal period of my life. I open one up and, unsure of what is inside, peel back a tissue of memory.

Racing towards dawn as the night flees, evaporating above
a cold Atlantic. We wait, hurtled onward.

I couldn't sleep that expectant night, the sensations too sharp for slumber. At last I had escaped, but in the process would turn myself into an exile, rootless and lost. There was freedom in that, undertaking a trip whose scope seemed limitless, to eternity perhaps. But all this can overwhelm in a vertiginous way, so I pulled in and, with pen in hand, felt a small sense of accomplishment as each page filled up, word by word, to the rhythm of passing miles.

To look forward fearlessly is my only hope, I penned, each word a talisman of unknown reach.

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When the plane broke through the low cloud cover over Glasgow to reveal a green, undulating hillscape below, I fancied I had entered an enchanted land of long-dead, upright ancestors. No matter that my movie-flickered thoughts of Scotland were in black and white, from dark romances with foggy homes and churning seas – these could be adapted, even co-opted, into the mosaic of first impressions.

In Glasgow I changed planes to a small, island-hopper to the Isle of Islay, ten miles off the west coast. Light in the air, we bumped and weaved dangerously toward the runt landing strip at Port Ellen, wondering how we could hit a target so small. Even the island itself, stretching tentatively out to sea only to be pounded by the Atlantic, looked too insubstantial to survive the storms that brew at Europe's door.

The unreal aura increased when we skidded down the wet-dark runway and, grateful to be on our feet again, entered the lone airport building, where the girl behind the counter welcomed us with a quick grin and a melodious brogue in a flood of accent. The soft edges of her voice and smile enveloped me in a warm, misty glow, with a clannish intimacy, which never fully dissipated even after I took my bearings and lost the fuzzy dementia of sleeplessness. Though I didn't know it until later, I had stepped into a world so exhilarating and secure, so languorous and somehow familiar, it was unattainable.

I phoned the Macinlays to warn them I had arrived seven hours early due to smooth connections, and offered to explore Port Ellen in the interim. They wouldn't hear of it and asked me to wait.

When the boxy Euro-van careened to a stop in the parking lot, I recognized the driver as my college friend Mira, an apparition in blue jeans: tall, groomed, and radiant. We kissed each other's cheeks – on both sides, the Continental way – and with a touch of awkwardness hugged a sideways hug to avoid mashing breasts. To my eyes, Mira always had a Tahitian-Gauguin look to her high cheekbones, long chestnut hair, and full-boned body, but something in the ripe Scottish air particularly agreed with her.

“Don’t you look wonderful,” I exclaimed, making her blush.

“You too!” she replied, in her bashful way of throwing a compliment back at you.

I, of course, felt anything but wonderful after a year in New York and travel all night; in fact, I felt a shadow of my former self. But who knows what briny magic the Inner Hebrides can bring?

We hadn’t talked since before graduation, which made her rescuing invitation all the more surprising, so we caught up in a halting sort of way during the drive back. We had only been school chums for a year and a half, with Mira starting two years behind me, but our families were friends over several generations. This was a new and strange circumstance for me, friendship weighed with such history, yet I found it reassuring, as though nothing I could do would break the generational bond. My grandparents had all but adopted Mira while she attended Concord Academy near our old home in the Great Meadows; so as soon as she arrived in Cambridge, my grandmother diligently tried to matchmake the two of us. Since neither of us was terribly interested, we didn’t meet until well into her freshman year. Nothing romantic ever developed, though I bought her flowers several times in bursts of chivalry and might have had a crush on her early on. From faraway Edmonton, Alberta, Mira had led a painfully proper upbringing and at first curtsied her teachers at Concord, my grandmother related. While this lent her a touch of vulnerability, after a few awkward dates the potential wore thin, like some delicate undergarment never intended for the washer.

“It will be great to see you in Cambridge again this year,” she said, as we hurtled down one of Islay’s narrow lanes. “Will you come visit me once in a while again, as you used to?”

When I told her I couldn’t, as I would be traveling eastward for some time to come, she started.

“You’re kidding?”

“No, really.”

“How long will you be traveling, then?”

“A year or more, or while the money holds.”

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At the end of a long, gravel driveway sits a stone-skeletal mansion named Dartmore, in a bright white splendor edged by windows trimmed in black. Seen from the small harbor behind, three gables knife upwards from second story dormers, breaking, along with three massive chimneys, from the slate gray roof into the grayer sky above. In anticipation of a storm, which are many, the house appears to shimmer from the contrasting white, gray, and black, as if a trembling bulwark against the Atlantic.

After woozy, half-remembered hellos, I was put to bed in my own second story bedroom, tucked under a dormer, and instructed to sleep off my jet lag before dinner. Soon after stripping and lying down, I spiraled effortlessly into a blank, easy sleep in my first strange, foreign bed.

Hours or weeks later, I awoke to an odd vocal trumpeting, something like a Canadian goose with a brogue. When I reached the window and its cold warp of air, I spied the Master and Mistress of the House, Mr. and Mrs. Macinlay, returning bundled up from an afternoon stroll.

I didn't recognize her at first, for Mrs. Macinlay, or Celeste to her equals and above, wore a large turban and carried a wood staff. But it was she who was beckoning a gaggle of white barnyard ducks in a loud, distinct heralding. I rubbed my eyes still speckled with sleep.

Groggily I descended in time for drinks and introductions all around, in one of the plush but pleasantly tattered sitting rooms alive with the crackle of an open fire. Even August can be cold on Islay. The house party, I soon learned, consisted entirely of friends of the children, the young and mostly well-heeled. Mira the Eldest's other guest, named Tony, was not only the editor of our college newspaper, but had just flown in from visiting his *maman* in Paris. Diana, the middle child, had enticed two classmates from her Swiss prep school: Kate, a bouncy blond Brit with curly locks, who soon took a liking to me, and Harold, the stuffy Swedish heir to a Northern spoil, who did not. In contrast to Mira, Diana sported a carefree spontaneity with a blonder, less

painstaking beauty. I liked her immediately. Finally, there was Marc the Canadian and childhood friend of Ian, himself the youngest and ruffled only son, who promptly made me feel at home by suggesting I masturbate in my room during the down times, much to his sisters' squealed embarrassment.

The inaugural dinner, elaborately orchestrated, arrived on the wings of female servants dressed, like the house, in conventional black and white. The Macinlay men, however, wore the plaid kilt of their ancestors and, like male birds, were more colorful. With assigned seating, I found myself next to Mr. Macinlay – whose first name, Rusty, is similar to my father's – who regaled me with the history of the Macinlay tartan, a yarn which lost little currency in its retelling. I felt jealous that my own spottier heritage, with only a touch of Scotch Irish blood, couldn't justify such airy above-the-knee skirts and high socks.

Not long into the main bird course, Mrs. Macinlay told us the story of her encounter with the disturbed remains of Dartmore's former owner, on the main staircase to the second floor only several years back.

"His hands were icy cold," she breathed, "and wrapped around my bare neck from behind. I tried to scream but couldn't, and after a tremendous struggle fell down the stairs right next to the sitting room where we had drinks this evening. I mean right here!" she exclaimed.

"Like tonight, Rusty, Ian, Mira, Diana – everyone was in the sitting room, all my loved ones – but did they come to my rescue? No! They hadn't even heard me fall. When I stumbled into the room, they looked up and saw my face ashen-white. I couldn't talk, I was speechless. Only after several minutes, after sitting down and catching my breath, could I tell them what had happened.

"No one really believes me, I should tell you," she continued while squashing dissent, "but now I never, ever use those stairs alone at night."

Pause.

"Oh, Mom," Mira chided her, "you always say the same thing – how could we not believe you?"

Mira's witticism was repaid later that evening when Mrs. Macinlay

identified Harvard, where Mira had had a worse sophomore slump than most, as worse than any vengeful ghost. In a full frontal onslaught, she attacked it as a chilling and indifferent place. Since I couldn't have agreed more, I left it to Tony to defend the alma mater, in his clipped, pithy way. Tony had already lost points, by my reckoning, for insisting on a vegetarian diet and leaving the fresh slices of local pheasant on his plate, so it didn't bother me to watch him struggle under Mrs. Macinlay's verbal barrage. In fact I already sensed a small, but important, rivalry between the two of us, and all the more eagerly ate my entire bird dish with a bit of chutney.

Tuesday broke early but overcast, settling over the wings of Dartmore like a thin fog. From my well-appointed bed, I could already feel the house humming to life beneath me, an engine of social activity unlike any other. It made me feel oddly safe and swaddled, surrounded by so much determined bustling. Could the contrast with a solitary life in New York be any greater?

That morning we trundled into the Euro-van for an introduction to Port Ellen and surroundings, which included an inspiring number of Scotch distilleries whose names, such as Laphroaig, Lagavulin, Bruichladdich, and Bunnahabhain, are a challenge to pronounce when sober. The small island appeared to be awash in booze, cask after cask of it. On a tour of Macinlay property accessible by car, we visited a guest house where the Macinlays occasionally put up struggling writers in a charitable way. True to the trade, the retreat felt both isolated and drafty. Returning from town, we spotted a large, stone Celtic cross named the Kildalton, which rose out of a peaty bog and reminded us that we were but the most recent, and frivolous, visitors to this windswept isle. The very bareness of the land, covered in a kind of stony silence when the wind allows, made me wonder how anyone could possibly put down roots.

In the afternoon, we set our sights on skeet shooting under the tutelage of the tweedy gamekeeper George, who slung clay pigeons from the automatic bird-slinger with controlled abandon. Gentle on

relative novices like me, he aimed the small discs higher in the air where they flew fatter and slower for our metal seed to catch them; but for old hands like Mira and Diana, he sped them lower and faster, honing their keener reflexes. When the smoke cleared and the ringing in my ears subsided, I learned I'd nicked, bisected, or pulverized half of my allotment, for which I was duly congratulated. Mira and Diana, on the other hand, were so ruthlessly on target, each with her own personally-fitted stock and barrel, that I shuddered at the thought of dueling, in bed or elsewhere, with either of them.

For drinks and dinner, they both transformed from tomboyish Dianas to radiant daughters of the house, whose flushed beauty could be felt from the far side of the voluminous dining table. The effect was only slightly diminished when Diana drank copious amounts of single malt Scotch, Lagavulin perhaps, and giggled.

By the end of the first day, I found the Macinlays so open and welcoming, the house party so congenial and effortless, I wondered if I had, like a family ghost, known them for a very long time.

A storm brewed in the Atlantic that night, waking me early. From my gabled window, it looked as though the waves and gusts of wind crashed in syncopation along the rocky edge of the small harbor. The Macinlays' old fishing boat had loosened its mooring overnight, flirting dangerously with the stony shore. When I learned Mr. Macinlay planned to secure it, I volunteered to help. For two hours before breakfast, the fastidiously polite Mr. Macinlay directed Ian and me where to set anchors from the bobbing, wind-driven bow until reasonably confident they would hold. After each attempted set, we drifted and then motored backwards, waiting for the anchor's claws to grasp and the rope to become thin and taut – almost to the point of snapping.

By lunchtime the front dissipated sufficiently for our merry crew to go on our first of several picnics. Carrying food, drink, and extra layers of clothing, we set out on a lengthy walk to a far corner of the property, crossing rocky moors all but inhospitable to life. The Macinlays, well layered and as usual dressed for the part, strode confidently over the

land like conquering Normans. At our destination, an abandoned stone hut by the ocean, we consumed our rich picnic in the lee of the shelter, away from the wind and sea spray.

On the march home, Mrs. Macinlay started out with Mira and me, but then peeled away on some transparent excuse, leaving us to continue alone over the bogs and crevices in a conversation only slightly less treacherous. For some reason, I was finding it more difficult to talk to Mira than I had at school.

Without a moment's rest, we practiced Scottish reels that late afternoon in anticipation of a formal dance later in the week. When paired with Mira, I began to suspect the presence of a script. At dinner's pre-arranged seating, I was assigned a place next to a poised Mira for the first time and swelled with pride. Suddenly I saw myself winning the house party sweepstakes, an outcome I could never have imagined from the depths of Broadway only a month before.

So while far from born to such opulence as found on Islay, I surprised myself on how well I concealed my discomfort and recent career as a hermit, turning a clever phrase here or there. And while our gracious hosts did their best to fool people like me into believing we belonged, the atmosphere also had a competitive edge in this sleepy corner of a sleepy island gently rocking on the waves of the North Atlantic. Not only were we vying for the attention of two lovely and tantalizingly rich daughters, we were unwittingly out to prove our worth as social beings.

On a roll, I succeeded in stealing a good share of dances with Mira one night at Port Ellen's lone discotheque, and during the van ride back, while feigning exhaustion, rested my head on her shoulder in the enveloping dark of the back seat. Our spent bodies were so close, I felt through mine the gentle shakings of her laughter and thought to myself: I could get used to this.

On the following day, Mrs. Macinlay announced she was falling in love with me. I forget whether we were indoors or out, but more than one innocent bystander bore witness to my startled embarrassment. I'm

not accustomed to women, much less cosmopolitan and married ones like Celeste, telling me they're falling in love with me, so I could hardly believe my ears. Perhaps she said it partly in jest – why else the loud pronouncement? – yet Mrs. Macinlay didn't seem the type to trifle with matters of the heart. If nothing else I admired her directness, for her wealth and eccentricity allowed her to say exactly what she pleased, the rest be damned.

Her declaration surfaced like a flying fish from the depths of a dark blue lake and then disappeared into the surrounding placidness, yet from that moment on I felt a bond which neither of us mentioned again. Could it be true, I wondered?

Perhaps unnecessarily, I scored more points that evening when I refused to let a poker game end for fear of winning everyone's sucker money, most of it in quarters. The game, I argued, had ended prematurely, as I had folded my last hand not realizing I would have to keep my little hoard. When we played one more round at my prodding, I bet everything and, naturally, lost. Mrs. Macinlay, ever the guide to unreconstructed youth, complimented my ploy by likening it to the sort of thing her husband Rusty would do.

"I want to be like Rusty!" I blurted, and immediately realized my error, that is, using his Christian name even though not one of the family. Silence.

At dinner, Mrs. Macinlay called me erudite for being the only person to recognize the piano piece she had played earlier that day. It was just before the high tea ceremony, an afternoon ritual of endless tea, scones, and cream, when I heard the dulcifying tones of Beethoven wafting through Dartmore. Tracing them to their source, I discovered Mrs. Macinlay engrossed at the keyboard and, while inexpert, she played with feeling, in a wispy, overarching way. It pleased her when I praised her rendition of the Moonlight Sonata.

I didn't mention, of course, why I remembered the piece so easily, as the last time I heard it had been at a small concert alongside Boston harbor, where my mother had brazenly and loudly flirted with every grown man in sight.

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For the first time in my life, I vaguely considered marriage. Mira was beautiful, charming, and considerate, her family not only rich but warmly eccentric. It would be a family life from my divorced dreams, enveloping and supportive. What a rarified, polite, and even loving environment it would be – if only I could become part of it! I was nearly dirt poor after all, with less than six thousand dollars to my name, and Mrs. Macinlay, in her ineffable way, broadly hinted one dinner that a woman of Mira's upbringing was entitled to a certain standard of living. My plans for world travel wouldn't help much, for how could such frivolous pursuits possibly aid my ability to support Mira? I felt unequal to the task.

Night comes late in Scotland, dusk until at least ten. The evening is now over, quiet settling over the restless wings of Dartmore.

I didn't sleep well that night, a Friday, the first of many restless nights over the journey ahead. While many would be caused by the poverty of my surroundings, here, if anything, my bed and room were too plush, the pillows too large and soft, almost suffocating. Maybe I felt a change coming on, a metamorphosis as sudden as an Atlantic storm, yet the house party plowed on, indifferent.

My birthday was coming up in two days, always an unsettling event. An early August birthday is a burden of sorts, more often celebrated among strangers and summer camp sadists than among friends, so I had learned to keep secret the perennial miracle of growing up by exactly one year. Not wanting to draw attention to myself among hosts more generous than imaginable, I didn't tell a soul and, in so doing, tried to carve out a small, private space.

More troubling still, I had given a much worse speech that dinner than Tony, my nemesis. I forget the subject, but for the first time I felt both pressure to perform and fear of failure at this small gathering.

It's difficult; with Mira I feel more than friendship is at risk:

a sense of inadequacy plagues and irritates me, hateful for its arrival in my young adult life.

And so, just when I found a family which somehow, someway could become my own, I felt the possibility, unmoored, drifting out to sea. In bed that night, after a long, troubled slide into sleep, my dream faithfully etched the outline of my fear. In it, Mira has to choose a husband between Tony and me, and eventually picks Tony; her face close up looks plain, even ugly.

I awoke to the noise of construction, for all day long a grand red and white striped tent with crenelated trim rose out of the stony inner courtyard, as if in defiance of nature. Every other year the Macinlays host a *ceilidh*, a peculiar kind of Scottish dancing fest, to which they invite practically the entire island in a form of *noblesse oblige* at its most resplendent.

For the occasion, the Macinlay men wore their cross-dressing best, while the women donned their midsummer finery. The houseguests, making do with our least wrinkled clothing, were deputized as honorary hosts and charged with dancing the reels we'd learned with as many barley-fed locals as possible. And that we did, prancing energetically into the late, lingering dusk. Sustenance included pheasant, ham, rib roast, and an entire roast pig, with hair in the ears, hoofs on the feet, and a curly little tail. Tony, poor lad, went hungry.

My own mission, critically, was to continue to woo Mira, who looked more and more the part of a fairy tale princess in an elegant, virginal white dress. While managing to pry her from her hostess duties for several reels, including the last, I excited her impatience by not dancing them as well as she, or taking the proceedings as seriously. Maybe I drank too much of the island's smokey Scotch, but then at midnight I secretly turned twenty-three.

The day of my birthday dawned gloriously, the rim of the horizon soaked whiskey-red. Although the house faced eastward, toward Europe and the sun, from my second story window I couldn't spot a smudge of

mainland Scotland, much less the continent – for that I would have to depart.

At breakfast, the house party’s collective, bubbly conversation descended into the political for the first time, with Mrs. Macinlay leading the way. Yet her voice, perfectly pitched to rise above the din of busy servants, grated on the subject of the Vietnam War. Her thesis, that America had lacked resolve, may not now seem controversial, but the high liberalism of my upbringing would brook no such magnanimity, even on my birthday, so without much tact I got up and left the table and house. I always try to do something different and memorable on my birthday – if not then, when? – so I walked the length of the rocky, seaweed-festooned point beyond Dartmore’s view, stripped, and swam naked in the steely sea. In my huff, I had neglected to bring a towel, so in order to dry off I crouched shivering in the wind on rocks only half-warmed by the sun.

In a collective fit of politeness, no one mentioned my wet, briny hair on my return to the house, but Mrs. Macinlay did say she feared I’d taken the argument personally. “I’m glad you’re back,” she said with evident relief, tinged with a soft criticism.

Two events conspired to lessen my secret pleasure that day. The first was the arrival of a burly new guest named Michael who, I soon learned, had already hatched plans to bum across Scandinavia with Mira for several weeks after the house party. Just when I thought I’d dispatched one rival, another drops in. The second occurred that evening as I entered the homestretch of my private birthday. No family or friends had called to congratulate me that day, thanks, no doubt, to my not sharing the phone number – but then no one had thought to write either. So I was feeling pretty good and in the clear until Mira asked me point-blank, after dinner, what date was my birthday. Michael later told me I turned white as a ghost – quite a feat considering my New York pallor – before blurting “Today!” in a reckless outburst of honesty. When Mrs. Macinlay learned of the news, she announced we would celebrate the next day, which seemed gracious if omnipotent.

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