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RE: Travel Writing Sample

#BRAW: Edinburgh's Hogmanay 2018

The crowd was packed so tightly on the North Bridge that I almost didn't feel the cold. We were at "Meeting Point 1" of three for the procession, and had paid almost 30 USD to hold an unlit torch that was made of paraffin wax. I looked around to distract myself from the numbness creeping across my face. The stone bridge had been built in the 1890s. Faces of war veterans were detailed in stone. Granite cherubs smiled at us.

The emcee had a deep Scottish brogue and I unfortunately couldn't understand most of his announcements – but the Scots in the audience cheered whenever he yelled, "And a merry New Year, ye bonny lads and lasses!" I cheered, too: who doesn't like to be called "bonny"?

I stamped my feet to warm them and gripped my torch. It was past 9 p.m. but there was no sign of the march beginning. Someone from the crowd joined the emcee on the loudspeaker: "I just want to wish my friends back in Los Angeles a happy new year!" I enthusiastically yelled, hearing the name of my hometown.

The shopping district of Edinburgh loomed around us: hotels, pizza parlors, souvenir shops, clothing stores, ramen restaurants. The architecture was gracefully gothic, but the atmosphere was decidedly Scottish. Kilted warriors with [fake] broadswords, Vikings with [maybe not fake] axes, tartan flasks filled with fine scotch, and a general sense of joviality and welcome.

"It's coming," someone next to me said. An eerie hush fell over the part of the crowd nearest me. I turned to my boyfriend.

"Lift me up," I said, and he obliged, wrapping his arms around my knees and hoisting me into the air. For miles in either direction, a surge of humanity stood huddled against Scotland's winter. The mass was kept in an orderly line that stretched directly down the center of Edinburgh, filling every available standing space, tens of thousands, stretching around corners and up into the hills: I had never seen so many people at once before. I learned later that about 17,000 people were gathered. The bodies darkened by night were an undulating sea, the sound of accents crashing together – Australian, Russian, Japanese, Italian, Irish, American, South African, and of course, Scottish. Despite the differences in country, clothing, and comfort, there was one thing in common: everyone was holding a torch.

But our section was still unlit. The torches at the very front and the very back – miles ahead and miles behind – were lit first. The flame was passed one torch to another, weaving a carpet of fire, until it met in the center.

My boyfriend, friends, and I happened to be almost dead center of the thousands-strong crowd.

But now, the fire was approaching us. The strangers around me suddenly laughed nervously. We were all quiet, watching the fire, passed to us by thousands, come closer. Suddenly, it felt sacred. We would

carry what they had carried. We would surge forward, flames aloft. It was our job to keep them lit for the 3-hour hike – the torches had to still be lit come midnight for luck in the New Year.

My boyfriend dropped me when the fire reached our section. Everything was suddenly illuminated in a smoky light. The pub behind us had a golden sign that read, “The Scotsman”, and I watched a real Scotsman – bedecked in kilt and flaming red hair – solemnly reach out his torch to be lit by a stranger.

He turned to us and I held out my unlit torch. He bent his fire until mine lit. I felt my insides warm at the metaphor. I turned and lit my boyfriend’s, and he lit our friends’.

Once everyone who had a torch in the massive crowd was fired up, the emcee came back over the loudspeaker.

“Let the torchlight procession begin!” he bellowed in his brogue.

Drumbeats. Bagpipes. Bellowing. We marched forward as people from many nations cheered. I felt like we were marching to war – a new year’s battle.

I held my torch as high into the air as I could, paranoid that I would bump into someone and set their hair on fire. When I looked up, the smoke made the stars swim.

The torchlight procession marks the start of Hogmanay, the New Year’s Eve celebrations that attract tens of thousands of international visitors. Some say it’s the biggest festive celebration in the Scottish calendar – it’s certainly bigger than Christmas, which is sparsely celebrated in Scotland (because it was illegal to celebrate it until...) Hogmanay starts on December 30 and lasts through January 2 (a public holiday). There’s a huge street party, with live bands and DJs, and grog freely flowing. There’s even a large fair: resplendent with a Ferris wheel, mini roller coaster, mulled wine, sausage stands, and souvenirs. But the torchlight procession is the beginning of it all.

Down the Royal Mile, we thousands crowded the streets of the main thoroughfare of Edinburgh’s Old Town. The Royal Mile runs downhill from the front gate of Edinburgh Castle and ends in Holyrood Park. It’s a mix of pubs, trinkets, museums, churches, and clothing stores, all within Edinburgh’s trademark gothic architecture. But as this time of night, with mainly loud tourists, Vikings, and Scotsmen marching with fire, the only places open were the pubs. When we passed them, we saw that their doors were flung open and yellow light made a square on the pavement in front. Curious drinkers peered at us through frosted windows.

Lined on either side of our procession street were cheering crowds – those left in the city who didn’t want to walk 8 miles in the middle of a December night.

Different sections of the route had bagpipers churning out their haunting songs. They seemed strategically positioned: whenever our group grumbled that maybe 8 miles is too long for a midnight walk, they seemed to appear, striking up a tune that used to urge warriors to battle. A set of drummers would sometimes join, tating out a beat for our feet to follow.

But mostly the energy of the crowd encouraged us. There was joking and carousing and many flasks passed between strangers-become-friends. When someone would start a drinking chant and dozens of people from around the world would join in, it felt easier to lift the torch a little higher.

My boyfriend Avery had earlier decided to buy and wear a “traditional Scottish kilt”, replete with sporran, knee socks, and buckler. Whenever people saw him in his kilt, they would cheer or pat him on the back.

“God bless ye,” an elderly Scot called after him, and Avery beamed.

I wondered how many generations of feet had stamped this path. I wondered why they had walked here – rushing to work, rushing to war, rushing home? I wondered how many had borne torches to light their way.

I turned to Avery. “Lift me, please,” I said again, and he again obliged.

Now the torchlit crowd was a river of fire, snaking through the main street. Faces were shifty through the smoke. When I crossed my eyes, everyone was a blurry, fiery dot, like a star. I felt united with them, knowing I must look the same way to them. The molten river curved and cascaded down the Royal Mile hill and around the corner, flowing into the Holyrood Park hills surrounding the city.

By the time we reached the end of the march – nearly 3 hours later, with the slow pace of a massive crowd – some of the excitement had fizzled out. Large water and sand tanks were set up so that people could safely extinguish their torches. The drums and pipes were still lively, but not many wanted to carry the torches anymore. But my friends and I were stalwart – well, more like superstitious. We wanted our flames to still be lit at midnight, for the good luck.

Hogmanay’s torchlight procession ends in Holyrood Park. A large grassy area was already filled with a crowd and live bands when we arrived. Gentle hills surrounded us. Some of the marchers climbed into the hills, and security chased after them to make them extinguish their torches first. Others made holes in the dirt and grass and dropped their still lit torches inside, making dangerous bonfires. Revelers danced around them, whipping their head to the music.

At midnight, fireworks burst – it was officially December 31, New Year’s Eve. Beneath the fireworks, the word #BRAW (slang for “great”) was emblazoned on the lawn. It was the word to capture the spirit of 2018: the Year of Young People.