

“So where’s home for you?”

It should be a simple question, with a simple answer. Name a city or a country, easy as that. For simplicity’s sake, I usually answer with something along the lines of “New York, just outside of the City”. It’s true, I do love my home on Long Island. But in reality, the answer has never really been that straightforward.

In my 21 years, I have been to Ireland 38 times. That’s 76 trans-Atlantic flights, 152 bad airplane meals, and about 450 hours spent in the air. But more importantly, 19 of those 38 trips lasted for at least ten weeks, during which time I lived in Dublin, just outside of the city center.

The trips began for me when I was barely six months old. By the time I reached my first birthday, I had not only two visits under my belt, but also two passports to my name, two citizenships. My childhood residential pattern was by no means conventional; I lived in New York with my parents during school year, but once holidays or summer vacation rolled around, my mom and I would pack up and move to Dublin to live with my grandparents, with my father to follow for as much time as he could get off work, and would return just in time for me to go back to school. The majority of my family lived in Ireland, two grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. As a child, spending so much time overseas was something I never questioned because I believed it to be the most natural, and most normal, thing in world. I loved it there. I loved the people, the traditions my family kept, and having cousins of my age to play with. Even from a very young age, I understood that there was something intangible about being in Ireland that made me feel safe and happy. Dublin wasn’t even a second home for me – it was home.

In middle school, all of this began to change for me. In the world of preteen girls, friend groups are in a state of constant change and flux. Imagine, not only being 3000 miles away from this social scene for two months, but also being incommunicado for that period of time. My grandmother’s house didn’t have Internet, and long transatlantic phone calls were too expensive. Instead, I would receive maybe one letter from my best friends during the course of the summer, updating me on the news and gossip. However during those years, upon my return to American suburbia, it felt as if I was missing out on more and more during my absences. Furthermore, my cousins and I began growing apart, as we became more invested in our own separate lives. It was during this time that my mother and I began to have serious discussions regarding whether to come back to Ireland as often and for as long.

At the beginning of high school, I knew my association with Ireland was going to become more logistically challenging. I would be busier, have to spend time making new friends, and have less flexibility with missing days of school to travel. I would either have to make a commitment to returning home to Ireland as much as I could, and thus missing out on time in New York, or say goodbye to the years of summers and holidays overseas. However, during my first three years of high school, my family was repeatedly blindsided by a series of devastating losses of close family members. Immediately following the first, my mother called me from Dublin and asked,

“Gillian, do you want to come over? I know you have school to worry about, so it’s up to you.”

“No,” I said, “I’m coming. Book me a flight home.”

During those three years, I went back to Ireland eight times. While some of the trips were for familial obligations, most were because of my choice to spend as much time there as possible. My cousins and I became closer than ever, now openly acknowledging that I was the sister in their family of four boys. We came to an understanding that we weren’t close by virtue of the fact that our mothers brought us together, as it was when we were children, but because we decided that was how we wanted it.

The same has become true for my association with Ireland. I love sense of ancestral connection to the country, the fact that a county bears my last name, that I can see the places where our relatives fought to defend their home from the British, visit the village my grandparents grew up in. This connection is more than I have ever felt here in the States, in New York. My second passport is more than a fast-pass through European security lines. It is perhaps the most tangible representation of what Ireland is to me: home.