

Molly Ferns

Walking the Rolling Hills of Eire toward Change

From the moment I knew my hair was red I knew what heritage was. Red hair means Irish and Scottish; Irish and Scottish means pride. I was culturally bred, pushed into Irish Dance at six and took up the Snare for a bagpipe band at eleven. I adored my culture, but that all changed when I entered High School.

High School girls' pettiness may seem exaggerated in the wake of movies like *Mean Girls*. In truth these "popular" girls do exist; girls with more money, more friends, more ways to flaunt it. Imagine rich girls, tan (more orange), with long, straight hair, decked out in Abercrombie and Fitch. So, at 15, although I could not lose my red hair, I tried to blend in with the crowd in other ways.

I had to sneak playing my beloved snare – secretly rushing off to bagpipe band practice when no one was looking. I became an Irish dance dropout, something, of which I am still ashamed. School work fell down the priority ladder, making room for a boyfriend, new wardrobe, and a new hairstyle which only happened after excessive morning hours of flat iron heat. I ran for class office, thinking it would somehow make me more popular. Ultimately, I was losing site of myself and there would be little time left.

Luckily there was still time to go to Ireland. For the month of July, following my sophomore year, I went on the Irish Way program. I was nervous going into it; nervous of leaving my family from whom I hadn't been away for more than 3 nights; nervous of leaving the sheltered rural community in which I lived; nervous of not being accepted among the 75 other Irish Way students with whom I would be travelling. Once at the airport, my stomach went somewhere else, like I was bungee jumping over the Grand Canyon. While at dinner with my family before the plane boarded, we saw a girl wearing the Irish Way t-shirt sitting at a table alone. My dad asked me to introduce myself; "No," I said, "she seems weird."

Tears welled in my eyes when we took 'good-bye' pictures, but I was determined not to let that show. I wouldn't act like one of the other cry-baby girls saying goodbye to their families. So, as my mom descended the escalator with tears in her eyes, I stood in the corner cracking my knuckles and texting a friend, away from this "weird" new group of people.

I suffered through the six-hour flight sitting next to someone who reeked of B.O. and my half-eaten lasagna churning in my stomach. I had no iPod, and my tiny seat and plastic pillow made sleep impossible. I couldn't wait to get off the plane and see the lush green pastures of Ireland.

Yet, when the plane landed in Ireland I didn't see the rolling green hills. All I could see was fog and rain drops rolling down the window. When we stepped outside my luggage was immediately soaked, and my smooth flat ironed hair became a ball of frizz. All I wanted was a bed; instead we were dragged through the rain to a tour of one of the first monasteries built in Ireland. It was surrounded by magnificent hills and a beautiful lake, but the amazing scenery was overshadowed by what I noticed going on around me: the friendships that were already forming...that I wasn't forming. Instead of breaking out of my bubble, I just followed people around that day and took pictures. Once on the bus on our way to our lodging, I realized I needed roommates. I bit my lip and turned to the people sitting behind me on the bus and asked if they wanted to room with me. Maggie and Emily, the cousins from Massachusetts, followed by Keegan and Julia, the best friends from New Jersey, replied with a yes. They were all so Irish looking.

The second day arrived foggy and overcast, just like the first. I couldn't labor with the heat of the flat iron because it began to smoke when I plugged it into my five-dollar adapter. It was cold so I wore my sweatshirt and jeans; I didn't want to get my nicer clothes wet. While exploring downtown Waterford I found myself talking to these people and stepping outside of my bubble. Maggie and Tom read all the same books that I secretly read back home. Emily, Sam, Sean R., and Shea listened to all the rock and ska bands that I secretly listened to on bus rides to school. Jess, Sean S., and Katya were part of theater, something I longed to be a part of in High School. Kelsey was an Irish Dance dropout, and Katie was an Irish dancer. There were so many things I had in common with so many of these people.

Quickly, I established a new routine: every morning I let my hair curl, threw on a sweatshirt, and hurried to join my friends for the daily breakfast. I did not have time to learn how to pretend in front of these people and that did not seem to bother me. I was accepted amongst these new friends.

With Maggie I ate a daily Yorkie chocolate bar; with Katya I shopped for European clothes; with Emily I read the newly released *Harry Potter*; and with Jess I simply talked about everything from boys and family to college and theater. I loved Blarney Castle, the Cliffs of Moher, and Croagh Park; I even loved the dark and dreary Kilmainham jail. I enjoyed the delicious Fish n' chips from a local shop just as much as the watery oatmeal that the boarding school made. My favorite days were those spent walking the city streets when I felt independent and free but, also, close and connected. Even walking through Dublin in the pouring rain and flooded streets would not bother me. The rain might have frizzed my hair but it could not change who I was.

When we visited Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, something struck a chord with me as I stepped off the bus. I saw the green hills flow right into the crystal blue sky. Below me were cliffs and as we inched our way down I noticed the famous hexagonally shape rocks. It was magnificent to think that the earth formed these rocks, and even more magnificent that I was thinking about the shape of rocks. Like the connection I felt with my new friends, I felt an utter connection with the earth. It was the feeling of being part of something much bigger. We climbed the columns that rose out of the sea and then I saw it, the coast of Scotland across the sea. At that moment, the whole meaning of heritage began to pulse through my veins again. I saw where I came from, not from a small High School, filled with petty girls. I came from Ireland. I came from Scotland. I came from the rolling green hills, the cliffs, the rocks, and the sea. I came from the earth, where a small thing like high school popularity no longer mattered.

Sadly the last day arrived as quickly as rain in Ireland arrives. Like the first day, this day was foggy and gloomy. I remember Jess sitting with her head leaned against the Shannon airport window crying while Sean handed her a pile of tissues. The flight home was surreal. I did not eat because I simply could not eat. I did not sleep because I wanted to soak up every last moment of these friendships. Landing in America remains a blurred memory of teary hugs and choked goodbyes.

When I returned home I threw away my flat iron, put my make up away for special occasions, and tore down the posters of Hollywood stars to make room for a mural of all my pictures of Ireland. I harvested my knowledge and improved my grades. I joined high school theatre. I joined Newspaper. I signed up for AP English and AP History classes. As Class Historian I suddenly started to be proactive in political issues; I no longer tried to be popular. I talked to people about Broadway instead of Hollywood. I no longer kept being in a bagpipe band a secret and I began to let my heritage define me. But the most inspiring thing to happen to me is that the people with whom I spoke began to value me for being exactly who I had been hiding: me.

It took going to Ireland to realize that fitting in should not be painful; it should not take hours in the morning in front of a mirror. No one should ever have to hide what he or she loves, nor should they have to pretend. I'm grateful I learned this lesson and grateful for rediscovering myself in Ireland because it allowed me to show my enthusiasm for the things for which I have the most passion: my heritage, writing, theatre, history...and of course, my red hair.