

Across the Pond

I was born on August 24, 2000, in Washington, D.C. With the nation's capital as my birthplace, could I be more American? I am proud to be from the United States, but the American flag isn't the only red, white and blue my heart belongs to. After living in London, United Kingdom for nearly five years, I also consider myself a Londoner.

My family and I moved across the pond in December 2011. We left our house in suburban Summit, New Jersey for a life-changing adventure on a different continent. For more than a quarter of my life, London was my home. I rode the Tube alone for the first time at 13 years old, and I can now say that the Jubilee line reigns supreme. I discovered that the best London food isn't fish and chips; it's the curry. I learned that "boot" means "trunk," "nappy" means "diaper," and "fit" means "attractive."

I built a life for myself in London. I attended the American School in London, where my best friends hailed from the US, Norway, Palestine, and India. We quickly became close, although our group shrank every year as people moved away. I joined the cross country team, which became my favorite sport and my second family. I was even lucky enough to travel to Switzerland and France for competitions. During these trips, I met students from other international schools and stayed with their families.

Life in London was incredible, so when my parents revealed that our family was moving back to Summit, I was devastated. After adjusting to life in the city—and falling in love with it—returning to the suburbs was unimaginable. My world was a balloon that London had pumped full of air; the revelation that we were going "home" popped it in a matter of seconds. But, moving was inevitable, and I tried to be optimistic. A few months

later, I said goodbye to my friends, my flat, and my city, and I boarded a plane back to the US.

Thirty-six hours later, after a redirected flight and an especially long drive from the airport, we finally reached the home we had left a few years earlier: a brick house with a long driveway and pine trees hanging over the lawn. Other than a few slightly overgrown bushes and some chipping paint, the house looked the same as it did when we moved.

When we had first walked into our new flat in London, it smelled like horrible, musty mothballs—like no one had lived there in years. At the time, the scent was so strong that it brought tears to my eyes and contorted my stomach. It eventually faded, but I never forget about it. Now, finally standing at the threshold of our American house, which smelled familiar but didn't feel like it was *ours*, I missed that smell.

We entered gingerly, strangers in our own house. Seeing my old room again was odd. The walls had been painted yellow, a claustrophobic color. The pink and orange dots I had once pressed to the ceiling while standing precariously on a chair were gone. My pink shag rug—I had spilled thumbtacks in it at one point and spent days trying to find and remove them—wasn't laid out yet; it was still rolled up in the corner like a dead body.

Even in my mundane hometown, everything was unsettling and terrifying. I needed to escape. A week after returning to NJ, I embarked on a two-week Outward Bound expedition. As I hiked and backpacked in the High Sierra Mountains of California, I searched for clarity. Without constant distractions, I could explore my thoughts. The silence allowed me to rediscover my voice and inner strength. Hiking for hours under the weight of a 50-pound backpack reminded me of my determination and resilience; I felt like I could

accomplish anything. I even pondered my significance as I slept under the stars. *I am a microscopic plankton, and the universe is a whale that has swallowed me*, I thought. Somehow, this idea didn't terrify me—in fact, I had never felt so at peace.

My experience in the California backcountry transformed me. I returned home sunburnt, scratched, and still digging the dirt out from under my fingernails. The lessons I learned on my trip stayed with me. After spending time far away from civilization, and 24 hours completely alone, I felt ready to adapt to life in the suburbs. The challenges I faced in the wilderness made attending a new high school seem easy.

When the first day of school finally arrived, I was open-minded, excited, and still a little scared. My classes went well. I liked my teachers, and the other students were friendly. They bombarded me with questions about life in London, and I was happy to answer them.

Why don't you have a British accent? I went to an American school, where most of my friends and teachers were American or had American accents. I never really had the chance to pick up an accent.

Where did you live in London? For the first two years, I lived in Marylebone, near the fictional Sherlock Holmes' home at 221B Baker Street. After that, I lived in St. John's Wood, and I walked across the famous Abbey Road, pictured on the Beatles' 1969 album cover, every day on the way to school.

What's your favorite part about London? Everything.

Nostalgia flooded my mind as I walked in the hallways from class to class. I was overwhelmed by memories from both my early childhood in Summit and my recent years in London. I passed people I hadn't seen since elementary school. Flashes of confused

recognition wrinkled their brows when we made eye contact. They must have been thinking, *Wait, do I know her?*

Even as I reconnected with friends from years ago, I couldn't stop thinking about my friends in London. The hallways, swarming with throngs of high schoolers, reminded me of the rush-hour crowds in the Tube. Suddenly, I longed to be standing on the platform of the St. John's Wood station, waiting for the train that would take me somewhere far away. I was trapped in limbo, in the strange universe between belonging and being a stranger, neither here nor there.

In the days that followed, I started to reacclimate to, and enjoy, life in Summit. Some of my former elementary school classmates invited me to sit with them at lunch. I joined the cross country team, just as I had in London, and my running buddies became some of my best friends. My family and I got a dog—an adorable cockapoo named Ollie—which is something we would never have been able to do in our small flat in London.

Although returning to my hometown was challenging, it has enriched my life, just as moving to London did seven years ago. Moving has deepened my understanding of other people, places, and cultures. I have realized that despite my shyness, I yearn for adventure and thrive in unfamiliar environments. I have been across the pond and back, and I am eager to discover what's next.