Transcript: Podcast Pondering. ‘The visa did not make me American: Part One’

*A lesson in Cultural Differences: day to day life.*

“Well, fun fact: I am now back in Ireland after studying abroad in America for the year which was quite an illuminating experience and I learnt a lot – it was great fun – but I also noticed there were many cultural differences between where I am compared to where I was living – I was in Iowa, in the Midwest. I just thought it would be funny to create a podcast to discuss those differences and just highlight the fact that even though we spoke the same language – which we also differ in, but I’ll get to that – America, the UK, Ireland: we’re still very different. So allow me to present ‘the visa did not make me American: Part One’, where I’ll cover differences encountered in day to day life.

Daily interactions and greetings. It was rather hilarious actually, because where I am from it is fairly traditional to greet someone with a ‘how are you?’ Now, that does not necessarily mean that we want to hear a detailed account of you and your day – in fact it is a well-known fact that you could have broken your ankle falling out of bed, slept in, missed breakfast, discovered you failed an exam and then consequently drop your phone down a well and yet here you will still say ‘oh I’m fine’ – it’s more just a polite means of starting a conversation. You’ll say ‘hi, how are you?’ and receive an answer of, ‘oh I’m grand thanks, yourself?’ / ‘I’m fine, lovely weather we’re having’ – in America I quickly found out that if you ask someone how they are, you will indeed get a blow-by-blow account of everything that has happened to them that day, probably covering the preceding year’s events and most likely their entire life story. Not to say that I’m not interested, because I am, but when you’re running late to class and accidently forget the story-unlocking power such a question holds, you’ll be stuck there for ten minutes until you meekly excuse yourself in true Irish fashion and consequently face a snarky professor. So don’t do that.

Also, we have a thing called ‘the Irish farewell’ which you will especially notice if you are on the phone here, and you’ll say ‘bye now. Bye. Take care. See you. Take care, bye bye, goodbye, bye now’ and that’ll go on for nigh on ten minutes – most noticeably with my mother and myself – and I discovered that this is not at all the case in America. And I remember the very first time one of my roommates ended a phone conversation, and she just said ‘bye’ and hung up. And I remember thinking, ‘oh my goodness, that was so abrupt, they must have had an argument’ – no. It’s just a standard goodbye in America. You just bye and that’s it, conversation over, end of. Very surreal.

Another thing I noticed was doors being held open – I don’t want to categorise this as ‘manners’ because it implies Americans are rude, which they are not and everyone at Coe was friendly and polite – but I am very used to people holding doors open and it’s not necessary a gender issue, because here everyone tends to hold doors open regardless of gender or age, unless you are at an airport and, you know, in a hurry. But in America, no. Fairly rarely were doors held open for me and I remember one time in particular when I was carrying a heavy parcel and my rucksack, and a fella just let the door to my dorm building slam in front of my face. I remember thinking, ‘oh, okay’ - it hadn’t been the best of days and that just, you know, really upset me. So, yeah. Be prepared for that, unless you enjoy getting close and personal with various barricades.

Another thing: the idea of gender equality. That debate about whether men should be gentlemen and offer to help woman or assist them. Where I’m from, a fella may come over if he sees I have my hands full and offer to hold a door open, or offer me a seat on the bus – not every fella or all the time mind you, but a majority of the time – in America that’s not really the case and I asked some friends about that. They said, well, it’s actually because the feminist movement is very strong in America and some men are actually fearful of causing offense by offering to assist in case the woman turns around and asserts, ‘I am a woman, I’m your equal and therefore do not need your help.’ Well, seeing as I myself am a five foot five and a half (I’m proud of that half inch, thank you) and can barely carry my own weight around, let alone the weight of heavy baggage, I appreciate people offering to help and you know, I don’t feel at all demeaned as a woman – I just feel grateful that are you are assisting me before I fall down the stairs (this happened, but let’s not go there) and break a leg.

Student dress: I was told several times I dressed ‘stylishly’ compared to everyone else which I found amusing – I had people saying it’s obvious you’re an international student - but it transpires that because in the UK and Ireland we only attend university several days a week, we make a show of it – especially girls, probably just only girls. You’ll dress impeccably, your hair and make-up will be immaculate. In America, it’s not like that. Because you’ll have classes at eight o’clock in the morning, maybe until evening, you could have sports and meetings to go to – you’ll throw on whatever is clean and that’s you. I will confess that I still followed my university dress-code, because after two years of that it is ingrained in my mindset.

Heads up, America: coffee. I thought that going to be America would be brilliant regarding coffee experiences, because it is after all considered ‘the’ original nation of hardcore coffee lovers. America, your general coffee game was weak! Whether drinking in coffee shops, at the caf, the brand coffee I bought and used in my room – it wasn’t as strong as I am used to. And I drink a lot of black coffee. Also, you cannot say ‘black’ coffee in America as it could be construed as racist, you instead say ‘dark’ coffee. Which, I’m sorry, but that just makes me think of Star Wars and the ‘Dark Side’ so no, just no.

Although the Starbucks stores I encountered were magical, so you get that one, America. We’ll call it even.

So, yeah. Language. Americans are proud of having ‘American English’. Because, you know, the War of Independence and the Boston Tea Party had to make some symbolic change, I suppose – but, vowels. What do you have against vowels? I just, I don’t understand. General spelling – you like to take letters out. Now, the Irish language, most commonly witnessed with Irish names, does like to throw letters around with careless abandon, but in America you just kick them out. I remember just having to cave into pressure and change my Microsoft Word default language settings to ‘US English’ and I judged myself. So much. But I had to learn the differences. For some reason, you love replacing ‘s’s with ‘z’s which you call ‘zees’. I was laughed at every time I said ‘z’ because apparently it is meant to be ‘zee’ to allow it to rhyme with ‘b’ or else, Heaven forbid, the Alphabet song no longer works.

The language barrier is real, my friends. Random words and expressions suddenly lose meaning when you switch continents. When I said I was having a ‘lie-in’, it confused people because it apparently should be ‘sleep-in’. There is a veritable plethora of words which either do not exist in America – never try saying ‘you were having a geg’ or ‘I’m a buckeejit’ – or have different meanings. I think the most humorous one was the word ‘fanny’, because – oh, I’m awkward even just saying it here – well, it means something a lot different here than in America, where it means your behind. I did not know this and one day a roommate texted me as I was running late to a floor meeting saying, ‘Leah, get your sweet Irish fanny here’ and I about died a death. And it wasn’t until I saw her and she asked, ‘what’s wrong?’ as I was between laughing and cringing when I saw here and explained, we spent the next half hour of that meeting in stitches, tears tripping us in the back of the room. I don’t remember much about that meeting but I remember thinking as it was early on in my year abroad that yes, this was going to be quite the year of interpretation.

Dates and time. I don’t understand the need for the month to precede the day. That confuses me. At my internship, a daily task of mine was to write letters to clients and I had to state dates and times in terms of court attendance, and obviously date the letters, and I felt my identity being challenged with every letter and statement of, you know, ‘February 19th’ and so on.

Telling the time in America was weird for me. Saying things such as ‘half past’ or ‘quarter to’ confused a lot of people. A friend was really confused the first time this happened, when I mentioned wanting to go and watch a match on campus at ‘half past four’ and he said, ‘wait, half past four so you mean like divide four, so two o’clock?’ I know you have the Common Core out there and it just makes up Mathematics as it goes along, but really. Also, ‘Maths’ is ‘Math’ over there which made me think I was talking with a lisp half the time as Maths was a major component in most of my classes.

Clothes/shoes sizing in America. Quelle surprise. It confused me. Now the UK is the odd one out in the EU, size wise, which probably keeps Nigel Farage content but you would think I would be used to measurement adjustments. Nope. So I’m a size six in the UK and was suddenly rendered to a size two in the USA. I’m a five and half, six kind of girl in shoes in the UK, but suddenly a seven or an eight in the US. I felt like Bigfoot.

Next: competition. Wow. Look, I know you are the land of the free and home of the brave, America but you’re the country of intense competition. Our mentality in Ireland essentially ‘do your best’ whether it is in education, your career, a relationship – in America it is ‘be the best’ and I know it is useful to encourage children to work to the best of their ability and carry that throughout their education into their career, but, sometimes it was scary. That also follows through into class discussions. It’s funny, because in university here hardly anyone will talk, whereas in America every hand goes up to answer a question. Everyone has an opinion, everyone wants to share it. And you know, I think it’s great – I can see the pros and cons of each mentality to be fair but the main point of this is that be prepared to have someone tell you why they are the best at something. I mean, when I received ‘A’s on papers I would say, ‘oh, well, it’s okay.’ My peers would say ‘yes, I earned that A, I deserved that A.’ It’s what we do at home, but in America you sell you sell you sell.

Our humour is very different. Especially because I’m sarcastic, so sometimes people didn’t quite get my sense of humour. Shout out to anyone who got it and apologies to anyone who didn’t, I hope I didn’t come across as rude.

Everyone is a gym junkie, or that is how is seemed to me. I never once set foot in that gym.

For sports: it is ‘soccer’ and not football, because that then is American Football. Also, NFL? NBA? Acronyms abound, apparently. And wherever is the rugby?

Lastly, food: it’s true. Portion sizes are a lot bigger. Jesus would only need one burger and one slice of pizza to multiply to feed a modern five thousand. Also, GM food is perfectly acceptable and never labelled as such, so goodness knows how much of that I consumed.

It is also acceptable to use a microwave in lieu of a kettle to heat water for tea and coffee. And on that shocking note of sacrilege, this podcast concludes. Until the next part, goodbye.