

Coming Home to Carrick'

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IN 2013, after a dozen years working and living in America, I wondered if I had passed the point of ever coming back to Ireland and my home town. I had travelled widely, seen 40 of the 50 U S states, and my American husband and I were busy raising our two young daughters in Maryland. Despite my best efforts to preserve a sense of Ireland in our home, my own vowels were slipping; and the girls already spoke "American". The idea of fitting back in at home was fading.

But circumstances conspired in my favour, and we are now back living in Carrick. The kids are attending the local national school and doing loops of the town on foot, just like when I was their age. Our obligatory route on these walks takes in the boardwalk, a sweet shop, whatever exhibition the Dock has running upstairs, window shopping along Main Street, and a stop at the library. These and several other little things have made Carrick home for all four of us.

Our decision to come was met with great whoops of familial excitement on this side of the sea and shocked groans of "What would you want to do that for?" on the other. Wasn't Ireland broke? Well, yes, but so was America; and we wanted to raise the girls in a small town with friendly faces and family close by—the kind of place where you meet a



■ Family photo: Irena, Carole, Lana & Larry Schott

neighbour in the supermarket. Carrick was not some frozen outpost where we would have to kill wild animals for food, we reassured our American kin, but a well-known spot on the Irish tourist and party map. Having cleared that up, we disposed of our accumulated chattels and rented a shipping container to transport the basics.

I had not lived in my home town since I was a child. At age eleven I had fled to board at the Mercy convent in Newtownforbes, 20 miles away. Then it was off to Dublin and further afield. Through journalism I made it to China, Russia, South America and most of Europe before ending up in the U S for RTE. After four years in Washington DC, I met my husband on a day trip to Annapolis and spent the next eight years there.

Perhaps because of my travels, coming

back has been easier. Carrick now resembles some of the more cosmopolitan neighbourhoods I have lived in. The din of Polish, Latvian, Kurdish and other tongues at the school gate reminds me that this small town is home to more than me and my 1970s classmates. Children from as far afield as Hungary and Iraq now call Carrick home too. They have brought their food and traditions with them, but luckily they have not become ghettoised. They speak English, and many are teaching their parents.

Another old friend looking lively is the Shannon. Childhood afternoons spent skirting her quiet banks fill my head as I watch kayaking kids dodge cruisers, rowers and banana boaters. The Rowing Club and River Mania are bustling as Carrick's most valuable resource chugs back to life. The boardwalk, Landmark

hotel and the shops along the bypass are the town's new front. Instead of turning its back on the river, Carrick now faces the Shannon. The trick will be to keep a decent footfall in the town centre where most of the small businesses remain. I've taken to shortcutting through the little alleyways that lead from the river side of the town back onto Main and Bridge streets. *Très European!*

Coming back, however, is not all smiles and warm memories. Drive a few miles in any direction and you land close to a rotting housing estate. Builders once flush with ambition and cement have scattered. Words like NAMA and repossession hang in the air. Visiting these ghoulish places, with their moulding windows and grass sprouting through the floors, has become an unexpected weekend pass time.

The drive from Carrick to Dublin may be shorter now, but the urban-rural divide is as wide as ever. I travel to the capital for work - often sharing a train booth with laptop-bearing commuters and students pressing eastwards. MBNA, one of Leitrim's golden hauls of the direct foreign investment era, is due to close; and buildings meant as magnets for foreign capital — or least a decentralised government department — remain unused.

Back home for a year now, I've noticed how totally disconnected so many people are from traditional decision-makers; and how unimpressed they are with politicians, journalists, priests, banks and quangos. The rebellion over paying for water has been a tipping point. When Irish people



■ Foggy morning ay quay side in in Carrick-on-Shannon

refuse to do as they are told, the times they are a-changing.

They're changing, too, at the ballot box—where an independent candidate with a handful of common sense policies can outpoll well-funded, well-established parties. Dwindling turnouts also show that people no longer rely on government to work on their behalf. Electing someone who can say “No” to the status quo has become the more desirable option.

As in America, the old institutions are in trouble; and communities are finding themselves in the driver's seat. Charity fundraisers for the sick, Tidy Towns volunteers, business organisations, local media and arts programs are drawing communities together. “Giving back” has become more rewarding than endlessly waiting for hand-outs that just aren't there anymore. John F Kennedy's words “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country” have never seemed more relevant.

On the family front, we are settling nicely. I admire my children's embrace of the Irish language and my husband's

valiant efforts at pronouncing places like Gortletteragh and Kiltyclogher — where we spent an enlightening weekend last June at the Sean MacDiarmada summer school. Our American family have become video-sharing experts and understand how much safer we feel away from the school shootings that the US gun culture has spawned.

A year on from our move, we are wondering why we didn't do it sooner. With families waving goodbye every week out of necessity, I feel blessed to have been able to return. I do not criticise anyone for leaving. Emigration is practically a rite of passage for the current generation. But once you go, it seems you are forever torn between two places. You become suspended somewhere between the home you have left and your new home - reluctant to cut ties with the one or fully commit to the other. Or maybe that's just me.

After twelve years, I have plenty of America in me. I met my husband there, and that's where we built our family. I am a proud American, but I have only one home town. I am thankful to have been able to return to Carrick as more than just a visitor.