



Hearts that beat as one

When Bre Graham took her mum on a road trip around Ireland, where they were able to share their love of seafood, baths and jumpers, it not only brought back childhood memories but enabled her to see her mother in a new light

words *bre graham*
illustrations *ce chen*

Growing up, there was always one image in my mind of who my mum was before she became my mother. She's 25, wrapped up in a scarf, impossibly beautiful with a Mona Lisa smile, a newlywed and she's beaming. In the photograph, she's standing on the Cliffs of Moher, on the West Coast of Ireland and my father is trying to get her to smile for one last shot in the November winds.

I know, out of shot, she's wearing a little gold and green Claddagh ring that sits on my hand now. I know that two years after it's taken she'll become a mother and have me. And I now know that 25 years later the two of us will look out over the same cliffs and sigh at the wonder of them in the same way.

I never quite knew who the woman in the photo was when I was a child. It's

that funny feeling that parents are never younger than when they had you, their lives only beginning at your birth. It's only with age that we can piece together the parts of them and see them as people separate from us, as perfectly imperfect people that we share so much with.

As a child, this photograph was always on my dad's desk, another copy folded in his wallet, and now the framed photograph →



“It’s that funny feeling that parents are never younger than when they had you, their lives only beginning at your birth”



sits on a shelf in my hallway in London, and I pass it daily on my way out of the door. My mum has always been at the centre of me, my dad and brother’s worlds and I look at the photograph every day.

We have always been close, always had the same mannerisms, tastes, eyelashes and toes. We speak together at the same speed, I live in her old jumpers, coats and lipsticks and we share the same sensitivities. But after 18 years of being inseparable, I left home and flew far, far away. Almost an adult, I moved across oceans and over 10 thousand miles away from everything I knew in Sydney to London. While Mum and I speak two, sometimes three, times a day, navigating time zones, mixed moods and missing each other, we only *really* see each other twice a year.

We’ve always wanted to go back to Ireland together. As children, my brother and I often heard about this trip my parents took when they were first married. Dad is Irish and though we grew up all over the world, it was Irish fairy tales we were read going to sleep and Irish names we were given at birth. I’ve had countless weekends away in Dublin and lots of childhood trips visiting relatives in the north, but this was the Ireland I had only seen in songs, stories and photographs. Saturdays and Sundays were always soundtracked by Van Morrison’s Carrickfergus, it still makes me cry, and my Irish grandmother’s Ulster fry is the best start to every Christmas morning.

So, when Mum booked to come stay with me for a month, I planned a trip to Ireland around mine and Mum’s great

shared loves – baths, seafood and jumpers. We’d start with seaweed baths in Connemara, dine on only the best seafood from clear West Coast waters and buy thick, knitted jumpers from the Aran Islands. Some trips don’t always go to plan, but with this one, it was perfect.

It was 7am by the time we were on the rickety Ryanair flight from Stansted to Shannon and by midday we were looking out at Galway Bay picking playlists for the long drive ahead. We were on our way to Connemara National Park, a place of dizzying beauty. Shocking in scale, the mountains shadow the roads and you’re swallowed up by the magnitude of it all. The people, places and things of the towns drip away slowly as you drive, only leaving sheep and the greatness of green.

Small single lanes loop through the



vastness of everything. The sun was out and as we got closer the mountains revealed themselves in a green glow. Connemara ponies started to replace cows and everything instantly became more wild. The sun was out, the sky blue and it felt like driving through a postcard. That evening, we sat in the 1970s dining room at our hotel and ate huge bowls of crab claws in pools of butter and mussels pulled out from the water that we were staring out at.

With butter like lip gloss still on our lips, we went for a whiskey in the bar next door. Although it was August, a fire burned and everything smelt like smoke as we sat and chatted about all that gets lost in our distance. My favourite scents all at once; seawater, smoke, and whiskey lingered long after we'd hit the sheets in our twin

room upstairs.

I had booked us into a hotel famous for their baths. Ever since I can remember Mum ends her evenings in the bath, always some fancy oil, usually a book and ever since I can remember I used to sit on the edge of her bath, dangle my feet in and we'd chat about our day. Away from the dinner table, away from the boys, there would usually be a dog or a cat in my arms and it was the best way to end a day. I now do the same. Every night, without fail I run a bath before bed - nothing bad can happen in the bath.

The Connemara seaweed baths were situated in our hotel that sat at the base of the bay, the water was still when we arrived

and the mountain behind it was mirrored in its shine. Stepping into a bathtub full of seaweed is more fun than it seems, amongst the tangle of green and scent of salt you just sink into the water and feel like a mermaid. Before the bath that morning we watched the women from the spa pull the seaweed straight from the shore. It swirls around you as you sit in it and after 40 minutes you pull a cord and ice cold water from →





“That closeness of being stuck together in a small car brings all the distance that’s usually between us in proximity back home”

the mountains floods over you leaving you anew.

Spa days aside, our time in Ireland was spent driving while listening to Anjelica Huston’s audiobook, stopping to eat oysters or browse antiques. That closeness of being stuck together in a small car brings all the distance that’s usually between us in proximity back home. Sleeping in small twin rooms in little beds, in funny old hotels, bickering about who stole who’s mascara and then making up over an agreement on the best colour blush for our complexion.

In County Clare, we stayed up late in a bar and in synchronicity ordered whiskeys and listened to Bob Dylan’s *Blonde on Blonde*, “This is the album I painted your nursery to, light light lemon, like the colour you’re wearing now,” Mum said as they started to pack up the chairs.

The next morning, I awoke to an open window looking over Lisdoonvarna. We had a busy day ahead but just in that little silence of the morning, when neither of us can speak till we get coffee, we shuffled downstairs for a breakfast of hot brown bread and marmalade and it felt like the same morning rituals we used to keep when we lived together. Hours later, on the ferry to the Aran Islands, Mum and I watched the waves together, it almost looked like our home in Sydney and we got homesick instead of seasick.

When we got to the island, Mum bought me a beautiful thick cream Aran jumper, although it wasn’t needed as the sun lit the water making it almost look Mediterranean. We ate crisps and drank Guinness looking at the beach, the shipwreck and out at the Cliffs of Moher over the sea.

The sun was hot and heavy when we got to the Cliffs that afternoon, and we found the same spot Mum and Dad had stood in all those years ago. I’m almost the age she was then in that photograph, and our lives look very different. I wear her ring and share her sensibilities, and now it’s easy to see that everything she was then and everything in between since that second was captured on film got us to where we were standing.

None of it was known or planned then, and none of our future is known now. We don’t know where the next 25 years will go, but these great ancient cliffs will still be here, there will be new generations, new stories of Ireland to be told. Because no matter how far apart we may live, when somebody is a part of you, you’re never far from each other and like the places we love, we’ll always come back. ♦