



Samantha

from Waterloo

to

Finland

"No Niin"

I was visiting with my first host family yesterday evening. Sharing a laugh about the recent Finland-Canada ice hockey game, rummaging through my host sister's closet for clothes to "borrow", listening to my other sister struggle with her math homework; the light from the 10:00 PM sun still painting the sky. As I hugged them goodbye and turned to leave, my dad suddenly turned to me and said "You've really made a life for yourself here, you know. " I thought about this statement the whole ride home, looking out the window as my sister played songs from the local "oldies" station. This statement, so simple and frequently said, played over and over in my head- alongside the steady beat of Stayin' Alive coming from the car radio. The drive from my first house to my last, coincidentally passing by every major part of my exchange. From my first house, past the street of my second, following the route that my bus took during the first half of the year. Past my friends' homes, towards my school, and almost to the capital city, my life here *literally* flashed before my eyes. We pulled into Mansikkatie (Strawberry Street), and I heard the bark of the family dog coming from inside my current home. "You've really made a life for yourself here, you know," I said to myself, and stepped inside, a grin creeping across my face.

Nine months have passed since I arrived in Finland, and everyday has brought new challenges and realizations, but also moments of undeniable joy. Since February, things have been going nowhere but up. I must admit that the long, dark Finnish winters do not pass quietly. They take a huge toll on energy level and mood; something I did not expect prior to coming to Finland. But it is a beautiful thing to go from 3 hour days to 21 hour days in a matter of months. The short winter days mean long summer ones, and everyone in this country makes the most out of the light that illuminates the north for almost 3 months straight.

I moved to my current and final host family at the beginning of March. I live in a beautiful neighbourhood called "Westend" with my host parents, little sister and poodle named Aida. I also have an older sister and brother who don't currently live at home. I knew that this home would be closer to Helsinki and to my school, but something incredible I discovered is how close it is to the sea. With a short bike ride I can either be riding along the shoreline (a shoreline dotted with numerous cafes and beach areas) or I can head towards the city centre. Optimal location aside, this house has quickly become a home. My family has been nothing but kind, patient and loving during my short time here, making it easy for me to build a life in a country that was foreign to me just a year ago.

Over the past few months I have been busy making the most out of my time here. I danced Finnish prom "Wanhat", celebrated Easter at my family's beautiful summer cottage, organized an International Evening for Rotaract Espoo, spent a weekend with Valtteri (exchange student Finland-Canada 2016), took a 5 hour language test to qualify my Finnish language skills, travelled to Sweden with my amazing family, celebrated Vappu (student/workers day), visited Estonia with my district, celebrated Mothers Day by watching the Mamma Mia musical in Finnish, and have been on countless bike rides, coffee dates and picnics with my friends. Finns, by the way, really love to get in touch with nature. Before the ice melted, I swam in a hole in the ice, skied on islands and lakes, and went snowshoeing through a national park. Now that the ice is gone, I have been biking, swimming, hiking and picnicking almost everyday with friends and family. This sheer appreciation for life and the surrounding world is something that I hope to carry with me until the day I die.

Life has been a whirlwind recently. Trying to cram in every last adventure before I return to Canada. There is still so much more to come: musicals, graduation parties, Eurotour, Mid-Summer, and cottage season. But I am just trying to take life day by day and am learning to enjoy the little things. Whether that may be feeling the heat of the sauna wash over me after a dip in the 7 degree water, or learning to play the harmonica with my host mom after hearing "Piano Man" on the radio, or listening to the sound of waves crashing and feeling wind rush past my face as I bike along the Baltic Sea. My year in Finland has been transformational in the most unexpected ways, ways that will shape who I am for the rest of my life. It's hard to admit that this beautiful chapter is coming to an end, but it has opened up a new list of opportunities that are mine for the taking.

With this being my final report as a Rotary Youth Exchange student, I want to touch on a few things.

First, in my previous Beaver Tales, I meticulously listed all of the major events that occurred as they were happening. The past two were more like journal entries, and this is more like a year in review. While those experiences were a huge part of my exchange, I can now look back at my year as a whole and talk about the impact of being a RYE student, instead of just giving a timeline of events. Let me tell you, it has been incredible. I wake up every morning knowing that there is a network of people that have agreed to help me adjust to a new life. These people have worked to find me families, a school, and activities, so that I can live as normally as I have for the past 17 years in Canada. This makes the most average days something to be grateful for, and the most exciting days even more exciting.

Secondly, to the future me. To the exchange student that will make the journey to Finland this August, to the student that makes the journey to Finland 10 years from now, to the student that is deciding if exchange is for them, or literally, to me in the future. I had the time of my life this year. That is not to say that there weren't trials, or days where I have broken down in tears. But the same goes for any real life. Exchange students are famous for saying "Exchange isn't a year in a life, it's a life in a year." So let your exchange be just that. Let it be a life filled with joy, anger, fear and all the emotions under the sun. Let it be imperfect. You will make it through this life, having had your happiest days, and maybe some of your saddest. But the lessons that you learn, about the world, and other people, and yourself, *those* are what make this life worth living.

Lastly, a final thank you to everyone that gave me this life. The Rotarians in District 7080 and in District 1420, the Rotary Club of Waterloo and the Espoo-Meri Rotaryklubbi, and to my families and friends in Canada and in Finland. You graciously allowed a naive girl from Waterloo to become a slightly less naive girl travelling the world, and this experience will remain a part of my life forever. Thank you for believing in me, and helping me to believe in myself.

Kiitos paljon kaikille! Nähdään elokuussa (Thank you very much everyone! See you in August) !!

Sam