

LIFE



# What it's like growing up without a hometown

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## How do you answer the question 'Where are you from?'

For most people, the question of identifying their hometown evokes a clear, succinct answer. "Boston, Massachusetts," they might say, or perhaps, "A suburb outside of Toronto, Ontario." Short, simple, sweet.

In my case, it's not so easy. For me, naming one specific hometown is difficult because I don't define the term "hometown" in the same way that most people do. I can't say that I am from any one place because I feel that I am more of a compilation of towns and cities around the world.



Over the years, I've learned to cut down on unnecessary details, but the overall story of my hometown has remained rather long. I was born in Taiwan, but was still a baby when my family immigrated to suburban Ontario, Canada. When I was six, we upped and relocated again to Eden Prairie, Minnesota, in the United States. After spending a few years there, we moved again to Morrisville, North Carolina, a small suburb of the state capital. The time that my family lived in North Carolina was by far, the longest period we lived in any one place. There were brief moves to Kentucky and Ohio as well, but those were rather insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

When I first opened my Facebook account, I remember proudly listing Taichung, Taiwan as my hometown. It seemed fair, given that I was born there, and besides, I was proud of my Taiwanese roots. As time went on though, it became apparent that calling Taichung my hometown wasn't accurate. I can't describe Taichung to you in any specific detail because my experiences with the city have been limited to the visits my family made over the years. I don't speak Mandarin as well as a native Taiwanese would, and my Taiwanese-speaking skills are limited to a few select phrases. Though I may have been born there, I didn't live there long enough to create any significant memories. Since I grew up primarily in North America, the culture that surrounded me was worlds away from the culture where my parents grew up and where I was born.



My earliest memories took place in smalltown Brampton, Ontario. I can vaguely picture the floor plan of our house on Drinkwater Road, but the more minute details escape me. I recall singing "O'Canada" in school every day and running around through the snow at recess - an impressive feat considering the marshmallow-esque snowcoat and snowpants my mother would dress me in. Still, despite the happy memories that I have of our time in Brampton, I don't think that it can be considered my hometown either, since I can barely recall our life there. My strongest memory of my childhood in Canada is of my family's beautiful, red brick house getting smaller and smaller as we backed out of the driveway one last time and drove away to build a new life in Minnesota.

My family stayed in Eden Prairie, Minnesota for less than three years. Although our time in the land of ten thousand lakes was relatively brief, it comprised a significant part of my childhood. I learned the "Pledge of Allegiance" during this time, joined Girl Scouts for a year, and became as tomboyish as I would ever be. Our family hosted some barbecues in the backyard of our house, and I often drew sidewalk chalk art with my best friend who lived diagonally across the street. If there were a quintessential picture of stereotypical suburban American life, it would show our life in Eden Prairie.



Morrisville, North Carolina is probably the closest thing I have to a hometown. I lived there the longest and made it through the most awkward period of my life (aka puberty) there. Still, while I lived through some of my most formative years in the Tarheel state, claiming Morrisville as my hometown doesn't feel right. Though bits and pieces of the South, such as southern hospitality, have rubbed off on me, saying I'm from only North Carolina doesn't do my story justice.

With my complicated upbringing, I admit that I sometimes envy my friends who can say that they were born and raised in one city. As a kid, whenever I voiced this sentiment to my parents, they would simply respond with the frustrating, age-old parental chide: "You'll thank us one day!" In response, I had a running joke that when my parents were old and depended on medical help, I would place them in a retirement community, only so that I could relocate them to a new nursing home every two years. That way, I retorted, they could finally understand what my semi-nomadic childhood felt like.



Nowadays, I cringe at how silly and melodramatic I was back then, and I hate to admit that my parents were right, as parents so often are. I used to struggle with having such a complicated backstory, feeling as though I were having an identity crisis. In any case, after reaching a certain age, I came to appreciate the frequent relocations that characterized my childhood. While constantly having to be the new kid at school was not the most pleasant experience, I did learn a great deal from moving around as much as I did.

Being someone who is rather shy and reserved, having to constantly start over in schools where I didn't know a single soul was certainly challenging. I can't say that moving around made me less shy since I continue to be shy to this day, but I would say that facing such circumstances no longer induces the panic it once used to. The prospect of moving to a new place to start a new life is something I now see in a positive light, which is a perspective I attribute to my childhood. I learned early on that some people are just not that great at maintaining contact, but the best friends are ones who you can talk to after months or even years of being apart as if no time at all has passed. I've also come to appreciate my sister a lot, despite our various phases of disliking one another. She is the only other person in the world who understands exactly how I felt each time our parents uprooted us to a new city in another state.



In the end, although I don't have the luxury of a straightforward answer to the question of where I'm from, I wouldn't have it any other way. I am proud to be a combination of all of the places where I've grown up. Each city or town in which I passed a part of my childhood ultimately contributed some aspect to create the person that I am today. So, while I will probably continue to struggle to explain the complex concept of my hometown, it will be a complication that I am grateful for.

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