
THE PLACE OF HOME

Sylvia Petter

When I'm at work or away on a trip I often say that I have to go home, meaning my husband and daughter in France where we live. When I say to my husband and daughter that I have to go home, I mean Mum and Dad in Australia. But I avoid thinking about what or where home really is.

My father had a stroke early last year. In May, my mother could care for him no longer and had to put him in a home. In November I went to visit. I live in France, my parents in Australia.

The place where they put my father was nice, friendly and warm. It was out in the bush, just a couple of miles from my parents' house. Mum painted a plaque with his name to put on the door to his room. Forget-me-nots filled the plaque's empty spaces. The rooms of the lodgers were never locked and the doors mostly stood open so that you couldn't always see the plaques on the doors. The socks Dad wore were not always those he had brought with him, but like the shirt he had on when I went to see him, they were clean.

'I want to go home,' he said.

'Not yet,' Mum said.

'I'm not sick,' he answered. 'Why do I have to stay here?'

Dad wouldn't accept that he'd had a stroke: his limbs were not paralysed, he could speak. He didn't believe that something had happened to his brain. We avoided saying we had to go home when the visits came to a close and when end November I went back to France.

Early December Dad was taken to hospital.

'An infection,' Mum said on the phone, 'but he'll be all right. He's stopped fighting. He admits he is ill.' Mum had been watching those little lights in his mind go out day-by-day, one after the other. I was homesick for her. One day she told me that the nurses couldn't understand him.

'They do that,' they said. 'They speak in their mother tongue.'

My father, after more than half a lifetime in Australia had begun to speak German again. I had been more than a lifetime in France and I had begun writing English again.

Mum phoned me and said: 'Last time when I saw him I was careless. I said that I had to go home.'

'Home?' he said.

'Yes.' I said the name of our street.

'Where's that?' he said.

'Our house. Where we lived for 45 years - where our daughter grew up. Don't you remember?'

Dad shook his head.

The house where I grew up had stayed the same: a white bungalow overgrown with vines and rubber plants, the type of plants that I coddle in our house in France.

The other houses hadn't changed either and the ivy was thick as always on the brick veneer over the road. All the houses in the street still had that band of lawn out the front that the same man still mowed year in and year out. The jacaranda still flowered and shed its mauve baby-trumpet blooms with the last gusts of a Southerly that petered out from Antarctica. But something was different, the last time I'd been back. The people had gone, replaced by new people. People I didn't know. The kids in the area that I had grown up with had grown over and out and had all gone away, their parents claimed either by death or a retirement village.

I didn't know anyone in the area where my husband and I built our house in France. For twenty years it's been home, home in the sense of the place of a family, a house that we live in, a house in which our daughter is growing up, growing up quickly. She wants to leave us next year and go to Australia, but not to the home, the house of her grandparents.

My parents wanted to grow old together, in their house in Australia. They had left Europe behind just after the War; they'd worked hard and made a new life.

I've made a new life in France, but in a few years we shall move to Australia and I do not want to live in the place where I grew up. When I ask my husband if he wants to go back to the place he grew up, Vienna in Austria, he never calls it home. He just says Vienna. Go back to Vienna? As a tourist, perhaps, but I don't want to live there anymore.

Last week my father spoke of the room my parents had rented when they first came to Australia as sponsored migrants. My mother asked him if he remembered the street where he'd lived with her for forty-five years. He shook his head. 'He's stopped talking in German. It's as if he's gone back to the place where his new life began. He seems content now,' Mum said on the phone. 'And he no longer mentions the word 'home'.

'But does he know who you are?'

‘Yes. Sometimes it looks like he's happy to see me. Last week I missed a visit.’

‘Because of your cold?’ I asked

‘He said he'd been worried about me.’

‘You've been together so long, Mum, maybe he senses things without really knowing.’

‘I don't know,’ she said.

My husband senses things when I'm away or when I'm down. We've been together a long time, too. My husband is sometimes sad when he thinks that our daughter will soon leave us, but he is content with his life, although he doesn't always understand the new one I have.

My new life began about seven years ago when I started writing. Although I can't relate it to a geographical place, I do feel that it started within a space, ‘a room of my own’, not one of brick and plaster, but a place in my mind. It lets me accept that our daughter will leave, that she will make a new life in far-off Australia, at least as a first step. Who knows where she'll go after that. She grew up in France, but doesn't want to stay. ‘But, I might come back one day,’ she always adds when she talks of her plans. ‘Depends where I feel at home.’ Home? Feeling at home?

Grappling with these thoughts, I asked my mother: ‘Where is home, Mum?’

‘It's not necessarily a place,’ she said. ‘And it doesn't really depend on who's there.’

‘Is that why you don't mind if you don't go back to Germany?’

‘I would like to go back, but I don't want to die there.’

I thought of growing old and having to die, die of old age.

‘I don't want to die in France, Mum’.

‘Then you must find a place where you are content, a place which doesn't impose its geography upon you.’

‘I don't want to die at all, Mum.’

‘Neither do I, dear. But there's no way around that. Being content makes things much easier.’

I wondered how I would know when I found such a place. I wondered if such a place even existed and whether I would ever know contentment. When you're an expat migrant you're somehow a step further removed from wherever it is you think might be home. When you live in a number of different countries and cities, the ones you go back to are never the same as you remember them. I remember not wanting to stay in Australia for fear of being stuck there forever. It was so far away. I had the same fear when we lived in Vienna. There it was not the distance, but the deepness of

history that I feared would suck me down to become a skeleton in another catacomb. Do we move on because we know that we cannot really go back?

‘You couldn't live with me anymore, the same way that I couldn't live with you,’ Mum said when I mentioned that we might come back to Sydney. ‘You don't want to come back here.’

She was right. I didn't. To go back to the home of my parents would be a betrayal of the faith they placed in me to be able to find my own life. It might even mean that they had failed me.

But Australia held something for me. A new Australia to go with my new life. It was a lifestyle I was looking for, one to accommodate the needs of my sport-loving laid-back husband and one that would let me roam that space in my mind. I don't know if the place I am looking for is in Queensland, where it's warm and where the rainforests meet the coffee plantations. The town we have chosen is small, but it sits on the edge of the ocean. Dad loved the ocean. Mum says she'll visit us: ‘It's closer than France.’ Maybe it's France that's so far away. Maybe I do have a home after all. I'll see when I get there.



Sylvia Petter was born in Vienna, she grew up in Australia and has been living in the Geneva area for the last 25 years. She started writing fiction in 1993, and her poems, articles and stories have appeared in print and on the web.

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