

UNITED WISDOM

Home after emigration: when the present stops being a waiting room

Relationships and Intimacy

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Epigraph

> *And yet here is where I falter.*

Mary Antin, *The Promised Land*, Chapter IX: the author describes her difficulty in retrospectively recounting her first steps in America. A short sentence in the original English. Text.

What this article is about

The suitcases are unpacked, the address is settled, and the key fits the door. Yet in the evening, when someone says home, they still mean another country. The new apartment remains a convenient place to sleep, while life seems to begin somewhere beyond this address: once the length of the stay is clear, once loved ones arrive, once there is work in the right field. Sometimes waiting makes sense. Sometimes it gradually takes away the possibility of living where ordinary days are already happening.

This article considers home after emigration as several different relationships: with a dwelling, daily arrangements, memory, people, and a possible future. It does not propose learning to love a new country on schedule or declaring the old home a closed chapter. Its question is narrower: which parts of present life can become your own even while the final decision about where to live remains open? This distinction makes room for both personal participation and real environmental constraints. Neither buying things, meeting neighbours, nor feeling grateful for the opportunity to move guarantees a sense of home. The absence of that feeling does not mean that someone has mishandled their life, either.

I. An address, a shelter, and a home answer different questions

An address tells us where someone can be found. Shelter offers somewhere to take refuge and recover. Home also involves being able to recognise one's own life here. These meanings can coincide in a single place, but after a move they often diverge. Someone may have a valid rental agreement and sleep in a quiet room without feeling that their day belongs to them. Someone else may begin to call modest temporary accommodation their own, knowing perfectly well that they will soon have to leave. Neither experience disproves the other.

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Imagine Lera, who has recently moved to another country. Her apartment has everything essential. Yet every spare surface is occupied by someone else's decorations, the furniture cannot be rearranged, and she has to make work calls from a kitchen through which people keep passing. From outside, this looks like a reasonably settled household. From within, Lera has almost nowhere to do something she chooses for herself. Her dissatisfaction need not mean ingratitude or longing solely for her country of origin. Perhaps what she needs first is a small area she can arrange: a desk, a shelf, or an agreed period of quiet.

Another person's difficulty may run in the opposite direction: they have enough possessions, but nowhere to direct their attention after work. They recognise their room, yet do not recognise the city beyond its door. An extra lamp might improve the lighting and remain a good purchase without resolving the question of participating in local life. It matters not to ask an object to perform every task at once. The domestic setting, familiarity with the neighbourhood, and relationships with people offer different possibilities, even when ordinary language groups them under one word.

This distinction has a limit, too. If accommodation is dangerous, unaffordable, or liable to disappear without clear notice, a discussion of inward acceptance does not remove the problem. What is needed is an actual improvement in living conditions, not a more attractive description of those same conditions. This article does not establish housing rights or a safe procedure for every country. It proposes first naming the subject: the dwelling, the ability to stay, ease of doing things, or the experience of belonging. At least the difficulty then stops dissolving into the general declaration that there is no home anywhere.

II. A temporary stay does not make the present day unreal

Uncertainty about the future often shapes the smallest decisions. Lera does not buy a comfortable pillow, join a nearby class, or unpack her books: perhaps everything will change again in six months. Each decision makes sense on its own. Together, however, they create an arrangement in which the present place receives only expenses and obligations, while enjoyment and participation are postponed until there is final clarity. Temporary life becomes a life with limited permission to be lived, rather than simply a life of short duration.

It helps to distinguish a major commitment from a reversible improvement. Buying an apartment, signing a long contract, or choosing a school for several years has consequences that cannot be reduced to a domestic experiment. A cup, a suitable walking route, or rearranging things where this is permitted belongs to another scale. Such changes can be useful for several weeks without requiring the justification of permanent residence. This is not a recommendation to spend more money. Sometimes a small improvement means abandoning an inconvenient arrangement that nobody required you to preserve.

In Jeremiah 29, verses 1–14, making a life in exile appears alongside hope of return. This is a letter to captives in Babylon within a theological framework, not an instruction for every modern emigrant. The relevant comparison is that attending to the present need not cancel a future return. The passage does not establish a duty to accept oppression, marry, or regard every order in a receiving society as just.

Lera can leave the question of where she will live next year unresolved and still decide how to rest this coming Saturday. Keeping those decisions separate is not always easy: we may want every choice to confirm a single story about the move. Yet a small, comfortable day does not have to cast a vote for permanent resettlement. If she later leaves, time spent here attending to her needs will not become a mistake. If she stays, today's care will not turn out to have been a secret promise never to reconsider. The present deserves proportionate participation under either outcome.

III. A new home should not have to pass the old home's examination

Comparison comes naturally: the bread is different, the light is different, the water is farther away. It helps identify preferences until it becomes a test that the new place is already destined to fail. The old courtyard is compared not just with the present street, but with a period of life, particular people, and a former role. One address in this comparison carries years of history; the other carries a few early weeks. The difference is real, but the comparison does not always tell us what could be changed in the new place.

In Chapter IX of Mary Antin's memoir, a new Boston address is described through the arriving girl's own perspective, which differs from an outside assessment of the neighbourhood. This is personal retrospective testimony. It does not establish that poverty can be overcome through the right attitude. The limited comparison concerns something else: the description of a dwelling and its meaning for a particular person do not automatically coincide. The historical derogatory descriptions of people in the surrounding passage are not adopted here.

Imagine Lera seeking an exact copy of her former Sunday. There used to be particular pastries, a walk with her sister, and a slow journey through a familiar park. She may find similar pastries, but her sister will remain far away. The disappointment after buying them will be real, though it need not concern the bakery's quality. Separating a taste preference from the absence of a person opens two different actions: choosing enjoyable local food and maintaining a suitable conversation with her sister. Neither restores the whole past, but both can have value of their own.

The opposite danger is to declare every comparison an obstacle to adaptation. Someone must then remain silent about what they cherish in order to prove openness to the new. That is

another examination, coming from the other side. Memory lets preferences and relationships travel between places; it need not govern every present choice. The old home can remain loved while the new one gradually acquires details that do not require resemblance. A useful question is specific: which possibility am I seeking now? If the answer is a former companion or an irretrievable time, the new dwelling should not be blamed for its inability to bring them back.

IV. Feeling at home has material conditions

A discussion of settling in can easily turn into a moral instruction to show initiative. Yet two people with the same desire may have different access to space and time. One can change their room and plan the next month; another is awaiting a further move. One is free after work; another combines shifts with caring for a child. A small action available to the first person may be costly or impossible for the second. The absence of a recognisable domestic routine should therefore not automatically be explained as unwillingness to participate.

In Leyla Kerlaff's study, published in 2023, interviews with thirteen recently reunited refugee families in Glasgow and Birmingham were examined. Housing conditions and local relationships featured in their accounts of belonging. This is qualitative research on a particular group, not a forecast for all emigrants. Remote interviews and relatives' presence may have constrained openness. It did not test the approach to settling in proposed here.

In an imagined situation, Lera is advised to interact more with neighbours, although her main difficulty is that she cannot afford a stable room. The advice addresses an activity that sounds available and leaves the actual constraint out of view. We can acknowledge the importance of acquaintances while also acknowledging that they have not been assigned the task of replacing housing. This does not devalue personal participation. It restores its scale: what someone can do under existing conditions, and what depends on other decisions and resources.

Sometimes material support is already present, yet someone continues to live as though every change is forbidden. Checking conditions can help here, too: is putting up a photograph genuinely prohibited, or is that an expectation of their own? Can they use the shared courtyard, or do they simply not know the arrangement? Answers vary. Uncertainty permits us to assume neither universal freedom nor universal prohibition. Home develops in a specific setting that allows some actions and limits others. Distinguishing a real constraint from an unread condition can sometimes reveal a small possibility without self-blame or the invention of rights that do not exist.

V. Repeated daily arrangements create familiarity without promising happiness

The large symbols of a move are more visible than small repetitions: the first celebration, a new document, a photograph against the city skyline. Yet an ordinary day consists of actions that have to be performed again. In our imagined example, Lera searches for her charger every morning, tries to remember where her travel card is, and chooses breakfast from scratch. These details do not explain the entire experience of emigration. They can, however, reveal some unnecessary work that temporary living arrangements keep bringing back.

Familiarity does not require a rigid schedule. You can have an obvious place for essential things while retaining freedom to change your day. If Lera arranges a small shelf near the door, she is not committing herself to leave at the same time forever. She is moving one decision from a daily search into a stable arrangement of space. The change can be checked through action: is leaving easier, and does she have to ask others to clear the passage less often? It does not require an immediate assessment of her entire emotional state.

Repetition can also be someone else's demand. In shared accommodation, dinner always happens late, and declining is treated as disrespect. The arrangement is inconvenient for Lera, although it suits the others. Creating a domestic habit then involves discussing compatibility, rather than simply exercising personal discipline. Perhaps she can eat separately and join the shared occasion sometimes. Perhaps no workable compromise is available. Repetition alone does not make an arrangement suitable; its consequences and the consent of those expected to participate matter.

The outcome of this work is modest. An evening may become more manageable while longing remains. This need not mean that the effort was wasted. A convenient routine and a loss that has been lived through concern different things. Every shelf need not become a remedy for loneliness, nor every successful week proof of completed adaptation. A small change can be evaluated against the task it was made to address. Routine then supports life instead of becoming another report on how successfully someone is supposed to feel in another country.

VI. An object brought along can support memory or hold time still

An object from a former home can sometimes connect periods of life. A familiar cup, a book with notes in it, or a photograph of a courtyard needs no complicated translation. Its meaning depends on what someone does with it now. The same object can be a useful part of a new day, a carefully kept reminder, or an exhibit that feels frightening to touch because doing so would acknowledge change. There is no list of correct possessions that distinguishes these roles in advance.

Imagine that Lera brought a tablecloth from her family home. At first she keeps it wrapped up, waiting for an occasion worthy of the former festive dinners. Later, she notices that no new gathering feels real enough. She might preserve it as a keepsake and use another cloth. She might put it on the table on an ordinary evening. Yet the decision should not be made solely to prove that she has let go of the past. The question is simpler: which way of using it fits her present relationship with memory without creating an obligation for other participants?

Objects do not mean the same thing to an entire family. To Lera's partner, the tablecloth recalls enjoyable gatherings; to her, it also recalls work that her mother always performed. One person calling it a shared inheritance does not erase another person's experience. A new home can make room to discuss those differences, without having to resolve them once and for all. Sometimes it is enough to clarify when the object is used and who looks after it. Memory gains a place without becoming a permanent contract to reproduce an old way of life.

There is also a limit to preserving everything through possessions. Moving, storing, and maintaining them requires resources; some things may remain inaccessible. The absence of family furniture does not prove an absence of loyalty to the family. It is possible to remember without a physical archive, or to keep an archive without feeling close. These possibilities deserve distinction, particularly when a move happened quickly or against someone's wishes. A home after emigration should not have to become a museum reconstruction for which someone lacks money, energy, or free choice. Memory remains a relationship even when its material carrier changes.

VII. A local route need not begin with love for the country

Someone is encouraged to discover the new culture as though familiarity with a place must end in enthusiasm. Yet an everyday connection can begin with a narrower action. Lera learns where crossing the road is safer, when a small shop is open, and where she can sit quietly after work. This knowledge does not amount to a complete cultural understanding. It makes her day less dependent on continual explanations and allows her to distinguish parts of a neighbourhood rather than assess an entire country through one impression.

A walk has conditions, too. A route that is convenient during the day may be unsuitable in the evening; an available place may require money or time that she does not currently have. Simply suggesting that she go out more does not answer every situation. Lera can begin with one necessary journey and see whether a variation is less tiring or allows a pause. That experiment concerns a particular day. It does not prove that the new place has become emotionally close, and it does not require ignoring circumstances in which going out would be inappropriate.

Sometimes getting to know a neighbourhood brings additional longing. Someone notices a beautiful square while also thinking of the person they would like to show it to. A new impression does not cancel an absent participant; it may make the absence more noticeable. That is no reason to call the walk a mistake. Two meanings can be acknowledged within one moment: there is something interesting here, and an important person is not beside me. They need not compete for the right to be true. Local life gradually acquires its own details without taking away the former life's significance.

This approach leaves room for a critical perspective. Lera can know the neighbourhood better and still dislike some of its conditions. Belonging should not demand complete approval. Equally, every inconvenience need not define the entire city. Distinguishing a shop, a street, access to an institution, and a conversation with a particular person can be more useful than passing judgement on the place as a whole. This is an editorial proposal about the scale of observation, not a measured adaptation technique. Its value is checked against whether it helps reveal a real, available choice, not a promise to change someone's attitude to the country.

VIII. Members of a family may reach a domestic present at different times

A family moves together, but each member encounters a different place. A child has school and familiar faces every day; one adult has work, while another has pending documents and domestic responsibilities. A shared decision to move therefore does not entail a shared experience of the new home. Our imagined Lera may still consider the apartment temporary while her partner is already inviting guests and discussing next year. The difference need not mean that one loves the family less or has forgotten the past more quickly.

Different feelings nevertheless affect shared actions. If one person wants every box to remain closed while another needs a comfortable room now, simply acknowledging their different paces will not settle the question. They need to discuss specific space: what stays packed, what can be used, which expenses are affordable, and who needs somewhere to work or rest. This discussion does not require a single answer to whether the country is home. A family can agree on daily arrangements before developing a shared account of the change.

It is especially important not to assign a child the task of validating an adult decision. Their interest in school does not prove that their parents' losses are insignificant; their longing does not establish that the move was a mistake. A child can value a new friendship and miss an old bedroom. Adults also retain the right to a mixed experience. If every account immediately becomes an argument for or against returning, ordinary feelings lose their place in

conversation. It is possible first to hear what is missing from a particular day without turning the answer into a family vote.

A shared home also has a limit to shared openness. People may need separate belongings, conversations, and periods of quiet. Living together does not grant automatic access to each person's whole inner life. A home becomes more usable when people can not only meet but also spend time apart without punishment for the absence of constant togetherness. This is not a universal family recipe. Sometimes conditions are too cramped or relationships are unsafe. The right to stop a conversation and keep decisions private then matters more than a demand to prove that the family can jointly furnish a new beginning.

IX. Returning can remain a possibility rather than the only permission to live

Plans to return serve different purposes. They may involve a specific date, a hope, a family obligation, or a thought that makes the present period bearable. They should not automatically be called avoidance. Sometimes returning is genuinely available and desired; sometimes the possibility is only being discussed. It helps to distinguish decisions already made, conditions still unknown, and actions needed regardless of the eventual route. Someone needs daily rest even when the move has turned out to be temporary.

Imagine Lera saying that she will return in a year. Her partner hears a commitment and stops considering local work, though Lera herself means a hope dependent on certain circumstances. The household becomes organised around different meanings of one sentence. The conditions can be clarified without cancelling the hope: what would need to happen for returning to become an actual plan, when will the next conversation take place, and which present decisions cannot be postponed? This is not a calculation capable of removing every unknown. It merely separates a wish from a jointly accepted commitment.

Sometimes the former place has changed as well. People have moved away, the house belongs to others, and familiar work is no longer available. Returning to a country and returning to a former life then become different tasks. Discovering this can hurt, but it does not oblige someone to abandon the journey. They can want to return to a changed place. It matters not to assign a future border crossing the task of restoring all the lost time. Likewise, deciding to stay should not promise the complete end of longing. Both routes have real consequences and limits.

It is therefore possible to preserve a plan for reconsideration without treating every detail of present life as provisional. A certain date is reserved for discussing where to live next; this evening calls for choosing a manageable dinner. Resources connect these decisions, but their degree of finality need not be identical. If returning ceases to be possible, a new conversation

is needed, not an accusation of insufficient loyalty to the original plan. If it becomes possible, today's domestic habits can travel with you or be left behind. They supported a period that was actually lived, which already gave them a reason to exist.

X. Settling in can mean having more distinguishable possibilities

At the beginning of our imagined story, Lera asked why the apartment still did not feel like home. The question can now be separated into several parts that can be checked. Is there somewhere she may arrange essential belongings? Does she know what an ordinary evening involves? Can she use a local route without constant assistance? Is there room for memory and for deciding not to know the future yet? No positive answer establishes completed adaptation. Each nevertheless describes an actual possibility instead of a general demand to feel differently.

Results can be uneven. The shelf near the door frees up the morning, talking about guests remains difficult, and news from the former city makes another evening painful. This need not be a return to the starting point. The morning convenience remains; the response to the news concerns another part of life. Equally, every small improvement need not be declared a success if the main problem is unchanged. We can acknowledge its narrow outcome while leaving unresolved the question of stable accommodation, important people, or where to live in the future.

Home need not become the only place where someone feels they belong. Some belonging can remain in a language, work, relationships, and memories connecting different countries. This article does not examine every form of such belonging. Its more modest task is to give the present address enough space within one's own life without requiring it to replace everything else. If someone later chooses another place, they are not betraying arrangements already created. The ability to live here and the ability to leave here can be compatible possibilities.

Returning to the evening door therefore does not require a beautiful final resolution. Lera turns the same key. Perhaps she is still thinking of the old home, but she knows where to leave her bag, how she will spend the evening, and which decision she does not have to make today. The present place has received some of her actions without acquiring ownership of her whole biography. For someone else, the first change will be acknowledging that conditions do not yet permit settling in. Both kinds of clarity deserve precise names. Home begins not with issuing oneself a certificate of belonging, but with being able to distinguish what already supports life and what it actually lacks.

What this means in practice

You can choose one ordinary moment when the present dwelling feels particularly unfamiliar. First describe what happens without making a general conclusion about emigration: searching for something, being unable to stay in quiet, finding it difficult to go out, or having nothing to do after work. Then distinguish an actual condition, an unknown arrangement, and a decision of your own that has been postponed. If the issue is danger or the absence of essential accommodation, a small domestic experiment does not replace appropriate help. This article does not establish how such help can be obtained in a particular country.

If a suitable possibility is available, one reversible action within your resources can be chosen: setting aside a permitted place for essential belongings, agreeing on when to use a shared desk, or taking a necessary route differently. Before acting, identify the narrow outcome you expect. Afterwards, check that outcome itself, retaining the right to longing and uncertainty. If leaving in the morning became easier, that supports the usefulness of this arrangement, not love for the new country. If there is no improvement, the earlier arrangement can be restored or the question reconsidered.

Finally, it can help to separate an immediate decision from the larger future. What is needed this week whether or not I stay? What actually depends on the later plan? This conversation with yourself or with willing participants does not guarantee a sense of home. It gives the present room for manageable participation while the future remains open. When there is threat, coercion, or no safe way to discuss shared arrangements, the experiment stops; refusal and a private decision do not become signs of failed adaptation.

Key quotation

> *What have we here?*

Mary Antin, *The Promised Land*, Chapter IX: her question on first encountering a new place, before later analysis of the experience. A short fragment in the original English. Text.

Connections between traditions

Material read	Connection to the question of home	Limit of comparison
Mary Antin, memoir Chapter IX	A personal perspective gives an address meaning	Testimony from one life is not a law of migration
Leyla Kerlaff, family study	Belonging is considered within actual local conditions	A limited qualitative sample does not test our practice
Jeremiah 29:1–14, KJV	Present arrangements and a future return coexist	A theological letter to captives does not prescribe a modern family or political norm

Sources

1. Mary Antin. *The Promised Land*. Houghton Mifflin, 1912. Metadata, introduction, and selected Chapter IX context read; no claim to have read the whole memoir. Project Gutenberg, 20885. Rights UNKNOWN; the host's territorial label does not establish universal permission.

2. Leyla Kerlaff. *"Now we start to make it like home": reunited refugee families negotiating integration and belonging*. Frontiers in Political Science 5, 1287035, 2023. Abstract, methods, selected results, discussion, conclusion, and licence read; not every work cited within it. Article. CC BY; third-party images and nested quotations are not reproduced.

3. *Bible, King James Version*. Jeremiah 29:1–14. The specified passage in this English version read; a limited comparison here without verbatim reproduction. Wikisource. Rights UNKNOWN for the particular page and territory used.

Tags

home, emigration, moving, housing, present, temporariness, memory, settling in, belonging, daily life, address, shelter, return, uncertainty, family, space, belongings, habits, neighbourhood, route, resources, consent, choice, loss, boundaries, personal history, Mary Antin, Leyla Kerlaff, Jeremiah, United Wisdom

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