

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-54362-0 - The Way Home
Sue Leather
Excerpt
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The Way Home

You can go home again . . . so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been.

Ursula le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

‘Damn it!’ said Jake, coming out of his study into the bedroom, where Alex was packing her bags.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked, looking up through her dark brown shoulder-length hair.

‘It’s this stupid film,’ said Jake, sitting down heavily on the bed in front of her and sighing.

Jake had been working on a story for a new film and his deadline was just a few days away. His handsome face was lined and he looked fed up. He was finding the writing hard and he was tired. Alex tried to care. But behind her husband through the window she could see New York shining in the late-afternoon autumn sunlight. She was busy preparing for her trip to England; her flight was leaving later that evening. She felt a longing to be gone, to be somewhere else.

‘I’ll never get it right!’ Jake went on.

‘Of course you will,’ said Alex weakly. ‘You know you always do.’ They both noticed the slight annoyance in her voice.

There was a silence.

‘So, er, when you come back, maybe we can take a vacation?’ Jake’s voice sounded hopeful. ‘I mean,’ he went

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on, ‘just a couple of days, a long weekend perhaps. Maybe we can go to Palm Springs?’

Alex’s eyes wandered to the tall silver buildings set against the pale blue sky.

‘Maybe,’ she said, smiling and trying to make it sound like it was a real possibility, but not managing it. Jake got up quickly and went back to his study, shaking his head.

Alex tried to wipe the confused look on Jake’s face from her mind and carried on packing. As usual, she was finding it difficult to decide which clothes to take. Though she was a buyer for an international fashion house and travelled a lot, she never found it easy to pack. And now it was even more difficult. She was going to the north of England to visit her parents; she was going home, for the first time in over ten years. She was going home to deal with the past. She was thirty-two years old.

A mix of autumn and winter clothes, she decided in the end. You never knew what the weather would be like in England. And she loved knitwear, especially woollen sweaters. Not everyone could wear knitwear, but she could.

She finished her packing, then felt tired and lay down on the bed. Her eyes looked up at the landscape painting on the wall opposite the bed. It was of the moors around the place where she had grown up, a copy of a famous painting. She loved it. She’d found it by accident in a second-hand shop on a work visit to London a couple of years ago. From time to time she would look at it and realise how much she missed those hills, that landscape. Her memories of it were like precious jewels that she kept locked inside a box; sometimes she opened the lid and they surprised her with their beauty. ‘My place,’ she said, out loud.

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The moors in the north of England were wild and as a child she had loved them. The moor near her home was called Randle Moor and she had spent a lot of time there walking and discovering its secrets. Now, in her dreams she walked the moors of her childhood. They fed her imagination and her desires.

In England, she loved packing a sandwich and a drink and walking out into the countryside for an hour or two. You could do that at home; the countryside was just *there*. She loved America, but it was so hard to go out for a walk here, she thought. The distances were so huge. When her American friends asked her what the moors were like, she was often lost for words. ‘They’re just beautiful, wild in their own special way.’ She often added, ‘Think of Emily Brontë – you know *Wuthering Heights*.’ Most people had at least seen the old film.

She suddenly jumped up from the bed, took her old leather walking boots out of the wardrobe, and put them in her suitcase. Perhaps she would want to go for a walk over her lovely moors.

She lay down again and closed her eyes. She still had time for a rest before she had to go to JFK airport to catch her flight to London. But though she felt tired, she couldn’t sleep. Her mind turned to thoughts of Jake. She felt guilty about not wanting to talk to him. They had met eight years before at a party in Denver. He had shone like a light in the room. He was very handsome and very charming. He had black hair and the most beautiful brown eyes. He had walked up to Alex and offered her a drink.

‘Before I met you,’ he said, giving her a martini, ‘I felt like a man with a fork in a world of soup.’

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‘That’s definitely a line from a film,’ she said and laughed.

They had talked all evening and most of the night. She felt comfortable with him. Comfortable, but excited. And he *was* very good-looking, a bit like Andy Garcia.

They had started seeing a lot of each other immediately and she soon realised that their interest in films wasn’t the only thing they had in common. She fell in love quickly and totally and they got married within six months. Then they moved to New York; it was better for both their careers and they liked the energy of the place.

When they got married, she felt complete. Jake was everything she’d always wanted and, incredibly, he wasn’t scared of her success, because he was successful too. Now she had her career, an apartment in Manhattan, great friends and Jake. Before she met him she had felt that she would always be searching, travelling, that somehow she would never find her own home, that she would never find her place. But now she felt settled.

Settled, she thought to herself. So where had it gone wrong?

* * *

A few hours later Alex was sitting in a quiet corner of the departure lounge at JFK airport waiting for her flight to London Heathrow. She felt a little better now that she was on her way, now that she was on her own. It was always easier when she was travelling, when she was going somewhere else.

The flight had been delayed for over an hour. She took out a thriller and tried to read, but she couldn’t

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concentrate. So she just sat and watched the people walking by and sitting in the departure lounge. She always liked to look at the way people dressed; she often found herself criticising their style, their clothes. It was because of her job, she guessed. She just couldn't stand badly-dressed people. Didn't they know that the way you looked said so much about you?

One of the things that had attracted her to Jake in the first place was that he dressed well, Alex thought. She started reading again but found herself still unable to concentrate. Yes, Jake dressed well, but not as well as Stefano. Ah yes, Stefano. It had started two years ago when she met Stefano.

Two years ago . . . She remembered that she had been sitting in the departure lounge at Milan Malpensa airport. She'd been to a big fashion show and was flying to Paris to do some buying before going home to New York. They called her flight and, as usual, she waited until everyone else had boarded; she just carried on sitting there. She hated queuing up; what was the point? You had your seat already. You might as well wait until everyone else had got on.

'*Mi pare che viagga molto.*' said a man's voice behind her. She turned round and looked right into the eyes of the most beautiful man.

'Er, I'm sorry,' she said, 'my Italian isn't very good.' She looked at him. He had to be Italian. He was dressed in that way only Italian men know how, in an Armani suit and a pale peach-coloured shirt that set off his dark skin perfectly.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' he said in perfect English. 'I was just