

Although the constellations

Journey to a New Town

Georgia Monaghan

"We're over Australia," my husband whispered into my headset.

"Don't tell me that—I don't want to know."

I was sedating myself with my fourth inflight movie on a marathon twenty-hour flight from London, refusing to believe that our six-month trip to Europe was over. My husband Darren continued to watch our plane tracking over the Great Southern Land on the inflight display embedded in the headrest of the seat in front of him while our two sons slept. I kept my eyes fixed on the screen ahead of me, but knowing we were re-entering Australian airspace felt eerily unnerving. A sense of dread welled up in the pit of my stomach. It gave new meaning to the word *homesick*: I felt sick to be coming home.

Throughout our six-month sojourn I had strangely felt more at home in northern hemisphere locales than I ever had in the country of my birth, the Land Down Under. I was the firstborn of two European immigrants who had migrated as teenagers to the other end of the earth. Was there something in my DNA that sensed when it was nearing home?

Walking out of the Whitsunday's airport into the brash Australian sunlight after half a year of being cocooned by muted northern skies was startling. Even Darren joked, "What is that bright thing in the sky?" I felt disoriented and stranded, a castaway in a modern, flat, one-dimensional streetscape being assaulted by harsh accents under cobalt blue skies. I yearned for the delicate layers of European history, beauty, and culture my soul had been steeping in for months. You hear a lot about finding a soul mate, but not so much about finding a *soul place*.

Even after several months back 'home' I could not shake the sense of restlessness, the sense that I no longer belonged in the country of my birth, and so I was finally receptive to my American husband's long-held desire that we relocate to the United States.

Once we decided as a family on relocating, finding an American hometown became my responsibility and privilege. We wanted a town where New York City was only a daytrip away, but where space and acreage were also still a possibility. We wanted a town with great schools, low crime, a sense of community, opportunities for a wide variety of activities, and that was close to many other interesting towns. These were the criteria that made sense, criteria you could measure and compare. But there were



change, the mind is universal.

other requirements on my inner wish list. Somewhere inside me, an old world European soul craved a beautifully historic and aesthetic environment. (Preferably one where wearing a turn-of-the-century ball gown would not be out of place!) So one of my secret wishes was for a pretty, historic, and quintessentially New England town. I knew there were plenty further north in Massachusetts, Vermont, and Maine, but could there be one this close to New York City? The internet teased me with its few and far between, washed out, low resolution, poorly exposed images of most of the Connecticut towns on our top-five list. But no matter how limited the photography, Newtown had a few images that caught my attention, my imagination, and my heart strings. One image in particular of a quaint white-steepled meeting house, a stone church, and an undulating flag peeking out through a forested vista stopped me short on my search. As important as all the statistics, this image was pivotal in my decision to put Newtown on the top of our list.

Slowly my sense of fear began to oscillate between nervousness and excitement. Perhaps fear of the unknown is just the flip side of excitement at the prospect of new possibilities.

We hadn't chosen Newtown, Connecticut, by throwing a dart at a map, but some days it didn't feel far off that. Maybe it was more like throwing a dart at a search engine. Yes, a year and a half of thorough (okay, obsessive) internet research had been done, but in the end there was a strong sense of intuition guiding the process. At one point we decided that we should seriously consider another town about twenty minutes away where house prices were more reasonable. Without ever having laid



eyes on Newtown both our hearts sank at the thought of 'leaving' Newtown. We were feeling homesick for a town we had never even driven through.

Which is not to say I didn't experience cold feet. In the lead up to this vast life-changing event I woke up in the middle of the night many times consumed by fear: fear of the unknown, fear of an empty abyss of a future that I knew very little about. What were we doing? Why were we doing this? Were we doing this on a whim? Why was it that the minute our lives were settled and organized we felt the need to shake everything up and start all over again? Was life like a giant jigsaw puzzle we wanted to pack away as soon as we had the last piece in place so we could get to work on a new puzzle? That was probably part of it, but there was more to this big move. It seemed to have chosen us more than we had chosen it. Something deep in the universe was moving us on; it felt like an ocean rip that you shouldn't fight against, a current you needed to go with.

It wasn't entirely rational, and it was difficult to explain: more a gut feeling than a decision reached after tallying up the pros and cons.

An internal shift had taken place and





we felt a deep sense that things were never going to be the same again.

After a long, drawn-out house sale and epic rounds of packing, we woke up one morning with a set of one-way international plane tickets, two suitcases each, and a sense of a new life beginning. Slowly my sense of fear had begun to oscillate between nervousness and excitement. Perhaps fear of the unknown is just the flip side of excitement at the prospect of new possibilities.

Before leaving Australia we had the opportunity for a stopover in Sydney to visit with family and reintroduce our sons to the city of their birth. We took them back to the great Sydney icons they had lived around as babies but could hardly remember: the Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Taronga Zoo, Luna Park, and the Queen Victoria Building.

As a Sydneysider born and bred, there was a time when a walk around Sydney Harbour filled me with the deepest sense of being home, of being where I belonged. But this visit to Sydney, as enjoyable as it was, filled me with a sense that Sydney represented my past—my memories, my heritage, my birthplace—but not my future. Revisiting all my old haunts, even my old high school and Oxford-inspired Sydney University, was a privilege made more special by being able to share them with my two school-aged children. At the University of Sydney, our eldest chose as a souvenir a pin with the

university crest and motto: "Sidere mens eadem mutato," which means "Although the constellations change, the mind is universal."

On our last night in Sydney we chose to spend the evening having dinner at the city's revolving Tower

Restaurant. As we watched

the whole panorama of Sydney descend into darkness and the southern stars emerge in the night sky, I could not avoid the sense that my future lay beyond these shores and under different stars.

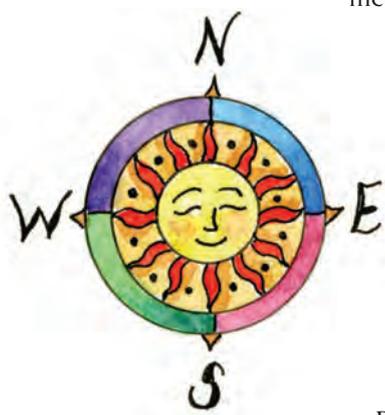
Honolulu was a two-night stopover that helped break up the inhumane twenty-four hour flight between east coast Australia and east coast United States. With our hotel right across the road from Waikiki Beach, we enjoyed the surf and balmy walks along the beach at night. We stumbled across an authentic Hawaiian hula show and learned a little about Hawaiian history and culture. *Aloha*, we learned, means more than hello or even welcome. It means what's mine is yours; its meaning encompasses compassion, love, and peace. It is the greeting of an incredibly generous, friendly, and hospitable people. We sensed that not only the Hawaiian

But now was the moment of truth: would Newtown, the town with the perfect name for our new life, also be the perfect town for us?

people, but the universe as a whole, was welcoming us with *aloha*.

The next morning we woke with a surreal sense of excitement. We were about to take the trip to the town we had chosen above all others, a new town where a new life would begin, a new town where we would meet new people, visit new places, and come face-to-face with a new destiny.

After zigzagging over almost every state of the continental United States, finally we were flying over the border into Connecticut and towards Hartford's Bradley International Airport. I could not get over to a window seat fast enough. I had looked at endless aerial views of Connecticut streetscapes on the real estate websites, most





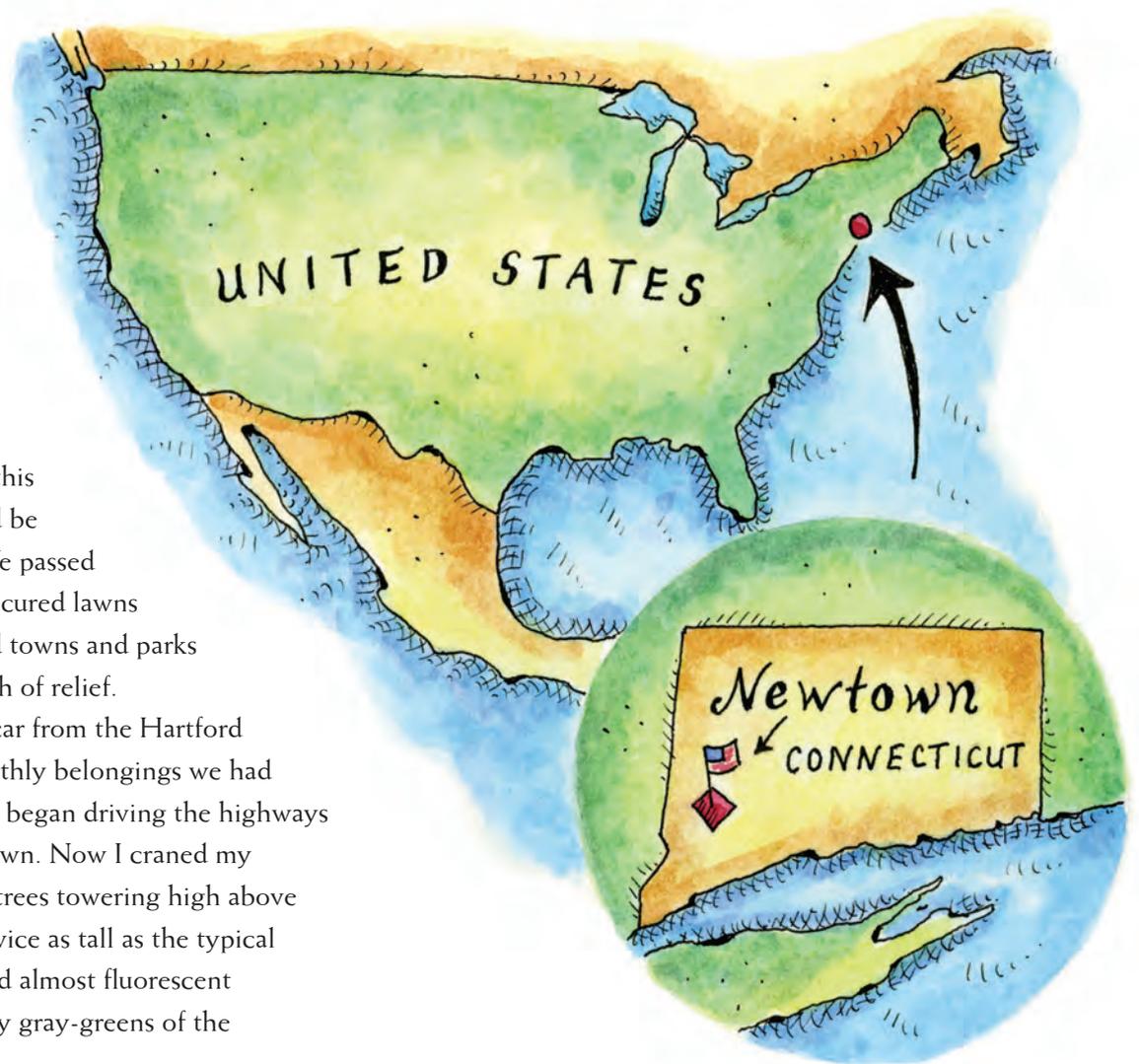
Illustrations by Jennifer Thermes

taken during winter to allow you to see the houses between the trees. But this was real, this was looking down at Connecticut for the first time with my own eyes. And as we flew toward Hartford in the middle of summer I could not believe how lush, green, and natural it looked. How could this much untouched forested land be so close to New York City? We passed over pristine homes with manicured lawns and classic brick buildings and towns and parks and I breathed a very deep sigh of relief.

We picked up a rental car from the Hartford airport, squeezed in all the earthly belongings we had managed to carry with us, and began driving the highways of Connecticut toward Newtown. Now I craned my neck upward, to see the leafy trees towering high above us. These trees were at least twice as tall as the typical gum trees we were used to, and almost fluorescent green compared to the scrubby gray-greens of the Australian bush.

Approaching the Newtown exit, my heart began to skip a few beats. Now was the moment of truth: Would Newtown, the town with the perfect name for our new life, also be the perfect town for us?

We made our way down Main Street toward the Dana-Holcombe House, the bed and breakfast I had booked for our first three nights. My eyes twinkled in disbelief. Newtown was beautiful! Quaint, picturesque, a town from another time and place. It seemed untouched by the twentieth century. Each historic home we passed had more architectural detail and charm than the one before. There were more homes and buildings built in the seventeen hundreds on Newtown's Main Street than in all



of Australia combined. And then we approached the main intersection. Now, as understated laidback Australians we like to keep our flag waving to a minimum. But here in the middle of the road was the tallest, grandest flagpole I had ever seen, and billowing in almost slow motion was the most beautiful flag. It seemed to have a life and spirit of its own, it moved with grace and elegance unlike any other flag I had known. It was mesmerizing, and I could not imagine this streetscape without it. It seemed to breathe its calm reassurance into me and I knew immediately, yes, I can live here, this feels like home, this is somewhere my soul belongs.

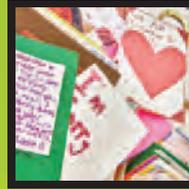
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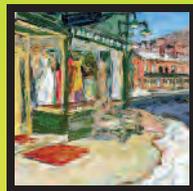
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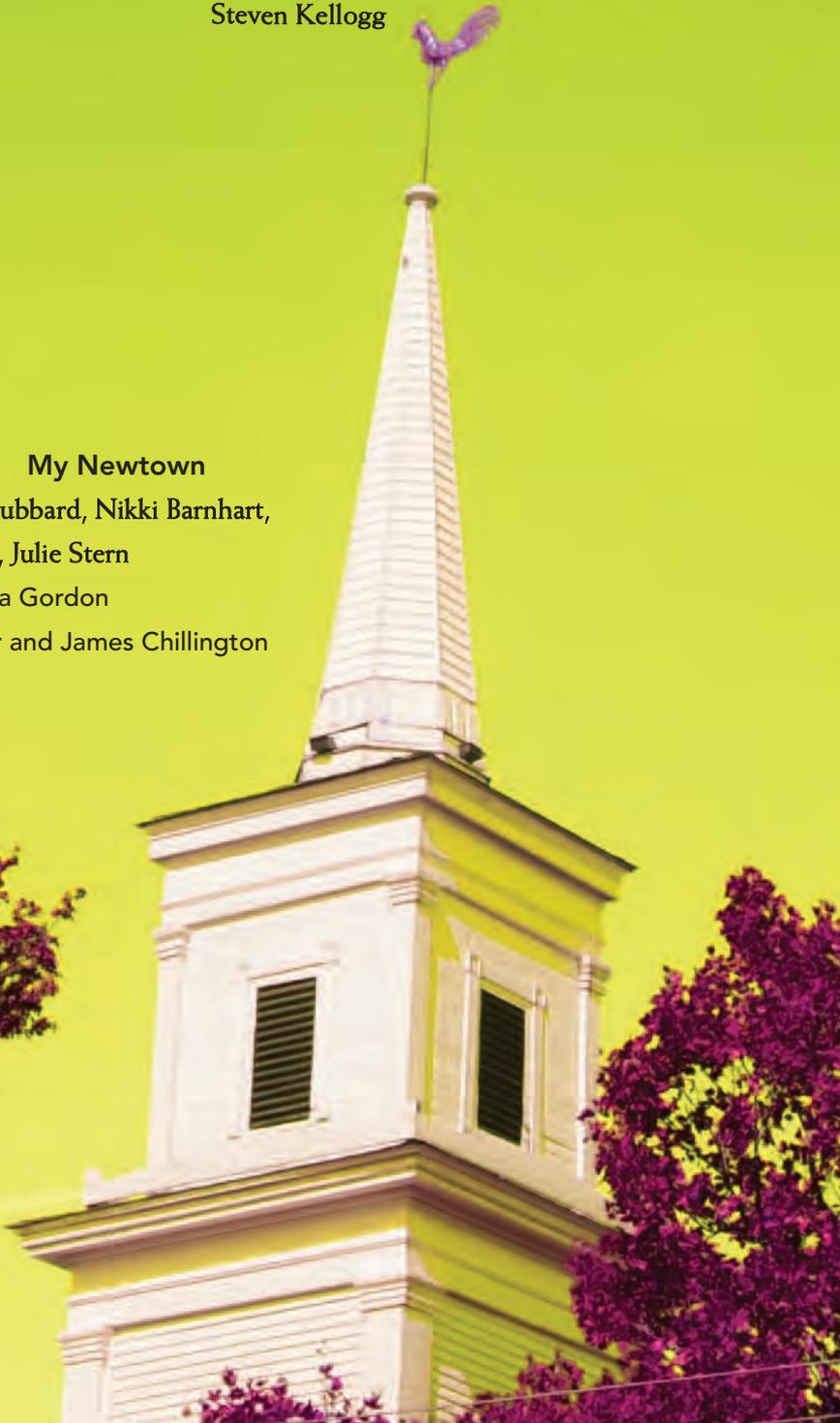
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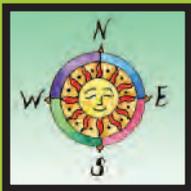
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