

Wild in the Hollow

On CHASING Desire
and Finding the
Broken Way HOME

AMBER C. HAINES



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For my kin:
Seth and our boys
and every child who comes after.



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Introduction

THE HOMESICKNESS

If you were to meet me in person, the first thing you'd notice is the green from my mama's eyes and the prominent nose from Daddy's sprawling Scotch-Irish and Native American line. If we were to speak, I wouldn't be ashamed of my honeysuckle drawl, the sense of home that drips from my mouth.

If you were to see me as a child, you'd see me with my sister, our manes a tangled mess, wind-wild in saw-briar woods. We never knew then to relish our age. We only woke in our time like babies in a blanket unfolding. I had grandmothers in three directions, baby brothers, and good cousins. We had a canoe in the yard and the lake down the road. We caught crawdads and sang "Blue Moon of Kentucky" while Daddy played guitar. The sky turned navy, and the whip-poor-will called us in. We

were Alabama girls in the dirt, Alabama girls lying down on the front steps. We knew the safety of a gentle mama. Dark came, and the woods crawled, always a snap from something hiding within them. Eyes glowed everywhere. We knew the settled way, the silence within, and we knew how to listen in the dark.

The sky looked like a sea of bats, and under their darts, we would close our eyes and let the cicadas and an Audubon's variety of frogs lift us into the hum and heartbeat of wild song. And then we would listen deeper. "What do you hear?" we would ask. An owl, rustling leaves, a truck door down the road, coyotes by the dozen: invisible things were everywhere, but we knew how to hear.

There had been a death in our house decades before us. A great-aunt had an aneurism. There was an attic, and I always wondered if she watched me from its window above. I knew that snakes lay in the dust. The crow's shadow always weaved through the limbs. We were never terribly afraid but stayed close enough to hear and to eat from the garden.

Once I dangled from our Appalachian Mountain on a tire swing, my hands choking the rope, body spinning fast round. The pines climbed to heaven and shivered, letting go the needles. I was in the safe, invisible arms, my Father's world. Then the terrible scream of a wildcat echoed into the hollow from right nearby, and I fell and hit the ground as the wind picked up in a furious howl, chasing me into the house, then blowing down the hill through a field of bitterweed. The wind took up the small places, the black knots in dead wood and the frilly powdered undersides of mushrooms. The maypops and pecan hulls, every one encased by the wind, their scents rode

on it and pushed at Mama Lois's rippling pond while cattails danced. There's something out there. I knew it then, and I know it now—something bigger and other. The terrible and the beautiful are watching me.

The invisible has always been as real to me as the smell from behind the barn—the hogs and then the sweet mix from the pile of chestnuts that Peggy Israel's mama gave us. I always knew there was more than what my eyes could see. Maybe that's why it's easy for me to imagine Eden. I have my own version, the place where I clearly remember my early childhood experience as beautiful, wild, and protected.

I wonder if I know a little of what Adam and Eve may have felt, or at least I like to imagine it. Adam had a home with God, who was still on his breath. He couldn't have known how marvelous it was simply to unfold and speak in holy tongue. God taught original language there but let Adam choose what to call the animals. When he woke to Eve, I wonder if he thought her like a dove. She wasn't made from the ground like the rest but was made of his bone, strong. He loved her. He loved how he fit with her. They were whole there together at home, where a million metaphors began, all the ways to experience God.

They were naked by the river, listening, legs sprawled out the way kids sit wide open in front of their mamas, no shame. The sky was a sapphire and full of water. They were in the freshness of God's rest: easy sleep and fulfilling work.

When the angel came with the flaming sword in every direction, sending them away from the Tree of Life, what grief must have pressed in. This is where our inherited sense of homesickness began. The clothes they hadn't needed before were sewn

by the hand of God, and then the babies came, and with them violence, rejection, and enough shame to send the world into needing a flood.

How they must have looked back and remembered. How they must have missed home. When Adam's plants bore no fruit, did he close his eyes and taste Eden's pomegranates?

I wonder if he was like I am. When the seasons change, anything shifts at all, it reminds me of home. I long for it. I can taste it. I've been known to wake up early in the morning, imagine the biscuits, and start packing my four sons in Arkansas to drive all the way to Alabama. I get sick with missing, but every time I go, it doesn't seem to have the same sweet feeling as the one I had as a child. Not many even know my name there now, and the sense of freedom I used to have isn't any easier there than it is here. It often doesn't stop me from trying though. I long for a place to fit, and sometimes I forget and become desperate for a sense of peace. I want to hear my daddy say my name. I want to listen to the creek run white over rocks with my sister. I want my children to feel the wind sweep through.

All the striving to regain such feelings of home, even as I create home now as a wife and mother, I know none of it will do to give me peace. Home here really is a mere metaphor, but it's one that anchors me. How wild and free we were when we were too small to care for ourselves in that hollow at the mountain base. The way I remember home is the same way the prodigal son remembered his when he found himself eating scraps. It's the place we know we can go, where we'll be received and fed. It's where we know we have a name.

INTRODUCTION

I'm not so naïve to think that most people have lovely childhood memories of home like I do. I think we were the only people on the planet to have a ginormous swimming pool slide in our yard without the actual pool at the bottom. Even still, I wonder if you feel it too—the homesickness for a people and a place to belong, the desire for the freedom and safety you might find there, the thrill and the comfort. Maybe it's what draws you toward the things you hold dear. We often hold on to memories, places, people, and things because there's something of home in them. There's a sense of freedom, the belonging that happens with real friends that makes you feel at home. So many of us are working out a homesickness, and I believe the homesickness is what all our wanderings are all about. We're searching for home—a place of acceptance, a place of fulfillment, and a place of identity. At the basest level, we suspect that home is the place where we'll find our fit, where we'll finally be free.



Rebel

As long as I was with our people—my siblings, my great-grandmother Mama Lois, and our assortment of yard dogs—I rarely teetered on loneliness as a small child. There was an ancient woman across the street named Florence who let us taste her snuff and eat her peppermints. Once in a while, Florence’s great-grandchildren would come for summer weekends. When they were gone, I longed for them, for interaction, the connectedness of imaginary play. A neighbor boy from down the road would ride up on his bike when his mama wasn’t making him work the garden, and once in a while, Daddy’s work friends would bring their children over too. I visited church friends often and came to know myself early as someone who loved to connect with people, to share space and stories.

When kindergarten started, and that big yellow bus picked me up for my thirty-minute ride to school, it was an overwhelming sensory experience. I remember standing in front of my

seat as tall as I could and my nose touching the top of the green pleather seat in front of me. I was a tiny thing aching to be seen, looking over. Out the windows were broken-down country roads, then fields of beans and brick homes with paved driveways. I huffed a cloud on the bus window and wrote my name in cursive and remember the honor of the big girl who noticed my swirls. She spoke to me. I remember it as clear as sky above the asphalt plant: “I love your cursive.” She saw me.

I remember the gorgeous girl with curly black hair, one shoulder exposed, who sat in the back and sang “Just Another Manic Monday” and “My Sharona” at the top of her lungs. We all loved to hear her sing, especially the boys. She was magnetic brave, wore a bra, and knew how to groove. It didn’t take me long to learn her art of connection, the air of sexuality, how it could control things.

After these initial stirrings to connect with the world, to see more than the stretch of yards between home and church, I dabbled in wanderlust every chance I had. I wandered into adolescence and found I could sneak some good MTV time and flip through mountains of romance novels at the house of my great-grandmother Mama Lois. There, I saw Janet Jackson dance. I figured I knew what nasty meant, and I was pretty sure I liked it. I saw the world as a place to be known, a place to connect, to be held in arms.

Even in these early days of budding desire, our Church of Christ youth group had some magical powers and made me feel right enough with God for several years. We memorized the Bible and won Bible Bowl championships. I felt like I belonged as long as I was just like everyone else, and I was able

to try for a while. I did my best to keep under the umbrella of God's grace by saying my prayers and no dirty words, wearing long shorts, and vowing never to have sex before marriage. Somewhere along the way, I began to believe that it was my job to make God happy. Somewhere along the way, I believed that making God happy meant conforming to the likeness of a church with all its rules and church programming.

I hesitate a great deal to say a negative thing about the church of my youth, the ones who painted that grace umbrella, the box of faith, for me. They taught me the words to "I'll Fly Away" and "Nearer My God to Thee." They took care of us when Daddy broke his leg, and they surrounded him with love when he lost his oldest sister. They took time off work to be our counselors at camp. I saw Susan Gallant close her eyes when she sang to Jesus. I always watched her because she was different. Once in a while, her palms would turn up. Years later, after I returned to faith, there were renegade women who would confide in me that they had learned it too, that God's consuming love spread far like a thrown net we couldn't get out of. I still don't understand some of their theological arguments, and aren't we all just doing the best we know how?

Back then, in my girl years, I sang "Amazing Grace" with the congregation but felt strangled by guilt, the despair at my pull toward the sensual, at my desire to dance to "Funky Cold Medina." It might have been my own idea that dancing would lead straight away to pregnancy, but it made sense. We were fed a steady diet of works-based, bootstraps righteousness, one that taught us to fear sex, music, and pleasure. Early on, I knew I wasn't good enough. I would never be able to make the

Jesus cut. The Christian requirements seemed simple, but I had too much curious-creative in me not to appreciate art and the body. I didn't know how to not love the skater boys and Cayce Keller with his guitar.

Young as Eve, I thought I knew what gave women power. Oh, the fruit on the tree, it looked good. I knew the long shorts were ugly, and I couldn't not dance to "Motown Philly." I had no place. I thought I would never be able to do enough to be accepted by God's people, and therefore by God. I lived outside the umbrella, and I knew it.



I lost my virginity in a bedroom while Lenny Kravitz played "Fields of Joy." I was fifteen looking up through the window at the tops of pine trees. We were kissing; his hands moved to my zipper; the word no was inside my mouth. I was a girl. I was a little girl. He was twentysomething, bigger than I. The wind blew the trees until their backs bowed, and I was watching it happen, and I thought I couldn't stop it. I thought I wanted those arms, but this was not a day for being known, not for fields of joy.

When I left his house, a ghost followed me home, the thick presence of something terrible. I went to bed that night and cried until it wasn't dark anymore, that ghost in my room watching me weep. I couldn't get rid of it, but I pressed on and wrote in my journal. "I give up," I wrote, and that was all it took. There, I resolved to a life outside the umbrella. Shame, I know now, was his name.

I woke up to myself, to the mirror like forbidden fruit. I said, “Show me the world.” I asked myself, “Isn’t there more than these hills? Observe the shape of my lips. See, I’m shaped like a woman.” On the scales, I made things add up as best as I could. I plucked my eyebrows, thank goodness, and I became ultimately self-aware. I assumed that I would finally come to freedom in the place I lost it, in the arms of a boy.

Freedom, I thought, was found in the knowledge of good and evil, in tasting both. Isn’t that where rebellion begins, when we desire the forbidden thing? For a long span, I lived self-aware, tried to fill my own hollow places. “I’m on my own,” I said. It’s only me *here*, surrounded by ghosts, eyes opened to the foolishness of trying to please the church. I saw the fruit of sexuality, the art of human connection, and it was good for eating.

Had God pulled me from Adam’s rib and placed me naked in the garden, the story would be no different. Let’s not blame Eve anymore. If she hadn’t eaten the fruit, it would most certainly have been me. I would have eaten it again and again, and then I would have given you a bite.



The fearless leader of my circle of high school friends was Easy. Easy was hard and enlightened and had tattooed in bold print on his wrist the word *freedom*. We all agreed that’s what we wanted. We wanted to be free.

In a small town, hardly a soul has grace to spare for the rebellious ones. We would have taken more extreme measures to be different from the rest of the world had it not been so easily

done. It was easy to wear funky clothes and stand out, CD case full of Nirvana, Sonic Youth, and the Velvet Underground. It was easy to get pushed to the wayside and easy to be labeled rotten.

When we saw that there was more to the picture, when the institutions became a set of droned rules with which we had no heart connection and the meaning was missing, we rebelled, and we did it with our middle fingers to the sky.

What I remember of that rebellion is that so many of us never had a space to work through difficult circumstances. There was no open culture to discuss pain or injustice. For many families, God was the answer, and he was a God who thought up good youth group T-shirt slogans, who said, “If you just believe hard enough, you’ll not suffer anymore.”

Look around at the cinder-block houses and the kids whose feet grow holes in their shoes. Look around at the beautiful clothes on the girl whose daddy finds her at night. The God of the bumper stickers doesn’t add up here.

We rebellious were trying to find the fix, and most weren’t fools for clichéd Christianity, and we good well shouldn’t be. So many daddies were gone. Some went home after school to mothers who lay drunk or full of cancer on the couch. One friend woke early before school to chop firewood for money so his siblings could eat.

It was as if one day we all woke up hungry, nearly like zombies. We rose from our parents’ houses and said, “None of this stuff feeds us!” We called our parents out. Their faiths seemed hollow, and we wanted free from it.

So many in our community, if they weren’t broken and sick outwardly, seemed trite in their outward religion. They wore

buns on their heads and sewed their skirts down to the floor. We may have done well to befriend the holiness kids with earnestness, but whether it was true or not, they seemed guilty in being pretty, happy, or fun. Many of us couldn't help but see their "Holy Ghost" as a virus we didn't want to catch.

So we marched, looking for freedom, tasting it together in the bottle, in sex, in circled confession. We made fun of each other and everyone was mean, but there were, too, always arms to cradle. There were long kisses, stories told without judgment. What we didn't have back then was a place to cry. We saw ourselves as broken, like there was no fixing, but there were days we rolled out of school with the windows down. We played our music and waved our arms through the air in the slow ride down to the mill, all the back roads, ghosts in the backseat.

Once I kissed the one who counted stars with me, and after that we didn't leave each other's side. We made promises. We felt so free, watching laughing trees slap their knees because that's what drugs do. They play to your feelings, like music to a dancing baby.

We joined together and watched each other in mutual destruction. In the name of pretty, happy, and fun, we took up a mighty dose of promiscuity and alcoholism. We experimented with every drug and became quite practiced at many of them. I cared so little for my body, all in the name of freedom—as if a lie were being whispered and believed, like death might be the actual secret. Turns out, the harder we fought to show the world that we were well with ourselves, so free, the sicker we became.



All these years later, I wrote Easy and asked him about that tattoo I remember from long ago, and this is how he responded:

I thought I knew why I wanted that tattoo and am glad I have it (for many reasons), but what it meant then and what it means now are from two different continuums. Now, after years of tribulation, turmoil, and personal persecution, I find it has a whole new meaning. Driving along one day I heard a song I had heard a thousand times before and by many different artists, but this one particular day it really hit a nerve with me—a song written by Kris Kristofferson that says, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose,” and I realized it is, and that’s all it is. Maybe I didn’t consciously get that tattoo then for that reason, but that’s why I got it in the end. Because when you think about it, “feelin’ good” is what it was all about anyway, right?¹

I think Easy is right. I think it’s a long road to the place that says, “I feel good about having nothing to lose.” It can be like a trek through the desert to get there sometimes, and that’s what it was for me. When my eyes opened, when I chose to put the fruit of the tree of good and evil to my lips, I was beginning my journey into temptation, into chasing the desires that mimic holy freedom. I wish it had taken me only forty days to walk alongside that snake.

All the things offered to me—the freedom, the Turkish delight, the kingdom—I took it all and fed my every desire, and as I did, I heaped up guilt. Guilt, my darling pet, was the one

thing I could never seem to lose, and so, freedom really had never been an option for me. Guilt is anti-peace, and without the fruit of peace, there's no real freedom and no real home. Instead, there's only the chasing of other, new desires we hope will fill the hollow.