

ATLAS GIRL

FINDING HOME IN
THE LAST PLACE
I THOUGHT TO LOOK

EMILY T. WIERENGA



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*Dedicated to my husband, Trenton Nathan Wierenga—
our love is the greatest journey.*

*And to my mum, Yvonne Patricia Dow—
for teaching me how to dance.*

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That's life and faith too.

Messy,
blurred, and
beautiful.

And even as Dad lifted Nanny's limp body from the bathtub and Mum ran to her bedroom, even as the ashes sat on the piano while Allison played "How Great Thou Art," the lines were blurred. The picture was messy.

But it hung on the walls of our hearts, unfinished.

And it was **home**.



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M u m

Canada: Blyth, Ontario

July 2007

Behind all your stories is always your mother's story, because hers is where yours begins.

Mitch Albom

The smell of my hands reminds me of Africa.

Of mangoes mashed, of Mum feeding me, and my brother too. And now I'm feeding her, and she doesn't open her mouth when I ask her to.

The sunrise sky is pretty, like Mum's pink silk scarf, the one hanging in her closet, and the windows are dirty; maybe I'll clean them today. Mum thinks today is Sunday—funny, because yesterday was Sunday too, she thought—“And there's church and I will need to take my blue purse with my Bible and where are my glasses?”

This is what she would normally say, but suddenly she can't speak. Kind of like me until age four because we moved so much, and Dad says I just watched people. Just stood at the fence in Congo and watched our neighbors.

Mum is trying to ask me something, but her mouth won't work. I busy myself with the spoon and the mashed fruit. I might as well be buying baby food for the way Mum can't chew. I don't have children of my own and this is something Trent, my husband, wants. "Maybe one day," I tell him.

I didn't used to want children at all, and now I'm bathing Mum, who's had brain cancer for five years, and I'm changing her and cutting her toenails and my womb is too full of grief and wonder to make room for a baby.

Funny how the two go together, grief and wonder, kind of like when Jesus died and his murderers realized he was God even as the sky tore.

The sky is bleeding red, and in a month it will blaze cerulean with late August heat. Combines whirring and the air thick with the meaty smell of harvest.

And Mum's still fumbling for words, and when she does talk she has a British accent, but now she has nothing and I wish, I wish she knew how much I loved her.

"Bigger," Mum says finally, and I know she's trying to say, "I love you bigger."

"I love you biggest," I tell her, wiping drool and mango from her chin with a cloth. It's not supposed to be this way.

I'm helping her stand now, and she's light. She hasn't been this small since Africa, where she knit afghans with local women while Dad taught blind men how to plant and Keith and I played in the mud, him in his cloth diaper and me in my underwear.

I read somewhere that stress can trigger brain tumors. Perhaps Mum's grew when she found Nanny in the bathtub, dead. Or maybe this tumor is my fault. Maybe it's from when I got anorexia, Mum holding me at night when she thought I was asleep, and her crying.

Or maybe it's from all of those pots and pans flying across the room when she and I would fight. Or maybe it's from when I left the house at eighteen and didn't look back.

Mum's diaper is poking out of her stretchy pants, the ones she always wears because they're the easiest to pull up if she's unconscious, and there's someone at the door and I'm helping her across the floor toward her blue recliner.

And Mum is asleep in her chair even before I answer the door.



Leaving Home

Canada: Edmonton, Alberta

September 1998

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Lao Tzu

Mum had said to sit close to the bus driver, so I sat as far away as possible.

And now a Chippewa man in a red bandana with stubbly cheeks was snoring on my shoulder.

He smelled like communion wine, the kind my father served in glass cups that we slid, empty, into the pew's tiny cup holders.

He smelled like beer, like the late August summer when I was entering puberty, cleaning up the Corn Fest fairgrounds in my Sunday dress with my family. The beer cans all clanging like empty songs against each other in their black garbage bags. It was what good Christians did, cleaning up after sinners' parties and marching in

pro-life rallies, and it was always us versus them. And all I ever wanted was to be them.

But always, we were taught to be kind to *them*, so I let this man sleep on my shoulder in the Greyhound bus headed west while I tucked up my legs and tried to shrink inside my eighteen-year-old frame.

I tried to close my eyes against the cold of the window but it had been two days since I'd hugged my younger brother, Keith, and my sisters, Allison and Meredith; since Mum—whose name is Yvonne, which means beautiful girl—had held me to her soft, clean, cotton shirt and her arms had said all of the words she'd never been able to voice. The Reverend Ernest Dow, or Dad, had loaded my cardboard boxes full of Value Village clothes onto the bus and kissed me on the cheek and smiled in a way that apologized. I was the eldest, and I was the first to leave. But then again, I'd left long before getting on that bus.

I'd slid my guitar, then, beside the cardboard boxes, its black case covered in hippie flower stickers and the address for the Greyhound depot in Edmonton, forty hours away.

And we still weren't there yet, and I hoped there would be mountains.

I should know, I thought. *I should know whether or not there will be mountains.*

My parents had raised us to believe in God, to believe in music, and to believe in travel.

We'd visited Edmonton as children, piled into our blue Plymouth Voyager, and we'd driven from Ontario to California, no air conditioning, living off crusty bun sandwiches and tenting every night.

And there was Disneyland and the ocean and me nearly drowning because I was all ribs, my body too tired to care. And we'd traveled home through Canada, through Edmonton, but all I remembered was the mall, West Edmonton Mall, and how it had hurt me to walk its miles, thin as I was.

I was hospitalized soon after that trip. The submarine sandwiches hadn't been enough to fill the cracks. But oh, how my parents taught us to love the open road. We caught the bug young, and here I was, and I couldn't remember where the Rockies began and ended.

I scratched at the night as though it were frost on my window, but all I could see were the bright yellow lines on the highway, like dashes in a sentence, like long pauses that never ended. The last sign had said Lloydminster, a town that stapled Saskatchewan and Alberta together.

And for some reason I always said a prayer for her when it was dark. *Mum*.

Not really during the day, but always when it was night and maybe because she was like a candle. We didn't talk much and we were opposite in temperament and so we yelled a lot, and yet I missed the way she smelled of lavender and would hold me when a boy dumped me or when Dad wouldn't listen to me.

The man with the alcoholic breath was whimpering in his sleep and I felt sorry for him, and annoyed, and I had a crick in my neck. No one seemed to notice this blonde girl with the man asleep on her shoulder, but that was the way I wanted it. No one seeing me, all hunched over with my Margaret Atwood novel and my Walkman.

I was listening to Journey. "Just a small town girl, livin' in a lonely world . . . she took a midnight train going anywhere . . ."

I closed my eyes against the jagged yellow of the road and buried my nose against my cardigan. It smelled of fuzzy peach perfume. Of the mission trip to Atlanta, Georgia, to the 1996 Olympic Games; of the twenty-one-year-old boy who had given me my sweet sixteen kiss.

It smelled like home and my room covered in Michael W. Smith and DC Talk posters and the floral quilt with Cuddles, my bear. And I didn't remember Dad ever entering that room. Mum sometimes slid books under the door, books on sex and why not to have it before marriage, and sometimes my sisters would come in and watch me do my makeup.

Ever since the anorexia—me starving myself from age nine to thirteen and ending up in a hospital where my hair fell out and my nails curled under—my sisters had been a bit scared of me and I didn't blame them. Mum didn't let them visit me very often because I played secular music from the radio, stuff like Bon Jovi and Bryan Adams, stuff that made the insides of my legs ache a little.

I twisted the silver purity ring on my ring finger and it wasn't coming off, not until my wedding day, and it was the one thing my parents and I agreed on.

But I would have pulled the Kleenex from my bra, and the bra from my body, for Seth Jones. For the scratchy way he said my name and the way his brown hair hung over his eyes, but I hadn't.

And Mum had knocked on my bedroom door that day, roses in her arms, and she'd sat on my bed and held me, the day Seth had dumped me in the school courtyard. The day he'd said I was too nice. Which really just meant I wouldn't get undressed for him.

But then Mum had given me the bouquet of roses and my fingers had bled from the thorns. And I'd known I wasn't too nice, just too afraid of sin, and sometimes it doesn't matter what kind of fear, so long as it steers you right.

I didn't know why I was waiting except that sex was a big deal, even bigger than drinking, and it was only allowed after marriage.

Not that marriage meant much with my dad sleeping on the couch after staying up late on the computer and Mum getting jealous over the ladies Dad talked to after church in his long minister's robe, his face full of laughter, a sight we rarely saw at home.

"Edmonton," the driver's weary voice crackled over the speaker, and the man on my shoulder was sitting up now, rubbing his eyes and yawning. As though he did that kind of thing all the time, as though we were lovers or friends, and I shrugged.

Stretched my legs. Tugged my green cardigan close, pulled the photos of my roommates from my cloth purse. Alex de Groot, short with dark curls and more of a smirk than a smile, and Meg

Hendriks, tall and Dutch and blonde. They would both be waiting for me, Alex had told me in an email.

The bus was stopping and the Chippewa man inched out of his seat.

And I stood up, and my heart fell out of my chest and I couldn't breathe.

For all of my eighteen years of not being able to connect with him, I missed him. My father.

I missed knowing he was there. That he could fix anything I asked him to.

That when he was at the wheel, I could just fall asleep in the backseat because Dad would get us wherever we needed to go.

That if I had a math problem I couldn't figure out, he would spend hours at the kitchen table showing me over and over how to do it.

And if there was a thunderstorm or a scary dream he would sit outside my room until I fell asleep, reading his book there on the floor by the light of the bathroom. Like a shepherd.

Dad was the one to teach us piano and the recorder. He played guitar but he knew the chords on a piano and we all sang and played instruments. There was a lot of music in our house.

I gripped the seat in front of me, braced against this sudden wave of homesickness.

We were stepping off the bus now and I saw my roommates standing there and they looked just like they did in the photo.

I wiped my eyes. Cleared my throat. And walked toward them.



We were sheep, waiting to be corralled, and there were forty of us.

Most of us were eighteen years old and fresh from home, our hair oiled and our faces squeaky clean and Scripture tucked under our arms because this was Bible school.

Mount Carmel Bible School. A square brick building on a plot of grass in the heart of Capilano, Edmonton, just blocks from

the townhouse I shared with Alex and Meg who listened to the Canadian indie band Sloan, and lounged in the living room talking for hours, and cooked delicious suppers.

And there were no mountains.

“Gosh, this is lame,” Alex said now, doing her smirk, and I loved her already. Loved her way of reading comic books in the bathroom and walking around the house in her bra and underwear like she didn’t have a care.

We all huddled, silently checking each other out in the entrance of the school until a man with a long face and glasses ran in like he’d forgotten something and saw us.

“Come in!” He gestured. “No need to be shy! We’re meeting in the conference room.”

So we filed in, the sheep that we were, and I didn’t see him.

The boy I would one day marry.

The boy who would hold me for nights on end while I shook from anorexia and insomnia.

The boy who would make my heart beat a thousand times faster for the way he smiles. The boy who would make me laugh, every day, for the rest of my life.

Maybe I didn’t see him because I’d promised myself I wouldn’t marry someone from Bible college (or “bridal college”) because it was too cliché.

But I saw his friend.

A tall boy with a Greek nose and olive skin who caught my eye and winked, and I forced myself to turn away because a man up front was calling for our attention. His name was Victor Rendusso. He stood beside the guy with the long face and glasses, whose name we’d later learn was Darb Kelly—and Victor looked like a sergeant with his clipped moustache.

“Welcome to Mount Carmel, class of 1999,” Victor said. “You may take your seats and we’ll start with a few songs.” And we did. We sang some church songs with a woman on the piano in steel-iron curls and it felt like summer camp.

“See any cuties?” Alex leaned in and I shook my head.

“Not really. Maybe that guy.” I nodded my head at the Greek, across the aisle. “But he’s probably a player. You?”

Her eyes went big. “Oh yes. To our right. The brown curls. He’s mine.”

His name was Patrick Stolte and he wouldn’t be hers. She would go on one date with him, and end up marrying another boy named Lane Dougan, who was also there, who also had curls. A boy who was best friends with my future husband, Trenton Wierenga.

I wouldn’t notice Trenton until our housewarming party one week later, the one Alex and Meg would throw and I would attend because it was in our house and I couldn’t hide out in my room doing homework forever.

So I tiptoed around that night saying hi to everyone and pouring myself soda while the others drank beer and coolers and the Greek boy fell drunk down the stairs.

He’d already asked me to save myself for him—me, and a couple of other girls—because he’d promised some guy he wouldn’t date for six months as a dare and so he was getting all of the girls he was interested in to promise the same. And we fell for it, for him and his wink—that is, until he fell down drunk, and then I saw him.

Trenton. The boy from the farm, the army-boy who got down and did a break-dance move in the middle of the living room floor. As I watched him dancing on the floor, it all caught in the back of my throat, all of those love songs and the loneliness, it caught like a big wad of gum. He was tall and strong with a dark brown crew cut and large hazel eyes.

It would be years until we finally got married. And we’d break up in between.

But there was something about the shy way in which he tucked his head as he danced, the quiet way he surrendered to the applause, and the look he gave me across the room, the look that said he truly saw me.

Leaving Home

Something about that made me climb the stairs to my room
and sit in the dark with my homework piled around me and weep.

For the way I missed home. For the way I had always missed
home, even when I lived there.

And would Dad notice I was gone?