

# making it home

Finding My Way to Peace, Identity, and Purpose

EMILY T. WIERENGA



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Dedicated to my friend Ashley—for having the humility to admit you were lost, and the courage to make it home.

Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and will raise up the age-old foundations;  
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,  
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

Isaiah 58:12



We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot

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## PART I

# Child

I believe in pink. I believe that laughing is the best calorie burner. I believe in kissing, kissing a lot. I believe in being strong when everything seems to be going wrong. I believe that happy girls are the prettiest girls. I believe that tomorrow is another day and I believe in miracles.

Audrey Hepburn







# Homeless

How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home.

William Faulkner

## September 2013

“One more song,” he says, pulling me close in the afternoon light.

It’s Sunday and the boys are napping. Trent smells like wood smoke and I’ve still got my church clothes on.

One more song. It’s what he used to say when we were eighteen and lying on the carpet in my townhouse at midnight, and now we’re thirty-three and lying in bed in the middle of the day, and yet it feels the same—this place where I can feel his heartbeat. It’s my home.

The slowing of his breath, now, and he’s asleep.

The house is so silent on the Sabbath, except for the third from the bottom stair, which creaks when I step on it, and I pause, hoping the kids won’t wake.

Continue past the entrance with its piles of boots and shoes and jackets, up the second set of stairs into the open space of hardwood and long counters and wide windows, JOY across the top of the stove in red stencils from Michael's. The counter has crumbs on it, the air smells like tomato soup and grilled cheese.

I make apple cinnamon tea in a mug I bought off the street in Korea, sit down in the living room easy chair. The tan one, across from the window looking out at the hamlet of Neerlandia. Three deer, now, peering at me from across the road, their white tails flashing like the tips of swords in the sun, and they're ducking into the woods. Our town of one hundred, quietly nestled amid farms and a crescent of elderly and young families, the co-op at one end and three churches at the other.

I can't rest for remembering her.

The woman in the old man's jacket.

I found her one week ago in Edmonton, two hours from here. I was on my way to visit a friend in the hospital and I'd stopped at a Wendy's to use the bathroom. I walked in behind a mother and her daughter and we all stopped because there were two skinny legs in men's pants, with white socks and black slippers sticking out from beneath a stall door. I thought it was a man, and I thought he was dead.

But it was a woman and she was stumbling but alive, rising and apologizing, and she had rich brown skin, coarse hair cropped close, and the reddest eyes. She wore an old man's winter coat, the hood pulled low, and she exited slowly from the bathroom but she didn't smell like she'd been drinking. Or like anything, really, except the dankness of an unwashed body.

There was an empty pop can in the stall. She'd spent the night there.

I followed her from the bathroom, until she turned around and saw me. "Can I buy you lunch?" I asked, and she nodded, walked up to the counter, ordered chili and a coffee, then went and laid

her head down on a table. I paid for the food and brought her the tray, and she ate without chewing.

“I’m Emily,” I said.

She looked up at me then, and smiled. “I’m Leah.”

Her smile exploded off her face like my friend Zoe’s in Congo when I was two, me staring through the fence at my neighbors, wanting to touch their night-skin, the light in their eyes.

But Leah’s smile faded fast and she shook her head and looked down, as though she’d made a mistake.

I reached across the table then, touched her arm, and she flinched. I asked if she had anywhere she could go, anywhere I could drop her off, and she shook her head.

“I’m from Vancouver,” she said, tattoos lining her wrists, black tribal ink. “I don’t know no one here. No friends, no family. No one.”

I decided, then, that she could rest in the back of my van—the second seat was pulled, the back empty. It was autumn, mid-October, but the sun was shining and the temperature around twenty degrees Celsius.

“I’m visiting someone in the hospital across the road,” I said. “You can sleep until I’m done, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, rising immediately, because it was better than a bathroom stall. We walked outside; I gave her my coat to use as a pillow and she curled up in the back of my Dodge, the red Caravan Uncle George had gotten us for six hundred dollars at an auction. In a moment she was snoring.

I wanted to bring her home. We have a guest room and I wanted to give her a bed and a bathroom and home-cooked meals because everyone deserves a home. A place to find themselves, a place to know they are more than a number, but when I called Trent he said she needed more help than we could give her.

So after my hospital visit, I dropped her off at the Hope Mission with its beds and its programs and its long line of men in scruffy beards, and my heart ached the two hours back to Neerlandia. It

ached for the world's Leahs who have no one to make them supper, no one to care if they've gone missing, no physical address or postal box, and God showed me her room in heaven, then.

He showed me a soft, high bed with a dozen pillows and a large Jacuzzi bath and the tallest, widest windows full of sunshine. He showed me food on a buffet table, and it was all for Leah. And I know that whoever calls on Jesus's name will have a room waiting, the kind that belongs to skinny legs lying in bathroom stalls.

That night I was tucking Aiden in, and I was praying with him, my three-year-old with the long lashes and serious eyes, but I kept seeing Leah's face.

"I met a woman today," I told him. "She has no home."

He turned to me, his eyes wide. "She has no home?!" he said. "We have to help them!"

Yes, honey. We have to help them.



I'm sitting and drinking my tea from the Korean mug, the house breathing around me. I'm reading Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies*, but for a moment I fold the page, close the cover, lean back, and remember Korean days: that tiny square apartment beside the fire station, stamps in our passports, and as many countries as possible stitched onto my backpack.

I had studied the Lonely Planet guidebook and learned the language on tape in the months before Trent and I moved to Wonju, a city nestled in the mountains east of Seoul, and we taught English there, for a year, traveling to Japan and China and Thailand on the weekends, and now I study cookbooks. I plan homeschool, and some days, like today, I stare out the window with a mug of tea and wonder how I got here.

In this farming community north of Edmonton where moose sleep on our front lawn; where we don't need to pay for groceries because the co-op has our account number; where the post office is in the back of the grocery store and the only Christian public

school in the country is just down the street, the same school my husband teaches at.

And even as our house slumbers, it's alive—with peanut-butter kisses on the windows and red wine stains on the carpet.

Home is *Uncle John's Bathroom Reader* beside the toilet, the smell of a strawberry rhubarb candle a lady from church brought me when I miscarried. I light it every time I have a shower. It smells like mercy.

Home is the pile of books, *Thomas the Train* and *Dora the Explorer* and *Winnie the Pooh*, thrown from Kasher's bed because he always pages through them before he goes to sleep and then he habitually tosses them. It's the bear's ear stuck in his mouth, which he sucks. It's the infant newness that still clings to his two-year-old cheek during sleep.

It's the long lashes of Aiden, the green bunny in his arms and the flashlight by his hand. It's his footy pajamas with the feet cut off because he's three and a half and has broken through the toes.

Beside me, a rough-hewn bookshelf made by Trent out of barn boards. There's the coffee table made from the same boards, the children's chairs—Mickey, Minnie, and Dora, which are bent out of shape from Aiden and Kasher using them to wrestle.

Home is the pile of dirty clothes by Trent's side of the bed, the stack of books on both of our bedside tables—mine all literary or devotional and his all historical or fantasy, and us meeting in the middle under a feather tick. It is the smell of baby powder fabric softener.

Home is me climbing the stairs to the kitchen, some of the crab apples we picked still piled in a bucket and the rest turning into apple leather in the oven. Bowls of apple juice waiting to be frozen on the counter, and it's Trent emerging from the office and seeing me. Saying, "It feels like I haven't seen you in forever," when really it's been twenty minutes.

It's the smell of his skin when he pulls me in, and me whispering, "Not by the kitchen window," because it's a small town—maybe

one thousand people on Sundays when the farmers pile into church—and we have no curtains. So he takes me into the guest room.

The house hums like it's in love: the dryer's tenor, the dishwasher's soprano, and the refrigerator with its low bass. I walk now, to the bathroom, look at myself in the mirror, at the fine wrinkles by my eyes—I have my father's eyes.

I have his heart too, his nomadic heart that took us to Africa when I was only two.



I remember walking home from school one day feeling like someone had split my heart open like a melon. Nothing had really happened that day. I was a kid in university, and the sun was shining when I bent over from the pain—and no matter how tightly my boyfriend held me against the rough cotton of his shirt, my chest throbbed.

It wasn't anything medical and I knew this because it had happened a year earlier too, on the hill outside Mount Carmel Bible School—a grassy hill where I fell and sobbed after watching a video of Mother Teresa tending to the leprous and dying in India.

And it happened again, fifteen years later on my way home from Uganda, and my heart cracked open across the airplane bathroom and I gripped the edge of the sink like I was in labor.

“When I was a girl, I grew from five foot seven to six foot in a few months,” a friend told me. “My legs would shoot with growing pains, and it's kind of how my heart feels a lot of times. Like its legs are growing—and the greater number of places I visit and the more people I meet, the more distance I put on my heart and the greater it hurts.”

It's like our hearts are homeless, which feels almost crude to say, because at the time of writing this four hundred villagers in northern Uganda have lost their grass huts to wildfires and they are literally without a home.

But our hearts—they wander around outside our bodies without a place of residence.

When I was a child, I lived in a house that didn't always feel like home.

I'd moved ten times by the age of seven. To places like Nigeria and Congo, where my parents worked with the blind, and then all over Southern Ontario with its small towns dotted between fields, and Northern Ontario with its jagged rocks and thick brush.

I stopped talking when we moved to Nigeria, and even though I'd started again at age four when we moved back to Canada I never really caught up with everything I wanted to say. Like a wad of unspoken longing in my chest.

High school was spent in a split-level house near Echo Bay, Ontario, its maple trees tapped in winter for sap, whose leaves caught fire like thousands of torches every autumn—valleys of flame, every time I walked the country road.

Our house was a brick structure. I'd lie for hours on blankets, suntanning in the grass, journaling about boys. Boys filled in the blank pages, and I plastered my bedroom walls with them too, and none of them lasted very long, just long enough for them to realize I wouldn't sleep with them and then we'd break up.

I wasn't starving myself anymore—I was done with that, for a while, the hospital at age thirteen, and nurses looking in horror at this purple-skinned girl whose braces showed through her cheeks, and they said I was a miracle.

All I knew was I was cold.

I'd stopped eating at age nine because I was a lonely home-schooled minister's daughter, and one of my only friends—an elderly woman who taught me how to knit and played cards with me—had died one day without warning.

So I'd stopped eating, because there was a hole in me no food could fill.

I missed Dad, who was never home, always visiting this person or that or working on his sermon, and Mum was overrun with

children—all four of us on her heels, and her feeding and clothing and schooling us on Dr. James Dobson and a shoestring budget.

I spent a lot of time in my room with the door closed. We had family meetings once a month and Dad would tell us how much we could spend on heat because he worked part-time at a little white church forty-five minutes away, and part-time as a chaplain for the army, always working. And Mum took care of her mother—my Nanny—who lived in the house next door.

There was good too, as there's light with the dark, and home was this place with a piano and the smell of bread baking and four kids, chatting. Dad would spend hours helping me with my math homework each night. He made us a playhouse in the woods and taught us recorder and piano. He wrestled with my brother on the floor and we always hoped he had time to read us a story. We liked sitting on his lap, feeling the scruff of his beard against our cheek, Mum crocheting or mending in the corner.



My tea is gone. The sun is setting fast as it does in the fall, like it can't wait to tuck behind fleecy clouds, and I hear my boys rising. Whimpering in their bunk beds, and Trent's calling them. "Aiden, Kasher, come to Daddy," and their feet on the rungs of the ladder and the carpet, running, through our bedroom door and onto the bed. And I smile, because I know I'll find them all huddled under the feather tick.

I place my mug in the sink and find my way down, past the creaky stairs, into that room, and the boys squeal when they see me and we all hold each other in the fading light of the afternoon.

And I hurt for Leah—like dozens of trapped birds flapping against my rib cage—and I wonder whether or not she is still alive. The woman with the skinny legs and the man's jacket who slept in the back of my van.

Because for all the home around me, I used to be her.

And home is making me.