



HOME

is where MY

PEOPLE

ARE

*The Roads That
Lead Us to
Where We Belong*

Sophie Hudson

Author of the BooMama Blog

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Home Is Where My People Are: The Roads That Lead Us to Where We Belong

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A QUICK NOTE ABOUT SOME THINGS



THE THING ABOUT writing books is that sometimes it makes me wish I were a robot.

I mean, not physically, really. Because robots move sort of awkwardly and seem to need a good bit of oil and are pretty much stuck between a rock and a hard place if they're at a wedding and the band plays "Hard to Handle" by the Black Crowes.

Because you know what's tough for robots? Jumping on the dance floor and BREAKING IT DOWN.

But robots, as best I understand from frequent viewings of *The Jetsons* and also *Star Wars*, have incredible memories. This probably has something to do with the fact that they're computers, though I'm not exactly sure since I'm not very science-y. But when I was writing this book that you're holding—a book that covers a big ole chunk of my life—I really wished that I had more robot- or computer-like qualities. I did my best to get the facts as accurate as I could, but since I am not in fact a robot, I was dependent on my very human memory. I'm well aware that my memories may differ from other people's, but I did the very best I could.

Also, I changed a few names and details when I was trying to protect people from the Google, and occasionally I rearranged the order of certain events so that the timeline wouldn't make your head explode.

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I feel like that's a good goal for an author: *try not to make your readers' heads explode.*

No need to thank me for that, by the way. It's just a free service that I like to provide.

Aside from a few minor changes and adjustments, though, these are real stories about the real lives of real people. Keep in mind that I have no doubt exaggerated some of the details since I'm Southern and we seem to have an unspoken adage in this part of the country: *If the story doesn't get a little bit bigger every time you tell it, you're telling it wrong.*

Unfortunately, there are no stories about robots. I do hope that's not a deal breaker.

Thanks for reading, y'all.

INTRODUCTION

THAT TIME I WAS GOING TO A PARADE



I'VE ALWAYS HAD a thing about home.

And I'm certainly not the only one. I mean, have you taken a look around the Internet lately? There are thousands of websites dedicated to building homes and furnishing homes and keeping homes and doing all the other home-related activities. America may be a nation that can't figure out how to balance its own budget, but by diggity we are a people that can create and also implement incredibly detailed instructions in order to transform pumpkins into festive decorative items.

Don't even get me started about what people are doing with gourds these days. Suffice it to say that the gourds are enjoying a bit of a home-decor renaissance.

But my lifelong affection for home has nothing to do with pumpkins or gourds or even the lesser-utilized squash. However, it *can* be traced back to a state that you spell with four *s*'s, four *i*'s, and a couple of *p*'s thrown in for good measure.

(I'm talking about Mississippi.)

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(I felt like I needed to go ahead and write it out in case you've been singing the fifty states song in your head and trying to figure out which state I'm talking about.)

(Sometimes the most obvious answers are the toughest.)

Mississippi is where I was born and raised. My beloved mother-in-law, Martha, might take issue with my choice of words in that last sentence, and she'd probably remind me, "You raise cattle and crops! But you rear children! So you were reared! You weren't raised!" But whether I was raised or reared or some combination of the two, I grew up in Myrtlewood, Mississippi, where I spent the first seventeen years of my life in the same red brick house with the same two parents. Considering how common it's become over the last few decades for people to move around and change spouses and blend families, I believe the level of stability I enjoyed is what sociologists would call *a cultural anomaly*. Back then, though, it was nothing unusual, and while life wasn't perfect, it was simple. And steady. And sweet.

Once I went off to college, though, I made up for lost time as far as moving was concerned. I must have moved eight times over the next ten years, but besides one summer in Georgia, I always lived somewhere inside the geographical comfort zone of the Magnolia State. I was happy to be hemmed in on all sides by the Mississippi River, the Gulf of Mexico, and the states of Louisiana, Alabama, and Tennessee. I didn't see any reason why I would ever leave.

But then, when I was twenty-seven, I married a boy who was living in Louisiana. Since living in the same place is generally a solid choice when you've promised to spend the rest of your life with someone, I packed up all my stuff and moved my newlywed self to Baton Rouge. Truth be told, I was kind of excited to start married life in a new place. But after a few weeks, reality started to set in, and make no mistake: even though I enjoyed and appreciated all the things that make south Louisiana unique and charming and pretty much like nowhere else on earth, I missed Mississippi with everything in me.

I continued to miss Mississippi for the next three years.

Eventually David and I realized that it was the right time for us to

make our first big move as a couple, so we left bayou country and moved to Birmingham, Alabama. That's another story in and of itself, and I'm gonna tell it in just a little bit. Or at least I'll tell the important parts of it. If I told you the whole thing, you'd probably lapse into a twitching fit and your eyes would roll way back in your head. And while I don't mean to mind your business, you should really demand more than that from your books. At least in my opinion.

Anyway. We moved to Birmingham. We settled in. We went to work. We bought a house. We joined a church. We felt comfortable here.

But it was hard for me to shake the feeling that home—my *real* home—was one state to the west, where the drawl is just the tiniest bit more pronounced and magnolia trees line the interstates, swaying like sweet old ladies who open their screen doors and beckon you to come on in.



Now. If you're thinking that this is a book where I'm going to tell you how to do some things—like how to turn a cross-country move into an adventure for your family or how to follow my simple eighty-nine-step plan for creating a more welcoming living environment—let me put your mind at ease. I don't have any advice. Or strategies. Or plans.

But what I do have are some stories.

Because what I've come to know way down deep in my heart is this: whether we've lived in the same house for forty-two years or we find ourselves moving every fourteen months, God has a purpose in every place. I don't want to overstate it, of course, but it's good to remember a little something called the Old Testament. And if I could play Captain Obvious for just one second, let me please point out that those Israelites—THEY MOVED AROUND A LOT.

And you know what? Not one bit of that moving around caught God by surprise. He ordained every single step of their journey. Take out any one stop on the long desert road, and you pretty much alter the whole course of human history.

Look at Jesus, for instance (yes, I just threw down the Jesus gauntlet on page xv of the book; clearly I am NOT MESSING AROUND). In order

for His birth and death and resurrection to happen, God had to orchestrate some significant historical events to get that family line from point A to point B, you know? It took a mighty long time to move those puzzle pieces from Eden to Jerusalem.

So where we were, where we are, where we're going—*it matters*. And even if you think that God can't possibly have a plan for you and where you live doesn't matter to Him and if He was so concerned about your location, then HE WOULD HAVE MADE SURE THERE WAS A TARGET CLOSER TO YOUR HOUSE, then just hold on for a little while. Stay with me.

Please and thank you.

(See? Those Mississippi roots run deep.)



Birmingham, as it turned out, was a really good move for us. Next year will be our fifteenth year here, and if we hold to fifteenth-anniversary traditions, I guess that means that David and I need to buy Birmingham a piece of crystal or something. I'm sure a cut crystal vase would make a lovely adornment on the end of Vulcan's spear.

But truth be told, we owe Birmingham a lot more than a gift from the "For the Home" department at the Belks. This place has been mighty good to us. It's been mighty good *for* us.

And about two years ago, something happened that made me reframe my perception of the whole "home" thing.

(And just to be clear: I now love Birmingham with an enthusiasm that might make you a little bit uncomfortable if we were talking in person.)

(Seriously. It's kind of ridiculous. I have been known to get visibly emotional when I talk about it.)

(Because that's totally normal.)

So a few years ago, I picked up our little boy, Alex, in the carpool line and headed to a nearby café so we could grab a quick snack before his school's homecoming parade began. He was in second grade at the time, and we had just turned out of the parking lot onto a fairly busy road when I spotted an SUV that I recognized heading toward us in the other lane. I

grinned and waved, and the other driver honked his horn while three or four teenagers leaned out the windows and screamed, “HEYYYYY, MRS. HUDSON!” as they drove by.

On the surface it was just a typical Friday afternoon in a beautiful Southern city. No big deal, right?

But for whatever reason, in that moment I was vividly aware of a profound feeling of familiarity—a confidence in being known by the people who belong to a place. I don’t know that I’d ever felt that so strongly as an adult. And as I pondered the unexpected sweetness of the moment, I was surprised to realize that I was wiping tears from my eyes.

It was such an ordinary thing—essentially I’d just waved at some people I knew and then continued to drive down the road. Somehow, though, it felt like an epiphany. Because what I realized on that sunny fall afternoon was that Birmingham is so much more than just a place where we live.

It really is *home*.

So is Mississippi, of course. It doesn’t have to be an either-or proposition. It took me a long time to figure that out.

And for the rest of the day, there was one specific thought that ran on a loop in my brain.

Home is where my people are.



It’s easy, I think, to go through life believing we can satisfy our longing for home with a three-bedroom, two-bath slice of the American dream that we mortgage at 4 percent interest and pay for over the course of thirty years. But it seems to me that, in our deepest places, what we’re really looking for is to belong, to be seen, and to be known. And what we sometimes miss in all our searching for the perfect spot to set up camp, so to speak, is that wherever we are—whether it’s short term or long term—we can count on the fact that God is at work in the journey.

So here’s what I know way down deep in my bones: at every stop in the road—no matter what the physical address happens to be—the Lord shows Himself to be so gracious. So loving. So intentional. So consistent. So kind. Even when our circumstances aren’t easy.

HOME IS WHERE MY PEOPLE ARE

Certainly that's been the case in my life. I have a feeling that it's been true in yours, too.



I'm pretty sure that Holden Gully and his buddies had no idea what kind of reaction they sparked that day when they honked the horn and waved at me on Altadena Road. They were just a bunch of seventeen-year-olds who saw a familiar face on the way to the homecoming parade.

But that moment, for whatever reason, has stayed with me. It was a vivid, visceral reminder that God doesn't just give us a place (though certainly in David's and my case, Birmingham would be more than enough since it is, in fact, the best of all the cities)—He gives us people.

Family. Childhood friends. College friends. The older couple who lived next door when you'd been married all of eight months and weren't entirely sure you'd make it to nine. The seemingly random person down the street who turned out to be connected to your life in more ways than you can count. We could list example after example after example.

And those places and those people? They teach us, shape us, refine us.

Those places and people change everything, y'all.

And to really and truly understand that, to see how intricately God has woven together all the threads and pieces and parts of our lives—well, sometimes we just have to look at things a little closer.

We might be surprised by what we see.

CHAPTER 1

SURPRISINGLY, THE FRIED CHICKEN IS NOT MY DOMINANT MEMORY



I'M JUST GONNA jump straight into the deep end and tell you something that I believe with everything in me.

I hope it's not controversial. But I need to say it.

Ready?

Google Maps is a wonder, y'all.

Seriously.

Because for the last ten minutes, I've been wandering up and down the road where I grew up in Myrtlewood, Mississippi. I happen to be sitting in a room off of my kitchen right here in Birmingham, Alabama, mind you, but thanks to my computer and the interwebs and some Wi-Fi hot spot web-based video technology (clearly I am well versed in technical language), I've been standing in front of Mama and Daddy's old house. Looking around. Taking it in. Wondering what happened to all the pine trees that towered over the backyard and provided some shade when I would perform my elaborate gymnastics routines.

HOME IS WHERE MY PEOPLE ARE

(Please know that when I say *elaborate*, what I really mean is “two front somersaults and a cartwheel.”)

For the most part, the house looks like it always has. There’s still a front porch that wasn’t quite as deep as what Mama had wanted when they built the house back in the early sixties, and I can’t help but smile when I see the three newel posts that weren’t as substantial as Mama would have liked.

That porch was an ongoing source of frustration—at least twice a year Mama wanted to rip the roof off of it and start over. I think she had visions of a sweeping Southern facade: something that would be *Southern Living* cover-worthy, something that would easily accommodate four or five full-size rocking chairs. However, Mama and Daddy’s construction budget dictated otherwise. And as a child of the Depression, Mama learned early on that there was always a way to do a lot with a little, so she made the best of it. She’d line that porch with her gorgeous asparagus ferns, add a few throw pillows to the deacon’s bench, and make sure there was something pretty blooming right by the front door.

It’s a Southern woman’s unspoken motto, really: When life gives you imperfect porch proportions, *accessorize, accessorize, accessorize.*



It was 1963 when my parents found the land where they’d eventually build their house. I don’t remember one thing about that time because, well, I wasn’t alive, but Sister has filled me in on most of the details. Mama and Daddy paid cash for twelve acres on a dirt road (I know it sounds like I’m writing a country song, but bear with me), and after Daddy decided that he’d work as his own contractor to save on construction costs, they drew up plans for their own little parcel of paradise.

According to Sister, building the house was all manner of lively. Daddy salvaged some bricks from an old house across the road—he and Mama wanted to use them for the fireplace—but unfortunately the gentleman who actually built the fireplace liked to have a beer or nine as he worked. The chimney, which was on the back of the house, ended up being too short, a fact that annoyed Mama to no end since she’d wanted the chimney to be visible from the front yard. There was also an issue with the chimney’s

craftsmanship: it never drew smoke correctly, so smoke would back up into the den on occasion, and really, what good is a fire in the fireplace if you have to open all the windows to ensure proper ventilation?

Granted, Mama wanted her guests to be warm, but she certainly didn't want them to suffer from smoke inhalation.

In some ways, though, the house was ahead of its time. It was one of the first all-electric houses in the area, and Mama's kitchen featured Coppertone-brown appliances that were all the rage in the sixties and seventies. Since Mama has always loved to decorate, she took charge of the finishes and trims, too. She bedecked the master bath with turquoise and light blue tile and selected a more minimalist black and white tile in the kids' bath. She elected to use a good-quality wood for her closets, baseboards, windows, and door frames, so there wasn't an inch of painted wood anywhere in the house. Once the house was finished and all of her furniture was in place, she'd managed to achieve a bit of Danish flair right there in the piney woods of central Mississippi.

Exactly where you'd expect to find it, right?



By the time I was old enough to have any awareness at all about where I lived, Mama, Daddy, Sister, and Brother had been in the "new" house for almost a decade. They'd shifted and adjusted to make room for me, so Sister and I shared the master bedroom for a few years while Mama and Daddy took up residence in a smaller bedroom at the front of the house. I thought all five-year-olds got to have a bathroom adjacent to their rooms, and it wasn't until I was much older that I realized how Mama and Daddy had sacrificed their space for us.

Life in the house that my parents built wasn't perfect by any stretch of the imagination. There were tensions and arguments and resentments. Sister and I both would tell you that we cried more tears in that house than we have in any place since (teenage drama is hard, y'all). And—just in case you've forgotten—please let me remind you that MAMA WAS UNHAPPY WITH THE PROPORTIONS OF THE FRONT PORCH.

Real problems. We had 'em.

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But we also had something else: stability. Daddy faithfully went to work every morning, and even though he never said a word about it, we all knew that he excelled at his job. Mama stayed home and worked just as hard in our house. The two of them shuttled kids to piano lessons and ball games and dance lessons and cheerleading practices and 4-H meetings. They put three kids through college, paid off their house, and tirelessly served their church and their community.

I don't recall a single time when they lectured us about responsibility. But they didn't have to.

Their actions preached that sermon just fine.



When I type in Mama and Daddy's old address on "the Google," as Mama calls it, the street view puts me smack-dab in the middle of an intersection about a mile from the house itself. I've traveled through that intersection thousands of times—to the point that I have all of its options memorized.

If I go east, I'll pass the Pak-A-Sak (site of many an orange slushie when I was a little girl), the swim club where I spent countless summer days (in this case, "swim club" is really just another way of saying "affordable swimming pool option located on the edge of someone's woods"), and the big Victorian house that belonged to the Yarbroughs and then the Hollands. Sister and Barry's wedding reception was there, as was my bridal luncheon. And if I keep moving past the Hollands' old house, I'll eventually pass the street where my friend Amanda lived, the turn that leads to my elementary school, and the Baptist church where our next-door neighbors were members. I went to VBS at that church from first through sixth grade. That's why I can't look at the steeple without thinking of Bible drills and strawberry Kool-Aid.

If I go north, I'll see every house and landmark I passed on the way to Aunt Choxie and Uncle Joe's or to my high school or to the Winn-Dixie where Mama often sent me to buy some grocery item she'd forgotten. Since that way led to most of my friends' houses, it was the road I traveled more than any other once I started driving. There's not an unfamiliar turn or curve; even now I'm almost certain that you could spin me around ten

times, put me in the driver's seat, and I'd be able to drive it blindfolded. That road led to Methodist Youth Fellowship on Sunday nights when I was in high school, and a few years later, I followed it all the way out to Highway 45, where I turned left and drove to Starkville for college. In so many ways it was the path to independence. The fact that it ran straight by my favorite fried chicken place didn't hurt one bit either.

(Sometimes I would visit the drive-thru for a little of that fried chicken before I'd start the journey back to Starkville.)

(It was my little pre-travel secret.)

(Except for the fact that if you'd scrutinized my freshman year weight gain, you would have eventually said, "I believe she's consuming more than her fair share of fried chicken.")

If I click south at that intersection, I'll dead-end at the building where my friend Kimberly and I used to take aerobics classes back when people wore leotards and leg warmers. Turn left, and I'll eventually end up at my friend Ricky's old house, which was where we did a whole lot of laughing and *SNL* watching in high school. Ricky's house was on the way to one of Myrtlewood's main thoroughfares, which just so happened to be the place where teenagers used to cruise up to the Sonic and back down to McDonald's on Friday and Saturday nights. I hated everything about that particular teenage ritual—mainly because the whole exercise seemed pointless to me: a waste of gas and a waste of time. Mamaw here would have rather stayed home and watched *Fantasy Island* reruns.

Head west, and well, that's the road that used to take me home. I'll pass the country store where I'd buy a copy of Jackson's *Clarion-Ledger* in the mornings so I could read whatever Rick Cleveland and Orley Hood had written about life and sports in Mississippi. I'll see the subdivision where the Haleys and the Cades used to live; we carpooled to dance lessons for a year or two, and Mrs. Haley, who had a wonderful, deep, almost-baritone voice, wore so much gardenia perfume that I developed a lifelong aversion to it.

If I continue to click my way down Pine Tree Road, I'll start to see the houses that are etched in my memory not so much for their architecture but because of the families who lived inside them: the Snowdens, the Hursts,

the Gwaltneys, the Lloyds, the Saxons, the Walkers, the Bonds. I don't remember a time when I didn't know their names, when I didn't overhear Mama and Daddy talking about this person's mother passing away or that person's sister finding a new job or somebody else's son getting a scholarship to college.

That road spans the gap of most of the joys and heartaches of my childhood; it's a road that was paved with casseroles and pies and progressive dinners, a road with an extensive collection of CorningWare and Pyrex—all carefully labeled with masking tape, a name, and a five-digit telephone number. It's a road where most of the houses had a vegetable garden in the back, where neighbors swapped recipes for squash pickles and bread-and-butter pickles and pickled okra. It's a road where I shelled peas and dodged traffic on my bike and carried on long conversations about everything and nothing over the fence that separated our house from the Easoms'.

It's just a road. But it's so much more. Because it was home.



I haven't lived in that red brick house in more than twenty-five years; it has probably been five years since I've even driven past it. So I guess I expected that clicking my way down Pine Tree Road on Google Maps—and clicking to see the house where I grew up—would fill me with all sorts of nostalgia. I thought that it would prompt me to think back on all the funny and hard and awkward moments that I associate with my childhood home. I imagined I'd get to the point where the house was front and center on my computer screen, and I'd reflect long and hard about *The Mistakes I Made*, *The Drama I Created*, *The Times I Cried*, *The Lessons I Learned*.

I thought that, given our history, the house and I would have ourselves a moment. Courtesy of Google and Apple and the worldwide interweb.

But the house and I didn't really have a moment at all. Oh, the house was special—no doubt. It was special because it was ours. It was special because I grew up there. I can see so many lessons just from the way Mama and Daddy took care of those twelve acres; over the course of our time there, they remodeled, they added on, they reroofed, they painted. They

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raked, they mowed, they tended, they watered, they pruned, and they weeded. They figured out what was broken. They fixed it.

And Lord knows that they planted and they sowed.

But the Google Maps, as it turned out, taught me something that I wasn't really expecting.

The house is significant, yes. But really, it's only part of the story.

Because what flat-out captivates me is the road.