



Bekah DiFelice

ALMOST



THERE



*Searching for Home
in a Life on the Move*

Almost There reads like a long-awaited letter from a long-lost friend. It's immersive, as the best kind of storytelling should be. It's honest and warm, as the best kinds of friends are. DiFelice writes about home as it's lived and lost and loved. Her book is a rewarding read!

JEN POLLOCK MICHEL

Author of *Teach Us to Want: Longing, Ambition, and the Life of Faith* and *Keeping Place: Reflections on the Meaning of Home*

If you've ever left something behind, you'll find a friend in Bekah DiFelice as she invites you on a quest to find home. Bekah shares her adventures (and misadventures), helping us all discover that even transplanted roots can go deep.

CATHERINE McNIEL

Author of *Long Days of Small Things: Motherhood as a Spiritual Discipline*

Among the stories and thoughts that Bekah DiFelice shares in her debut book are her joyful passion and earnest quest to live life fully. *Almost There* is packed with so many relatable themes, including fear, longing, doubt, and identity. Bekah's story will not only help you discover big and small pieces of your own story but will also encourage and inspire you to pursue your own new adventures, wherever you are. A beautiful storyteller whose heart for God and family shines, Bekah gives us all a gift of light and love in *Almost There*.

JESSICA N. TURNER

Wall Street Journal bestselling author of *The Fringe Hours: Making Time for You*

“Are we there yet?” No, not until you pick up this book and start reading. I expected to skim through these pages, on the way to somewhere else. I had to stop. And laugh. And savor. And wonder. This is a trip I hope many take, because Bekah DiFelice brilliantly shows us where to finally hang our hats—and our hearts.

LESLIE LEYLAND FIELDS

Author of *Crossing the Waters: Following Jesus through the Storms, the Fish, the Doubt, and the Seas*

Bekah DiFelice writes beautifully and profoundly about our longing for and journey toward a true sense of home. This book is for all who are yearning for a belonging deeper than this world can offer. When I read the middle sections of *Almost There*, I was at that time overwhelmed by a family crisis and was feeling desperate, orphaned, and lost. Bekah’s chapters on fear and on faith and doubt reached out to my brokenness . . . and I began to stumble back to my true home where my Abba was waiting with his secure love. Wherever you are in your pilgrimage, *Almost There* will meet you and embrace you, and it will provide intimate, heartfelt companionship for the rest of your journey.

J. KEVIN BUTCHER

Author of *Choose and Choose Again: The Brave Act of Returning to God’s Love*

Our path to maturity in Christ is often accelerated when we find ourselves dealing with change that is thrust upon us rather than chosen. Through the lens of military life, and with animated style, young wife Bekah chronicles life on the move for herself and her husband, Mike. With her captivating take on the unexpected elements she found embedded in marriage, moving, injury, deployment, and pregnancy, Bekah enlists us to share in her inmost responses of faith. Her story is an enjoyable read that touches the deep places of faith many young women experience.

DANA YEAKLEY

Author of *The Gentle Art of Discipling Women: Nurturing Authentic Faith in Ourselves and Others*



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INTRODUCTION

ADRIFT

For most of my life I have wondered if I belonged somewhere else. I imagined that alternative versions of myself existed in places I hadn't yet been, that unknown lands were the key to self-improvement, enhanced social skills, and better skin. From the vantage point of my hometown, I thought that if I could just linger in a foreign country—you know, develop an accent or climb the right mountain or stumble into the right place at the right time—I might encounter the best-case scenario of my life. I thought that if I could get to the right location, I would finally arrive where I belong.

This sensation of belonging is what I've come to think of as home—a feeling of being inwardly settled, as if your soul gets to sink into a couch with deep cushions after a long day of being on its feet. Each of us has a deeply personal concept of home. It's an intimate place by nature, and often one difficult to describe. *Home* tends to grow in explanation and complexity over time, sort of like fine

cheese or, say, the weight you have listed on your driver's license.

Originally, home is your parents' house, the place you grow up, where you store your old porcelain dolls or the Field Day ribbons that represent your crowning achievement of the fourth grade. Home is where you boomerang back to at the end of each day to do homework or eat dinner or sprint up the steps to make curfew by the slimmest margin. It's where you are called by a mortifying nickname, where your stocking hangs at Christmas, where a framed family photo immortalizes your unfortunate hair-crimping phase. For however brief a time, home is a fixed address, a single location.

But then there is a shift, a change, a disrupting curiosity. The timing is different for everyone—perhaps in childhood or during high school or when you read a novel that transports you into a different kingdom. But it happens: Your sense of belonging outgrows its previous residence. You suspect you need a fresh start—different friends, a different opportunity. You need to live away from family, to chart your own path, to get your own place. Home, then, becomes a quest driven by the belief that peace and rest are out there somewhere, if only you could find them on a map or in a career field or among a community of people who finally “get you.” In the search for home, we all try on different places and relationships and hobbies like outfits that make us feel pretty, all along lamenting the fact that belonging refuses

to be nailed down to exact coordinates. It denies us permanence. And that feels like betrayal.

I think that by nature we are agitated by this restlessness, by the enigma of belonging. We're pestered by the notion that people and places and things are all important pieces of home but not the whole thing, at least not in themselves. Deep down we know there is a permanence of home that exists somewhere. There is a whisper of eternity that beckons in the heart of every one of us.¹ So it seems, almost by necessity, that home must expand beyond its physical definition and broaden into a more spiritual one. This, I think, is when the real search for home begins, when we look for *Home* in its singular, uppercase form, when we pursue it as a permanent destination, an orienting landmark amid the impermanence of everything else.

I don't presume this is the case for everyone, but in my experience the pursuit of home has been a pursuit of God—because I need to know that peace and rest can be found in every place I am, that there is reason and rightness beneath the chaos of my days. I need a spiritual home so that when former iterations of home expire, I'm still assured that a deeper belonging holds fast. I need a Home that ministers to me the same way the tug and pull of an anchor murmurs solace to a ship: *Take heart, restless one. You aren't adrift after all.*



CHAPTER ONE

GILA BEND

On Leaving Home

Home is where one starts from.

T. S. ELIOT, "East Coker"

It was in the desert that I realized I was far from home.

I sat on the curb of a small-town gas station, listening to the buzz of a failing fluorescent lightbulb and the hiss of cars passing by. It was late. Close to midnight, I think. The desert sun had long descended into darkness, but it was still hot. One hundred and twelve degrees hot. And I'm going to be honest with you—the back sweat situation was widespread and alarming. I pulled my shirt away from my perspiring torso like gum from a shoe.

I was in Gila Bend, Arizona. "Home to 1,700 Friendly People and 5 Old Crabs," according to the whitewashed sign near the highway. Inside the convenience store was

an array of souvenirs ranging from fermented rattlesnake and porcelain cacti to an entire aisle of creepy-crawly knickknacks that would thrill a nine-year-old boy. Hot dogs were two for a dollar and cigarettes were on sale and Mexico was only eighty miles away.

Our bright yellow moving truck was parked nearby, speckled with kamikaze bugs smeared across the windshield. I had followed my husband here, and that husband had followed the Marine Corps here, obeying his first set of military orders all the way to the outer fringes of Arizona, the sunbaked miles of almost-Mexico. He was being stationed in Yuma, Arizona, at a small air station ten miles from the border.

Do you know where Yuma is?

Yeah, I didn't either.



Our engagement was spent on the phone, as Mike trained in Quantico and I finished college in Colorado. When it came time to wait on military orders, Mike spoke confidently about the options. He said that San Diego was likely where we would be stationed—that's what he requested, after all—although Hawaii or Japan were possibilities as well. Since we had not yet lived under the discretion of the military, Mike and I mistakenly assumed that the military would cooperate with our best-laid plans, that perhaps it would consult our thoughts and feelings before making arbitrary decisions

about our future, as though it were a waitress taking our order and offering helpful suggestions before ultimately giving us what we wanted.

For the record, the military is not at all like a waitress. It's more like a cafeteria lady—a domineering force with hair netting, bushy eyebrows, and heavily perspiring forehead—scowling at you from behind a cloudy sneeze guard. She puts on your tray whatever's available, whatever she likes, a menu predetermined in high-up, unseen places. And your job is to say thank you, to make the most of it. Your job is to keep moving.

But Mike and I didn't know this yet. We were just a couple of twenty-two-year-olds, idealistic and hungry for adventure. So in the waiting period of engagement, Mike and I discussed the luxury of living near an ocean, the possibility of learning how to surf, the prospect of living in Asia. I told my girlfriends about these exotic locations while twirling my engagement ring and awkwardly pronouncing the word *fiancé*.

Mike's orders came on a Friday afternoon in November. He had been in the field for the past two weeks mastering skills of land navigation, which basically meant he was learning how to use a compass while wearing camouflaged face paint as I waited for him to call. When he finally did, I was quick to answer.

“Hello?”

“Hi,” he answered. “I got orders.” His voice sounded quiet, calculated.

“What? Where?” I demanded.

“Arizona.” The verdict sounded rehearsed, as if he had practiced it over and over again, rolling it around his tongue and speaking it aloud until the word drained itself of emotion.

Somehow I could sense the aftertaste of disappointment on his tongue, the discouragement he was trying to conceal. Somehow I knew that it was bad news he was trying to spin into good.

“Arizona.” I repeated it aloud. First as a statement. Then as a question. My eyes darted side to side as I took a mental inventory of everything I knew about Arizona: Phoenix, golf courses, cacti, rattlesnakes, suntans, retirees, prescription deodorant.

“I can do Arizona,” I said, more to convince myself than him. “Where in Arizona?”

Silence.

I heard him breathing, procrastinating.

One second.

Two seconds. Three. Four.

The silence sounded distinctly like dread.

“Where in Arizona?” I prompted.

He used to do this. He still does this. Mike takes an enormous amount of time to break big news. He is a careful decision maker, thoughtful and impossibly thorough. I'm certain that he organizes his thoughts before thinking them, aligning them squarely to one side and alphabetizing them when time allows. He reveals a deci-

sion slowly, feeding details one by one and waiting for me to chew, swallow, and digest before giving me more.

“MIKE. Where?” I yelled into the phone.

“Yuma,” he whispered.

One word. No context. Mike delivered the news reluctantly, driving it like a flag into the space between us. We both stared at it in the distance as it waved frantic and final against a cloudless sky.

Yuma. For three years.

I opened my laptop and searched “Yuma, Arizona,” frantically skimming the top results: Sunniest place on earth. Hottest city in America. Home of Yuma Territorial Prison.

Sun. Heat. Prison.

Sun. Heat. Prison.

SUN! HEAT! PRISON!

It was late fall in Colorado when I absorbed these words. The notion of Yuma arrived while I was wearing a sweater and wool socks, while I was sitting on a twin bed cloaked in flannel sheets and a down comforter. I owned nine jackets at the time and only one pair of flip-flops. The flip-flops were incidental leftovers from summer camp. I called them “shower shoes.”

Colorado was home to me because it was where I grew up. The outdoorsy, casual persona had been nurtured into me, and I was proud of it. Mountains were my everyday companions, tall chaperones that waited outside all ordinary places: grocery stores and gas

stations and suburban backyards. My lungs had a sense of athletic superiority because I grew up at high altitude. “Sea level” was a term you used to feel sorry for people who lived near natural disasters.

Yuma was at sea level. And when ranked alphabetically, it was basically last. *Did that matter?* I wondered.

Sun. Heat. Prison. I turned the words over and over.

“Wait,” I said to Mike with growing panic, “you are moving me away from home. To the hottest place on earth. To live among criminals?”

Silence.

“Do you realize that is the actual definition of hell?”



Mike and I dated for six years before we got engaged. We were high school sweethearts, so, you know, *adorable*. Yuma was our new task, our first joint assignment away from home. So I suppose I should have felt a swelling sense of destiny and purpose and excitement. But those feelings didn’t come until later. They came slowly, over weeks and months. To this day, I don’t really know how a person adapts to change. But I suspect that most of the time you just have to live into it, to take deep breaths and get out of bed in the morning and trust that interruption usually doubles as provision, even when you can’t see the how or why yet.

When I look back at the time between that phone call and the day I moved away, I don’t recall a moment

of breakthrough or epiphany, a moment when I came to terms with the unexpectedness of Yuma as my temporary home. I do remember a lot of emotional eating and Google research on whether rattlesnake repellent was a thing. It's not, in case you're wondering, which is why I told Mike that I'd prefer to live on the second story of a secure fortress if we had to live in the desert. He laughed as if I were joking.

I was not.

Over and over again I told friends and family about our orders, saying no, Mike didn't request Yuma . . . no, we didn't even know it was an option . . . and yes, we were getting excited . . . sort of. Passing days wore down the shock of the news until our excitement became meager, fragile, then eventually real. Arizona wasn't so far from Colorado. We heard that there was hiking and recreation on the Colorado River. "Outdoorsy people love it!" a non-outdoorsy person once told us. We heard, too, that a small town was a good place to build meaningful relationships, which was absolutely true. Perspective arrived for us day by day until the location became a small footnote on the bigger announcement: Mike and I were getting married. And we were moving to a place of our own.

At least in my experience, I've found that pressing into big change doesn't always translate into easy or instant enthusiasm. Even good surprises tend to knock the wind right out of you. They often feel more like an

invasion, a redirection, a total inconvenience. Adapting to change is like tucking your knees in when somebody wants to squeeze by your seat, or hitting the brakes for a car to merge ahead of you when you're already in a hurry. Adapting to change is making room for something you didn't expect in space that's already crowded. For most of us, it is painful and annoying.

Resilience, then, is a trait that has to be stretched—or shocked—into us. It's the prize of those who have watched their placeholders of control crumble and have lived to see how there was, in fact, a future beyond the circumstance that they considered the end of the world. For all the ways Yuma was not at all what I wanted, it was in many ways exactly what I needed. Does that sound trite? Perhaps it is. But even though the move was not preceded by excitement, it was eventually followed by a deep sense of gratitude. And I think this is true of a lot of change. We can experience the vast potential of what's next only after we are forced to step away from what came before.



I'm not sure I would have ever left Colorado on my own. I would have talked about it and planned it and made excuses to stay while meaning to go. I would have grown swollen with potential but remained fixed to the comforts of home. I'm not sure I would have ever uprooted if I'd had to do it alone. I'm a tiny bit bold, but mostly

I'm impulsive, reckless, and unbelievably bad at packing. This is why God linked me up with a responsible Marine, I think. Mike did not rescue me, but his companionship did make me braver and better in every way. And I loved him with such abandon that I would have followed him anywhere.

So I did.

Just after our honeymoon and the day before we moved, Mike and I decided to buy furniture since we owned exactly none. On a Saturday afternoon we pulled into a discount furniture store and purchased items I assumed all adults owned: a sectional sofa, coffee table, and dining set. The two of us reclined side by side on showroom sofas, sat in chairs that weren't ours, and shared opinions that we made up on the spot: "Of course I prefer microsuede!"

After an hour of canvassing the showroom floor, Mike pulled the yellow moving truck around the back of the store and asked the employees to load our newly purchased furniture next to our newly received wedding gifts. It was all so tidy, the boxes on boxes that were pre-labeled and as geometrically compatible as a winning game of Tetris. It felt like an accomplishment, that truck that held our whole mobile life wrapped tight in plastic and potential.

Preparing to leave might be the most thrilling part. Still cushioned with the familiarity of home, you can change your name and register for an absentee ballot

and purchase furniture for rooms that haven't felt resoundingly empty yet. There are a multitude of ways to say good-bye that require only an efficient execution of a checklist. And in the midst of change it's such a relief to have something to do, to have tasks that combat emotional pressure with endorphins of productivity. Before pulling out of the driveway, you can sprint through a dozen rites of passage in front of a cheering audience, fueled by excitement and home-cooked meals made by your mom.

The hard part for me was not the preparation. It was the actual leaving, the ducked head and enthusiastic wave down the backward descent of the driveway. It was saying good-bye without knowing if I would ever raise kids near my sister, if I would miss out on family milestones or holidays or lose touch with friends whom I considered lifelong. It was the fact that I had no idea what was coming. I had never been to Yuma, nor could I picture it at all. But I could see what I was leaving, what had been home most of my life. I knew Colorado. And it was in me, around me. So leaving it was a risk. It was giving up what I knew to gain what I didn't.

There's no guarantee that leaving and arriving are a fair trade. And this is nerve-racking, like painting a statement wall in the center of your living room or ordering beef lo mein at a restaurant without a safety rating. You have a hunch that this choice might improve or enhance your life, but in the end you're not totally sure how it's

going to turn out. So you stand in your living room staring at the walls, or in the lobby of a restaurant looking at a menu with pixelated entrée photos, and in the end you decide whether or not you're the sort of person who's willing to risk, which is really another way of deciphering whether or not you're the sort of person willing to fail spectacularly.

At least for me, this is the hard part. Paint to wall. Fork to mouth. Car to road. The hard part is leaning into the risk and convincing yourself it's worth it. The hard part is finally, ultimately moving away from home. It is leaving. It is the uneasy silence that settles into the car after you merge onto the highway. Or if you can't bear the weight of silence, it is the song you turn on that will forever act as the soundtrack of this moment.



We left Colorado early in the morning, before the sun cracked light on the purple mountains. It seemed appropriate that this new endeavor coincided with the sunrise, like God was shining a flashlight pointing us west.

It takes fifteen hours to drive from Colorado Springs to Yuma, longer if you're following a rented moving truck that sways clumsily in the desert wind. My mom called every half hour while I squinted through the windshield and watched mountains give way to plains and plains succumb to desert. Soon the landscape was populated

with plants sharpened slim as knives. Barbed wire grew out of cacti. The terrain was impossibly, insistently flat, a single plain that stretched for eternity.

When night set in, headlights flashed bright and aggressive from the opposite direction. So many people, it seemed, were fleeing from the very place I was headed. I departed Colorado armed with Cheez-Its and gusto, and in the desert I realized that both were gone. I started to feel a bit sad and homesick—mostly, I think, because I was tired, a symptom that tends to light up the rest of my emotional circuit board.

There was so much hope and optimism for the next chapter. Of course there was. But still it was quite sad to mourn the end of something, to realize that a part of you is shrinking in the rearview mirror, and that when you wake up in the morning, your life will look completely different.

Practically speaking, I know that leaving home has a lot of reasonable advantages. It matures everyday humans into respectable citizens by making them independent and self-reliant. It trains them in building community, forces them to manage time and money and refrigerator inventory well. Away from home, we realize that cable television is, in fact, quite expensive, and that bills come at the unfair pace of once a month. Living in an unfamiliar space frightens us into the habit of locking the front door behind us. It also thrills us with the

liberty to stock a freezer with ice cream or to vacuum without pants on.

To leave home is also to make room in an important interior way. It removes your associations, your affiliations, the characteristics and comforts of homes that came before. It is terrifying and exciting to arrive at a place where no one knows you, where suddenly it doesn't matter if you got good grades in high school or used to be a few pounds lighter or had a season where you were, regrettably, brunette. Suddenly you are no longer defined by your history or decisions, nor by the people who spoke into your future with plans that didn't match your own. The moment of departure is the moment of reinvention, of renewal, of freedom. The moment you get a redo on the adjectives associated with your name.

Isn't it interesting, then, that many of the famous people in the Bible had to first leave their homes before their real stories began? Abraham was called to leave his country before he knew where he was going. The Israelites were sent to the enormous waiting room of the desert before arriving in the Promised Land. Jesus collected disciples by first calling them off their fishing boats and into his companionship. All of these people were commissioned upon departure—to be the father of the faith, God's own special possession, fishers of men. They got big, important jobs. More than that, though, they were christened with adjectives like

chosen and *beloved*. They received promises of God's faithfulness directly, persistently, and in one case, in the form of manna. God became personal, relevant: a shepherd who leads from among, not a deity who exists absently from above.

It's as if the act of leaving is part of the equipping, as if God personally leads people out of familiar territory so he can tell them who they are.



Here's the thing about Gila Bend: It was the first place I realized I wasn't sure where my home was. I knew it was behind me in Colorado. And it was ahead of me also. Surely it had something to do with the ring around my finger now, this marriage, this man, and the mission we now had together. So, too, I knew home had something to do with the leading of a God who sends at the same time he receives, who gives my life purpose.² I knew that God was building a continuity of home within me somehow. I just didn't know how it all worked together. I still don't know how it works, really. But I suppose a desert is as good a place as any to get to the bottom of what you believe. To wring out what is true from the place where you're most desperate to see it: in the absence of the familiar, in the middle of the disruption.

While visiting Sequoia National Park several years ago, I read about how the enormous sequoia trees grow. There's a sign on one of the walking trails that

tells the story of how one of the largest trees in the park fell down. A tragic collapse, one might say. Soon, though, the broken roots exposed bare soil in a sunny spot, creating the perfect conditions for a new tree to grow. And eventually a new tree did grow, a small but earnest sequoia that's still growing today. That spot is now marked by a sign that evangelizes the benefits of disruption to everyone who walks by on the footpath. "Disturbance is good for the environment," it reads. When I saw the sign, I felt a surge of hope. I took it as an indication of God's redemptive work in the world, regenerating the old into new, cultivating growth out of costly beginnings. The park named the site "Inheritance."

But when I think of inheritance, I don't think of disruption. I think of lushness and wealth, bounty and provision. The desert seemed to be the opposite of those things: severe and barren, the site of ruin rather than riches. As I sat on the curb in Gila Bend, I wondered: Could a desert be a good inheritance? Because that is what I had been given.

When Mike came out of the convenience store, he was armed with snacks. He offered me Skittles and I looked at him horrified, as if he didn't know me at all. To be fair, Mike didn't yet know how offended I am by desserts that are nonchocolate, by fruit charading as junk food. But at that moment he learned.

For a minute the two of us sat there together on the

curb, our knees cramped to chests, staring at the cars passing by while we ate pretzels, the bag loudly rustling beneath our fingers. We only had a couple of hours left on the drive, and then we'd be in Yuma. We'd be *home*. Is that what we'd call it?

In a single day we had driven from Colorado to Arizona: a small thing, I suppose. I mean, what did it involve, really? A handful of gas stops, bathroom breaks, and a half-finished book on tape? But it cost more, so much more, and sometimes you have to sit down and take it all in, the enormity of packing a car and a truck and pointing them away from home, as if by declaration.

On that curb, the magnitude of the day sank in. And we let it. Our silent fear and enormous hope for the future intermingled with each other until they became a single entity, a heavy, pulsing possibility laid upon our backs—or maybe it was a hand that gently urged us forward, onward, as if there were no other option, as if this were somehow an act of obedience, as if the new life we longed for were provided as a pathway directly through this wilderness.³

Perhaps that's what it feels like to be a tree giving way, or a seedling piercing through the ground.

Perhaps this is what it feels like to travel toward inheritance.