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THE ROAD FROM LONGING

By Barbara Lygthel Rohrer

The road was new to me, as roads always are, going back. —Sarah Orne Jewett

The news that Paul was getting married brought Longing to my door. I recognized it immediately, unlike in the past when I confused it with regret or loss. *Longing*. What could this yearning tell me?

I first met Longing as a 12-year-old while standing in my backyard one afternoon as a storm moved in. Our house was built at the top of hill in Dayton, Kentucky, giving a view of the town of Bellevue and, beyond, the Ohio hillside across the river. I felt the wind toss my hair and brush my face. I loved the gray of the sky and sensed its power. I saw how vines curled around the old iron fence, an ornamental section stuck along the edge of the yard between a hedgerow and a section of wire fence. A decorative piece so out of place in my working class neighborhood. Where it came from or how it got there, I did not know. The fence called to me, as if it were an entity, like Longing would someday become for me.

For years, I would turn back to that moment. What was that feeling? So full, as if I touched something I could not know. And I was in awe of its beauty. That may have been the first time I merged in my psyche an emotion or an unconscious sense with a physical object. That iron fence represented that experience for me, came to represent Longing itself, though it would be years before I would tease that into a frame of understanding.

In my twenties, I was in a relationship with a man 20 years my senior. Don owned a farmhouse about 75 miles east of Cincinnati, Ohio, nestled near Serpent Mound. Our mailing address was Peebles, Ohio, the closest town, but Hillsboro, west of us, was larger, was where we shopped and so I identified more with that community. While I was with Don, I always kept an apartment in the Cincinnati area, but for the most part I lived with him on his 30 acres of land.

We had a garden, and I learned to can. We raised chickens. We kept honeybees—and sold the honey commercially.

I spent time walking the woods that flanked the house. There was much there that was good, but there was also pain and loneliness. Don and I were not building anything together. I was simply living with him on his property. I longed for intimacy, but that was not possible in that relationship. Don had his limitations, but so did I. I could not create with him what I yearned for.

During those years, I fell under the allure of Hillsboro. It stood for me as all that was good about small towns. I saw community and the opportunity for a simpler life: backyard gardens, a library and post office within walking distance; a smart dress shop with an adorable sundress that I could not afford; a fabric store with remnants that I could afford. There was a cafe with the best biscuits and gravy and a little sidewalk creamery with my favorite mint chocolate chip ice cream. I saw myself living there, inviting friends over for dinner. And, yes, I saw possibilities for intimacy.

Some twenty years later, two visionaries began building a community of trees, about 20 minutes east of Hillsboro, on the Rocky Fork Gorge. Their purpose was to rebuild a swath of wilderness, a sanctuary. I was one of many who stepped forward in support of this endeavor, which eventually came to be the Arc of Appalachia Preserve System. This is where I met Paul—a doll of a young man with long dark hair. He came to the sanctuary as a college intern and stayed. *If only I were 25 years younger*, I thought.

I heard of Paul's upcoming marriage as I was volunteering at the Arc for its annual wildflower pilgrimage. I gave him my blessings and wished him well. He had been an integral part of a place I love, and now he would be moving north with his bride. His departure awakened Longing in me for what I was never able to build with a man.

In the past at such moments, I would have stepped into the regret of the choices I have made and the life I have not lived. But that day, I was following Longing to see where it would take me. I knew something deeper was stirring and the waters had yet to clear.

After completing my morning stint as part of the pilgrimage's breakfast crew, I headed to the creek that cuts through the Rocky Fork Gorge and slipped my kayak into the waters. I love hiking the trails of the Arc, but I consider these waters to be the heart of the sanctuary. That day, I passed two mother geese sitting on their eggs atop grassy boulders near the water's edge. White

trilliums and Virginia bluebells grew along the banks I floated by. The craggy faces of rock cliffs gazed down on me in my little blue boat. I was paddling in paradise.

At one point, my eyes were drawn to sunlit white waters spilling down a cut in the rock, like a waterfall from heaven. I tried to slow my boat to absorb the image, wanting to hold it and not let it go. But the creek pulled me on. Like a teen texting while driving, I wasn't watching where I was going. When I looked up, I saw I was headed into a low hanging branch. I tried to lift it overhead, but the branch would not budge. It took me out. Over I rolled into the waters. I was baptized anew.

Later, in dry clothes, I wandered over to the house on Briar Hill. Some of the properties that the Arc has been able to purchase have houses that are offered to land stewards. Briar Hill was one of those properties. It had an old schoolhouse that a couple had converted into a home to live in until the end of their days. Land stewards buy houses such as Briar Hill for the Arc with a life-long right of residency. The land stewards get a tax deduction, while the sanctuary expands its holdings. Briar Hill was available for land steward purchase.

When I walked into the Briar Hill house, I could see the shabbiness of its rough floors and bare walls, its warped cabinets and rusty porcelain. But I also saw the alcove with a little bench by the front door. I saw the built-in corner cabinets with glass doors in the dining room. I saw wall panels with scored rectangles in the bedroom. At one time it had been a sweet home. A stairwell rose up from the four rooms on the first floor to a large open space on the second floor, sloped walls and all. The space would make a nice writing studio, I thought. I knew the whole house could be lovely once again—with much work and far more dollars than I had. *I will never own this place*, I thought. Surprisingly, I accepted that thought with ease.

Still I ached with Longing.

And Longing is what I rode home with later that day. My route back took me, as it always does, straight through Hillsboro. I picked up Route 138 west out of town. The miles gave plenty of space for thought.

What did Hillsboro represent for me—and the Arc by extension? My mind returned to Don, the man who brought me to this area, and what hadn't been possible between us. Did Hillsboro represent what was not possible?

When I left Don, I left the town of Hillsboro. Now my work with the Arc has me returning again and again. It has me returning to my Longing.

“The thing that I call living is just being satisfied.” I have always liked that line from Gordon Lightfoot’s “Carefree Highway.” To be satisfied sounded like a way to live a life that had depth and meaning. But as the miles rolled by that day I drove home from the Arc, I saw that there was a place for Longing too. It was a place that I needed to touch again and again.

I pulled into my driveway where my house, a Cape Cod, sits on the end of a cul-de-sac in a suburban community just east of Cincinnati. It was late in the afternoon. Birds were calling and flitting about. Trees in the woods that line my property stirred against the blue sky. Their leaves were so young and fresh that their green color had a yellow cast in the sunlight. The grass was shaggy and thick, and heavily sprinkled with dandelions. In the side yard, two dirty white Adirondack chairs waited for me to sit a spell. The colors were as vivid as a postcard. I liked what I saw. I got out of the car and walked inside.

I looked at my comfortable living room with walls my nephew painted a forest green. I walked into the kitchen I had just helped my brothers remodel with new maple cabinets and a bamboo floor framed with dark red walls. Upstairs in a butter yellow studio with sloped walls, I had essays waiting to be completed. And with that, Longing left.

I realized that Hillsboro represented my longing, as well as what was not possible in my life. *Once*. I thought how just because something was not possible now, does not mean it is impossible forever. And the deeper I had gone into that feeling of longing, the wider that reality became. I saw how my longings could be met in more than one way. And while I could not have voiced it this way at the time, it was as if I knew, as a dear friend would later say, that accepting what I had was not giving up, but opening up.

And for those longings that will never be satisfied, I have the purity of desire—and that too has a purpose. I will always have longings that are greater than what I have or am. I need these longings to push me on, like the current of the river. Who knows what I’ll find just around the bend.

Now when I drive through Hillsboro, I touch that longing. It feeds me, like good food, a pleasant evening with friends, the rain on my skylight, all things I enjoy but none of which I would want to go on endlessly. Likely I will never go through Hillsboro without feeling longing. But I know now that this is not to live unsatisfied. *Longing is part of what makes my life whole.*

I walked through my Cape Cod again, more slowly this time. It is a house that in many ways resembles the old schoolhouse on Briar Hill. If Hillsboro represented my longing, it also

was my blindness. Despite a clear plan, I was realizing the desires of my heart. I hadn't been able to see what I had created.

I knew then why I was comfortable with the thought that I will never own the house on Briar Hill, why I could let go of that dream so easily. I did not need to buy and re-model the Briar Hill house. I already had. I was standing in it.