

# HEARTWOOD



**"IMPOSSIBLE TO PUT DOWN."  
—JENNIFER EGAN**

**"AN ABSOLUTE MUST-READ."  
—ELIN HILDERBRAND**

A  
NOVEL

# AMITY GAIGE

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# HEARTWOOD

A NOVEL

AMITY GAIGE

*Simon & Schuster*

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*To Keith and Mira*

*and to Tim*

*A wind has come and gone, taking apart the mind;  
it has left in its wake a strange lucidity.*

*How privileged you are, to be passionately  
clinging to what you love;  
the forfeit of hope has not destroyed you.*

—Louise Glück, “October”

Dear Mother,

You used to call me Sparrow.

Why Sparrow? Well, because the woods are full of sparrows, and you loved everything outdoors. Songbirds, wildflowers, wind. You could read the weather like a poem.

But why did I remind you of a sparrow and not another songbird? I never thought to ask. With their white cheeks and dingy underparts, plain brown sparrows are everywhere. They beg at outdoor tables and hop under city benches. They nest in chimneys and rafters and even tailpipes. Sparrows are not much to look at, but they're smart. Canny. Tiny, feathered battle-axes.

Sparrows are survivors.

I like to think that's what you meant.

Back then, I followed you as if you were a fixed star. Fumbling against your leg, mouthing a bit of your skirt, I kept you close, better to go wherever you went. I'd straggle after you to the garden and right back inside. Up the stairs and back down. Sometimes, in your lap, I would press my hand against your chest so that I could feel the center of you—your heartwood, your innermost substance, like the core of a tree that keeps it standing. When I couldn't see you, I listened for you. Your puttering was the music of my life. An equivocal sigh, the crack of a knuckle, a stifled *Shit!*, an avalanche of baking sheets.

When I grew taller, I stood beside you in the kitchen, the apron strings tied three times around my middle. You were magical. You had machines for every task. A tool that peeled apples. An apparatus for scraping the fragrant part of the lemon peel but not the bitter pith. A wand of turned wood used for withdrawing honey from a jar.

I was four or five when I began to sense the truth of my position, which was that we couldn't go on like this forever. That, in fact, we were never meant to. I'd have to leave our country of two. I couldn't bear this news. I didn't want to grow up.

Naturally, I had no choice. I grew up anyway.

Kindergarten, grade school, high school.

I survived the ordeal. I liked the hustle of adult life, in fact. The changing faces. The possibilities, the open road, and even the solitude.

Spitting in the eye of my numerous anxieties, I became a nurse.

Eventually, I understood that motherhood, as the child imagines it, is unperformable.

No woman is a star. No woman is a god or a tree or a magician.

But for a while, in your arms, the universe was the right size, and I knew where I was.

## Lt. Bev

Any woodsman who says he's never been lost in the woods is a liar. It's inevitable. Up here in the North Woods, everybody goes woods queer now and again. That's because we spend so much time outdoors. Ice fishing, hunting. Kids grow up following their parents into the backcountry, where they learn the basics of outdoor survival. How to build a camp. How to dead reckon by the sun. Up here, we tend to think of being lost as something you can be good at.

I've been in the business of finding lost people in the woods for thirty years. I know how hard it is to keep a clear head when lost. The disorientation can be shattering. A lost person is like the believer who is told "There is no God." After that, everything seems like a lie. But loss of mental control is more dangerous than the lack of food or water. Panic crowds out common sense. It makes the lost person crave a quick, easy solution.

Imagine you're her. Valerie Gillis. You have been hiking for a long time. Three months. You're no young lass, though you're tougher than you thought you were. Like a lot of people, you'd always wanted to hike the legendary Appalachian Trail. Since taking the plunge, you have hiked through mud, water, pain, and heat. Maine is even harder than you heard it would be. One difference is the density of the woods. Walls of vegetation hem you in on both sides. In the past, when the trail got hilly and punishing, you stared at your boots, willing yourself forward one step at a time. But now, you raise your head. You pause. Somehow, for some reason, you step off the path. Maybe you've seen something—a rare bird or flower. Or maybe you just need to pee and want some privacy. Hikers are supposed to chug two hundred paces away from the trail before they urinate, and you're a polite person. Or you're spooked by a sound in the woods, voices approaching. You step off the path and fight your way through the head-

high saplings and sticky bushes. You look up at the sky, which is barely visible through the dense, netted canopy.

Time passes.

Rested, relieved, you look for the path. Ten steps, twenty. Nothing. But the path was *right there*. You don't backtrack. Lost people seldom do. Rather, you push on farther, because you are dead certain this is the direction you came from. Every direction you turn, the view is identical, a claustrophobic wall of foliage and shrubbery. You wade forward into the mass of vegetation.

You begin to run. Branches beat your head. Buckthorn snares your feet. Brambles tear your skin. You're desperate to get a view, to reorient, to understand.

We frequently find lost people looking very beat-up. They've been lanced by thorns and snags. Their clothes are filthy and ripped or even torn off from falling down or crawling or stepping into dangers they would have otherwise seen.

That's what the terror of being lost makes people do.

\* \* \*

By the time they get up here, northbound Appalachian Trail hikers have trod 1,900 miles. The class of hikers that starts as a mob down in Georgia really thins out by the end of the season. The beleaguered few who make it up here are an ugly bunch. They are very close to their goal, but it seems to me there's something about the proximity to the finish that makes them lose focus. They tend to wander off, to break down physically or mentally.

That, I understand.

Dreams burn a wildfire in a body. It's worth it, but there's no coda.

This year seems worse than normal. The AT was officially closed for thru-hiking for the first time in history when the pandemic hit in 2020. I question the readiness of some of the folks out here this season.

You can't get lost on the AT, they all say. But here at the Maine Warden Service, we get several dozen calls for lost thru-hikers every season. Maine is the worst place on the AT to get lost. It's a whole new kind of hiking, more remote than anything that's come before. Not much farther north than where Valerie Gillis was last seen lies the Hundred-Mile Wilderness. At the trailhead looms a

sign that reads, verbatim: *Do not attempt this section unless you have a minimum of 10 days supplies and are fully equipped. This is the longest wilderness section of the entire A.T. and its difficulty should not be underestimated.*

Seems appropriate that the architects of the Appalachian Trail put the northern terminus on the other side of these woods. As the hikers say, “No Maine, no gain.”

\* \* \*

To search is to guess. If the location of the lost person is known, that’s a rescue, not a search. A lost-person search begins with a couple of knowns and a whole busload of conjecture. If that sounds hard, it is. I always bear in mind that a century ago, the work I do was conducted with no GPS, no CB radio, no sidearm. Just a couple of guys in beaver skins tramping through the snow.

Here’s what we know. On the morning of Monday, July 25, Valerie Gillis awoke early at Poplar Ridge shelter, said goodbye to two female southbound hikers with whom she’d bonded the night before, and continued her journey north. She had a cell phone and appropriate gear and supplies, and was in a fine mood. There’s no cell service on that stretch of trail, but her husband was set to pick her up for resupply at a trailhead the following day. She was almost done with the northern portion of her hike. She smiled for a snapshot just as she turned to leave.

Then she vanished.

The husband waited a day to report Valerie lost. It was common for Valerie to be waylaid at a meetup, so he didn’t panic on Tuesday. He panicked on Wednesday. That evening, we send a crew of wardens out to the shelters on foot in the hope that we run into Valerie ourselves, as often happens on a hasty search. Overdue hikers are frequently found trailside dehydrated or with a broken ankle.

We come up empty. All we get on Wednesday is a lead from a teenaged hiker who runs into a warden in a parking lot thirty miles to the north. He says he saw a middle-aged woman sitting on a rock “looking played out” near Spaulding Mountain shelter the day before. Lacking anything stronger, I designate this as our point last seen. We find the two southbound women who saw her leave

Poplar Ridge shelter as they are provisioning in town. They give us the photo—perfect. When I get home, I settle at my kitchen table under a cone of light to study my maps of the search area. Only eight miles stretch between Poplar Ridge shelter and the next shelter north, Spaulding Mountain. But because there is no point of exit between the two shelters, the search area broadens to thousands of acres of conifers, fallen trees, rocks, streams, and hobblebush. Numerous unnamed ridges rise and fall like waves with a short fetch. There are no settlements to speak of in any direction for many miles.

It's long past midnight by the time I put away my area maps. I spread my old Appalachian Trail map on the table. The trail is named for the mountains that span the entire eastern coast of this country, north of the Gulf Coastal Plain all the way to Canada. And through this range wends one long, continuous footworn path. Georgia. North Carolina. Tennessee. Virginia. West Virginia. Maryland. Pennsylvania. New Jersey. New York. Connecticut. Massachusetts. Vermont. New Hampshire. Maine. The trail does not follow the low ground of valleys, nor does it circumvent obstacles. Instead, it goes tramping over countless summits, straight across streams; it marches into towns and occasionally humps down highways. The trail moves like a story. Sometimes it makes sense and sometimes it doesn't. The trail wanders like a vagabond. Here it veers toward the impractical, there toward opportunity. How much thought must have been put into its route, and how much agreement. Southerners and northerners clearing a fourteen-state corridor to make way for a humble footpath.

I stare at the map for a long, long time.

Valerie's whereabouts are somewhere right in front of me.

As soon as I hear the first birdsong, I pack a bag and get in my truck.

## UPDATE: SEARCH FOR VALERIE GILLIS

Thursday, July 28, 2022

Maine game wardens are seeking information concerning missing 42-year-old AT hiker Valerie Gillis, who uses the trail name “Sparrow,” from the hikers using the following trail names: “Strider,” “Another Lisa,” “Leviticus,” “Blister,” and “Santo.”

Warden investigators would like to speak with the hikers listed above to determine Valerie’s point last seen on the Appalachian Trail. Warden investigators are seeking to verify if anyone stayed at the Spaulding Mountain shelter with Valerie on the night of Monday, July 25, or Tuesday, July 26, or if any southbound hikers can ID Valerie from this photo.

Valerie Gillis started her AT “flip-flop” hike on April 21 in Harpers Ferry, WV. If any hikers not listed here have information about her current whereabouts, contact the tip line at 1-800-595-8872.

The Warden Service also wants to inform bear baiters in the search area to be on the lookout for Ms. Gillis.

Dear Mom,

The first thing I should say is that you were right.

You didn't want me to hike the Appalachian Trail.

Mothers have a sixth sense. Their love is occult.

You argued that I'd be miserable. Only one-quarter of Appalachian Trail thru-hikers achieve their goal. What if I made it nearly to the end (you said presciently) and something unexpected happened, like a turned ankle or bad case of giardia, and I had to quit anyway? Thousands of people section-hike the trail, completing a couple hundred miles every summer. Why not me?

Why not? Because hiking the Appalachian Trail isn't a reasonable thing to do. Anyone who wants to walk two thousand miles in a row does it because they find beauty in the *un*reasonable.

All that misery, that's the point.

The high probability of failure, that's motivation.

You had a bad feeling, you said.

And you were right!

You were right, as usual.

\* \* \*

People have romantic notions about hiking the Appalachian Trail. *I* had romantic notions about hiking the Appalachian Trail. The truth is, the journey involves a lot of moisture. Always being wet. Mostly in the form of sweat. Damp, rank T-shirts. But also, rain. In June, it rained on us for seven days straight. Rain for a day or two is no problem, almost a novelty. But rain for seven days? Strange rashes grow in the armpits and buttocks; the feet become pruned and cadaver-like in the boots. Nothing dries. You are trapped in crowded shelters with other wet and miserable beings.

Another form of moisture is tears.

Sometimes out on the trail, I'd get so frustrated and tired I'd just sit down and cry.

My heels were cracked. My knees throbbed, especially on the downhills. Who was I kidding? Those were forty-two-year-old knees. They weren't supposed to be flexed for seven or eight hours straight, all the while carrying a heavy load. Since I'm small, my pack looked unusually large and burdensome. People laughed at it, even after I pulled everything nonessential out. Goodbye, paperback and personal locator beacon. Goodbye, compass.

My trail brother Santo was used to my cathartic crying jags.

He'd just settle down and have a snack or look around.

After I wound down, he'd come and offer me his hand and pull me back up, as huge as I am small.

"C'mon, girl," he'd say.

I'd say, "I'm trying!"

"Do or do not," he'd say in his best Yoda voice. "There is no try."

\* \* \*

But every time I was on the verge of quitting, every time I made peace with the decision to quit, to say goodbye to my "tramily" and wish them well and walk away and find some feather bed and be done with it, I'd reach the next shelter just as the woods were growing rosy with dusk, and somebody on the same journey would be building a campfire, the evening air full of fireflies and cricketsong, and I would realize, once again, that the act of walking while carrying the weight of my pack had wrung all the sadness out of me, the sadness for myself and for the world, and that in that moment, I was totally without stress, confusion, or agitation, and that I was perfectly, blamelessly, *whole*.

The trail transformed me.

And I can't say, even now, that I regret it.

After all that I've undergone. All that has been done to me.

**“Santo” Live Interview, Bronx, NY, 7/30/22**  
**Recorded by Warden Cody Ouellette**

The first time I ever went hiking, I didn't even know what to bring. I knew I needed something to drink. I brought a liter of Sprite. As soon as I started walking uphill, I thought I was gonna die. I was swearing at myself. “You fat piece of shit!” But you know, I'd driven all that way to the trailhead. Almost an hour out of the city. Plus the cost of gas. I said to myself, “Just make it to that spot ahead, Ruben. That tree.” And I made it to that spot. “OK, now make it up to *that* spot, that rock.” That's how I got uphill.

Fast-forward to me deciding to hike the AT. *Me*. Got a used tent, check. Used hiking poles, camp stove, sleeping mat. But it turns out there's no hiking clothes for someone of my size. I bought two pairs of big-and-tall golf shorts. People wonder why I hike in golf shorts and polo shirts. This is my pops's polo shirt. Dri-Fit is for real. They do not make hiking shorts for fat people. They're like, “Can we all agree we do not want to see fat people in shorts?”

I see fat girls on the trail sometimes. I am like, “Sister, fat girl, hello, I see you.” Fist bump. We share a wink.

It's OK with me if you use the word “fat.” These skinny people... I call them “gazelles.” The gazelles just scamper up the mountainsides and disappear over the next horizon. But you know, a lot of those people are down bad on the inside. They *bagged* the Appalachian Trail, they *bagged* the Pacific Crest Trail. They can't stop, because there are so many mountains to crush.

I feel bad for them. You get my 260-pound ass to a campsite, Ima *sit down*.

Sparrow was the same. Just walking. Tramping. Watching some birds. Thinking about life. Waiting to hear a good story. She is what my moms, who is a dreamer herself, would call a poet soul.

Wherever Sparrow was, that's where she *was*, you know what I mean?

(pause)

Sorry.

Sorry.

Give me a minute.

(pause)

What the fuck happened to her? Somebody hurt her?

Dear Mom,

In this small tent, in these huge woods, it's you I imagine on the other end of this letter.

I write to pass the time. I write to keep my sanity.

No—I write because it's all I have.

A notebook, two pens. No more food.

If things don't work out in my favor, at least I will leave a record.

I'm writing love letters, I guess.

This one is for you.