



Making the Leap

A plunge into a creek and other rites of Southern childhood welcome Allison Glock back to her homeland

▶ **MOVING BACK SOUTH** is something Southerners do. Lovers of nostalgia, we are all about the rearview mirror, the greener grass in the yard where we grew up. Since leaving home at 17, I have moved back South eight times in 25 years, departing various Northeastern professional arcadias and supposedly superior dining opportunities for the bleached-linen, biscuit-baking, horsefly-biting landscape of my childhood. Or as close to it as my California-born, New York City-bred husband would permit.

This latest go, I made it all the way from NYC to Tennessee. The relocation was met with more raised eyebrows than the entire cast of every *Real Housewives* reality show.

"Why?" they all (okay, mostly the New Yorkers) would ask.

I never had a clear answer. It is impossible to distill atmosphere, to defend a decision made without concrete reasoning. I suppose I could have said, "Because the South, like anything worth knowing, is complicated. And complexity married to beauty never bores."

But I did not. Usually, I said, "The economy."

In truth, I had wants.

I wanted to sweat when I climbed into my car.

I wanted a place where playdates did not exist and play did.

I wanted not to be the only woman at the school bake

sale who 1) loved coconut and 2) made her own cake.

I wanted to garden more than three months a year.

I wanted my kids to know the value of manners.

I wanted to hear birds sing at night and get high on honeysuckle and marvel at the size of magnolias, perched like Easter hats on waxy green heads.

I wanted to drink in twangs and drawls.

I wanted to hear the frenzied jangle of banjos and fiddles.

I wanted to lay eyes on men wearing overalls and cowboy hats and women with hair teased high as Larry Hagman.

I wanted to hug people I just met.

I wanted to see bugs big enough for saddles. And insolent enough to stick around when the lights come up.

I wanted to drive past walls of kudzu, both terrible and beautiful, draping the landscape like living quilts.

I wanted to suck wild berries and guzzle RC.

I wanted to stop agonizing over fried food.

I wanted to eat. And eat. And eat.

Most of all, I wanted to raise my children, girls ages 10 and 11, in my ancestors' geography, where they could ramble barefoot in the sunshine and not fret about being sideswiped by a speeding taxicab.

It was less than a week after our move South that we found ourselves kayaking Abrams Creek at the border of

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the Smokies. We paddled for an hour, then tied off where the river pooled, meeting a series of falls. We swam among the moss-capped rocks, the girls trying vainly to cup small trout in their hands. After a bit, we ate lunch, chicken-and-cheese sandwiches, spicy okra, chips, canned root beer chilled by the stream. We watched the water go white as it fell, like a tour guide photograph, the sun throwing sparks, everything glint and glimmer and the lullaby of a rushing creek.

Dusk approaching, feet pickled and bellies full, we climbed back into our boats, paddling more slowly now, any urgency bled. We cruised along the riverbank, talking little, smiling at the rosy trees with roots like tripods, at the circling hawks.

Ahead, local teens were jumping off an overpass bridge.

"Mama!"

I looked to my spouse, who shrugged. Why not?

We docked again, trudged up the packed gravel to the road, and took our place in line.

The drop was higher than I thought. And I knew nothing of the depth below. I watched a boy pitch off, surmising he was at least 6 foot. He hit the water like a spear, bobbed up grinning. More importantly, alive. I tightened my girls' life vests.

"Nothing fancy!" I cautioned. "We're going to hold hands and jump."

It was, of course, the perfect metaphor. We were all plunging into the unknown, the South nothing if not a place of infinite mystery. I had come back, boomeranged yet again, still searching for that elusive missing part, the Southernness—*otherness*—one finds only in Dixie, a land of stark contradiction, where grace and guilt sit shoulder to shoulder, where the past isn't past, and redemption is ever on offer.

"Count of three?"

The fall was, as all falls are, exquisitely rousing. We popped from the water like corks, hearts pumping, skin smacked pink, breathless.

Home. ●