JILLIAN BENFIELD

The Gift of the Unexpected.

TO BE WHEN LIFE GOES OFF PLAN

"This book is nothing short of extraordinary! I'm not sure I have *ever* had words on a page meet me so deeply, exactly where I am. For every single one of us who has been knocked to the floor these last few years, *The Gift of the Unexpected* offers us a way forward: by first going back. And this time truly leaning into the transformation offered. Jillian's words are equal parts raw, real, and redemptive. I can't wait to share this beautiful book with everyone I know!"

Mary Marantz, bestselling author of *Dirt* and *Slow Growth Equals Strong Roots*, host of *The Mary Marantz Show*

"Intense. Stunning. Needed. Jillian's words will help you discover beauty in the unexpected."

Leslie Means, creator of Her View From Home

"This book extends an invitation to see that what cracks our hearts can also expand them. Thoughtful and honest, Jillian's story of transformation reminds us that God is present and pursuing us, even in the most unexpected moments of our lives. Read and be changed."

Kayla Craig, author of *To Light Their Way* and creator of Liturgies for Parents

"In *The Gift of the Unexpected*, Jillian reveals the beauty of transformation through life's difficult circumstances when we choose to *undergo* rather than *overcome* our hardships. This subtle shift points toward hope in the middle of life's inevitable unexpected moments and will leave you forever changed."

Mikala Albertson, MD; author of Ordinary on Purpose: Surrendering Perfect and Discovering Beauty Amid the Rubble

"Written with gentleness, thoughtfulness, and honesty, Jillian Benfield's particular story of giving birth to a child with Down syndrome is a balm for all of us who dare to doubt and dare to hope that God is present in the midst of the unexpected hardships and unexpected beauty of our lives."

Amy Julia Becker, author of *To Be Made Well* and *A Good and Perfect Gift*

"Jillian's story reminds us that no matter how painful, the unexpected circumstances of our life aren't the end of our story. God can take what shakes up our world and turn it into our deepest purpose. Jillian's words are beautifully raw and will meet anyone who's suffering with validation and hope."

Kelli Bachara, licensed professional clinical counselor and writer

"In *The Gift of the Unexpected*, Jillian Benfield shows us that life's unexpected—and unwanted—twists and turns can lead us toward purpose and reveal both the power and significance of landing in unanticipated circumstances. Benfield takes us on a journey of hurting, healing, hoping, and ultimately becoming."

Jenny Albers, author of Courageously Expecting: 30 Days of Encouragement for Pregnancy After Loss

"An essential read for anyone who's ever faced unmet expectations. Jillian tackles the complex realities of life in a way that puts God's purpose into perspective. Her stories are authentic and practical as she gently reminds us it's okay to not be okay."

Allen Thomas, lead pastor, Outer West Community Church

Gift Of the Unexpected

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The Gift of the Unexpected

TO BE WHEN LIFE GOES OFF PLAN

DISCOVERING WHO YOU WERE MEANT

JILLIAN BENFIELD



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To Andy

Thank you for loving who I was before the unexpected, who I was during, and who I am now becoming.

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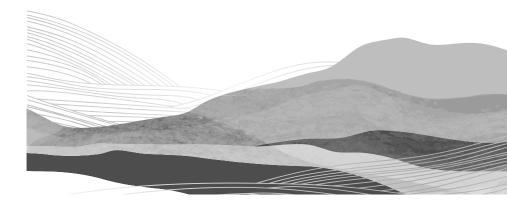
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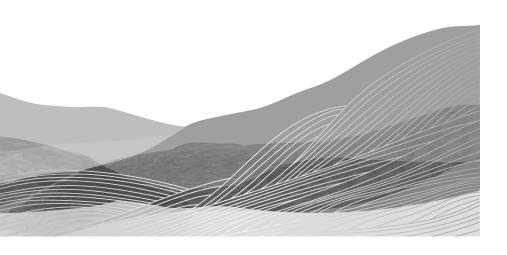
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Introduction

The Gift of Before-and-After

y life fell apart with a twenty-second phone call. The words on the other end of the line took the air from my lungs. My cheeks instantly became wet, and my legs went weak.

Some events are so momentous that they erect a divide in the timeline of our lives. There is a glimpse of time that ends life as we know it and begins a whole new one. It's called the before-and-after moment.

My before-and-after moment came when I was twenty-seven years old and pregnant with my second child. I could never go back to the time before those words were spoken. Life would never be the same. *I* would never be the same.

The words came from my husband, Andy. "The doctor called me, and it's . . . um . . . it's not good. I'm coming home."

My heavy, twenty-two-weeks pregnant body slid onto the cold kitchen-floor tiles of our new rental house, many of our belongings still unpacked. I dropped my phone and frantically cried, "Oh no, oh no, oh no. This doesn't feel real, this doesn't feel real, this doesn't feel real." It was as if my mouth had to repeat what my head and heart didn't want to be true.

Years ago, if you had told me I would one day write a book about how this moment was in reality the greatest gift of my life, I wouldn't have believed you. But I have done just that, because my before-and-after moment led to both the unbecoming and the becoming of me.

I believe your unexpected moment, your unexpected life, holds the same potential for you. But only if you resist society's insistence on *overcoming* the unexpected and choose instead to *undergo* it.

Do a quick Google Images search of the word *overcoming*, and you will see people standing atop mountains, hands raised over their heads in a stance that claims victory. Now search *undergoing*, and you will find people about to be cut open by surgeons. The healing they need can be found only by digging deep into the dark spaces within. The newness comes only by confronting the pain. And we know it's not over when the patient awakes. The patient will have to pursue recovery.

Yes, the undergoing I'm suggesting is like that.

A synonym for the word *overcome* is *suppress*. This is the message we so often get from our Western and church cultures. We are expected to go from positive to positive. We're expected to be the PR team for Jesus and ourselves by feeling our pain for the shortest amount of time possible. We're expected to push through the sadness and grief and to bring our #goodvibesonly. We're expected to return to our normal selves as quickly as we can.

That's the mark of the strong, we're told.

And to be honest, it's probably easier now than ever to overcome our unexpected circumstances. We push through by stuffing our feelings down and numbing out with Netflix, social media, and wine that can be delivered to our doorstep. And we may just accomplish what we set out to do. We may just get to that metaphorical mountaintop and show the world how

strong we are because we have overcome the sadness, we have come out on the other side of grief intact despite our crushing experience.

But if we do this, we come out on the other side wrapped in sameness. We miss out on the opportunity to be transformed.

The real mark of strength is when we do the difficult and slow work of walking through the dark place where we find ourselves. We must sit with the hurt and confusion instead of suppressing them, but then we must allow them to be our guide. We must listen to the voices while in the depths—the voice of God, the whispers of our own hearts, and the input of others who have also spent time below. That's because listening is essential to receiving the grace necessary for transformation.¹

If we are brave enough to take in our present surroundings and eventually work through them, God can use our unexpected circumstances to help us first rediscover our core selves. He does this by helping us tear down the false constructs we've built atop our identities. If we let Him, He will show us what parts of ourselves we've added that need to go, what parts need to stay, and what we need to acquire. And when the dust has settled from the demolition, we'll begin to see ourselves more clearly as wholly His and wholly beloved.

Only when we start to see ourselves as our creator always has will He remind us that all new life begins in the darkness. Just as He formed us in the depths of the womb, He can shape us once more in this unexpected place. By feeling our pain instead of ignoring it, we can connect to the aching of the world from which we were perhaps once distanced. Through this work, then, we become more whole and more real than we were before. We not only find our healing but begin to see how God wants us to bring this healing to the world.

That's when we take first steps out of the darkness and toward that mountain peak. We take them in the same skin we wore when the unexpected first hit our lives but with a newness running through our veins. The unexpected pain may have broken our hearts for a time, but with time, we are broken wide open to possibilities anew, possibilities greater than ourselves. And when we get to the summit, I don't think the snapshot of us will show our hands raised in victory, believing we've made it. Instead, our faces will be pointed toward the sun, knowing this is only the start of a new beginning.

This is when we ask God to show us the way forward. This is when we ask Him to set this good transformation to purpose—purposes beyond the confines of our individual lives. This is when we climb back down the mountain and start participating in this life we get to live in a whole new way. This is when we have fully realized the gift that can come from the unexpected—ourselves made new.

Let me stop right here—not for the last time—to say you don't have to classify your unexpected circumstances as good. As you will see, I was misinformed about my before-and-after moment. But I have had other unexpected moments as well—open-heart surgery for my older son, a miscarriage, and then a fetal intervention surgery and a horrific medical injury for my youngest child. I do not consider these events to be good.

But what I have experienced is this: God can make good come from the unexpected heartaches we experience in this life. And most of the time, that good is a change from within.



I originally started writing this book trying to answer a question: Was my life always meant to end up this way? I was searching for the God of certainty and instead found the God of surprise. He surprises us with the beauty of the unexpected and the grace He provides when the unexpected is any-

thing but. Through the years—and through many unexpected events—I've discovered that God does not promise us a steady life; He promises resurrection. He said we will have trouble in this world but to take heart because He has overcome the world.²

This promise is not just about the grand finale of our lives when we take our last breath and catch our first glimpse of heaven. It's also about the many resurrections we will experience in the here and now. This vow of God is intertwined with all our unexpected endings and beginnings, because it is often through the unexpected that our creator shows us who we are and points us to who He wants us to become.

Maybe your before-and-after experience left a gaping hole in your life, and you just can't imagine anything good down there. I can't tell you this hole will be filled the same way it once was, but if you are willing to take this journey, if you are willing to walk back past the point before everything fell apart so you can move forward changed, something good can come from this. We are known and loved by a God who gives beauty where our deepest, unexpected hurts once resided.

And He often does this through the work of transformation.



When you experienced your before-and-after moment, did you notice that your world came to a screeching halt but somehow everyone else's kept turning? And turning. And turning. And turning.

I did.

When Andy called, the doctor had just let him know the blood screen on our unborn son had come back positive for a genetic anomaly. But we didn't know which one, and we needed to return to the man's office to find out.

My mom was driving Andy and me through the winding back road to the hospital when we passed a group of young boys riding scooters and laughing as though all was right in the world. Their happiness highlighted my despair. I stared ahead, dazed, wondering how this could be.

For you, maybe it was getting the dreaded medical results at your desk while coworkers laughed and chatted away. Or learning of your spouse's betrayal and only seconds later hearing your baby scream because she needed to be fed. Or perhaps you were walking to your car after saying goodbye to a loved one for the final time when parents strolled by holding new life, filled to the brim with possibilities.

When others' lives carry on with the usual threads and weave in new ones but your life is suddenly barren, it can pierce your soul. Your threads are now frayed, and you're left unable to fathom how it can all possibly be. But having been through my moment when time paused and hung and ached, I've come to believe that the world that keeps cruelly spinning is God's way of pointing us to hope. I have ultimately learned that the unexpected can lead us from the depths of desolation to a resurrected self, a resurrected way of living God has called us to.

Chatting coworkers can act as a reminder that we will one day again hum along with life. A hungry baby can remind us that, although empty now, we will one day be full again. And the loss of a loved one will always hurt, but a couple high on possibilities can remind us that one day we will dream anew.

First sunset, then sunrise. First storm, then a rainbow. First death, then resurrection. That's what they say. But, of course, it doesn't happen just like that. We experience hours of inconceivable darkness, strong winds that threaten to knock us down, and the hopelessness of an unopened tomb.

Yet right there in the midst of it, God is making something new.

This book is about inviting Him to make something new in us when the unexpected leaves our lives and ourselves unrecognizable. Because after we've done our time processing, griev-

ing, and lamenting, life begins to stir. The dawn breaks, the clouds fade, and the stone rolls away. Yes, life moves on, and one day, so will we. But hopefully, we will take steps toward a life different from when we started.

This new and different life is the gift of the unexpected, and I've written this book for those willing to unwrap it. But it's like The unexpected can lead us from the depths of desolation to a resurrected self, a resurrected way of living God has called us to.

one of those super-sized packages at kids' birthday parties, where the giver wrapped it in layers of paper for the receiver to remove before finally reaching the prize. This gift requires our time, effort, and patience. What we find inside is not our old life, our old faith, our old perspective but ourselves, wholly loved and wholly transformed.



The Gift of the Unexpected is divided into three parts.

In Part 1, we'll see how to do the work of returning to ourselves and seeing ourselves as our creator sees us—beloved not because of what we do or don't do but because of who we are.

In Part 2, we'll see that once we know ourselves, we're primed for change, for transformation. But before we get there, we must feel our pain so we can get in touch with our humanity, stop distancing ourselves from the hurt of the world, and instead, allow it to work in us and through us.

And in Part 3, we'll see that if we do the work of internal transformation, spurred on by our unexpected circumstances, we can discover who God wants us to become.

Each chapter, then, is divided into three sections. The first is where I tell you my unexpected story in hopes you will see yourself and your own story there.

The second is titled The Gift. Here, I lean on Scripture, research, and metaphor to draw out the lessons I've learned from the unexpected along the way. It's important to note that I was not learning these lessons in the first few chapters, the chapters where I'm wrecked with grief. They came with time, prayer, reading, good counsel, reflection—and ultimately, undergoing.

And finally, under the heading The Gift of You, I provide journaling questions to help you reflect on who you were during the heat of the unexpected, who you are now in regard to the topic of the chapter, and who you want to become in light of these unexpected lessons. You will also find journaling space to dig deep and discover the gift of the unexpected—discovering who you were meant to be.



God will set our unexpected transformations to purpose but only if we are willing to participate.

This path of the unexpected life is steep, twisty, and at times lovely. And although the road is long and some points are scary, we arrive at overlooks now and again, where the views are extraordinary. But we must walk it. We must be bold enough to face our realities both past and present to get to the place where God wants us to arrive. And when we get there, to our new beginning, we can't help but also look back to see how He made our lives over again from dust, one more time.

Dear reader, you will see me say that my grief about my unexpected moment was based on ignorance. It was based on my faulty beliefs of what constitutes a good and worthy life. Nevertheless, the subsequent grief was real.

You see, the twenty-second phone call that knocked me to the floor did break my life apart. I just didn't realize how God would use those pieces. He pulled most of them back, swept some away, and added new ones. The result has been an evolving picture that has more beauty and depth than I could have ever imagined.

The unexpected gave me my son Anderson.

And in doing so, it also gave me, me.

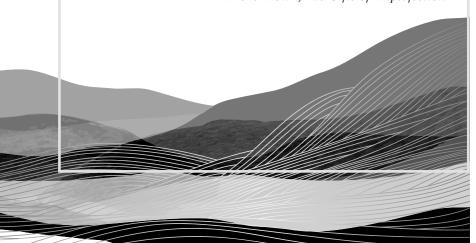
Let's begin unwrapping to discover the gift that awaits you—that through the unexpected you can become who God always imagined you to be.



The Gift of Returning to Yourself

Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.

-Brené Brown, The Gifts of Imperfection



1

Breaking Open

any of the happiest moments of my life run together in a brightly colored blur.

I remember the delight I felt when, surprised, I walked up to a white blanket, pink roses, and Andy down on one knee waiting for me. But I don't recall his exact words when he asked me to marry him. I remember sitting in my white gown, overjoyed and even giddy while laughing at my dad's toast during our wedding reception. But I can't recall the content. I remember the ecstasy-riddled joy I felt just after seeing our first child's fresh pink skin for the first time. But I don't recall the words Andy and I spoke to each other as Violet lay on my chest after delivery.

But when I look back at my worst moments, I'm haunted by the smallest details.

The years 2013 and 2014 had already been laced with the unexpected. Andy graduated dental school on an air force scholarship, and soon after he moved his tassel, the military sent us from Augusta, Georgia, to Las Vegas, Nevada, for a one-year residency program. Then after spending hours toiling over what

to put on our "dream sheet," a list of our preferred locations for our next assignment, we opened an envelope with orders to a location that felt more like a nightmare—Alamogordo, New Mexico.

Alamogordo is where they tested the first atomic bomb in 1945, and this news felt like a bomb of our own had gone off, blowing up the scripts we'd written in our heads for what the near future would look like. Particularly for me. Moving to Alamogordo meant no chance of going back to my career as a TV journalist.

We had no idea the plot was about to become so twisted that we wouldn't even recognize the story as our own. We would think this was the kind of narrative that belonged to other people, not us. Although now I'm so grateful our stories played out the way they have, at the time I couldn't see how anything good could come from these unscripted parts of our lives.

Thankfully, I was wrong. Thankfully, this was the beginning of unlearning and learning, of breaking and stretching, of changing and transforming.



Eight days after we arrived in our new and remote town, I was twenty weeks pregnant with our second child and in the waiting room at a new OB-GYN's office for my anatomy scan. The ultrasound technician greeted Andy and me and escorted us to her examination room. She had short sun-kissed hair and skin to match, and there was something gentle about her that I liked right away.

She asked me to pull up my silky top. I took a deep breath, my chest expanded against my skin, and for the first time in weeks I felt centered. In the chaos of moving, in the disappointment about where we'd landed, I had nearly forgotten I was carrying a miracle inside me.

She took her white squeeze bottle out of its holster and covered my midsection with warm aquamarine goo, then untangled her wand to show us a glimpse of our future. Another baby.

"It's a boy!" she concluded almost immediately.

Andy cried happy tears. I cried too. And for a few minutes, everything was perfect. In our young married years, we'd day-dreamed about our future family. We'd picked out names for both sons and daughters yet to be, and now the dream was becoming reality. Our family portrait would be what we wanted it to be.

As I stared at the smooth white ceiling above, pondering the nuances of a brother-sister relationship between children less than two years apart, I didn't realize how much time had passed. The technician had me turn on my side to get the last measurement, and when she got it, she thanked us, flipped on the lights, and walked out the door.

A cheery nurse bounced into our room minutes later and said, "Well, the doctor isn't here, so everything must look great!" But as soon as she'd said those words, he walked in wearing the traditional white coat—and a concerned look on his face.

"We need to discuss some things on the ultrasound," he said.

He pulled up the screen and pointed to the black and white image. "You see here a bright spot on the baby's heart. The heart appears to be working fine, but this spot can sometimes indicate other things may be wrong."

He continued to tell us our baby also had a thickened nuchal fold, a fold of skin at the back of the neck. The measurement was only slightly off but still enlarged. He explained that with those two markers, our baby had an increased chance of having one of the more-common trisomies—13, 18, or 21.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means your baby could have a genetic condition like Down syndrome."

The room grew blurry, and my back broke out in fire as the doctor's voice began sounding like one of the monotone adults in the animated versions of *Peanuts*. I couldn't concentrate on what he was saying, because the thought *I can't be a special needs mom*, *I can't be a special needs mom* played in my head over and over again like a skipping CD.*

The doctor explained that a new blood test was on the market, and we would have the results in about two weeks. The scene was still blurry and began to spin, but somehow, with Andy's help, I managed to walk to the lab.

They took my blood.

And then we waited.



Waiting admits a lack of control. The situation was out of our hands. Yet as we waited for the blood test results, we tried to grab the power in a powerless fight. We told ourselves a "Podunk" Alamogordo hospital probably didn't have the best technology and booked an ultrasound appointment in El Paso, the largest nearby city.

Once again, I lifted my shirt, but this time I shuddered as the new ultrasound technician squeezed the familiar blue goo across my midsection. And then, there he was again. Our son. Dressed in black and white. His spine wiggled, and his hands stretched across the nice office's big projection screen. I wanted to love him, but now I was afraid of falling.

She measured his nuchal fold and looked at his heart. "This baby is completely normal," she concluded.

Normal.

*Dear reader, this is the only time you'll see me use the term *special needs*. From the disability community, I've learned that the word *disability* is preferred. But in this case, I want you to know the very real thoughts I had in this moment.

When I was a senior in high school, my parents sat me down in a New York City restaurant while we were on vacation, some cozy little spot in Little Italy.

"Jill, if you want to do this, we'll support you," my mom said.

My parents were offering to move me to the city to pursue a Broadway musical career instead of a journalism degree, but I dismissed the idea immediately. I wanted the wild and free college experience. I wanted the big football school and frat parties. I also knew my parents had a bloated confidence in my talents. Maybe I had the singing voice, but I couldn't dance and could barely act. It would take a lot of classes to get me there, and I wasn't sure if I had "it" anyway.

But really, that type of move was too out there for me, too risky. I wanted just a notch above normal, and a TV journalism career would be the perfect mix of flashy and practical.

Now normal sounded extremely appealing. But with only a six-day gap between ultrasounds, how could the results be so different? Like a pendulum, I swung into times of self-affirmed peace and just as quickly into doubt.

I remember when the pendulum stopped swinging. A storm brewed above the mountain behind our home. The eight more days of waiting for the blood test results had started to bubble up my emotions, and I was about to burst. My mom, who'd come from Florida to help us unpack, and I were sitting on the porch when tears of frustration and fear started trickling down my cheeks.

"All day long I've felt like he does have something," I choked out.

There was a slight pause, as my mom didn't know what to say. Who would? But then she suddenly spoke, pointing. "Look! As soon as you said that, a rainbow appeared."

I turned around to peer at the colorful view in the still-cloudy sky, then hung my head. "I don't think that's a good sign."

I thought God was telling me He was still there—but I wouldn't get the news I wanted.



The next day Andy came home for lunch in a good mood. He liked his new dental clinic, and my ever-optimistic husband believed we would get good news about the blood test that day and this ordeal would be over. I hid my doubts as I kissed him goodbye and handed him his hat. He went back to work.

I was still cleaning up from lunch when my phone rang. It was Andy.

"The doctor called me, and it's . . . um . . . it's not good. I'm coming home."

I dropped the phone, and that's when my twenty-two-weekspregnant body fell to the cold tiled floor. My mom held my head as hot, sticky tears poured down my face. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," she cried.

We sat there on the kitchen floor, bodies entangled the way they had when I was a child with a skinned knee or a teenager with a bruised heart. And we stayed in that pool of each other's shock until Andy walked in.

I had never seen the look he wore on his face; the light he normally radiates was out. I followed him into our bedroom, where we lay on our yellow duvet, held each other, and cried. I'd chosen the yellow Pottery Barn cover when we registered for our new life together. It was happy. It was perfect. I didn't know our story would turn into a sad one, the cover now damp with a pain we couldn't exchange.

Andy ran to the bathroom and started vomiting. I ran my hands up and down his back as his body rejected the shock. When he finished, I unbuttoned his constricting military uniform. He rested his head on my enlarged chest, and his warm

tears fell down my shirt and onto my round belly. We had just turned twenty-seven years old, and when I got pregnant, there was only a one in thousand chance we would conceive a child with a trisomy. We were on the wrong side of the statistics.

Or so we thought.

I remember everything.



An hour later, I walked into my new OB-GYN's office for the second time but now in a dreamlike state. Only the objects directly in front of me felt real—feet walking, backsides in chairs, magazines on tables. Everything else was hazy.

"Benfield?"

"Benfield?"

I snapped out of it, and then Andy did too. We moved to the front desk, where we found the receptionist and another front-office employee with heavy eyes.

It was clear everyone who worked there knew, but what did they know? Was it trisomy 13—fatal, trisomy 18—sometimes fatal, or trisomy 21 (Down syndrome)—livable? I didn't want any of them. I wanted a way out.

In the hall connecting the waiting and exam rooms, I felt as if I were walking the green mile, certain our fate, in one way or another, was death.

Now I wish I would have known this moment was instead an invitation to a new life.

Everyone else knew of the execution about to take place, and I kept my eyes down to avoid the looks from the gallery. I was the twenty-seven-year-old with the body that failed, a body I could barely lift onto the exam table covered in white crinkled paper. Andy and I waited under the fluorescent lights in silence. There was nothing left to say until our fate was known.

The doctor finally walked in and cut through the sterile quiet. "Well, it's not good. Your baby has a 99 percent chance of having Down syndrome."

After riddling us with his opinions about Down syndrome, he followed up with, "But don't worry. You don't have to be heroes. If you decide to go through with the pregnancy, you can have the baby here. We can keep him comfortable, but we don't have to do anything drastic to prolong his life."

In other words, we could let our son die of natural causes.

We walked out, and the heavy-eyed receptionist handed me an envelope with information about a Down syndrome support group more than an hour away.

I didn't want support. I wanted to disappear. I wanted a baby whose life wasn't over before it began.

This is where I should tell you this level of honesty is grueling, but I want you to know the depth of my story. I want you to know how little I knew then and how I feel so differently now.

There was a death that day—just not the death I thought.

The details of the day are sharp. I remember the bushiness of the doctor's furrowed brows and the weakness of his mouth. I remember the horror I felt at his words and the guilt I felt over my emotions. I remember the drive home and the afternoon light shining too brightly, and my craving its absence.

But I have no details of the night. I only know it was as dark as my memory.



Two days later I found myself looking for armor inside my closet.

Our new town was so remote that a maternal-fetal medicine specialist and her team traveled there only once a month, but

we got an appointment. And because of our positive screen for Down syndrome, we were her first of the day.

What will make me look like my life isn't falling apart while also conveying to this doctor who cares for high-risk pregnancies that I need her to be gentle?

After choosing a white peasant, wholesome-looking maternity top, I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror, then at the cross necklace Andy gifted me after Violet's birth. It was lying on the counter, staring back at me, revealing me.

Do I wear it?

I didn't want to. If Jesus made the blind see and the deaf hear, why wouldn't He heal my son of this lifelong diagnosis? It wasn't a matter of whether He could; it was a question of why He had not.

I thought wearing the cross close to my heart might help get rid of the ugliness lurking in its chambers. I thought it might help remove any unspoken desires to hit the rewind button, to get my old life back. I reluctantly fastened the white-gold clasp around my neck, then looked up at my reflection again.

The shiny cross had the same effect on me as it always does—hope. I felt a small surge of the feeling that had gone missing ever since military orders had forced us out of our exciting Las Vegas home to this barren New Mexico town only weeks earlier.

My hope was that God would still come through for me and for my son, in the way I prescribed.



Andy and I walked into the doctor's small waiting room. The bottom halves of its walls were covered with vinyl woodlook planks, the top with a stained white plaster. There was a hum in the air, from what I don't know. Maybe an overworked

air conditioner. Photos of newborns adorned in nothing but handstitched hats lined the entire lobby.

My heart sank. No one will want a photo of my baby.

I wondered if Andy was thinking the same thing.

A woman just a few years older than me sat across from us. Her pale hair was glued to her head with an unkempt bun perched on top. Her stark black glasses frames didn't match her worn purple T-shirt. She wore no armor, which was perplexing to me. *She must be pregnant with twins*, I thought. No one could possibly be experiencing the depth of the tragedy that landed my legging-clad backside in that waiting room chair.

Grief whispers lies of isolation again and again.

We eventually walked back to a tiny exam room, where the doctor greeted us. She was an older woman with a tiny frame, a blunt haircut, and a no-nonsense demeanor. I liked that. I couldn't handle the weight of anyone's empathy without crumbling.

She looked at me directly. "You can pretty much take the blood screen results to the bank, but if I were your sister, I'd tell you to have an amniocentesis."

So I did.

I wanted to know for sure, and in those raw first days, my fear of losing my baby wasn't as great as my fear of raising him. She performed another ultrasound on my weary abdomen to find the safest point of entry, and guilt washed over me as I looked at my son's unsuspecting frame wiggle on the black and white screen. Then she told me to count to three.

"One . . . two . . . three."

She stuck a large needle into my womb to extract fluid, which would give us a clear answer—forty-six chromosomes or an extra forty-seventh. But she had trouble getting enough fluid for the test. My body didn't want to let go, making the procedure last longer than it should. Yet the pain of why she was doing it hurt worse than the sting and pressure.

A tear rolled down my face as the sign of Jesus frantically moved up and down on my chest.

Forsaken.



A distant relative gave us a large clock engraved with "BENFIELDS, EST. 2009" as a wedding gift. I remember hearing it *tick*, *tick*, *tick* when I was a weekend news anchor and home alone on Thursdays and Fridays while Andy was at dental school. I tried to keep myself busy. I volunteered, did housework, and cooked, but when I got lonely with too little to do, I would hear that *tick*, *tick*, *tick*.

Life got louder once Andy graduated, he entered active-duty military service, and our first baby arrived. The quiet I once knew was now filled with little cries and lullabies. I hadn't heard the clock ticking since Violet was born a year and a half earlier. But now as September began to fade and signs of fall appeared, I heard it again.

Tick, tick, tick.

The specialist told us it would take ten to fourteen days to get the amniocentesis results. As we left her office, we let ourselves feel hopeful that our baby would be the exception, the previous test a false positive. The first few days of the waiting process were easy, some even joyful. Then the tenth day came . . .

Tick, tick, tick.

Attempting to fill the spaces between the minute and second hands, I left the house with Violet in the morning and tried to get to know our new little town. I even experienced five-minute periods when I forgot I was waiting for the biggest news of my life.

But in the afternoons, when I knew the lunch break at the doctor's office was over, it would hit me again. I held my phone

with sweaty palms and a weak stomach and stared at the screen. Anytime it made a noise, I felt like vomiting. I spent those afternoons thinking, *Just a few more hours and then I'm safe for the day*.

We'd instructed the doctor to call Andy since he's more medical-minded than I am, and if I never left my phone, then I couldn't be caught off guard by his name appearing on the screen. I wouldn't be knocked down to the floor again. Only, no amount of preparation can soften the news of what is lifealtering and permanent. It is always unexpected, even when the evidence hints at its coming.

Neither could I have known the transformation God sets into motion when life as we know it ends—and then a new one begins. *Tick*, *tick*,

Late on a Thursday, I was changing Violet's diaper when Andy called. I held her steady with one hand and hit the speaker button with the other. Because it was so late in the day, it didn't occur to me this was *the* call.

"The doctor called me with the results. He has Down syndrome."

The clock stopped. I was no longer threatened by the *tick*, *tick*, *tick*. The dreaded moment had passed.

After I hung up, I finished changing Violet's diaper and yelled to my mom in the other room, "Results are in, and he has Down syndrome," as casually as if I were yelling, "Hey, what do you want for dinner tonight?"

I sat on the floor to play with my daughter, and my mom walked into the room. She put her arm around me, squeezed my shoulder . . . and nothing. I had no reaction. No tears. No emotions.

I was numb.

Andy and I had been in a roll-over car crash a couple of years prior, and we survived the impact with no obvious signs of trauma. We had no cuts, no broken bones. The sheriff of Jackson County, Georgia, drove us to our North Augusta home, and we rode stunned and silent but unharmed. Not until I started undressing to take a shower did I realize I had wet myself.

The impact of the crash slowly started revealing itself, first with hurt backs, next with physical therapy appointments and a new car to buy.

The effects of this new impact were also slow to appear. I rode passenger through the moments after, aware of life happening around me but replaying the crash in my mind as the scenery passed by.

It started with a steady flow of wordless tears more than an hour after getting the news. I cried over my mom's homemade lasagna while still managing to eat it—because pregnancy. I tried to talk it out with Andy on the porch in the shadow of our desert mountain view, fluctuating between anger and sadness. But he wasn't giving me the grand reaction I wanted. It wasn't enough. I needed to feel the full weight of this definitive truth. I needed to remove the armored clothes and put on a sackcloth like they did in ancient times.

I undressed, then folded a thick towel and placed it on the shower floor. I turned on the hot water, sat my backside on the towel, and let my fate wash over me. The beads pelted me with the realization of how quickly our lives had changed forever. The clock would never turn back. Our lives would never return to what they once were.

The cry I cried on the shower floor wasn't an ugly cry; it was a scary wail. I had witnessed the sound that came out of my body only a few times before, back when I was a journalist and drove up to a tragic scene too early.

It's the cry that only comes from sudden loss. Because that's what I *believed* it was. I used to be a witness to tragedy. Now I *was* the tragedy.

When I was a reporter and sat across from victims I interviewed, it felt as if an invisible barrier separated me from them. Because of my position, my financial security, my privilege, I was safe. They were on the side of the misfortune; I was protected, set apart. I guess in one way or another, we tell ourselves these lies to keep living. We search for reasons why his car crashed or why her body got cancer. We put the blame on the blameless to hide from our own fragility.

As I curled up naked, cradling the boy who was making me question, making me feel, and unknowingly making me, *me*, I was aware of how exposed I had always been. I was just pretending before.

The water finally turned cold, the tears and my skin dried, and I got my awkward pregnant body off the shower floor and went to bed empty.



Dear reader, in the introduction to this book, you saw me say my grief about my son's Down syndrome diagnosis was based on my ignorance. And particularly around my ignorance about disability. It was based on fear and my unknowing ableism.*

On my bad assumptions about God, myself, and the world.

No matter the reason for my grief, however, it was real. And that's where I want to meet you, now, in your real grief.

*Disability activist Leah Smith defines ableism this way: "Ableism is a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be 'fixed' in one form or the other." Center for Disability Rights – Integration, Independence, Civil Rights, cdrnys.org/blog/uncategorized /ableism.

The late singer Nightbirde rose to quick fame in 2021 after she wowed the judges of *America's Got Talent* with her beautiful voice and painful story. At the time of the performance, her cancer diagnosis gave her a 2 percent chance of survival.

She penned this on her blog: "I have heard it said that some people can't see God because they won't look low enough, and it's true. If you can't see him, look lower. God is on the bathroom floor." 1

I know this because I met Him there.

I know this because He helped me meet myself there.

Whether your unexpected sorrow is attached to something you will feel differently about one day or is tethered to what can only be classified as a tragedy, I want to meet you on your bathroom floor, where God is so very present.

I want to tell you that your willingness to feel all you need to feel here on these cold tiles is necessary. I want to come and sit cross-legged next to you, stare into your damp eyes, and tell you to let yourself break apart because that is necessary to breaking open.



Researcher and author Dr. Brené Brown studies shame, and she defines it as an "intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging." We experience shame when we believe we've done something or failed to do something that could make us lose our connections to others—love—or perhaps something that makes us feel unworthy of having connection in the first place.

To deepen her study around shame, Dr. Brown interviewed more than twelve hundred participants who were living what she called "wholehearted" lives. Every one of us experiences shame, yet these people believe and live as though they are enough. What emerged as a key category in both her study on shame and in her study on wholeheartedness was vulnerability.³

In her book *Braving the Wilderness*, Dr. Brown writes this about vulnerability: "Our families and culture believed that the vulnerability that it takes to acknowledge pain was weakness, so we were taught anger, rage, and denial instead. But what we know now is that when we deny our emotion, it owns us. When we own our emotion, we can rebuild and find our way through the pain."

Vulnerability is not weakness. It takes tremendous amounts of courage to be vulnerable with others and even to ourselves on the bathroom floor. Vulnerability is required to build resilience to shame. Vulnerability is required for us to live wholeheartedly as ourselves.

You see, who I was on the shower floor that night was someone who had let the world tell her who she was. Somewhere along the way, I'd absorbed the message that my worthiness came from my ability to perform. That was my armor. If I could just outperform the person next to me, if I could make it look like my life was perfect, if I always looked my best, then I would be worthy of connection and praise.

I hid behind this armor. I was not vulnerable. I lived scared.

I wonder what lies that lay heavy across your shoulders you absorbed while the water pelted you with your new reality—and maybe even still. Did they say you were too much? Did they say you were incapable of taking risks? Did they say you would never break the cycle of addiction or abuse? Did they make you believe you were unlovable? Did they whisper that you would never be more than your worst mistake or your family's worst mistake?

Somewhere along the way, many of us have tied our worthiness to something other than our creator. And so we've lived with armor to protect us from the world and ourselves.

The bathroom floor strips us of this armor we once thought protected us. And this is a gift, because that armor prevents us from fully living.

This is why we need to go back. Back to those cold tiles that caught our tears, back to those walls where the armor came off and our bare souls were all we had left.

Maybe you sat on those tiles only days ago. Or maybe your unexpected moment was years ago, but you skipped the bathroom floor. Maybe you tried to push through the pain instead of letting it push you deeper.

Whatever the case may be, go back.

Because this journey of undergoing the unexpected requires us to examine ourselves curled up on the shower floor. We need to look at that person with empathy. We need to examine the false constructs she built around her identity. What armor was she using to protect herself? What armor was she wearing that kept her from living wholeheartedly?

It's necessary to go back and sit in that steamy room before we can move forward.

The bathroom floor may have us breaking apart, but it also

offers us the opportunity to break apart the lies we believed about ourselves long ago and may carry with us still.

The bathroom floor can help us walk back to who we really were before the world ever told us differently.

The bathroom floor is devastating, yes. But it is also an opportunity. It allows us to ex-

The bathroom floor may have us breaking apart, but it also offers us the opportunity to break apart the lies we believed about ourselves long ago and may carry with us still.

amine the shame we carry deep down, the lies we've lived with

that tell us we aren't worthy of the connection we all desire. The bathroom floor is an opportunity to then shed the armor we've worn to protect ourselves from these deceits. The armor that has kept us in line so that we behave. Or the armor we've used to try to control every possible outcome. Or the armor that made sure we'd keep achieving and never rest. Or the armor that helped us live small so we could be worthy.

The bathroom floor is where we recognize the armor and begin to take it off piece by piece. It's where we can connect with the living water and allow it to wash us clean once more.

And when we emerge from the floor, when our eyes and our skin have dried, we're given a fresh start to live vulnerably anew. We're given the opportunity to live into the fullness of ourselves.

The bathroom floor can help us live in a whole new way—wide open.

As Brené Brown suggests, although learning to live vulnerably can be difficult, it allows us to experience the fullness of love. To show up as ourselves and find the places where we truly belong. To hope more. To live with more empathy. And to find more meaning.⁵ Living vulnerably is key to helping us return to ourselves—the ones God created with intention.

This is the path we take from the bathroom floor. It will be steep, and it will require much, but it will also give us much.

By going back, by owning our whole story, we can eventually move forward as the wholehearted people we want to be. We can eventually move forward with the purpose of living into our God-dreamed entirety.

The baby growing inside me would strip me of my armor. He would out me, he would show me a better way, and he would teach me how to show up just as I am. My body was shaping him, but one day he would shape me.

One day.

I believe your unexpected life holds this potential for you if you are willing to be brave, if you are willing to be vulnerable.

Go back to the bathroom floor. Spend time there. Don't skip over this part. Because when you shed the tears, when you un-

leash your innermost thoughts to the One who always hears, when you ask the hard questions, when you sit under the confusion and the weight of your reality in this present moment, you're building up your courage to go deeper still.

You will be strong enough to go back further in the timeline of your life. You will have the By going back, by owning our whole story, we can eventually move forward as the wholehearted people we want to be.

courage to go back and see where you have been and how it has shaped your beliefs, your relationships, and your grief so far. Go back and run your fingers along the armor you wore for so long. And then take that armor and put it where it belongs—in the history book of your life. You don't need to wear it going forward; it no longer fits you. Shed the weight it added to your strong and delicate spine. The armor never protected you anyway; it only held you back from being you.

Let the cold tiles beneath your body be the foundation for a new way of living. You can be brave. You can be vulnerable. You can be you—the you your creator formed long ago. Go back so you can move forward into who He always dreamed you'd be brave enough to be.

Go back to the bathroom floor and break apart so you can break open.

Go back so you can be free.

THE Gift OF You

• Who was I then?

Did I spend time on the bathroom floor? If so, what did I believe about myself? And how did these beliefs shape my grief?

• Who am I now?

Am I still the person on the bathroom floor who believed the lie that I was worthy of connection only if I followed some unspoken rules laid out by society? Or am I living with more vulnerability? In either case, why or why not?

Who do I want to become?
 What armor do I need to remove in order to live whole-heartedly as myself, as the person God intended me to be?