

J A M I N A T O

this
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be the
place

FOLLOWING THE BREADCRUMBS OF YOUR
PAST TO DISCOVER YOUR PURPOSE TODAY

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JAMI NATO



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To my children: I had you in mind when I wrote this book.
I hope it helps you most of all when you feel
that you've lost your way.

Contents

I Saved a Seat for You 9

PART 1: WHERE YOU'VE BEEN 15

1. My First Kickstarter 17
2. Surprise! 25
3. The End Is the Way 37
4. The Business of Finding Yourself 49
5. A Tale of Two Bosses 59

PART 2: WHERE YOU ARE 73

6. A Basket, a Frozen Pizza, a Front Yard 75
7. Laughable Dreams 87
8. Death by Motherhood 99
9. Someone Else's Garden 111
10. Blind Driving 101 121

PART 3: WHERE YOU WANT TO GO 135

11. Acceptance Speech 137
12. The MiraculASS Transformation 149

Contents

13. Dream On	161
14. Now What?	173
Epilogue	181
Acknowledgments	187
About the Author	189

I Saved a Seat for You

Have you ever experienced a Southwest flight? There are all these unspoken rules, people hogging the armrests, and the tiers of importance: groups A, B, or the dreaded C! And don't get me started on finding a place for your luggage in the back of the plane, then trying to walk against the sea of travelers in the wrong direction. I'm sweating just thinking about it.

Once when I was pregnant and had to put my luggage in the overhead bin, it felt like it took me three hours to finally find a spot. And because people magically lose their manners in airports (see also Costco), no one remembered they had hands to help this very pregnant woman. The worst part was that I did finally get my suitcase up into a bin, but it didn't quite fit. So as I was trying to rearrange someone else's luggage as if I were playing a sweaty game of *Tetris*, I hit the guy below me on the head with two very swift tummy taps. Right on the head. I was mortified but also pleased that my baby helped me knock some sense into the passenger who eventually got up. *Oh, you needed help?*

Life can feel like a bad flight sometimes. You may feel like a C passenger struggling to find a place for your suitcase while no one notices. But with God's seating arrangements, there's no rush or hustle to find your seat. There's no wondering where you're supposed

to sit or unspoken rules or questioning whether you're annoying your seatmate. He's already tagged a specific seat for you, and while you're on the same plane, you're most certainly on a different journey than the person next to you.

Your journey may not look like you had hoped it would. You may have what feels like too many layovers, a few detours, and frustrating delays. But every experience, good or bad, molds and contours who we are today and directs us toward who and what we are meant to be. I truly believe these experiences are hand-tailored to highlight the gifts God has already appointed in each of us and to give a unique empathy to each of us. When you pair a unique empathy with a unique gifting, you find your calling. (I'll help you discover this in the coming chapters, and I promise you it will be more fun than painful.) And that unique calling is not to build up our kingdoms but to go and build his by simply being exactly who he made us to be, not who he made others to be.

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 4:10–11 NIV

It's like God has given each of his children a treasure map. While the destination is the same, the routes are as unique as we are. We are trying to get from the start to the big X that marks treasure, bringing his kingdom to earth in our unique way. But it's never a straight line, is it? There are obstacles and comic relief. There are beautiful and weird and even seemingly dangerous things. It feels dangerous to ask questions about our faith and about God. Maybe it feels like you're doubting him and, thus, somehow sinning—as if he can't handle your questions about himself and you and your purpose in life. It can feel dangerous to be curious if all you've known in life is

the very comfortable idol of control (ask me how I know!). And no one really wants to look at suffering, to look back. We think we're going to be turned into a pillar of salt for it (didn't that Bible story scare the knock-off Marshmallow Mateys cereal out of you?). The truth is that revisiting suffering to find meaning is something we are challenged to do as we recount the suffering of God's people over and over in the Bible. He gave us so many specific stories to help us see him more clearly, to ask where he was and who he is during the pain.

A straight line wouldn't allow us to see our need for God's mercy and his tender guidance as we brave our tenuous journey. Each place, each stop on the way is necessary and never wasted. I'll give you lots of examples so you won't have to do this alone.

God left us breadcrumbs along the way because he knew we would get lost. Those breadcrumbs are the things you are naturally good at, skills you've learned, and weird things that make you YOU: the suffering, the obstacles, the experiences, the relationships, the joys, and the mundane. I want you to see those things as a way to transform those you influence, those who are right in front of you. Many of us believe a false narrative in which we have to have a big audience to make a real impact. The truth is that Jesus taught that every single person we encounter is important. Perhaps it's your children. Perhaps it's your neighborhood or the elementary school where you volunteer. Maybe you're an entrepreneur with five employees or a CEO with five hundred. Maybe it's a friend group, a college sorority, your knitting-with-cat-hair group. With God, nothing is wasted; every single situation is on purpose. If we believed that, we would see our lives differently. We would start paying attention to each detail and looking back for the breadcrumbs that have been there all along.

We don't know where our faithfulness will end up; we only know that God asks us to be faithful to his calling on our lives right on the path he's mapped for us.

The first time I spoke about breadcrumbs to a large audience, my goal was to give those forty thousand listeners in the audience a new pair of glasses. (Pro tip: If you imagine everyone naked and wearing

glasses, it will make you MORE nervous, not less.) So I did everything I could to get their attention (you know, dance, wear armpit pads, mess up my PowerPoint—the usual speaker stuff) and show what I was good at—selling an idea—and not so good at—following the rules. I was not going to let them leave that auditorium without knowing that everything and anything could be used for their good if they had a new perspective.

Let me show you what my treasure map looks like, where I got lost along the way, and how the breadcrumbs helped me find my way. Then I'll guide you to do some reflective work to make sense of your own treasure map. You'll have to look back. You'll have to look forward. You'll have to do some digging and get a little dirty—wait, are we about to discover the next hidden city or a cluster of dinosaur bones? My inner six-year-old is excited about this! You'll even have to pay attention to some things you've long ignored. But what you'll discover will confirm who you are and who you are meant to be. Keep in mind that my map won't look like yours—and it shouldn't. My biggest hope is that you gain so much confidence in what God has done in your life and where he's taking you that you change your family, school, neighborhood, city, and the world for the Gospel of Christ!*

The stories from my life will be the flashlight to shine on the breadcrumbs that God has left for you on all parts of your journey:

- Where you've been (part 1)
- Where you are (part 2)
- Where you want to go (part 3)

My goal is to help you realize that nothing is wasted. Where you are today is the very place you're supposed to be . . . in fact, *This Must Be the Place*.

* I hope you're slow clapping at this point because I yelled that last sentence!

..... **Following Your Breadcrumbs**

If you're like me, chances are that you've found your identity in many roles outside of God's child. I remember when I got the results from a genetics test that told me all sorts of quirky things, one being that I was built as a "power athlete." Go ahead and laugh (my friends who are true athletes sure do!), but I did always wonder why I could catch a diaper thrown across the room easily, or why I could beat everyone at cornhole without any practice. (TRY ME . . . I will crush you!) Growing up, though, I was told I wasn't good at sports because I was super short, didn't have the money to start sports early, and had a hard time paying attention. So I stopped trying and started believing I'm no good. My genetics say otherwise! Sometimes that's how we walk around too. God says we are made uniquely and wildly loved and accepted, but we walk around wondering who we are and if we have a place at the table.

Can you list all the labels placed on you in your life (Intentional Mother, Good Wife, Mediocre Sister, World's Okayest Friend, Thoughtful Neighbor, Best Jazzerciser) to see the areas where you've found approval, accolades, or even hurtful mislabels?

Which one most defines who you are and why? Which ones remind you of your identity in Christ and which ones pull you away from that? Ask God to meet you in these places and transform how you see yourself so your view takes on his lens.



PART 1

Where You've Been

one

My First Kickstarter

Really, if you want to know who funded my first Kickstarter campaign, it was Mrs. Yollands (that's *Yawlllllands* with a thick Texas accent), who lived catty-corner from our pink house on Monroe Street. She wore a green, belted jumpsuit and had short white hair. Her house smelled like stale smoke, mothballs, canned soup, and hairspray. Perhaps she was lonely, because she always let me come inside to peddle my worn plastic sack of rocks.

I would plop down on her itchy, blue floral chair and the smoke would exude from the cushion like I was the character Pigpen on *Peanuts*. It would have been endearing, except I had terrible allergies, so my eyes puffed up, and I sneezed aggressively. I would talk with her for hours and hours. Well, probably more like ten minutes, but those minutes were very long. The only thing that kept me in that chair was the yellow candy dish full of Red Hots and the thrill of a sale I was about to make. While she told me stories about her dog (which I'm not sure was alive), I zoned out and studied her glass hutch full of porcelain cat treasures. As a matter of fact, she told me the same dog stories over and over and never remembered my name, just that I was one of the many offspring from across the street. In hindsight, she

might have had some dementia—which is probably why I kept selling her rocks from her own yard and she kept buying them. For what it's worth, I did pick the prettiest ones. Sometimes people just need you to curate what's right in front of their faces so they see the value. Even if, as a safety precaution, you should not have gone into her house and should have reported to your parents that the dog never moved.

As the seasons progressed, I also sold seeds to her and a couple other neighbors. Zinnia seeds from Mr. Baggott's backyard, four houses down. He was a hermit who never came out of his house. We would peek into the windows to see if we could catch a glimpse of the myth and the legend, but I never saw him. His yard was ripe with business "opportunity." I wonder why he didn't yell at us to stop picking the black seeds off the stems. He certainly couldn't have enjoyed the muddy mess we tracked through his yard, bringing it into our yard and eventually landing it in our house, throwing Mother into a tantrum. I think this was why my mother, with a baby on her hip, locked the doors and threw sandwiches to us out the side window and onto the trampoline. "Have a picnic!" she'd yell. And we were thrilled.

My mother had six children at the time (more would come later), four of which were in diapers, and was often in a blur of exhaustion. So we played outside for hours and hours without coming home until dark. Not that I gave her much consideration, I just knew she was always inside cooking beans or changing diapers or cleaning up some mess. Mom was both intensely familiar and deeply mysterious to me as a child. She could have been knitting sweaters made of cat hair or making a spaceship so she could escape our small town for all I knew.*

* I would sometimes run into the bathroom and see toilet paper with black smudges on it in the toilet. How strange that Mother has black boogers. Confused, I wondered how it got there—I tried to solve the riddle off and on for years. After throwing my own mascara-laden tissue in the toilet during my first year of motherhood, it hit me. Like me, she was crying; she was tired of making ends meet, and I, in the joys of childhood, had no idea how tight things were.

I had plenty of freedom to do mostly whatever I wanted, within reason. While other children wrestled on the trampoline or played hide and seek, I was on a mission of hustling for a goal. At the corner store was a glass case of all things random—jewelry, baseball cards, and the shining Mecca of all my ten-year-old dreams: New Kids on the Block trading cards. Oh, the glory of Jonathan, Joey, Jordan, Danny, and Donnie! I had listened to them in my room on the brown shag carpet for hours, lying close to the speakers, staring at the popcorn ceiling, and memorizing the words.

Obviously if they knew me—poor, stringy haired, garage-sale-clothes-wearing, rock-selling gal—they would want to spend time with me. What a catch. But as I couldn't afford to go to a concert, nor would my mother allow me to go see anyone else but Amy Grant, the trading cards would suffice. (In truth, my parents also let me see The Power Team. How was I not scarred for life when they lay on a bed of nails and someone hammered a cinder block on their chests “for the Lord”?) The thing about collections is that they're never ending; you always need more. And the thing about being poor is that your parents never give you money and you never ask for it anyway because it isn't there. So each week, I set out to earn more and more by swindling all my neighbors. I would need two dollars each week or so to get a new set of five cards, and there were four sets, so if you do the math—I would need like \$800,000 in cash.

So that's where you would find me: building relationships living room to living room. First with Mrs. Yollands, then over to Melba, who was hard of hearing, then with Caroline next door. Caroline was always good for a pity sale even though she already had a garden full of rocks and zinnias. She knew I was hustling so, when her family went out of town for the weekend, she asked me to watch their bird. I was thrilled to have another stream of income and gladly accepted.

The problem was that I also had a beloved cat that followed me as I went door to door. Truth be told, I don't know why the cat and I made fast friends, but we had a strong connection after another family decided to give her away on account of allergies. I also had terrible

allergies and a nose full of snot to prove it. The cat was brindled and silky and moody, and her name was Dollface. Coincidentally, she was not anything like a doll. That's probably why she was given away.

This cat was more like a gangster walking the streets on the prowl. Aside from following me around, she was very independent, very scrappy. Once I watched her get hit by a car. She jumped up and ran up a tree with blood coming from her nose. I yelled for my mother to call 911 while I sat below the tree. Tears running down my face, I hollered for Dollface to come down. She wouldn't. Sweating, hair matted to my face, I wondered if she had died up there and why the fire department never came. Later in the cool of the day, she climbed down the giant tree and came home with me. When I walked in the door, my mother exclaimed, "That cat will never die!" And that is true; my love kept that cat alive for too long. She stayed with me through a lot of heartache as a child and a lot of fearful nights.

To me, she was a sweet animal fixture on my chest while I slept who continued to lovingly give me terrible allergies that we didn't have medicine to fix. In the morning she would lick my eyes open and gently pat my face to wake me (even though she had claws). I knocked food off the table "accidentally" for her and snuck milk for her at night. When I was seven or so, with a very creative imagination, I pretended to be a cat with her for about a year and wouldn't break character. To the point where I napped on the porch and drank water from a bowl that my mother set down with an eye roll and a sigh. I loved when the mailman stepped over me while I was catnapping. I would meow at him as he placed the mail in the door slot, to which he would reply, "Oh, my. They must have gotten a new cat!"

What I'm getting at is that while I was lost in the imaginary cat world, Dollface was an actual cat who liked to eat mice and apparently also birds. She followed me to Caroline's house where I was bird-sitting, saw a delicious prize, somehow opened the cage (that I probably didn't shut), and promptly ate the bird, leaving a wing and some feathers for show when I went to check on it that night. Through tears I came up with a plan to break the news to

my neighbors with a gentle buffer: I would forgo the New Kids on the Block trading cards and, instead, buy a new bird. I simply had to sell more seeds, hustle harder, and never again agree to watch something my cat would eat. It was a small setback in my summer goals. I gathered all the neighbor kids and told them the vision: we needed to collect more seeds and expand the territory to the next block to get a new bird . . . even though it was my fault and they had no skin in the game.

Despite the setbacks, I did end up making enough money to buy all of the trading cards that summer. The saddest part of the whole deal was that in a moment of distraction, I laid the cards on our 1980s hand-me-down waterbed. My brothers jumped on the bed, and gentle vinyl waves pushed the cards to the sides, lodging them into the crevices. I came back and swore I had set them right there! Naturally, for weeks I blamed my brothers for stealing my collection. That is, until the bed sprung a leak and deflated (oh, the perils of sleeping on water!). We found the cards soaked and mangled as we threw the giant bed in dumpster hell where it belonged, along with the moldy New Kids on the Block. Two huge losses in one day: one in size, the other in the form of my hard-earned money.

While this story isn't a real heartwarmer of triumph, it was the first time I had a goal and accomplished something without the help of my parents. I made something out of nothing, and I was proud of it. There was something special about earning money outside of a chore. I learned money doesn't always come from parents, birthdays, or the luck of a dime on the sidewalk. My gift was the joy of the neighborhood hustle, building relationships, and selling. And it was one obscure woman across a brick roadway on Monroe Street who kept buying my rocks. Long gone as she is, her voice still talks to the little girl living inside of me: "Come in. Tell me more! How much for that one?"

For many years, I had often thought what a strange kid I was. But there came a time in my career when I wondered why I loved selling stuff so much. What was the thrill of it? Why am I like this? Did God

make people to sell? I could make a video about a spray cleaner set to a medley of gangster rap while I shuffled with delicious mom moves across the kitchen go viral. I could motivate a room full of women by telling vulnerable stories about myself and how God still loves me and still chooses to use me. I felt guilty for enjoying my career in sales and leadership. It's just not what women do. Especially good Christian women. But God didn't make me like this on accident. I was not defective material that somehow didn't get the right wiring. Accepting and embracing my real identity frees me to let God do work in others and in me. If I don't have to be the Holy Spirit for you, that frees me up to focus on my own work with the Lord. I can stop judging everyone else. How freeing to look at where God is leading me and has been leading me.

We're about to go on one of those terrifying, but fun, twisty-turny water park slides, so I hope you'll join me as we look at where God has been in your past, where he's with you today, and where you're going as you dream for the future.

*When I look back,
I see that God was
leaving breadcrumbs
for me: "I made you to
do this! Run with it!"*

When I look back, I see that God was leaving breadcrumbs for me: "I made you to do this! Run with it!" Since I stopped fighting it, there has been such joy in living in my design, running freely in the gifts my good Father gave just for me. By the way, I have a few really sparkly rocks in my front yard if you'd like to get first dibs!

..... **Following Your Breadcrumbs**

Too many of us question our gifts and our longings. It may be because we've been told they don't fit in the proper mold, or someone thinks we should be different, or we've been wanting others' gifts

for so long that we've forgotten how to see worth in our own. Let me explain.

My husband is as blind as a bat. I remember trying to get a prescription for him at Costco, and they had to refer him to a specialist. That's how bad his eyes were! Several years into our marriage, his parents gave him Lasik surgery for a birthday present. After the surgery, I was amazed. I was used to him not seeing so clearly. One morning, he was looking at me lovingly—I thought. But it turned out he had found a really wiry chin hair. "Wow, babe! We both have beards!" We died laughing.

When he could finally see properly, he noticed so many more details that he had never seen clearly before.

That's what I'm here to do for you: give you a new pair of glasses to put on. When I have eternal glasses on, I am quick to see everything in my life more clearly. I don't take on false identities that hinder me from doing the work I am made to do here on this earth. I can immediately see where I've been distracted from my true purpose and gotten off track. I can see the very specific events in my life that God has used to shape me. I can see the path behind me and the way ahead. It's time to reorient your thinking and reassess the value of what you have diminished for far too long.

Look back to when you were about eight to ten years old because that's when you were likely your truest self and showed pure intentions. I may have been selling rocks, but you may have been painting, teaching the neighbor kids, or operating on your stuffed animals or siblings. Maybe you were on adventures by the creek or collecting frogs and spiders. Whatever you were doing then holds clues for today. Maybe it is in rocks and seeds, free to everyone else. But everyone else, even children, are pursuing what God made them to do, too, if you simply watch. Watch them with delight: the performers, the builders, the lemonade stands, the fashion shows, the sword wielders.

My treasure map word:
ENTREPRENEUR



When you were a child, what did you spend time on and really enjoy?

Do you still spend time on any of those things as an adult?