

slow
growth
equals
strong
roots

*finding grace, freedom, and purpose
in an overachieving world*

MARY MARANTZ

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MARY MARANTZ



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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TO JUSTIN,
*who was the first one
to ever tell me
slow growth equals strong roots.*

And TO KIM,
*who made me believe in the power
of standing firm
in our place on the shore.*

THANK YOU BOTH
*for being the anchors
in my high-wire act
of a life.*

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Slow growth equals strong roots.

Slow



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THE AUTHOR

THIS IS ULTIMATELY a book about breaking free from achieving for your worth.

But what I want you to know right off the bat, is that these words are not being handed down to you from some mountaintop moment bathed in golden light. One where I have all the answers and pretend to have never again struggled with comparison or feeling like not enough of something to be invited into most rooms.

This book was written from the trenches.

It was birthed from a place of deep exhaustion and daily desperation. A feeling that a life spent chasing the next dopamine hit of a gold-star high, only to feel more empty with every checkmark that seemed to numb but never satisfy . . . was, in fact, no kind of life at all. These words are an

NOTE

*read this
before you turn
the next page . . .*

anthology and a twisting road map. A collective charted course of a grown woman just trying to find her way to freedom.

When I wrote my first book, *Dirt*, I called it a love letter to The Girl in the Trailer. In so many ways, this book is a love letter to The Girl After the Trailer, the woman I affectionately call “The Most Put-Together Woman in the Room.” She has run so hard for so long trying to get that littlest version of herself to safety, that she doesn’t know how to stop. And in all this trying to outrun failure she has now built a life so beautiful on the outside, you would never guess the hard things she has had to overcome.

I want you to know that I get the irony of making a book like this so . . . well . . . *pretty* on

the outside. Between the pink and gold, the typography and beautiful pictures, in so many ways this book is the most put-together version of itself.

That was on purpose.

This is the book I would have picked up five years ago when I was at the height of achieving for my worth. I would have been drawn to it for how it looked, how it fit into the beautiful life I was trying so hard to build. But my hope is that once I got home and opened it up, I would have been changed by the message inside. That is my hope for you too. That however this book found its way to you, all the pretty of these pages you now hold will pale in comparison to the beauty of what God does with these words in your heart.

As you go through, you will be introduced to different (yet somehow all the same) versions of *The Most Put-Together Woman in the Room*. These characters are the people we think we have to become in order to belong. You'll meet *The Woman Who Is Always Performing*, *The High-Wire Tightrope Walker*, *The Contortionist*, *The Masquerader*, and *The Illusionist in the Distance*.

What's interesting for you to know, though, is that the editorial images of these characters you now find in these pages are all photos that my husband Justin and I took over five years ago. We were starting to find ourselves in a place of burnout with our photography business, and we wanted to create something just for us. So we set up the ballerina shoot and a styled shoot in Venice with a few different looks that was a total dream come true. But then we came home from that trip and only edited up a few favorites and quickly posted them to Instagram. The ultimate in highlight reels. And that was it. Nothing else was ever done with those photos. They remained unpublished for years, just sitting and waiting for the decisive moment.

And then this book happened. And it suddenly felt like maybe God had a plan for these images all along, as all the different puzzle

pieces snapped into place for the story we were telling. Which brings me to the other interesting thing for you to know about these editorial images: every single one of them is of the same model—our friend Kathryn, who was kind enough to help us out. So when I say these characters you'll meet are different yet somehow all the same versions of The Most Put-Together Woman in the Room. . . I mean it, *literally*.

When I was talking to my friend and coach, Kim, about whether we were crazy to use such high-fashion, editorial images in a book about letting go of being perfect, she said something that stopped me in my tracks:

The very fact that you created these images five years ago when you were at the height of your achieving, is exactly why they are such a necessary photo narrative for this book. See, you just thought you were creating something pretty. At that time in your life, you thought *this*—being masked, always performing, staying on your toes, wearing all the pretty clothes—was how to be beautiful to the world. So you put together styled shoots of what you thought the world wanted to see. But at the very same time, you were reaching that breaking point of burn-out, that pain of being masked and always trying so hard to be perfect. And you see that in those photos—you *feel* it— that tension there of the woman who is always performing now trying to break free. That's what makes them so powerful. It's the fact that you didn't even know at the time just how much the woman in those photos was you.

What follows in these pages is a journey of unraveling, this coming undone to striving, achieving, and perfection in pursuit of grace, freedom, and purpose.

And it's for every woman who has grown weary of the performance. ■



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THE PRELUDE

AT A CERTAIN POINT, *you stop running.*

Breathless and at last exhausted, you double over at the pain of a lifetime spent proving. You've run so hard for so long, you've gone so far out into the world, only to keep finding yourself back at the beginning. You have spent a lifetime starting over, breaking loose to run free only to be taken captive again and again. This one truth always dragging, always clawing at your heels like the heavy chains you never asked to bear: no matter how hard you run, you can't outrun you.

So you crawl there for a while, panting through the pain, and then you curl up in surrender and rest your face on the cool, hard ground. Death to this old life you once knew. A mourning of what was lost before the thrill of hope takes flight. A dying of self to become a new thing—this time one with both roots and wings.

"God set me free, of me."

—THE BOOK *DIRT*

THE INCITING

OUR STORY BEGINS, as all great stories do, with our inciting incident.

The *inciting incident* is a darling in the literary tool belt amongst most writers both for setting in motion the telling of a powerful story . . . and also for occasionally sounding smart at cocktail parties. Trust me on this. If someone asks what you do for a living over passed champagne and miniature pigs in a blanket in the middle of some stranger-once-removed's living room, you could fumble out something like, "Words. I write words. Words are my friends. Occasionally people read them." But I assure you it sounds much more impressive if you can instead wax poetic about the moment something happens that divides our beloved protagonist's life into *Before*

INCIDENT

and *After*. My friend Hannah Brencher calls that moment a Sharpie mark slashing through the calendar.

We are all just one Sharpie mark away from having our lives forever divided in two.

But if you're looking for an official definition, which you probably are, it would go something like this: "The inciting incident is an episode, plot point or event that hooks the reader into the story. This particular moment is when an event thrusts the protagonist into the main action" of the narrative arc,* one which hopefully will leave her utterly and forever changed by the end.

We are standing on the precipice of our *After*.

*"Inciting Incident: Definition, Tips, and Examples," Now Novel, <https://www.nownovel.com/blog/inciting-incident/>.

It is this moment when we decide we have reached the end of something. We have reached the end of all this striving. All this hustling. All this achieving for our worth. We keep hoping against hope that the next gold star will finally be the one to fill this giant hole we've had in our hearts for as long as we can remember. Except if third grade taught us anything, it's that even a whole sheet full of gold stars is still razor thin when you turn it to the side. Trying to fill that hole in your heart would take nothing short of a *blizzard* of gilded five-prong snowflakes. And you are a person who has grown weary of living in the storm.

You are dust. You are embers. You are walking around so bone-tired and world-wearied, it's like one big raw nerve ending screaming out every time someone carelessly bumps into you. You are burned-out, there is no question. But what you've realized more than anything is that the burn didn't make you any harder on the outside like you thought it would, this charred, petrified block of wood made impenetrable by walking through the fire.

Instead you have been reduced to this brittle, fragile, ashes-to-ashes version of yourself. You have run so far for so long, trying to achieve your way into worth, that you are completely spent. Consumed. Exhausted. Finished. You're doing everything you can to hold it all together, but every day you're out there these little pieces of you keep flying away. Pieces you know you can never get back. They float away, never once turning around to give any indication that they are going



*OUR INCITING INCIDENT IS THIS:
“BREATHLESS AND AT LAST
EXHAUSTED.”*

to miss you half as much as you already miss them. It's gotten to where you feel like at the slightest push, the slightest gentle breeze, you might just disappear altogether.

Dust on the wind.

Our inciting incident is this: "Breathless and *at last exhausted*."

We don't get to our Sharpie-mark moment unless you are starting to hit that point where you have finally had enough. Until you are ready to trade all this striving, achieving, and performing, caught in an endless pursuit of gold stars and outward success. Until you are finally starting to realize that maybe there is no amount of more that will ever keep you from feeling less-than.

Are you right in the middle of your own doubled-over-at-the-pain-of-a-lifetime-spent-proving moment? Do you wish for nothing more than to curl up in surrender and rest your face on the cool, hard ground? Have you tired yourself out yet only to end up back where you started? Have you gone hard enough and long enough that you are *at last* exhausted?

Are you ready to stop all this running from your own story yet?

Good. Now the real work can begin. ■

breaking
GRO

PART I

UNIND

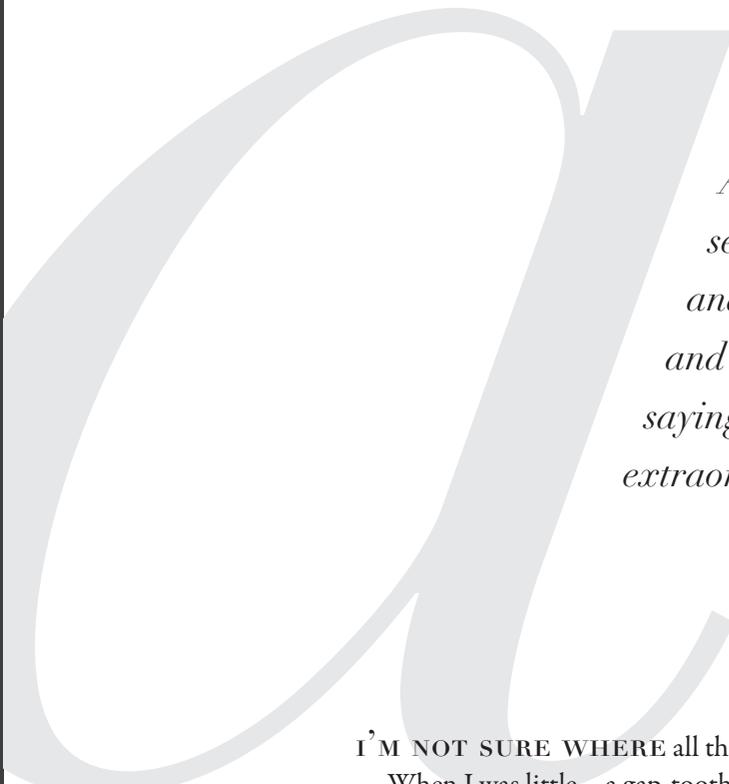
this time we have is fleeting

*the antidote to more is noticing all
we already have*

NO

1

WALK AMONG
THE FIREFLIES



*And amazement
seized them all,
and they glorified God
and were filled with awe,
saying, “We have seen
extraordinary things today.”*

LUKE 5:26

I’M NOT SURE WHERE all the fireflies have gone.

When I was little—a gap-toothed, skinned-knees mess of curly brown hair—growing up this wild thing, untamed, on the top of Fenwick Mountain, there was no shortage of fireflies. *Lightning bugs*, as we used to call them. On those hottest July nights when the tall pines on the edge of our neighbor’s yard blurred and bled into one another—this twisted tangle of stark, bare arms, these puppet masters pulling all the strings and casting shadows of our most-feared demons against the deep blue fade of twilight giving way to the darkness—our whole world could be seen by the light of a million fireflies. Like a fluorescent night-light protecting us from all the monsters hiding in the shadows. An Appalachian allegory of the cave, lighting up

these mere reflections of the versions of ourselves we might one day become.

We would sit like that for hours—leaning back and propped up on the palms of our as-yet unscarred hands, the blades of thick, freshly cut crabgrass stabbing at the backs of our knees—telling ghost stories against the silhouette of imagined apparitions that were never really there. A million points of light blinking in and out of our existence. As if one day we might just disappear right alongside them.

I'm forty as I write this. And for years I've watched the summers pass without the slightest glimpse of that electric neon yellow burning up the night sky. Where there used to be a million miracles, now it can be hard to see even one.

Growing up tends to do that to us.

Somewhere among the mortgage payments and stainless-steel appliances, the retirement funds and the endless piles of laundry, we lose that wonder for a life we have spent a lifetime dreaming of. I used to sit with a blue spiral-bound notebook outside the trailer where I grew up in West Virginia, drawing sketches and dreaming of the *real* house I would one day have. Now all I'm tempted to see is a kitchen that needs updating, perpetually dirty dishes, and a boiler in the basement



*BECOMING AN ADULT TENDS TO
PUT BLINDERS ON US. IT MAKES US
FORGET TO SEE THE THINGS RIGHT
IN FRONT OF US THAT USED TO
GIVE US WONDER.*

that—if all its coughs and sputterings are any indication—we’re going to need to replace pretty soon.

We lose ourselves in our obligations and color-coded to-do lists. We feel tired all the time. We drink more wine than maybe we should. Food has started to lose all its flavor. And we just let the episodes run on the latest binge-worthy television show, one after another after another, until all the plotlines blur. We’re numb. We’re checked out of our own lives.

And we’re not even sure we would recognize that wild-thing, untamed version of ourselves if she came and sat down on the couch beside us with her skinned knees and tangled hair, looked us right in our exhausted eyes that are mirror reflections of her own, and asked the question we’ve been asking ourselves for far too long now:

“What happened to you?”

I once heard a photographer named Will Jacks say, “Be willing to walk among the fireflies.” When he said that, I took it to mean be willing to slow down, be willing to walk in wonder, be willing to see the smallest things right in front of you as the miracles they really are.

Becoming an adult tends to put blinders on us. It makes us forget to see the things right in front of us that used to give us wonder. The things that used to give us pause.

And it got me thinking: what if fireflies cease to exist in equal and opposite proportion to the amount of time you spend noticing them? It reminds me of Julia Roberts with her pixie cut and fairy wings in *Hook*, telling all the children to clap if they believe. But never once letting on just how much other people’s clapping was a lifeline for her.

Without it, she didn’t know how to breathe.

For years I wasn’t sure where all the fireflies in my life had gone.

But then two summers ago, in the year of our Lord 2020, when the world was burning down all around us, for the first time in a long time . . . the fireflies returned. The first time it happened we were sitting a



It takes a radical act of

COURAGE

to see the miracle in the mundane.

socially distant six feet apart on our front porch with our friends Erin and Peter. And we all had to blink our eyes against the night sky to believe what we were seeing.

Just like that, in the height of darkness . . . the light returned.

I don't know why the fireflies chose to come back in a year that was so hard. If I were them, I think I would have just stayed floating safely on warm currents of air to far-off places like Neverland or maybe Bora Bora, sailing off in a deep blue sea of dreams. Maybe they returned because the world got quiet enough that it finally felt safe for wonder to re-emerge. Maybe they were like the dolphins that supposedly were swimming in the Venice canals because the dust had settled and the water had become clear again. Or maybe, just maybe, it's because we were all slowed down enough to begin this act of *noticing* again.

Noticing the smallest things right in front of us for the wonder and the miracle that they really are.

It takes a radical act of courage to see beauty among the broken. But it is no less radical or courageous to witness the miracle among the mundane.

Perhaps this is the antidote to the problem of more: it's noticing the magic and enough-ness of all that we already have.

So we begin this good work right here. ■

SLOW GROWTH PRAYER

GOD,

I don't want to wake up one day and realize I've sleepwalked through my entire life.

I don't want to spend another day pretending like every little piece of this life in front of me is anything less than extraordinary.

This blue planet floating through space, spinning wildly on its axis.

7.8 billion humans.

And somehow you still see fit to bring me my people.

You care enough to give me a house and sunsets, the smell of salt air, a song that can bring me right back to my childhood, fluffy dogs and cold tangerines.

I want to see every good gift from above for the miracle it really is.

Wake me up, God.

Help me to not miss it.

Oh, how I am so afraid I'm missing it.

AMEN.



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