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WITH

JULIE LYLES CARR

When God Rescripts Your Life

Seeing Value, Beauty, and Purpose When Life Is Interrupted
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Jaci Velasquez with Julie Lyles Carr
“Mom,” he says, “when I grow up, I’m going to have a house with eight bedrooms. And it’s going to have six beds for my twelve kids. And there will be a bedroom for me and Zealand. And it’s going to have a bed for my wife and for his wife. And we’re going to all live together.”

That’s what my baby, my Søren, tells me.

He’s just fourteen and a half months younger than his older brother. And let me tell you, having two babies just a little over a year apart? It does something to a girl’s body. I remember trying to get down the aisle of a plane to get to a singing date when I was just several weeks away from having Søren. Even though I was still far enough away from having him that my doctor was in support of this trip and there was no reason for me not to fly, my, um, ahem, silhouette was a bit more dramatic than your usual gal in this stage of pregnancy. For someone who’s always been considered petite, it was a reality check. My tummy and hips were banging into airline seats as I tried to maneuver down the aisle. People were looking at me with fascination and horror, as I’m sure they figured they would be witnessing a live birth in the air after the coffee and beverage service was over. My body weight almost doubled in that pregnancy with Søren. As big as I was, I knew he’d be a big baby.

What I didn’t know was how big his heart would be. His heart for his older brother.

I’m the baby of my complicated family. I’ve got two older brothers from my mom’s first marriage. I’ve got a brother and a couple of sisters from my dad’s side. I’m
the only child of my parents’ marriage to each other, so I have an interesting rung on the birth order ladder, baby and only, but not, in a modern family kind of way. My husband, Nic, is also the baby of his family and, since he’s seven years younger than his older brother, he gets a bit of that whole “only child” dynamic too. His older brother seemed to live in a world Nic really didn’t share when they were kids, given the age difference.

I know people who swear by the whole birth order thing, believing it has powerfully shaped their personality and motives. I know people who think it hasn’t had that big an impact on them. What is true for me is that I loved being the baby sister, the baby girl. It made me feel special in a perplexing family dynamic. It gave me a sense of place in a huge extended family. (My dad is the middle child in a family of ten kids and my mom is the middle child of seven.) There were things about that role that I saw as part of myself.

When Søren came along, he was the baby of the family, the younger reflection of his older brother. I envisioned a day when Zealand would teach him guy stuff, when Zealand would take Søren under his wing and teach him the ropes on getting math homework done, calling a cute girl from school, or learning how to shave. Big brother to little brother stuff. But those roles got far more complicated as the boys grew.

Søren starting talking first, putting together more complex words and sentences. He interacted more. From an earlier age, he was easygoing and outgoing, engaging people with all the ease of a natural politician. His social skills contrasted with Zealand’s more reserved approach to people and new situations.

Because the boys were so close in age, people understandably thought they were twins. People were always comparing them in size, height, and verbal skills. For a long season when they were both still little, in those toddler phases, we just thought Søren was ahead of the curve
because he had the benefit of an older sibling. And a lot of that was true. He was always watching what Zealand was doing. But it was Søren hitting developmental milestones in contrast to Zealand’s unique spin on hitting “typical” marks.

Maybe it’s because Nic and I so relished our roles as the babies of our families of origin. Maybe it’s because we both have described who we are by saying, “Well, I’m the baby of the family,” as if that explains certain things about our personalities and approaches to life. Or maybe it’s because Søren really is the baby of our family unit, the second cut on the parenting album after we got our parenting feet wet with Zealand.

We wanted Søren to fully be able to own that role as the baby. But God had a different role for him.

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It sounded like a crazy idea. I had a career built on being on the radio. As in, I was a recording artist being played on the radio. Not talking on the radio about other people’s music. And now these people were talking to me about being a radio disc jockey?

I was clear about my role as a singer. I understood where I fit into that equation, what was required, who I was in my role as a musician. But when I added the role of mom to musician, new responsibilities and desires popped up. No more late, late nights writing, recording, and generally living a night owl creative’s lifestyle. Remember, I had this deep need to provide stability and daily routines for my kids. So being constantly on the road and chasing lyrics until the wee hours, well, that was going to have to change.

I’d been making a few call-ins for our Christian music station in Nashville over the years. It was fun to interact with the morning show personalities, and I found that my interviews with stations across the country had given me a feel for how to chat it up on
air, how to keep my thoughts within time segments. And I really loved keeping up on current
trends and conversations, which also worked well when I would be a guest on the show.

But I was still really surprised when the general manager for the station came to me with
an idea I’d never considered. In a series of changes to the station, he asked if I would be
interested in becoming part of a new morning team for the station. It was called The Family
Friendly Morning Show and it would go to over one hundred stations across the country. I’d
stepped in to guest host for a few months, but this was new territory, the idea of being a full-time
radio host. It was a role that I hadn’t sought and hadn’t prepared for, but one for which God had
been preparing me.

The boys were still in those baby and toddler phases and I wanted to be home with them
as much as possible as their primary caregiver, with as much consistency as I could, while still
staying in the music and ministry arena.

Now, you may be thinking, how does being a radio personality on a successful morning
show fit with that goal of creating a predictable home life? Fair question. But here’s the deal: If
you’re getting up at four in the morning five days a week, lots of things in your life have to line
up. At least if you want to be able to form complete sentences while you’re on the air. And
remember, this format of radio is live, so it’s not like you can go back and edit whatever jumbled
jargon you sling around due to a late night before. It’s all out there in real time.

So, in praying about and ultimately taking on this new role, it meant a few changes. It
meant that we had to create and stick to a strong routine to make sure I was getting good sleep
before sliding behind the mic early in the morning. It meant that we could lean into more steady
financial planning since this role was a regular gig instead of the feast and famine of the music
industry. For the first time in my life, I found myself waking up every day, commuting to the
station around 4 a.m., prepping for the show, sitting behind the mic for four hours with my cohost Doug Griffin, wrapping up a few details, then heading back to the house, arriving home just a little bit after the boys had finished breakfast. Routine. Five days a week.

*The Family Friendly Morning Show* would go on to be aired on over one hundred radio stations across the country with 1.5 million listeners. It was a career role I never imagined. Sure, there were learning curves and bedtimes that didn’t get observed and days that went a little longer at the station. But for the most part, this new role I was walking out, it met my family’s needs in a way I couldn’t have orchestrated on my own.

I did face some criticism from those who thought I was selling my music short. I was no longer able to take every singing date that came my way. The new job also changed how often I was able to record. I’m sure there were those who interpreted my new role as a relinquishment of my old one—as the girl with hits on the radio giving that up to become the girl talking about other people’s records. It was a time of stretching, of letting go of certain ways I saw myself while adapting to a new persona, how other people saw me.

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You’ve got roles you were born into. You’ve got your position in your family of birth. You’ve got the role your parents put on you, your role in the family dynamics—the dutiful daughter, the rebel, the comedian of the family, whatever that is for you. You’ve got the roles you’ve sought for yourself. Working girl, stay-at-home mom, volunteer, girlfriend, lover, friend. You’ve got the role you’re known for in your community—the
gal who’s always positive or the one who can get the best stuff for the silent auction or maybe you’re the go-getter who’s willing to volunteer for anything.

But as much as I have often thought of roles as something permanent, something fixed by which I can define and understand myself, most roles have this little feature built into them: They change. They get repurposed. Sometimes we embrace the change or the different definition. Sometimes we don’t.

Maybe you never pictured yourself in the role of single mom. Or stay-at-home mom. Or working mom? (Can we talk about that for a minute? All moms are working. Can I get an amen?) Or single? Or single again? Or wife of an addict? And when that change in role comes, that place that you never saw yourself in, what then? How do we understand ourselves in the wake of our role not looking like what we thought it would? How do we square it up into the angles that we thought made up the measure of us?

It’s fascinating to read about the many people in God’s Word who found themselves in roles they had never pictured themselves in. I’m pretty sure Noah, living landlocked in the middle of a continent, never saw himself as a master shipbuilder. Then there was Gideon, doing his best to live as a pacifist, who found himself at the front of a military unit, getting ready to take on Israel’s most oppressive enemy. And what about Mary? Talk about a role reversal, from a virginal good girl to the gossipy topic of every kaffeeklatsch in the county, what with that whole teen pregnancy issue and all. And while we’re on the topic of Mary, let’s talk about her kid, Jesus. He was with God, part of God, standing outside of time and then boom! squalling baby, potty-training toddler, synagogue-trolling twelve-year-old, oldest brother, perpetual single guy, controversial ex-carpenter, vilified social change advocate. And finally, receiver of capital punishment.
Yeah. Jesus gets the whole repurposing of role thing. I’m going to guess. Paul reminded the early Christians at Philippi that being humble is the most important component of any role we are given. He reminded them that Jesus was willing to lay aside the glories he had in his identity as God and allow his role to become that of a slave. The citizens of Philippi were generally wealthy. They lived in a small but important region. And the people Paul encountered there allowed their faith in Jesus to repurpose their roles in the community. Paul wrote in his letter to their church:

Your attitude should be the kind that was shown us by Jesus Christ, who, though he was God, did not demand and cling to his rights as God, but laid aside his mighty power and glory, taking the disguise of a slave and becoming like men. And he humbled himself even further, going so far as actually to die a criminal’s death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5–8 TLB)

Lydia was a wealthy business woman who lived in Philippi. She had made a nice little business for herself selling purple fabric, which was a major fashion statement at the time, like our designer labels of today. People who could afford to wear purple clothing were seen as well-off, and they made Lydia well-off as her purple cloth was more and more in demand. She met Paul and Silas and was drawn to Paul’s message about Jesus. Ultimately, she and all of her household were baptized. Her home became a place of refuge for Paul and Silas after they were miraculously released from prison, and her home also became the place where the new church met in the area. A lot of historians think that she helped financially support much of the mission work of Paul and Silas as a result of her belief in Jesus.
I have to think that she was inspired by Jesus’ willingness to let God shape his role. Let’s face it: it looks like she was living the good life in Philippi. A great product, a thriving business, happy clients. She could have kept coasting on that for a long time, without the hassle of having missionaries in her house, without the hassle of hosting church services, without the hassle of sharing her bank account. But God had other ideas. And now, all these centuries later, we read about Lydia, the fabric business magnate who allowed her role to be repurposed and became a major player in the spread of Christianity. All because she was willing to take on a new role.

That thing you were good at and that role you were comfortable in. That title that you loved having in front of your name and the expectation you had that that role would continue forward, a definition of who you are. But then, things shift.

Sometimes it’s because a spouse decides to walk out the door. Or the boss shows you the door. Or your aging parent needs you and you set aside that job you love to be there for them.

Or sometimes, you’ve been trying to claim a role. You’ve put in the work. You’ve dreamed big. You’ve made the right connections, showed up early, stayed late. But that role isn’t rolling out for you. And now you’re having to face that, perhaps, that role wasn’t meant for you. So now what?

Our roles are not static, even though we often think of them that way. We go from our parents’ homes to our first apartments. We go from that intern position at the job to manager. We go from being single to being someone’s girlfriend to being someone’s fiancée to being someone’s wife. We go from being someone’s favorite aunt to being someone’s mama. When these gradual or expected roles shift in expected ways, we don’t really feel the sting in their transition.
But when our roles get reversed, when the script gets flipped, when things are required of us that we didn’t see coming and feel far outside of what we thought was our job description, it can feel unfair.

It’s wanting things to be fair, for things to be predictable, that trips me up when it comes to this whole lane of being open to the role God has for me. For what he has for my boys. But I’m learning. I’m learning to smile with the roll of the roles. And part of how God is teaching me that, part of how he is showing me the rescript of my life, is through Søren’s smiles. Søren smiles at the role he has, he smiles at his brother, and he smiles at his real life, his actual life, not saving a grin for some distant shore.

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We were just going to take Søren on an upcoming spring tour. We were doing it to give him a break, to give him special attention. We were worried that he might be feeling the burden of his loyalty to Zealand. We worried that he wasn’t getting to experience being the baby of the family. So we pulled together all the plans and had figured out a great solution for Zealand to stay in Nashville. We presented all this to Søren with a sort of “ta da!” kind of jazz hands.

His response was not what we expected. His usual smile gave way to a quivering lip. And then his eyes welled with tears.

“I can’t live a day without my brother!” he wailed.

Huh?

We tried to explain that this would be a time we could focus on just him, that it could be a special time just for him and his daddy and me. But Søren wasn’t having it. At all.
So we ended up taking both boys in a very crowded Chevy Sprinter filled to the gills with our band and team because Søren couldn’t go a day without his brother. Honestly, Zealand probably would have been just as happy staying home with the spoiling grandparents—he actually might have been happier, given that he could have stayed on his preferred routine. But Søren wouldn’t have been as happy without Zealand.

Søren’s is the voice that drifts out. It drifts out in advocacy, in inclusion for his brother. With Zealand along to experience life on the road, Søren smiles.

Were we paying attention, not wanting Søren to feel overburdened or overly responsible? Of course. But here’s one of the mysteries and beauties of wearing your repurposed role well: it makes a more complete you.

In the wake of the dramatic diagnosis of autism for Zealand, it could’ve been easy to miss. Yes, Søren is protective and amazing with his big brother. But I was reminded recently that Zealand also invests in his relationship with his little brother. And it makes Søren more complete.

I was recently flipping back through some old videos of the boys on my phone. I smiled at the birthday cake candle-blowing archives, found myself stunned at how much taller they are than some footage from just a few months ago. I kept scrolling back and went to those videos that just open up all kinds of mama feels, those little fragments from when they were toddlers.

Mamas, take video. Keep it. Upload it to lots of places. Trust me on this.

And there it was, this clip. Søren at about nineteen months old, smiling a grin as big as Christmas. Zealand, two and a half years old, stomping around in front of his baby brother and then jumping at him, pretending to scare him. In this little glimpse of the past, Søren giggles and
cackles at each attempt of Zealand’s. And as he laughs, he says over and over in his squeaky little toddler voice, “Happy! Happy!”

Søren isn’t really all that interested in what the typical role of the baby of the family is. He’s living and is happy in the tailored role of the baby of this family. And in this family, that makes him the baby brother of big brother Zealand. And God is customizing that role just for him and equipping him for it.

Søren laughs.

Søren cares.

Søren advocates.

Søren protects.

Søren dreams.

Søren smiles.

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What is a role?

I did a little deep dive into that word role, wanting to understand where it comes from. Turns out it’s something cool. Really cool. The word role comes from the word roll. Not like a crescent roll, though I am a fan of those. Roll like how they used to carry parchment or paper, a writing surface that was rolled up. It’s how they used to carry important documents, scripts, and papers of identification. A roll would be the script for an actor, the document that would give the actor his lines. It’s the same word you find in the word scroll, that written material that is rolled up. One of my favorite verses in the Bible, Psalm 139:16, says, “Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for

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me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (NIV). Be sure and check out book. In the original Hebrew it means “scroll.”

Whatever role God has you in, he provides the roll you need: the words, the wisdom, the inspiration. Even when you don’t feel prepared for the role. Even when the role doesn’t seem to fit. I started to find more and more verses that showed me the connection of role and roll. This verse kept jumping out at me: “I will give you the words I want you to say. I will cover you with my hands and protect you. I made the heavens and the earth” (Isa. 51:16 NCV). In other words (pun intended), God will provide the words for our scripts.

[[pull quote: Whatever role God has you in, he provides the roll you need: the words, the wisdom, the inspiration.]]

In Scripture, Solomon didn’t feel ready for the role he received. Technically, he wasn’t the one who should have received the throne after the passing of his father, King David. He wasn’t the oldest son whom the crown usually went to. He wasn’t even the second or the third or the fourth son. He had plenty of older siblings who were in line to take over the kingdom. And yet he found himself in the role of king. He told God, “I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?” (1 Kings 3:7–9 NKJV). In response to Solomon’s humble request, God gave him the roll to lead, the words and the script that led him to be considered the wisest king. God repurposed Solomon’s position from one of nineteen sons of King David into the son who would carry his father’s legacy as king.
Jesus also repurposed the roles of his disciples. He took a bunch of guys who had never had debate training and never been to Bible college. And he gave those guys the leading roles in the early church. He made them pioneers, this diverse group of people from various areas of the Holy Land, who had been leading different lives, some as commercial fisherman, one as a tax collector. And because they’d been following Jesus, it wasn’t long before they found themselves in all kinds of situations they never could have imagined. Jesus encouraged them and reminded them that he would provide the roll for the role: “You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you,” (Matt. 10:18–20 NKJV).

It’s funny that I would have such an idealism about my role as the baby of the family. Whereas most people consider the baby of the family to be the role that gets all the spoiling and all the extra attention, because of God’s plan, I became the breadwinner in the family. I became the one who was financially providing for my extended family for a period of time, as they put their lives on hold to help me with my recording and travel schedules through my teen years. It was a role reversal, to become the caregiver to those who had been my caregivers. So it should be no surprise that God would not be confined yet again in my life by giving Søren a “typical” role.

I was up at the school recently, right before the start of the school year. I was helping get some things ready. I was determined to be that Super Homeroom Mom, cape
fluttering in the wind. I’d brought the boys with me and they were at a table in the cafeteria within my line of sight, chatting quietly with each other, waiting for me to finish. One of their teachers, Mrs. Green, walked through the cafeteria and saw them there. "Boys, I need some helpers," she told them. "Could you help me put some books out in my classroom?" She caught my eye, tilting her head for permission, and I nodded back. The boys popped up, ready to take a break from all the sitting. They trailed after Mrs. Green, ready to show off their volunteer skills as the Sons of Super Homeroom Mom.

After a while, Mrs. Green returned to the cafeteria with them, mission accomplished. They took their seats back at the table, while Mrs. Green headed my way. She approached me with a wistful smile. "I’ve got to tell you about the boys, Jaci," she said.

"Were they a problem?" I asked.

"Not at all," she said. "Let me tell you what happened. I asked the boys to set books out on some tables at the back of my classroom, displaying them nicely so that my students would be sure to see them on the first day of school. I began placing stacks on the tables, and Zealand jumped right in, spreading them out across the tables. But then Søren followed behind and reorganized the books. He set them like I had described, artistically displaying them so that the pop-up books were opened to show the artwork inside, standing some books up, and straightening along the way. When we were finished, Søren motioned me aside and whispered, ‘Mrs. Green, sorry about that, about the books. I haven’t taught him how to do that yet.’"

Mrs. Green and I held gazes for a long moment, then looked back over at the boys who were sitting back at the cafeteria table. We looked back at each other, and Mrs. Green’s eyes filled with understanding and kindness.
I haven’t taught him how to do that yet. It was the first time Søren had most clearly identified his role in Zealand’s life, the one that exists and is more important than his birth order in the family. The role he was truly born to and equipped to carry out by God: the protective, compassionate, guide of a baby brother.

May we all learn to roll with the role.

FLIP THE SCRIPT

* What is a role you feel you were assigned in your family of origin?
* What is a role you “inherited”? That place where you had to step into the gap, fill the spot on the bench, even if it was for a position that you didn’t think fit you or didn’t align with your personal goals? What did you learn from that inheritance?
* Is there a role you’ve been hesitating to take on? Is it that manager position at work, the one that seems scary because of the responsibility that goes with it, and you struggle to see yourself in the role? Sometimes I’ve had a script running through my head that tells me I’m not educated enough, not experienced enough, not wise enough to take on a role that seems out of my reach. But so often I’ve come to realize that’s just been the enemy trying to keep me down. What step could you take today, this week, to explore taking an additional step toward a role you’re a little scared of?
* Is letting go of a role you’ve cherished hard for you, like needing to retire as Super Homeroom Mom because you’ve packed the last kid off to college and it’s time for a new generation of homeroom moms to make their run? If you’re in a season of transitioning away from a beloved season in your mom life, your work life, whatever that is for you, take some time to think through not what you feel like you are
losing, but what could be on the horizon. It’s so easy for us to get stuck in a time of transition and only look back at what was. What could be on your horizon? What interest have you had on the back burner for a while? What vision do you have of yourself, of who you want to be, in this new season of your life? What steps can you take today to begin walking toward that future?
Chapter 12

The Ultimate Purpose

You’d probably think I was something of a lunatic. That would be nothing new, believe me.

But if you and I could be sitting at my long white dining table, slurping on coffee and swapping stories, for me to tell you this one, I couldn’t do it from a seated position. I’d need to jump up and pace and wave my arms really big. It’s that kind of story.

And it’s probably the kind of story that can only be told if you’re still decorating the inside of your house like a city mouse but the outside of that house is set in the country.

And by country, I mean...country.

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Here’s where a lot of my stories like this one start: Nic was out of town.

It’s a thing with us. Some crazy crisis hits, and Nic is on a trip to sing or do mission work or whatever. I’m sure it’s all noble and needed, but what I know in the moment when this kind of deal hits is that Nic-Is-Out-Of-Town.

Which leaves me as the primary adult in charge. Which is terrifying.

But let me back up to the beginning of this story, which, yes, begins with Nic being out of town, but also marks this little chapter in my chicken career.

It was not something I ever expected to put on my resume. But here it is.

In addition to now being a chicken mom, I have also been a chicken day-care provider. Yes, I have been entrusted with the keeping and care of someone else’s chickens. The guy who helps keep our three acres mowed down to a respectable length
also owned chickens, but he was having some issues in his neighborhood, which was undecided on allowing chicken residents. He was waiting for a permit from his county office to allow his chickens to stay on his property, and so as to not continue to ruffle feathers (see what I did there?), he asked if his chickens could come stay with me for a bit, since my country mouse county has no issues with chicken residents. I told him that would be just fine, that his chickens were welcome to stay with me while he sorted out their county immigration status. He happily thanked me, and we made plans that he would drop off his chickens the next day.

My chicken career was expanding.

He showed up the next day with a couple of crates, ready to add his chicks to mine. But then, controversy struck. My plan had been for his girls to stay with mine in my big, fancy chicken coop. I wasn’t at all worried that we’d have any kind of identity crisis. He had a couple of different breeds than mine but, after all, as we’ve established, I know my girls. So, I was just going to toss everyone in together and have us a little hen social.

But he didn’t just bring hens. He’d also brought a couple of roosters in the mix, and what that meant was that his chickens were all living in sin together.

If I wore pearls, I would have clutched them.

Now listen. My hens are virgins, and I intended to keep them that way. I didn’t need some bad boy rooster strutting around my pure girls and being a bad influence. I’m a better chicken chaperone than that. This unforeseen situation of rooster frat boys entering the yard called for some quick troubleshooting on my part. Luckily, I still had my little chicken tractor and was able to move my friend’s cohabitating chickens, the boys and the girls, into the chicken tractor setup, on down the backyard from what I was now considering my hen nunnery.

Problem solved.
The next morning Zealand marched into my bedroom, adamant.

“I never want to feed chickens again,” he reported emphatically. “They are deegusting. Dares blood evawee where. Deegusting!” He was at an age where he would draw out his r’s, sometimes making him a little hard to understand.

“What?” I asked, rubbing sleep from my eyes and pushing myself up onto my pillows. Zealand is a consistent and early riser and likes to get his assigned chores knocked off the list early in the day. He’d headed out early, like he always does, to let out and feed the chickens. And he’d often come to my bedroom after, to let me know how many eggs he found and that he was done. Surely I wasn’t hearing him right. And I hadn’t had my first cup of coffee yet, so all interpretation is a little fuzzy before that first caffeine hit. “What are you saying?” I asked again.

“Blood eva-wwwhere,” he insisted.

He definitely had my attention.

“And dead chickens all over the place. I’m never feeding those chickens again. It’s gwoss.”

“What do you mean, dead chickens all over the place?” Caffeine deprivation was beginning to be overtaken by sheer adrenaline. Surely I wasn’t hearing Zealand right.

“Mom. Mom,” he started enunciating more slowly, since I seemed to be struggling with his message. “There are dead. Chickens. Everywhere.”

I bolted up out of the bed, running for the back door. My girls! My girls! Genevieve and JoJo and Chubby!
I busted around the corner from the back porch at a full sprint toward the coop, heart in my throat. I ran up the hill in the backyard to the coop, terrified of the sight that might await me. I came skidding to a stop at the wire door to the coop, my eyes taking it all in.

One. Two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine....

All my girls. All present and accounted for.

All...just fine. What?

Zealand has a great imagination, but not in the vein of chicken violence. So what on earth could he be.....?

The other chickens! My foster chickens!

The living-in-sin chickens!

I spun on my bare heel and tore down the yard to the chicken tractor.

And there it was. Total chicken carnage. Five dead chickens, the chicken tractor door pried open—Zealand’s assessment was absolutely correct. Blood everywhere.

Clearly, I’d had a chicken day-care provider fail. In the biggest way. This was not going to look good on my resume.

A fox had managed to get into the chicken tractor and enjoyed himself a fresh chicken dinner. And he’d left all the feathered scraps for us to find.

And Nic-Was-Out-Of-Town.

I started hollering the only words I knew to holler. “Mr. Howard?!?!?!? Mr. Howard?!?!?!?”

Mr. Howard is my neighbor next door. My backyard runs alongside his side yard, our acreage and his twining through the tall pines together. He’s almost always in his yard or his...
garage, working on something, fixing something, chopping something, planting something. He’s a true Tennessee “git ‘er done” kind of guy.

He heard my holler for Howard and came ambling over, overalls and a sweat-stained sleeveless T-shirt his morning attire.

“Well, Jaci, good morning. What’s the problem you got?”

“Mr. Howard, Mr. Howard, fox, blood, chickens, not my chickens, chicken tractor, for, blood, Nic-Is-Out-Of-Town,” I blathered and stammered, still in chicken murder scene shock.

“Well, darlin’, my goodness. Huh. Yeah, looks like you had a little fox git yer chickens. He done it good. Whew!”

I was beginning to be able to string sentences together again. Well, one sentence at least. “What do we do, what do we do, what do we do?!”

Mr. Howard rocked back on his heels and bent his hairy forearm up to his chin, pulling on his chin and thinking. “Are you wanting to save the meat?”

“What?” I practically shrieked. “Ah, no! No, no, no! No!”

He looked a little surprised that I wouldn’t want to take advantage of this unexpected poultry harvest. “All right then,” he determined. “You got a bag or somethin’?”

Like a trash bag? Was this appropriate chicken crime scene protocol? Shouldn’t there be some yellow tape and some fingerprinting or something?

But then I quickly remembered that Nic-Was-Out-Of-Town and I had Mr. Howard ready to act on this chicken crisis. So I went and got a trash bag.
By the time Mr. Howard had the carnage bagged up, he’d arrived at another possible hiccup in what to do next. See, on our side of the street, the trash had come the day before. Which meant the trash guys wouldn’t be returning for six more days. And this was in July. In Tennessee. So, I trust you can do the math on this one.

“So should we put ‘em in your freezer? I mean, not for meat, since you decided you don’t want that. But yer trash is gonna stink up something awful if we put ‘em in there.” He shifted his toothpick from the left corner of his mouth to the right, giving me some time to think. Which I did not need.

“No! No, no, no! No! That bag is not going in my freezer! No way! And not the trash can! No way! No!” I was almost back to the place where I couldn’t form sentences.

“Alright, alright,” he soothed. “Now, I’d stick ‘em in my freezer, but I’m full up with catfish and that five-point buck I got end of deer season. Lemme think, lemme think.” He paused a moment, stroking his chin, thoughtful. While he considered, I excused myself to the kitchen. It was time for some caffeine, stat. These are not the kinds of decisions one should make from a noncaffeinated position.

By the time I arrived back to the scene of the crime, Mr. Howard had arrived at a plan. While our side of the street had just had our trash service come by, in that way that unincorporated neighborhoods in the country find themselves at the whim of weird school boundaries and school bus schedules and trash pickup, the houses across the street are on a completely different garbage calendar. Ours gets picked up on Fridays, but theirs gets picked up on Mondays. This was Saturday, which meant if we could, um, make a trash can contribution to the across-the-street neighbor prior to their Monday morning trash pickup, we’d be in a much better chicken disposal position.
Mr. Howard, God bless him, told me he’d get it taken care of.

I don’t know which across-the-street neighbor received the bounty on the fox raid on the chicken tractor. I’m not asking Mr. Howard for details.

Some things are better left unknown when Nic-Is-Out-Of-Town.

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The next day, Nic-Was-STILL-Out-Of-Town.

I’d made my apologies to my lawn guy about the passing of his chickens. He was sad but understanding, and I promised to get him some new chickens. Because, remember, you can order them online and have them shipped to your house or post office. So there’s that.

Mr. Howard had checked my big chicken coop following the chicken tractor crime scene and pronounced it sound and safe, fox-proof in the wake of the day’s events. But I was anxious through the night, hoping everything was okay.

Zealand got up before me, as usual, the next day, and headed out to the chicken coop. And then he came stomping back into my bedroom.

“Deegusting. Just deegusting.”

What?!? No way. No, no, no.

I got to the coop, trying to ignore the empty chicken tractor staring at me accusingly from down the backyard. My girls seemed to be fine, but they were acting a little odd. They were huddled up together at one end of the coop, which is unlike them. And they seemed a little nervous and flustered. I scanned the tree line in the backyard, curious if they were sensing that horrible fox nearby or maybe a hawk, but I didn’t see anything. Zealand followed me out to the yard, his manner very serious.
“Do you see it? It’s disgusting.”

“What’s disgusting, buddy? What is it?”

“The snake.”

Right then, I aged ten years. In that very moment.

Snake? I was in a wire cage with a snake?

“Dat’s what I saw,” Zealand reported. “I came out to feed the chickens. It went into Genevieve’s nest box!” Then I turned slowly and caught a flicker of sinister, slick scales, coiling menacingly in the nesting box. Zealand turned around like a soldier at Buckingham Palace and marched back into the house, his duty done, leaving me to fend for myself. That turkey!

I was frozen for a moment. Because, really, what is protocol when you’ve just discovered that you’re in close proximity to a snake and you’re both in the same enclosure? If it’s to freeze, to not move, then I had that strategy down. But eventually, I figured that playing the Lot’s wife pillar of salt thing wouldn’t be helpful in taking care of my boys and getting breakfast going. provided I survived this snake cage fight.

So I started hollering the only words I knew to holler.

“Mr. Howard?!?!?! Mr. Howard?!!?!?”

Nothing. Crickets.

I screamed his name a few more times, but only the sound of my own voice echoing off the hills greeted me. It was time for extreme measures. I told my brain to unfreeze my body and to run for it. Thankfully, my body and brain cooperated, and I dashed for the back door and slammed my way into the kitchen, peering out the window to see if the snake had chased me.

I grabbed my cell phone and punched Mr. Howard’s contact info, stabbing the dial command.
“Well, hello, Jaci. How are ya this mornin’?” his voice rumbled across the line. I could have wept out of sheer relief.


“Well, Jaci, I’d love to come help ya. But I done cut my finger off and I’m sitting in the hospital right now.”

I think it’s important for you to know that Mr. Howard has cut off three, maybe four, of his fingers in the six years we’ve been neighbors. He routinely hits one of his digits with a chainsaw or rogue tool or what have you. He scoops it up, puts it in the pocket of his shorts or overalls, and trolls on down to the emergency room. They reattach it, with varying degrees of accuracy. Mr. Howard has fingers reattached like most folks get their teeth cleaned.

This latest finger decapitation was very inconvenient for me. Very. Given the snake status in the coop.

Next, I called Mr. Professor, another one of my neighbors. That’s not his real name. But he is a professor. Of something like super smart biology neuro something or other. I figured maybe the biology or whatever all his degrees are in might be helpful with the removal of an evil environmental presence. I’m not saying all my chicken crisis logic makes perfect sense. But, as I’ve told you, Mr. Howard was unavailable.

“Hello,” he answered when I dialed, my cell phone sweaty in my nerve-shocked hands. I quickly explained the snake-tastrophy going on. “Well,” he breathed, considering. “I’ll be right over. Do you have a small shovel?”
A small shovel? Had I not just described a freakish python-esque kind of serpent invading the chicken castle?

“You see,” he explained in all too calm fashion, “the humane thing, the thing that is best for the environment, is to rehome the snake. I’ll just scoop him up on a little shovel and move him off further into the woods.”

Rehome. I was all for rehoming the snake, right back to the depths of Hades where it had slithered from. I said as much to Mr. Professor.

“Oh, no, no, no,” scolded Mr. Professor. “Snakes are good. They are good for the ecosystem. We don’t want to harm the snake, we want to help it, and it will help us.”

Blah blah blah.

Let me be clear. If you don’t hold to my particular snake theology, in which it is understood that all snakes are evil, then you and I can still be friends. But you are wrong.

Very, very wrong.

But I was desperate to get the snake out of my chicken coop.

And...you know the punchline.

Nic...was...out...of...town.

So. Limited options.

Mr. Professor tooted on over with snake compassion on his mind and I showed him to the chicken coop. The snake had decided to make itself comfortable in the bank of nesting cubbies at the back of the coop and had curled its inky black coils into a sinister spiral. As Mr. Professor approached the nesting cubbies, the snake started moving, possibly sensing a relocation was in the making. Mr. Professor gently raised the shovel, attempting to slide it under
the snake. I guess he expected that the snake would simply shift onto the blade of the shovel like a magic carpet ride, curious to see where the winds might take him.

But no. The snake glided deeper into the covered nesting boxes, and we couldn’t see him anymore. Mr. Professor was undaunted. He poked his head into the nearest nesting box to figure out where the snake had gone. Now, it’s dark in those nesting boxes. I personally would have to question the sanity of anyone so boldly jamming their head into that space with a recent snake sighting currently playing out. But who am I to judge, as long as I’m not the one having to do it?

Mr. Professor called to me in a muffled voice from inside the box, “I’m having trouble seeing where he went, Jaci! Can you hand me your phone with the flashlight on?” I didn’t know until that moment that I actually have a strong belief system about my phone and snakes. But I do. My phone should not be anywhere near a snake. As it turns out, I have a strong ethic about this.

But, again, Nic-Was-Out-Of-Town and Professor Earth Lover was my best bet at this point. And the man needed my phone.

And since I didn’t want to come any closer than necessary to the nesting boxes, I leaned over as far as possible from my perch near my escape hatch at the door of the coop, and handed over my cell phone, flashlight on.

Mr. Professor palmed the phone in one hand, gripping the shovel with the other. He shoved his head back into the nest, bringing the phone up by his cheekbone, searching for the snake. He twisted and turned, looking all around. He backed up, brought the shovel back up, attempted again to gently encourage the snake to willingly board the
shovel blade. The snake disagreed, a little more forcefully this time, swirling farther into the depths of the nest.

Mr. Professor was starting to get a little frustrated. It’s a pain when nature doesn’t do what humans want.

He dived back into the box again, cell flashlight at the ready...and promptly dropped my cell phone into the depths of chicken poop and feathers at the bottom of the nesting stack.

Just lovely.

The snake hissed and slithered and slipped ever deeper into the gloom. Mr. Professor was starting to get a little sweaty and red.

They continued this dance for a long time, Mr. Professor trying to preserve wild nature, the snake determined to inhabit tamed chicken habitats because...free eggs. Mr. Professor was getting angry, and the snake was past angry. If I hadn’t been so creeped out by the snake, I would have almost enjoyed the show.

This is the part where those of you who don’t share my snake theology need to just skip ahead to the next section. Go ahead. Go on now. I’ll see you over there in a few minutes.

For the rest of you theologically sound people, here’s the rest of the story.

Mr. Professor finally hit the end of his need to humanely rehome this reptile, exited the coop, and returned with a BB gun, where upon the snake was briskly rehomed to the pit of Hades from where it had come.

All while Nic-Was-Out-Of-Town.

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All these crazy stories in my life. And all the crazy stories in yours. The funny ones, the weird ones, the sad ones, the awful ones, the joyful ones, the unexpected ones, the predictable
ones—those stories are the makings of us. They are how we understand ourselves, how we place ourselves in the world. When I think about the various stories in my life, the ones that make me laugh, the ones that make me cry, the ones that make me angry, the ones that make me proud, I often think of each of them as singular events. But when I back up a bit, when I refocus the eyes of my heart, this lyric begins to emerge. Things that I thought of as isolated incidents begin to connect, begin to form a melody.

Do you feel like that, like you’ve got random events in your life, these individual stories? Can I just tell you: they’re adding up to something. It’s not always clear, it’s not always obvious, but God is in there, stringing all those events and anecdotes and comedies and tragedies and histories together. Your life has a fuller story to tell, and God will connect all those dots, all those points of experience as you live out your days.

Through all of it, all the experiencing, all the retelling, God is up to one thing, one ultimate purpose.

He wants you to know something, to know it so deep down to your core that you can see it in every angle, every note of each moment of your life that plays out.

What he wants you to know is this: you are his child. His. Wanted, loved, designed, specifically placed in time as his.

What he wants you to do with this knowledge is this: to live as his child fully in this day, to be transformed into his spiritual image, fully who he created you to be and fully redeemed.

I used to think of the things that happened to me as random bits of good decisions, bad ones, happy days and sad ones, times I got it right and times I got it wrong.

But your life is not random to God. It’s ransomed.
There was a time I wouldn’t have understood why a fox would take down my chicken tractor. Why God would move me next door to Mr. Howard. Would move me down the street from Mr. Professor. Why Nic would be out of town while chicken mayhem ensued.

I’m certainly not claiming I totally see it all now.

But here’s what I do know. All of it, it’s part of a bigger book that God is writing, the message he writes over and over to you and to me, that we are his, treasured, loved. God tells the most amazing stories. And he’s willing to work with all kinds of material: The stuff I’m proud of, the stuff I’m not. The failures, the progress, the two steps forward, the one step back. I mean, look at all the factors that had to go into the fox and the snake and the neighbor adventures. There’s nothing random about it. First, he created the beautiful Tennessee countryside and created a piece of land that would capture Nic’s and my heart as the place to raise our family. God led us to move to that certain neighborhood, with people next door and down the street that are also his children, with their own gifts and skills, people who are willing to come running when I call. He designed chickens. And foxes. And, it pains me to say it, snakes. He created summer mornings and chores and fresh eggs, and he blends it all together with storylines that make me appreciate my neighbors and love my chickens and find him in the hilarious moments and in the crises.

In small ways and big, he’s always showing me there is a bigger picture going on than just the day-to-day scenes of my life.

What if?

What if you let him into your story? What if you opened your heart to letting him show you that everything you experience, the things you wish you could take back, the things you count as your best days, the things that you regret, the things that weren’t fair, the things that
were deliriously awesome, what if you could pull the lens back and see it all as a beautiful mosaic, a story he’s building to completion?

In that time I spent in London, I’d troll some of the various old cathedrals. The ancient stone, the pillars, the pews, the incense, the quiet, it made for contemplative settings. And the stained glass always drew me in. I’d stand before a massive window and look at all the tiny squares of colored glass. Here a circle of red. There a shard of green. Over here a pane of blue. Those individual pieces are important, carefully crafted and placed. Some of them were my favorite colors. Some were not. But then I would back up. Look up. Crane my neck. And move my vision from the individual panes of glass to the larger story.

There it would be. A story told in glass of someone from the Bible or of a saint’s sacrifice in the early days of the church. All those bits of glass I could now see for their ultimate purpose, once I backed up and allowed the total story to come into view. And all of those mosaics were recounting the life of a person who mattered to God. The God who has the ultimate purpose in mind, that each of us would be drawn to him, would receive his redemption and salvation, would fulfill all the days he has written for us.

The details of your life matter because they make up the total story of your life. Yes, you may have chapters that are huge in your story. You may have chapters that seem less important. You may have chapters that tell of a devastation. But you’re still here. The story isn’t over. The thesis remains the same: You matter to God. You live as his child. And that is the ultimate purpose of his story for you. That’s the artistry of what God does, repurposing everything that happens to you and by you to be crafted into a greater story. That’s the ultimate art of repurposing.
After the great chicken tractor raid, after the snake-ageddon incident, after Mr. Professor had dispatched the serpent and I'd calmed my girls and made peace back in the coop, I pushed open the back door to the house, kicking off my muddy rain boots at the threshold. I had two things on my mind: coffee and a shower. I pulled the sunglasses off the top of my head, pulled my keys from one pocket, my recovered (and somewhat still chicken-poop-smudged) cell phone from the other, and tossed them onto the sewing machine cabinet next to the door.

That sewing machine cabinet.

That awkward hand-me-down that I never thought would fit in my home, my decor, my plan, my brand. That thing that I could have cast off because I thought it didn’t have a place in my life. Yet there it was—repurposed, redeemed, needed, and appreciated in the context of my daily life. That cabinet holds the story of my mother-in-law’s early married life. It holds the story of Nic’s boyhood. Now it’s holding the stories of the generation Nic and I are building in Søren and Zealand. It’s where I toss my keys after an average day. It’s where I toss my keys after days that require Mr. Howard. And Mr. Professor.

And I could have missed what it would come to mean, had God not shown me the art of repurposing.

I want you to come away from our time together with this going deep down into your heart: You matter. You matter to God. Don’t let a detail that doesn’t seem to fit with what you expected in your life be the only focus. Repurpose that pain. See that detail with fresh eyes. Put a new lens on it. Embrace the personality you were gifted with and let the Holy Spirit repurpose
the parts of you that you haven’t been so sure were valuable. Don’t decide it’s too late. Let God run the clock. You have so many more beautiful chapters in your story. Trust him with every nuance, every element. Let him repaint, refurbish, renew, and redeem.

And let God repurpose it all to draw you close to him.

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,*

*who have been called according to his purpose.*

Romans 8:28 NIV