

TO ^{THE} Road
Becoming

REDISCOVERING YOUR LIFE IN THE
NOT-HOW-I-PLANNED-IT MOMENTS

JENNY SIMMONS



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To my sweet Annie: If only I could keep you from life's dead ends and detours; but then you would miss the beauty of being lost and being found. So I will walk every road, detour, and dead end with you for as long as we both shall live.

To my mom, dad, sisters, in-laws, and the many dear friends who have walked these long roads with us: *Thank you* will never suffice. You were the streams in our desert.

To Ryan: God only knows how many dead ends our marriage has seen, how many detours. But we are still here, still being lost and found together, and I am forever grateful.

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Prelude

Mangledy-Bangledy

Early one morning in the spring of 2011, I woke up in my own bed sweating, afraid, and completely lost. I felt like a piece of driftwood. The mangledy-bangledy kind that gets ripped off a tree during a storm and thrown into a river three counties over, bewildered and broken. I was in a current I could not control. In a river I had never known. Nothing was familiar and *nothing* was going the way I had planned.

I had made *good* plans for my life.

Dreamed up when I was nine years old and the universe was compliant with my every whim. Revised when I was nineteen years old and way smarter than my parents. When I had my existence—and everyone else’s—all figured out. Revisited after college when all I wanted was a safe road without surprises or detours, a well-laid plan that would tell me my place in the world. But that morning in 2011—as a thirty-one-year-old wife, mom, and successful recording

artist—I realized the plans I dreamed up were long gone and I was completely lost.

The worst twelve months of my life were barely behind me. But in that moment, trembling in my own bed and wracked with fear, I would have gone back to that hellish year because at least back then I knew who I was and where I was going. Even if getting there meant enduring a fire, thefts, bankruptcy, and complete physical exhaustion.

But the mornings spent lying in my own bed afraid of the future, unsure of my own name, living in complete lostness? They were breaking me.

With no tears left to cry that particular morning in 2011, I stared the terrifying unknown in the face and knew I was at a crossroads. As I lay there in a daze, dreading the day at hand, it occurred to me that I had spent years encouraging *other* people to live by faith but I had no idea how to live by it myself. I was the kind of girl who wanted faith for other people. Me? I wanted answers, happily-ever-afters, and enough control over my life that I did not have to cling to Jesus for my very breath, my very bread. I only wanted religion.



Security has become the drug of choice for religious people who don't really want to live by faith. We naively (arrogantly?) assume there are monuments that we can erect in honor of the steadfast certainties our lives are centered around. Mother! Artist! A 401(k) plan! Philanthropist! Gainfully employed! A path, a plan, a purpose! All monuments. All man-made.

My monuments were well erected. Wife. Mom. Musician. World traveler. Woman of purpose. Woman of faith. My

band, Addison Road, was on the radio, had traveled around the country on a sold-out tour, and had sold nearly 200,000 albums. I was certain we would be making music together well into our nursing-home days.

But when those monuments began to crumble, I found myself in the midst of broken dreams with no security and no clue *how* to move forward. Or *where* to move forward. Each new day I woke up with soul paralysis, feeling like a piece of storm-ravaged driftwood.

Being all mangledy-bangledy from a storm is supposed to be a good thing. At least that's what preachers and stoics say. Storms grow you up. Get rid of all the bad stuff in you. Refine you with their holy fire! Apparently some people come out of storms as stronger, shinier, more beautifully refined versions of themselves. And I'm happy for those people. *Kind of*. But that wasn't me. I made it to the other side of the worst year of my life and was, well—worse.

Seasons of hardship can leave us worse for the wear, at least in my experience. Instead of making it to the other side as a better version of ourselves, we can end up bitter, broken, and barely recognizable. Just because one makes it through a hard season and is still standing doesn't mean they have traveled down the life-giving road to becoming something new. It just means their feet still work.

My feet still worked. But nothing else did. I was a mangledy-bangledy mess. That morning the Lord whispered something deep inside of my soul. A confirmation of what I long suspected but fiercely avoided: transformation would only happen if I buried the past and blindly, bravely stepped out into the terrifying, unknown future. The Redeemer of stories invited me into a new kind of journey. It was a long-standing

invitation to join the Storyteller on the road to becoming. And I finally accepted.



Four years have passed since that morning in 2011, and I have learned that *the road to becoming* requires much more than just “still standing” after the storm batters and bruises our monuments. It is the journey after the storm, on wobbly knees and tired feet, that matters the most. In my own story, after the chapters of *The Dreaming and Destruction*, my life unfolded into an unknown season marked by distinct chapters that I have come to know as *The Burying*, *The Lostness*, *The Waiting*, and *The Becoming*. Side by side with the great Storyteller, these distinct stages made up the path that led me to new life.

Perhaps you know what it feels like to dread the day at hand. Your plans have changed, failed, or come to a screeching halt, and you are living in the in-between. Not who you were and not yet who you might become. Like driftwood thrown into a river three counties over, you feel bewildered and broken. Standing—but all kinds of mangledy-bangledy.

Maybe you have asked the same types of questions that I asked. Am I hopeless? Will I ever become something new? And how? When? What? And isn't there a book I can read that will just *give me the freaking answer already?*

Perhaps each new day begins with feeling lost. Another day without a road map. Another prayer whispered or screamed: *How long, oh Lord?*

If nothing more, I share my story to remind you that you are not alone in yours. I am one of many who have gone before you on this road to becoming and surely in time will

circle back around once more and pass through the dreaming and destruction, burying, lostness, waiting, and becoming.

There is a moment in each person's story when leaning into the unknown becomes the only viable pathway to new life. It is at this weighty juncture that a person of faith must ask, "Do I believe the Storyteller knows better than anyone else how to repurpose a piece of driftwood?" If the answer is yes, pack your bags and get ready to follow God into the unknown. The road to becoming is not easy; it is certainly not for the faint of heart. But it is here we begin to discover that new life—*life abundant*—is always, ever among us. Dancing on the horizon.

THE *Dreaming*
AND *Destruction*



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1



Magnolia Trees

When I was a little girl, I had my own magnolia tree. No one else in the world was invited underneath her canopy of waxy citrus leaves. She was all mine. My fortress, my empire.

Under the leaves of a mighty Mississippi magnolia, you can become anyone you want. A pirate or sprite. A wicked witch or withered old man whose only job is to keep the lanterns burning and whisper to weary travelers the secrets of traversing the hidden passageways of the kingdom.

Inside my big laurel I was the boy with a sword and stone—and a princess fairy for good measure. I splattered stars in the sky, robbed from the rich and gave to the poor, and waited in my tower for Prince Charming to come with true love's first kiss. The plans for my life were carelessly and passionately concocted under the limbs of the mighty magnolia tree in my grandparents' backyard. This is where I learned to dream.

I was going to be a board-game inventor, newspaper editor, voice animator, professional whistler, fashion designer, billionaire-millionaire. And I was going to perform on stages.

I learned to sing in the branches of that magnolia tree. I was fearless and my audience free. The magnolia tree was my Radio City Music Hall, and I was Pavarotti! The magnolia tree was the Olympic floor of life, and I vaulted, danced, tumbled, and dreamed my way across the springy surface with childhood bliss and ignorance. The famous gymnastics coach Béla Károlyi would cheer me on from the upper limbs as if he were cheering on Mary Lou Retton. Olympic gold medals were at my fingertips; the branches held within them every possibility in the world. I was destined for greatness!

I dreamed up my whole life under that tree. And the adults in my life gave me permission to do so—encouraged it even.

Did I want to be a firefighter? An astronaut? A prima ballerina? Or the president of the United States? What college would I go to? What great things would I achieve? What type of world-changing person might I become? How many babies would I have? What was my dream car? And would my husband be a lawyer or doctor or perhaps something nobler like a teacher or preacher? Every woman got married, of course.

In this modern American age of privilege and opportunity, every child seems primed to cure cancer or star on Broadway. At the very least, each child deserves a spot on *American Idol* or their own reality TV series. I think that's why my grandmother made sure my sisters and I watched volumes of the old black-and-white Shirley Temple films. "You could do that, Jennifer. You could sing like that little girl." It was the earliest message I received in my tiny corner of the world: you can become anything you want. And you should *want*

to become someone amazing. It was our inherent right as American children: to be overachieving, exorbitantly paid, famous versions of whomever we wanted to become. To have plans that succeeded if we worked hard enough and fame that exploded if we dreamed big enough. The sky was the limit!

A movie reel of heroes, princesses, fairy tales, renowned athletes, happy endings, and famous people living lifestyles that less than 1 percent of the world will ever enjoy splay their way through my earliest memories. *The world is yours for the taking!*

Blurring fantasy with reality as if they are interchangeable, everyday possibilities are our society's blessed curse. Self-made heroes. World-changers. People on a mission, with a plan, in a country where everything is possible if you just *try* hard enough, *work* hard enough, and *plan* far enough in advance.

Do you have goals? Achieve them! Is something standing in your way? Nothing is impossible—just do it!

Under this bold optimism we are sent out to prepare for our future.

Later, as a teenager and young adult raised in the evangelical church, I was expected to decipher “God’s will” for my life and decode the weighty “purpose” for my existence. Not only was I trying to achieve fairy-tale love, success, and happiness, but I was doing so with the burden and confusion of trying to please an all-powerful, invisible God by figuring out His omnipotent will for my life. No. Pressure.

It’s a miracle that any of us makes it past the first grade, much less our early twenties. From the moment we enter the world, we are bombarded with equal parts make-believe and future planning. We are taught to dream big and achieve those

dreams with a smile on our face and a solid work ethic oozing out of our back pocket. And I am all for optimistic dreaming and the occasional fantasy, I really am. But shouldn't somebody, somewhere give a wee heads-up about reality?

You know, the *this-is-NOT-how-I-planned-it* moments of life?

As privileged children we daydream. We fantasize. We read stories. We perform at Radio City Music Hall—the people on the edge of their seats in awe—and we *crescendo*. Here comes our big moment when we will bring the world to tears of joy with our giftedness and our beauty and our—

“Dang it, ELLIE! You can't let Jennifer climb the magnolia tree. It's dangerous. She could hurt the TREE!”

Reality interrupts.

Reality trumps dreams.

Reality sneaks in and mocks you. You are no princess. There is no castle. And that tree? It is not a stage—a springboard for all that I will become. It is just a magnolia tree in the back of my grandparents' house, off a gravel road, across from a pond, in a tiny town called Ellisville, right smack-dab in the middle of Mississippi.

I'm just a little girl who might hurt the magnolia tree.

Life is complicated. I learned this much when I was six years old.

With the waxy leaves and citrus smell of the mighty magnolia, you rule everything and everyone. You are the master of your own fate. You make plans that don't break and dream dreams that don't crumble. You see the world as it could be, as it *should* be. And every adult cheers you on, hoping you will be more and do more than he or she ever could. *Carpe freaking diem*.

But here? In the real world? A decade or two later, you come face-to-face with reality. You are not living in a magnolia tree and you are no more a pirate than those weird British fellas who sing pirate songs on TV.

There are bills. Babies. Boyfriends. Bosses. Beliefs. Life is not as simple as choosing whether to be an astronaut or the president or a rock star.

It is not black-and-white and glossy and perfect, the way the six-year-old mind dreams it to be. Turns out, life is unpredictable. And more times than not, it does not make any sense at all. There are more questions than answers, more in-between spaces than successfully-arrived-at finish lines. It's all quite complicated. The depth of the human soul is complicated. The depth of human experience is complicated. God is complicated. Families are complicated. Friends are complicated. The church is complicated. Lovers are complicated. *Dreaming is complicated*. Living in the tension of big dreams and reality is complicated. It's all cotton candy and nuclear science thrown together in one big pot.

Real life is never as easy as it was underneath that tree. The big dreams and happy endings that teachers and parents and Disney movies prime you for—those types of endings should be talked about in awe, with hushed voices. Big dreams with happy endings are rare treasures, not inherent rights.

And yet, the solution is not as simple as making a choice to be a realist or a dreamer. *To dream or not to dream* is not the question. A decision that simplistic means cutting off the head or the heart. But God gave us both head and heart, so what now?

I have decided to let them both exist. Bumping into each other, fighting for space, clashing over the rights to the way

I will live my life. Let the head and the heart coexist, though it makes little sense. Don't forsake dreams for reality. Don't forsake reality for dreams.

The complexity in our existence as humans allows us to embrace both. Without dreams and plans, without vision, the people perish. But don't make those dreams and plans and hold on too tightly, because when reality bites, it bites hard.

This is where I confess I have no real answers, just a mantra: I will choose to be a dreamer in the face of reality because that is the only way I have found to be fully human. I watch the dreams go up in flames and keep breathing, and dreaming, and trusting that I will become something new all over again. That is where the becoming of all things new is born—in the in-between places.