

## one

Jack and Margaret stand next to the table on a spring evening in 2011, looking out the kitchen's bay window as I finish cooking dinner. It's taco night. Tim will be home in a few minutes, then Margaret and I will head off in one direction for soccer, he and Jack in another for baseball.

"They're trying to fly!" Margaret exclaims, and she and Jack step closer to the window. My children are watching three baby cardinals gain the strength and skill to fly.

Every winter and spring we follow "our flock" of downy woodpeckers, cardinals, chickadees, and titmice as they rest on the bushes, eat from our feeders, and entertain us from this window. But this is the first spring we've seen an actual nest in the bushes and have watched baby birds hatching, and now this.

Yesterday a black snake inched its way up the bush, heading toward the nest where the still flightless babies sat. If it got to them, they wouldn't stand a chance. Amid both kids' screams, Tim ran out the door and chased the snake away with a broom. If these birds can get their act together and learn how to fly rather than continue their little hopping dance on our brick walkway, we think they'll have a pretty good chance of survival. It's what we're rooting for.

And today it happens. One by one, the fledglings figure out what they were born to do. The hopping morphs into something else entirely, and the tiny birds take flight. We gasp at the sight of a miracle.

Ten-year-old Margaret reaches around her big brother and gives him a squeeze, leaving her arm at rest on his back. He keeps looking out the window and says with a slight shake of his head, "They just grow up so fast." I laugh as they stand there like proud parents, Jack at twelve saying words that could so easily come out of my mouth.

Not that the twelve years of mothering these kids have gone by all that fast. In fact, some of the hardest, most relentless days felt a whole lot longer than just

twenty-four hours. Like the many days when Tim worked nonstop-with a full-time job and then law school at night-and I had to figure out how to keep the kids occupied and myself sane until bedtime. There were days when I would plot to keep Jack and Margaret distracted just long enough to go to the bathroom without someone on my lap. There was my adjustment from being a busy high school English teacher to someone just hoping to catch the highlights in *People* magazine in the checkout line during a late-night solitary grocery store run.

Those were hard, good years. I tried to mother Jack and Margaret the way I had been mothered, with a lot of laughter, acceptance, and patience. Some days were disasters; others small, precious victories. And motherhood seemed to get easier as the years passed. When the kids were seven and nine, I began blogging about thrifty decorating projects and funny observations about family life. I hoped that an honest look at our experiences might give encouragement to other moms and help form a community for me.

Tim eventually scaled back his grueling career, choosing time with the family over money. He was able to coach baseball, lead Cub Scouts, and help with the church youth group we had formed. I started working part-time as the manager of our church bookstore after almost nine years at home, and we found a new rhythm that worked for us, much of it taking place by this bay window at the same round kitchen table from my childhood. In a way, Jack is right, they do grow up so fast, because even though the individual days sometimes felt dreadfully long, I'm baffled as to how we got to this place so soon.

I'll revisit this tender moment at the window a few weeks later, in early June, when it's time to read something to Jack at his sixth-grade graduation dinner from the kids' small private school. Tim and I will stand in front of Jack's friends and their parents in the back room of an Olive Garden, each with a hand on his shoulder. We'll look down into his deep brown eyes. I'll tell this story of the fledgling cardinals, ending with, "Jack, parenting you is an honor and a privilege, and we know the day is coming soon when you'll be flying on your own. When things get hard, and they will, please remember your special

Bible verse: *'For nothing is impossible with God'* We are proud of you, Jack, and we love you very much." He'll smile an embarrassed smile, and I'll hope he hears, really hears, how proud we are of him. I'll give his shoulder an extra squeeze and steer him back to our seats.

As we twirl our pasta and bite into our breadsticks, we cannot know that three months later our son will indeed be flying on his own, not to middle school and the blossoming independence we had envisioned, but to someplace entirely different. And that in exactly three months, we would need to cling to his special Bible verse more than he ever did.

***Excerpted from Rare Bird by Anna Whiston-Donaldson***

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