

GWEN SMITH

*Broken into
Beautiful*



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This book contains some stories in which the author has changed people's names and some details of their situations in order to protect their privacy.

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Behind the Smile

*Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.*

PSALM 34:5

 I should begin with a confession: I've spent most of my life hiding behind a smile. You know that saying, "My life is an open book"? Well, it never really applied to me. My life has been more of a partially opened book. While I've shared satisfying successes, tear-filled trials, and entertaining experiences over the years, I've kept most of the shadier happenings of my life under wraps in a prideful attempt to save face.

Nice admission for a woman in ministry, huh?

I've always considered my past just that: my past. I'm pragmatic that way. I've experienced shame, pain, and brokenness as much as the next person. I just haven't been in the habit of sharing the particulars with people who could possibly judge me for it. God has graciously rescued me from the pits that I've fallen in—and I'm thankful that He has—but I've never wanted to chat with people about the darker details. I'm a smiler by nature. I have a positive, upbeat personality. It's *my* stuff. People don't need to know my stuff, right? Right.

So why the book?

The simple answer is this: God has called me to a higher level of transparency in ministry. While you may never have to share your stuff with masses of women, I must if I am to obey Him. God has written His restoring, unconditional love into every broken paragraph

of every broken chapter of who I am. I've spent my entire adult life fearfully flipping past pages that tell of the failures and struggles I've been through.

Not anymore.

It's time for my life to become an open book.

Time to get real.

An Average American Girl

I grew up in Mayberry. Well, the town was actually called Irwin, but comparatively it was Mayberry.

In the summers, my brothers, sisters, and I spent our days outside in the blazing sun, playing barefoot in freshly cut grass. We enjoyed big Fourth of July parades, drank large amounts of ice-cold lemonade, attended huge family reunions, and ate our weight in fresh tomatoes and homegrown sweet corn.

In the fall, we rooted for both the Steelers and our high school football team, went trick or treating, raked endless piles of colorful leaves (then jumped in them, of course), and sipped warm apple cider as often as we could get our mom to buy it.

Each blustery Pennsylvania winter, we had pictures taken on Santa's lap, shoveled ridiculous amounts of snow, and rooted for our high school basketball team. We drank mug-after-mug of hot chocolate with mini-marshmallows, waited on pins and needles to see if Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow on Groundhog Day, and ate many bowls of tummy-warming chili with buttered saltines on the side.

Our springs were filled with Easter programs at church, bulb planting at home, and great anticipation of the last day of school.

The people were kind, the houses were modest, and the community was committed to clean living. That meant different things to different people, but for my family it meant going to church, washing behind our ears, and applying the Golden Rule. Basically, I come from your average middle-class American family and your average hard-working American town.

I am the middle child of five, born to my parents in eight short

years. We squabbled like normal siblings, shared bedrooms, and often fought for our parents' attention, but overall we enjoyed the benefits of being raised in a large family. We had quirky family jokes (someone would ask, "Who lives in that house?" and another would reply "Howard Ino?") and favorite family movies (*The Sound of Music* and, forgive me for this one, *The Jerk*). We had a kind, practical, and godly mom who kept the house running smoothly as best she could and a strong yet silly dad who worked hard and loved to tease us. We always had a roof over our heads, a hot meal on the table, and clothes on our backs (even if they were hand-me-downs). We were very blessed.

From the time I was little, I loved going to church. I didn't necessarily love wearing a dress like my mom always wanted me to, but I loved church. I loved the singing, the flannelgraph Sunday school lessons, the Bible games, and my friends. I loved Mr. Dunn, my Sunday school teacher. He was always quick with a smile that was warm like a blanket. Each Sunday he would share a simple gospel message and then ask us if we wanted to accept Christ as our Savior. With our small heads bowed, he would lead us in the sinner's prayer. I'm certain there will be a long line of people in heaven thanking Mr. Dunn for his faithful service and life-changing prayers. I'll be one of them.

So before braces ever graced my teeth, I had a smile that shone for the Lord. It was a buck-toothed smile, but a smile nonetheless. I became a Christian in Mr. Dunn's Sunday school class when I was just nine years old. To me, faith was pretty simple. I knew that I regularly made mistakes and bad choices, which the Bible calls sin, and even though I was young, I knew that I could not measure up to the perfect standard of a holy God. So when I learned of this God-man named Jesus—who came from heaven to earth, lived a perfect, sinless life, suffered and died in my place, rose from the dead, and then ascended into heaven, *all so I could be forgiven*—it was pretty much a no-brainer to my nine-year-old self. I confessed my sin, asked to be forgiven, and embraced the joy that had been placed in my heart.

I was His and He was mine...simple as that. I have loved God since I was a child.

The Drama Angel

I've also loved music and sports. I sang my first solo when I was ten. It was for the 1980 West Hempfield Elementary School fifth and sixth grade Christmas pageant. The program was called "The Blue Angel." I was the blue angel. Now, you might think that I would have been excited to be the blue angel, but I was actually miffed about it because I had previously auditioned for a speaking part and was told that I would be a princess in Act III of the play. A princess! My heart soared when I found out that I had won a speaking role. I had always wanted to be a beautiful princess. What little girl doesn't? I threw down a serious happy dance that day. Life was good. I went home and spent that entire evening in my bedroom, going over my lines and prepping for my theatrical debut.

The very next day at school came a fateful call to the principal's office. I remember it as if it were yesterday. My pulse raced as I walked down the hall toward the curious meeting. Once I got there, I was asked to sit in one of the plastic chairs outside Mr. Welty's office. I waited for what seemed like forever, and when I was finally called in, I saw Mr. Welty, Mrs. Downs (the music teacher), and Mrs. MacDonald (the PTA president). They said the usual pleasantries and then dove right into a conversation that wrecked my plans and broke my little heart. They wanted me to be the blue angel instead of a princess.

"What?" I said. "Why? I really *want* to be a princess! I auditioned for the part and was chosen. Why do you want me to be the blue angel?"

Mr. Welty patiently explained that Mrs. Downs had just informed both him and Mrs. MacDonald that I had a pretty singing voice, and they really needed a good singer for the song of the blue angel. They said there was only one song in the play and *I* would get to sing it. But all I heard was that I would not get to be a princess. I reluctantly agreed to be the blue angel, left the office with my head hung low, and cried the whole way back to my classroom.

My flare for drama was in full swing when they phoned my mother a few days later and told her that, as the blue angel, I had to wear a

light blue, flowing dress. A sissy dress! As a card-carrying member of the tomboy club, I was fit to be tied. I hated dresses and was mad as a hornet. I thought the whole play would be a big mess and that they had made a huge mistake by making me sing.

Eventually, the big night came. I swallowed my pride about the dress and got through the song. The program was the talk of the elementary school, and I had now been formally initiated into public singing. From that night on, whenever a solo needed to be sung, I was a prime candidate. Dress or no dress.

Steps of Faith

Life went on, and before I knew it I was in the awkward junior high years struggling with normal teenage girl issues: buck teeth, braces, boys, backstabbing, bras, and boobs. (Can I say *boobs* in a Christian book? *Anyhoo*, moving on...) I got along with most everyone except my siblings. On good days we hung out, played, and had lots of fun; on bad days we fought like cats and dogs. Normal, right? I was not perfect by any stretch, just your basic good kid who made relatively good decisions.

I was blessed to have been active in my church youth group from the time I was twelve through college. It was in youth group that I became deeply rooted in my walk with Christ and began to understand that my faith should show in my actions and decisions. There's a funky-cool Christian song by Nicole C. Mullen that poignantly says: "You can't get to heaven on granny's angel." I love that. My profession of faith was sincere as a nine-year-old, but as a teen I embraced faith in Christ as *mine*...not as my family heritage but as a very personal faith.

I was (and, to some degree, still am) quite the sassy girl. And though I was a believer, I had the normal teenage/parent "mouthy" issues and countless other rough edges that needed smoothing. I went through small bouts of rebellion and was romanced by a few things the world had to offer. But all in all, I was romanced by the Lord so much more.

One of the highlights of summer was always youth camp. We washed cars, sold hoagies, and babysat like crazy to raise money toward camp tuition. Each year, on a smoldering hot July day, we traveled across the long and winding Pennsylvania turnpike in a rickety old church bus that eventually delivered us to a church camp in the wooded hills of Carlisle. The trips up were always electric. Excitement sat in every seat. Even the peskiest of youth group boys were somewhat tolerable on the way because we bore a grace that accompanies focused anticipation. There was fun to be had, games to be played, and boys to be kissed at church camp. But more than that, when I was at camp I experienced God and worshiped with a passion that seemed incomparable to anything back home.

It was at church camp during the summer of 1984 that God placed a call on my life to serve Him in ministry. He spoke to my heart. No audible voice was necessary. *I knew that I knew that I knew* in my heart that God was calling me to join Him in a special way. I didn't know specifics, but I did know that I was to sing for Him, and Him only, for the rest of my life.

I began to write songs and jot down observations of life that moved me. My songs and writings were private, like a journal, so I kept them tucked away in a folder. A safe little folder. They were thoughts and songs just for me, or so I thought at the time. In reality, God had given me a talent to write. A talent that He would later require me to share with the world for Him.

I was an athletic youngster. Sports came naturally to me. My father was a great athlete too, and he still held a few track records at our high school when I attended twenty-five years later. I played anything and everything—softball, basketball, volleyball, and track. If a backyard football game was being played, I'd jump in on that too.

I eventually earned a full scholarship to play volleyball at a Division I university in Ohio. Of all the sports I played, volleyball was my passion. I loved the game and the high level of competition.

So off to college I went as a mostly innocent, God-loving, hard-working teenager who had said yes to the cross and no to the crowd.

I was a girl with convictions. A girl of strong disciplines. A girl of high moral standards. A girl who walked the straight and narrow. I was a virgin.

Good start, huh?

Don't be too impressed. College was the place where my faith collided with the temptations that led me to choices that altered the course of my life and landed me in a pit of despair.

Season of Compromise

So how does a girl who loves God and comes from a loving, stable home find herself wading through muck and mire in the pit of brokenness? How is it possible that a girl who longed to do right and honor Christ with her life could end up in an abortion clinic at the age of twenty? And how is it conceivable that a young lady who made such horrible and murderous decisions could be reconciled to a holy God in heaven?

I never meant to stray from my values. I went off to college and began a new chapter in life, one that I thought I could handle on my own. I continued to say yes to God about some things, like going to church every Sunday and being involved in campus ministry. But I also began to say yes to the world about other things, like having a drink at a party or messing around with my boyfriend. I was still the same Gwen, just a compromised version of me. It was a gradual thing. I was the frog in a pot of cool water over a low flame that eventually became frog soup.

My career as a college athlete brought many blessings and many challenges. One major blessing was a full scholarship that saved my parents and me thousands of dollars each year. It gave me a promising post-college future without debt from student loans. Blessings were also found in the close friendships I formed with a few of my teammates and in the game itself. I flat-out love to play volleyball.

There were a few significant challenges as well. I played under a coach who had little respect or tolerance for people of faith. He was from a communist European country and had a potpourri of

theological convictions that he had gathered along the way—mainly *secular humanism* with a touch of *new age* thrown in for good measure. Consequently, he and I were not tight chums. I became the token Christian, the virgin, the good girl on the team.

All of that pressure made my season of compromise even tougher. I felt obligated to hide behind a plastic smile so as not to mess up my Sandra Dee persona. So my sophomore year, when I handed my purity over to my boyfriend, I kept it a secret. It was nobody's business but mine. Eventually, secrets and compromise became comfortable to me. I wore them like a pair of faded jeans. If I drank at a party, cheated on a test, or slept with my boyfriend, I was discreet.

My boyfriend and I were in love. Though we knew it was not God's plan for us to have sex outside of marriage, and though we tried to control our passion, we often found ourselves surrendering to the moment. We were Christians. It drove us nuts! We didn't want to grieve the heart of God. We went to church together and prayed that God would give us strength to make pure decisions, but we kept falling into the familiar trap of our sin.

In the middle of my junior year, the compromises and choices that my boyfriend and I had made resulted in a pregnancy. When the stick turned blue that cold winter morning, my heart turned black. I thought my life was over. I had disgraced my family and my faith. I felt like the world's largest phony and could hardly stand to be me. It was unbearable.

My mind flooded with consequences that I had no desire to consider.

What choice do I have? I thought. *If I actually have this baby, I'll lose my volleyball scholarship. I'd have to drop out of college. I'd be the topic of campus gossip. I'd publicly disgrace my family and my faith. People would know that I had been having sex! My secrets would no longer be secrets.*

I couldn't let that happen. I just couldn't.

I reacted by rushing past the values I had been raised with, the convictions of my heart, and the fundamentals of my faith to the

blurred “solution” of death. I had never accepted that abortion was a moral option for an unplanned pregnancy until it was *my* unplanned pregnancy.

I remember the phone call to my boyfriend. Through sobs, I managed to tell him I was pregnant. There was a long pause on the other end of the phone...and then came the speed round of questions and comments: “What are we going to do? Do you think we should get married? Oh, my gosh...oh, my gosh...what are we going to do? Do you want to have this baby? What are we going to do? What about volleyball? What will your parents say? What will my parents say? Oh, my gosh!”

Like trapped animals, we were frantically looking for a way out. Then we made our decision. We would take care of it. It wasn't time for us to have a baby yet.

God wasn't consulted. He wasn't invited into our decision.

Adam and Eve hid in the garden after eating the forbidden fruit. My boyfriend and I hid from God and did what we considered to be our only option. We made a plan. He would pick me up and take me to a clinic that I read about in the yellow pages.

When the day came, we drove in icy silence. I was Fort Knox. No one was going to break through the protective walls I had constructed.

You see, there was never a moment that I believed having an abortion was the right thing to do. I only stubbornly and naively believed that my choice was the only ladder out of the horrible pit I had dug for myself.

I was wrong. Dead wrong.

There, in the sterile room of that stale clinic, I used an alias. I wasn't Gwen. My charts did not say that I was Gwen, the girl who was raised by good parents, the girl who was raised in the Word of God to know right from wrong. The counselor I had met with said that using my name could have made me feel uncomfortable with the “harmless and legal procedure” I was having done that day. Nobody else needed to know. I was anonymous.

It was my secret. A secret of chains that bound me in silence for the ensuing fifteen years. A secret kept because I mistakenly assumed that no one else could handle the ugly truth of my sinfulness with grace and forgiveness. I was a Christian girl. Christians don't get pregnant when they aren't married, and Christians don't have abortions, right? It was all too scandalous, and I was crazy afraid of the consequences.

Most of that day was a blur. It was a dark, cold January day. Though the clinic was lit with bright fluorescent lights, the flame of dignity and hope in my heart had grown dim. I blocked out all the voices in my head as they contested what I was doing. I was desperate and scared.

I was Peter. Simon Peter was a fisherman Jesus had called to be a fisher of men. His relationship with Christ was passionate and intimate, but far from perfect. He was a disciple, one of Jesus' closest friends. Jesus called Peter "the rock," and he would eventually go on to build the foundation of the Christian church.

But before he did, the Bible shows us, in Luke 22:54-60, that the night Jesus was arrested, Peter "followed at a distance," sat in a courtyard with enemies of Jesus, and denied three times the Lord he loved. Remarkably, Jesus *knew* Peter would betray Him, yet still extended advanced mercy as He said to him, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32).

I imagine that when Peter betrayed Jesus on that long, dark night preceding the crucifixion, he must have felt a physical illness and emotional angst similar to the one that shattered my life the day I said yes to death and betrayed my Lord. Luke 22:62 tells us that after he had disowned Jesus three times, Peter "went outside and wept bitterly."

Peter *knew* Jesus, yet still betrayed Him.

He *loved* Jesus.

I *knew* Jesus, yet still betrayed Him.

I *loved* Jesus too.

A Broken Heart

But that love was tucked into the icy trunk of my heart on that snowy winter afternoon.

For weeks following my abortion, I went through each day under a dark cloud of despair. I couldn't reconcile what I had done with who I was and who I was supposed to be. My heart was broken. I felt hopeless and was horribly ashamed. I was disgusted and lost. I remember fighting with my roommates about things that really didn't matter and fighting with my boyfriend about most anything. My poor roommates had no idea why I'd turned into Cruella DeVille. I was irrational and angry 24/7. I hated what I had done, and I hated myself for doing it. I was responsible for the death of my baby. It was my fault and I knew it.

And it haunted me.

Voices of accusation screamed in my head. *Murderer! Baby killer! Hypocrite! You can never tell a soul about this!* Condemnation from the accuser kept me shackled. Without realizing it, I was a captive to my own acceptance of his words.

The dark days turned into weeks, which turned into months. Although I could turn on the fake charm like water from a faucet—oh, how my plastic smile served me well in those days!—I was dying inside. At night, my pillow soaked up rivers of tears. I would lie awake, wondering if my baby was a boy or girl, or if my baby had felt any pain as she was being sucked from my body.

I wept. I wept for both my baby and for myself. It was necessary. It felt right to cry. And though the tears helped my soul grieve, none were as healing as the ones I cried to Jesus when I finally turned back to Him.

A New Song

Like Peter after the rooster crowed, I wept bitterly at the feet of Jesus in raw repentance. Then, as the psalmist did,

I waited patiently for the LORD;
 he turned to me and heard my cry.
 He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
 out of the mud and mire;
 he set my feet on a rock
 and gave me a firm place to stand.
 He put a new song in my mouth,
 a hymn of praise to our God.
 Many will see and fear
 and put their trust in the LORD.

(PSALM 40:1-3)

And though I didn't deserve His mercy, Jesus forgave me. My forgiveness was immediate and complete, but the healing took time. He eventually did give me a new song.

Who is a God like you,
 who pardons sin and forgives the transgression
 of the remnant of his inheritance?
 You do not stay angry forever
 but delight to show mercy.

(MICAH 7:18)

Who is this God who forgives *all* of our wretchedness?
 How could He?

Although I knew I was forgiven, I wrestled with these perplexing questions for years. I accepted most of His truth, but a disquieting voice hung around to tell me time and time again, "You are now disqualified for anything of significant kingdom value because of what you have done. You had your chance and you blew it."

It wasn't the voice of God.

I recognize now that it was the voice of the accuser.

Have you heard that voice? If so, tell him to stop talking! Listen to God's voice, the voice of Truth. The Bible assures us that our hope has *never been about what we have done; it has always been about what*

Christ has done. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Friend, accept God’s gift of grace today. He wants so badly to give it to you. It’s free, but it was bought at a very high price.

It is extravagant. Unwrap it. Embrace it. Live with it.

Embracing God's Restoration

When I was twenty-nine years old (nine years after my abortion) God called me to His service again. He gently reminded my heart that when He calls you, you are called. The great commission is for all of us, not for the perfect among us. Mistakes don’t change that commission. There may be a time of healing, restoration, and discipline, but God can and will still use you.

Did you hear that?

God can use each and every person who surrenders her brokenness into His hands...no matter what. That is what the good news of Jesus is all about! The Bible is filled with people just like you and me who failed miserably, wounded themselves and others, and were still met with divine mercy. David was known as “a man after God’s own heart,” but he had a scandalous affair with a married woman and then murdered her innocent husband. Mercy met him at his deepest need. Mercy longs to meet each of us at our deepest need and bids us to come.

Have you met with mercy? Have you experienced God’s compassion and forgiveness?

Once I understood that I was still called, I desperately sought God’s will for my life. I knew my heritage in faith, but I wanted to leave a clear legacy. His Word reminded me in Romans 8:1-2 that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.” Forgiveness freed me to respond to God’s call and to step out in faith.

So I did. I said yes to God. I told Him I would do what He wanted

me to do. And after I said yes to God, my journey became rich in love. I began to experience God on a whole new level. I still made mistakes, and I still failed regularly as a wife, mother, and friend. But the more I grew in Christ, the less I seemed to fail. Not because of anything good in me, but because of Christ in me.

Blessings followed the surrender. I embraced my forgiveness and got busy for God. I wrote songs, led worship, recorded CDs, and told people about the unconditional love of God. I did all that He was calling me to, and I was willing to do most anything He asked of me. But I was *not* telling anyone about my abortion. That was not an option.

I had been healed and restored from deep spiritual and emotional wounds, yet for fifteen years I wasn't willing to tell anybody. I had held tightly to my secret for so long that my stubborn grasp did not release easily. As I grew in Christ, the Holy Spirit began to nudge me to talk about my abortion. I wrestled with God about this. We went countless rounds. I'm embarrassed to say that thousands of tears fell, and my pride had to be continually crushed before I conceded.

A Willing Heart

God asked that I be willing to tell so that others could know forgiveness and healing as I do. It made sense, but oh, it was hard!

God *should* have my willingness. It's nothing compared to His sacrifice.

Now I am willing. It took me a long time to get here, but I'm willing. A great responsibility comes with this forgiveness. I do not think that we are obligated to recklessly share all of our stuff with others just because we are believers. I am convinced, however, that if God is calling us to use something for His purposes, then—as His children, saved by grace—we *are* obligated to obey Him.

I'm not sure what this might mean in your life, but I suspect the Holy Spirit might just be stirring something deep within your heart right now. My friend, is there something that God is calling you to do for Him? How has the unconditional love of God affected who you are? Are you willing to step past your fears to walk in obedience? It

is time, as Jesus said to Peter, “to turn to [our] companions and give them a fresh start” (Luke 22:32, MSG) through the testimonies of our lives. It’s time to embrace the brokenness of our past and view it as an opportunity to do good.

The guilt, pain, and shame of our pasts tell us we are disqualified to move on, to serve God, to be free, and to know peace. But to believe this lie is to believe that your sin is outside the scope of God’s grace. Nothing could be further from the truth. You have purpose in this life. And though you may have gone through a season of hurt, rejection, or pain, God can and will pick you up and place you back on track.

There is no condemnation for those in Christ. While the enemy loves to cast false guilt, our Lord loves to extend grace and forgiveness, which is the remedy that restores all our broken pieces. Don’t hold onto those pieces. Don’t hide them behind a plastic smile. Bring them into the light, lay them at the feet of Jesus, and let go.

Then stand back and watch the wonder of grace at work as God creates something beautiful in you.

"Broken into Beautiful"

Gwen Smith, Sue Smith, Chad Cates

She's smiling on the outside,
But she's hurting on the inside.
It's getting hard just living anymore.
And the shadows she has clung to,
Painful things that she has been through,
Have left her feeling worthless, Lord...but

*You change worthless into precious,
Guilty to forgiven,
Hungry into satisfied,
Empty into full.
All the lies are shattered,
And we believe we matter
When You change broken into beautiful.*

We live with accusations,
Sometimes heavy expectations,
That tell us we can never measure up.
And yet You repeat with mercy
That in Your eyes we are worthy
At last we see how much we're loved 'cause
Though we can't see how we can stand before You, Lord
And feel valued, priceless and adored

[Chorus]

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