



CONFESSION: WHEN I WAS LITTLE, I THOUGHT THAT IF I SWALLOWED A WATERMELON SEED, IT WOULD TURN INTO A BABY IN MY BELLY AND MAKE ME PREGNANT. I ALSO THOUGHT I MIGHT GROW UP TO BE A SUPERMODEL SOMEDAY. LATER I LEARNED THAT SWALLOWING A WATERMELON SEED IS HARMLESS AND WILL LEAD TO NOTHING MORE THAN SOME MILD INDIGESTION. I ALSO LEARNED THAT A TATTERED AND FRAYED GIRL LIKE ME IS BETTER SUITED FOR TRUNWAYS THAT ARE NOT SO GLAMOROUS.

Perhaps you're wondering who the enchanting beauty queen on the previous page is. You know—the one with the stylish pink dress and the not-so-stylish bandage on her twisted ankle.

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Well, that's me.

The photo was taken in the fall of 1996. I was sitting on top of a luxury car as I rode through a small-town festival parade. It was my senior year in high school, and I was a festival queen—a far cry from the supermodel lifestyle I'd once dreamt about. The stylish supermodels of the 90s—Nikki Taylor, Cindy Crawford, Tyra Banks—were people whose lifestyles I sought after. But somehow, through a weird chain of events, I ended up sitting atop a car as a festival queen.

It's obvious I'm no supermodel. Unless you count my dog, no one thinks I'm famous. No one has ever followed me around desperately trying to snap a picture of me as I dine at a ritzy restaurant or carry my grocery bags into my house. In fact, when compared side by side, the dreams of my youth and the realities of my life seem as different as Sanjaya Malakar and Carrie Underwood. But I'm guessing that if these two *American Idol* stars wanted to, they could pull off a pretty decent duet, in spite of their obvious differences in style and musical genre.



It's the same for me as I look at the differences between the life I'd imagined as a supermodel and the indisputable gift that is my own "super-model" life. When I became a festival queen and, later on, a youth pastor, one might think I didn't make it, that I wasn't any kind of supermodel at all. But I have become one—in a

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wonderful, different, unexpected Sanjaya-and-Carrie type of way.

I write to you, beautiful young friend, because not so long ago I was a teenager like you, searching for something to give my life meaning and purpose, and wishing for someone to love me. In my journey I found something I think will be worth your time, something that could change the way you look at yourself and the direction of your own dreams.



TRIPPED UP

A few years ago I was on my way home from a National Youth Worker's Convention and had some time before my flight. I was wandering around an airport bookstore when I stumbled onto something that would eventually lead me here, writing to you. Now when I say "stumbled," I mean it literally—I tripped over my little travel suitcase and went hurtling into a display at the Hudson News Bookstore in the airport in Columbus, Ohio. Not only did I scatter the display and send about ten books to new homes on the floor, but I also ended up on the ground myself, scrambling after the books I'd just knocked over. There probably weren't many people watching, but I was embarrassed—so I picked up one of the books I'd landed on and pretended to studiously read the back cover.

That book had a profound impact on me. It was called *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write about Their Search for Self*

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(Harper, 1999). It was written by a college student named Sara Shandler who'd begun working on it when she was just 16. Shandler's book was a response to another book written five years earlier, Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (Riverhead, 1994). Both books were about girls and the challenges they face, but Sara Shandler got the stories straight from other young women like her who were in the midst of the struggle. The idea intrigued me. The young women in Shandler's book shared about the difficult issues shaping their lives—ranging from family dysfunction to drug abuse, friendship to eating disorders. I read each chapter with tears in my eyes, marveling at the harsh realities girls face each day and wondering where they find hope. I was saddened and frustrated that there were very few glimmers of healing to be found in the book, very little evidence of wholeness.

The hope I did see sprang from the honesty of the girls willing to share their stories. Sharing a story can be healing in itself, a freedom someone experiences when something pent-up gets set free. But something major was still missing. As the author wrote of the thousands of stories that had poured in for this book, I thought of all the young women who had written, desperately desiring to be heard. Although it wasn't the purpose of her book, I wished Shandler had included the stories of the girls who had found wholeness and strength through the struggle, the ones who had found redemption and forgiveness. As I thought about how I'd wandered through the murkiness of adolescence, I realized the girls in the book—and the girls I minister to back home—were all wandering, too. They hadn't yet found that they could emerge from the wilderness into a land of purpose and plenty.

I shared this observation with the girls at the camp I attended every summer. I read a few of the stories from the book with them, and told them how I wished it had included stories

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of hope and inspiration in the midst of those same struggles. I longed to read of the girl who—through the struggle, after the tragedy, in the midst of darkness—found a new reason to live. I longed to read of the girl who suffered pain or obsession but found that light and transformation were available to her. I wasn't looking for every story to turn out perfectly in the end. I was looking for the stories of girls who didn't have a perfect life but were willing to live by faith and to chase after their God-given dreams anyway.

I guess I was looking for a story more like mine. I once lived in darkness. I once lived with fears and dysfunctions—in fact, I still do. But God brought me into a place of light, a place where I could deal with these struggles in a way that reveals the person God desires me to be.

I grew up in a state of semi-confusion and youthful hope about my dreams. I would stare into my bedroom mirror, envisioning myself as a runway model—believing that if I worked hard enough, I could become the next great supermodel. But this dream also scared me. I would have died if I ever found someone spying on me as I posed in the mirror. I held these dreams of my heart tight inside, fearing that if I revealed them to anyone, then I might be held accountable to them or be seen as a failure if things didn't work out. In my mind it was better to be safe and keep my hopes and dreams to myself than to share my dreams and be let down in front of everyone.

It's not easy to be a teenage girl. I'm sure you have your own struggles. Struggles (plural) camped out in my teenage mind and body for a long time, and I didn't even realize how some of these struggles were damaging my understanding of myself and even my relationships. So, after reading a book about girls I didn't know and considering my own story, I had to ask...

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...Is there anyone else? Is there anyone else who has been able to find her way through the struggles that keep her from seeing who they are in Christ and the dreams God has given her? I had to believe there were others who had seen the truths beyond all of the lies. There have to be others who, in the midst of struggle, have found a new reason to be alive.

I brought all these thoughts to the girls at camp that summer. I told them I wanted to find the girls who recognized God in the midst of their circumstances (even during the most painful and unjust ones), to share the stories of girls who were in the heat of life but were holding on to something far more stable than their temporary and sometimes false selves. I wanted to offer a sequel of sorts—one that showed resilience and strength gained from having a relationship with Christ through even the hardest times.

After my talk that day, I hung out at the front of the room among metal folding chairs while sounds of lunch being prepared rang in the nearby kitchen. I expected all the girls to exit the room where we met, but instead a line of girls formed in front of me. Each one of them had something unique to share with me, her own story of hope. One girl, Natasha, urged me with fiery determination to never stop believing in this dream to help girls find their voices for God. I will never forget what she said to me, “Pastor Brook, I’m going to write that book for you someday.” She was talking about a book in which she would share her struggle and how God gave her strength to get through it. She was determined to find a way to share her story of hope and redemption with others.

Who knows what Natasha is up to today? Maybe she’s working on writing that book. Or maybe she doesn’t even remember that little talk we had that afternoon in the heat of summer. But I know I felt deeply her strong desire to be heard,

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and it reinvigorated my belief that God is at work in all of us. And it made me want to tell my own story.

So here I am, writing a book I dreamed about years ago, and telling you I wasn't always so sure of myself. I sit here a few months away from giving birth to a daughter of my own, and I wonder, "How on earth am I going to say anything that makes a difference to you?" But it's the same feeling I had that day at camp when sharing my heart with young girls yielded great fruit. So I'm trusting that something good will happen again. I'm hoping you will read something here that will speak to your heart and help you realize how awesome you are in God's sight.

I dreamt about being a supermodel my entire life. Now I know what that dream was for. It led me here, to this place of sharing with you.

SUPERMODEL BABY

We don't usually categorize babies as supermodels. So to say that I was born with a supermodel birthmark, or something that set me apart to become a model, really wouldn't be fair. But as far back as I can remember, I daydreamed about becoming a supermodel.

Brooke Shields was perhaps the most famous model of my childhood days, and I knew she'd been modeling since she was a very young girl. I believed there was a supermodel living in me, too. I even had a book about Brooke, filled with pictures of her when she was young. The pages were worn, and I'd read the beauty tips over and over again. I still remember most of them: "Always throw away mascara after six weeks." "Wash your face each night." "Don't pick!" The similarities in our