



Sweet
Like
Jasmine

Finding Identity
in a Culture
of Loneliness

Bonnie Gray

“In a world crying out for kindness and belonging, this is a book needed for our times. *Sweet Like Jasmine* is a gift, a beautiful remembrance that God treasures each of our broken hearts in His sweeping story of redemption.”

Ann Voskamp,
New York Times bestselling author of
The Broken Way and *One Thousand Gifts*

“*Sweet Like Jasmine* feels like having a cup of tea with a kind and brave friend who reminds you of God’s love, His grace, and how His unseen hand is in all of our stories. It’s beautiful and powerful, life giving and heart freeing, deeply personal and soul-touching relatable. I read it one weekend, savoring every word, and I didn’t want it to end.”

Holley Gerth,
Wall Street Journal bestselling author of
The Powerful Purpose of Introverts

“Bonnie has a gift! Her stories draw you in from the start, and her raw honesty captures the heart of all who are looking for love and belonging in a culture of loneliness and isolation. This book is a healing balm of beauty from brokenness.”

Rebekah Lyons,
bestselling author of *Rhythms of Renewal* and *You Are Free*

“If you’ve struggled with feeling as if you don’t fit in or aren’t good enough, Bonnie’s story of finding beauty and belonging in her brokenness will encourage your heart. I loved her poignant retelling of both the sweet and the bitter memories from her childhood, and how she can look back and see God’s goodness and faithfulness in the midst of it.”

Crystal Paine,
New York Times bestselling author, podcaster, and
founder of MoneySavingMom.com

“Bonnie Gray is an engaging storyteller who reminds us of the grace woven through each chapter of our lives. This book is both poetic and insightful. Beautiful and honest. A worthy companion through the wilderness of learning to find our identity. Through stories, letters, cultural insights, and reflections, *Sweet Like Jasmine* generously provides much-needed language and permission to embrace the wholeness of who we are.”

Morgan Harper Nichols,
author of *All Along You Were Blooming*

“No one tells a story like Bonnie Gray! Join her on a journey of vulnerability, discovery, and a growing awareness of God’s redemptive power in our lives. Along the way, you’ll see that it’s right in our broken places that God shows himself strong.”

Kathi Lipp,
bestselling author and speaker

“This is one of those books that will stay with you long after you’ve turned the final page. Bonnie’s story is achingly beautiful—not only because it’s true, but because it is truly transformative. Our two life stories couldn’t be more different, yet Bonnie’s story is also mine. And it’s yours. This is a story of the secrets and shame we all carry, and how God is working—always working—to bring beauty out of every broken moment. This book is a treasure.”

Jennifer Dukes Lee,
author of *Growing Slow* and *It’s All Under Control*

“*Sweet Like Jasmine* is a love story that will bring beauty and healing to tender places in the heart and deeper compassion for those who have ever felt unlovable or unworthy.”

Melissa Michaels,
New York Times bestselling author of
Love the Home You Have and *Dwelling*

“A beautiful book with thought-provoking reflections, *Sweet Like Jasmine* is a captivating blend of powerful story and hope-filled self-discovery. I couldn’t put it down!”

Renee Swope,
bestselling author of *A Confident Heart*

“Bonnie has often led the way to freedom and truth by going there first herself. Her ability to invite us as readers into her stories, and therefore into our own stories, makes this world a better, more healed place.”

Annie F. Downs,
New York Times bestselling author of *That Sounds Fun*

S w e e t
L i k e
J a s m i n e

B o n n i e G r a y



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*To Jesus
my Loving Savior
who understood my loneliness
and tenderly calls me His beloved*

*To Eric
my beloved soulmate
because writing a new story
with you makes life beautiful*

*To Josh and Caleb
my beloved sons
because being your mom is a joy, seeing
God's light shining within you*

*And to my kindred readers
because we are all simply walking each other home*



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Introduction



I've never truly felt beautiful or beloved. That sounds like something only people with perfect families in nice-looking houses get to experience. I wanted to grow up and leave behind everything that made me feel weird, flawed, and broken. So, I did all the things I was supposed to do and built a life that looked like everyone else's.

I did this so I could have a chance at being normal. So I could belong. So I could be loved. But something unexpected happened. As I tried to build the life I thought I should have, I discovered that I was not whole—not even close.

Even though I was grateful for everything in my life, I didn't feel happy. I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere. Instead of joy, I felt lonely and uninspired.

Somewhere along the way, I lost the things that make life beautiful and meaningful, that make us come alive with beauty and joy.

Once I had my second baby and became a mom to two boys, I figured it was too late for me. I was a parent now. We can't all choose our childhoods, but it was time to make the next generation better. *Just get over yourself, Bonnie*, I told myself. And that is how I gave up on myself.

But God didn't give up on me. This is a story of how He tenderly

gathered all the bruised and broken fragments I had tried to throw away. This is the story of God whispering, *What no one wants, I cherish. I love every part of you. You are worth loving. You are My beloved.*

As we take this journey together, I pray that you will hear this loving whisper come alive in you too, as you open your heart to your own story and embrace all you are created to be.

CELEBRATE THE JOURNEY

Join me. Listen to your life and celebrate everything that has happened to you, because it is through those events that God speaks. Together, we will go on an intimate journey to recognize your belovedness, realizing that flaws are not meant to be erased, but worth loving and even celebrating. The things that make us different and broken are the very parts that make us beautiful and bind us together.

This soulful journey is a powerful self-discovery experience made more meaningful by sharing it with friends, as you pause in the busyness of life and discover the gift of your stories. I encourage you to read this book with a gathering of kindred spirits to connect deeply using “Reflect and Share” questions I have tucked in each chapter to help spark conversation. Why? Because when we share our stories, we create a place of refuge in the world that says, “I see you. Rest awhile. You are at home with me.”

It's never too late to be you.

It's never too late to begin again.

It's never too late to be loved.

By the time you finish walking through this journey, you will gather a collection of your own stories to celebrate God's story in you—marveling at the glimmering mosaic of His love in your life, bringing beauty into the world.

For me, this journey began in a way I never could have predicted. Unexpectedly.



Chapter 1

Birth Certificate



My mother, *Ab-Ma*, was a mail-order bride from Hong Kong, and my father, *Bah-Ba*, worked as a busboy in a noodle shop in San Francisco Chinatown. I rarely tell people about any of this; it only leads to more questions: *How did your mother meet your dad? Why did your dad leave? Where is he now?* I never wanted to answer these questions because I didn't know the answers. No one ever told me. And what little I did know, I wouldn't want to tell anybody.

If you had asked me what my father looked like, I wouldn't even be able to really tell you for sure. It was a long time since I last saw him.

I didn't have a single photograph of my father by the time it was all over. My mother was cutting up every picture we had of him as I sat on the floor the day my father left, when I was seven years old. She yanked the photos out of their vinyl album pockets, making sure to cut straight into the middle of his face on each image, throwing them all over the living room floor, like weeds thrashed and ejected from under the relentless blades of a lawn mower.

I learned to never ask questions about my story because Ah-Ma always shouted the breath out of my questions as I sat frozen with chopsticks in my hand, feeling as small as a kernel of rice sticking to

the rim of my bowl. “What does it matter anyway?” she hollered at me. “Your father left, and that’s the end of that. Why are you asking? You wanna pack your bags and go live with your father?” Her eyes narrowed into me, like the scissors in her hand.

This was the moment I immigrated to a different kind of land, leaving my broken past behind, so I could start over. I wanted to be just like my mother—a 17-year-old, pregnant bride, who climbed a metal stairway into a Pan Am airplane to fly from Hong Kong and start a new life in San Francisco Chinatown.

Except the ocean I wanted to fly across wasn’t a body of water, but oceans of broken memories and unanswered questions that silently filled the pages of my life. I tried to hide all these questions away because the new land I endeavored to enter and belong to was the land of the unbroken and the beautiful. And there was no room for baggage on this journey.

• • •

I felt this same way when I became a mom. I had finally made it. I had stepped firmly into this new land to create the family I always wanted. My weird family history wouldn’t taint the new pages of my children. I felt the excitement of starting fresh, shaping lives from the beginning. My transformation into living as a normal, unbroken grown-up was about to be complete.

Once I got married, I never returned to Chinatown. I threw away my Canton-pop CDs and stopped speaking Chinese. I learned to cook pasta and stopped making Chinese bone-broth soup. I filled boxes with all the Chinese knickknacks I owned and drove it all to Goodwill. I became Mrs. Bonnie Gray, hoping that Bonnie Sook-Wah Lee would never come back to haunt me or my good life. I swore I’d never return to Chinatown. Ever.

• • •

If you've ever baked chocolate-chip cookies, you've seen a recipe that tells you to "bake for 8 to 12 minutes or until golden brown." That last part always stressed me out. What exactly was golden brown? But somehow, on the fourteenth time I peeked into the oven to check if they were ready, the hot air brushed up to singe my face, and I felt it in my gut.

It's time.

That's how I felt about my story. I was a stay-at-home mom who had just started blogging when my second son, Caleb, was born. I was writing about safe topics, sharing inspirational thoughts about the life of faith. Just like all Christian bloggers do. I was following what everyone else was doing, happy to have a part in encouraging others.

I even entered a short film contest because I was curious if I could win. It offered a thousand dollars to the person who could tell a real-life story best in 90 seconds. As I searched my mind for something unique to help me stand out, my thoughts kept returning to seven-year-old Bonnie. Of course, I couldn't tell *that* story, so I sanitized and submitted it.

I thought I had a pretty good shot. After all, how many people in the world have a mail-order bride as their mother? But I didn't win. The guy who held a multiday vigil to get a senator to sign a bill to feed children in Africa won.

It was hard to get back to writing on my blog. As I was showering, driving, or sometimes staring off into space, the question sat there.

Why don't you tell your story?

Been there, done that in 90 seconds. Can I just move on now? I wished I hadn't entered the contest.

That same week I lost, I was rummaging through paperwork, looking for my oldest son Josh's birth certificate. It was time for summer school, and I was collecting all the needed documents for him to attend preschool. That way I could get a breather while baby Caleb napped and three-year-old big brother was cutting construction paper and making popsicle-stick art for a few hours.

I opened up an old, dusty file cabinet we store in the corner of the closet, covered by piles of clothes. I was hoping I did not misplace Josh's

birth certificate, shoving it somewhere random, because four years ago is a long time during baby-survival years. My fingers were traveling through the files, when they stopped on a yellowed, folded paper. I made a mental note to get this messy pile of stuff organized one of these days and opened up the document.

CERTIFICATE OF LIVE BIRTH

Name of Child: First Name: Bonnie

City of Birth: San Francisco

It was my birth certificate.

I don't think I had ever really studied the information on my birth certificate. I had used it a couple times—mainly to prove my identity, birth date, and citizenship. You know, to get a driver's license, passport, and whatnot.

But this was the first time I *really* looked at it. Line by line.

Place of Birth: Chinese Hospital

Street Address: 845 Jackson St.

Age of Mother: 18

Residence of Mother: 1042 Jackson St.

I had to read the two addresses again. Did I read this right?

I was born in a hospital on the same street as the house my mother lived in...that *I* lived in? I was born in a hospital literally called "Chinese Hospital." Where and why in the United States could a hospital be named by a race? Apparently, there is one such hospital. I was born in it.

I thought the story I had told in 90 seconds was done. But when I took a second look, I realized my story was actually just at the cusp of turning golden brown. The afternoon I found Josh's birth certificate, I folded up my own and placed it back in the envelope.

Just like I know when it's time to take the cookies out, I knew I had to take a trip to Chinatown, to find the home I was born in. I'd never had any interest before now. *What's the point?* I recognized this questioning voice. It was seven-year-old Bonnie who had learned to be invisible and be quiet. But something new sparked in me. Curiosity.

My mother and father left San Francisco when I turned five, moving us inland to a small town. Two years later, they would divorce. I had not been back to San Francisco since I married Eric. I had never seen the house I was born in.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I called our babysitter to watch the boys that weekend. I was about to do something I had vowed never to do, and I needed my husband, Eric, for this mission. Although I did not know what I would find, I decided to set my GPS for *845 Jackson Street*—for the very first time.

You yourselves are our letter, inscribed on our hearts, known and read by everyone...you are a letter from Christ...written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Corinthians 3:2-3 BSB).



LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

Your Story Matters



Beloved,

Don't hide your story. Share your story. What God has done in your life...that's what you need to shine. You're the only one who can tell His story in you.

Your story matters. You matter. You are beloved.

How do you tell a tale you've wanted to forget and leave behind? You've always told yourself, *The past is the past. There's no point in looking back. Let's just move on.* But the past isn't something to be erased. It's a beautiful story God shapes to show what it means to be human and to be loved. Even when your past has made you feel insignificant, small, and not quite good enough.

God doesn't want you to kill your stories. He wants to take you where you've been and show you He was there. God wants to show you He saw the loneliness in your eyes and the tears that

went unshed. When you can't put the pieces back together again, let Jesus gather them with you, so He can tenderly fold your hand into His and gently hold you close.

Everything broken that is loved becomes beautiful by His touch. Jesus sees what others have missed—how lovely and lovable you are. He treasures each broken, beautiful moment in your life because you were there.

Jesus loves you through your story, the bitter memories made sweeter by the knowledge of His presence. We all have a broken, beautiful story that makes each of us unique and real. It's how God whispers, "Abba" into the world—through loving us in our story.

The parts of the story you want to cut out are the very parts that God want to shine His beauty through.

OPEN YOUR HEART

Chinese words originally began as a drawing of what the artist first saw. The Chinese character for *heart* 心(*xin*) can be visualized as a pictograph that shows little brushstrokes creating the image of the heart, beating and alive with movement.¹ The word *heart* is special because it is used to form the phrase for "happiness" 開心 (*kai-xin*), which literally translates as "open heart."

What a beautiful picture to embrace. We weren't designed to close our hearts to our sorrows and our joys; we were made to open our hearts to God and each other, to display the unique brushstrokes of all of life's experiences as indelible imprints of God's story.

Reflect and Share

- *What was your childhood home like?*
- *Do you have a desire to kill off any part of your story?*
- *If you gave yourself permission to be curious about your past, what would you want to know?*