

# Work in Progress

## An Unfinished Woman's Guide to Grace

By Kristin Armstrong

### **Introduction**

You may have met, or know, a woman like this: She brightens a room, can literally alter the energy before she opens her mouth. Her presence alone is uplifting, her warmth is genuine radiance, and her eye contact feels like a gift. Her compassion and confidence are unshakable. She knows herself well enough to be able to get to know you. She has no pretense about herself, has no need to hide because she lives in truth. She has no need to exalt or deprecate others or herself, and this allows others the freedom to be authentic in her company.

She is the kind of woman who makes you check your posture, inside and out. She makes you want to think before you speak, not because you feel judged or compelled to impress her, but simply because she makes you want to be better. Her integrity draws others into the light. Her laughter is contagious. Her hugs feel so good you wonder how you can get another one without appearing needy. When she is happy, you want to celebrate with her. When she is struggling, you still want to be with her. Come to think of it, anything with her would be just fine.

Who is this woman? To me, she is a woman of grace.

And she is the reason I am writing this book. Not because I am a woman like this. I am a flawed woman . . . I spend too much at Target, I get very sour and sassy when I have PMS, I don't always pick up my dog's poop on a walk, I think new eye cream is a solution, I have eyed the clock in anticipation of a nice glass of red wine, I shush my children when I'm on the phone, I have memorized more song lyrics than Scripture, I have, in the past, cheered myself up with a new handbag. My spiritual walk has taken unnecessary side treks (off-road), and I have said and done things that I wish I could inhale and undo. I am as full of holes as I am good intentions.

But you know what? I know I can do better. I know that with God's grace I can become a more graceful woman. I know I can do a better job of making Him proud, making Him happy He created me, or at least making Him laugh. Just like my children enjoy exceeding my expectations, I want to be a delight to my Creator.

I have some awesome, like-minded girlfriends, many of whom you will come to know while reading this book. They, like me, are open to improvement. We run marathons together, we have weekly track workouts followed by Bible study together, and we raise our children together. We're fortunate to be blessed by friendships like these. The idea for this book came about in conversation on about mile five of a twenty-mile run. We were discussing the hunger we had for improvement, for direction, and for companionship on our spiritual journeys. We believe these desires come from God. Acts 11:23 says, "When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts." When He arrives, I want Him to see evidence of grace—in me, in you, in all of us. We need to encourage one another.

I eagerly read *The Girlfriend's Guide to Pregnancy* by Vicki Iovine when I was pregnant. And when I was in the pit of my divorce, I eagerly read every spiritual book and devotional I

could get my hands on. Why? Because I wanted to connect with someone who knew exactly where I was and how I felt. And now at a time when society gives all kinds of wrong images about what it means to be a woman, I want to counteract the counterfeit by putting another message out there. I want to investigate what God has to say about what it means to be a woman. Not just any woman, but a graceful woman. I turned thirty-six this year (that's over halfway to seventy, mind you), and I think it's time to find out.

Join me. I have chosen twelve traits of grace to explore. It's my hope that we emerge as more graceful women.

Kristin

## Chapter One: Beauty

I used to be one of those women whose list of New Year's resolutions included items like: lose five pounds (or ten), drink more water, eat more protein, eat fewer carbs, exercise five times a week, purge closet and get rid of ugly clothes, drink wine only once a week, drink less coffee, do yoga, stretch more. My list looked more like a diary entry from Bridget Jones than a statement of goals and directions for Kristin Armstrong. Why? I don't have a weight problem. I guess wasting time by focusing on items like these is more indicative of a vanity problem or of misguided social conditioning. Perhaps I was confused about beauty, thinking that the harder I worked at it, the more diligent I would become; or depriving myself would somehow equate to greater beauty.

My first point of confusion was interpreting beauty as something to be aspired to instead of a reflection of who we are. From the time we are little girls we aspire to be women of beauty. To say that you have never once cared about this is to *lie, lie, lie*. We all want to be beautiful. But is it right to *aspire* to be beautiful? According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, the word *aspire* comes from the Latin word *aspirare*, which means "to breathe." This tells me something huge. We cannot strive our way into being beautiful. We have to relax into it; we need to breathe.

The world has unreliable standards. Throughout history the definition of beauty has shifted to reflect the mind-set and trends of the current society. Sometimes we should be curvy, other times rail thin; sometimes tanned, sometimes pale; sometimes with long hair, sometimes short hair, permed hair, straight hair, feathered hair (God help us); bright red lipstick, pale gloss; long acrylic nails, short real nails . . . All right already—I'm tired just typing this. We devote our energies to meeting the latest standard or at least reaching some approximation of it, and we are

rewarded by . . . guess what? Another new mandate to chase after. It's an empty and relentless pursuit. Thank God we have another place to look for standards that are worthwhile and unchanging. *Up.*

God created each one of us specifically and beautifully. Among all of God's creation, we are the pinnacle, the icing on the cake, the signature on the masterpiece. This means that beauty is innate in each one of us in a way that is timeless and unalterable. Why are we wasting our time creating something that already exists within us? We can't. So what can we do instead?

We can unveil it.

### **Taking Off the Old**

When it comes to beauty, each one of us carries baggage from childhood. Seemingly innocuous moments of our girlhoods are etched into our psyches with a Sharpie pen. (And those really are permanent; remind me to show you my hallway upstairs.) I can remember some of mine, like changing for PE class in sixth grade and figuring out why all the boys loved this girl named Michele. Her body and my body looked like two different species. I changed in the bathroom after that. Or when I was putting on eyeliner in the crowded cafeteria bathroom mirror in eighth grade, and a girl named Tracey said, "That won't help you." Or this bossy boy in fourth grade who always picked me last for teams, saying, "She *sucks* in sports." (Do I? Six marathons later? But that "fact" about myself kept me on the sidelines until I was thirty-two.) You see? These moments, either painful or dismissive or both, are messages (lies, actually) spoken to our fragile images as we tentatively try to define who we are. I challenge us to understand that just as we didn't create ourselves, we do not have the power to define ourselves (and neither does anyone else). Only God can tell us who we are. But before we are ready to hear what He has to say about

us, we have to do a little housecleaning (I probably need Tilex—how about you?) to remove the debris of old, untrue notions about ourselves and our beauty.

For a little spiritual Tilex on the mildew of our past, let's try 2 Corinthians 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" This verse is so powerful in combating the lies in our heads about our existence and our appearance. It is a Magic Eraser on the past, clearing our slates and removing the misperceptions and misplaced values, imposed by ourselves or others. When we take off the old and realize that many "truths" we have built upon are actually false, spoken by voices other than God's, we begin to wake up.

[Callout]

Awake, awake, O Zion, clothe yourself with strength. . . . Shake off your dust; rise up, sit enthroned, O Jerusalem. Free yourself from the chains on your neck, O captive Daughter of Zion.

—Isaiah 52:1–2

[End callout]

We must pray for God to reveal those things that prevent us from seeing our true beauty. We must ask God to show us who we are and what we look like to Him. Though metaphorical for us, just like when Ananias cured Saul's blindness, we must remove the scales from our eyes.

[Callout]

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized.

[End callout]

We will never learn about beauty by looking at beauty magazines and comparing ourselves to airbrushed objects of so-called perfection. We are real women, in real relationships, doing real work, and our beauty is actively unveiled here, not captured in frozen poses. There is no comparison! I don't subscribe to any of those magazines anymore because if I did, I might begin to subscribe to them internally, and that is not acceptable to me. I have twin daughters, Grace and Bella, and those images are not what I want on our coffee table, permeating their young spirits and providing counterfeit standards. No, thank you!

Being a writer, I default to journaling when I have spiritual or inner work to do. Try it. Make a list of all the lies you have been told or have told yourself about who you are, what you look like, and what you are capable of. Pray 2 Corinthians 5:17 over every statement on your list. Then cross them out. *Yeah, baby.*

### **Putting on the New**

Once we have prayed our way through clearing the old image rubble, we have more freedom to consider something new. When I say new, I don't mean that we suddenly look in the mirror (with scale-free, crow's-feet-free eyes) and see this glam girl winking coyly back at us. No. I mean an entirely new way of looking at ourselves that may, in fact, not include a mirror at all.

[Callout]

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

[End callout]

Just like taking off the old requires a detour through the past, so does putting on the new. Because our new is really not new, it is innate in who we are and has been part of our passion, purpose, and pleasure since our first breath. Think of what you loved to do when you were a child. I loved to fling myself as high as possible on the playground swing set, legs pumping, heart racing, head dizzy. Go back far enough in your memory that you can connect with the activity that made you lose sense of time and place and forget your skin and all your self-consciousness, so immersed were you in the moment of living your delight.

I loved to chase the waves on the beach for hours in my Wonder Woman bathing suit, my braids filled with sand and my freckles multiplying in the squinting sun. I loved to run as fast as possible across the grass, thinking that if I could just get a little more speed, surely I would take off and fly. My parents told me that I could be anything I wanted to be when I was all grown up. “Anything?” I challenged. “Absolutely anything, honey,” they replied.

“Okay, I want to be an eagle.”

Just as the reality of Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy eventually spoils the fun, I learned that I had to remain human, much to my dismay. However, this does not change the fact that there is a tiny place inside me that still feels like I was meant to fly, maybe not meant to be eternally tethered by my humanity. When that tiny place stirs, I can feel my feathers.

What gives you so much happiness that you do not give a second thought to how you look doing it? At mile twenty-five of a marathon, do you think I care that I am wheezing like a dying cow, gimping along with cramping calf muscles, covered in a whitewash of dried sweat

scum, and smell like a locker room? No way; I am living a dream, face-to-face with my weakness, on the brink of despair, pushing past every fear of failure and success, totally humbled, totally lifted, totally exhausted, totally invigorated, and totally alive.

For my friend Paige, her thing is riding bareback on a horse, flying at top speed across the pasture, hair streaming out behind her, screaming “Yeeeeee-hawwwwww” at the top of her lungs. For my friend KT, it is the trained, timeless, ageless way her body propels through water in the lanes at Deep Eddy pool. For my friend Jena, it is the weightless, bounding joy of her trampoline. For Laura, it is riding her bike and taking her hands and feet off the handlebars and pedals while coasting downhill. For Elizabeth, it’s connecting with her inner gladiator, competing ruthlessly on the soccer field and doing a victory dance with every goal (or is it her compulsion to wrench a microphone from any performer onstage and belt out a tune of her own?). Jennifer cannot deny her internal ballerina as her feet inadvertently assume ballet positions while we do bicep curls in the gym mirror. Crystal cannot imagine life without sandy, sweaty beach volleyball. My friend Janie is a black belt. Who knew? Peggy can sew, knit, cook, or create anything, at any time. When I’m writing and I’m on a roll, I forget to eat—and I am someone who has to snack every two hours or I have a mood plummet of space shuttle proportions. What is it for you? What makes you lose track of your age, your decorum, the passage of time, or any constraint? What makes you feel like a kid?

Your assignment: travel down memory lane and reclaim your lost belongings.

If you honestly cannot remember, this is serious. Time for an intervention conversation with your mom, your sibling, or your oldest, bestest friend—because she will remember. Because it is that thing, the memory and the reacquaintance with it, that will clue you in to your beauty. When you are reveling in your passion and living your purpose, you are becoming

transparent, reflecting the inner beauty of God. Think about it, when you watch someone doing the thing they were meant to do, aren't they gorgeous?

Well, so are you.

### **New Eyes**

[Callout]

Give me your heart and let your eyes keep to my ways.

—Proverbs 23:26

[End callout]

Beauty is not about a reflection in a mirror. It is something God created, the essence of God Himself, and it stems from the heart. Changes in our appreciation for beauty need to come from the heart, not from the way we see ourselves with our eyes. In the verse above from Proverbs, God is asking us to relinquish our hearts to Him. He is the only One who can undo the damage that has been done to our hearts and heal us in such a way that we will have true vision. We have to believe that He can restore and reveal us.

[Callout]

He touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith will it be done to you." —Matthew 9:29

[End callout]

When I went to a retreat called “Captivating,” led by Stasi Eldredge, Stasi told us that each one of us has a special name given to us by God. It is something highly personal, incredibly intimate, and if you want to know what it is, ask God and He will reveal it to you. (I will admit, I was highly suspect.) I thought there was no way that the Creator of the universe would have the time or inclination to make up a pet name for me. Nicknames are cool, usually funny and based in love, indicative of close relationship. I figured that Stasi would get a special name, but I might just be Kristin Cate Richard Armstrong, or perhaps an assigned number. Like maybe God has a highly evolved Dewey decimal system to keep track of His flock, noting each one of us by a birth or death date and exact time. Doubting, but a direction-follower, I went outside for a covenant of silence, purportedly to speak to God about my so-called name.

I wasn’t getting much in terms of two-way conversation with the Master, and I was starting to get cold, so I pulled my jacket over me like a blanket and lay down on top of the picnic table. I closed my eyes and turned my face toward the sun. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I got a visual of this time I went for a magical run with my best friend Paige, through these picturesque fields in Provence. We ran beside rows of lavender and endless miles of sunflowers. I remember feeling perfectly inserted in a postcard image, totally blessed, totally at home even in a foreign land. *Sunflowers . . . I have always loved the way they turn and follow the sun. Follow the sun, follow the Son; oh, dear God, yes! That’s me. That’s it. How many times have You given me sunflowers? OHMYGOD (Sir), are you kidding me? I have a name—Sunflower!* And I know it’s for me, and I know without a doubt that every time I turn my face toward the Son, I am beautiful because I am loved, because I am warm and well-lit.

[Callout]

Those who look to him are radiant.

—Psalm 34:5

[End callout]

Since that day, I have seen sunflowers everywhere. From a roadside cluster noticed in the middle of deep conversation on a run in Santa Barbara; to a Volkswagen Beetle's dashboard vase in the adjacent lane of thick traffic, noticed while driving (and running late) to my cousin's wedding in Minneapolis; to the sole sunflower, tall and graceful, staring me in the face when I had the courage to take a spontaneous solo trip with my children to a remote lakeside cabin. It is my personal reassurance that He uses the beauty of His creation to achieve His purposes, and that His plan includes *me*.

And you too, by the way.

### **The Beholder**

[Callout]

We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness.

—2 Corinthians 3:18

[End callout]

The verse above sums up everything we have been learning about beauty. When we begin to unveil ourselves by stripping away old layers of lies, false definitions, and misplaced values about beauty, we are able to turn a fresh face toward God, reflecting His glory through

our being. The more we allow ourselves to be transformed into His likeness, the more captivating, irresistible, and breathtaking we become. And this is not the kind of beauty that is off-putting or exclusive; it is the kind of beauty that is inclusive and alluring. We can invite other women to freedom and possibility by being free and seeing the possibility in ourselves.

[Callout]

We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.

—1 Thessalonians 2:4

[End callout]

Remember the old cliché “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”? I used to think that this meant the man who was meant for me would find me beautiful. I spent the majority of my years trying to please the wrong beholders! I have fretfully hung pants of every size (up and down the pregnancy and postpartum size scales) in my closet. I have messed with makeup when I should have slapped on sunscreen and gone directly outside to play. I have eaten close to nothing in an effort to play small (and let us not forget my snack deprivation/mood issue? Yikes). I have wasted time worrying that I wasn’t pretty enough to keep “his” attention, when I should have been enjoying the things that made me interesting to begin with. If only in our twenties and thirties we could receive the self-awareness possessed by women in their sixties, how much time would we save and savor?

Maybe you know a sixty-something woman who possesses this self-awareness. The woman who makes you do a double take, trying to figure out what the heck makes her so lovely when she has twenty or thirty years on you. Look again, and see that her beauty is not about the

presence or absence of wrinkles or the settling of a few pounds. When she is busy living (not striving), she considers herself pleasing and alluring to one source only—and it isn't her adoring husband or smitten (and probably much younger—ha!) boyfriend. Nope, it's the Almighty.

[Callout]

The king is enthralled by your beauty.

—Psalm 45:11

[End callout]

We must seriously consider whose heart we are trying to capture with our beauty and understand that God's heart is the only one worth pursuing in this way. The only healthy, lasting definition of beauty and the only healthy, lasting appreciation of beauty come from God. God gave us our beauty and our purpose as a gift, and the gift is meant to be returned to Him. He is the One who deserves our praise and our passion. He is the One who loves our upturned faces. When our beauty is revealed and shared in a way that is intended to glorify our Creator, we are rewarded with a peace that surpasses all understanding, a peace that stems from being rightly related to God. We are set free from striving and judging and comparing. Women are different from men; we know this! Our way of bringing more hearts to God is through the softness and beauty of our invitation, which is issued by the way we live.

Beauty is not an outward covering; it is not something to pursue relentlessly and fight for ruthlessly. Beauty is a fountain, emanating from the core of our souls and bubbling outward, overflowing. If the fountain springs from the eternal well, our beauty, like our lives, is everlasting.

[Callout]

The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

—1 Samuel 16:7

[End callout]

Listen to the way God speaks to us, hear how He cherishes us, and see how He sees us:

“Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me” (Song of Songs 2:13).

C'mon, girl, let's go!