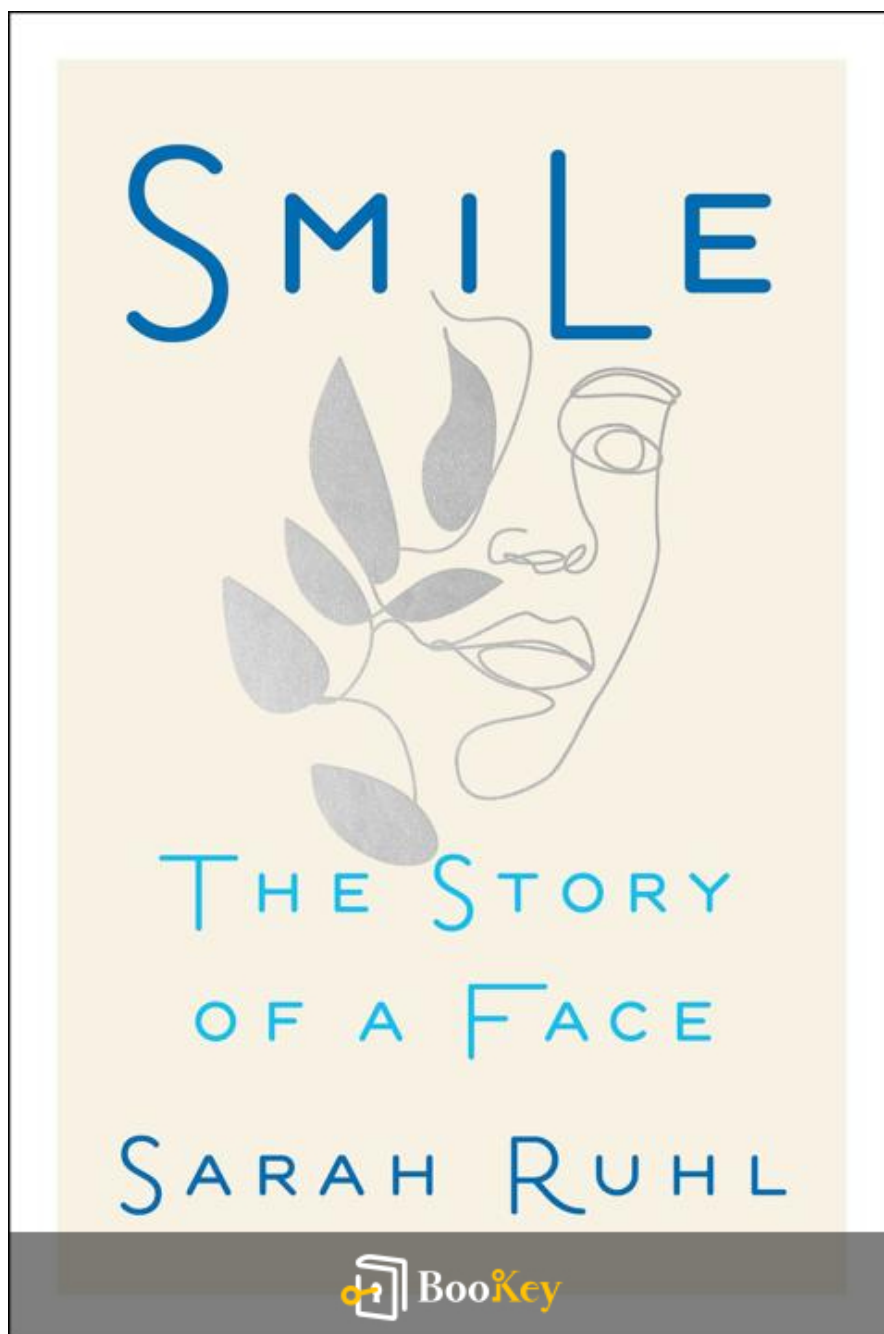


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Smile By Sarah Ruhl Summary

Finding Joy Amid Life's Struggles and Transformations.

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About the book

In "Smile," Sarah Ruhl brilliantly navigates the complex landscape of human emotion, exploring the intricate relationship between pain and interpersonal connection through the lens of a seemingly simple act: the smile. This poignant and thought-provoking play delves into the depths of how our physical expressions can mask our innermost struggles and vulnerabilities, raising profound questions about authenticity in a world that often demands a facade of happiness. Ruhl's unique blend of humor and heartache invites readers to reflect on their own experiences with joy and sorrow, ultimately revealing that the journey to finding genuine connection is as beautiful as it is fraught with challenges. With lyrical prose and powerful imagery, "Smile" is a captivating exploration of what it means to truly share ourselves with others, making it a must-read for anyone seeking insight into the human condition.

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About the author

Sarah Ruhl is an acclaimed American playwright and poet, celebrated for her innovative and contemporary approach to theater that often intertwines the personal with the profound. Born in 1974 in Wilmette, Illinois, Ruhl's distinctive voice features themes of motherhood, mortality, and the complexities of human relationships. She has garnered numerous awards throughout her career, including the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, and her plays, such as "Eurydice," "In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)," and "The Clean House," have been performed worldwide, earning her a reputation as one of the leading figures in modern American drama. Ruhl's writing is marked by a lyrical quality and an exploration of the intricacies of emotional life, making her an important voice in contemporary theater.

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Chapter 1 Summary: Twins

Ten years ago, a significant shift occurred in my life when my smile seemingly vanished, setting in motion a quest to reclaim it. The journey is rooted in hope, ignited by the anticipation of a new life as I lay in a clinic, awaiting the life-affirming sound of a heartbeat during an ultrasound.

Having already nurtured a three-year-old daughter, the prospect of welcoming a second child filled me with mixed emotions, particularly with the looming debut of a play I had written, set to grace Broadway stages in just five months. The tension of navigating these two exciting yet overwhelming paths was palpable.

As I lay there, apprehension enveloped me, memories of past misfortunes swirling through my mind. The technician's words pierced through my anxiety when she revealed the presence of twins. Shock transformed into elation, but accompanied by the sobering realization that my pregnancy was now classified as high-risk, mandating a shift in my healthcare provider. Left alone after the appointment, I eagerly anticipated sharing the news with my husband, Tony, but chose to relay the information via text, leading to a mix of surprise and excitement as we went to celebrate the news over lunch.

The moment was surreal. Despite the excitement of potentially expanding our family to three children—something Tony longed for—conflicting emotions brewed within me. Having initially settled on having just one or



two children, I couldn't help but grapple with the fear of being overwhelmed by my new responsibilities. During our lunch, we reflected on how my lost pregnancy felt like it had returned, integrating itself into our lives anew. The conversation soon turned somber as I expressed my concerns about whether my body could handle this level of abundance and if my writing career would survive the demands of motherhood.

In the aftermath of the news, I found myself freezing before parenting books, overwhelmed by images of mothers with multiple babies—a reality I wasn't ready to face. I worried about my ability to balance the attention required for my three-year-old, Anna, alongside new twins. The anxiety led me to call my mother, where I learned about a family history of twins—my great-aunt Laura had experienced the loss of stillborn twins, a tragedy that now colored my understanding of family and legacy. The haunting specter of Laura's heartache loomed over me.

As I shared my news with friends, reactions ranged from laughter to tears. Kathleen, a supportive friend from a large family, reassured me with her excitement for big families and offered her unwavering support. Three months into my pregnancy, I sought solace with former mentors Paula Vogel and Anne Fausto Sterling. Their love and hospitality on Cape Cod provided a momentary escape, yet I found myself grappling with the fear that I may never write again. Paula's reassurances that I would indeed write again provided a glimmer of hope amidst my inner turmoil.



My first Broadway production loomed on the horizon, yet I could not shake the profound unease about how I would manage my newfound responsibilities. The fortune cookie saying resonated deep within me; it articulated a truth I struggled to comprehend, suggesting that delivering my children could ultimately save my life or perhaps signal a necessary personal metamorphosis. As I embarked on this tumultuous journey of motherhood, I would spend the next decade unraveling the deeper meanings of this profound statement and understanding how my children might indeed reshape my existence for the better.

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Chapter 2 Summary: Opening Night

In Chapter 2 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the author shares her experiences leading up to the opening night of her play, **In the Next Room, or the vibrator play**, while grappling with the physical realities of pregnancy. As she attends rehearsals with a burgeoning belly, perched on a table and surrounded by snacks, Ruhl reflects on the complexities of balancing motherhood and her ambitious career in theater. She humorously notes the ambiguity of her appearance, where she is at the stage of looking merely "fat," not overtly pregnant. Despite being engrossed in the creative process, she finds herself preoccupied with the logistical challenges of managing a growing family after the arrival of her twins.

As the high-pressure opening night approaches, Ruhl's nerves intensify, magnified by her unique physical state. She is busy with press interviews, during which the focus surprisingly shifts to the play's male nudity—a detail she perceives as relatively subtle compared to the much more significant themes of intimacy and marriage present in the narrative. Ruhl is perplexed by the reporters' fixation on the male form, contemplating societal double standards that equate male nudity with shock, while female nudity often goes unnoticed or is treated lightly.

During the last week of previews, she shifts her viewpoint by sitting in the audience for the first time and becomes acutely aware of the actor Michael



Cerveris's full-frontal exposure. This newfound perspective leads to concerns about the distraction it causes during a pivotal monologue. Ruhl tries to resolve the issue by discussing "sight lines" with her leading man, who humorously retorts about the unavoidable association between his anatomy and his face. Despite her desire to intervene creatively, the stage manager insists she focus on resting rather than problem-solving.

The reality of opening night arrives, and Ruhl dresses in a sparkly navy maternity gown. She experiences the excitement of the Broadway atmosphere but refrains from indulging in champagne, prioritizing her health and the imminent arrival of her children. The after-party brings praise for the show, marking a moment of celebration and triumph for the cast and crew.

However, joy turns to anxiety the following day when Ruhl discovers she is bleeding, a distressing sign during pregnancy. A haunting couplet she wrote after a prior miscarriage echoes in her mind, embodying her fears and the secrecy surrounding women's experiences with loss. When she contacts her doctor, the chilling advice to stay home and remain in bed for the next four months compounds her concerns about balancing her art with the fragility of her pregnancy. Ultimately, the chapter poignantly captures Ruhl's navigation through the complexities of creativity, motherhood, and the unpredictability of life.



Chapter 3: Bed Rest

In Chapter 3 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the author reflects on her experiences during a period of bed rest, intertwining themes of boredom, the passage of time, and the complex emotional landscape surrounding pregnancy, particularly after a miscarriage. The narrative unfolds with Ruhl's initial intentions to engage in enriching activities, such as learning Greek and reading Proust, but instead, she finds herself distracted by the escapism of the "Twilight" series on her iPhone. As time stretches during her confinement, she grapples with the tedium and the inevitable introspection that comes with being confined indoors.

In 1, Ruhl poignantly addresses the literary fixation on the motifs of dead twins and dead mothers, a haunting echo reverberating through her own grief from a past miscarriage, which she processes quietly amidst the dynamic of her social interactions. Despite the cheerful distractions brought by her friends in the form of books, the prevalence of these morbid themes feels overwhelming, prompting her to discard many titles that bear reminders of loss.

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Chapter 4 Summary: The Itch

Around the twenty-fifth week of pregnancy, the narrator experiences an intense and debilitating itch that begins in her hands and feet before engulfing her entire body. This itch becomes increasingly unbearable despite various remedies, including lotions, humidifiers, and cold baths—echoing the historic plight of Jean-Paul Marat, who suffered from a mysterious skin condition. Her doctor dismisses the itch as common in pregnancy, but the narrator, feeling uneasy with this trivialization, researches online and learns about cholestasis of the liver—a rare condition that can threaten the health of her unborn twins. The anxiety escalates as she becomes convinced she has this condition after spotting all the symptoms detailed online.

1. The initial assumption that this itch is merely a pregnancy symptom shifts dramatically when lab results confirm the presence of cholestasis. Faced with the life-and-death seriousness that this diagnosis entails, the tone shifts from casual concern to the stark reality of medical vigilance. The doctors prioritize her health and that of her babies, instituting thrice-weekly ultrasounds to monitor fetal movement, a constant source of anxiety for the narrator.

The days stretch as she anxiously awaits the reassuring signs of life from her twins. The act of feeling movement becomes imbued with significance; their kicks and flutters are reminders of their vitality. This tension contrasts



sharply with the placid actions of relaxing or reading, yet she finds solace in the familiar world of fiction, noting how Gothic elements run parallel to her own experiences of pregnancy and fear.

2. As the weeks progress, the itch intensifies, and blood tests reveal rising bile levels, further heightening her worries. In a frantic late-night call to her doctor, the narrator learns that an amniocentesis might be necessary to assess the babies' lung development, which weighs heavily on her mind as she considers the potential risks involved.

The day of the procedure, the narrator grapples with her feelings of vulnerability while Tony holds her hand, illustrating their shared emotional burden. After the test, they await anxious results that will determine the timing of delivery. When the news comes that the babies' lungs are not yet ready, the doctors prescribe steroid shots to expedite their development and navigate the precarious balance between the dangers of cholestasis and the risks associated with premature birth.

3. As thirty-six weeks approaches, the urgency of the situation compels the narrator to the hospital under the pretext of feeling no fetal movement, a statement that fills her with dread, yet she recognizes its necessity for admission. An empowered decision emerges amidst fear and fatigue when she asserts they should proceed with the delivery after a long and arduous journey of pregnancy. Her doctor's guidance reassures her; his blend of



professional knowledge and empathetic support reinforces her trust in him as they navigate the complexities of delivering two babies.

In the operating room, everything accelerates toward the moment of birth. The narrator finds strength in pushing out William, marking a critical moment of joy mixed with relief. The subsequent delivery of Hope reinforces a profound connection between the twins, who hold hands as they enter the world. Amidst the chaos and hormonal upheaval post-delivery, she transitions from nervous anticipation to a moment of solace as both babies are placed in her arms, an intimate culmination of her arduous ordeal.

4. Unfortunately, her physical state is scrutinized by a nurse, reflecting a harsh reality in the postpartum experience that contrasts with the joy of motherhood. Despite struggles with feeding—particularly with William’s size—she takes immense pleasure in the tastes and sensations of the world post-delivery, feeling a mix of exhaustion and happiness. The offering of blueberries symbolizes nourishment, both literal and metaphorical, providing sustenance after a long and arduous journey through pregnancy, confinement, and ultimately, childbirth.



Critical Thinking

Key Point: The journey through pain and uncertainty can lead to profound connections and joy.

Critical Interpretation: As you navigate the unpredictable journey of life, much like the narrator's harrowing pregnancy, remember that your struggles, however intense, can foster deeper bonds with those around you. Embrace the challenges and anxieties as part of your story, nurturing a resilience that ultimately brings you closer to the people you love. Just as the narrator discovered joy and strength amid her fears, recognize that every trial you face can culminate in moments of connection and happiness, transforming what seems like suffering into a pathway for personal growth and shared experiences.



Chapter 5 Summary: Bell's Palsy

In Chapter 5 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the narrative unfolds in a poignant moment of vulnerability and unexpected health challenges during a pivotal time of motherhood. The chapter begins with a lactation consultant visiting to assist the author with breastfeeding her newborn twins. As the consultant observes an unusual droopiness in the author's facial features, a concern arises that shifts the tone of the scene.

1. Initial Realizations: Upon being prompted by the consultant, the author looks into the mirror and is shocked to see that one side of her face has become immobile. This moment of self-discovery transforms her perception of herself, illustrating how the profound impact of appearance can change one's identity. Until that moment, she felt unchanged, but the stark reality reflected in the mirror reveals a sudden and alarming difference.

2. Emergency Response: Alarmed by her condition, the author contacts her husband, Tony, a child psychiatrist who is depicted as calm and reassuring. His response reflects a blend of concern and professionalism, indicative of his medical background. As she describes her lineage of doctors, a sense of inherited knowledge about her conditions intertwines with familial bonds and shared medical histories, highlighting the emotional weight of her situation.



3. Diagnosis of Bell's Palsy: The arrival of a neurologist brings a formal diagnosis of Bell's palsy, contrasting the prior fears of potential stroke. The author learns about the symptoms and differences between the two conditions, noting how this knowledge impacts her understanding of her health and future. Although relieved that it is not a stroke, the ambiguous prognosis regarding the potential resolution of Bell's palsy leaves her in a state of uncertainty.

4. Emotional Turmoil: As the chapter progresses, a profound emotional vulnerability emerges. The author expresses her fears about being perceived as unattractive to her husband. Despite this, Tony reassures her of his unwavering affection, deepening their bond amid her struggle. This emotional exchange encapsulates a moment that transcends physical appearance and touches on the core of self-acceptance and love.

5. Intimacy Amidst Challenges: The chapter closes with a scene that encapsulates intimacy and support during a trying night in the hospital. While outside a blizzard howls, the poignant contrast of the couple's quiet connection offers a sanctuary. This tumultuous yet tender moment emphasizes themes of resilience and emotional support, framing the narrative within the broader context of love and connection amid life's unpredictability.

Overall, Chapter 5 reflects on the intersection of physical health, identity



perceptions, and interpersonal relationships, all while navigating the complexities of motherhood and emotional vulnerability.

Section	Summary
Initial Realizations	The author discovers one side of her face is immobile after a visit from a lactation consultant, prompting reflection on how appearance impacts identity.
Emergency Response	The author contacts her husband, Tony, who remains calm and professional, revealing the emotional weight of her inherited medical history.
Diagnosis of Bell's Palsy	A neurologist diagnoses her with Bell's palsy, alleviating fears of a stroke but leaving her uncertain about her future health.
Emotional Turmoil	The author fears being perceived as unattractive, but Tony reassures her of his affection, highlighting self-acceptance and love amidst her struggle.
Intimacy Amidst Challenges	The chapter concludes with a tender moment between the couple in the hospital, emphasizing themes of resilience and emotional support during difficult times.
Overall Themes	The chapter explores the intersection of physical health, identity perceptions, and relationships while navigating the complexities of motherhood and emotional vulnerability.



Critical Thinking

Key Point: Emotional vulnerability and self-acceptance in relationships

Critical Interpretation: As you navigate through life's unpredictable challenges, remember that your true worth isn't defined by your appearance or health—it's your courage to embrace vulnerability that fosters deeper connections with those you love. Just as Sarah Ruhl experiences the profound journey of accepting her altered self during a time of motherhood, you too can find strength in being open about your struggles. This chapter teaches you that sharing your fears can lead to unexpected intimacy and understanding in relationships, allowing love to flourish despite life's imperfections. Allow yourself to recognize that sharing these moments not only strengthens bonds, but also cultivates an environment of acceptance, reinforcing that you are valued for who you are inside, not just how you look.



Chapter 6: Sir Charles Bell and the Greeks

In Chapter 6 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the narrative unfolds around the historical and personal implications of Bell's palsy, a condition that affects facial expression through paralysis of the seventh cranial nerve. Sir Charles Bell, an influential figure in anatomy and neurology, gives his name to this affliction, which he studied in depth through his artistic observations of human expression. Yet, historical references reveal that the Greeks, Romans, and Persians had previously documented similar facial paralysis, with notable figures such as Galen and Aulus Cornelius Celsus providing keen insights into the condition.

1. Historical Context and Medical Understanding: Bell's contributions were significant but not pioneering. Even long before his era, ancient civilizations observed and described the symptoms of facial paralysis, indicating a longstanding recognition of the condition. Various ancient texts outline how such paralysis affects the ability to wrinkle the forehead and could lead to uneven facial features, demonstrating a continuous curiosity about human health and anatomy across history.

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Chapter 7 Summary: The NICU

Chapter 7 of Sarah Ruhl's "Smile" poignantly captures the emotional whirlwind of preparing to take one's newborns home from the hospital, while simultaneously grappling with unexpected challenges. The chapter opens with the narrator expressing a sense of distress over her altered appearance following a facial surgery. Despite this discomfort, she is filled with anticipation at the thought of reuniting with her child, Anna, who awaits her return under her mother's care.

As the narrator and her partner, Tony, prepare to leave, the focus shifts to their newborns, particularly Hope and William. The imagery used to describe Hope paints her as a delicate figure, almost ethereal with her "round and perfect" face. In contrast, William is described affectionately with the whimsical nickname "Chicken Legs," highlighting his small stature and the initial curiosity and affection parents often feel toward their children. The narrator fondly recalls William's early smiles, even though some might argue that such expressions are not expected at that stage, capturing the depth of parental perception.

A visit from Andy, a long-term friend and fellow playwright, adds another layer to the narrative. His arrival with car seats symbolizes a step toward normalcy but also highlights the discomfort the narrator feels regarding her changed appearance. She draws a parallel between feeling underdressed in



pajamas and her anxiety about being seen with her altered face, emphasizing the strain of vulnerability in such intimate moments. Andy's kind response reinforces themes of friendship and acceptance despite physical changes and challenges.

However, the situation takes a dramatic turn when a nurse discovers that William's lips have started to turn blue due to choking on his spit-up. The panic that ensues is palpable, capturing the fears and challenges new parents face. Tony's visible distress and sense of guilt reveal the internal conflict many parents experience, feeling responsible for their children's well-being even when circumstances are beyond their control. The narrator tries to comfort Tony, reiterating that this crisis is not his fault, which underscores the deep emotional bond between them during this tumultuous moment.

As the doctors work to stabilize William, additional distress arises when they decide that Hope must remain in the nursery under a heat lamp due to jaundice. The narrator's heartache at the idea of leaving her newborn daughter alone is palpable, and her desperate request to stay with her babies demonstrates a profound maternal instinct. However, she is faced with the stark reality of insurance limitations. Her farewell to Hope is imbued with gravity, amplified by her return to prayer—a reflection of her need for solace and faith amidst crisis.

In summary, this chapter intricately weaves together themes of vulnerability,



parental love, fear, and the harsh realities of neonatal care. It captures the emotional landscape of a mother balancing her inner turmoil with the urgent care of her newborns as she navigates the complexities of her newfound role.

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Chapter 8 Summary: A Brief Digression on My Catholic God

In Chapter 8 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the author reflects on her complex relationship with Catholicism, starting from her early experiences in faith and culminating in a moment of disillusionment that profoundly shaped her life. At thirteen, Ruhl was preparing for confirmation, a significant step in her Catholic upbringing. Despite having been baptized and having received her first Communion, her initial experiences were marked by anxiety and misunderstanding; during her first Communion, she was so focused on the proper way to receive the Eucharist that she forgot to eat it. This self-consciousness foreshadowed her ongoing struggles with faith.

During her confirmation class, a substitute teacher, Mr. Ivancovitch, instilled fear through graphic descriptions of Jesus' suffering on the cross, which only distanced her from the church's teachings. Each Sunday, she accompanied her father, a lector at their local church, yet felt conflicted about participating in confession even when she felt she had no sins to confess. This raised questions for her about honesty versus pride, ultimately leading her to exaggerate trivial actions to receive penance rather than risk appearing self-righteous.

Ruhl struggled with the theological principles she was required to memorize, particularly the Nicene Creed, finding inconsistencies in its teachings and



questioning the exclusivity of the Catholic Church. Her doubts regarding the role of women in the church, especially regarding their ability to participate in sacraments, further fueled her uncertainty. When she finally expressed her desire to forgo confirmation, she anticipated negative judgment from Sister Linda, her Sunday school teacher. Much to her surprise, Sister Linda responded with compassion and understanding, letting her know she was welcome back at any time.

However, the real judgment came from her peers, who taunted her for stepping away from their shared faith. Confronted by this group of classmates, Ruhl faced harsh persecution disguised as playful curiosity, culminating in a cruel gift—a plate of cookies shaped like Stars of David and a Hanukkah coloring book—meant to humiliate her. The calculated nature of this act perplexed her and deepened her feelings of alienation.

Her sister Kate, protective of her, suggested retaliatory pranks against the perpetrators, yet Ruhl chose to keep the incident hidden from Sister Linda, convinced the church community itself perpetuated hurt rather than the love it preached. This experience and the subsequent sentiments of mistrust towards religious institutions and social dynamics shaped her future beliefs, leading her to seek a more inclusive spiritual path.

Reflecting on this transformative chapter of her youth, Ruhl articulates her evolving relationship with faith, highlighting the emotional and intellectual



struggles that accompany an individual's journey in grappling with establishment beliefs and personal identity. Ultimately, this chapter encapsulates Ruhl's realization that the message of love she sought was often overshadowed by an unwelcoming culture within the very institution intended to embody those values.

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Chapter 9: The NICU, Continued

In Chapter 9 of Sarah Ruhl's "Smile," the emotional journey of a mother navigating the complexities of the NICU after giving birth to preterm twins, Hope and William, is poignantly unveiled. The chapter opens with Ruhl's prayer to her Catholic God for the safety of her babies, a prayer echoed by her mother, who claims the title of "NICU Catholic." This initial sentiment sets a tone of anxiety and faith amid uncertainty.

Returning home without her babies is a traumatic experience for Ruhl. She observes the bittersweet scene of her three-year-old daughter, Anna, who has prepared welcome signs for her new siblings. The mother's worry transcends to thoughts that Anna might harbor resentment towards the twins for changing her mother's personality and presence. Indeed, Ruhl grapples with her altered appearance from Bell's palsy, fearing it may alienate her from her daughter.

Initially, Ruhl receives well-meaning advice to rest while the twins are in the NICU, but morning brings a panicked phone call about Hope's health scare,

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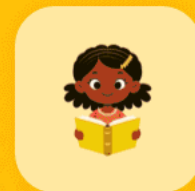
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Chapter 10 Summary: Home

In Chapter 10 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the narrative unfolds as the author and her partner, Tony, transition from the NICU to bringing their newborn twins, Hope and William, home. The initial moments are filled with both joy and challenges. The heaviness of the experience is palpable as the couple navigates the logistics of caring for two infants, while also encountering a tense interaction with an impatient elderly woman who calls out her frustration at them for blocking the car door. This outburst reveals the author's internal struggle, amplifying the pressures she feels, perhaps exacerbated by medication taken to support the twins' lung development.

1. The constant cycle of feeding and the nighttime challenges emerge as a central theme, illustrating the exhaustion that accompanies parenthood, especially with twins. The author describes a relentless routine where one baby awakens as the other is fed, creating a sense of never-ending responsibility and guilt over her perceived inadequacies, such as insufficient breast milk, further complicated by the formula supplementation. The weekly visits from a lactation consultant bring both guidance and a sense of avoidance, underlining her struggle to fulfill her maternal role.

2. Amidst the chaos, the author highlights the comfort and assistance provided by her mother-in-law, Liz, who arrives with beauty and wisdom. Liz's history as a former midwife and her supportive presence allow for



moments of connection and shared stories over the trials of new motherhood. Liz's own challenges and perseverance resonate, as they provide the author with valuable insights and camaraderie during the restless nights filled with the sounds of breastfeeding. Bound by a shared understanding of motherhood's complexities, their relationship grows deep, although it is tinged with the bittersweet awareness of Liz's impending illness.

3. The return of the author's own mother and sister reinforces the theme of familial support, yet also underscores the overwhelming nature of sleep deprivation. The author reflects on the sheer chaos of coordinating care for not only the twins but also her older daughter, Anna. This juggling act is exacerbated by Tony's limited paternity leave, which calls attention to the systemic inadequacies surrounding parental support.

4. Seeking additional help, the author turns to a sleep specialist only to leave feeling frustrated and unresolved—a reflection of the societal pressures placed on mothers to navigate parenting perfectly. Likewise, her venture into acupuncture to address her Bell's palsy introduces an alternative perspective on healing, yet adds layers of disappointment when immediate results do not manifest.

In summary, Chapter 10 captures the tumultuous early days of motherhood with a raw honesty that resonates broadly. It explores themes of love and



sacrifice, the delicate balance of familial bonds, and the quest for self-acceptance amidst societal expectations. Through laughter, frustration, and the occasional moment of connection, the author paints a vivid picture of the highs and lows of nurturing. As she navigates her challenges, the chapter serves as a heartfelt reminder of the complexities and beauties embedded within the experience of motherhood.

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Chapter 11 Summary: Smile!

In Chapter 11 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the author recounts a transformative moment in her life, marked by the nomination of her play "In the Next Room, or the vibrator play" for a Tony Award. This achievement, while typically a cause for celebration, felt distant and muted for Ruhl, as she grappled with the physical and emotional repercussions of Bell's palsy, which left her face partially paralyzed. The chapter unfolds with Ruhl's apprehension leading up to a Vanity Fair photo shoot, where she was tempted to decline participation due to her discomfort with smiling—a common expectation in the spotlight. Despite her reservations, she attended at the insistence of her agent.

As she stood on the makeshift red carpet, surrounded by a throng of photographers demanding her smile, Ruhl was confronted with her own insecurities. She felt out of place, and as the camera lenses focused on her, she could not comply with their demands. The fracturing experience of being urged to smile, particularly while facing physical limitations, led her to reflect on societal expectations of women, especially in public.

Ruhl draws a comparison between the discomfort she felt during the photo shoot and her past experiences as a figure drawing model in England. In that context, she found it easier to be unadorned and vulnerable, embodying her physical self in a way that felt natural, contrasting sharply with the pressure



to project happiness through a smile in photographs. This led her to explore why smiling often feels superficial or unnecessary, especially for women. She ponders whether smiling serves as an inappropriate adornment to her nakedness and what that reveals about societal norms regarding women, image, and interaction.

The chapter broadens its scope to tackle the broader implications of enforced smiling on women, with reference to the historical narrative of women of color who face additional burdens in this regard. Ruhl highlights the often-condescending insistence by men for women to smile, framing it as a call for validation of their existence rather than an invitation to genuine joy. This observation leads her to reflect on the complexity of women's emotional landscapes and the unspoken struggles inherent in public perception.

Simone Biles's rebuke of a judge's comment about smiling becomes a cornerstone of Ruhl's argument, amplifying the reality that external expectations do not define personal success or happiness. The chapter culminates in a powerful call to recognize the validity of women's emotions in their natural state—whether they are joyful or somber. Ruhl emphasizes the importance of allowing women to rest their faces without judgment, advocating for a shift in societal expectations that would enable women to embrace their authentic selves without the pressure to perform pleasure through compliance.



Through her narrative, Ruhl encourages readers to reconsider the implications of compulsory smiling, prompting a dialogue about emotional authenticity in women's expressions and the societal implications of imposing happiness as a requirement for femininity. The profound exploration of bodily autonomy, identity, and the expectations placed upon women resonates powerfully, challenging norms that dictate how women should present themselves to the world.

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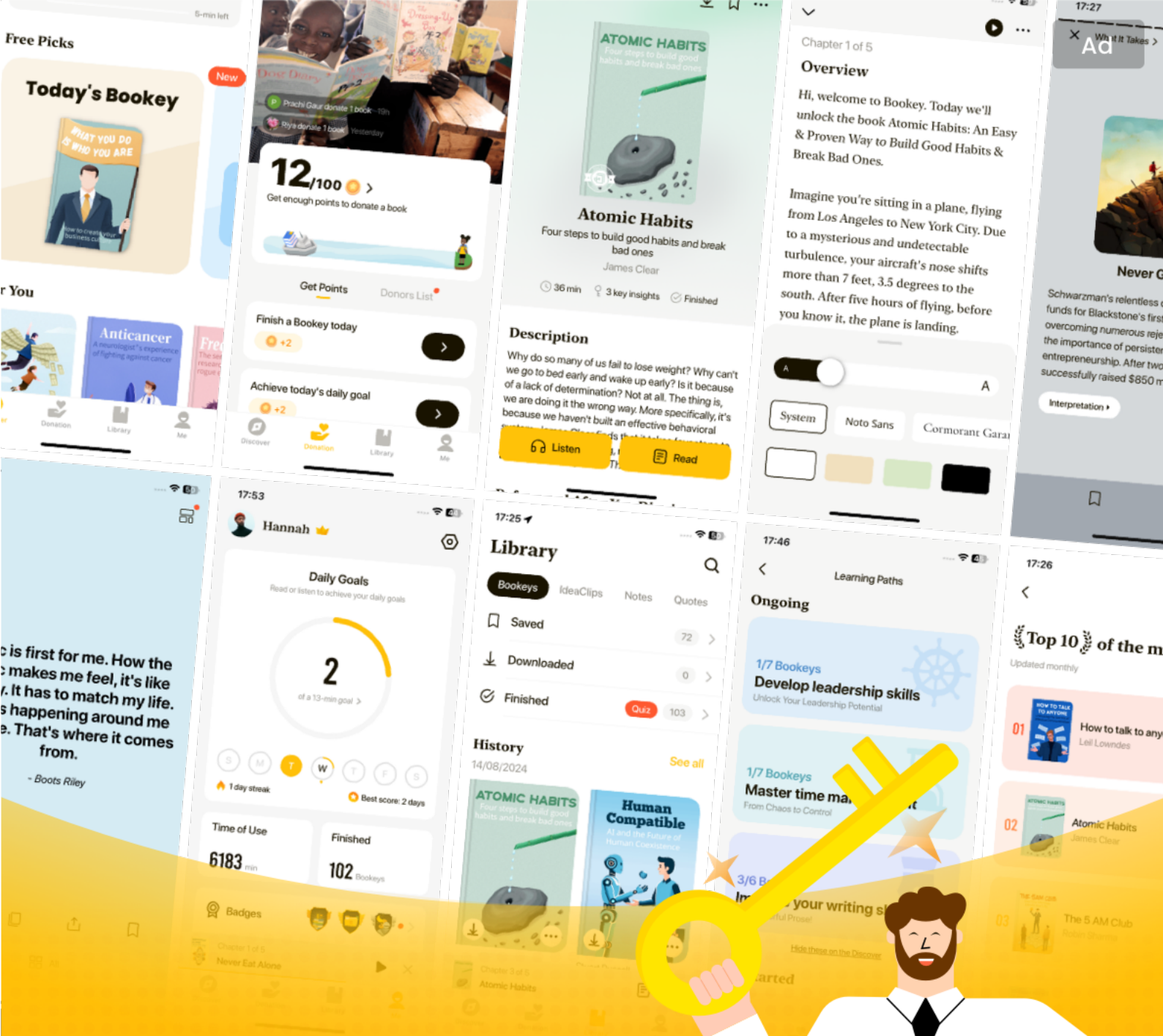
Chapter 12: Actors and Mothers

In Chapter 12 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the author reflects on the intricate relationship between actors and their mothers, intertwined with her personal journey as both a playwright and a daughter. Three months after the birth of her twins, Ruhl experiences an emotional opening night for her long-awaited play, "Passion Play," which takes place in a Brooklyn church. Despite the excitement of the performance, her inability to express joy due to facial paralysis leaves her feeling isolated, even from her own mother, who is sitting nearby.

Ruhl shares that this play has been twelve years in the making, having begun in her youth while studying in England. Inspired by thoughts on medieval mystery plays and the pressures of familial expectations, she found herself navigating a complex emotional landscape—marked by both grief and the thrill of creation. A memory from her past surfaces, where her first act of "Passion Play" was covertly submitted to a theater festival by her professor, Paula Vogel. A traumatic car accident on the way to her opening night, where she briefly blacked out, marks an important transition in her life and

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Chapter 13 Summary: The Duchenne

In Chapter 13 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the author reflects on the profound impact of a smile and how its absence reshapes her interactions and sense of self. This chapter, titled "The Duchenne," begins with Ruhl recalling her childhood confidences and dreams of a natural, effortless smile, contrasting sharply with her painful reality of having Bell's palsy, which renders her face immobile.

1. Confronting Reality: Ruhl's journey starts when she seeks help from a physical therapist, feeling disheartened by his observations of her condition. This experience in a prestigious gym highlights her struggle with not only her physical limitations but also the emotional toll of inadequately performing basic expressions in front of a small audience. The imposition of an unwelcome photograph by a bystander without her consent exacerbates her feelings of vulnerability and violation, prompting a vow never to return to that gym.

2. The Sound of Silence: Beyond physical expression, Ruhl expresses frustration over her inability to enunciate certain sounds, particularly her daughter Hope's name. This communication barrier underscores her struggles with identity and connection, showcasing how integral communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is to human interaction.



3. Value of a Smile: Through memories and anecdotes, Ruhl memorializes the significance of smiles in social code. She recalls a moment post-9/11 where a conversation about smiles as a means of peace underscores their universal importance. The chapter reveals her newfound appreciation for the smile she previously took for granted and the genuine warmth it brings in daily interactions.

4. Duchenne Smile Explained: Ruhl introduces the Duchenne smile, named after a 19th-century researcher who differentiated between genuine and forced smiles. The Duchenne smile is characterized by not just the lips but also the eyes, amplifying its authenticity and emotional depth—something Ruhl learns to cherish in her past and long for in her present.

5. Experiments in Social Interaction: Reflecting on her own social experiments, Ruhl recalls how her smiling interaction with strangers in high school yielded positive responses. However, her move to New York brings mixed results, where a smile may sometimes mislead, leading to awkward situations. This highlights the complex social dynamics surrounding women's smiles and their implications in public spaces.

6. Adapting Communication: As she adapts to her new reality, Ruhl finds alternative ways to communicate friendliness, relying more on voice and gestures. The loss of her smile forces her into an internal struggle as she



navigates her identity; the delineation between her past self and her new limitations becomes painfully evident, complicating her interactions, especially with new acquaintances.

7. Link to Motherhood: With the arrival of her twins, Ruhl expresses an intense yearning to smile at her children—a gesture imbued with affection and connection. The inability to smile back at her babies adds a layer of obsession, as a mother’s smile carries deep emotional significance. As she recounts the first smiles of her children, she grapples with the stark contrast between her joy and her physical limitations, longing to share in their expressions wholeheartedly.

This chapter intricately weaves Ruhl's personal journey with broader themes of communication, identity, and the universal human need for connection through the simple act of smiling. The interplay of light and darkness in her experience invites readers to reflect on the intricate ways in which our physicality influences social interactions and personal identity.



Chapter 14 Summary: Still Face and the Tony Awards

In Chapter 14 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the author explores the complex interplay of motherhood, emotional expression, and the pressures of professional life, particularly in the context of her experiences during the Tony Awards. Ruhl begins by reflecting on the psychological concept of the "still face" experiment, which highlights the detrimental effect of a mother's unresponsive demeanor on infants. This notion triggers her anxiety about whether her emotional state—particularly her ability to smile—may affect her own children. The struggle for self-expression becomes more palpable amid her overwhelming duties as a mother to twins, Hope and William, along with their older sibling, Anna.

The chapter is filled with intimate moments as Ruhl details an almost chaotic day with her twins, where she battles feelings of despair and inadequacy while striving to tend to their needs. She vividly recounts a harrowing afternoon where she attempts to simultaneously nurse her babies, illustrating the physical and emotional toll of motherhood during a demanding stage of life. Through her experiences, Ruhl paints a picture of a woman caught in the blur of nurturing while contending with her own mental health and the stresses motherhood brings, documented through a worksheet from her internist that unexpectedly reveals how her children add to her stress.



Despite the chaos, Ruhl acknowledges fleeting moments of joy, contrasting her struggles with the modern expectation of capturing happiness through social media. She writes a poignant reflection on how the focus on documenting joy can overshadow the actual experience of it. Transitioning from her early days of attachment parenting, Ruhl now finds herself more resourceful and willing to request accommodations from her professional environment, though this becomes increasingly challenging with three children. She notes a lack of relevant resources for parents of multiples in popular parenting literature, highlighting the complexity of attempting to balance an artistic career with family life.

One of the standout experiences in this chapter occurs when Ruhl unexpectedly nurses Hope during the Lilly Awards, illustrating a powerful moment of maternal instinct amidst the formality of the ceremony. She recognizes the significance of visibility and representation for women in theater, especially as she navigates the expectations of being both a professional and a mother.

Preparations for the Tony Awards present another set of challenges; Ruhl's struggle to find an appropriate gown that suits her hectic role as a mother showcases the disconnect between personal identity and professional appearances. The awards ceremony is rife with anxiety for Ruhl, from navigating the red carpet to pumping milk in the bathroom, dramatizing the tensions between her roles as a performer and a nurturing mother. She



grapples with feelings of inadequacy, comparing herself to the polished and seemingly perfect individuals surrounding her.

Ultimately, whether Ruhl wins or loses, she emphasizes the importance of returning home, where genuine happiness comes not from accolades but from the comfort and authenticity of family life. Yangzom, her caregiver, reflects on the deep-rooted values of gratitude, prompting Ruhl to contemplate the paradox of awards culture that encourages public gratitude while fostering competitive jealousy. Ruhl concludes with the realization that expressions of thankfulness do not exclusively come from winning but are essential parts of everyday life, serving as anchors amidst the storms of ambition and motherhood. Through this chapter, Ruhl eloquently articulates the delicate balance between personal fulfillment and professional identity, revealing that true contentment lies in the connections we nurture, both at home and in the world.

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Chapter 15: The ‘Mona Lisa’ and Illness as Metaphor

In Chapter 15 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the author reflects on the complexity of expressions, particularly smiles, using the famous portrait of the Mona Lisa as a backdrop to her exploration of illness and self-perception. Historically, smiles were not a common feature in portraits; they were considered unseemly, with subjects posed solemnly. Ruhl notes the unique ambiguity of the Mona Lisa's smile, which conjures differing interpretations of happiness and sadness depending on the viewer's perspective. This complexity deepens with the knowledge that Leonardo da Vinci studied cadavers to capture authentic facial expressions, suggesting a diversion between outward appearance and inner emotion.

1. Ruhl shares her personal experience with Bell's palsy, a condition that affected her ability to smile and shifted her own self-image. Initially, she identified with Lucy Snowe, the introspective character from Charlotte Brontë's "Villette," who reflects on the futility of positing happiness as a simplistic goal. This connection illustrates her own struggles with the expectations of expressing joy despite feeling otherwise. This internal

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Chapter 16 Summary: Three Children Under the Age of Five and Three Kinds of Vomit

In Chapter 16 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the author reflects on the challenges and joys of parenting twins, Hope and William, alongside their older sibling, Anna. The chapter opens with a poignant observation about the peculiar demands of caring for twins, where the author's desire to devote equal attention to both children creates an emotional conflict, leaving her feeling split in two. The thrilling yet perilous experience of watching them learn to walk highlights her anxiety as each child imitates the other, testing her limits as a mother eager to protect them from harm.

A particularly anxious moment arises when Hope chokes on a strawberry while she is seated in her high chair. In a frantic act of rescue, the author manages to save her daughter, reflecting a mother's instinctual drive to ensure safety. Yet, this constant vigilance takes a toll, leading her to the decision to limit her involvement in out-of-town theater openings due to the overwhelming challenge of balancing her professional and parental responsibilities. She poignantly describes a moment of relief when she finally travels alone for a production, enjoying the rare luxury of solitude, savoring simple pleasures such as drinking coffee and reading without interruption.

However, during this time away, disaster strikes when Tony calls to inform



her that William is hospitalized due to a breathing episode linked to his premature birth. This news sends the author into a state of panic, compounded by feelings of guilt for being away. Despite Tony's reassurances that he can manage the situation, she makes the decision to return home to support her son.

Upon returning, she realizes her children have transitioned away from breastfeeding, a bittersweet milestone that signifies both independence and her own physical exhaustion after a demanding year of caring for twins. The chapter culminates in a moment of triumph as the author successfully navigates the challenges of previewing her play, reveling in the laughter from the audience, only to be confronted by the artistic director's harsh criticism for her perceived absenteeism during rehearsals. This confrontation ignites a tumult of emotions, leading her to question the sacrifices she has made for her art and the expectations placed on working mothers.

The artistic director later offers an apology, which the author graciously accepts, recognizing the importance of forgiveness in the tumultuous landscape of balancing motherhood and creative work.

As winter descends back in New York, the author faces profound feelings of isolation, intensified by the pressures of parenting. After enduring a bout of illness, she resolves to get her children out of the house. This endeavor quickly devolves into chaos as she grapples with the simple logistics of



dressing her children for an outing. The scene spirals into hilarity and frustration, underscoring the unpredictable nature of motherhood, and ultimately concludes with the defeat of her plans to visit Dunkin' Donuts that day, a microcosm of the broader struggles she faces as a mother trying to manage her responsibilities and aspirations.

This chapter weaves together themes of maternal sacrifice, the challenges of juggling work and family, and the humorous chaos that often accompanies parenting, painting a vivid portrait of the joys and trials of raising young children.

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Chapter 17 Summary: All the Crying Mashas and the Concept of a Good Side

In the winter of my journey, I found myself immersed in auditions for my translation of Chekhov's "Three Sisters." As I observed the emotionally charged performances, particularly those of the actresses auditioning for the role of Masha, I was struck by the spectacle of their tears, which seemed to defy gravity. However, amidst this display of vulnerability, I noticed my own expressionless demeanor, leading me to ponder a profound query: Can one truly feel joy without an expression of joy? This introspection spiraled into a broader contemplation on the nature of emotions and performance—the interplay between joy and its outward expressions, specifically in the realm of acting.

1. The Connection Between Emotion and Expression

The question arose whether actors need to genuinely experience sadness in order to portray it convincingly. A neurological study highlighted that actors' physiological responses to grief onstage were indistinguishable from those of non-actors, which sparked a sense of compassion for their emotional burdens. This dynamic mirrors the ancient theatrical masks of tragedy and comedy, designed to channel extremes of emotion both physically and metaphysically.



2. Separating Personalities Through Facial Expression

The 1970s introduced Ken Campbell's revolutionary enantiodromic approach to acting, suggesting that the two sides of one's face can embody different emotional personas. My discussions with an actress who trained with Campbell revealed that recognizing and exaggerating these opposing tendencies can effectively create distinct characters, blurring the line between identity and performance.

3. The Paradox of Smiling and Public Perception

Reflecting on my experience during a photo shoot for American Theatre magazine, I found the demand to smile authentically complicated by hunger and fatigue. Alongside my talented peers, I confronted the photographer's insistence on a specific type of smile—one that felt alien and disingenuous to me. My experiences revealed a certain duality in playwrights: some are naturally inclined towards performance, while others, like myself, harbor an innate reticence that renders their participation in public performances more daunting.

4. The Nature of Smiles and Asymmetry

I compiled a list of idioms related to smiling, contemplating the multifaceted nature of smiles and their implications. The concept of a “good side”



revealed societal standards surrounding beauty and acceptability, drawing a contrast with the truth of our human asymmetry. Historical perspectives on symmetry and beauty highlighted that imperfections contribute to character—a notion reinforced by artistic representations throughout history.

5. Villains and Their Faces

Exploring cultural representations, I noted that many villains embody asymmetry—signifying malice or inner turmoil—while those who conform to traditional beauty standards often emerge as protagonists. Engaging with Jungian symbolism, I considered how asymmetry might symbolize deeper truths, urging the need for narratives that embrace all forms of humanity.

6. Embracing Imperfections

In moments spent with my daughter, I reflected on my own perceived imperfections. The love of a mother, I realized, extends beyond societal standards of beauty, inviting a recognition of the beauty inherent in all faces, even those deemed "crooked." This connection led me to reflect on the embodiment of Jesus—a figure whose approachable humanity and physicality stood in contrast to abstract divinity.

In summation, the exploration of emotions in performance art and the inherent contradictions of beauty is profound. It urges us to reevaluate our



perceptions of happiness, productivity, and acceptance, invoking the rich tapestry of human experience that transcends mere symmetry. Ultimately, the question of how we recognize and value each other—through our faces or the stories they tell—remains an enduring meditation as we navigate the complexities of emotion, identity, and art.

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Chapter 18: Show Me What You've Got

In this poignant chapter of Sarah Ruhl's "Smile," the author explores the intricate emotional landscape of living with Bell's palsy, drawing parallels to the concept of twins as a symbol of duality, unity, and loss. The chapter opens with a reflection on twins, emphasizing their representation of perfect symmetry and the idea of finding completeness in reconnection—echoed in literature, notably Shakespeare's works. Ruhl evokes a personal narrative, where the joy of her twins' first birthday starkly contrasts with her frustration over her ongoing physical condition.

1. Ruhl reflects on her rising anger and disappointment regarding her health and perceived societal expectations for recovery. She acknowledges that she is an outlier in her struggle with Bell's palsy, grappling with symptoms longer than the majority of others affected. This revelation highlights her feelings of being trapped in a liminal space, both physically and psychologically.

2. The visit to her neurologist unfolds in a stark and clinical manner,

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Chapter 19 Summary: The Observer and the Observed

In Chapter 19 of "Smile," Sarah Ruhl reflects on her journey of teaching playwriting at Yale, catalyzed by a request from her mentor Paula Vogel. Initially hesitant, Ruhl embraced the opportunity, recognizing the need for connection and creativity amidst the chaos of motherhood and her personal struggles with Bell's palsy. She recounts the profound impact that Paula had on her life, providing both emotional and practical support at critical moments, urging her toward self-care and creative expression.

1. Ruhl's introduction to teaching offered a form of respite from her overwhelming responsibilities. The structured commute to Yale became a sanctuary, allowing her to engage in focused reading and writing in the rare silence of the Amtrak's quiet car—a stark contrast to her home life.
2. Upon meeting her students, Ruhl faced the challenge of disclosing her condition. Opting for honesty, she explained her Bell's palsy to foster an honest environment and alleviated her concerns about being misinterpreted as disinterested. To connect with her students, she introduced an exercise that involved intense eye contact, designed to cultivate emotional vulnerability and understanding among them.
3. Ruhl's struggle with her identity as both an observer and a participant was intricately tied to her condition. The discomfort of being the observed led



her to retreat into a position of observation, masking her emotions with an expressionless façade. This coping mechanism reinforced a feedback loop that deepened her perceived aloofness and further isolated her.

4. Burdened by her early experiences with grief and the subsequent misunderstandings regarding her demeanor, Ruhl reflects on her desire to channel profound emotions into her art. She recalls seeking help during a tumultuous time in her life, which resulted in dismissive comments about her personality that stung deeply and fueled her motivation to express complex emotions through storytelling.

5. Throughout her teaching stint, Ruhl rekindled her passion for writing through short essays, which ultimately coalesced into the book "100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write." In this creative pursuit, she found an outlet for her thoughts and emotions, confronting chaos with structured reflection.

6. Among her students was Max Ritvo, a remarkable young poet battling cancer. Their friendship blossomed into an exchange of letters and support, illustrating the potential for deep connection in the face of suffering. Max's tenacity and love for writing reminded Ruhl of her initial aspirations as a playwright.

7. The chapter culminates in a poignant reflection on mortality and the lessons learned from their friendship. Despite facing unimaginable pain,



Max's spirit exemplified resilience. His passing at twenty-four left a lasting impact on Ruhl, imparting invaluable lessons about grace and the profound human experience.

Through this chapter, Ruhl navigates the complexities of personal identity, vulnerability, and the healing power of connection, ultimately revealing how teaching and friendship can illuminate the darkest corners of life. Her narrative serves as a reminder of the enduring human propensity for creativity and empathy.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The healing power of connection and honesty

Critical Interpretation: As you navigate your own life filled with its unique trials and tribulations, consider Sarah Ruhl's brave choice to share her struggles openly with her students. This transparency not only fostered a deeper understanding among her peers but also served as a reminder of the transformative power of honesty. When you embrace your vulnerabilities, rather than conceal them, you create pathways for authentic connections with others—connections that can ultimately lead to healing and mutual support. Just as Ruhl found solace in teaching and nurturing her students, look for opportunities in your life where openness can help bridge divides and cultivate a sense of community that uplifts you and those around you.



Chapter 20 Summary: Celiac Disease, or I Remember Bagels

In Chapter 20 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the author reflects on her personal struggle with Bell's palsy and the subsequent diagnosis of celiac disease, tying these experiences eloquently with art and motherhood. The chapter begins with a poignant description of Vermeer's painting, "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter," which resonates deeply with Ruhl. The painting symbolizes the interplay of acceptance and expectation, reflecting her own state as she navigates health challenges during and after pregnancy.

1. The chapter reveals Ruhl's initial hesitance to explore the implications of Bell's palsy, a facial paralysis that can occur postpartum. Her research provides insights into the condition's possible connections with childbirth and the various medical factors that complicate her understanding of recovery, instilling a sense of uncertainty.

2. Drawing parallels to Chuck Mee's memoir about polio, Ruhl shares her own experience with Bell's palsy, emphasizing the pessimism of doctors who informed her of the unlikely prospects for full recovery. This pessimism cultivates a conflicted relationship with her facial expression, sparking a sense of existential contemplation on beauty, societal expectations, and personal identity.



3. As Ruhl grapples with her new reality, she humorously contemplates the implications of her "half smile," contrasting it with popular culture references, including Kristen Stewart's famous smolder. Joking about her disfigurement offers a coping mechanism, yet it also highlights the societal pressures surrounding appearances.

4. The narrative then shifts to Ruhl's decision to seek help from a new neurologist, Dr. Russell Chin, who takes a genuine interest in her full story. His inquiry about her weight loss leads to a critical diagnosis of celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder that prevents the absorption of gluten, resulting in various health complications.

5. In describing her diagnosis, Ruhl reflects on the emotional weight of food memories—a bittersweet remembrance of gluten-rich treats like croissants and bagels, now rendered inaccessible due to her condition. This moment captures the grief associated with loss and acceptance, resonating with the theme of longing that permeates the chapter.

6. Ultimately, the revelation of celiac disease brings a measure of relief. Ruhl realizes that her slow recovery from Bell's palsy is not simply a reflection of her mental state, but rather a physical impediment due to her body's inability to process nutrients. This understanding shifts the narrative from one of internal blame to an acknowledgment of external circumstances.



In conclusion, Chapter 20 eloquently weaves together art, personal narrative, and medical realities, illuminating the complexities of motherhood, identity, and health. Ruhl's reflections resonate with a profound understanding that sometimes biological explanations provide clarity that psychological introspection cannot fully encompass. The chapter ends on a note of acceptance, recognizing the unpredictable nature of life's challenges and the importance of finding meaning amidst them.

Aspect	Details
Theme	Personal struggles with Bell's palsy and celiac disease, intertwined with motherhood and art.
Art Connection	Vermeer's "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter" symbolizes acceptance and expectation amidst health challenges.
Initial Hesitance	Ruhl hesitates to explore Bell's palsy implications; research uncovers complications linked to childbirth.
Doctor's Pessimism	Doctors express low recovery prospects for Bell's palsy, leading to existential contemplation on beauty and identity.
Humor and Coping	Ruhl humorously contrasts her "half smile" with cultural references, revealing societal pressures on appearance.
New Diagnosis	Seek help from Dr. Russell Chin leads to celiac disease diagnosis; explores the significance of weight loss.
Emotional Weight	Reflects on food memories and grief over loss of gluten-rich treats, highlighting longing.
Relief and Understanding	Diagnosis brings relief; recognizes slow recovery is due to a physical issue, shifting narrative from blame to understanding.

Aspect	Details
Conclusion	Integrates art, personal narrative, and medical realities; emphasizes acceptance and finding meaning amidst life's unpredictability.

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Chapter 21: Childhood Illness and the Symmetry of Siblings

In Chapter 21 of Sarah Ruhl's "Smile," the author poignantly reflects on her childhood struggles with illness, particularly celiac disease, and explores the complex dynamics of sibling relationships, parenting, and the emotional ties to food and memories.

1. Sarah reveals her experience of frequently falling ill as a child, spending significant time away from school, which was attributed to her undiagnosed celiac disease. This condition not only stunted her physical growth due to vitamin deficiencies but also created a pervasive sense of weakness compared to her peers. Despite her ill health, literature became her refuge, allowing her to explore different worlds and escape her physical limitations.

2. The chapter brings forth vivid memories of nostalgia intertwined with a sense of isolation. As Sarah reflects on a childhood experience listening to what she believed was the distant sound of a seesaw, she realizes that the sound was actually a birdcall, symbolizing how childhood perceptions can

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Chapter 22 Summary: Can You Have Postpartum Depression Two Years After Having Babies?

In Chapter 22 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the author delves into the emotional complexities surrounding motherhood, revealing a deeply personal narrative that raises the question of postpartum depression—particularly its potential emergence two years after childbirth. Ruhl begins by reminiscing about her early relationship with her husband, Tony, emphasizing the warmth and care he brought into their shared living experience during graduate school. The narrative establishes an intimate backdrop, portraying moments of tenderness and connection that underscore her love for him.

As Ruhl reflects on her life with her twins, now two years old, the chapter transitions into her internal struggles with chronic illness—specifically celiac disease—complicating her recovery and emotional well-being. She grapples with feelings of inadequacy and hidden rage toward her circumstances, detailing the overwhelming demands of motherhood as Tony steps in to shoulder daily responsibilities, allowing her to cope with their chaotic life.

1. Ruhl confronts her internal conflict against societal expectations of motherhood, revealing a perfectionist mentality that fuels her feelings of failure. The external pressures of traditional parenting ideologies, combined with her personal struggles, heighten her sense of isolation and despair. She



reflects on a deeply ingrained belief that admitting weakness would undermine her perceived luck in having a loving husband and healthy children. Despite her passionate love for her children, the battle against emerging depression and feelings of invisibility threaten her emotional equilibrium.

2. Ruhl's narrative progresses as she experiences moments of deep emotional withdrawal, augmenting her internal chaos further. She recalls a particularly harrowing episode where, after feeling ignored and invisible in her domestic life, she seeks solace away from her family. This culminates in a metaphorical descent into despair, where she equates her feelings to an impending loss of her identity—considering the self-sacrificial fantasy of erasing her existence for the sake of her husband and children.

3. The chapter highlights the lack of adequate mental health care and postpartum support available to new mothers, drawing attention to how societal perceptions ignore the complexities of maternal mental health. Ruhl acknowledges the importance of candid conversations about postpartum depression, admitting that she wrestled with this reality long after her twins' births. She recognizes her underlying depression, prevailing despite her loving environment, and questions whether it truly qualifies as postpartum depression due to its delayed onset.

4. With a series of candid reflections, Ruhl ultimately confides in her



husband, who, recognizing the depth of her struggles, encourages her to seek professional help. She describes her initial hesitations toward therapy, yet emphasizes the positive impact of being listened to without judgment—a novel experience that begins her healing journey. This prompts profound realizations about the interplay between physical health, emotional intelligence, and the vital need for support within a community.

As the chapter unfolds, Ruhl intricately weaves her experiences, drawing readers into her struggle with identity, motherhood, and recovery—highlighting vital themes of self-acceptance, the permanence of change, and the importance of addressing mental health openly. By juxtaposing her moments of joy with struggles of despair, Ruhl vividly captures the multifaceted nature of motherhood, inviting her audience to consider the often-unspoken emotional challenges faced by women in the wake of childbirth and throughout their parenting journey. Ultimately, Ruhl's story resonates as a poignant reminder of the necessity for compassion, understanding, and the courage to seek help when navigating the tumultuous waters of motherhood.

Key Themes	Details
Motherhood and Postpartum Issues	Explores emotional complexities of motherhood and postpartum depression, particularly emerging two years after childbirth.
Personal Relationships	Reflects on her loving relationship with husband Tony, providing a backdrop of support amidst struggles.

Key Themes	Details
Chronic Illness	Celiac disease complicates Ruhl's recovery and motherhood, leading to feelings of inadequacy and hidden rage.
Internal Conflict	Confronts societal expectations and perfectionism regarding motherhood, leading to isolation and despair.
Emotional Withdrawal	Experiences moments of deep despair, grappling with identity loss and the self-sacrificial urge.
Mental Health Awareness	Highlights lack of postpartum support, emphasizing need for open discussions about maternal mental health.
Seeking Help	Confides in husband who encourages therapy, leading to healing and the importance of being listened to.
Self-Acceptance and Change	Weaves together joy and despair, capturing the challenges of motherhood while advocating for compassion and understanding.

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Chapter 23 Summary: Refuge

In the reflective narrative of Chapter 23 titled "Refuge" from Sarah Ruhl's "Smile," the author presents a transformative journey following her experience with Bell's palsy. It's three years since her diagnosis, and Ruhl resolves to embrace life, setting aside the fixation on improving her face and body. Instead, she immerses herself in multiple creative pursuits, including teaching, writing, and raising her children. This period marks a shift towards an active, disembodied existence, where she engages in her life passionately while sidestepping the dissatisfaction she feels toward her physical condition.

1. The Complexity of Prayer and Acceptance

Ruhl reflects on her early experiences with prayer, shaped by her father's battle with cancer. She expresses an inability to pray for concrete outcomes, fearing it might destabilize her already fragile faith. Instead, she turns her prayers into requests for inner courage and peace, resonating with thoughts from theologians like Serene Jones and Calvin, who articulate prayer as an ongoing practice of presenting life's chaos before God rather than a formula for achieving specific results.

2. The Burden of the Disfigured Smile

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In a poignant conversation with Jones, they discuss the social ramifications of their physical conditions, particularly the significance of a smile in establishing connections across cultural and racial boundaries. Ruhl grapples with the concept of grace and how personal struggles can transform prayers into deeper acceptances of life's complexities without the weight of demanding divine intervention.

3. The Interplay of Physicality and Identity

Ruhl's description of the mundane challenges stemming from her disfigurement illustrates a deeper interrogation of identity and self-worth. While listing her milestones—both of overcoming physical barriers and witnessing her children's growth—she begins to see value and joy despite the limitations imposed by her body. Her realization that her worth extends beyond her physical appearance fosters a broader understanding of human experience.

4. Embracing Change and Seeking Healing

After a physical incident where her legs abruptly give way, Ruhl visits her neurologist, leading her to explore acupuncture with Zoe. Through these sessions, she begins to confront the importance of acknowledging her body and integrating this focus into the broader narrative of her life. This encourages a belief in gradual healing, represented by the emergence of a



tooth as a sign of recovery and joy.

5. Art, Religion, and Self-Exploration

Ruhl's creative process culminates in writing "The Oldest Boy," which pushes her to meditate on themes of identity and selfhood. She acknowledges the interconnectedness of art and spirituality, as experienced through her interactions with Tibetan Buddhism. Here, the notion of self as separate from the face becomes a means to liberate herself from the constraint of physical appearance, inviting a meditation on brokenness as a path to wholeness.

6. Finding Refuge in Buddhism

Ultimately, Ruhl seeks refuge in Buddhism, embracing its precepts as a form of shelter rather than a permanent conversion. Her encounter with Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo solidifies a significant spiritual transition as she joyfully acknowledges the act of cutting her hair—a symbol of shedding her former self and stepping into a new understanding that embraces both vulnerability and resilience.

Through these intertwined themes, Ruhl articulates a deeply personal exploration of recovery, identity, and the human condition, culminating in a profound acceptance of both joy and suffering as integral to life's journey.

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Chapter 24: I Can Only Imagine

In Chapter 24 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the narrative weaves together memories of the author's father with reflections on grief, empathy, and the human experience of suffering. The chapter opens with a nostalgic reminiscence of weekly trips to the Pancake House, where the author learned new words from her father, who was a gentle and observant man. This gentleness resonates throughout the chapter, as it informs the way the author sees the world and connects deeply with others.

1. The emotional impact of familial loss is expressed poignantly through the memory of the father's death, which occurred before the author was born. His memories of hunting with his own father reveal a bond forged in silence rather than words. This simplicity amplifies the understanding of love and connection, hinting at the lingering effects of grief that ultimately shape the author's identity as a playwright and mother.

2. A significant turning point occurs when the author reflects on her father's cancer diagnosis, showcasing a rapid decline from vitality to fragility. This

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Chapter 25 Summary: Lizard Eye, or Kill the Ingenue

In Chapter 25 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, titled "Lizard Eye, or Kill the Ingenue," the author reflects upon six transformative years in her life, balancing her evolving career as a playwright with the demands of motherhood. During this period, while managing an array of responsibilities—ranging from parenting duties to professional engagements—she experiences a mixture of success and introspection in her artistic endeavors.

1. The passage of time is marked by both personal and technological advancements, signifying how Ruhl's life continues to evolve amid the chaos of motherhood and a writing career. She stays actively engaged with her children, takes them to various activities, and finds time to write and produce plays annually. As her children grow, they begin to require less supervision, allowing her to reclaim precious hours for her writing pursuits.

2. Ruhl's fortieth birthday is celebrated in a unique manner, where she and her husband create terrariums together, symbolizing their growth and shared experiences. However, this idyllic time contrasts sharply with the struggles she faces regarding her artistic identity post-motherhood. Ruhl grapples with the perception of her work being received differently as she transitions into different phases of womanhood.



3. After the success of "In the Next Room, or the vibrator play," none of her subsequent works attain the same acclaim, leading her to question the impact of age and motherhood on her career. A metaphorical divide forms in her mind between her previous life as a successful playwright and her current experience, linking her sense of waning success to changes in her physical appearance and self-identity.

4. A notable encounter with Edward Albee reveals the gender biases in the playwright community. His compliment directed at her youth and beauty overshadows her professional achievements, prompting Ruhl to reflect on the concept of the ingenue—a young woman characterized by innocence—against the backdrop of her matured artistic voice. She decides to evolve her writing focus from ingenues to more nuanced characters representing women across various life stages.

5. As Ruhl deals with both personal transformation and the effects of Bell's palsy—a condition affecting her facial symmetry—she links this aspect of her health to a broader narrative about womanhood and artistic expression. She describes an awakening about how her physical appearance influences societal perceptions and her creative journey, even humorously relating it to her children's playful terminology—calling her left eye the "lizard eye."

6. Engaging with her condition leads Ruhl to explore therapies, including the unexpected possibility of mime therapy to address her facial asymmetry.



This exploration serves as a metaphor for her overall artistic journey: attempting to redefine her narrative and regain agency over her body and voice amidst the challenges of motherhood and societal expectations.

7. Finally, through conversations with a friend who is a neurologist, Ruhl gains insight into the complexity of her condition and reassurance about her creative pursuits. Their discussion underscores the importance of understanding the intersection of art, health, and gender, as well as the power of friendship in navigating life's uncertainties. Ruhl's journey culminates in a rejection of the ingenue archetype, embracing the full spectrum of womanhood and the wisdom that comes with age and experience.

Through this chapter, Ruhl intricately weaves her personal narrative with broader themes of femininity, artistic identity, and the ongoing struggle for recognition in a predominantly male-dominated field. The reflections and determination to redefine her craft are powerful affirmations of resilience in the face of both internal and external challenges.



Chapter 26 Summary: Hermione, the Frozen Statue

In Chapter 26 of "Smile," titled "Hermione, the Frozen Statue," the author recounts a profound experience that unfolds during her visit to a performance of Shakespeare's **The Winter's Tale**. Set against this theatrical backdrop, the chapter explores complex themes of acceptance, identity, and emotional expression, particularly through the lens of illness and self-image.

The author reflects on the striking moment in the play when Hermione is revealed as a statue, seemingly lifeless but on the verge of awakening. This imagery resonates deeply with her own struggles following a diagnosis of Bell's palsy, prompting her to ponder the meaning of acceptance versus resignation. She grapples with the notion of whether one should accept their situation or strive for recovery, making a connection between Hermione's transformation and her own hope for healing.

As she continues to navigate her feelings toward both her condition and her self-worth, the author recalls reading an essay titled "Give Me a Smile" by Jonathan Kalb. Kalb's candid exploration of living with Bell's palsy mirrors her own experiences and amplifies her feelings of sadness and isolation. The shared experiences of facial asymmetry create a bond when she finally reaches out to invite him to lunch. Their meeting serves as an opportunity for connection, empathy, and understanding, as they both confront the



societal expectations placed on them—especially as women—to maintain a smile in the face of adversity.

During their lunch, the dialogue flows effortlessly, revealing their mutually recognized struggles with self-image and emotional expression. Jonathan's reassurance that it is indeed more challenging for women to navigate their conditions evokes a camaraderie rooted in shared experiences. Through their conversation, the author finds solace in knowing she is not alone, which rekindles compassion for herself that had long been absent.

In a profound moment of connection, Jonathan shares a practical approach to managing his condition through a minimally invasive procedure, suggesting hope for recovery, however tentative. Their parting gift—a book inscribed with the line from Shakespeare, "Methinks 'tis time to smile again"—offers a promising reminder that healing, both physically and emotionally, is possible.

This chapter beautifully encapsulates the nuances of vulnerability and resilience, illustrating how connections with others can facilitate self-acceptance. The journey from feeling like a "frozen statue" to rediscovering the warmth of life's expressions unfolds poignantly, affirming that moments of shared understanding can inspire the courage to embrace oneself, flaws and all. As the author reflects on her ongoing journey, the themes of empathy, compassion, and the hope of rebirth resonate



powerfully, encouraging a deeper understanding of both oneself and the collective human experience.

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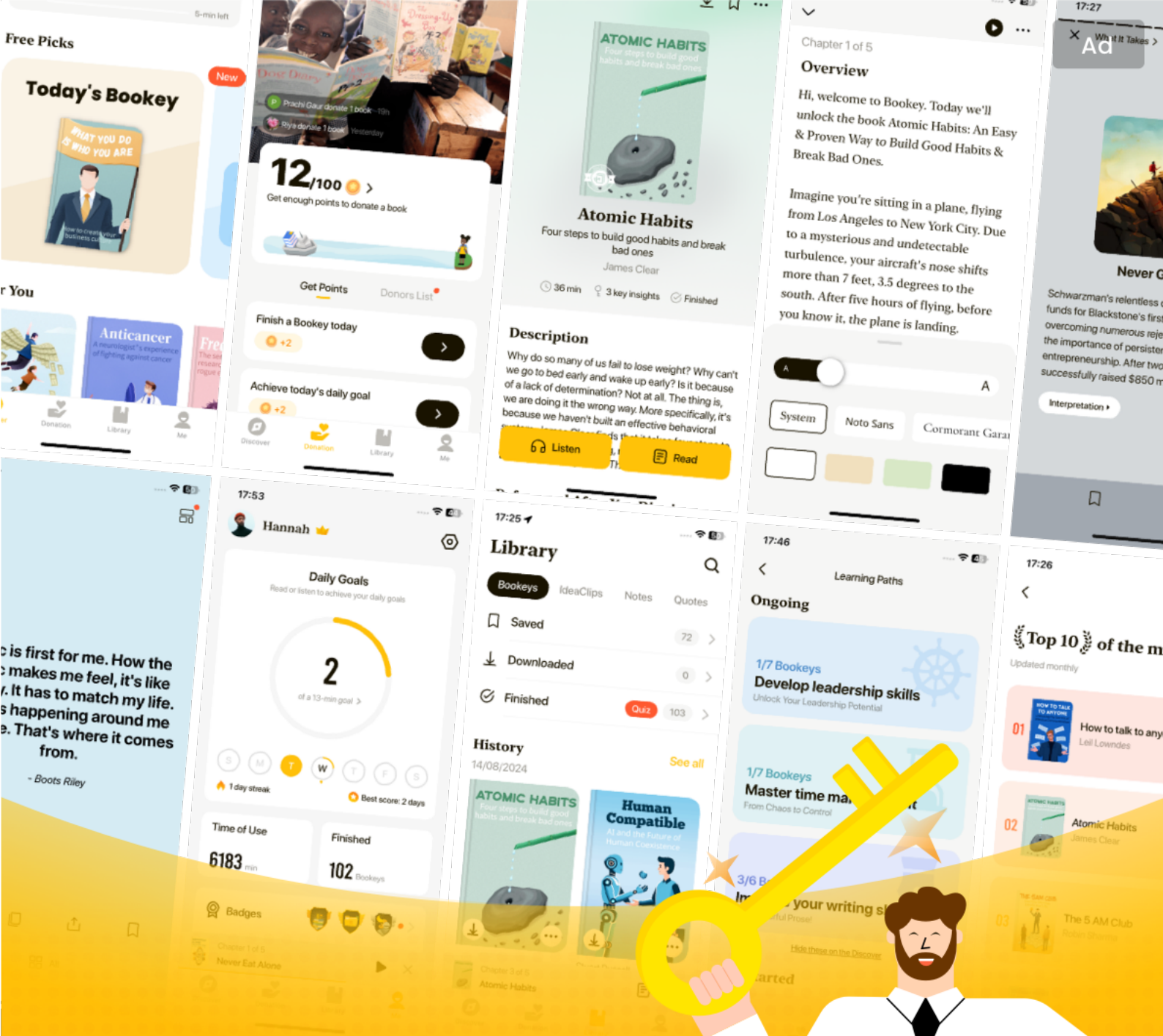
Chapter 27: The Neurosurgeon Who Liked Irishwomen

In Chapter 27 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the narrative unfolds in the context of a visit to a neurosurgeon's office located on the Upper East Side, a place that evokes a sense of foreboding in the author due to past experiences. As she awaits her consultation, she engages in research about Bell's palsy and its psychological implications, discovering studies that highlight the distress experienced by patients, particularly women, who are affected by facial conditions. This emphasizes the deeper emotional struggles that accompany physical disfigurement, including the societal pressures on women regarding their appearance.

Upon entering the doctor's office, the neurosurgeon immediately comments on her beauty, seemingly a tactic to disarm his patients facing disfigurement. The author shares a personal anecdote about her condition, prompting the doctor to reveal a fondness for Irishwomen, which leads to an exploration of his divorced status. The exchange juxtaposes personal struggles with professional expertise, as he discusses potential surgical solutions like a cross-facial nerve graft that requires significant compromise in re-learning

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Chapter 28 Summary: The Good Doctor and Gratitude

In Chapter 28 of "Smile," Sarah Ruhl reflects on the profound relationship between being a good doctor and the essential practice of listening. She indicates that a truly effective physician embodies a combination of expertise and an exceptional capacity for empathy, underscoring the emotional connection formed when a doctor actively listens to their patients. This becomes evident through her personal experiences and anecdotes, contrasting her good doctor husband with other practitioners who may prioritize their professional interests over patient connection.

Ruhl recalls the historical context of her family's involvement in medicine, particularly her grandparents' dedication to the medical field amidst changing societal norms. She illustrates the evolution of the doctor's role, especially in light of the recent pandemic, identifying the good doctor as one who perseveres through exhaustion and fears for their own safety while maintaining a commitment to their patients. The notion of heroism in medicine becomes paramount, positioning the physician as a vital figure in overcoming current hardships.

Amidst these reflections, Ruhl delves into the idea of gratitude, inspired by a conversation with a doctor named Julie who encourages patients facing dire conditions to list the specific aspects of their lives that they cherish. This exercise not only serves to foster appreciation but also heightens the



awareness of what is truly valuable. Ruhl presents her own list of gratitude, which ranges from the simple joys of life—like hot showers, the laughter of her mother, and the companionship of her dog—to more significant acknowledgments of health and presence, illustrating a balance between simplicity and depth.

Through her detailed enumeration of things for which she is grateful, Ruhl confronts the innate human tendency to compare joys and losses, ultimately yearning for a sense of connection to those experiencing hardship. Her reflections conclude with a powerful prayer for gratitude and usefulness, encapsulating her desire to transcend personal grievances—such as her “half-smile problem”—in favor of a broader commitment to empathy and support.

This chapter thus encapsulates a journey from personal reflection to universal themes of gratitude, the intricate relationship between patient and doctor, and the resilience found in moments of vulnerability. It highlights the importance of recognizing both our losses and our plenty, fostering a deeper appreciation for life and the connections we share with others.

Key Themes	Description
Doctor-Patient Relationship	Emphasizes the importance of listening and empathy in effective medical practice.
Personal	Contrasts Ruhl's good doctor husband with other practitioners who

Key Themes	Description
Anecdotes	may lack patient connection.
Historical Context	Reflects on her family's long involvement in medicine and the changing role of doctors.
Pandemic Impact	Identifies the good doctor as resilient and heroic amidst challenges and fears during the pandemic.
Gratitude	Incorporates a conversation with a doctor named Julie about cultivating appreciation among patients.
Personal Gratitude List	Shows Ruhl's reflections on simple joys and significant aspects of life.
Universal Themes	Addresses the balance between joy and loss, aiming for deeper connections with others.
Conclusion	Ends with a prayer for gratitude, highlighting the desire for empathy and support over personal grievances.

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Chapter 29 Summary: Ding-Dong, Ding-Dong, or Grow Accustomed to Your Face

In Chapter 29 of "Smile," Sarah Ruhl reflects on her personal journey with Bell's palsy, using the experiences of the celebrated poet Allen Ginsberg as a backdrop. Ginsberg, who had been mistakenly diagnosed with a stroke instead of Bell's palsy, serves as an emblem of acceptance, demonstrating an unabashed attitude towards his facial difference. Inspired by his confidence, Ruhl embarks on her own exploration of self-acceptance and healing, marking a pivotal moment in her life after years of avoiding the true reflection of her face.

Initially reluctant to engage in therapy due to past insecurities, Ruhl discovers a physical therapist named Elaine, who not only specializes in Bell's palsy but also shares a personal connection through her own encounters with the condition. This newfound relationship sets the stage for Ruhl's healing journey where she begins to redefine her relationship with her face and the expressions associated with it. Through physical therapy rooted in the concept of neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to rewire itself—she learns that it is possible to regain control over her facial movements, which had long been a source of shame.

The chapter delves into the complexity of shame and its prevalence in Ruhl's life, often linked to moments where her body was seen or scrutinized



without her consent. Reflecting on various instances of childhood humiliation and self-perception, Ruhl differentiates between public humiliation and private shame, asserting that the latter often has deeper emotional implications, rooted in how we perceive ourselves versus how others view us.

As Elaine helps Ruhl practice facial expressions, she begins to emerge from the long shadow of shame that has tainted her self-image. This process involves a series of exercises designed to activate the neglected muscles of her face, paralleling her internal journey of reclaiming her identity. The therapeutic sessions provide a space where Ruhl can face her insecurities without judgement, as Elaine mirrors her expressions, creating a supportive environment.

Amidst physical discomfort and emotional release, Ruhl's reflections bring her to broader conversations about beauty and acceptance. She grapples with societal standards of beauty, showcased by an interview with actress Lupita Nyong'o, who articulates sentiments about inner worth beyond external appearances. This theme resonates deeply as Ruhl strives to redefine what beauty means to her amidst her own struggles.

The transformation Ruhl seeks becomes palpable when she recalls a moment spent at a Broadway show with her daughter, during which she is prompted to embrace her imperfections. Instinctively drawn to a song reflecting



acceptance, she recognizes a desire to find harmony with her own image. The chapter concludes with Ruhl's newfound resolve: through perseverance and the willingness to confront her insecurities, she takes steps toward reconditioning not only her facial expressions but also her self-perception, aiming to grow accustomed to her face once more.

1. **Acceptance of Imperfection:** Ginsberg's candid display of his facial anomaly inspires Ruhl to stop hiding from her own face.
2. **Healing through Therapy:** Ruhl seeks help from Elaine, a therapist who herself experienced Bell's palsy, fostering a supportive environment for change.
3. **Understanding Shame:** Ruhl explores the nature of shame—its origins and effects—distinguishing it from public humiliation and unearthing its ties to her personal history.
4. **Neuroplasticity as Hope:** The concept of neuroplasticity underlines Ruhl's belief in her capacity to regain control over her expression and identity.
5. **Redefining Beauty:** The discussion around societal beauty standards emphasizes the importance of inner worth and the rejection of superficial ideals.
6. **Commitment to Change:** Ruhl's practice in mirroring expressions signifies her commitment to overcoming her fears and insecurities, signaling the beginning of her journey toward self-acceptance.



Chapter 30: Mirror Neurons and Narcissus

In Chapter 30 of "Smile" by Sarah Ruhl, the author shares her transformative journey through physical therapy, during which she comes to a deeper understanding of her facial expressions, social interactions, and the neuroscience that underlies human connection. After months of rehabilitation, she notices significant improvements in her facial mobility and a renewed ability to express genuine emotions—particularly smiles—while socially engaging with others, a practice she had avoided for years.

1. Understanding of Mirror Neurons: Ruhl reflects on the concept of mirror neurons—brain cells that activate both when a person acts and when they observe another doing so. This neurological phenomenon supports empathy by allowing individuals to resonate with the emotions displayed by others. She fears that her past struggles to smile might have negatively influenced her children's capacity for empathy and social connection.

2. The Psychological Impact of Self-Image: The narrative emphasizes

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Chapter 31 Summary: The Fortune Cookie

A decade ago, a fortune cookie read, “Deliver what is inside you, and it will save your life.” Initially interpreted as a humorous take on motherhood, this phrase echoes deeper themes as the author reflects on her family history and personal experiences.

The narrative begins with a quest to uncover the past, specifically the life of the author’s great-great-great-grandfather Patrick Gregg, a Civil War soldier turned poet. In the midst of researching family roots, a discovery about her father emerges from his baby book: he had celiac disease, a crucial piece of knowledge he never possessed. This condition, if recognized, might have altered the trajectory of his health, potentially preventing the cancer that ultimately took his life at fifty-four. The author laments how the misdiagnosis and subsequent treatment for various ailments masked the real issue, illustrating the tragic cascade of events leading to her father's demise.

Interwoven with personal anecdotes, including a poignant family visit during her college years when her father’s cancer was disclosed, the story explores the surreal nature of illness. The author draws parallels between her father’s struggle and the existential themes in Kafka’s works, underscoring the stark realities of sudden health crises. The narrative also incorporates joyful memories, highlighting her father’s ability to find humor even as he faced terminal illness. He often kept a facade of normalcy to shield his family



from the painful reality of his deteriorating condition.

As her father navigated profound health challenges, he displayed a remarkable spirit, from driving long distances to fulfill obligations to sharing wisdom through thoughtful letters. His journey culminated in the hospital, where his presence and humor persisted until the end. The author recounts her father's farewell and the emotional aftermath, revealing the raw grief and fragmented memories that followed his passing.

In contemplating the nature of life and loss, the author references "The Farmer's Luck," a Buddhist tale that encapsulates the unpredictable twists of fate and the potential for new perspectives. This leads back to the resonance of the fortune cookie's message. Through her own experience of delivering twins, she recognizes that temporary paralysis during childbirth unveiled a diagnosis that significantly impacted her family's health. This revelation reframes her understanding of suffering and healing, urging an embrace of uncertainty and open-mindedness toward life's myriad maybes.

Throughout the text, the author cultivates a nuanced view of health, drawing connections among her father's legacy, her own experiences, and the broader human journey. She invites readers to reflect on their own challenges and the ways in which they navigate resilience and transformation. The notion that healing is not a linear process suggests a profound acceptance of life's complexities, where every struggle may lead to unforeseen insights and



growth. The presence of asymmetries in life—whether physical or emotional—serves as a reminder that everyone carries their own burdens, yet seeks a path toward understanding and connection in the face of adversity. Through her contemplations, the narrative conveys a deep appreciation for the interwoven stories of struggle and survival that define the human experience.

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Chapter 32 Summary: A Woman Slowly Gets Better

In "A Woman Slowly Gets Better," Sarah Ruhl explores the themes of recovery and self-acceptance through the lens of her journey with Bell's palsy and the insights it imparts about identity, beauty, and connection. The chapter begins with the imagery of Janus—the Roman god with two faces—as a metaphor for how we perceive time and experience. Humans are limited in their perspectives, but Ruhl contemplates whether we should aspire to see reality more fully, as the gods do.

1. Ruhl reflects on her ongoing recovery from Bell's palsy, acknowledging that despite not returning to her youthful appearance or symmetry, she experiences meaningful progress. She recounts instances in her life, including interactions with her daughter, which reveal that love and acceptance transcend physical appearance. The true essence of connection, as illustrated through her children's acceptance of her half smile, is drawn from deeper emotional bonds rather than superficial judgments.

2. The concept of asymmetry emerges as a crucial theme. Ruhl cites Tori Sampson's play, where a woman declares her self-worth through her body, emphasizing that identity goes beyond mere physical aesthetics. This perspective aligns with the idea that true joy emanates from within, rather than from external validation. The imperfect smile becomes a symbol of authentic connection, suggesting that our vulnerabilities lead to greater



empathy and understanding among individuals.

3. Ruhl draws from literature and film, including Ingmar Bergman's "Fanny and Alexander," to highlight the importance of embracing the 'little worlds' of personal and artistic life. Unlike characters in Ibsen's works that seek escape, Ruhl finds solace in the mundane, suggesting that fulfillment can be found in everyday experiences. The chapter maintains that recognizing the value of incremental, non-drama-infused recovery is equally valid as the stories that feature tragic catharsis.

4. Acknowledging the wrong narratives that women often accept about their appearances, Ruhl confronts societal pressures regarding beauty and self-expression. She ultimately discovers that authentic storytelling comes from embracing her imperfections, which allow her to relate more deeply to others. Ruhl's journey involves overcoming the misleading tales propagated by experts—realizing that true recovery lies in self-advocacy and self-definition.

5. The notion of imperfection as beauty surfaces repeatedly. Ruhl discusses how cultural ideals prioritize symmetry, but recognizes that true connection and understanding arise from recognizing our shared flaws. She finds parallels in various cultural expressions—aesthetic concepts in Japanese haiku and Navajo weaving—that celebrate asymmetry and the stories that emerge from imperfection.



6. As she moves toward a conclusion, Ruhl rests in the acceptance of her present self—crooked smile and all. She articulates the significance of feeling “better enough,” encouraging readers to embrace their own journeys of self-love and acceptance. The narrative celebrates the beauty of individual stories, emphasizing that each imperfection contributes to the rich tapestry of human experience.

Through the lens of her personal struggles, Ruhl invites readers to find solace in their own imperfections and to cherish both the marks of time and the stories they carry. Ultimately, she offers a heartfelt affirmation that every face, in its unique form, is worthy of love and acceptance. The chapter stands as a powerful meditation on the beauty of authenticity amidst life’s complexities.

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