

*The
sixteenth
year*

AN OPEN ADOPTION MEMOIR

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KW
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PUBLISHING

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To my birth daughter, whose existence
changed my path and world for the better.
May you know that you are always wanted
and loved.

Endorsements



"*The Sixteenth Year* is a powerful book of a birth mom's brave journey to make the choice to place her baby for adoption. Not only will you be inspired by Leah's personal story, you will hear a refreshingly honest perspective of her adoption process beginning from pregnancy, through birth and leading to her bond with her teenage daughter today. Leah's courage is contagious!!"

— Amy Ford, President of Embrace Grace,
author of *Help Her Be Brave*

"Her experiences will both inform you and inspire you."

— Melissa Ohden, President of Abortion
Survivors Network, author of *You Carried Me*

"Leah is an inspiration to everyone she encounters. She is talented, authentic, and passionate."

— Tori Shaw, President of They Are Not
Forgotten, author of *I Had A Secret For
Seventeen Years* and *Free Indeed*

Note



The situations and conversations in this book are written as factually as possible based on my memory and according to others who were also present. Some names or places have been changed to protect privacy.

I also realize that this level of open adoption isn't possible for everyone, nor is it best for every circumstance. Open adoption can look different, just as every birth mother's experience varies. This is our story and what worked well for us, but I hope it shows what can be possible.

I do believe in family preservation first and foremost, but when adoption is chosen, I advocate for it to be done well. Unfortunately, the unbiased support you'll read about that I experienced from my family, social worker, community, and even my daughter's adoptive parents is rare. The system is flawed, and somehow I got lucky within it. I share my story to help advocate for better care for expectant moms and birth moms— because our healing matters. When birth parents are loved and supported well, they often are emotionally healthier so that they can have healthy relationships. That benefits adoptees, too. It benefits everyone in the adoption constellation. As more adoptee and birth

mom voices are rising to share their experiences, I urge you to listen to them. We can all learn from each other's stories of what to do or what not to do. My story is just one.

Introduction



No one dreams of one day becoming a birth mother. After all, in this American culture, we are not generally looked upon in a positive light. We can be seen as taking the easy way out. Selfish. Greedy. No one wakes up and says, "I'm going to become a birth mother!" with excitement.

In reality, becoming a birth mother is a slow progression and a devastating choice, a domino effect of one thing leading to another caused by choices of our own making, actions done to us, or a complex combination crashing into one after another after another. Then there is no other choice but to fall.

Yet, it was falling, toppling under the weight of my sin, that helped me to finally look up for help and see Jesus' kind eyes waiting for me. That was the real domino effect: the process of falling so far that all I could do was look up. When I did, I found a God who loves me deeply, even when I felt so undeserving, and who sought to stand me upright again. This time, doing things His way.

For redemption to take place, there has to be a fall. There has to be an end of ourselves and of our own efforts before He can make something new in His way. For me, that was my sixteenth year.

Part 1



HOW DID I GET HERE?

*“When we chase happiness
externally, we’re simply looking
for God in all the wrong places.”*

— **Gabrielle Bernstein**¹

¹ Bernstein, Gabrielle. *Miracles Now: 108 Life-Changing Tools for Less Stress, More Flow, and Finding Your True Purpose*. Hay House, Inc. 2014. p. 7.

CHAPTER 1

Looking for Love

In a teeny college town in the mountains of North Carolina, I was born to two parents who barely knew each other. I was an unplanned pregnancy myself. Adoption was even considered for me at one point, but my mother, Evelyn, chose to parent me as a single mother. When I was pulled into the world, she figured I was her one chance at being a mom. Forceps left a scar on my cheek as a reminder of her hard labor that September 11th, 1987, day. My newborn pictures have a screaming crimson gash next to my yellow pacifier to mark my stubbornly late arrival. My father, Vic, was a senior in college when I was born. I arrived into this world while he was taking his Spanish exam, and he rushed to see me at the hospital nearby as soon as he could.

Though my parents were not together for long, I am grateful I still had them both in my life in their own ways. My mom was my primary parent for most of my childhood. She worked hard to finish her degree and state license to provide for us. She aimed to provide me with opportunities that she didn't have growing up. She has always been my biggest fan and encouraged me to chase my dreams, whatever that was at the moment. My dad made efforts to see me whenever he could, even after graduating college

and moving a few hours away to build stability in his hometown. Eventually, our time turned into scheduled shared holidays, weeks spent together in the summer, and every other weekend during the school year. Overall, though, it wasn't an easy or joyful childhood, to be quite honest. There were certainly good memories and giggles, fun trips, and making the best of things, but I held a deep sadness at my core.

My mom taught me a love for hiking adventures even as a tiny three-year-old, a love for concerts, an appreciation for journaling feelings, and creating art. I know she did the best she could, given her own deficits in her family growing up. She could not give me what she had not received herself.

We bounced from house to house, moving often as she found new opportunities to provide for us or for me to be closer to my dad. My family all described me as quiet until I got out of my shell, and I still can be like that. I did well in school, often making the honor roll and earning "Terrific Kid" awards. I aimed to make people smile; I wanted to be liked. Despite moving often, I easily made good friends no matter where we lived. They were rays of sunshine peeking out of the gloomy clouded sky of my childhood.

One day in elementary school, it occurred to me that I was different from my friends. In the 1990's, divorce wasn't as common as it is now; I didn't know *anyone* with separate households at that time. Just me. Worst of all, my mom and dad weren't even

divorced; they'd never truly been together. Did that make me a burden? An outsider? Did it make me unloved and unwanted? Did this make *me* shameful? These are questions I wrestled with internally, and I desperately sought love and approval to prove otherwise.

My dad married my stepmom, Cyndi, when I was five years old, but her warm hugs and adoration have been around for as long as I can remember. Her family embraced me as their own too, providing me with an atmosphere of cozy acceptance when I was visiting. A family that is not biologically mine became a close emotional connection, which made me feel loved and cherished in their presence.

I treasured those visits. It was an escape, a glimpse at what a happy family could look like with a solid, secure attachment. My dad would snuggle me as we read books before bedtime. Cyndi would sing me "The Rainbow Connection" and rub my forehead as I drifted off to sleep. They would take me shopping for new clothes and toys. My cousin and I would have matching Christmas plaid pajamas and slippers with Santa's head on them. My Pawpaw, Cyndi's dad, would buy my favorite Peach Buds candy to let me know that he was thinking of me while I was away. My Nanny, Cyndi's mom, would sew me outfits by hand. One of them was a blue and white striped dress with red gummy bears as the buttons that my youngest daughter now wears. The environment was always so thoughtful and welcoming. I felt wanted and safe in their arms. I felt like they took authentic delight in who I was.

In contrast, when living with my mom, it was often just the two of us. She was exhausted from working a full-time job while also in school. And while I understand that now, I often felt lonely. I remember playing board games being both myself and an imaginary player when my mom couldn't play and watching *a lot* of television. I struggled to understand why I felt such anger boiling within me. Now I know that the anger bursting from my tantrums towards my mom was sadness. I wanted what I perceived to be a normal family, happy and together like my friends had. I wanted to feel seen and loved. At times I wanted to live with my dad, but I never said a word out of fear of hurting my mom, only expressing my feelings through tantrums.

A majority of my memories as a young child living with my mom are in daycares or with babysitters. Did I have fun and make good friends? Of course. But I also missed my mom; I just wanted to be with her. I wanted to have my mom pick me up right after school and not need to ride the bus or attend after-school care. These feelings intensified because it was in the care of others that my life took a twisted turn.

The memories still engulf and impact me today when they resurface, though therapy has been helpful. I was sexually molested by two men at separate times, that I can remember, between the ages of three and five. The perverted choices of others stole my innocence and awakened curiosities that shouldn't have been awake yet. In a time of

vulnerability and needing protection, I was easily trusting, seeking the love and security I desired, yet I was robbed. Of course, as a petite, blonde-haired olive-skinned girl, I didn't know it was wrong. I thought I was loved and special in this perverse narrative. This secret burrowed deeper into the soil of my heart, threatening to grow its prickly thorns as the years passed—and it did. It would be many years before I realized the truth and began to rip out the weed someone else planted to begin healing.

This abuse coupled with my early years also may have been why I was boy crazy. Even in kindergarten, I chased boys around the playground hoping to capture attention. However, in eighth grade when my mom met and quickly married my stepdad, I spiraled deeper into seeking attention from boys. Falling into depression as my home life shifted, I sought approval and control in the outside world.

Maybe it was a rebellion to express my disapproval. Maybe it was coping or survival. As I went into high school, seeking value and what I thought was love from others became an obsession. I always had crushes and often had boyfriends. I would say “yes” to boys that I didn't even really find cute simply because I liked the idea of being desired. Eventually, that led to boys taking advantage of me, and I let them. I didn't know my own inherent value and worth. I've always wanted to be liked, remember? It wasn't likable to say no. I thought I was going along with things because I wanted to, but looking back, I

realize I made the choices I did simply to keep feeling valuable. The shame swallowed me as my worth actually diminished more, yet I kept on.

The void within me I was seeking to satisfy would be filled for a time by one relationship or another in a cruel illusion that I would be happy for a time. Before long, I'd be cast aside and rejected, too clingy for them, or they had moved on to the next girl. Of course, this trampled any worth I thought I had acquired, so I kept looking for the next "fix," so to speak. I used this time in the most unhealthy way to steal back the power taken from me as a little girl. Realizing my looks had power over others to gain attention and connection, even for a brief time, I used it. In doing so, little pieces of my heart chipped off here and there, not even considering how that would affect my future marriage or my self-worth.

The illusion of fulfillment was there, always fooling me for a time; but reality never failed to assert itself with a swish of its hand to sling shame back at me. *What am I doing? What have I done?* I was spiraling internally—torn between the highs and lows of it all. Still, I pressed on.

Trying out different versions of me depending on who I was with at the time was thrilling, and if nothing else, it widened my view of the world. There was too much freedom in those teenage years, too many compromises made or turning a blind eye. Each year, each boy, each internal cry for love and attention was another domino falling.