

FINDING  
MY  
SON

*A Father's*  
ADOPTION  
JOURNEY



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Eric Odell-Hein

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My life is a living testimony to those who value love, life, and grace.  
Without these, my family would not be here.

This book is dedicated to them.





# Prologue

I CAME HOME FROM WORK *to an unusually dark home one evening in February of 2008. As the sun sets early in winter, all the lights on the lower floor were usually turned off. My wife, Chris, was not found in either of her normal afternoon locations; in the office or the TV room. I took off my shoes and, with some confusion, began to investigate. Her car was in the garage, but there was no sign of her in the house. I quickly scanned the downstairs before moving up to the bedroom level. As I approached the top stair, I heard muffled sniffing coming from the farthest door to the left: the nursery Christine had started preparing. All the upstairs lights were off, too, so I carefully walked into the room and saw her shadowy shape on the futon. She was crying, and it was clear they were sobs born of deep sorrow and despair. I put my hand on her shoulder as she continued to sob out her pain. I knew the source of that pain, but I couldn't do much to solve the issue. I offered the support I could, but that felt feeble. Ultimately, we both felt helpless, and as her emotions surfaced that night, it broke my heart.*



# Chapter 1

IN THE MIDDLE OF A remote area in Iowa in the 1950s, a Lutheran pastor's wife, named Bonnie, was pregnant with her second child. She'd had a medically difficult pregnancy and as she approached the baby's birth, her doctors informed her of a serious problem.

"Bonnie," the doctor said in a grave tone, "the situation is life-threatening. If you continue the pregnancy, either you or the baby will die." He paused before adding, with ominous emphasis, "Very possibly both of you will die."

Bonnie was tough, though; as a child of German and Scottish descent, every ounce of her heritage and determination had already been put to the test early on, as a young child of a horribly abusive father. They lived in the middle of a St. Louis ghetto. Despite this, she emerged remarkably well-adjusted. She met Hugo Hein in her late teens, and a lifelong love was kindled. The medical situation with the baby was certainly not going to defeat her.

Hugo came from a large family of Austrian immigrants who'd struggled during the Depression. One of twelve siblings, his father and mother had faced tremendous difficulty as they attempted to provide

the basics for their family. He remembered, as a child, watching his father pack up the entire family to leave their failed farm in Minnesota to head to the great unknown of western Oregon. The move consisted simply of Mom and Dad, twelve siblings, a vehicle, and some camping gear. “God will provide,” was his father’s mantra. Hugo’s father had said it repeatedly and with great conviction. Miraculously, God did provide for all of them, though it wasn’t easy. Both the difficulties and the faith to see them through left quite a mark on young Hugo. Now, as an adult and an ordained minister of God serving in the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, he leaned on his father’s refrain, “God will provide.”

While the doctors pushed the young couple to agree to a medical abortion, Bonnie and Hugo decided to continue the pregnancy and take the risk—trusting that God would indeed provide.

By divine grace, Bonnie not only lived but so did her child. She ended up having three boys and lived to be seventy-one. My father, Ken, was the baby boy the doctors had wanted to abort. He was the miracle of God’s provision.

About the same time Bonnie was facing her pregnancy dilemma in Iowa, an unwed mother living in the Pacific Northwest, named Wanita, gave up her newborn daughter for adoption. Wanita lived a complicated life and became pregnant by a man who moved to California before he knew about the pregnancy. Wanita did not tell her daughters about this. However, she did ask one of her girls to mail a letter to the birth father for her. In a twist of fate, her eldest daughter never mailed it, and the father never ended up knowing about Wanita’s pregnancy.

During her pregnancy, Wanita reconciled with her former husband, who was not the father of the new baby. When the time for the birth came, Wanita sent her children away. Once at the hospital, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl and immediately gave the child up for adoption. She never told her daughters about the baby. She simply explained that she had been in the hospital and may have suffered a miscarriage. Wanita

eventually had four daughters, and this baby had been the third. She kept the existence of this baby girl a secret—a secret she took to her grave in 2010.

A loving family in Washington, the Odell's, who could not have children of their own, adopted the baby girl. She was the second of three children they adopted. During their life, Noble and Mary Odell adopted an older boy, Howard, and a younger girl, Margie, making this baby girl the middle child. They named her Virginia (Ginnie). She was raised in a small town named Renton, in a home overlooking Lake Washington. Unbeknownst to them, they lived just a mile or two from where the birth mother lived. They probably ran across each other at the local store without ever knowing it.

Ginnie is my mother.

Unfortunately, Noble and Mary were not forthcoming about her adoption, and it wasn't until she was ten years old that she found out she was adopted—from the neighbor kids, no less. Ginnie and her friends were out riding their bikes, they got into a spat, and the neighbor kids with youthful spite told her, "It's okay. You're adopted. They didn't want you anyway."

Ginnie responded with angry tears of denial. "You're lying!" she yelled as she quickly rode back to the house.

Ginnie burst into the house to ask her mother about the situation. Her mom was on the phone and it had been a difficult day, so Mary absentmindedly responded to her with short dismissal. "Of course! All you darn kids are adopted." And that was that. It was one of the worst days of Ginnie's life. Adoption was not a topic Noble and Mary were willing to discuss. This left Ginnie to process this news on her own. Ginnie, a tall, thin girl with bright red hair and a pale, heavily freckled face, now realized why she looked so different from her sister Margie, who was Inuit.

When Ginnie was seventeen and Ken was eighteen in the late summer of 1973, they met during orientation days at Central Washington University in a town called Ellensburg. They lived in the dorms. During initiation, the guys from Beck Hall had to line up in front of girls from Hitchcock Hall and sing a nasty song. The girl across from each young man was supposed to slap him after the song. Ginnie lined up across from Ken. A few days after the slap, they met again and, over time, found love. After a short while, Ken asked Ginnie to marry him. She said yes. When they were just two young kids starting a life together, Ken enrolled in military service to pay for college and provide as best as he could for his family.

Though in love and intended, Ginnie realized she was pregnant before their marriage took place. Both Ken and Ginnie had been raised in a traditional environment, so this was an undesirable situation. Ginnie's family was conservative Episcopalian while Ken was the son of a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor. It was awkward and embarrassing, not to mention inconvenient. Abortion was legal, but Ginnie and Ken made the decision to continue the pregnancy. They valued the life of the developing human baby. To accommodate both the expected June birth and Ken's military deployment schedule, they moved the wedding up from June 1974 to December 1973.

Ginnie's Aunt Dorothy made her wedding dress. Ginnie dreaded having to tell her she needed alterations due to the "baby bulge." Ginnie went to visit her aunt Dorothy at the family homestead to try on the dress. Dorothy had completed the patterns several weeks earlier. However, as Ginnie tried on the dress, it was clear it did not fit.

Dorothy told Ginnie, "Well, I'm glad you're not one of those silly girls who feels like she needs to lose weight right before the wedding!"

Ginnie nervously responded, "Well, there is a good reason for the poor fit." She paused to gather herself before continuing, "I'm pregnant."

Dorothy also paused for a moment, then gave a fun, cackling laugh as she exclaimed, “Well, that is one more baby for the family to kiss on!” No judgment or condemnation came from Dorothy; she simply celebrated a new life. Dorothy Chapman, as with all the Chapmans, was a special person.

With the support of their families, Ginnie married Ken and they promptly moved to Germany as part of his deployment orders. I am the baby born on June 1, 1974, at the US Army’s Fifth General Hospital in Bad Cannstatt, a small town near the larger urban center of Stuttgart.

Life was very challenging for the two young, just-married parents. At the time, my parents were nineteen-year-olds who lived overseas in small German towns without a good support system. Ginnie struggled with feeling she was an incompetent mother. She once accidentally dropped me in front of an oncoming car. Another time, she set the kitchen on fire! Frau Gaugl, their landlady in Ludwigsburg, helped Ginnie gain confidence as a mother. Meanwhile, Ken’s military duties required him to conduct fuel training in different regions of Germany. As a result, he was not always at home and able to lend quality support.

After a few years in Germany, we moved back to Washington state. Life continued along a steady path. My family moved to Puyallup when I started the first grade, and Puyallup remained my home until I finished high school. A smart but not too social child, I enjoyed football quite a bit. I found everything about it exciting, from tossing the ball on the playground to watching it on television. I was a Seahawks fan from the age of five and loved watching Steve Largent’s Hall of Fame career in Seattle. The Seahawks were a big part of my family and my passion in those years.

Life continued in normal fashion until May of 1989. I was just two weeks from my fifteenth birthday, and late one rainy Friday night, I did something *verboten* in my family. My friend Dave was over, and thanks to a free preview of one of the pay channels, we secretly watched

the movie, *Predator*. I loved it, but I knew I was breaking the rules by watching an R-rated movie. I would face severe punishment if my parents ever discovered my deed.

The next morning, they called me down to sit at the dining room table for a family conference. The air was thick with anger and frustration, and their faces were as grim as I had ever seen them.

They asked, "Do you know why we're having this conversation?"

Of course, I knew. They had figured what I had done the night before, but I sure wasn't going to fess up to it.

"No," I replied nervously. In my denial, I held on to the slim hope I would somehow get away with it.

They looked at me a long while. Time passed slowly. I began to wonder if I should crack and fess up. The atmosphere was intense! After a few more excruciating moments, I heard the news that surprised me to the core: Mom was leaving Dad that very day! It was the day before Mother's Day. I hadn't known why we were having the conversation. It had nothing to do with *Predator*. I had no idea my parents were about to break up. The separation and subsequent divorce shook my world and my sense of security as a teenager.

Although their marriage failed, they did do a great job of raising me. I felt very loved by both of my parents. Over the years, I have been consistently grateful for their choice of life over abortion, since I wouldn't be here otherwise. I had no idea then, my family's history of adoption versus abortion would play such a strong role in my life going forward, too.