CHAPTER EIGHT

Micki: the Birthmother Who, After Marriage, Had to Adopt

This story addresses four important questions: When adoptees like Kurt decide to search, should they tell their adoptive parents? When a birthmother finds a birthson she relinquished years before, will he welcome her into his life? How will her husband react to discovering she'd given birth before he knew her? And fourth, when a birthmother gets too wrapped up in a newfound birthson, how does that affect the children she is raising? Micki's adopted son got into a lot of serious trouble.

Micki, birthmother: That particular Monday was not a good time for her to call me. That morning at recess my son Chris had been kicked out of Green Bay Christian School for saying the word shit on the playground. When I picked him up, I pulled my daughter Jennifer out also. So they're both home, plus my husband, Lee, who is home on vacation. The four of us were just sitting down at the kitchen table to eat a ham sandwich when the phone rang.

I've been very involved in adoption since we adopted Chris and Jennifer, so I didn't think a thing about it when social worker Jane Semphill started talking to me about adoption. Not until she asked me if December 5, 1963 meant anything special to me.

"What is going on?" I asked, taking my coffee and the phone into the laundry.

"Last Friday I had this very handsome young man—his name is Kurt—come in here to see me. He believes you may be his birthmother." I just go… ! After twenty years of marriage, this is still my little secret, 'cause I had never told my husband about it. So I just went kind of numb when she was talking to me.

"Is this a good time?" she asked.

"Not really, but there's never going to be a good time. You tell me."

She told me why Kurt had come to see her. After his adopted sister Lorna had been found by her birthmother, he thought, Maybe my birthmother's not going to look for me, so maybe I'd better look for her.

All Kurt had to go on was his *amended* birth certificate which listed the names of his adoptive parents as if *they* has given birth to him. It did, however, provide the name of the Milwaukee hospital where I had gone to have him. He drove there on Friday, September 25, 1987 and discovered it had been torn down. Then he located Catholic Social Services and went to see Jane Semphill. After he left, she called the dental office where I had been working twenty-four years earlier, and bingo! by the following Monday she had tracked me down.

Now Jane said to me, "Would you be open to contact with him?"

"Oh my God, yes, there's no doubt!" I said, my heart racing.

"Does your husband know?" she asked.

"No, he doesn't," I said.

"Are you sure this is okay?" she asked.

"Yes, without a doubt!" I am never going to say no to this; it's time it came out, is what I was thinking.

"Is there going to be a good time when Kurt can call you?" Jane asked.

Ah, I thought, Lee and Chris go to gun class Wednesday night. I'll stick Jennifer in front of the TV.

"Wednesday night, about seven," I said, walking back into the kitchen to hang up the phone. I threw out the remains of my sandwich, and cleaned up after lunch.

I couldn't eat, sleep, anything; I was a nervous wreck. I couldn't wait 'till Wednesday. I was petrified, still trying to keep everything so secret, afraid Lee would sense something big was going on. How do you have something like this happen in your life and not talk to anybody?

So finally, the next morning, I called my mother, my mother who never handles anything, and I told her.

"Oh my God, what does he want?" she asked, nervously.

"Mom, he doesn't want anything, he just wants to meet me."

"What if he's a little weird?"

"Well, he's got my blood in him, maybe he is, who cares?"

Finally Wednesday came. I was wound up so tight I could hardly stand it. I made lasagna for dinner, went through the motions of serving and eating it, then washed up afterwards. When six forty came and Lee and Chris left for gun class, I watched them drive away and then took Jennifer to the other end of the house where I sat her in front of a new Muppets cartoon I'd rented for the occasion.

It was ten to seven. I poured myself a big mug of coffee and took it into our bedroom to wait for Kurt's call. Just as I was setting down my coffee, the phone rang and I nearly spilled it. I snatched up the receiver and said "Hello!" It was my

co-worker, Nancy, and I said "Can't talk now. Got to go!" and slammed the phone down. God himself could have called me and I wouldn't have talked to him.

I had just settled myself on the bed and I was crying and praying at the same time and the phone rang again and I picked it up and nonchalantly said "Hello?" He was right on the button at seven o'clock.

"Is Micki there?" an unknown voice said.

"This is her," I said slowly, trying to sound very calm and sophisticated.

"This is Kurt," said the voice.

"Hiii," I said, trailing off because I did not know what to say. Blank! Me who can't stop talking was absolutely speechless.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" asked the voice.

"Oh, no. No, *no*, I don't mind."

He was very loving and gentle and mature for his age, more mature than I, 'cause I was a blubbering fool and I couldn't seem to stop.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"No, no, that's okay. I did my crying already. When Jane called to tell me that you were open to talking to me or meeting me, Micki, I drove to the lake and sat there cryin' my eyes out 'till three o'clock in the morning."

"Yeah! You're my son!" and I cried all the harder, hearing him say that.

He touched a little bit on his childhood, that he said had been happy. It was reassuring, after waiting and worrying for twenty-four years, to hear he was okay. Talking to him on the phone, I fell in love with him. I had always loved him, but now I could tell he really was a wonderful person.

We talked about meeting for lunch on Friday and he wanted us to meet half way between us, in Appleton.

"Don't ask me to drive that far, Kurt, I'm in such a state. You'll have to come here to Green Bay." So I said Sergio's in Green Bay. I was so dazed I couldn't even tell him where it was.

"Don't worry, I'll find it," he said. "How will I know it's you?"

"I'll have a rose in my hair." After laughing at that silly remark, we hung up.

We talked for over two hours, and he thought it was neat, that I had two adopted kids. He couldn't believe I'd never had any more children, except for my second birthson, Anthony.

After Kurt and I talked that first time, I still didn't tell my husband, Lee. For now this was going to stay my secret, and I was going to handle it like I've handled everything else in my life.

From the moment the social worker had called me, I dreamed of meeting my son. In case we would meet, I ran out that same night and blew myself to a beautiful apricot-colored silk pantsuit. Now that I knew my dream would be reality in two days, I went out again to complete my new outfit. I bought a chocolate-colored knit pant coat, a designer scarf, shoes, even underwear. I put the whole works on my charge card. I just wanted to feel *good* when I saw him, to be the very best I could

be. At that point I was forty-three and, because I had started walking a couple of months before, my weight was down over twenty pounds. I looked pretty good.

By Friday morning the two kids were back in school and, at my suggestion, Lee had gone fishing for the day. I washed and set my hair, dressed carefully, and stopped at a florist's to pick up a little tea rose for him. I was in Sergio's parking lot by quarter to one. We had said one o'clock, and it got to be ten to one, it got to be one, and he didn't come. By ten after one I was thinking, please God, he's got to come! I couldn't believe he could have been so sincere on the phone and not showed up. Finally about quarter after one, this car came flooring past me, and this tall, good-looking guy got out and I thought, It's got to be him! My God, he looked like my father!

I opened the window and hollered, "Kurt!"

He turned and looked at me. He said, "Micki?"

I thought, my God, it *is* him!

My heart started pounding like it had on my first date. I got out of the car and I went over and handed the rose to this tall, thin, very handsome young man who was my son. He took the rose and the other stuff I had for him and put it on the hood of his car, then he just grabbed me and squeezed me tight against his chest. It was *wonderful*, I was in heaven! I was just like a giddy school girl again. Finally he let me go.

"I'm sorry, you can't even breathe!" he said, 'cause he's nearly six feet and I'm five two.

"I don't mind," I said.

He held my arm as we walked into Sergio's, this young man who looked so much like me. I thought, Oh, my God, this is so thrilling! It was just like going to the prom. I wanted to scream, Look at him, everybody, this is my son!

We sat down at a booth. The waitress came to take our order and asked if we'd like anything to drink.

I said, "I'll take a white wine."

"I'll take a bloody Mary," my son said.

So we were sitting there, and I said to myself, bloody Mary, okay, just trying to concentrate on his words so I didn't forget anything. But my excitement erased nearly everything he said anyway. I kept staring at him like he was going to disappear if I took my eyes off him. He had my hazel eyes, high cheek bones, and brown hair with auburn highlights, like mine had before I went gray.

We were talking, and all of a sudden I saw he had this puddle of water on the table in front of him; his glass of water had a hole in it. We just cracked up, and I said, Thank you God, because that broke the tension. After the water was mopped up, we both relaxed.

Then he began showing me pictures in this enormous leather-bound album he'd taken from his mother's bookcase. He was still living at home then.

Kurt showed me pictures of himself and his sister and his family and all I could

see were the images of him and I just wanted to take them all for myself. I didn't tell him because I didn't want to be grabby or pushy; I just wanted to take whatever he wanted to give me. I had this new camera with me, but I was so mesmerized I didn't even think of taking his picture. It took me 'till the following May to get a picture.

I did remember to ask him something, though.

"Did you ever get the blanket I made for you when I was at Lorelei Manor?"

"Blanket?" he asked.

I just looked at him. "I worked on that thing day and night all the months I was there, and you never got it?" I said, "Kurt, I made that for you!"

"I hate to think my mother got it and then didn't give it to me, Micki," he said.

I was very upset about that possibility. If his parents *were* given that blanket and then didn't give it to him at the appropriate time, it was like a denial that I had any importance in his life.

The couple that adopted Kurt is approximately ten years older than my husband and me. His mother never worked, just stayed at home with their two adopted kids, Lorna and Kurt. Apparently it was a regular, normal childhood. He said there was never any conversation about his adoption or his birthparents.

He told me about something that had really upset his mother. One day the front doorbell rang and when his mother opened the door, the young woman standing there said, "Hi, there, I'm the birthmother of your daughter, Lorna." I guess it was awful, just awful; Kurt's mother went into a tizzy. Hearing this made me angry because Lorna's birthmother had screwed things up for me; her thoughtless actions had soured Kurt's parents on birthmothers, perhaps forever.

Before my meeting with Kurt, I had found a beautiful piece of writing at the Christian bookstore. It was burned onto a piece of koa wood and it said, "You're important; you're special. God made you to be just who you are. There's nobody else like you in the whole, entire universe. You are unique!"

I presented it to him and he just looked at it.

"This is beautiful," he said. The plaque and the rose touched him a great deal, as did my aunt's huge book of our family's genealogy going all the way back to the first white settlers in Wisconsin.

"Here, you take it and read it and then you'll know who you are and I'll see if I can get you a copy."

"Gosh, Micki, I wanted to know my heritage, but I never dreamt it would be like this!"

"I don't mess around, kid!" I said, being funny.

After a few minutes of silence, he asked, "Did you name me?"

"Well, of course!" I said, "Didn't they tell you?"

"No," he said.

"You were baptized in the hospital soon after you were born," I said. "I held you

and gave you the name of James Lee Perry. That was your name for six months, until you were adopted."

"Do you have a picture of my birthfather?" he asked.

"I did have," I said, "but when Lee and I moved from our apartment into the house, I threw it away because I never dreamt someone would want that picture of Paul. I needed to get away from that part of my life."

"That's okay, I understand," he said.

He wanted to know the story of how he was conceived, so I told him about that. I can't remember naming Paul as the father when I filled out the original birth certificate, but I probably did, because, after we took him to court, he paid all Kurt's medical bills. I do remember that when, days after my twentieth birthday, I was in the courtroom signing my parental rights away, Paul wasn't there. They told me he was in jail for statutory rape of some fifteen-year-old girl. In spite of that fact, he'd been good to me sometimes—he once brought me a puppy—until he had to be responsible for his actions. Then I found out who the real Paul was. I never told Kurt all of that stuff. But I did tell him that Paul had wanted me to have an abortion and that I never had anything to do with him after that.

He said, "Thank you for not having one."

I said, "Kurt, I couldn't have, I just couldn't."

Kurt did share a little about his teenaged years.

"I was quiet, not outgoing at all," he said. "Even though my sister and cousins were also adopted, I always had this feeling I didn't belong. I didn't have any close friend or girlfriend I could talk to."

We had a wonderful lunch, but when he left and drove away, I knew in my heart that was going to be the first and last time I'd see him, because now *I* was *his* secret.

That lunch at Sergio's was four years ago, and it was a bad situation because he didn't tell his parents about me until this year, and the guilt was not good for him. He'd have me write to him at his sister Lorna's apartment, and would pick up my letters there. I didn't like this deceitfulness, and neither did Lorna.

Once she said to me on the phone, "I'm angry at Kurt, not for searching for you, but because he didn't tell our parents. He's being sneaky, having your letters come to my house, and I don't like being used. I told him he should grow up and tell our folks."

Finally he got his own apartment and could get his mail there. Even then I felt like the other woman in some dirty affair, the mistress who's warned, "Don't you *ever* call my home or my office!" I felt like I had zero worth, zero status.

When Kurt found me, I was in a terrible upheaval with my own children, but still I made Kurt the focal point of my whole life, and it wasn't fair to my son and daughter. Right after that was when Chris started setting fires and getting in serious trouble with the police.

My father was a soldier in WW II; we never met each other until I was two and a half years old. I'd been born on December 7, 1943 in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and my mother and her sister raised me in a little apartment. When my dad finally came home from the war, I was afraid of him even though he was very loving. I was their only child. When I was about six, we moved into the home that my mother still resides in here in Green Bay.

My father was a long-distance truck driver and wasn't home much. When he was home he'd fight with my mom, and I'd stand between them to protect her. I now realize he was an alcoholic. My mother wasn't; she was just very passive. When I went into third grade, my mother got a job so she'd have a little spending money.

My baby-sitter was a neighbor, a sixteen-year-old boy who abused me sexually. He was the son of my mom's close friend, Clarice. He ended up going into the seminary. When I finally told my mother a couple of years ago, her response was, "Oh, my gosh! What would I have done? How could I have told Clarice?"

I just looked at her. "Mom, *I'm* the one that got hurt!"

"Oh, but you're fine now," she said.

I never ever had anybody I could talk to; I just shoved everything down inside. Now I'm in counseling and it's helping me tremendously.

In 1962 I graduated from high school. Not long afterwards I met Paul in a teen bar. I was still living at home, so he met my folks. They really liked Paul—they thought he was a nice Catholic boy. In March I found out I was pregnant, and being Catholic, I didn't even consider abortion. I was naive enough to think Paul would marry me. I loved him and he loved me and we'd get married, just like in the movies.

When I told Paul, he said, "Oh, my God, how stupid!"

"What do you mean?" I said, my heart in my mouth.

"I mean you'll have to get *rid* of it, that's what I mean!" he shouted.

I was absolutely crushed; I felt sick to my stomach. How could he even *think* of such a thing?

My mother was no help whatsoever. I finally made all the arrangements myself; I knew I was on my own.

I went to see Mitzi Fowler at Catholic Social Services and she helped me. Although there was a place right in Green Bay, my mother said, "Oh my God, *no*, somebody might find out!" So when I was five months pregnant, I went to a Catholic home for unwed mothers in Milwaukee. It was awful, just *awful*.

Lorelei Manor was actually two big, old houses next door to each other. In one, we watched TV in the evenings and slept, and in the other we ate meals and did craft things and worked. We did all the dishes, the washing, ironing, and the cleaning. The boss of that house, Mrs. Petry, would bark at us, "Get down on those knees and scrub those floors!" She seemed to enjoy giving you a dirty, difficult, job. It was like, You terrible children, you will be punished! You will repent! Even

though we were earning our keep, my stay cost a hundred dollars a month.

There were ten of us girls at Lorelei Manor, all with phony names. Mine was Pat. Soon after I got there, the sister hauled me into her office. She said, "I want you to know there's a girl coming in from your high school in Green Bay and you are not to acknowledge you know her."

When that girl arrived, of course we recognized each other, but I just said Hi, like all the rest. That night we were alone in the TV room for a few minutes. I sat down in the chair next to her.

"Jody," I whispered, "I just want you to know this secrecy stuff is all baloney! What are you supposed to be doing?"

She said, "I'm having a nervous breakdown."

"Well, I'm in college," I said, and we giggled about it.

One of the sick things we had to do was to wear little dime-store wedding rings because the sisters thought it would look best, if we were out walking. So, here's five or six pregnant girls out walking, some of 'em fifteen, sixteen years old. Well, of course we're all married! Heck, we were just babies ourselves. I will never forget the face of one fourteen-year-old girl who was told she would have to have a Caesarian because she was so tiny. She lived in fear of that day.

Finally my turn came. I gave birth to Kurt on December 5, 1963, two days before my twentieth birthday. I named him James Lee after my very best childhood friend. I had been born with club feet and so was Kurt, and I was petrified nobody was going to adopt him. I thought, how am I going to pay for his surgery? Thanks to Mitzi Fowler pressuring Paul, he agreed to pay for it. When my birthson was about six months old, the agency called and told me he'd had corrective surgery and had finally been adopted.

Two and a half years after I had Kurt, things were going good for me. I had finally got my $500 debt to Lorelei Manor paid off and moved into my own little apartment. I was still working for the same dentist who had hired me soon after high school graduation and had taken me back after my visit to Lorelie Manor. I worked there about five years altogether.

Bernadine, the other girl in the office, was much younger than me. I would go to her house sometimes, and eventually I started dating her divorced brother, Trevor, who was also living at home. When it was getting very serious, he said "Since I'm divorced, we can't get married in the Catholic church. We might as well just stop seeing each other."

"All right," I said, passively.

Not long afterwards that I found myself pregnant again.

I agonized about whether or not to tell Trevor, and I thought, What's the point? We can't get married. I didn't have the money to go to Lorelei Manor again; I had barely gotten them paid off. In the dental office, I was Jill-of-all-trades, and I loved

it. All I could do was to keep working as long as I possibly could. I was in total denial because this couldn't be happening to me again, *no*!

Desperately, I lost over twenty pounds—I was my slimmest ever. The dentist never realized I was pregnant. Nobody suspected anything because I was wearing blue jeans, playing baseball for the office league, even though I was scared to death to be doing that.

When I was eight months pregnant I finally told my mother, and she said, "What does the doctor say?"

I said, "I don't know, I haven't seen him yet."

Finally I got scared for the baby and went to see my loving doctor that I had gone to the first time.

"Oh, Micki," he said.

"No lectures!" I said.

"No," he said, "I'm just amazed you waited this long before coming in."

"Well, I thought it would go away!" I said, trying to minimize it. I was so scared and I had no one to talk to.

When I told him I wanted this baby to be adopted, too, he got me an appointment with the same social worker I'd seen before. I was embarrassed to be in Mitzi Fowler's office again, but she was a sweetheart.

All she said was, "Micki, I'm not judging you, I'm just glad you came in, but my God, girl, what were you thinking of, waiting so long?"

"I thought we were going to get married, but he's divorced and the Catholic Church wouldn't let us get married."

She said, "Did you tell him about the baby?"

I said, "No, why would I? We couldn't get married."

Even though I got pregnant twice, I was this good Catholic girl that went to church every Sunday and was so ignorant I didn't realize a justice of the peace could have married us.

A week before my due date I started my two weeks of vacation time. I thought, Boy, you better come, you better come, and I'll get through this somehow. I just stayed in my apartment watching TV, reading, trying to sleep, trying keep it together. Only my mother and Bernadine knew. They called me every day.

On the morning of my due date, I dreamed I had wet the bed. When I opened my eyes, I saw it was seven o'clock, and that I *had* wet the bed because my waters had broken. Right away I started having slight contractions, which progressed very fast. I was trying to stay calm and relaxed, concentrating on breathing properly, something one of the Lorelei Manor girls had taught me two and a half years before. Around nine I gave up trying to control the pain, and called my mother. "The pain is too bad," I gasped, "I've got to have you help me!"

She was in the midst of kneading bread, but she covered her dough and threw it in the fridge. Ten minutes later she helped me into her car and rushed me to the

hospital emergency entrance. They shoved a wheelchair under me and whisked me away. I know that was hard for my mom, going in for the paperwork and giving our name to a clerk she knew.

An hour later, on June 10, 1966, my second birthson Anthony was born. I was twenty-two.

I went back to work about a week and a half after that. I'm not sure if the dentist knew I'd had a baby—he welcomed me back but didn't say a word about my vacation, and neither did I. Of course Bernadine, my co-worker and Trevor's sister, knew everything. She knew it was his baby, but said she never told him in case it aggravated his heart murmur.

Three months later a tall, good-looking, man named Lee started coming to the dental office where I still worked. He had neglected his teeth and needed several crowns. After his final visit I was walking him to the front desk to settle his bill when he asked me for a date.

I'd always dreamed of finding someone like Lee: kind and good-natured with a great sense of humor. We fell in love immediately and got married in the chapel of Sacred Heart Catholic Church on September 23, 1967 when he was twenty-four and I was twenty-three. I wore a pale aqua wool suit, high heeled pumps, and carried lilies-of-the-valley.

We tried to have a baby and I thought, No problem, I'll get pregnant, I've already had two children, but Lee knew nothing of them. But nothing happened, nothing. Five years later, after all kinds of tests on both of us, I finally realized I wasn't going to ever have any more children and decided to look into adoption.

All the time Lee and I were trying to conceive, I wrestled with the question of, Shall I tell him about my two birthsons? I was on the verge of it, but I was too afraid of losing him, afraid he'd say, Goodbye, Micki, I'm going. I just couldn't take that chance. Now, in retrospect, I should have been open and honest, but sometimes total truth-telling backfires.

Like once when, between the times I had Kurt and Anthony, I had been engaged to a man called Cyril. Cyril was Methodist and after we'd gone to see the priest, he said, "I can't turn Catholic, Micki. I just can't swallow all that stuff."

So we had a long discussion. Then I said, "I'll be honest with you, Cyril," and then I told him about having had my first birthson, Kurt.

His he stared at me with big eyes, his mouth falling open. "Oh, my God," he said, "used material! I'm so glad you told me. I'm sorry, but I want nothing more to do with you." I thought, He's right, I'm no good. What kind of a person gives up their own flesh and blood? He's a good, perfect person; he deserves a perfect person, not used material.

Soon after Kurt found me, I ran into Cyril on the street. Ignoring the woman with him, I said, "Hi, Cyril, nice to see you again. By the way, do you remember years ago when I told you about the birthson I had?"

"Yeah," he said, his voice still scornful.

"Well, you'll be glad to know he found me and we have a wonderful relationship. He thinks I'm a fine person." And then I smiled and said, "Thank you Cyril, for being there when I needed you," and I turned and walked away.

A couple of weeks after I had met Kurt at Sergio's, I knew he was a fantastic young man I wanted in my life, so I finally decided to tell my husband, Lee.

Lee was working three to eleven that week, and I thought, This is it, do or die, so I waited up for him to get home from work. By eleven-thirty I was emotionally exhausted, trying to keep my eyes open. I met him at the door and said, "I've got to talk to you," and I had him come in the family room. I was terrified, but I thought, If I lose my family, if I lose everything, I can't help it. Kurt was so important, I wasn't going to have him be a secret any more.

I sat Lee down, and he just looked at me and by now the tears were starting, and I thought, I've got to make it through this.

"I'm sorry to do this to you when you come home from work, but I can't hold it in any longer." I didn't hug him or nothin', we just sat across from each other on chairs.

I told him about Kurt, my first birthson who had found me.

"Who's the father?" he asked.

I ignored him and I said, "And that's not all, there was another one."

With that his eyes just bugged out and he said, "Two?"

"Yes," I said. And I told him about Anthony.

"Who's the father?" he asked for the second time.

"That's not important, Lee," I said, "you don't know either one of these men. It doesn't matter who they are, I'm just telling you this is the situation."

"Who else knew?" he said.

"My mother," I said. "My Dad knew about the first one, but my mother thought it best not to tell him about the second one." That's how I'd been trained, that the dishonesty of secrets is best. After I finished my story, I told him this:

"Lee, I've given you twenty years of faithfulness. I've never ever done anything in our marriage I would be ashamed of, never! Twenty years, Lee. I've already decided if you want to leave, there will be no argument from me. I've lied to you all these years, I haven't been honest, and you didn't deserve that." No feelings, nothing. I was totally drained.

At one o'clock in the morning I finally got to my feet. "I have to go to bed," I said. "You think about it."

I dragged myself up the stairs to our bedroom, threw my clothes on a chair, and crawled into bed. I cried myself to sleep. When I opened my eyes in the morning, my God, there he was, asleep beside me! Thank you, God, I whispered to myself.

Now that my first birthson, Kurt, had found me and knew our current family health history, I began worrying about my second birthson, who knew nothing about it. Years ago, I'd had a serious bout with multiple sclerosis when Lee and I

were trying to adopt; either I had a relatively mild case of it and it's gone, or I've been in remission all these years. We adopted Chris and Jennifer from Bogota, Colombia, because the State of Wisconsin had turned us down, due to my M.S.

After Kurt and I had lunch at Sergio's in 1987, I phoned Jane Semphill of Catholic Social Services to tell her how wonderful he was. She was delighted about it all; then she blew me away by saying, "Now I'll help you find Anthony."

"Okay," I said. A while after that she called me.

"Well, I found out that he's in college. I keep trying to get ahold of him, Micki, but I can't get through to him. You know how kids in college are."

This went on for a couple of weeks and I thought, Well, that's enough of that, I'm going to find him myself. That's when I went to see Pam at the Adoption Information and Direction Group.

"Pam," I said, "he might be sick, he might have multiple sclerosis, I've got to find him!"

"Well, Micki, you had him here in Green Bay, so we'll just go down to Clerk of Court's office and find him," and I just stared at her.

"What are you talking about?" I asked her. She explained what we had to do and it was a simple process. I didn't know it was that easy, talk about dumb!

So Pam and I went down to the clerk of court's office at eight o'clock the next morning, and I thought, They all know why we're here! I felt like I had these big fluorescent letters, BPS, written across my forehead, birthparent searching type of thing. Heck, the whole thing took us forty-five minutes.

I had my aunt's genealogy scrapbooks with me and I told the clerk I was working on the *now* generation, bringing things up to date. So she got out the record book with a list of all the Green Bay births in 1966 and set it in front of us. Of course, I knew the date, so I turned right to June, I knew the hospital, I knew the doctor, so all we did was go up and down the rows, looking for all the boys born on that date in that particular hospital, and there were only five of them. So I just wrote the names down and I whispered to Pam, "You mean this is all there is to it?"

But in order to pin down which one of the five male births was my son, we had to find out the name of the attending physician and the time of birth, and that information was not in the book but only on the birth certificate, so we asked for copies of all five birth certificates. The woman looked at me kind of funny, but she went ahead and made copies of four original birth certificates and of one *amended* birth certificate, because she knew it was one of *those*, 'cause there were some markings in there, and I thought, hummmmm. But Pam whispered to me to relax, the clerk *had* to give them to me because they were all part of the public record.

When the clerk put a glassine envelope in front of us and collected our money, I picked it up and thanked her. Then we went to a nearby Starbucks for a cup of coffee and an old fashioned donut. We sat down at a booth and excitedly spread the five birth certificates out in front of us. There was only one male born in the right hospital with the right doctor and at the right time of the right day, and

that baby was named on the *amended* birth certificate they used for adopted kids. I knew my second birthson had been born in the middle of the day, and BINGO, there it was! The amended birth certificate said, Time of birth: 12:30 p.m., and I thought, Oh, God, my memory serves me right!

I thought, my God, now what do I do? So then I went home and immediately called up the information operator. Anthony's parents, whose names and address were listed on his amended birth certificate, still lived in the same place as when they had adopted him.

After a while I called Jane Semphill at Catholic Social Services again, not telling her about what Pam and I had found out, but just to see if she had any more news about Anthony. She told me again he was in college, but this time she mentioned that it was a college here in Wisconsin.

Ten minutes after I'd hung up the phone, my adopted son Chris came in the door. He had just come from college days at his high school, where they have speakers and booths and handouts about various colleges, trying to recruit kids for their college. He handed me a brochure listing of all the campuses in the huge University of Wisconsin system, and I looked at it and said to Chris, "Let me borrow this for a day or so."

I thought, What the heck, so the next morning I called every college on the list except UW-Oshkosh, thinking, why would he go there, so close to home in Kaukauna, so I left that one 'till after lunch.

When I called the number, the college operator said, "Oh, Anthony Vandenburg? Sure." My heart started to pound. Then she gave me the phone number of his dorm room and asked if I wanted to be connected. I said, "Oh, no, thanks. I'll get hold of him later," I just sat there for a long time watching it snow, and then I went out and cleaned my aunt's house 'cause she was elderly. When I came home a couple of hours later, I thought, All right, this is it, do it, and I called the number.

"Hello?" a voice said.

"Hi, is Anthony Vandenburg there?" I asked.

"This is him," the voice said.

I think time stood still at that particular instant. I did not expect him to answer the phone. I mean, here I was, talking to this person who was then twenty-one years old. I didn't know what to say. I was absolutely dumb.

"Who is this?" he said.

"Oh, you don't know me, my name is Micki. But did you get a letter a couple of weeks ago from Jane Semphill at Catholic Social Services?"

"Oh yeah," he said, "Jesus, I'm really sorry about that, I didn't call her back, didn't call *you* back, and I think the letter got lost, but what can I do for you?" I mean, he was very nice.

"Anthony," I said, "the letter isn't from me, but it was *about* me."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I'm your birthmother." Dead silence. Absolute, icy silence.

Finally I broke it. I thought, Okay, Micki, give it all you've got, this might be it. "Am I scaring you, Anthony, because if I am, I don't mean to."

"No, you're not," he said.

"I just needed to know you were healthy and you didn't have any problems. I just needed to know you were all right."

"I'm fine." Very abrupt.

"That's good, I'm glad."

"Yeah, I am," he said.

"Anthony, I probably wouldn't have searched for you except that your half-brother Kurt found me two months ago, and I met with him."

"Well that's nice. I have no need to."

"What, meet with him or meet with me?" I asked.

"Neither one. I have no need to," he said, firmly indifferent.

"All right, I can respect that." All of a sudden the conversation just went dead.

Then I said, "I want you to know your background, in case I never get to talk to you again. You do have cancer and a lot of heart problems on your father's side of the family. None of the males on that side of the family has lived past the age of fifty-five."

"I take care of myself, I'm fine," he said.

I thought, typical college kid, nothing can happen to me.

"Well," I said, "I want you to know this: I've had multiple sclerosis, my aunt and my cousin have also had it, and your great uncle died of Alzheimer's, so there's been a lot of sickness in your background and I need you to be aware of this for your own sake. I will never bother you or interfere in your life in any way. I want you to be happy and safe."

"I'm fine. I'm fine," he said, again.

"That's good. That's good." I said, "Anthony, thank you."

"Yeah, fine," and he hung up. I just sat there, numb.

Right away I called Bernadine Daoust, my old friend from the dental office, and by now I'm breaking down.

"Micki," she said, "he didn't hang up on you! He didn't reject you! He could have just slammed the phone down and said 'Get out of my life!' He wasn't saying the things you hoped he'd say, but he was decent." He was decent, that's a good word, but the temperature of his words slid from being a warm Hi! down to an icy silence.

Feeling sheepish for catching him off guard and invading his territory, I called my social worker friend, Jane Semphill.

"My God, Micki," she said, "*why* did you do that?"

"Jane, I can't explain it," I said. "Chris came home with that list of college phone numbers and he seemed so close, I couldn't *not* do it. I couldn't wait any longer."

I did act very impulsively, which I've done all my life. If I had it to do again,

I would call Jane and say "Call him right now, he's there!" or I might do a letter, which you can labor over 'till you get it exactly right. *Getting* a letter gives him time to adjust to the idea.

Ah, crap, I can't take it back now, but I did talk to him approximately two and a half minutes, I did hear his voice. Now I know he's alive and healthy. Of course immediately the next day I drove to Kaukauna, took pictures of his high school, his beautiful home from every angle with my telescopic lens. It was like, Thank you God. But his dad, again, is just a factory worker, whereas I thought maybe a doctor, lawyer, something. But it's good his Dad is just a regular person because that will probably make Anthony more ambitious.

Now he's graduated from college and is territorial manager for a big company. He's getting married October 19th, but I wouldn't think of going there or doing anything to hurt his day. This is his mom and dad's big day for their boy. I'm not even going near the church.

A couple of weeks after the wedding I did take a very expensive Precious Moments gift for the bride and groom into the bank where his wife works. I wrote on the card, Be happy, and signed it Micki. I'd had my hair done that morning and my girlfriend had given me a makeup job, I was dressed to the hilt, but I was shaking when I walked into the bank. I asked the receptionist if Tina Vandenburg worked there.

"We don't have any Tina Vandenburg here," she said.

I thought, Oh, no, but then I said, "Well, she just got married a couple of weeks ago," and I mentioned Tina's maiden name.

"Oh, *that* Tina, oh sure, I forgot she got married," the young woman said. "She's the gal in the pink sweater at our New Accounts desk. Do you want me to call her over?"

"Oh, no, that's fine," I said, "don't interrupt her at work." Thinking, Oh my God, I would die! Then I said, "Just give her this present. I didn't have a chance to give it to them. There's a card inside."

"Okay," she said, taking it. When Tina got home and showed it to him, Anthony may have thrown my gift in the trash, but if he did, that's his choice. I didn't think a wedding gift was interfering. If it was, well, that's too bad.

Five years ago when I called Anthony that one time in his dorm room, all I told him was that my name was Micki and then afterwards I thought, I'm never going to see him, he's got to know, so I wrote down everything pertaining to his life, how he came to be conceived, how much I loved his father, how we broke up 'cause we couldn't get married 'cause he was divorced. I also wrote, "He does not know about you, and he has never had any biological children after you, and neither have I."

I signed it Micki, nothing else. I enclosed one of those You Are Unique plaques I'd given Kurt, and sent them to Jane Semphill to forward for me. She enclosed a note on one of her business cards saying she would get in touch with me if he ever wanted that. Then she sent everything registered mail to him at his parents'

home because she knew he would be home on spring break. Anthony did sign the postal receipt, but he has never contacted Jane.

After Kurt and I met for lunch at Sergio's that one time, he sent me roses, and that was the honeymoon phase. Afterwards, he wrote me beautiful, deep letters, and I responded the same way. He called me, and after he got his own place, I would call him. That went on for two and a half years.

Then about eight o'clock one evening in May 1990, my phone rang. And here's this grown man, twenty-seven years old, crying on the phone.

"Micki," Kurt sobbed, "you were right, the guilt was getting to me, I just couldn't take it any more. Last night I finally told my folks I had found you and that you were a wonderful person."

He said his mother started to cry, looked at his dad and fell into his arms. He said his dad was furious and shouted at him. "How could you do this to us, after all we've done for you? How could you hurt your mother like this?" Telling me this, Kurt choked and tried to get control of himself. There was a long painful silence on the line.

Finally I said, "Kurt, what can I do for you?"

"Nothing, I just want you to know I've got to be their son, Micki. I can't have you in my life 'cause it's killing them, and I don't want to hurt them any more," he said.

"If that's the way you feel, fine, but you know you're wrong," I said.

"I may be, Micki, but I just can't deal with this right now," he said.

The next morning I attended an adoption conference in Madison, and while I was there Kurt's call was all I could think of. After the keynote speaker had finished her speech, I went up and told her what had happened and asked if she had any advice.

"You've got to write his parents a letter," she said.

So I wrote them a letter, sent it to Kurt with a note that said, "You read it, and then, if you want to, give it to them with my love."

Later he told me, "Micki, I cried when I read your letter. I went right over there with it, got Mom and Dad to sit together on the couch and handed it to them. Reading it, my mom cried and my dad had tears in his eyes."

Now this part is what angers me. After reading the letter I'd labored over, pouring my heart out to them, they said to him, "Can we write her? When can we meet her?" But they have done absolutely nothing—no letter, no contact—in the three months since then. Why should they be afraid of me? I am not a person to be afraid of, *God!*

Finally I called him at his apartment. I said, "I tear my guts out and put it on paper and I haven't heard a word from you. I want to know what the hell's goin' on!"

"I'm sorry, it's just that… ," and he apologized.

Afterwards, I showed my counselor a copy of my letter. "Micki," she said, "this letter would thrill any adoptive parent, but is it really the truth?"

"Well, I guess not," I finally admitted, "it's probably what I thought they'd want to hear. If I was being honest, I would have said 'I'm sorry I had to give him up. I want him to be my son and to be in my life. I'm sorry that you've had the pleasure of his turning out so wonderful in his smile and his devotion. I'm sorry I had to miss all that.'" My counselor helped me realize that I'm going through a grieving process for my loss of two healthy birthsons, and that I've been tormented by their turning out so wonderful while my adopted son has been so messed up. I guess it's the old nature versus nurture thing.

But I'm glad his folks mean so much to him; they must be very special that he is so protective of them.

At Christmas the next year, I sent Kurt's parents a plant and got a nice card from his mom thanking me and saying, "I'm going to call you, and we can get together." I was very excited to think I would finally meet this wonderful lady Kurt loves so much. I had visions of us being Kurt's one big, extended family. But the days went by and she never called, and I wondered if she could be afraid to meet me. At first I was disappointed, then I resented her writing that note because it turned out to be so phony. I thought of calling *her* and sayin', "Hi, this is Micki, I'm in the area, how about lunch?" As far as Kurt's concerned, *she's* his mom, I'm just Micki, for heaven's sake, not somebody to fear. I am my adopted son Chris's *mom*. Why can't we all be friends? was what I wanted to know.

Finally, in January, 1992, in the middle of all this serious trouble with my son Chris, I got a typed letter from Kurt:

Dear Micki:

I am very angry that you gave me up for adoption because the thought of being given away has left me with feelings of defectiveness and abandonment. I have to get these feelings out from deep inside, where I've been stuffing them for twenty-eight years; I'm writing this letter so I can be at peace with myself and get on with my life.

As a young boy, my father's presence in my life was almost non-existent, consequently I drew close to my mother. She protected me from many problems and I have done this to you by protecting you from my feelings of anger.

I cannot have a relationship with you. This is not because I want to protect my parents. I have no control over their feelings on the subject, they are dealing with it all in their own way.

*It is **my** decision to write this letter; no one has prompted me to do it. Please respect my decision to sever our relationship and do not attempt to contact me in any way. No reply is necessary.*

Kurt.

After I cried, I laughed about it. I thought, Get your act together, Kurt. You're twenty-eight years old and you still don't know what you're doing.

I got Kurt's letter when my adopted son, Chris, was facing a jail sentence for setting fires. When we adopted him, they told us he'd had a lot of abuse, so now that he's eighteen, this is coming out and hitting us in the face.

He disappeared for months, then suddenly on February 4th, Chris called me from a jail in South Carolina, crying, "Mama, mama, I need you!" He was eighteen, but he sounded like a little six-year-old boy again.

Chris had been six years old when we adopted him from an orphanage in Bogota, Colombia. Four years later when I was getting ready to return there to adopt our second child, Jennifer, Chris begged to go with me. He still remembered his birthfamily and longed to see them again in that huge teeming city where he'd been born, where millionaires walk by legless beggars sitting on piles of newspapers.

When we arrived, we went to the American Embassy. I introduced my son Chris and asked the official to show us his records.

"If an adopted child *has* any records, they are always destroyed when that child is taken out of Colombia," he said, smiling stupidly. "Why do you want them?"

I was shocked and furious. "We've flown thousands of miles and Chris wants to see his birthfamily, *that's* why!" I said, indignantly. "How are we supposed to find them now?"

But despite the lack of any leads, Chris, in his street-smart way, insisted he remembered where his five brothers and sisters lived, he was going to find them, and he could handle it. For days we looked and looked and looked, without finding a trace of them. I wanted so much for my son to connect with someone—anyone—in his birthfamily, but we will never find them, you know.

The night before we were to return home to Green Bay, Chris and I and our new baby, Jennifer—who was sound asleep—were in our hotel room. I'd turned out the lights and was just drifting off to sleep. Suddenly I heard Chris say, "Mom, I'm not going home with you in the morning. I'm going to stay here and find them." My eyes snapped open. Quick, God, give me something to say!

"If you're not coming back with us," I said, "I don't want to see you here in the morning." Then I said, "We got Jennifer to bring her into a family and *you* are our family and if you're not going to be here for her then I'll have to take Jennifer back to the orphanage." He was totally silent. And the tears were just streaming down my face and I thought, God, why is this happening to me? Eventually I went to sleep. When I woke up he was still there.

After Chris's call saying, "Mama, mama, I need you!" I hung up the phone and saw Kurt's letter still sitting open on my desk, and it made me angrier and angrier. I thought, Damn you, you're not going to have the last word! You're angry you were adopted; I'm sorry, I did the best I could. If your home life was not picture perfect, I

had nothing to do with it, that's the way life is. Kurt, grow up! So I sat right there and wrote him, using the blackest, thickest ballpoint pen I could find:

"Who started this, Kurt? It seems that you forgot who started this. *You* searched for *me*. *You* came looking for answers. I gave you all the information I could, and now you say we cannot have a relationship. That's fine, but just remember who started it, and I still will be here if you ever need me. Love, Micki."

Then I took his picture and buried it in the bottom drawer. When we met that time at Sergio's, I felt I was a curiosity for him, like a china figurine in a store, to be picked up and scrutinized and say, 'Well, I like you, I'll keep you' or 'I don't like you, so I'll put you back.' Well, I'm *not* a curiosity, I am a *person* with feelings. Still, I'm glad we met, even though he's put me back on the shelf, so to speak.

After Kurt's letter of outright rejection, I shed my fantasy of having him over for chicken dinner every Sunday. Lee and Chris and Jennifer—my family right here under my roof—became my main issues. Thoughts of my two birthsons receded.

Three and a half years later, my mother came over with her cookie sheets to help me bake thirty dozen cookies for a church fund-raiser. We'd finished eighteen dozen when the phone rang, and it was Kurt! I took the phone into the laundry and we talked for three hours. My poor mother was stuck with all that work.

A week later, on July 7, 1995, I met Kurt for breakfast at Perkins Restaurant in Appleton. We talked for two hours, then went to his home where I met his new wife, Kelly. They gave me a video of their wedding, and a framed picture of themselves. Kurt did most of the talking, I just listened. That incredible experience lasted four hours.

Before I left, Kurt traced the outline of his left hand on a piece of typing paper and then traced my left hand inside it, getting us both to initial our handprint. He said, "See, Micki, our lives have crossed again." That was pretty intense for me. It's ironic that Anthony, my second birthson, and his wife, Tina, live only six blocks from Kurt, and I told Kelly that. She gave me the feeling that, one of these days, she will seek out Tina.

I've been doing just fine, really. I'm busy home-schooling Jennifer, who's a couple of years behind for her age. She has a paper route and is becoming more responsible. Her moment of fame came when, after Chris was convicted of arson and was being mistreated in jail, she wrote a letter to Barbara Bush. A week later she got a letter from Mrs. Bush and one from the director of federal prisons: real fast they transferred Chris to the Young Offenders' Correctional Facility. In six months he'll be on bracelet release so he can attend trade school.

I think all that has happened has helped my husband Lee and I to get things in perspective and to really appreciate each other. Before, we just rolled along with our daily lives, never stopping to realize what we had or how important it was.

I know there has been a reason for all of my life. If I hadn't gone through what

I did, I wouldn't be able to be the kind of parent these kids of ours needed. I tell Jennifer and Chris, God had you guys picked out to be my daughter and son.

Chris just hugged me and hugged me. "Mom," he said, "*that's* why, when I wanted to go to Colombia, you *knew* how I felt, how much I wanted to find somebody in my birthfamily,"

"Yeah, I did, Chris," I said.

In spite of all the pain, I thank God for all that's happened because now that unknown factor in my life is gone, and I can deal with reality better, instead of trying to live on fantasies. I know where my birthsons are, who they look like, and what kind of people they are. *My story is about accepting reality,* and people need to do that so they can deal with it. It's scary to read it though and to hear that a reunion might not work out, at least, perhaps not at first. Still, if you have lots of patience and understanding, things can turn around for you in time.

From all of this I've learned that you can't go and take back that baby you gave up and put the pieces together again. Instead, you focus on life as it is today—for the child you relinquished and for yourself.