

“A bouquet of diverse stories, *We’ve Been There* illustrates the uniqueness and complexity found in every adoptee’s journey. The importance and courage of sharing your story is evident on every page and will inspire everyone to have more nuanced and meaningful conversations around adoption.”

—KATI POHLER, 25, China, featured on BBC Stories’
Meet Me on the Bridge

“In *We’ve Been There*, adoptive mother Susan TeBos shares insights gleaned from the many teenaged and young adult adoptees whom she has interviewed. Some disclose the trauma they suffered as young children, some delve into what abandonment feels like, and all are candid about the particular ways their adoptions continue to affect their senses of self and their mental health. By collecting and sharing their stories, TeBos offers comfort and hope to teenaged adoptees.”

—JENNIFER GRANT, author of *Dimming the Day* and *Love You More*

“Easy to read and filled with affirming aha moments, *We’ve Been There* demonstrates that when our stories connect, we find a little bit more community and a little bit more hope that we’ll be okay.”

—COREY METTLER, MA, LPC, Adoption Therapist,
Families Forever Counseling

“Stacks of books have been written for adoptive parents, but few have been published with a teen-adoptee audience in mind. In this book, Susan TeBos brings a sweet gift to the hands of adoptees—a book uniquely tailored for them, relating to their joys, pains, sorrows, and achievements. Through these stories, Susan and her adoptee contributors walk the reader through a journey of confidence, loneliness, trust, answered (and unanswered) questions, and acceptance. In these pages, you’ll find a kindred spirit that will encourage, strengthen, and equip you to confidently embrace the story God has written for your life.”

—LEAH JOLLY, 21, domestic adoptee

“As a family support network with more than 25 years of experience, Families for Russian & Ukrainian Adoption (FRUA) knows adoption is a lifelong journey. We find children go through phases of connection to their adoption, an ebb and flow of emotions toward their birth parents, birth culture, and heritage. Susan TeBos’s book validates the feelings and resiliency many of our FRUA Young Adult Club members have expressed.”

—MJ KAMEN, chair of Families for Russian & Ukrainian Adoption,
www.frua.org

“A wonderfully insightful and refreshing read for anyone who’s experienced adoption. Susan TeBos cleverly combines the God-and-grit ingredients found in every adoption story, and the result is like *Chicken Soup for the Adopted Soul*. I plan to give this book to my own teenagers, and expect they will be intrigued to find themselves comparing their own circumstances and feelings surrounding adoption to those they read about in this book.”

—JIM SPRAGUE, adoptive father

“Thank you, teens, for the peek inside your hearts and minds, for sharing your feelings and thoughts. Your stories have helped me come to a greater understanding. I have new ideas on how I can ask questions, listen, and pray.”

—ROBERTTA DEVRIES, adoptive mother

“As a grateful adoptive mom of six, I am confident this book will not only abundantly bless adoptees, but also all those who are party to adoption. It is full of practical advice and contains numerous glimpses of love amidst the many relationships that surround adoption. Though heart-wrenching struggles pepper many of these stories, hope shines through.”

—BETH SCHNYDERS, adoptive mother

WE'VE BEEN THERE

True **STORIES**, *Surprising* **INSIGHTS**,
and Aha **MOMENTS for ADOPTED TEENS**

Susan TeBos



KREGEL
PUBLICATIONS

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**TO THE STORYTELLERS IN
THIS BOOK WHOSE HONESTY
AND VOICE IS A GIFT TO ALL
WHO OPEN THESE PAGES**

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INTRODUCTION

ON OPENING UP

When you have the courage to look squarely at your losses, and to grieve them, you're finally free to fully embrace the life you have today. As you do, know that you are not alone. The One who loves you is with you, as is the great siblinghood of other adoptees—who you may not even know—who share your journey. You can do this.

MARGOT STARBUCK

Adoptee, adoptive mom, and author

IF YOU'RE READING this book, I know a little something about you. You're curious—curious about what others who were adopted are thinking and feeling and experiencing. In a way, you crave a little intel into their lives because you're hoping to make sense of things going on in your own life. And why not? It's only natural to want to connect with other young people who share a common bond. If anything, it will help just to hear what they have to say—and bonus, you'll never wonder if you are alone in this again.

My daughter, a recent high school graduate, had this to say: “I did feel pretty alone in my thoughts about my separation story, simply because other adopted people in my life never shared deep things. I like being able to see what other people struggle

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with. We all handle it in different ways. I want to see how other people have dealt with it and what has come of it.”

Sound like something you’re thinking? Welcome aboard. We’ll cover a lot of ground in these pages: sometimes hard, often good, but always hopeful. Among the short stories . . .

A cheerleader opens up about feeling defective.

A film student explains how he handles social anxiety.

A college finance major learns how to manage his emotions before he explodes.

A junior in high school grieves the loss of her birth father, whom she never met.

From finding oneself on a study abroad in Shanghai, to wrestling with God about fitting in or not belonging, or just living with too much self-doubt, every person I talked with was open about feelings and situations they had rarely, if ever, spoken about before. I am proud of them for stepping up, looking back, sharing their intimate thoughts and experiences, and when possible, making sense of what was going on—all for you. I appreciate them for showing you it is okay to open up to a trusted ally, and the sooner the better. They would say we need stories. We need each other. We need to be real and tell it like it is. These are their stories—no fake smiles, no perfect selfies.

ABOUT THE PEOPLE YOU’LL MEET

This book began with an invitation I posted on social media that fanned out across the nation. It went something like this:

If you’re a young adult who was adopted and currently between the ages of sixteen and thirty, tell us about a time when you were a teen, good, bad, or otherwise.

On Opening Up

Open up about how your separation story had impacted you—unfiltered, of course. In other words, give us an honest glimpse of your journey including how you made it through the tough times, if any, plus any advice or insight you have to share.

One by one, adopted teens and young adults ages fifteen to thirtysomething responded to me from Florida, Louisiana, Texas, Minnesota, the Great Lakes, Pittsburgh, New Jersey, and down the East Coast. A handful contacted me from universities in Michigan, and a few others from local high schools in my hometown. Many took their first breath in Russia, China, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Kenya, Guatemala, and South Korea—and some right here in the US.

We met face-to-face when possible, or on Zoom, FaceTime, and email too. I asked questions, they opened up, and I was drawn in by their honest, sometimes flailing attempts to put words to their feelings of rejection, loss, depression, anxiety, or fear of being abandoned again and how these feelings affected them. I was equally touched by those who had questions and wondered and were working it out. You'll see a range of responses.

WHY READ THE SHORT STORIES IN THIS BOOK?

There's a simple and excellent reason for you to read the experiences of others who have been adopted: to help you sort things out. It's a first step worth considering. Perhaps you will relate to something someone says or to someone struggling with stuff similar to yours. Maybe you'll be inspired. Or you'll make a better decision because someone worked through something that gave you renewed hope. Wouldn't it be nice to know you

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are not the only one who feels the way you do? To hear what others have to say?

You can approach the stories in several ways. You do you.

- Read from start to finish. You might be surprised.
- Read randomly, kind of like surfing through TikTok. You never know what you'll find that will make you laugh or cry or inspire you.
- Read a section. Let the tug of your heart and curiosity pull you where you need to go.
- Let someone else read the book first and point out stories just for you, especially if reading isn't your thing.

Here's the thing. My guess is that you'll find yourself in a story or two. Let them speak to you. Then consider this: What if you don't outgrow your separation story but instead grow *into* it, in a healthy way? What if you have to look at it to see it? Talk about it to understand it? Say it out loud and reorganize it to accept it? And feel it firsthand to grieve it and release it? It's what many of the teens and young adults I interviewed did over time. Easy? No. First steps usually aren't. But they found that opening up and revealing the invisible things hidden in their hearts was the path forward and well worth it.

Think no one else knows what it's like? Think again. Inside these pages you may just find a kindred spirit who thinks and feels the way you do. Take a look.

SECTION 1

DARE TO OVERCOME

WRESTLING IS A PART OF LIFE

*Courage doesn't mean you don't get afraid.
Courage means you don't let fear stop you.*

BETHANY HAMILTON

CHAPTER 1

BRAVE

You sort of start thinking anything's possible if you've got enough nerve.

J. K. ROWLING

MATTHEW WAS ADOPTED in 1998 from Surgut, a sprawling oil-drilling city in Siberia where temperatures can drop as low as -60 degrees Fahrenheit. At birth he barely tipped the scale at six pounds. His adoption documents say his birth mother was thirty-five when she gave birth to him in a hospital. Then she left.

Matt has one picture of himself as an infant wrapped in a hospital receiving blanket like a fresh loaf of Russian brown bread. For seven and a half months, he camped out in a crib, alone, losing out on what all babies need. Not a single visitor came until he was adopted by his American parents.

Today, Matt is twenty-one. He's a friendly, good-looking guy but considers himself awkwardly quiet when you first meet him. He's rocking a scruffy beard and wearing blue titanium glasses that make him look like a typical college guy, which he is. His black hair, tight curls, and warm olive skin make me think he's more Greek or Italian than Russian. I ask him what he knows about his birth ancestry, and he smirks and smiles. Recently he took an Ancestry DNA test. "My parents gave it to

me for my birthday.” Turns out he’s half Russian and a delicious Mediterranean tossed salad mix of Greek, Turkish, and Italian. He says it was a great discovery. At least now he knows where his birth father came from, and who he looks like. Like others who dive into their DNA history, there’s usually someone fascinating swimming in the gene pool. Turns out Matt is also related through DNA to Otzi the Iceman, a fully preserved European male from around 3300 BC discovered in a glacier between Austria and Italy. Fascinating! Now I get the smirk.

Matt is a college junior. He is studying film and sound. He’s attracted to a wide range of music from EDM to Christian pop, loves every last *Fast and Furious* movie including the *Hobbs and Shaw* spin-off, and enjoys virtual reality games like *Beat Saber*. He holds down two part-time jobs, one on campus working in audiovisual for campus events and one down the road at another college as part of an audiovisual setup crew and event stager. All the while, he struggles with social anxiety.

“It hasn’t been easy,” Matt says when we sit down to talk. He tells me his social anxiety peaked in middle school and high school, not to the point that it derailed his life but enough that he had to deal with nervous habits and trouble talking to random people in the halls and between classes.

“I’d get sweaty hands,” he says. He describes his anxiety as a domino effect: whatever is going on inside his head triggers his body to cue the sweaty palms and uncomfortable feelings . . . especially when dealing with people he doesn’t know.

“I try to be nice, because I’m a nice guy, but it can get awkward.”

Especially in high school, he was self-conscious and afraid of what people thought about him.

Dare to Overcome

“It’s just how my brain rolled. I have a mix of social anxiety and general anxiety, my own self-diagnosis. I call it an anxiety fusion. It’s this piece about me that I don’t like. It gets exhausting.”

Even at twenty-one, he still battles social anxiety to some degree, sweaty palms included, although he says it’s getting better as he gets older. So I ask him how he deals with his version of social anxiety. I’m sitting at the table while he paces, anticipating my questions.

“What happens when you’re in film class?” I ask.

“I am a wallflower.”

“What does that mean?”

“I stand in the back of the small group in the studio and watch. I pay attention, but I don’t make any executive decisions.” Pausing to think, he says he prefers to lead from behind the scenes. I say, “That’s perfect. More people should do that.” He smiles.

“What about the classroom?” I ask.

“If the subject matter is intriguing, I might join in on the conversation. If the professor points at me, in my head I say, *Crap!* But I answer.”

“I get the impression you don’t like to be seen, or maybe you’re just shy. What about interviewing for a job, such as a summer job or internship? You have two.”

“Interviewing stresses me out, but I still do it.” He frowns. “There was one time when I had to talk to a guy at church about an audiovisual internship. Everything inside my head screamed, *Freeze!*”

Matt says he had to push himself and go against all instincts or miss out on a great opportunity.

“What about dating?” We lock eyes and he shakes his head.

“I imagine I can push through. Maybe five minutes into the date I say I have social anxiety.”

“You’re actually going to spit it out like that?” I laugh. “Bravo.”

“Yeah! And I hope the other person says, ‘I do too.’”

“Wow! That’s quite an icebreaker.”

He admits, with a laugh, that dating is on hold or that maybe he and his best friend will remain single forever.

“What about friends? Does it seem harder to make friends when you have, as you call it, an anxiety fusion?”

“Making friends in high school is different for everyone. I mean, we all have some degree of anxiety then.”

Matt met some of his best friends in a six-by-three-foot sound booth running sound and lighting for school events.

“When you’re in that close proximity, it’s a great place to make friends. It’s easy when you’re around a few familiar faces.”

He says he felt uncomfortable when someone new stepped into the booth.

“I just had to step up and push through the uncomfortable feelings.”

Being in the sound booth in high school got Matt interested in sound, lighting, and film. He says it was incredible, like a whole new world opened up for him.

“Ask me to step onto the stage in front of a crowd, and I go from awkward to disabled. Ask me to light the stage and unmute mics, and I suddenly become confident and capable. It’s just how my brain rolls.”

But that’s not totally true. He mentions a brief one-time stint on stage during a dance-off battle between ten dorm sections.

Dare to Overcome

“You were in a dance-off?” I question with a big smile on my face.

“Yeah,” he laughs. “I liked working with our group of guys who choreographed our dance, but I knew them from the dorm. That’s the difference.”

Taking a huge risk, Matt joined his section team, and twenty guys learned to synchronize their hips to a Coldplay medley. Their section won third place.

“It was a lot of fun!” he says. “It was worth the risk.”

Matt admitted to a lot of fear, failure, and self-doubt over the years. Recently, while creating a memoir piece for a class film project, he had what some might call an epiphany or turning point. He was watching a twenty-year-old VHS of his adoption while preparing for a film project for class.

“I saw myself as a baby in my dad’s arms.” Then he began filming the scene off the old VHS with a borrowed camera from the university.

“Suddenly, I wanted to tell myself something I don’t tell myself enough.”

That’s when he began talking to the baby in the lens. “Be brave. Be oh-so-brave. You are going to do amazing things. Don’t give up.”

“Wow! You really said that?” I ask, a bit undone by his vulnerability.

“Yes. I just needed to tell this to my younger self.”

“So were you making some sort of connection between anxiety and what you experienced as a baby?” He had spent the first critical months of his life alone.

“I think so. That makes sense,” he says, with a thoughtful look on his face.

**“ I AM GETTING BRAVER EVERY DAY.
IT’S SOMETHING YOU DON’T REALLY MASTER.
YOU KEEP WORKING AT IT UNTIL YOU DIE.**

“Are you brave?”

“I am getting braver every day. It’s something you don’t really master. You keep working at it until you die.”

Then he begins to unpack some final pieces of wisdom for anyone like him.

“Be brave. Get those ‘what-ifs’ out of your head. Tell yourself not to get bogged down with negative thoughts, because there is a lot you will miss out on if you do—such as a chance to change your life, discover a career, have something big happen, make new friends, get a job, or even dance on stage someday. Don’t let anxiety decide your next move. You decide. Sure, there are things we anxious types don’t like and a million different things that go through our heads that can derail us. These imaginings rarely become reality. Like 99.9 percent of the time, these things don’t happen. Trust me.”

Matt wishes for a miracle cure for social anxiety.

“Maybe pushing ourselves, taking chances, and trusting ourselves more is the miracle.”

Matt’s social anxiety could have crippled him. But he found some things that helped: maturing, pushing through, learning it’s okay and important to lead from behind the scenes, engaging in conversation even when it is uncomfortable, taking risks, practicing positive self-talk, and making healthy connections to his birth story.

CHAPTER 2

A TRUE FRIEND, MUSIC, AND GOD

*We've all got both light and dark inside us.
What matters is the part we choose to act on.
That's who we really are.*

J. K. ROWLING

PAUL WAS ADOPTED from South Korea when he was about two and a half years old and was raised in Oklahoma. As an infant he was found on the streets of Daegu. Today, he's a youth pastor in the Midwest. We met at his church on a Tuesday morning, sat at a table in the middle of the welcome center, and were constantly interrupted. That's because Paul is a people magnet. It's his gifting; he's just a really nice guy who loves to take care of others. So as people came and went, they chatted with him—even the UPS guy—and we talked in between.

I was interested in Paul's story because youth pastors have a certain way with teens; they're vulnerable and authentic and usually spill their guts on all things, including Jesus. Would an adopted youth pastor spill his story—like, seriously return to his teen years and confess? What Paul told me is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to his life and the things God helped

him overcome as a kid, teen, and adult, but he was willing to be honest.

“My two favorite activities as a teenager were running and music. Running helped me physically get my mind off a lot of the things that bothered me. When I ran, I could get away and leave my problems behind me.”

Paul had found the “runner’s high,” a super healthy way to get outside of his head and leave the stress and negativity behind. As simple as it sounds, running made him feel satisfied with himself and life for a time. It was benefits like these that kept him lacing up his Nikes on a daily basis.

Paul says music helped him in a different way. “Sometimes I found myself at the piano for hours, just writing lyrics and composing music that fit how I felt about life, relationships, and God.”

As an adopted child, Paul grew up wrestling with his identity and feelings of loneliness. He says shame haunted him so much that it led to anxiety, deep depression, and even suicidal thoughts. Music gave him an outlet to express his feelings and air his struggles.

“Most of my music was sad in words and in tone, but it was how I felt. Not all of my music was dark, though, as there were moments I expressed worship to God. Even though I struggled a lot as a teenager, I had hope in Christ.”

Paul says his separation from his birth family and South Korea was a traumatic event that he believes affected him most as a teen.

“I have no knowledge of who my biological parents are or if I have any siblings. I don’t even know my real birthday.”

“How does that make you feel?” I ask.

Dare to Overcome

“Back then it filled me with endless questions. Why would my parents just abandon me on the streets? How could they do this? Do my new parents really love me? Am I as valuable and precious to my new parents as their biological kids? Why do I keep having these nightmares that my adopted parents are going to stop somewhere and dump me off and then drive away? Why do kids at school make fun of my appearance? Why am I so ugly? Why can't I make friends?”

Throughout his teen years, questions hung over Paul. While running and music helped keep him going in life, it was relationships that mattered most. He says relationships have purpose and are the core of why we are alive.

“I am so thankful for my friend Scott. He was really my only friend throughout high school, but it only takes one good friend to make a huge difference. Scott was the type of guy you could share anything with, and he'd even cry with me. He was always there and never got mad at me for my emotional struggles. Instead, he'd even sing along with those depressing songs that I wrote.”

“That's an amazing friend,” I say.

“Music and friends have a way of helping us open up. Scott was the opposite of me in so many ways. He was popular, had many girlfriends in high school, was really handsome and outgoing, and he had many friends. Yet he mostly chose to spend his time with me because he truly cared about me. He was a gift from God in my life.”

But the most important relationship that kept Paul going, he says, was with God.

“I can't tell you how many nights alone on my bed I would spend talking to God. Cry, laugh, and cry some more. I always

knew in my heart that God was real and there was a reason I was adopted,” he says.

Paul always thought being in America had a purpose. He just needed to be patient in the process. He says when a child has to go through the process of waiting for a family and being placed into a new home, there can be a lot of fears, worries, and uncertainties. And the longer the child has to wait, the worse the struggles can be.

“Yet God can turn any scary situation into something more beautiful than we can ever imagine if we put our trust in him.” Paul quickly slips into youth pastor mode. It just comes out. He flips to Ephesians 1:5.

“It talks about how all of us, before time, were selected to be in God’s family through Jesus. It doesn’t matter our ethnicity, our background, or our talents. God is described as a Father who sees us as his children. God the Father wants to have a relationship with us.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because through a relationship with God we can find purpose for our lives.”

“But you wrestled in your relationship with God as a teen,” I press.

“I was fifteen. There was a time I didn’t want to live, a time when I was at youth camp in the mountains of Colorado, and I left the group and found myself on the edge of a cliff. I thought I was going to die.”

We sit at the table; he is gripping his Bible.

“Life is hard,” he says. “God never promises that it will be easy.”

He doesn’t add any specifics. But I get the gist. That dark day

Dare to Overcome

on the mountain cliff changed him. His life was spared, and he was transformed. He told me that after high school he attended college and landed a camp ministry gig for a while that ultimately led him to his current position leading a church full of teens. He has finally found where he belongs.

“ YOU WILL KNOW YOU ARE HEALING WHEN YOU ARE LESS CONSUMED WITH YOURSELF AND MORE AWARE OF OTHERS.”

“I would encourage everyone who is reading this to seek God and to be prayerful and patient. The world is unfair sometimes. You can become bitter, feel like a victim, or fall into depression, but I encourage you to spend time with Jesus and find out that you are alive to be a blessing to people. You will know you are healing when you are less consumed with yourself and more aware of others. Find great friends, have an outlet, and come close to God. You will discover your purpose and identity as you grow in your relationship with God. It is all connected.”

Paul struggled with feeling unworthy. His lack of self-worth undermined his day-to-day. If that sounds familiar, you might try some of the things that helped Paul: composing and writing music (or doing something creative that you enjoy, even if that’s meticulously piecing together a thousand-piece Lego Titanic), running, hiking, biking, opening up to a good and loyal friend, or coming undone and releasing your anguish to God. In other words, if you don’t like how you’re feeling, do something that can make a difference. It worked for Paul. It can work for you.

CHAPTER 3

STANDING STRONG IN WHO YOU ARE

*I always get to where I'm going by walking away
from where I have been.*

ALEX ROSS PERRY

I CONTACTED DIBORA, a high school senior who was adopted from Ethiopia when she was six. Over a period of two months, we got acquainted over the phone and hit it off right away. Dibora is eighteen. She loves Electric Cheetah's mouthwatering brisket sandwich, which she claims she cannot begin to explain the depths of how good it really is. It's that good. Since I knew the restaurant on her side of town that she raved about, I made a note to check out the brisket.

Dibora told me she's a regular latte girl—one shot of espresso with almond or soy milk, steamed. She wears rompers in the summer and jumpsuits in the fall. Heels are her favorite go-to footwear, but she was quick to add she can go from super fashionable to sweatpants and sneakers in a heartbeat. As a self-described extrovert and people lover, Dibora plans to study hospitality and tourism in college. God, family, and friends excite and energize her. And when she's not binge-watching

Dare to Overcome

TikToks, hiking, or singing with earbuds in (she's been told she sings really bad), she's nestled on the couch with her older sister watching romantic comedies such as *Valentine's Day* or *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (the first one; she says the sequel is too predictable).

What rocks Dibora's world?

When people don't stand up for themselves.

"I'm not afraid to stand up for myself," she says.

"So you're self-assured?" I clarify.

"Yeah. I like that. I am self-assured. I believe in myself."

Dibora radiates maturity beyond her years. She's earned her stripes the hard way. She's no stranger to trauma. As a child in Ethiopia, her first family was broken apart by disease and poverty. She says her parents carried her and her younger brother to an orphanage in Addis Abba and left them there rather than leave them to fend for themselves on the streets. They had no other choice.

Now an American teen and daughter of a white family, Dibora carries an unwanted burden: she's been bullied by classmates for being African, adopted, and having a white family.

"Sometimes when people see my family, they see that we're different. Yes, I have my birth family who gave me life. And yes, I have my parents who give me every chance in the world to have such a fantastic life."

But not everyone gets that. Especially a group of girls who made Dibora's sophomore year miserable by calling her "Oreo," a derogatory word for being black on the outside and white on the inside.

"The year I turned fifteen was the worst year ever. I was a sophomore, and I had to transfer schools when I didn't want

to. I had to leave behind all my friends I had known since sixth grade,” she says.

“Sophomore year? Sheesh. Bad timing for sure.” I could feel her pain.

“I was angry. So I sulked. I had no choice but to accept the move and get over it,” she said.

Surprisingly, things went better than expected. On her first day at the new school, she ran into a guy whom she knew from the old one. He introduced her to a group of girls he thought she’d like, and she did. The three girls quickly became her best friends. And while she says it was scary at first being the new kid, she was thankful to have found the best friends a girl could have. And it worked out, mostly.

At the same time, another group of girls befriended her as well. These girls were a curious bunch of African American girls who wanted to know everything about Dibora because she looked like an Ethiopian classmate they knew.

“Of course, I told them I am Ethiopian, and that clicked with them at first,” she says. “They even liked me.”

But the difference was that these girls were first-generation African Americans whose parents had immigrated to the United States from various African countries and tribes. Tribal culture was still being practiced in their homes, a tricky concept to understand. So when Dibora’s six-foot-six white dad showed up one day, wandering the halls of the school to find her after cross-country practice, white dad didn’t click with the girls. In fact, the girls had never heard of adoption. Dibora says they couldn’t believe she belonged to a white family.

“They thought my dad was someone helping out my family. He’s tall and Dutch, and I’m short and Ethiopian.”

Dare to Overcome

She says her new African friends didn't know what to say. They must have talked about her that night, because the next day things changed.

Standing around the lockers, a girl teased Dibora.

"So you have white on the inside and black on the outside? You're an Oreo," the girl mocked.

"How did you handle it?" I ask.

At first she played along. "Ha! Very funny." She remembers responding sarcastically. All the kids gathered around laughed and called her Oreo too. It cut Dibora to the core, but it didn't stop at one and done. The name calling went on for months. She continued to brush it off. Over time, however, she says, "I secretly seethed inside."

Dibora couldn't understand why these girls' perception of her had changed just because she was being raised in a white family.

"I was so hurt. I told them they were acting like five-year-olds."

But it was no use. She even threatened to tell their teachers, but that didn't work either. The angrier she got, the more it egged them on. She said they continued calling her Oreo through her sophomore year and into her junior year.

"How strange that these kids were so weirded out," I say.

"Yeah, I didn't know how to get them to stop."

That is, until her junior year prom night.

Dibora and her best friends were getting dressed in one of their bedrooms, which overflowed with makeup, frilly dresses, and laughter.

"I had borrowed my dress from my sister, who had recently been a bridesmaid in a wedding."

Breaking from tradition, Dibora chose a short, flowy,

pinkish-purple dress and wore sparkly, strappy stilettos that, she confessed, hurt her feet so badly she couldn't stand it. While the girls snacked on Mexican food and brownies, Dibora styled everyone's hair. Before they took off to the dance at a local country club, they posed for pictures.

"When I look back at those pictures now, the night seems bittersweet."

"Why?" I dare to ask.

"At the country club, I kicked off my shoes and we hit the dance floor," Dibora says.

The DJ was thumping. Teens grinding.

"I don't grind. It's gross. I don't want some strange guy rubbing on me."

She requested a slow, romantic song: "Thinking Out Loud," by Ed Sheeran.

"I love that song," she says. "It was my prom too, right?"

When the girls who'd bullied her on a regular basis saw her dancing to an Ed Sheeran song, they moved in.

"Look at her, she dances like a white girl and listens to white people's songs!"

"Seriously?" I whisper.

Her friends stood next to her like a shield. Then from the other group, one girl with a serious glare got in Dibora's face. "We don't claim you anymore!"

That's when Dibora leaned in, barefoot and all, and yelled, "Tribes claim people. You are not my tribe. Nobody claims me. I am just as African as you."

She had reached the end of her rope.

"But I wasn't afraid. I wasn't shaking."

She says she broke out in a sweat though.

Dare to Overcome

“I let it all out in one big breath.”

The DJ pushed pause on the music. The dancing stopped. Teachers surrounded the small group of girls and watched and waited to see where it would go. Dibora exploded. “No one but my *real* friends, my family, and most importantly God, claims me!”

This was beginning to sound like the next *Footloose* movie, I thought.

Then she took another deep breath and walked away. Dibora had stood up for herself.

The next school day, the girls involved stopped calling her Oreo, and she was thankful. But did they know how much they had hurt her?

“Did they know I lost my first family? Did they know being adopted hasn’t been a walk in the park? Did they know that my birth parents left me on my own to take care of a three-year-old and a newborn and scavenge for food? I was five. I still try to parent my little brother today. If God had not been with us, I would not have survived. I lived in two different orphanages, and it was very scary. I remember strange men taking care of a bunch of kids. Three kids slept together in small beds. It smelled disgusting. The food was gross, the rooms were never clean, and all the kids were crammed together in a small space. Nobody expected us to get adopted from that place.

“No kid should have to go through that. I had to grow up very quickly.”

Then one day, she and her brother were moved to Hannah’s Hope. It had a school and playground and good food. When the civil war spread, Dibora and her brother were some of the last kids to be adopted.

“One day we were on the playground and the next on a plane

to America. I had to learn to be a kid and play again. For the longest time, I didn't feel like I belonged. Forever, I will struggle with not knowing my birth parents or seeing who I look like most. Did those mean girls know?"

Now it was my turn to take a deep breath. Dibora is my hero, a young Ethiopian American adopted person not afraid to stand up for herself. She is proud of who she is and of her adoptive family too. She hasn't chosen the trajectory of her life, yet she chose to embrace it and believe in herself. Being a grown-up means becoming more, not less. And that night at the prom, Dibora didn't tolerate the status quo of injustice.

 **STAND STRONG IN WHO YOU ARE. . . . IT'S YOUR STORY.**

I ask her to share advice for teens who find themselves in her shoes. She confidently says, "Don't be surprised if kids in school don't understand adoption or don't get it that you have parents who look different than you. Stand strong in who you are. Don't be embarrassed about your adoption. It's your story. There will never be enough words to explain adoption. Believe in yourself."

Sometimes you choose your friends, and sometimes they choose you. I recently discovered a quote about friendship from people smarter than me. They say, "Your friends will give shape to your life. They will either stunt your growth or spur you on. And when you find good friends, keep them. They are like gold. Treasure them. Invest in them. Spur them on too. Be the kind of friend that you would like to have."¹