

A red car is parked on a road at sunset. The car's trunk is open, and its taillights are illuminated. The background shows a sunset sky with power lines and trees.

FINDING

LOST to a CULT, SURVIVING

BABY

MY PARENTS' MURDERS, and SAVED BY PRAYER

HOLLY

HOLLY MARIE

WITH CINDY & DAVID LAMBERT

FINDING BABY HOLLY

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NEW YORK NASHVILLE

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Author's Note: Many of the events discussed in this book took place several decades ago. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy and safety of others. I also reconstructed dialogue to the best of my recollection and reordered or combined the sequence of some events. Others who were present might recall things differently. This is my story.

I dedicate this book to my parents, Tina and Dean Clouse. I praise God for shining His light on the truth of how their lives ended. I thank God for allowing me to find out this truth at a time in my life when my heart could handle this news and also reconcile this tragedy with my belief in a loving God. Because my parents were saved by grace through faith, they will live in eternity with our Father in heaven. And one day we will be reunited.

I thank God too for the incredible privilege of getting to know my parents through the memories of my newfound family—a family I can claim as my own, so that I can love and pray for and with them the rest of my days!

PROLOGUE

What Was Found in the Forest

I had waited ten months for this. Until now, I hadn't felt ready. And even though I knew the time had come, I still found myself feeling anxious as Troy and I parked our rental car beside a small office building.

I was thankful for the bright sunshine and perfect seventy-five-degree temperature. A cloudy, gloomy, rainy day would have made this visit harder. Sadder. Instead, this gorgeous April day just outside of Houston, Texas, was filled with light and life.

Troy retrieved his machete out of the back of the car.

The detectives had warned us, so we had prepared as well as we could.

"It's a thick, overgrown woods," they'd explained on a Zoom call when I'd told them I was going to make the eight-hour drive from my home in Oklahoma. "Lots of vines, brambles, bush palmetto, and thorny undergrowth. Wear long sleeves and long pants. And better wear boots. Parts of

it may be marshy.” We’d taken their advice. Troy had added the machete.

“There’s the red and white satellite tower, just like they told us,” I said, pointing. “And that must be the dirt road leading to it, right across the street.” Cars raced down Wallisville Road in front of us, so we stood for a few minutes, waiting for the traffic to clear enough to safely cross.

Now that I was finally here, my nervousness was beginning to fade. I felt God’s reassuring presence and was thankful He had prepared my heart, just as I’d prayed.

We made our way to the base of the tower in less than five minutes.

“Now we enter the woods to our left. The site should be about forty to fifty feet in,” I said. “To a clearing that was back there . . . forty-two years ago.” Troy charged forward. I followed, stepping carefully through the undergrowth. I didn’t know exactly what I was looking for. There would be nothing to mark the spot where, on January 11, 1981, the bodies of Tina Linn and Harold Dean Clouse, my parents, had been found in a horrific way.

The college-aged son of a local resident was out with his four huge German shepherds on January 6 when he noticed one dog had something in its mouth. From a distance, he couldn’t tell what it was. A squirrel maybe? The media account I’d listened to said the young man had been very shaken when his dog laid a human forearm, with a hand still attached, at his feet. The boy had called the police, who cordoned off the area and started a search. Five days later, they’d first found my dad’s body, then my mom’s some twenty feet farther in.

After a few more minutes of walking, Troy and I came to a small break in the trees. You could hardly call it a clearing,

but it was close enough. I didn't need to go any further. I stopped, stood very still, raised my face to the sky, and just listened. Three sounds. Traffic from Wallisville Road, bird-songs floating on the breeze, and the rustling of trees. All three were gentle. I noticed the tops of tall pines extending above the lower canopy of scrubby deciduous trees around me. Were those pines over forty years old? Had they stood as silent witnesses to the evil done here?

My heart was full but calm. I had wondered what emotional response I would have. Quiet tears? Heart-wrenching sobs? Raging anger? Overwhelming grief? None of those, as it happened. My soul was somber, but peaceful—evidence of the healing God had already been doing in the past ten months.

I did have some dark thoughts, though. I knew the detectives forty years ago were fairly certain that this was not the murder site, but more likely the dumping place for their bodies. But if you were looking for a spot to commit murder, this one was certainly desolate enough. Who'd brought my parents here? And why? I'd been told that all those years ago, this had been acres of woods. The road had been here, yes, but it hadn't been as well traveled then. A doctor's office and a church a little farther away hadn't been here then. Just the tower—a radio tower at the time—and the small dirt road leading to it. Probably just a remote, undeveloped site that the murderer, or murderers, figured would go undiscovered for a long time. I started to think about the condition they'd been found in but decided not to follow that train of thought. I didn't need anything ugly in my mind right now.

I listened to the sound of Troy thrashing his machete through the undergrowth nearby, still hunting for the elusive

clearing to satisfy my hope of finding the spot. I smiled, knowing that my tender hearted husband would have cleared the entire forest floor for me if that's what I wanted. "I think I'm good, hon," I called. "I don't need to go any farther." He stopped and walked toward me. Had my parents been found exactly here? Ten feet farther or to the left? It didn't matter, I decided, whether I was standing on the exact spot or not. Either way, their bodies had long since been removed, and either way, the sweet-sounding chirping I heard and the rich Texas woodsy smells I inhaled were the same ones that had wafted over my parents' bodies for a short time. A ray of sunshine lit up a palmetto plant, and I looked up and prayed for healing and restoration for our family and resolution and justice for my parents.

Together Troy and I made our way back toward the small dirt road. I was glad I'd worn boots for the marshy spots we trudged through before returning to the crumbling road.

"Ready for our next spot?" Troy asked gently, referring to the potter's field where my then-unidentified parents had been laid to rest. We'd been told it was about a half hour away.

"I'm ready." And I was. I really was. I was grateful we'd come. And I was glad we did so privately. The producers of the ABC television show *20/20* had asked if they could accompany me, but I'd decided against it. This was personal, and I'd needed to keep it that way. I appreciated their understanding and respect.



I'm ready to tell you my story, and I'm glad you're reading it. So much good has already come through the research I've

done to write it. Over the last year, I've interviewed so many people—the most precious of whom are my *new* family. My grandma Donna, the mother of my dad, and my aunts and uncles, the siblings of both my parents. Not only have my visits with them made me feel loved and blessed, but I feel that through their memories I've come to know my mom and dad a bit. Allison Peacock, the amazing forensic genealogist who worked so determinedly to discover the true identities of my parents some forty years after their deaths. That's an amazing adventure I can't wait for you to read! The impressive and kind and tireless detectives of the Cold Case and Missing Persons Unit of the Office of the Attorney General of Texas who not only found me, a person missing for forty-one years (I was not quite one year old when my parents were murdered and I went missing), but who are all still working hard to solve my parents' murders. And of course, the incredible team at NCMEC, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, who helped find me and so tenderly reached out and protected me during my most vulnerable days. There are others, too, whom I mention in the acknowledgments. I've come to treasure my relationships with all these good people.

Remember that many of the people who've aided in my research are working from memories of things that happened forty years ago. Memories fade. They're subject to distortion and interpretation, filtered through personal experiences—which is why, as the detectives from the cold case unit reminded me, eyewitness accounts are often unreliable. Some of the events I share were remembered somewhat differently by different people, so at times, I've had to make a judgment call on how to describe them. I assure readers that everyone did their best, and so did I, in reporting truthfully, to the best

of our knowledge and ability. In other words, please extend some grace if it turns out that some things I say are a bit off the mark.

As you read, I'd like you to understand my reasons for writing this book. First, there is an active ongoing investigation into the murders of my mom and dad. I am hoping and praying that through this book and the media interest it generates, new evidence or witnesses might surface to help solve that case. Second, I realize what a privilege I've been given in being "found." So much good has come because of it. You'll discover how as you read. By writing this book, I wanted to share that good news. Third, mine is a story of what happens when so many good and faithful people work so hard together. From law enforcement across four states, to forensic genealogists, to NCMEC personnel, to generous people along the way, they and their organizations deserve to be recognized and praised.

But above all, there is a loving and gracious God who has intervened in many ways in my story. Without Him, there would be no story to tell. In fact, without Him, as you will see, I may never have lived to see the day those searching for me finally found me—in the most unexpected of ways.

That same God loves you, whether you know Him yet or not. I hope and pray you meet Him through these pages.

PART I

FOUND

The Drive-Through Window

I was forty-two years old the day I found out that I was missing.

Evidently I'd been missing my entire life—well, except for my first ten months. What a strange discovery to absorb. How could I have been so alive, so loved by my precious family, so *present*, without ever knowing that I was *lost*, *absent*, *gone*?

Why had this happened to me? Had God allowed this? For what possible purpose? Why was I finding out now at forty-two? Why had I spent nearly my whole life missing? Lost without ever knowing it?

But now I'd begin to learn the answers. Because on June 7, 2022, I'd been found.



The phone rang before I'd even had the chance to unlock the front door and let customers into Naifeh's Deli and Grill in

Cushing, Oklahoma. It was a Tuesday morning, but even before the ringing phone our whole morning crew knew it was going to be a very busy day. Not because it was a Tuesday. Those are not typically remarkable. But because the owner and his family had all come down with COVID-19 and needed to stay home in quarantine. We'd be working understaffed by four people—Joseph Naifeh, his son Nick, and two of his granddaughters. That was a lot of help we'd be missing. But Naifeh's was a popular eating place in this small town because our boss, Joseph Naifeh, liked to give his customers what he called a “nearly perfect” experience. Our customers were inclined to return the favor, and we knew most were gracious and wouldn't get angry when waiting longer than usual. Those of us in the restaurant were masked up, sanitized, and determined to keep it going as well as we could for our little community.

My morning had already gotten off to an unusual start. Because we were understaffed, I had been busier than usual and was running behind, so I had missed my prayer and coffee time before starting. Usually I begin my workday by sitting in the lobby, off the clock, for at least thirty minutes (if not an hour) to pray while enjoying breakfast. Today I had to do my praying as I rushed about my opening routine.

“Holly,” called the coworker who'd answered the phone. “We have a big phone order.”

“Big” was an understatement. A local business had just ordered twenty-seven steak jalapeño wraps and fries, with two cookies per box, to be picked up by lunch. Most of the food at Naifeh's is hand prepared and isn't cooked until ordered. I needed to bake the handmade cookies, then cool

and package them within the hour for both this order and the cookie case. All the kids' meals for the day would get a cookie as well—chocolate chip, peanut butter, sugar, snickerdoodle, or peanut butter chocolate chip. I also needed to bake the large flower-shaped cookies for the ladies who had made handmade icing. I shifted into high gear.

I had just put the last of the cookies in the oven and rushed to the front counter to make another bin of tea when I noticed something unusual. Loretta, the drive-through cashier and a good friend, had opened her window to speak to someone who was *walking* up to the window. Not something we see every day. Loretta began to explain that we weren't yet open and wouldn't be until 10:30. She stopped midstream. I couldn't hear what the woman outside the window was saying.

"Yes," Loretta answered. "She's right here. Hold on for a minute." Turning to me with a puzzled expression, she said, "Holly, these people want to talk to you about something."

This was something new.

"Send them around to the door," I said.

As I got the key to open the lobby I tried to guess who they were and what they wanted. *Probably customers*, I thought. *Maybe they want us to cater an event*. That might be good for Joseph's business. But they'd asked for me by name. Why?

I met them at the door—one man, one woman. Dressed in business suits. Not a common sight in Cushing.

"Hello, I'm Holly Miller. Can I help you?" I asked, motioning for them to come in. It seemed only polite to invite them inside. Funny that it never occurred to me that that

might be a security risk. Then I noticed that the man was wearing a badge and had a gun on his belt.

“I’m with the Lewisville Police Department in Texas, ma’am. Detective Craig Holleman. I’m working with Mindy Montford here, who is with the Texas Attorney General’s Office. We’d like to ask you a few questions.”

As the mother of five children, including teens, my heart skipped a beat. I immediately went on high alert and braced for bad news.

“Can we sit down for a minute?” Mindy asked gently. Her kind and relaxed tone soothed me a bit. I led them to a booth along a wall of windows.

I slid into the opposite side of the booth, and Detective Holleman began a detailed explanation of why they were there. I was so nervous, thinking that one of my kids knew a missing person or had a friend who’d run away. Or worse, that they were part of some crime, that I couldn’t focus on what he was saying. I kept thinking, *We don’t know anyone from Texas. Who are they talking about? What has happened?*

Mindy looked at me and smiled, patted my arm, and said, “Holly, you’re not in trouble.” I knew *I* wasn’t, but I kept thinking about my kids and what they might have got themselves into. She repeated a few times that I wasn’t in trouble, but it didn’t help much—until Detective Holleman finally got to the point.

“Do you know anything about your adoption or your birth parents?” he asked.

I did a double take. Where did that come from?

“Yes, I do,” I said. “My dad always told me the truth about when and how I came to be his daughter.”

“Do you mind sharing that with us?” he said.

“Not at all,” I said. “My mom and dad gave me up to follow the cult they were in. My dad never actually referred to them as a cult, but listening to his memories I came to realize that my birth parents had joined a cult.”

“Do you know what happened to them?” Detective Holleman asked.

“Yes. They died in Waco. I mean . . . I’m not sure about Waco specifically, but that is when I mourned my parents. That’s when I realized that the fate of a cult member is death, and I suspect my parents probably sacrificed themselves for their cult.”

Neither of them responded right away. I squirmed in the silence, realizing that I didn’t have any actual evidence for what I’d just said. But in 1993 the cult known as the Branch Davidians had a clash with federal agencies at their religious center in Waco, Texas, that resulted in over one hundred deaths, including twenty-five children. I was a teenager at the time and watched in horror as the news showed scenes of the standoff unfolding. Since I’d already learned that my birth parents had given me up because they were members of a cult, I identified strongly with the cultists. Having already wrestled with loneliness and the mystery of where I’d come from, I decided then that my parents had died that day, and as the death toll rose, I mourned their deaths deeply.

Finally, Detective Holleman broke the silence.

“Well, you’re right that your parents are dead, but not at Waco. They were murdered, and their bodies were found near Houston, Texas. Because they were unidentified murder

victims for the longest time—since January of 1981—they were actually known for decades as the Harris County Does—as in Jane and John Doe.”

I simply waited, frozen and stunned. The Harris County Does? Murder victims? This blew apart what I had believed most of my life. My heart felt suspended.

The detective continued, saying that on January 11, 1981, two bodies were found in the woods just northeast of Houston. One male, who seemed to be about twenty. One female, maybe sixteen to eighteen. They’d had no ID and had clearly been murdered. They had not been reported missing in the Houston area, but back then, there were no national databases of missing persons, and DNA science was practically nonexistent. With no other evidence, the case eventually became a cold case.

“Then in 2011, thirty years later,” Detective Holleman went on, “DNA science was advancing rapidly. A group of forensic DNA investigators were given a grant to research some cold cases. They exhumed a number of cold-case bodies and collected DNA from them. Jane and John Doe’s bodies were chosen as part of that group. And in 2021, forensic investigators were able to identify them as Dean and Tina Clouse, your biological parents.”

He pulled a photo out of his jacket pocket and set it on the table in front of me. “This is your parents with you when you were six months old,” he said. I stared at the photo of a man and a woman sitting on a couch, baby between her and the man. My brain couldn’t make sense of it. My mother? My father? Me?

Despite my confusion, my heart swelled.

“That’s me? That’s my mom and dad?” Tears spilled out, blurring my vision. I picked up the photo, marveling over their faces, their eyes, their smiles. I tried to wipe my tears with the back of my hand, but they kept coming.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “This is the first time I’ve ever seen them.”

“That’s okay,” Mindy said gently as she sat quietly beside Detective Holleman.

“I . . . I don’t know how to feel,” I choked out, unable to look away from the photo of my parents’ faces. “You tell me my parents were murdered. And then you give me their picture . . .”

I’d known their names because of my birth certificate, but this was the first time I could finally put faces to those names. I wanted to savor the moment, but clearly the detective and Mindy had a job to do. They shared more details, taking turns filling me in on some of what they knew.

Tina and Dean had married in 1979 in Florida, where both their families had lived. They were young—my father nineteen and my mother fifteen. Then on January 24, 1980, I was born. That April, they left Florida with me and eventually relocated to Texas. At first, my parents wrote their families often, and one of those letters had contained this photo.

I absorbed it like a sponge, just taking in the story. Warmth spread through me when I heard that they had sent our pictures to their families. That instantly told me so much about them. They must have been close to their families and genuinely cared about them to make that effort. And apparently they were proud of me and wanted to show me off to their loved ones. *Someone had received those letters and*

pictures—probably my grandparents, possibly my aunts and uncles? Did I have more family than I realized? Family that knew of me?

Here's an important truth about me. *My family is my life's greatest treasure.* You will see that as you read my story, and you will see why. You'll also see a time in my troubled youth when I questioned that, and how that experience eventually showed me how much my family means.

Questions about this new family raced through my mind, but I didn't want to interrupt. I let them continue—I wanted to know everything at once! The entire story.

“Holly,” said Mindy. I had at first thought that she too was a detective, but I learned that she was an attorney who heads up the Texas attorney general's Cold Case and Missing Persons Unit. “In October of 1980, the letters and pictures suddenly stopped coming.” My tears increased because I knew why those letters had stopped. “Two months later, in December, people from a religious group, in long white robes, returned your parents' car to their families in Florida.”

It struck me that the story my dad had always told me about my adoption lined up perfectly with the scenario these two were telling me. He'd said I was brought to him by three women, three members of a cult, or, as he called them, a nomadic religious group, in November 1980. One of the three, he had said, was my mother, and she had handed him a letter from my father relinquishing his parental rights for me. My dad believed that she was acting in submission to the cult.

I held up the picture of us. I felt suddenly overwhelmed by grief, and tears flowed even stronger—if that was even possible. Then I grew angry. Who would brutally murder my parents? And why? Had my parents actually been running back home to Florida to get help from their family in leaving the cult? What if they had planned to come back for me, but couldn't because they were murdered? All this time, I had believed they had sacrificed themselves *to* the cult, but did they die instead for *leaving* the cult?

Mindy continued:

When authorities told your parents' families about Dean's and Tina's murders, they asked, "But where is the baby? Where's Holly?" This was the first anyone in Texas had heard of a baby. The search began, and they filed a missing person report. That began a huge media campaign to find you. It's been on social media for several months. Your parents' families have been searching and praying for you since they've known about Dean's and Tina's murders. They thought the cult might have taken you to raise.

Questions flooded my mind. Had there been foul play in my adoption? Did my birth parents willingly give me up, or were they coerced into giving me up by the cult? I sat, jaw hanging open, tears still falling down my cheeks, holding the picture of me with my parents. I didn't know what to think. I kept saying to Mindy, "I'm so sorry, but I just can't stop crying."

“Holly,” Detective Holleman said, “you have a large family in Florida eager to meet you. You have the right to refuse. But if you’re willing to meet them, is there any way we can go somewhere for a Zoom call with your parents’ family and the other detectives working on this case? Everyone would love to meet you, Holly. We’ve all been praying that we would find you.”

What? I thought. They’ve been *praying* for me? Did this mean that some were people of faith?

Now that I understood about the murders and the cold case, it made sense to me that detectives were still looking. This was, after all, a murder case. But *family* wanted to meet with me? Today? They were already gathered somewhere ready for a call with me? Incredible!

Loretta, now approaching our table, pointed outside toward a customer who had just pulled up to her drive-through. “This is the customer looking for the cookies for that big order,” she said. I looked up. The lobby had already begun to fill without me even noticing.

“This will sound strange, under the circumstances,” I said to Mindy and Detective Holleman. “But can we continue this discussion after work? We’re short-staffed here today. And there’s no one else we can call to fill in.”

Detective Holleman looked at me, surprised. “You’re actually going to go back to work today?”

“Are you sure you can’t break away, Holly?” Mindy asked.

“I really can’t.” I explained about the owner and his family. “I can’t leave knowing they might have to close the restaurant because of not having enough people to run the shift.”

We agreed that they would rent a room at the hotel next door, where we could Zoom with my *new* family and the other detectives at 5:30.

New family? What a wonderful gift, I thought.

“One more thing,” Detective Holleman said. “We have some detectives at your dad’s house right now to explain all of this and gather information from him that might help us. But he’s not home. Do you know where he is? Could you call him and have him meet with them now?”

I quickly agreed and dialed my dad. I got his voicemail. “Dad, please call me back as soon as you get this message. It’s really important. Detectives are at my work right now telling me about my parents. Please call me back.”

I kept thinking, *How could I not know I was missing? How did I miss every mention of me on television and social media?*

The phone rang within minutes. It was Dad. “Hey, Holly. I’m at work, but I got your message. I’m looking at the image from my doorbell camera on my house right now. Some people are on my front porch. What’s this about?”

I began to explain, but Dad interrupted me, his tone encouraging. “Okay, I’m going home right now to talk to them. I’ll show them my records of the adoption.”

“Okay, Dad. I love you.”

“I love you, too. I’ll call you back.” We hung up and I went back to work.

I tried to dry my eyes, only to find new tears continually rolling down my cheeks. I washed my hands, prayed to God for the strength to make it through my shift, and began to package the cookies for the order waiting for me.

After the waiting customer was on his way, I had a minute to try to explain to my manager, Angie, what had happened. I'm not sure I made much sense to her, but I left her wide-eyed—and happy for me.

In between customers, cleaning, and stocking, I kept pulling out the picture and staring at my parents. I'd never known what they looked like! I'd always wanted to know who they really were and to understand why they'd given me up.

Over the next few hours, I cried every time I thought about my parents' murders. My heart would fill with anguish and grief as I began to mourn them all over again, only to find myself excited a few seconds later at the thought that I was about to meet their loved ones on Zoom. What would my newfound family look like? Were they like me? In what ways? And did they really want to meet me and get to know me? Eventually, I realized I needed to stay in the back washing dishes, avoiding customer interaction.

I also tried desperately to get through to Troy on the phone. He had no idea what was happening. I couldn't wait to rush home to tell him and our kids, so I made a plan: I would dash home right after work. Even though I wouldn't have time for a shower, I would change my shirt, take my braid out, and brush my hair.

But as much as I wanted to share this day with Troy and my kids, if I could have been only one place over the next hour, oh how I wished I could be at my dad's house, hearing him tell the detectives the story of how I came to him, and hearing anything those detectives might tell him in response. My appreciation for my dad swelled in my heart, and more tears fell from my reddened eyes. It occurred to me that most

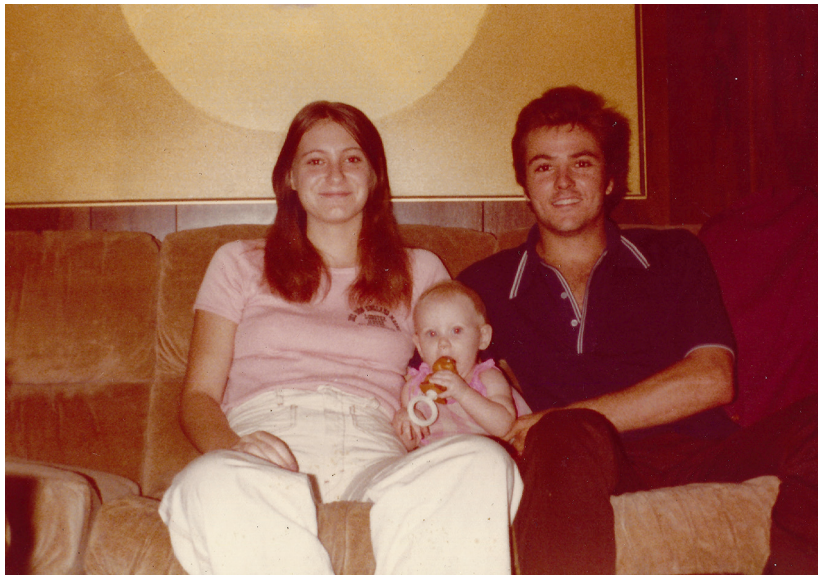
everything I knew about family, I learned from my dad. If my family was suddenly going to expand, I wanted Dad to know that he'd been a truly wonderful father to me. Nothing would change that. I wanted to hug him and let him know how grateful I was.

But before I could do that, I had a roomful of brand-new relatives to meet, relatives who'd been waiting over forty years for this.



Above: Tina Linn and Dean Clouse. Written on the back of photo:
“Me and Junior before We Was Married—1979.” (Credit: Sherry Green)

Below: Tina Linn, Dean, and Holly Marie Clouse. Written on the back of photo:
“Tina + Dean + Holly—17, 21, just turned 8 months.
Lewisville, Texas. September 20–25, 1980.” (Credit: Author’s personal collection)





Above: In honor of my parents—standing in the patch of woods outside Houston where my parents' remains were found on January 11, 1981. (Credit: David Lambert)

Below: Kneeling at the site where my parents' remains are buried in the Harris County Cemetery. (Credit: David Lambert)





Above: Our family reunification: At Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University with (from left to right) my daughter Serenity, Grandma Donna Casasanta, me, Aunt Debbie, Uncle Chris, and my son Jeremiah. November 4, 2022. (Credit: Michele Eve Sandberg / Polaris)

Below: Aunt Sherry, Grandma Donna, and me at our family reunification. November 4, 2022. (Credit: Michele Eve Sandberg / Polaris)

