

“This exquisitely written book isn’t just for those raised fatherless. It’s for everyone—male or female, single or married, patchily parenting or poorly parented—who cares to know more about the character of God. Buy it. Give it. Savor it.”

REBECCA MCLAUGHLIN, Author, *Confronting Christianity*

“Blair Linne’s story reflects our universal longing for a father who will protect and love us. Her aching desire for that earthly father may bring you to tears as her memoir unfolds. Blair’s burgeoning faith in her heavenly Father will bring you to worship by the end of this memorable book.”

COLLIN HANSEN, Executive Editor, The Gospel Coalition

“This is an extremely timely and beautifully transparent read! Blair invites us in with gospel-ward and hope-filled insight. She fearlessly follows often-severed echoes throughout creation to find the first voice, who spoke all of us into being. She shows us how in real life Christ restores and steadies and answers the deep yearning of every soul by enabling us to know God as our good Father.”

KRISTYN GETTY, Hymnwriter; Co-founder, Sing! Conference

“In *Finding My Father* Blair doesn’t just tell her moving story; she tells ours. Whether in sorrow, triumph, confusion or breakthrough, the different brushstrokes of our lives paint the same incomplete picture. Every void we’ll know can be traced to one veil-tearing truth: we need our Father. This book compels us to not only acknowledge but relish in it; and if we do, nothing can ever really remain the same.”

EZEKIEL AZONWU, poet

“The pain of the wound of fatherlessness is hard to put words to, but Blair Linne has done just that. But there is more than just pain in the pages of this book. There is hope and wisdom and an invitation to be loved by a Father who will never disappoint, always provide, always protect, and always be present.”

NANCY GUTHRIE, Author, *God Does His Best Work with Empty*

“Blair Linne has a message we need to hear. She has written with refreshing honesty not only about the struggle of growing up in a single-parent Black home but also of the vital role fathers play in every child’s life. More than that, Blair has given a message of hope: that there is a Father to the fatherless, and that an intimate connection to him brings the real healing we need. As an inner-city pastor for over thirty years, I have witnessed some of what she writes about, and this is a book I want every family in our church to read—especially the fathers!”

HUGH BALFOUR, Vicar, Christ Church Peckham, London

“On one level, I cannot relate to this book. My dad was the best man at my wedding. On a deeper level, though, I certainly can. Blair Linne and I share the same heavenly Father, so we have far more in common than earthly indicators would suggest. Even the best dads, after all, only dimly reflect the Lord of love. If you are a victim of fatherlessness—whether his absence was physical or relational—this book will be a balm for your soul. Most important, it will crystallize your view of the greatest Father, who turned your criminal trial into an adoption ceremony and has never regretted making you his.”

MATT SMETHURST, Managing Editor, The Gospel Coalition

“*Finding My Father* is profoundly substantive and masterfully written. With theological insightfulness and vivid, engaging, and endearing eloquence, Blair puts her finger on the pulse of one of the most critical issues of the day—fatherlessness. By weaving together her powerful personal story with relevant biblical principles and a tinge of strategically placed sociological data, Blair leads hearers to the Father *par excellence*. She presents him as one who not only produces better earthly fathers but also provides a remedy for any who may deal with some sort of ‘father wound.’ In short, I was riveted. This is a must-read!

WILLIAM “DUCE” BRANCH AKA THE AMBASSADOR,
Musical Artist; Assistant Pastor of Preaching, Southeastern Baptist
Theological Seminary

“This is a powerful book. Pain and a sense of wistful loss surge out of practically every page. A few times I found myself drifting back to my own chaotic childhood, lamenting my own lack of a strong father figure. It’s rare to find a book that genuinely moves the soul in the way that this one does. Beautiful. Haunting. Poetic. A book that simultaneously grieves you and heals you. I honestly wish I had the words to convey how much I love *Finding My Father*. What a service Blair has done for the church of Jesus and the millions of fatherless (and motherless) wounded souls that surround us at every level of society. I’ve already thought of a dozen people I can give it to in my church. And my guess is that you will too.”

MEZ MCCONNELL, Author, *Church in Hard Places* and *The Creaking on the Stairs*; Senior Pastor, Niddrie Community Church, Edinburgh, Scotland

“Blair Linne’s story about needing, seeking, and finding her father echoes the need we all have to find our true Father and our eternal home. The words on these pages read like a poem, a prayer, a puzzle, and a promise—achingly beautiful, wise, and hope-filled. This book is not only for the fatherless; it’s for all of us who are part of the family of God.”

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, Research Professor of English and Christianity and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; Author, *On Reading Well*

**FINDING
MY
FATHER**

**HOW THE GOSPEL HEALS THE PAIN
OF FATHERLESSNESS**

BLAIR LINNE
WITH SHAI LINNE

The logo features a stylized, light gray bird-like shape above the text.
thegoodbook
COMPANY

Finding My Father
© Blair Linne, 2021.

Published by:
The Good Book Company



thegoodbook.com | thegoodbook.co.uk
thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher.

Blair Linne has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as author of this work.

Cover design by Jennifer Phelps | Art Direction and design by André Parker
Cover photo taken by Marisa Albrecht

ISBN: 9781784986469 | Printed in Turkey

To the fatherless –

*“I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters
to me, says the Lord Almighty.”*

(2 Corinthians 6:18)

Contents

Foreword <i>by Mark Dever</i>	11
Chapter 1: Partly Cloudy, Mostly Sunny	15
Chapter 2: His Name on My Tongue	29
Chapter 3: Fathered from Above	47
Chapter 4: It Takes a Christian Village	61
Chapter 5: The Missing Piece	77
Chapter 6: #GirlDad	93
Chapter 7: Becoming the Dad I Never Knew <i>by Shai Linne</i>	109
Chapter 8: Jumping off the Merry-Go-Round	125
Chapter 9: Coming Home	141
Acknowledgments	153

Foreword

John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* is the story of the disintegration of a family under the withering circumstances of poverty, homelessness, and violence. At the beginning of the novel, Steinbeck presents to the reader the family before they lost their homestead and became unemployed and displaced. He observes that "women and children knew deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole."¹ Steinbeck's simple honesty here is so rare today that it seems to contain insight. In fact, his observation stumbles on a central picture that God has left us about himself in normal human life.

The Bible presents God as our loving Father if we are in Christ. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus Christ, the second Adam, shows the way back from the tragic sin of the first Adam, who rejected his Creator's wisdom and presence. The Lord's Prayer begins with the recognition of God: he is "our Father." Such an understanding of God is central to the Bible's message, as the second Adam leads us back to the Father we've lost through the ancient sin in the Garden of Eden.

The centrality of fathers and fatherhood pervades the book you are holding. That centrality in Blair Linne's story

1 *The Grapes of Wrath* (Penguin, 1992), p 7.

doesn't show itself in the presence of wise and loving fathers, as it did in American sitcoms of the 1950s. Back then, "he's a good family man" was a common expression. Instead, the centrality of fatherhood in Blair's life has shown itself in its widespread absence. "Fatherlessness is the elephant in the room," she writes. "It is rarely talked about but extremely important" (p 34).

In this recounting of a part of her own life story, Blair generously shares with us some of the deepest pains and highest hopes of her own heart. She observes this not with the cool detachment of a research student but with the beating heart of a daughter in search of her dad. As she writes, the truth about the way God made us—with the gifts of gender, marriage, family, childhood, fathers and mothers—shines out. Sometimes it appears in the aches of what Blair didn't have and at other times in the joy of what she found.

The book is written by one who is an artist with words, and we, the readers, get the pleasure of reading it, all ready and prepared for us. In one chapter, the refrain about common experiences in the lives of the fatherless hits the reader: "I did not know it, but I was living it." Blair's prose is as clear as sunshine on a cloudless morning, even when sharing difficult memories. Her writing brings us rich, crisp truths about personal responsibilities, about external difficulties and injustices, and, most especially, about forgiveness and the gospel. This is an absorbing narrative, soaked in biblical wisdom and full of practical help. Blair's own example of humbly receiving God's grace, even through pain, is inspiring, encouraging, and instructive.

Blair's husband, Shai, also contributes to the book, not just by being Blair's husband but by sharing something of his own story, which is both similar to and different from Blair's. And both are very different than the story that they're helping to create for their own three children.

FOREWORD

The stories that Blair shares are her own, but they stand for the experience of so many in this fallen world. Whether you know fatherlessness from your own experience or not, this book will inform you and illustrate some of life's most important truths. Blair lets us know her honestly as she puts into words her own disappointment.

In the end, though, her story is one of hope. Through Christ and his church, Blair found her father—and more. I won't ruin the story. It's worth you reading along and letting her guide you through her own experience. As she does—as you read these chapters—I pray that every twist and turn will be used to help you toward the Father you should never miss and who, once found, you can never lose.

I've had the joy of knowing and loving Shai and Blair for years. But by reading this, I've come to appreciate them even more.

Mark Dever

*Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,
Washington, D.C.
June 2021*

CHAPTER 1

Partly Cloudy, Mostly Sunny

The section on my birth certificate reserved for my father's name is blank. The inside of the narrow, barren horizontal box has neither been struck through nor erased. It simply lies willfully untouched. So my birth certificate, like many others, tells by omission the story of a mother and father who were never married. This piece of paper was seldom referred to. It almost didn't exist at all, because I almost did not.

Meet Mother. (She is always Mother to me, from when I first learn to speak—never Mom or Mommy.) She is the youngest child of her family. She spends her free time during her high-school years modeling in local fashion shows, brushing shoulders with soul-train hopefuls, and winning the Jabberwock.² You'll never find a subject my mother hasn't read up on and doesn't have plans to conquer.

So when Mother finds out she is pregnant with me, she is not ecstatic. She is chained in her second trimester, trying to find a way to pick the lock. She has already known the abrasive reality of being a single mother. Adding to her undisclosed

² The Jabberwock was a scholarship pageant fundraiser for Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

trials with another fatherless child is not a magazine cut-out she had ever glued on her 80s vision board.

This is why I almost did not exist.

Months before that one-sided information was recorded on my birth certificate, Mother set out to abort me. She had already had my sister at 17, and the thought of raising two daughters on her own at 21 was in tension with her own dreams. But before she went ahead with her plan, she sought out advice from a Baptist minister whose Spirit-filled words convinced her not to go through with it. That's what I'd like to think—or it may have been the fact that by the time she found out, she was too far along in the pregnancy to end my life in our small Michigan town and would've had to travel to a large city like Detroit or Chicago, which made the whole thing too inconvenient. I owe my life to that pastor's words or to those logistical complications.

Apart from a few friends, Mother had little to no support while pregnant with me. She was no longer seeing my dad or my sister's father, and to be pregnant again was frowned upon by our family. My mom's mom—Momma—would have scowled at the news.

Meet Momma. The center of our family, Momma is always busy at service, preparing a plate of food for anyone who stops by. If not ruminating over a cast-iron skillet on how to feed the belly, she is tarrying in prayer for a soul. Her Holy Bible is opened each day by hands which once picked Alabama cotton but now—ever since she headed north in the Great Migration—shovel Michigan snow all winter and then hoe dirt on Good Friday to plant mustard greens and Kentucky Wonders. On Sundays at church, she slides my sister and me a slither of Trident gum, giving us a little something to chew on but never enough to blow a bubble. The fact that my grandmother was divorced and then remarried is confidential information that has been locked away in the memories

of older family members, never to be used in a game of Telephone. Coming up, I know nothing of it. My mother is the result of her second marriage, and my grandfather died when my mother was nine, so I knew nothing of him. Marriage is valued by Momma and so, since my mother has no intention of entering it, there is a problem.

So no, this pregnancy was not celebrated with a yellow Pooh Bear bassinet with a matching Piglet blanket, pink bows, or a smocked dress. During Mother's pregnancy, she was left alone to sit in her own mother's disappointment. And when Mother's body began contracting, she checked into Butterworth Hospital alone. No one was there to hold her hand or tell her it would be ok when she went into labor one brisk November, the day after Thanksgiving.

My mother and father had met at a dance a couple of years before I was born. I like to envision them falling for each other at some point during their rhythmic sways to "Let's Get It On," or being enamored by each other's footwork during the club's mock soul-train line as the DJ changed the vinyl to Michael's "Rock With You." With Grand Rapids being a small town where everyone knows when you come and go, I imagine that the fact that my dad was from a big city like Chicago felt mysteriously appealing to my mom.

Meet my dad, Dee. He is smooth as suede and, being the eldest of six, a natural leader. With his father absent from his home, he has been the one to enforce his mother's will. He's as rugged as the projects he was raised in. He is brown like a Tootsie Roll, and when people get to know him they soon realize he's just as sweet.

By the time Mother gave birth to me she was no longer dating my father. The relationship had been on again, off again, but now it was permanently off. From what I've been told, it seems like they knew how to press each other's nerves. So when Mother decided she would go through with the

birth, she also decided she would give me up for adoption. Not hours after she had had me, she later told me, I looked her straight in her brown, almond-shaped eyes. I wonder if she saw herself in mine. Maybe the idea of what I could be was ricocheting off of her hopelessness, leaving fragments of delight to soak up some of the disappointment she felt. I'm sure that after they pulled me from her cloven belly I cried like every living newborn, but when they laid me next to her, I just stared at her. What was in that exchange, as we gazed into each other's souls, both looking for answers? Maybe my eyes signaled that I would rather she not let me roam too far, or that God works in mysterious ways and sometimes brings much good out of much sorrow. Whatever, Mother always says that that moment melted her heart toward me.

Mother's cousin convinced my Momma to come to the hospital with her, ungluing Momma's cemented plans. Aided by the words of the doctor who told her, "You don't seem like the type of woman who would give your child away," and her cousin's words, Mother decided she was ok with having two daughters. Still, I don't know that there was much of a celebration when they stitched her stomach after the c-section and the epidural wore off. No pink balloons or confetti that day to my knowledge—but I made it. God threw me a birthday party, and for that, I am thankful.

THE FACTS OF LIFE

One day we were whisked off to southern California, the place where it supposedly never rains. I'm not sure if Mother was running away from the small town or toward her dreams of life in a metropolis. I was three; my sister, seven. We had a one-way Greyhound bus ticket that Mother had purchased in hopes of raising two movie stars. We packed all our worldly goods into several large brown Kraft boxes. I slipped into my

faded yellow Care Bear pajamas before the start of our three-day journey. There was \$300 tucked in Mother's purse. My dad didn't come, of course.

I don't remember much about those early years of not having my dad in the home. I did spend some time around him. I'm sure he changed a few of my diapers. But the only memory I have of my dad living nearby is of Mother taking me to his house to play, and him coming by sometimes, holding a small, brown paper bag filled with Now and Laters, Sugar Daddys, Bazooka, Fun Dip, Bit-o-Honey, Lemonheads, Mars bars, and candy cigarettes. I would be in heaven. Even though my sister and I had different fathers, mine would still come bearing gifts for her, and for my cousin. He was generous with sugar. Candy must have been my dad's love language, and I loved to speak it with him. I think we believed what I had watched that English nanny sing on our Zenith color TV: "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down."

I have one childhood picture with him. Multicolored beads hang on the ends of my 1980s individual braids, which brush just past my shoulders, with bangs similar to Rick James's. I'm a mix of busybody and beauty. I have a visible glob of bright blue Bubblicious on the left side of my mouth as we gaze into the camera. My dad's dark chocolate skin is weatherworn. Hair naturally formed into a small 'fro. His expression is stoic, the look of a man raised in the Ickes on the South Side of Chicago.

Growing up without my dad was mainly sunny but partly cloudy. The older I got, the more aware of the clouds I would become. I would struggle with authority, poverty, and identity as a result of not having my dad in the home. But for now, I'm just a little girl on a Greyhound bus, heading west, caught up in the wind of her mother's dreams.

During the long trek across the US we eat fried chicken that Momma packed for us in foil and paper napkins even as she

pleaded with Mother to stay. I chat with just about everyone on the bus. Our last stop is supposed to be Hollywood but someone advises us to get off in Pasadena, telling us about a shelter there where we can stay for a week. The people at the shelter kindly let us stay for two. The place is homey. The rooms have built-to-last wooden bunk beds and a couple of bright, multicolored granny-square crocheted blankets draped on the back of the couch.

After those two weeks, we get a ride to Hollywood and stay in a motel near Sunset Boulevard for two days. We have so much stuff to carry. But we make it there, and put our things down. Now Mother has to figure out what to do next: we can only stay in the motel two nights, since money is already crepe-thin. The morning it's time to check out, Mother asks the motel owner if we can leave everything we own there until she figures out her next move. The owner refuses. We grab what we can carry and leave all of our other things on the side of the motel, behind a dumpster in the alleyway. And we set off walking and praying.

That day she meets a Nigerian security guard, Ayo. She enters a store to buy orange juice and tells him about our situation, asking if he has any leads. He lets us stay in his two-story home off of Arlington Avenue, the color of a pickle. Mother uses his gray hatchback and returns to the motel to get our things, which the motel owner has set aside for us after all.

Ayo has a thick accent and is kind. He treats us to McDonald's Happy Meals and we try fufu for the first time. That Christmas, the tree is surrounded by packages wrapped with snowmen and candy-cane wrapping paper, with our names written on them.

I like it there. But after being there a few months, little do I know, Mother begins planning our exit. Later, she would tell me it was because Ayo tried to hit on her and she wasn't interested in reciprocating, so he told her we had to leave.