

Her name is Leah

the Leah Sharibu story as told by Lee Cantelon

Her name is Leah and she is a hostage. She was only fourteen years old when she was taken captive. The word *taken* still has the power to shock, the very idea that a person can be removed, like an object, taken away from their life, family, and friends, held captive against their will, made property.

Leah is in her Government Girl's Science and Technical School dormitory that night; Dapchi, Yobe State, Nigeria, February 19, 2018. It is early evening when the terrorists come. Chaos! Shots fired, girls screaming, scattering, first in one direction and then another, colliding, falling down. In groups of twos and threes they are captured, dragged, kicking, struggling, towards the idling trucks. The air is filled with smoke, gasoline fumes, static with the sounds of violence and screams. Some of the girls manage to escape. They are hiding beneath beds, in a ditch beneath branches, behind one of the school buildings, some in plain sight, flattening their bodies to the ground in the dark. One girl has hold of Leah's hand and is pulling her towards safety, but her grip is broken and then Leah is running back into the school to see if she can help someone escape. She doesn't make it. The terrorists begin herding their captives into the trucks, their open doors black like yawning mouths. Leah is among them. In a nightmare that won't stop she finds herself pressed in among her hysterical classmates. Tailgates slam, there is the rattle of chains, engines revving. The trucks lurch into the night, springs complaining as they hit the ruts and rough road, a gun barrel jabbing into her ribs. Darkness is falling. Her captives' eyes appear in brief flashes of light behind the slits in their masks. It is cold, but the girls shake from fear and trauma. In a few horror-filled hours their lives have been ripped away. Welcome to hell.

For three days the terrorists keep the girls on the move. On day four the girls wake up inside the terrorists' camp. They

are exhausted, moving as if still asleep. Every muscle hurts. One by one, they are singled out, surrounded. Many of their captors are still boys, only a year or two older than the girls themselves. They threaten them with guns that look too big in their bony hands. "You belong to us now," they are laughing, high-fiving. Some are dressed like soldiers, others like rappers, sunglasses, baseball caps tugged backwards. The presence of evil is crushing, it clings to their skin and makes it crawl, makes it difficult to breathe, like a cord tightening around the heart.

"Allah Akbar" the men are chanting. "Denounce your faith in Jesus," they say. Most of the girls come from Muslim homes, but their voices still shake as they plead over and over that they are devout, that Mohamed is Allah's prophet, praise his name. When they hear this the terrorists aren't impressed. They shove them aside, spit, curse, sneer, and move on. Until they come to Leah. Had she been anticipating this?

For months leading up to this moment she had been telling her Christian friends, "Be ready. Be strong. Don't give up." Now words stick in her throat. But there is a warmth, like a fire inside, and she hears her voice saying "I am a Christian. I will not give up my faith." Her voice might have trembled but she is speaking loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Give up your Jesus and go free," one of the terrorists is yelling, his face nearly touching hers. His breath is hot and angry. He smells bitter, acrid, of sweat, fish, rough cut tobacco and drink. Leah can only repeat, "I will not. I will not," even as the other girls are being loaded into the waiting trucks. One hundred and four. That's the count. It should have been one hundred and ten, but five died during the raid, and one is being left back.

That's what we know, that because of one defining moment of courage, Leah Sharibu is still being held. She is one of *the taken*, far from everything and everyone she holds dear. More than two years have passed. We try our best to imagine her were she is today but cannot grasp it fully. It is too terrible, the images that come too easily to mind and haunt us. God be with her. Keep her. **Her name is Leah and she is a hostage.**