

Searching for Me

by Lynne Connor

I am sitting on a panel with three other adult adoptees ready to talk to a sea of adoptive parents, who eagerly wait to listen and absorb our words as the new holy gospel. We are the guests of honor at a transracial adoption conference on top of a Northern California mountain, the closest big city being Gilroy. All we have to do is give testimonials about life as a transracial adoptee.

Since I am the only Asian American adoptee on the panel (the other adoptees are African American) I have the added pressure of not only representing Korean adoptees, but the whole continent of Asia. I want to start by saying, "I had a good life." But I stop myself. This isn't the time to appease these parents. I want them to know that what hurt me was not being deprived of love, or abuse, or poverty. What broke me in a way I couldn't put back together, like Lego blocks clicking into place, was lost ethnic identity.

As I start telling them my story—I was adopted from Korea at the age of two and a half by a single, independent white woman who chose not to marry—I wonder how much I should reveal and how much I should leave out. Do I want them to walk out of this place feeling good about their choice to adopt? Do I want to scare them by throwing my hands up in the air and saying, "Your kid will be messed up no matter what you do?" How do I explain to these parents that even with a good childhood and a mother who gave me love, what I remember the most is silence? My mother not seeing that yellow is darker than white. That yellow is not the "tan" that people want to spray on their arms and legs. That yellow goes with a new kind of dark stereotype that "Cultured America" has not acknowledged. I am part of the silent minority. A minority in a minority. One that has to figure out a way for these parents to understand that this poison, this flip of the hand, this forgotten invisibility is screaming inside and waiting for a hole to come out.

Up until I was twelve, growing up in a predominantly white, middle-class suburb of Trenton, NJ, I was blissfully ignorant of color. All my white friends were just girls who I laughed with, played with and confided in. There were occasional comments that my face was flat and I had "chink" eyes. But for some reason I didn't let these taunts penetrate. They fell off my shoulders like dandruff. In fourth grade when the family tree project was required, I did have a "Hey, wait a minute" moment. My mother's stand was I was a Connor, my family background was Irish. But she never explained how that

made sense when my Asian face didn't match.

Everything changed when I entered Fisher Junior High in seventh grade. I was immediately conscious of the importance of fitting in. This was a place where designer labels became a rite of passage, where boys chose the popular, pretty blond hair girls to date, and looking different with an Asian face was the kiss of death. I was also introduced to prejudice by a boy who used to scream at the top of his lungs, "China, China, China." Everyone's stares and the teacher's averted glances only confirmed my growing belief, "I am worthless." I was once a self-assured, outgoing girl, but now I lost my voice. Any brightness or beauty I felt was stripped clean, leaving ugly yellow residue.

I look out at the crowd wondering if they are picturing their daughters in school who are now twelve and thirteen, the prime time for self-esteem erosion. They are wondering if their daughters hate the way they look too. Good, I want them to hear me. I want them to finally look at the dark side. The unforeseen pain that the adoption agencies did not think about when they started mixing colors.

On some level, I do think my mother knew I was Asian. She sent me off to Korean heritage camps (all of which I hated). We went to Trenton Heritage days, a yearly outdoor food event. We'd pause at the Korean table with steaming beef, bowls of rice, red spiced kimchi. We'd think about buying a plate and then quickly move on and load up on gyros and funnel cake instead. My mother never talked about the significance of understanding Korean culture. When I was a junior in high school, I became friends with a girl who was what I called a Korean Korean. She had moved to the US from Korea when she was twelve and could still speak Korean fluently. She insisted I come to her Korean Presbyterian church. Since my mom was a non-practicing Catholic, I had no opinion on religion. I shrugged my shoulders. Sure, I would go.

As I entered this world of all Korean people, with their fast-speaking Korean-language tongues, with mounds of Korean food served for free after every Sunday service, I thought I was beginning to grasp the concept of being Korean. But just as I was in awe of this new glittering world, I became increasingly aware of what I did not grow up with and what I would never be fully accepted as—Korean. I started to feel like a fake Korean. And while these good Christians swayed

to songs, I started to think that coming to a church not in the name of God but for Kimchi and rice was a bit immoral.

Despite my growing interest in all things Korean and a slow stirring of wanting to own it, I unwisely chose a college where I was again the minority. I skipped off to the University of North Carolina in Asheville and slammed up against not just a white wall, but a Southern, racist white wall. My freshman-year roommate, a native North Carolinian, had never seen an Asian girl before and thought for the first semester that I was mute. Her boyfriend liked to ask me questions like, "How do you fold those noodles in wonton soup?"

I sought out my people, Asians, in desperation and only got as far as the UNCA International Student club, where my best friend became a girl from Japan. I corrected her English slang, she reflected back black hair and slanted eyes. It was the best I could do.

Feeling like North Carolina was not where I saw my future, I transferred to New York University for the last two years of college and immediately joined the Korean Student Association. I didn't last in the club longer than a month. I was starting to feel that the more I grabbed for this notion of being Korean, the more it shunned me. I was reminded that even if I looked Korean, I did not grow up with the culture of food and language to help me define it.

After college, I had a degree, but I still had no sense of my place in the world. I longed for a place where I could completely fit in. So my focus became finding a Korean adoptee community. I joined Also Known As in New York, an adult adoptee support group where I met several Korean adoptees who were just as obsessed as I was with claiming this notion of Korean-ness. With my new group of friends, I traipsed up and down 32nd Street, which was considered the Koreatown of NY. We ate Korean BBQ and drank soju till our faces were red and we smelled like smoke and Kimchi spices. And then I moved to San Francisco to work at a non-profit that promoted Asian American films. I went from a very Korean-focused environment to this new idea of an all-inclusive Asian America. I liked how being in this new label had nothing to do with your clothes or what you ate or what language you could or could not speak. What got you in the club was your Asian face; I had that without any effort. And so I began the process of incorporating my learned-Korean self with my already-established American self and letting them rest together peacefully inside of me, instead of as warring rivals.

As I finish my story, I wipe my tears away in annoyance. I am tired of how real and present the pain remains. When the panel ends, we adoptees stand to the side and immediately are surrounded by hungry parents. We are the rock stars here at this conference. Three different sets of arms embrace me in hugs. They want to hug away all the pain and tears I've shed. I should have mentioned that I did not come from a family of huggers. And that I already felt like a stripped naked baby in front of them.

In various nuanced ways, the adoptive parents all ask the same question. What can they do to make sure their kid doesn't wind up on a panel twenty years later and blame them for screwing them up? I stare at them incredulously. As if sitting up on a platform and spilling my lifelong process of trying to be okay with myself wasn't enough, they want more. They want to take more from me. They want me to be a psychologist, all-knowing God, mother and best friend all rolled up into one.

I talk to parents who have adopted internationally. I am disturbed by a new trend: parents overly embracing their child's ethnic culture. China is a large exporter of babies to the U.S. for adoption. White parents parade their little Chinese daughters down the street during the Chinese New Year celebration. They boast that their kids not only eat dim sum every Sunday, but they attend Chinese language classes to learn their native tongue.

And I should be happy for these little girls who are getting pounded in their head what it means to be Chinese from their parents. But I wonder if this is the answer, if this will prevent the new generation of adoptees from suffering the way we did. I was a part of the first generation of transracial adoptees, the guinea pigs of this anthropology experiment. I know my mom didn't have the resources or support groups that are available today. So is it fair to blame her? After all, she did the best she could with what she knew.

But then I think, no. These new parents don't fully get it either. They can't just throw token representations of Chinese culture at their daughters and say they have fulfilled their duty. There has to be a full, everyday, ongoing immersion of culture so the child doesn't have to think about it. So it becomes as natural as breathing. There also has to be open discussion around it. I can't say it enough, but race matters. When adoptive parents agree to adopt across color lines, they have essentially signed up for a larger responsibility than just parenting. They are challenging and exposing their child to racism that is still prevalent today.

Long after the transracial conference, I still searched for that nameless feeling, that moment when I would know that I had found myself. The search for my identity, the search for being a true Korean, the search for seeing my real beauty, the search for complete acceptance. And I came to a too-obvious conclusion. That the point of searching is not to ever find the end. That there can never be an end. But it's about the journey and the feeling that I have the power to embrace my lost ethnic culture over and over again, in any way I chose.

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