



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Hambun-Hambun

By Susan Ito

The census form came today. I saw the dreaded instructions, the stern admonishment to check only one box. White. Japanese. Other. There is the blank space to fill in, a half inch in which to claim identity. I am other. Hambun-Hambun, or half and half. Happa. Biologically, genetically, I'm fifty percent Japanese and fifty percent... unknown. Adopted as an infant into a Japanese American family, I have always had a heightened awareness of my "otherness."

"Your parents, they're so good, they treat you just like you were their own." I've heard this a lot.

Then is it true, that I am not "their own?" If not them, to whom do I belong? From where do I come? From out there. From them, those phantom parents. Am I a part of this family, or not? I cling to their name, to my name, Ito, as one holds an amulet. I fasten it around my throat. Yes. I do belong. And yet, there is that question, that other name, burned into the black plastic of microfiche, buried in the catacombs of hospital storage like the name of a dead person. The life I never lived.

I've met the woman who gave birth to me; she is a nisei, second generation, like my parents. I hunted her down when I was in college, searched the underground of buried information until I arrived at her door. She wasn't happy about being discovered, but when she learned that I had grown up a sansei, a third generation Japanese American, something inside her softened. She had let me go into the world, destination unknown, and I could have turned up anywhere. But I grew up as the daughter of Masaji and Kikuko, who brought me to visit relatives in Japan when I was nine, who taught me to sing "Sakura," the cherry blossom song.

They get along well now, the three of them. They fall easily into a natural camaraderie, their shared culture, their linked parentage of me. We have all eaten sushi together, chopsticks clicking comfortably. None of them will mention that missing link, the other part of the equation, the one out of four parents who is not Japanese at all.

This invisible one, my nameless birth father, shows up to haunt me every time I look in the mirror. I see his freckles, his pink skin that doesn't tan easily. His dark furry forearms, and legs that need to be shaved every day. His nose, twice as long and more defined than those of my Japanese kin, is an unmistakable flag on my profile. But what color is that flag? What country? What people?

When my second daughter was born with blonde-red hair and blue eyes, those recessive genes surfaced like an earthquake in our family. Who are those fair freckled blondes, her great grandparents? My birth mother has remained silent to my questions, and I have become tired of asking.

These questions of origin and identity have been circling around like stubborn moths in my head ever since I was small. They beat their wings, bumping up against my brain, dumbly searching for answers. What? Who? Why? I started writing when I was six, making up stories that always ended with astonishing surprises: The cat was really a turtle in disguise. A girl found a rabbit under her bed and they became sisters. The questions and answers surfaced as fables in my green marbled notebooks before I knew how to speak them out loud. I wrote incessantly for years and years, words bleeding uncontrollably onto the page. When I searched for and found my birth mother, people would say, "You ought to make this into a story. Your life is such a soap opera." It seemed like a ludicrous idea to me; Japanese people don't show up on soap operas.

My adoptive parents, both nisei, are solidly cemented into the Japanese American community. They have their friends from half a century now, who all grew up together in New York City public schools, all with immigrant parents, mothers who were picture brides, fathers who didn't speak English. They stick together. I grew up between them, bolstered by their unflinching love for me, the way they never question my "authenticity." My parents' people took me in, called me "Susie-chan." Yet without my parents, I feel shy, self-conscious about joining the Japanese community in California. I worry that they'll look at me sideways, saying, "What is she doing here?"

Whenever I was out with one parent, new acquaintances would always assume that the other parent was White. And why wouldn't they? They were innocent questions, innocent assumptions, but the years of constant questions, the curiosity, the nosiness, have left me with a bitter taste that won't go away.

I am fourteen or fifteen years old, my body bursting into adolescence, all bright flowers and elastic in my new halter top. I am helping my father set up one of his merchandise booths and another salesman comes up and slaps him on the back.

"Mr. Ito! This is your daughter?"

My father beams and reaches out to ruffle my hair. "Yes, this is Susan."

"Why, you old dog. I never woulda known!" An elbow in the ribs, another slap, a wink. "Well, your wife must be some beauty then." Meaning: you snagged a White woman, you crafty jap.

My father and I busy ourselves with our work, not looking at each other.

I am thirty-five years old, teaching English at a community college. A colleague invites me to join an Asian American faculty organization and, as I am introduced to the group, a nisei man does a double take, looks at me sideways.

"You don't look like an Ito."

What does an Ito look like? What does it mean to be Japanese American, to be "real?" I try to keep my voice steady, to find a balance between a humiliated whisper and outraged shouting. "Well, I am. I am." I don't offer an explanation.

I go to a conference of mixed race people and am moved and astounded to see the hundreds of people who, in a peculiar way, all look like me, even as we are singularly different. It is a relief to be among so many who know this life, this happa seesaw, but as I meet and share stories with other biracial people, I realize that once again I am on the periphery. Everyone seems to come from a family with two identifiable parents. Even those whose parents have split up still have photos, stories of the one who isn't around. They see themselves reflected in this dual mirror: "I get my blue eyes from him but my black hair is from her." They get to see the source of their mixture, their differences split by their blended roots. It is as if half of my mirror is covered up.

Even among this peculiar group of people with whom I have so much in common, I feel separate. They talk about the cultural wars between parents: Mom wanted to fix won tons, but Dad insisted on corned beef. I had none of the bifurcated experience. So maybe I'm not really a happa, not really part of the club. It was a homogeneous front, my all-Japanese family. Yet sometimes, when I caught a glimpse of my own reflection or saw a portrait of the three of us together, I felt dizzy.

My junior high school friend Cathy laughed when she saw the framed family photo on our piano. "What's wrong with this picture?" she giggled, pointing at me. It was like a children's puzzle, a song my own daughters have learned from Sesame Street: One of these things is not like the others, one of these things just doesn't belong....

Not long after we met, my birth mother and I began to wage an emotional tug-a-war. I pulled and pulled at her, trying to extract information, stories, memories. Tell me where I came from. Tell me who I am. She begrudgingly let go of tiny fragments of her history, a small tidbit or anecdote every few years, but never much about the pale midwestern man who helped to create me. Years of struggle, of tears and demands and refusal, and finally a silence that has turned in a stiff saccharine cordiality. We don't bring it up any more.

Is information something that can be owned, hoarded, desired? Is it really possible to guard the truth as she has? After years of raging, pleading, begging and threatening, I must finally accept the truth: We are not going to sit down together, a pot of green tea between us, talking about the past, flipping pages of a photo album, while I soak up a sense of identity. We are not going to appear on "Oprah," an ecstatic mother-daughter reunion. If I am going to have a birth story, a chronicle of my roots, it is going to be up to me.

I write down all that I know of my beginning, and these scanty notes barely fill one side of an index card. My birth date. Birth place. The place where they met. The few precious details she has let slip into conversations, the small specks that I have been gathering like dust in my pocket.

I take my birthday, count back nine months, calculating my conception to be somewhere around Christmas of 1958. I close my eyes for several minutes, pulling myself back there. A cold month, a month full of snow. Then I begin writing. I imagine him, red-cheeked in the bitter wind, stomping ice from his boots. I see her in her cats-eye glasses, a schoolteacher with black hair and red lipstick. The only Japanese woman in the tiny midwestern town. I give them outfits, like paper dolls, and winter colds. He carries a linen handkerchief in his pocket. I write them closer and closer together, until their paths cross and I give them eye contact. This is the beginning of my story. This is where my life begins.

I write, not to provide a screenplay for "The Days of Our Lives," but to fill in the holes of this tale that I don't know but which exists in my blood, my skin, my bones. Pages accumulate, and like the Velveteen Rabbit of childhood, I feel myself becoming real.

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