

CHOSEN ONE

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I followed the sharp clicking high heels of a Korean social worker from my adoption agency, Eastern Child Welfare, into a locked room. We stood in front of rows and rows of sky-high metal shelves with outside markers starting with the year 1950 and ending in 2001. I stared in wonder at these metal prisons that held the secrets of thousands of Korean children who were adopted over a fifty-year span.

“Year of birth?”

I blinked hard. “1977.”

With quick precision, she pointed to the years, going backward. 1990. 1980. 1977. We stopped in front of my year. She spun the shelf dial like she was on the Wheel of Fortune. The shelf slowly creaked open, just enough for her body to squeeze in. Not for both of us.

A shiver of icy coldness shot through me, and I rubbed my bare arms. What was I doing in this sterile place where everyone spoke Korean with a monotone cadence, and the Korean block letters kept me at arm’s length from fully understanding my surroundings?

A year ago when I was twenty-three, something stirred inside of me—a longing that turned into an impatient grunt. I thought I had figured out a way to make sense of being adopted at the age of 2 ½ by a strong, independent white woman who chose not to marry. She raised me with the old-fashioned belief that race didn’t matter, that love was enough. But of course, it wasn’t. So, I focused all my attention on what I didn’t have—a Korean identity. I swallowed down kimchi, I tried to learn Hangeul, and in college, I surrounded myself with Asian faces to make up for the lack of them in my childhood.

With all this work on “becoming” a true Korean, however, I had ignored the adoption issue. Whenever I went to the doctor’s and had to fill out the family history section, I confidently wrote—N/A. That’s what I thought of my adoption: not applicable, non-issue, no need to address. Still, a tiny part of my consciousness knew that being adopted was intrinsically tied to my identity problem. I decided, then, that the only way to feel closure was to return to the source.

Holt International, the largest agency for international adoption, organized a tour to Korea every year as part of their post-adoption services. The tour was designed specifically for adult Korean adoptees to get a better understanding of their history through planned activities, such as looking at your adoption file, visiting an orphanage,

and going to a shelter for unwed mothers. I filled out the long application and waited eagerly hoping I'd get chosen.

Before the trip, in my dreams I would walk on the same dirt as my people. That's what I called them, my people. I would feel a rush of sweet air and I would breathe in a way that I never could in my hometown of Ewing, New Jersey. I thought a wave of nostalgia, of lost voices, of prisoned memories would flow out. But now that I was in Korea, forced to deal with my feelings on adoption, I wasn't sure I was ready. Really ready.

"So this is you? Eun Ja Kim?" The social worker's penciled in eyebrows gave her a permanent angry expression.

"Yes."

Early on, my Korean name was something I was proud of. While kids in first grade bragged that they could curl their tongue or whistle nursery rhymes, I'd whip out my cloaked Korean identity. "Bet you didn't know my real name is Eun Ja Kim."

I pronounced my first name Yune Ya, until I showed my birth certificate to a co-worker friend who was a Korean national. She corrected my pronunciation saying, "It's not Yune, it's Un. Like undone. Un Ja." She also noticed that I was born in a province near Pusan, the southern most tip of Korea, and not in Seoul as I had believed. For twenty years, I didn't know where I was born and pronounced my own Korean name wrong.

I wondered if there was any truth I could own. A month before the trip, without fully thinking through the consequences, I called Catholic Social Services during a bathroom break at work. This was the U.S. adoption agency that paired me with my mother. A woman answered, and I politely asked for the contents of my adoption file. A few minutes later after some keyboard typing, she said, "Oh, it says here that you were found by a policeman and brought to an orphanage when you were two."

I almost dropped my cell phone. "It says I was two? I was two?"

"Yes," she answered in a crisp voice.

"But my mom always told me I was a little baby when I was found by the policeman. I was a baby."

I could hear more keyboard clacking. Then she corrected herself, "Ohh, wait. I think I'm looking at the wrong file. Sorry."

Her apology came out flippantly, like she accidentally handed me the wrong drink order, diet Coke instead of regular. Now I couldn't

remember which truth I grew up believing and which truth was in my file—if it was, in fact, my file.

The woman cleared her throat on the other end. “You were right. You were found as a baby.”

My brain was unable to form a rebuttal. I hung up the phone and immediately dialed my mom’s home number in Florida, where she had retired. She picked up on the second ring. I laid out the conversation with the social worker like a deck of cards.

“Which is the truth? Was I abandoned after a few days, or did my birthmother keep me until I was two and then throw me away? Two years is a big difference. I need to know. Which one?” And just like that, my carefully stored away emotions came gushing out in a torrent of messy tears.

“I don’t understand. Who told you this? Who’s lying to you.” My mom’s voice remained hard, but I knew she could hear me crying. Even with her armor, I was seeping in. I was affecting her, probably ruining her day. After all, she hated tears.

She saw no appropriate place for them. Ever.

And now in Korea, I was alone with the same lack of preparation or support. As the social worker flipped open my file with an almost annoyed obligation, I thought, this is it. What if something was in my file? A last name to my birth mother or father? The actual date I was born, not some made-up date that the orphanage handed out. When exactly I was abandoned? Up until this point, the history of my identity before I left Korea was lost in translation.

She read the first page and then flipped it over. The next and then flipped.

My eyes tried to scan in the illegible handwriting. “What?” I leaned forward. “What were those papers?”

The social worker shook her head quickly. “Not important.”

A surge of anger darted through me. This was my life we were talking about. When I was a baby I had no choice in my destiny. Today, I had a right to know every word that was written in my file.

She pointed to the boxed fields. “Mother’s name, unknown. Father’s name, unknown,” she said and then shrugged. As if to say, Oh well, long trip for nothing.

A loose-leaf paper with English words caught my eye. I reached out and pulled it closer before the woman could stop me. It was by a social worker reporting on the final home study visit. After a year of being together, the adoption agency wanted to ensure that my mom and I were a good match. I scanned it smiling slightly at the observations. The report said I was an exuberantly happy, well-adjusted child. Adoption success story.

“Can I have a copy of this?” I flapped the almost transparent paper in the air.

The woman plucked it out of my hands giving me a tight smile. “No copies. Sorry.”

My shoulders collapsed in. Why hadn't I studied up on my rights to my adoption file? Did I even have rights? She stood up indicating my time was up, but I didn't budge. I wanted the blankness of my file to fill me. No information. No one gave birth to me. No Korean identity. The first two years of my life—lost, never to be found.

A couple days later on the tour, we traveled from Seoul to Pusan to visit an orphanage with babies who were no older than three years old. We piled out of the bus and without training, without a profound speech, we sat down on the gray linoleum floor and picked up babies like they were seashells at the beach.

I saw a little girl with a dazed look on her face. Even with all the baby noise and cribs surrounding her, she looked completely alone. I glanced around, and everyone had their arms overflowing with two, sometimes three, babies. I walked over to the little girl and extended my hand, the way I would to a shivering stray cat. The girl turned her back to me and now faced the wall. I placed my hand gently on her back and rubbed in a circle. She wouldn't turn around and cringed even more into the corner.

I gave up as sadness descended over me. Was this what I was like in the orphanage? Afraid of human contact? Did I have this glazed look in my eyes when I was her age?

As if my spirit was gone and only the shell remained? A final health report that was mailed to my mother from the Korean adoption agency had read, “She looked to not be bright in character.” Did orphanages, these waiting halls for the abandoned, do that to you?

I heard a new baby crying. I quickly left the cowering girl and scooped up a crying little boy off the ground. His head lulled back in surprise and then his face was just inches from mine. We stared at each other. His black bangs were wispy, like stretched out cotton balls. But it was his mouth, the way the corners naturally dipped downward that made

me see the resemblance. This little boy was the spitting image of me as a baby. He could have been my twin. As ridiculous as it sounded, I felt like I was rocking my former baby self.

I hugged him against my chest and swayed back and forth. The baby laid his head on my shoulder and his tiny, chubby arms wrapped tightly around my neck.

I remember my mom telling me that my first night in America, I wouldn't stop crying. There's a picture of me sitting on the couch, still in the tiny red knitted sweater-suit, looking absolutely miserable. My baby mouth was down turned sadness. On the very next page in my baby photo album, I'm in my mother's lap with a huge smile on my face. There are a lot of pictures of me simply clutching onto her, hanging on for dear life. As if human touch really was the magic balm to make an orphanage memory disappear.

Maybe I should have felt guilty devoting all my time to just one baby. After all, there were ninety-three orphans who needed hugs, with only twenty Korean caretakers to look after them. I watched as others moved on from baby to baby in ten-minute increments. They applied the same rules used at a cocktail party: eye contact, brief connection, politely step away, and move on. But when I tried to put the little boy down, he clutched even tighter. I was fine with that. I wouldn't let go.

As his head created a warm pocket under my chin, I wanted to tell him that everything would be okay. That yes he had no mommy now, but there still was a chance. He could still be chosen.

When I was little, and had no clue how the adoption process really worked, I imagined myself as the chosen one. I went as far as asking my mom if she got me from a JC Penny catalog. After all, she bought everything from the catalog: clothes, furniture, and Christmas gifts. Why not me? I liked the idea of her flipping through orphan faces and stopping when she saw mine. She'd slam her finger down on my face, not needing to flip any further. Instead my mom scoffed, "You were the first available kid." I met her requirements: a girl between the age of two and three who was potty trained. But somehow in a magical fated way, I was chosen to be adopted. I was chosen not to grow up in an orphanage where my future was unknown. I was chosen by my mother.

When it came time to leave, my baby tensed up, and I had to pry his fisted hands loose. I placed him next to another baby on the floor and smoothed out his soft hair. I walked away without looking back to see his face scrunch up, his hungry eyes disappear underneath folds as his guttural crying returned. The minute I let go, I just became another adult to abandon him.

The short afternoon in the orphanage wasn't enough time for us to hold the crying toddlers, faces without mothers, faces who once were us. The utter helplessness we all felt when we left could be heard in the long silent bus ride back to our very American Hyatt hotel.

Up until this point of the trip, I hadn't cried. Maybe on some level I had put up such a steel armor to protect myself from the pain of loss, the pain I had carefully avoided, that I couldn't even feel. I couldn't connect to the raw wound that was always there, just hidden. But then we went to the Salvation Army, a home for unwed mothers. We sat in two long rows of tables. On one side were the adoptees from the tour, on the opposite side were Korean women with bulging bellies and heads bent down. Some of the women looked to be younger than I. We all sat, afraid to move, afraid to make a disrespectful sound. Afraid to make eye contact with a woman who planned to give her baby up for adoption, a woman who could have been our birth mother twenty years ago.

I gripped the sides of my chair. I didn't want to cry. I didn't want to be forced to think about this. It actually had never been an issue, the giving up part. The abandonment of it all. The sense of loss that a woman out there gave birth to me and looked liked me. The idea of her was dead to me. The need to find her now, now that I was in Korea, that I was amongst other Korean adoptees, the feeling still refused to wash over me. The woman across from me who looked like a caged rat trying to find the quickest, most painless way out—she was nothing to me.

We were instructed to show our partnered birth mother photos from our childhood. This was to visually show and give permission to the birth mothers that what they planned to do was the right thing.

I flipped to the first page of the small album I brought. There I was, a two-year-old baby in a black and white photo, my mug shot. The picture they mailed to my mom saying this will be your new daughter.

I flipped.

A picture of me sprawled on the yellow couch, eating a bowl of popcorn. My stomach plump. My cheeks rosy.

I flipped.

Me and my mom out in the snow in my backyard in New Jersey. The blizzard of '81. I was in a hot pink snowsuit, my hood with white fur framed a face full of brightness.

I flipped.

My high school graduation, white cap and gown.

I flipped.

A picture of me sitting on my mom's lap. I was twenty-two, just graduated from college and about to enter the work world. A splash of red roses in the background. My head leaned against my mom's. Black hair against blond, grey curls.

Somewhere between childhood and graduation, my tears fell. The woman, my assigned birth mom was also crying. Our cheeks glistened. For the first time, our eyes met. We didn't try to speak because we had reached each other on a level that didn't need words.

This birthmother, who could have been my birthmother, gave me the answer I didn't even know I was searching for. In the reflection of her tears, I understood how difficult it was, this decision to give up her baby for adoption. I saw clearly now that I was not the throwaway child I once believed. My birthmother gave me the greatest gift she could. By fully abandoning me, she gave me a real chance at life, in the most selfless way possible. Through my tears, I finally got it. I felt it. I was loved by my birthmother. I was loved. And with the spin of a wheel, I was adopted and placed into the arms of my mother, who continues to love me. How easily I could have been left behind in a Korean orphanage—unlucky, unchosen. Somehow, I wasn't. I was the chosen one.

