

BLOOM

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BLOOM

The majority of my adolescent years have been shadowed in uncertainty and unresolved grief. In my seventeen years of life, I have not had the luxury of knowing simple facts, such as the name of hospital I was born in or the time I was born; my childhood had been full of loose ends and blank spaces. As an international adoptee, my experience with identity and narrative has been a lifelong struggle that I am still trying to resolve. My life so far has been defined by unanswered questions, ghosts of the past, and a long-lost longing for something that I never had. I began this artistic journey by researching the history of adoption, the legal process, and the psychology of adopted children. My research examined the nature of what it truly means to be adopted and led me to explore my birth story and personal roots in depth.

This oil painting depicts an image of a young girl with a blossoming tree growing from her head. The girl represents myself and the tree symbolizes my divided sense of identity. The right side of the tree features red roses that symbolize my American side, whereas the pink hibiscus flowers on the left side represent the Korean side of my identity. In the middle there are several intertwined branches and various leaves. This section of the tree represents the intersectionality of my identity and the grey area where my two dominant cultures intersect. This is the place where I feel I often exist. This specific feeling of being stuck between separate worlds and cultures is a common occurrence for many adopted adolescents. As a whole, the work represents my inner conflict regarding my adoption and the identity-related confusion and frustration I feel on a daily basis.

I will never feel truly at peace with the either sides of my identity. I may never know what it means to be fully “Korean” or fully “American,” but the uncertainty has become less of an emotional burden for me. I have learned to accept my complicated sense of identity and appreciate the richness of a multi-cultural life and a non-traditional family structure. I may never understand the complexity of all the facets that make up my identity or the two worlds that I am constantly shifting between. I may never know the face of my birth mother or the life that I could have lived, but I do know who I am and where I came from. My name is Portia Hubregsen and I finally understand what closure feels like.

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Multiplicity : A Personal Memoir of What It Feels Like to Exist Between Two Worlds

Before beginning to write this memoir, I extensively researched the topic of adoption. I discovered more than I thought was possible about the legal process of domestic and international adoption. Additionally, I looked into the psychology behind adoption stigma and why adopted kids tend to have emotional attachment issues. I consulted many resources about the history of adoption in South Korea and why the laws there regarding inter-country adoption have changed. I also read various stories and poems from the perspectives of Korean-American adoptees. At the end of my research, I had compiled a lengthy eighteen pages (single-spaced) of typed research notes, including excerpts from poems, graphs, statistics. However, it is not the amount of research that I have conducted that separates my story from many others - it is the rawness. While writing this narrative, I tried to present the most honest version of my story. The honesty presented in the memoir is not meant to shine a negative light on adoption or non-traditional family structures; it is simply a written representation of my own experience with adoption and how it has shaped me as person. The purpose of writing this story was not to craft a detailed narrative, but to rewrite the narrative that I had been assigned from birth and finally retell my personal story.

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Introduction

I was born in Seoul, South Korea on December, 19, 2000. This is one of the few things that I have always known for sure to be true. In my seventeen years of life, I have not had the luxury of knowing such things- my childhood had been full of loose ends and blank spaces. The vast majority of my life has been defined by unanswered questions, ghosts of the past, and a long-lost longing for something that I never had. Why? I am adopted. That sentence itself has been a source of emotional turmoil for me. To be able to type that statement now with such conviction is something that I could have never seen myself doing during my early adolescent years. Although I have now reached the point in my life that I am far more comfortable with my adoption, the emotional process of understanding what it means to be adopted is something that still haunts me today. In writing this memoir, I hope to be able to recover some of the tender emotions that I had spent so much of my childhood trying to bury. I want to be able to feel the emotions that I did not allow myself to feel when I was younger. The process of writing this story is one of emotional healing, recovery, and resolution. There is not one, all-encompassing end goal for this narrative except for moving forward in my process of self-reflection. If I had to explain why I wrote this memoir, I would say that I want to write something that is solely for myself. I want to create a piece of work that is uniquely and selfishly mine, in the sense that the story's main focus is myself, and unapologetically so. I want to be able to effectively express the conflicted sentiments that have burdened me when I was a child in a way that an audience could understand. Simply put, this memoir is not a story about adoption. It is a story about *my* adoption.

Chapters:

I. I learned how to fly before I could walk

A breath of fresh air. That is how most children's lives begin. Their primal noises are guttural screams; as they take their first much-needed gulp of air, they enter the world. Their lives began in a hospital. I would like to say that is how my life began as well, but truthfully I

was born in the airport. Well -not exactly- but that is how I recall my entrance into the world. My earliest memories take place in the overcrowded and busy terminals of the John F. Kennedy airport. I never knew what hospital I was born at, let alone the time of birth. I am still unsure of how much of this “memory” is my own recollection and how much of it is a reimagination of what I have been told happened. A large majority of my memories are based off of photographs. Many of my childhood memories have been reinforced through the extensive collection of photos my parents have collected. Without photographs, I would have little evidence of any of my previous life before I arrived at the airport and became a citizen of the United States. I would like to believe that short period of time that I spent in Korea was somewhat pleasant, but a few meager photographs do little to provide that reassurance and I am still left with a large gap of time unaccounted for.

I arrived in New York City, at JFK airport on May 17, 2000. My parents call this my “Gotcha Day,” as in the day that they “got” me. “Gotcha Day” is a common practice among adopted kids and their families. This day serves as an important reminder of the moment that you entered their lives and officially became a part of their family. In terms of significance, it can be equated to a second birthday. May 17 will always hold a special place in my heart because it symbolizes the beginning of my journey into another world and a new life. I can briefly recall flashes or blurry fragments - like pieces of glass. I have been told that I spent the majority of the exhaustingly long plane ride hours sound asleep in my foster mom’s warm arms. At some point, the plane landed and my foster mom, whom I only know through pictures, carried me through the terminal. I do not recall the moment that I was transferred from one parent’s arms to another’s. At the time, I am sure that my six month year old brain could not possibly comprehend the significance of this exchange, but looking back, the gesture was much more than just a physical act.

The moment I was passed from my foster mother’s arms to my new parents, I had officially left behind one of the living reminders of my past life in South Korea. There is something bittersweet to be said about that now, but there is no use mourning what has already been lost. I do not remember the first time I looked up and saw my parent’s faces. The pictures depict my round, chubby, cheeks curved into a soft, toothless smile while I gaze adoringly into their eager eyes. Both my parents have the same glowing smile that radiates happiness and my father’s large hands gently cup the back of my tiny head. My mother’s hazel eyes are bright with excitement and the slight shiny gleam at the corners of eyes tell me all I need to know about the love she feels for me. I have never seen my father cry. Now, I consider it an impossible feat, but the photographs from that day in the airport show a side of my father that even I have yet to witness.



II. The ground shook beneath my feet and my world began to collapse

There comes a point in almost everyone's life when the foundations of the world begin to shift drastically and everything starts to change. The tectonic plates of your world finally collide and begin to shift, shattering whatever remained of the comfortable life you were once living. This moment occurred for me much earlier than I would have liked. I had always known that I was adopted. My parents did not hesitate to answer all of my relentless questions and never strayed from directly telling me that I was indeed "adopted." They visited my first grade classes, book in hand, to explain the nuances of what it means to be adopted in an attempt to raise awareness on adoption. Yet, my mind never connected the dots and I never considered the fact that the contents in that book related to me. I knew that my dark brown, almond-shaped eyes did not match those of wide-eyed and blue-gray features of my father. The yellow and olive undertones in my skin did not quite seem as they though they came from the same family as the paler, more pink undertones in my parents' complexion. As a young child, my understanding of the concept of adoption was simple. Although I grew with the word attached to me, I never bothered to understand what it meant. I simply accepted the fact that I was "adopted" without ever truly understanding or questioning it. I wore the label proudly as if it was etched into skin and never seemed to acknowledge the confused stares that pedestrians on the New York streets would throw my way when I was out with my parents. My naivety and blissful ignorance came at a price. That price was established when I finally inquired my parents about my birth-story.

When I was in second grade, I popped the question unexpectedly and the bluntness of it caught my parents by surprise. The tension in the room seemed thick enough to swallow the

three of us yet my tiny seven-year-old body seemed immune to the awkwardness. I positioned myself on a smooth, modern, dandelion-colored stool, hands pressed onto the top of the stool and eyes glancing up at their now creased faces. My mother sat adjacent to my father on the dark purple couch in our living room. The two of them held a silent conversation, their eyes silently pleading with one another to be the first to break the silence. Moments later, one of my parents began to explain what the word “adopted” meant in further detail and later shared the origins of my birth story.

“What is my Korean name?” I asked patiently, carefully observing the faded manila folder that sat in my mother’s lap. Her slim fingers gingerly pulled out a stapled packet of paper, a photo of my face at the top.

“Eun Seo¹. Shon Eun Seo” It means blessing.” She answered, glancing down at the paper to confirm before her kind eyes met mine and her lips curled into the a small smile. *Eun Seo*, I thought silently. The name sounded distant and nostalgic when I spoke it aloud but no new memories or images came to mind. The thought that the name was given to me by my birth mother made me feel closer to Korea than I had ever before, but nothing could settle the internal sea of unresolved grief that boiled inside me. I waited a few moments before deciding on another question to ask them. My parents held the same somber yet understanding look in their eyes as they sat, reveling in the quiet. When I took my next inhale of air before beginning to state my next question, their shoulders deflated significantly and I could almost feel their shared relief.

“How old was my Mom? What did she look like?” This question did not seem to excite them but faces showed no indication of surprise. “She was around 16 or 17 - very young for her age. When she had you, she didn’t feel like she could take care of you in the way she wanted. She had very little money, no job, and she was not married.” My father had answered this question. His tone was unreadable - like a document that had just been through a paper shredder - and I found myself trying to string back together the torn pieces in attempt to put the sentences back together. My mother shifted her body towards me so that I could see the packet she was reading off of. On the second page of the collection of documents was a photo of a woman that I had never seen before.

“That’s your mother, sweetie.” I stared at the photo, waiting for the tiny pixelated image to suddenly come to life and provide me with the all the answers I had spent my life searching for. Yet, nothing happened. The longer I stared at the picture, the further away I felt. I wanted to recognize her, *needed* to recognize her, but I did not. I was staring back at a stranger.

The information that they told me about adoption seemed to explain a lot of the weird glances that had become second nature to me. At first, my brain seemed to be fascinated by my the mysterious nature of my birth story and I interrogated my parents with such a stubbornness that should not be acceptable for second graders. However, at some point in their explanation, I realized what they were not saying; I was abandoned. Though they would never utter the phrase out loud nor did they go into the gritty specifics about how I was put into the adoption system, I suspected that I was not formally dropped on the doorsteps off an orphanage or an adoption agency. Although my birth mother only did so out of love and her desire for me to have a life that she could not provide for me, I could only focus on the fact that she had given me up. I became hyper-focused on this particular detail of my birth story and the thought of being left

¹ 은 (Eun) means kindness, mercy or charity. 서 (Seo) means felicitous or auspicious. Though I am not entirely sure about this translation. Meanings vary depending on whether the names are derived from hangul or hanja (different form of the Korean alphabet with characters similar to Mandarin). 손 (Shon/Son) is a common Korean surname

behind consumed me. Whatever reasoning behind it no longer mattered to me because the only thing I felt was sadness. My feelings of grief channeled into anger and I shouted something I cannot remember before storming up the stairs, my tee shirt covered in blotchy tear stains. I do not remember much after that except for the lingering question that the conversation left in my head: "Why didn't she want me?" I retreated to my bedroom where the familiar aqua-colored walls comforted me and reduced my sobs to silent cries. No synonym for "upset" could describe the physical and emotional ache that radiated throughout my body. Each drop of water that rolled down my cheeks stung of salt and parental betrayal. I felt heavy. The blood flowing through my veins suddenly felt foreign and each shaky breath that I struggled to take painfully reminded me that I did not *belong* - I was unwanted. I then came to the horrifying realization that if I was incapable of being wanted, then how could I ever be loved? Would I ever be loved? Is it possible? Who could love me? Would anyone want to? Thus, in many ways, my heart learned to break before it ever truly knew how to love.

III. Trust issues and crumpled-up tissues

Slam! The old, mahogany, wooden door of our brownstone stood before me, now closed and effectively preventing my ability to exit. Tonight, my parents could not stay behind with me and entertain my middle school shenanigans; they were going out to dinner. My legs were sprawled across the hardwood floors in front of the door and the back of my sleeves were permanently cupped around the circular edges of my face in distress. A strangled cry in the back of my throat tries to voice itself but my tongue is like sandpaper and the only thing that comes out is a hoarse whisper: "Come back.". My cheeks reminded me of sea glass in its beginning stages; rough and covered in scratches. Dried tear stains adorned my face as if they were newly developed scars. *I know that they will be back soon*, I tell myself. They have to. To be forgotten is an awful thing, but to be left behind is another. It is normal for many children to fear that their parents will forget about them. (Or at least that what I have been told). However, no one ever explained to me if it was "normal" to spend hours staring at the door handle, eyes brimming with tears, anxiously anticipating my parents' return home. I never had a firm understanding of what "normal" looked like, being adopted and all, but I was almost positive that my reaction to their leaving deviated slightly from typical childhood behavior. I wondered whether it was simply a childish fear of mine or if the anxiety stemmed from something deeper. My mind worried more about the latter. I realized later that what I feared most was not that my parents would leave; it was that they would never come back. For me, closed doors represented a kind of permanence, and I always feared the doors would never open again. The thought of being left behind still troubled me enough to send myself into a downward mental spiral, but the true cause of my anxiety lie in the fact that I was scared to be left alone and feel unwanted again. I never wanted those feelings to return. Separation anxiety plagued my adolescent years and, after a while, it became a part of me. A significantly large hole in my heart had blossomed into a deep well and my pent up feelings were stored there for safekeeping. By the age of nine, protective emotional walls had formed.

Eventually, those emotional walls deteriorated and my feelings of grief manifested themselves into pure anger. I am sure that many children reflect on their childhood and recall countless hurtful verbal exchanges with their parents and various temper tantrums. "Children are young and do not know any better," is what children or parents often say to excuse their poor behavior. I, however, do not classify my behavior as such, and would never think to dismiss it so

nonchalantly. As a young child, I was a hand grenade. The slightest touches or certain phrases - "What is making you so upset?" "How can we help?" - would set me off and left my parents attempting to deactivate me. Any conversation we had felt like a battlefield and my weapon of choice was always words. Vulnerability frightened me to no extent. Whenever the surface layers of my fury were stripped away, my mind panicked and my automatic defense mechanism of snark triggered itself into action. Often, the exchanges my parents and I had resembled a formal stand down, both parents raising their arms in surrender while attempting to talk me down. Despite my young age, my vocabulary was not as limited as it should have been. I hurled brutal insults at their faces, and I was probably the only child who openly cursed in front of the parents, despite the consequences. I knew what to say to disarm my parents and targeted their insecurities as parents: "You aren't even my real parents," "I hate you," "You don't love me," "I wish you never existed," and "I wish you had never adopted me." I would use whatever I could to my advantage; there were no limits. I blamed my mother and my father for every and any wrong doing that occurred in my life. Playing the victim was an easy role to fall into and it was even easier to pretend that they were the problem, not me.

As I child, I was undoubtedly cruel to my parents; to say otherwise would not only be foolish but a lie. The emotional hurricanes I created had them blindly navigating their way through with no safe place to hide, but their faith in me never staggered. If anyone were to ask me why I acted in such a way, I would lie and say that I did not know. The truth, of course, is that I do know. Admitting the truth is not so much shameful as it is painful. I had my parents walking on eggshells around me. On purpose. The two of them were forced to undergo trial after trial, continuously proving their love to me. I distanced myself farther and farther and incessantly pushed their buttons by challenging their every order, arguing on purpose, and having meltdowns in public. I wanted to see if I could ever break them; I wanted to test their commitment to me. They needed to prove their sincere affection and reassure me that I was not just a charity project. Every time we fought or I lashed out, it was a test to see if they would stay. Yet nothing I could do was ever enough to push them away; they loved me. I resisted their warm embrace in every way possible out of fear of becoming too attached. I told myself there was no point in getting attached if they were only going to leave one day. Nothing is ever permanent. Everything can become temporary. I still believe this to be true today. I am still afraid of being abandoned. Not just by my parents but by everyone: my friends, teachers, or future lovers. I live in constant fear that one day someone will decide that enough is enough and then they will no longer love me. People change and people leave. Love is not a constant emotional state, and it would be incredibly naive of me to think so at this point in my life. Yet, a part of me cannot help but hold onto that cherished naivety. I often find myself lying in bed, late at night, a million thoughts drifting in and out of mind. Pitch black is the only visible color and the plush duvet is wrapped around my shoulder, engulfing my body in a comforting cocoon. In the final seconds before I drift into the R.E.M stages of sleep, I sink further into the mattress and wish for a world where change does not exist and people never have to leave.



IV. To be or not to be

For reasons unbeknownst to me, Shakespeare has always seemed to be a reoccurring theme in my life. My name often reminds many people of the famous literary character, Portia, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. English teachers, Starbucks employees, and strangers on the street always seem to be delighted by this small tidbit of information. Unfortunately, the origin of my name does not have any correlation to Shakespeare. The story behind my name is not nearly as poetic, in fact, it is quite simple. I was named after my great grandmother Portia, on my mother's side, and my current grandmother whose name is also Portia. Regardless of whether or not I was named after one of his infamous characters, Shakespeare still generally applies to my life. Prince Hamlet's opening line, "To be or not to be..." in his renowned soliloquy has been a question that I have sought to answer throughout the course of my life. Growing up as an internationally adopted child has many disadvantages. During my preschool and middle school years, I was often interrogated with personal questions regarding my adoption such as "Where are you *really* from?", "What's your *real* name", "Do you ever miss your real parents?" "Is she your *real* sister?" Though I was never offended by these questions, I felt severe frustration at my peers' lack of understanding. When I interviewed my parents and asked them about some of the complications they were forced to deal with as adoptive parents, they shared my sentiments of frustration. My parents said, "At times you when you were younger, people would ask intrusive questions about adoption such as 'Are they real sisters,' 'What country is she from,' or 'How old was she when she was adopted?' These questions would be asked in front of you as if you would not understand or hear them. At times, this provoked questions or made you feel different. In addition, when you were in elementary school peers would ask you directly if you were adopted or if we were your real parents. These types of questions would create challenges for us as parents."

My childhood experience with adoption was an ongoing struggle for both my parents and myself. My mother and father were forced to deal with the aftermath of these intrusive questions as they typically caused me to question myself and my identity. Even at a young age, I was engaged in the process of self-revision and reflection. Often times, I felt incomplete, as if I were a circle that that was only half-drawn and had been erased many times prior. I struggled to find any place where I truly felt that I belonged. My parents always gave me the love and support that I needed, but I lacked a real community and a sense of belonging. I longed for a safe space where people knew and understood the experience of living between two cultures but not feeling as if they fully belonged to either. I longed for a past that never was and grieved for a loss that I did not know I was feeling. Authors David C. Pollock and Ruth. E Van Reken describe this emotional hollowness as a hidden type of loss that many cross-cultural kids experience. Pollock and Van Reken write "The problem is that in these types of losses, no one actually died or was divorced, nothing was physically stolen. Contrary to obvious losses, there are no markers, no rites of passage recognizing them as they occur - no recognized way to mourn. Yet, each hidden loss relates to the major human needs of belonging, of feeling we are significant to others and of being understood."²

As I aged, the questions became increasingly more direct. I often found myself being asked questions like "So what are you?" or being told blanket statements such as, "Oh, so you're

white then,” or “You’re not really Korean.” I never enjoyed being in the spotlight but being adopted gave many people the opportunity to scrutinize me and treat me as if I were a rare specimen under a microscope. My life often feels more public than private, and no answer that I can provide ever seems to satisfy these questions. Many times, the temptation of simply shouting “I don’t know!” crosses my mind, because truthfully I do not have the answer. How can they expect me to answer their questions about myself if even I do not know who I am yet?

These questions inspired me to delve deeper into myself and explore the nature of who I truly am. I wanted to examine the parts of myself that made me me. In the end, this reflective process only resulted in aggravation. I found that I did not know who I was and I was still unable to answer their questions. My knowledge on Korean culture is far more extensive than the average person, but it is still nowhere near enough to qualify myself as “Korean.” Despite the fact that I was raised in America by parents who both grew up Irish-Catholic households, I never felt culturally or fully “American” either. The majority of the time, I refer to myself as Korean-American because it seems to be a fair balance of the two, but I still question whether I am enough of either of those categories to identify as Korean-American. My parents could dress me in a ³한복, take me to Korean restaurants, or help me learn ⁴한글, but it is still not and will never be the same as living in or growing up in Korea. I have learned to accept the intersectionality of my identity and understand that this cultural divide is natural for many internationally adopted children. However, nothing can change the fact that I will never feel fully Korean nor American. I will always exist between two worlds without feeling like I belong to either one.

³ (Hanbok). A traditional Korean dress, commonly associated with the rich history of Korean culture. It is also featured in the photograph at the end of the paragraph.

⁴ (Hangul) The Korean alphabet. Hangul was created during the 15 century under King Sejong during the Chosun Dynasty. Hangul has been used every since.





V. The “what if” years

Alternate universes are often referred to as a pieces of fictional work that change or “alter” specific elements outside of what is canon in the universe that they are writing about. Scientists refer to this concept as “parallel universes.” Similarly, parallel universes are universes

that exist within our own universe but function separately as a sort of multi-dimensional world where alternate realities can occur. The basis of all these hypothetical scientific theories is that there is an infinite number of timelines in which you can exist simultaneously. In many of these timelines you do not exist, but in some you do. Theoretical physicist Michio Kaku elaborates on this concept further, “Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg likens this multiple universe theory to radio. All around you, there are hundreds of different radio waves being broadcast from distant stations. At any given instant, your office or car or living room is full of these radio waves. However, if you turn on a radio, you can listen to only one frequency at a time; these other frequencies have decohered and are no longer in phase with each other. Each station has a different energy, a different frequency. As a result, your radio can only be turned to one broadcast at a time. Likewise, in our universe we are "tuned" into the frequency that corresponds to physical reality. But there are an infinite number of parallel realities coexisting with us in the same room, although we cannot "tune into" them. Although these worlds are very much alike, each has a different energy. And because each world consists of trillions upon trillions of atoms, this means that the energy difference can be quite large. Since the frequency of these waves is proportional to their energy (by Planck's law), this means that the waves of each world vibrate at different frequencies and cannot interact anymore. For all intents and purposes, the waves of these various worlds do not interact or influence each other.”⁵ The differences between these different universes may be subtle or they could be drastically different. Thus, where the idea that there is “another you” that exists somewhere within these universes originates from. Except, if you were to stick to this theory, then there would be multiple versions of yourself all existing in separate worlds but in the same overall universe. While these types of nonsensical theories often cause others to panic and worry endlessly about the vastness of the world, alternate universes are sources of comfort for me. Although, I tend to be an obsessive over-thinker and worrier, these alternate or parallel universes give me the opportunity to explore my adoption in ways I never thought possible. I often imagine one of these alternate versions of myself sitting somewhere in a cafe in Seoul, sipping bubble tea out of a pastel-colored straw while studying for an upcoming exam. Not many people get to say that they spend a significant portion of their life daydreaming about a life unlived. It is not that I am discontent with the life I am living with now, it is more about the closure that I have never gotten to feel. I often fantasize about this hypothetical “what if” type of life that I would be living if I had never been adopted.

I do not have any photos of my biological mother nor do I remember anything from the short few months I spent in South Korea. This leaves a significant gap in my memory and does not allow room for closure. Thus, the only way I can visit Korea is through my imagination. I can only visualize what life is like in Korea through photos, Youtube videos, and articles. So, I imagine my own reality. I imagine speaking Korean perfectly; the intonation and nuances all pronounced with the fluidity of a native speaker without the awkward pauses and the foreign feeling in my tongue. I imagine multi-colored illuminated city streets and neon signs all in Hangul, small, communal meals with my family while we all kneel by the low wooden table, and various Kimchi dishes, rice cakes, and red bean pastries as we celebrate Chuseok⁶. While these scenarios may seem childlike and silly, they serve a purpose: they are my own way of coping

⁵ *Parallel Worlds: A Journey Through Creation, Higher Dimensions, and the Future of the Cosmos*

⁶ Chuseok translates to “Autumn Eve”. It is often referred to as Korean Thanksgiving. Chuseok is a three-day holiday that celebrates the major harvest season. Families usually travel from far and wide to celebrate with their family, share food and stories, and give back to their ancestors. It is a very important holiday in Korean culture.

with my adoption-related grief. My whole life has been based off a “what if” and a possibility. Therefore, it is only natural that I am curious about examining a life full of possibilities that were previously unexplored. I am still searching for this final piece of emotional closure, though I am unsure if I will ever find it. I guess I will just have to leave that to possibility.



VI. Home

What defines home? Where is home? These essential questions are thoughts that I have kept in the back of my mind throughout the process of writing this memoir. In the past, I would have simply defined home as “the house that you live in.” Now, I would argue that the definition of a home differs depending on the person and their life experience. Home cannot be simply defined in a few words or a sentence; it is much more complex. I previously considered home to be a physical place or manifestation, but I now view home as a concept or idea based on people and the environment. How a person defines a home relies on more than one factor; home is multi-faceted. Home depends on a person’s roots, location, and their sense of family. How can you define home without first defining what a family is? This is a question I still have yet to answer. For me in particular, my definition of home has fluctuated frequently.

As a child who was born out of the country and has moved from one place to another at a relatively young age, I had to be accustomed to adaptation. This might explain why transitioning from old locations to new ones are not as daunting for me as they are for others. It is a weird phenomenon for me because I am still deathly afraid of change because I believe that change fosters people leaving which can, in turn, lead to abandonment, another fear of mine. However, it has only recently occurred to me, I have a tendency to adapt faster than most. It came up at a conversation at dinner one night with my parents. Much to my surprise, they informed me that I was “very adaptable.” Upon hearing this, I was shocked. The thought had truly never occurred to me before. In fact, I always thought that my resistance towards change made it impossible for me to be adapt anywhere. However, the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Compared to my peers, I have tended to adjust to new locations and lifestyles faster. I have undergone many transitions: living on campus at a boarding school, sleep-away camp, and living 2,441 miles away from home. I have adjusted to various family structures and dynamics. I have dealt with death, depression, and loneliness. Perhaps the reason that I am so accustomed to these changes is because I have never felt at home in any one place, but multiple places.

Home is many places. When I think of home, I think of a traditional brownstone on East 93rd street, and late-night, take-out dessert pizza eaten on the rug of the second floor the night that we moved in. I think of a camp in the Poconos Mountains; crowded wooden cabins, campfires, bittersweet goodbyes, and color wars. I think of the old apartment building on the Upper East Side and cheap Chinese steamed vegetable dumplings. I think of serene, lazy afternoons spent lounging on the lawn with friends, while the California sun illuminates my cheekbones and highlights the metal buttons on my light-washed denim overalls. Home has never been about the location. It has always been about the people and the environment. Home is not only a place or a person. Home is Oxbow. Home is Korea. Home is my mother and father. Home is New York City. Home is my sister. Home is Pennsylvania. Home is Martha’s Vineyard.

Home is anywhere or anytime I feel safe, loved, and supported.

Home is the closure that I have so desperately spent my life trying to find.

Home is my family.





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Portia Hubregsen
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Multiplicity : A Personal Memoir of What It Feels Like to Exist Between Two Worlds

Before beginning to write this memoir, I extensively researched the topic of adoption. I discovered more than I thought was possible about the legal process of domestic and international adoption. Additionally, I looked into the psychology behind adoption stigma and why adopted kids tend to have emotional attachment issues. I consulted many resources about the history of adoption in South Korea and why the laws there regarding inter-country adoption have changed. I also read various stories and poems from the perspectives of Korean-American adoptees. At the end of my research, I had compiled a lengthy eighteen pages (single-spaced) of typed research notes, including excerpts from poems, graphs, statistics. However, it is not the amount of research that I have conducted that separates my story from many others - it is the rawness. While writing this narrative, I tried to present the most honest version of my story. The honesty presented in the memoir is not meant to shine a negative light on adoption or non-traditional family structures; it is simply a written representation of my own experience with adoption and how it has shaped me as person. The purpose of writing this story was not to craft a detailed narrative, but to rewrite the narrative that I had been assigned from birth and finally retell my personal story.

Acknowledgements

Writing this memoir has been an emotionally challenging experience and I would like to formally express my gratitude to all the people who have assisted me throughout this personal process. I would like to express my great appreciation to all the faculty at the Oxbow School for supporting me and challenging me to constantly push myself out of my comfort zone. I would like offer my special thanks to Meghan Broughton and Chris Thorson for guiding me in my creative process, specifically in assisting me in formalizing my ideas and expressing my thoughts in the most clear format. I am particularly grateful to Jennifer Jordan for taking the time to edit all my first, polished, and final drafts and helping it become the developed narrative that is now. I would also like to express my greatest appreciation to Sharon and Andrew Hubregsen for their help in the collection of my research data, specifically the photos provided and the interview responses. I would like to thank Sharon and Andrew Hubregsen again for their endless guidance, assistance, support, and encouragement to pursue topics that I am the most invested in.

Introduction

I was born in Seoul, South Korea on December, 19, 2000. This is one of the few things that I have always known for sure to be true. In my seventeen years of life, I have not had the luxury of knowing such things- my childhood had been full of loose ends and blank spaces. The vast majority of my life has been defined by unanswered questions, ghosts of the past, and a long-lost longing for something that I never had. Why? I am adopted. That sentence itself has been a source of emotional turmoil for me. To be able to type that statement now with such conviction is something that I could have never seen myself doing during my early adolescent years. Although I have now reached the point in my life that I am far more comfortable with my adoption, the emotional process of understanding what it means to be adopted is something that still haunts me today. In writing this memoir, I hope to be able to recover some of the tender emotions that I had spent so much of my childhood trying to bury. I want to be able to feel the emotions that I did not allow myself to feel when I was younger. The process of writing this story is one of emotional healing, recovery, and resolution. There is not one, all-encompassing end goal for this narrative except for moving forward in my process of self-reflection. If I had to explain why I wrote this memoir, I would say that I want to write something that is solely for myself. I want to create a piece of work that is uniquely and selfishly mine, in the sense that the story's main focus is myself, and unapologetically so. I want to be able to effectively express the conflicted sentiments that have burdened me when I was a child in a way that an audience could understand. Simply put, this memoir is not a story about adoption. It is a story about *my* adoption.

Chapters:

I. I learned how to fly before I could walk

A breath of fresh air. That is how most children's lives begin. Their primal noises are guttural screams; as they take their first much-needed gulp of air, they enter the world. Their lives began in a hospital. I would like to say that is how my life began as well, but truthfully I

was born in the airport. Well -not exactly- but that is how I recall my entrance into the world. My earliest memories take place in the overcrowded and busy terminals of the John F. Kennedy airport. I never knew what hospital I was born at, let alone the time of birth. I am still unsure of how much of this “memory” is my own recollection and how much of it is a reimagination of what I have been told happened. A large majority of my memories are based off of photographs. Many of my childhood memories have been reinforced through the extensive collection of photos my parents have collected. Without photographs, I would have little evidence of any of my previous life before I arrived at the airport and became a citizen of the United States. I would like to believe that short period of time that I spent in Korea was somewhat pleasant, but a few meager photographs do little to provide that reassurance and I am still left with a large gap of time unaccounted for.

I arrived in New York City, at JFK airport on May 17, 2000. My parents call this my “Gotcha Day,” as in the day that they “got” me. “Gotcha Day” is a common practice among adopted kids and their families. This day serves as an important reminder of the moment that you entered their lives and officially became a part of their family. In terms of significance, it can be equated to a second birthday. May 17 will always hold a special place in my heart because it symbolizes the beginning of my journey into another world and a new life. I can briefly recall flashes or blurry fragments - like pieces of glass. I have been told that I spent the majority of the exhaustingly long plane ride hours sound asleep in my foster mom’s warm arms. At some point, the plane landed and my foster mom, whom I only know through pictures, carried me through the terminal. I do not recall the moment that I was transferred from one parent’s arms to another’s. At the time, I am sure that my six month year old brain could not possibly comprehend the significance of this exchange, but looking back, the gesture was much more than just a physical act.

The moment I was passed from my foster mother’s arms to my new parents, I had officially left behind one of the living reminders of my past life in South Korea. There is something bittersweet to be said about that now, but there is no use mourning what has already been lost. I do not remember the first time I looked up and saw my parent’s faces. The pictures depict my round, chubby, cheeks curved into a soft, toothless smile while I gaze adoringly into their eager eyes. Both my parents have the same glowing smile that radiates happiness and my father’s large hands gently cup the back of my tiny head. My mother’s hazel eyes are bright with excitement and the slight shiny gleam at the corners of eyes tell me all I need to know about the love she feels for me. I have never seen my father cry. Now, I consider it an impossible feat, but the photographs from that day in the airport show a side of my father that even I have yet to witness.



II. The ground shook beneath my feet and my world began to collapse

There comes a point in almost everyone's life when the foundations of the world begin to shift drastically and everything starts to change. The tectonic plates of your world finally collide and begin to shift, shattering whatever remained of the comfortable life you were once living. This moment occurred for me much earlier than I would have liked. I had always known that I was adopted. My parents did not hesitate to answer all of my relentless questions and never strayed from directly telling me that I was indeed "adopted." They visited my first grade classes, book in hand, to explain the nuances of what it means to be adopted in an attempt to raise awareness on adoption. Yet, my mind never connected the dots and I never considered the fact that the contents in that book related to me. I knew that my dark brown, almond-shaped eyes did not match those of wide-eyed and blue-gray features of my father. The yellow and olive undertones in my skin did not quite seem as they though they came from the same family as the paler, more pink undertones in my parents' complexion. As a young child, my understanding of the concept of adoption was simple. Although I grew with the word attached to me, I never bothered to understand what it meant. I simply accepted the fact that I was "adopted" without ever truly understanding or questioning it. I wore the label proudly as if it was etched into skin and never seemed to acknowledge the confused stares that pedestrians on the New York streets would throw my way when I was out with my parents. My naivety and blissful ignorance came at a price. That price was established when I finally inquired my parents about my birth-story.

When I was in second grade, I popped the question unexpectedly and the bluntness of it caught my parents by surprise. The tension in the room seemed thick enough to swallow the

three of us yet my tiny seven-year-old body seemed immune to the awkwardness. I positioned myself on a smooth, modern, dandelion-colored stool, hands pressed onto the top of the stool and eyes glancing up at their now creased faces. My mother sat adjacent to my father on the dark purple couch in our living room. The two of them held a silent conversation, their eyes silently pleading with one another to be the first to break the silence. Moments later, one of my parents began to explain what the word “adopted” meant in further detail and later shared the origins of my birth story.

“What is my Korean name?” I asked patiently, carefully observing the faded manila folder that sat in my mother’s lap. Her slim fingers gingerly pulled out a stapled packet of paper, a photo of my face at the top.

“Eun Seo¹. Shon Eun Seo” It means blessing.” She answered, glancing down at the paper to confirm before her kind eyes met mine and her lips curled into the a small smile. *Eun Seo*, I thought silently. The name sounded distant and nostalgic when I spoke it aloud but no new memories or images came to mind. The thought that the name was given to me by my birth mother made me feel closer to Korea than I had ever before, but nothing could settle the internal sea of unresolved grief that boiled inside me. I waited a few moments before deciding on another question to ask them. My parents held the same somber yet understanding look in their eyes as they sat, reveling in the quiet. When I took my next inhale of air before beginning to state my next question, their shoulders deflated significantly and I could almost feel their shared relief.

“How old was my Mom? What did she look like?” This question did not seem to excite them but faces showed no indication of surprise. “She was around 16 or 17 - very young for her age. When she had you, she didn’t feel like she could take care of you in the way she wanted. She had very little money, no job, and she was not married.” My father had answered this question. His tone was unreadable - like a document that had just been through a paper shredder - and I found myself trying to string back together the torn pieces in attempt to put the sentences back together. My mother shifted her body towards me so that I could see the packet she was reading off of. On the second page of the collection of documents was a photo of a woman that I had never seen before.

“That’s your mother, sweetie.” I stared at the photo, waiting for the tiny pixelated image to suddenly come to life and provide me with the all the answers I had spent my life searching for. Yet, nothing happened. The longer I stared at the picture, the further away I felt. I wanted to recognize her, *needed* to recognize her, but I did not. I was staring back at a stranger.

The information that they told me about adoption seemed to explain a lot of the weird glances that had become second nature to me. At first, my brain seemed to be fascinated by my the mysterious nature of my birth story and I interrogated my parents with such a stubbornness that should not be acceptable for second graders. However, at some point in their explanation, I realized what they were not saying; I was abandoned. Though they would never utter the phrase out loud nor did they go into the gritty specifics about how I was put into the adoption system, I suspected that I was not formally dropped on the doorsteps off an orphanage or an adoption agency. Although my birth mother only did so out of love and her desire for me to have a life that she could not provide for me, I could only focus on the fact that she had given me up. I became hyper-focused on this particular detail of my birth story and the thought of being left

¹ 은 (Eun) means kindness, mercy or charity. 서 (Seo) means felicitous or auspicious. Though I am not entirely sure about this translation. Meanings vary depending on whether the names are derived from hangul or hanja (different form of the Korean alphabet with characters similar to Mandarin). 손 (Shon/Son) is a common Korean surname

behind consumed me. Whatever reasoning behind it no longer mattered to me because the only thing I felt was sadness. My feelings of grief channeled into anger and I shouted something I cannot remember before storming up the stairs, my tee shirt covered in blotchy tear stains. I do not remember much after that except for the lingering question that the conversation left in my head: "Why didn't she want me?" I retreated to my bedroom where the familiar aqua-colored walls comforted me and reduced my sobs to silent cries. No synonym for "upset" could describe the physical and emotional ache that radiated throughout my body. Each drop of water that rolled down my cheeks stung of salt and parental betrayal. I felt heavy. The blood flowing through my veins suddenly felt foreign and each shaky breath that I struggled to take painfully reminded me that I did not *belong* - I was unwanted. I then came to the horrifying realization that if I was incapable of being wanted, then how could I ever be loved? Would I ever be loved? Is it possible? Who could love me? Would anyone want to? Thus, in many ways, my heart learned to break before it ever truly knew how to love.

III. Trust issues and crumpled-up tissues

Slam! The old, mahogany, wooden door of our brownstone stood before me, now closed and effectively preventing my ability to exit. Tonight, my parents could not stay behind with me and entertain my middle school shenanigans; they were going out to dinner. My legs were sprawled across the hardwood floors in front of the door and the back of my sleeves were permanently cupped around the circular edges of my face in distress. A strangled cry in the back of my throat tries to voice itself but my tongue is like sandpaper and the only thing that comes out is a hoarse whisper: "Come back.". My cheeks reminded me of sea glass in its beginning stages; rough and covered in scratches. Dried tear stains adorned my face as if they were newly developed scars. *I know that they will be back soon*, I tell myself. They have to. To be forgotten is an awful thing, but to be left behind is another. It is normal for many children to fear that their parents will forget about them. (Or at least that what I have been told). However, no one ever explained to me if it was "normal" to spend hours staring at the door handle, eyes brimming with tears, anxiously anticipating my parents' return home. I never had a firm understanding of what "normal" looked like, being adopted and all, but I was almost positive that my reaction to their leaving deviated slightly from typical childhood behavior. I wondered whether it was simply a childish fear of mine or if the anxiety stemmed from something deeper. My mind worried more about the latter. I realized later that what I feared most was not that my parents would leave; it was that they would never come back. For me, closed doors represented a kind of permanence, and I always feared the doors would never open again. The thought of being left behind still troubled me enough to send myself into a downward mental spiral, but the true cause of my anxiety lie in the fact that I was scared to be left alone and feel unwanted again. I never wanted those feelings to return. Separation anxiety plagued my adolescent years and, after a while, it became a part of me. A significantly large hole in my heart had blossomed into a deep well and my pent up feelings were stored there for safekeeping. By the age of nine, protective emotional walls had formed.

Eventually, those emotional walls deteriorated and my feelings of grief manifested themselves into pure anger. I am sure that many children reflect on their childhood and recall countless hurtful verbal exchanges with their parents and various temper tantrums. "Children are young and do not know any better," is what children or parents often say to excuse their poor behavior. I, however, do not classify my behavior as such, and would never think to dismiss it so

nonchalantly. As a young child, I was a hand grenade. The slightest touches or certain phrases - "What is making you so upset?" "How can we help?" - would set me off and left my parents attempting to deactivate me. Any conversation we had felt like a battlefield and my weapon of choice was always words. Vulnerability frightened me to no extent. Whenever the surface layers of my fury were stripped away, my mind panicked and my automatic defense mechanism of snark triggered itself into action. Often, the exchanges my parents and I had resembled a formal stand down, both parents raising their arms in surrender while attempting to talk me down. Despite my young age, my vocabulary was not as limited as it should have been. I hurled brutal insults at their faces, and I was probably the only child who openly cursed in front of the parents, despite the consequences. I knew what to say to disarm my parents and targeted their insecurities as parents: "You aren't even my real parents," "I hate you," "You don't love me," "I wish you never existed," and "I wish you had never adopted me." I would use whatever I could to my advantage; there were no limits. I blamed my mother and my father for every and any wrong doing that occurred in my life. Playing the victim was an easy role to fall into and it was even easier to pretend that they were the problem, not me.

As I child, I was undoubtedly cruel to my parents; to say otherwise would not only be foolish but a lie. The emotional hurricanes I created had them blindly navigating their way through with no safe place to hide, but their faith in me never staggered. If anyone were to ask me why I acted in such a way, I would lie and say that I did not know. The truth, of course, is that I do know. Admitting the truth is not so much shameful as it is painful. I had my parents walking on eggshells around me. On purpose. The two of them were forced to undergo trial after trial, continuously proving their love to me. I distanced myself farther and farther and incessantly pushed their buttons by challenging their every order, arguing on purpose, and having meltdowns in public. I wanted to see if I could ever break them; I wanted to test their commitment to me. They needed to prove their sincere affection and reassure me that I was not just a charity project. Every time we fought or I lashed out, it was a test to see if they would stay. Yet nothing I could do was ever enough to push them away; they loved me. I resisted their warm embrace in every way possible out of fear of becoming too attached. I told myself there was no point in getting attached if they were only going to leave one day. Nothing is ever permanent. Everything can become temporary. I still believe this to be true today. I am still afraid of being abandoned. Not just by my parents but by everyone: my friends, teachers, or future lovers. I live in constant fear that one day someone will decide that enough is enough and then they will no longer love me. People change and people leave. Love is not a constant emotional state, and it would be incredibly naive of me to think so at this point in my life. Yet, a part of me cannot help but hold onto that cherished naivety. I often find myself lying in bed, late at night, a million thoughts drifting in and out of mind. Pitch black is the only visible color and the plush duvet is wrapped around my shoulder, engulfing my body in a comforting cocoon. In the final seconds before I drift into the R.E.M stages of sleep, I sink further into the mattress and wish for a world where change does not exist and people never have to leave.



IV. To be or not to be

For reasons unbeknownst to me, Shakespeare has always seemed to be a reoccurring theme in my life. My name often reminds many people of the famous literary character, Portia, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. English teachers, Starbucks employees, and strangers on the street always seem to be delighted by this small tidbit of information. Unfortunately, the origin of my name does not have any correlation to Shakespeare. The story behind my name is not nearly as poetic, in fact, it is quite simple. I was named after my great grandmother Portia, on my mother's side, and my current grandmother whose name is also Portia. Regardless of whether or not I was named after one of his infamous characters, Shakespeare still generally applies to my life. Prince Hamlet's opening line, "To be or not to be..." in his renowned soliloquy has been a question that I have sought to answer throughout the course of my life. Growing up as an internationally adopted child has many disadvantages. During my preschool and middle school years, I was often interrogated with personal questions regarding my adoption such as "Where are you *really* from?", "What's your *real* name", "Do you ever miss your real parents?" "Is she your *real* sister?" Though I was never offended by these questions, I felt severe frustration at my peers' lack of understanding. When I interviewed my parents and asked them about some of the complications they were forced to deal with as adoptive parents, they shared my sentiments of frustration. My parents said, "At times you when you were younger, people would ask intrusive questions about adoption such as 'Are they real sisters,' 'What country is she from,' or 'How old was she when she was adopted?' These questions would be asked in front of you as if you would not understand or hear them. At times, this provoked questions or made you feel different. In addition, when you were in elementary school peers would ask you directly if you were adopted or if we were your real parents. These types of questions would create challenges for us as parents."

My childhood experience with adoption was an ongoing struggle for both my parents and myself. My mother and father were forced to deal with the aftermath of these intrusive questions as they typically caused me to question myself and my identity. Even at a young age, I was engaged in the process of self-revision and reflection. Often times, I felt incomplete, as if I were a circle that that was only half-drawn and had been erased many times prior. I struggled to find any place where I truly felt that I belonged. My parents always gave me the love and support that I needed, but I lacked a real community and a sense of belonging. I longed for a safe space where people knew and understood the experience of living between two cultures but not feeling as if they fully belonged to either. I longed for a past that never was and grieved for a loss that I did not know I was feeling. Authors David C. Pollock and Ruth. E Van Reken describe this emotional hollowness as a hidden type of loss that many cross-cultural kids experience. Pollock and Van Reken write "The problem is that in these types of losses, no one actually died or was divorced, nothing was physically stolen. Contrary to obvious losses, there are no markers, no rites of passage recognizing them as they occur - no recognized way to mourn. Yet, each hidden loss relates to the major human needs of belonging, of feeling we are significant to others and of being understood."²

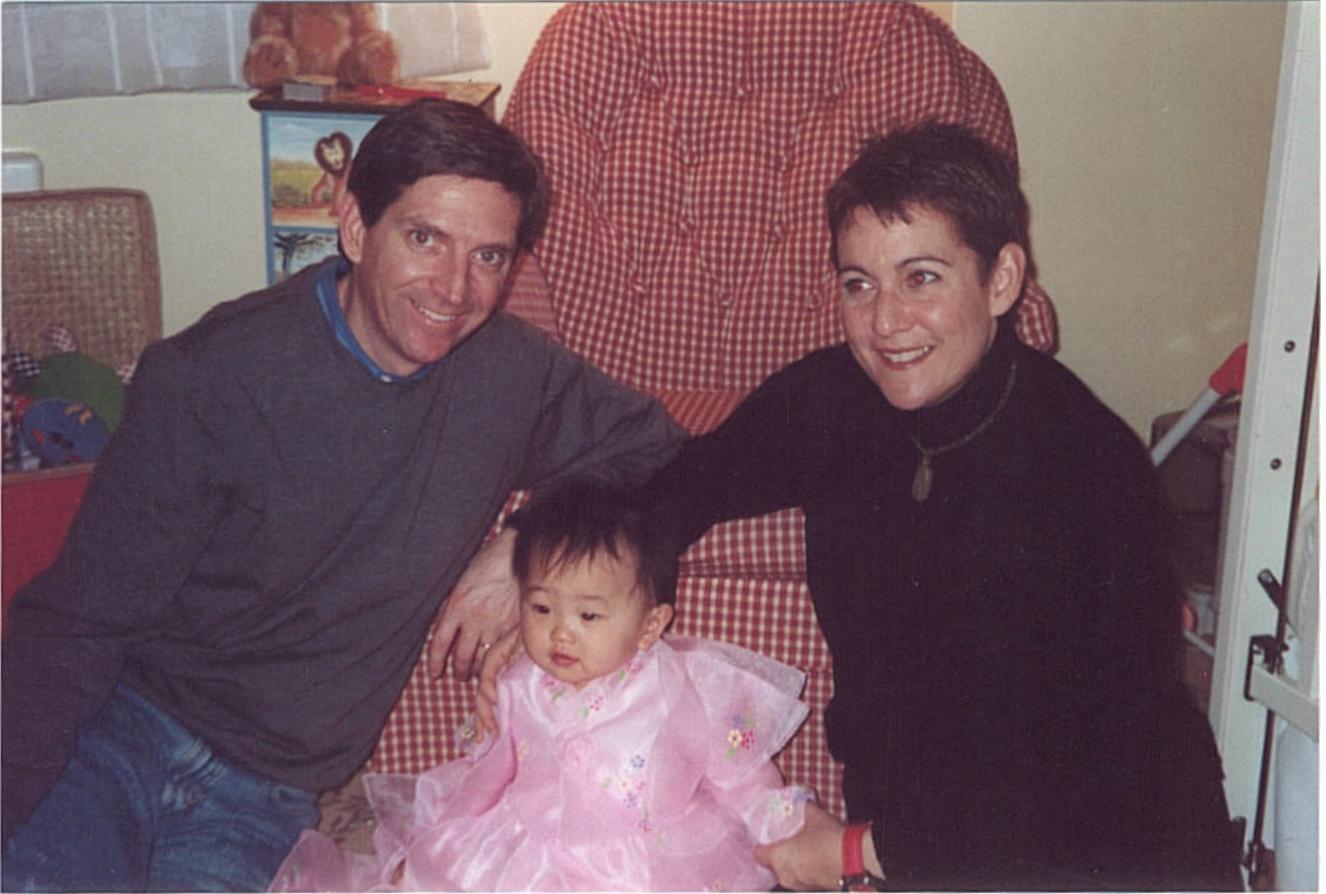
As I aged, the questions became increasingly more direct. I often found myself being asked questions like "So what are you?" or being told blanket statements such as, "Oh, so you're

white then,” or “You’re not really Korean.” I never enjoyed being in the spotlight but being adopted gave many people the opportunity to scrutinize me and treat me as if I were a rare specimen under a microscope. My life often feels more public than private, and no answer that I can provide ever seems to satisfy these questions. Many times, the temptation of simply shouting “I don’t know!” crosses my mind, because truthfully I do not have the answer. How can they expect me to answer their questions about myself if even I do not know who I am yet?

These questions inspired me to delve deeper into myself and explore the nature of who I truly am. I wanted to examine the parts of myself that made me me. In the end, this reflective process only resulted in aggravation. I found that I did not know who I was and I was still unable to answer their questions. My knowledge on Korean culture is far more extensive than the average person, but it is still nowhere near enough to qualify myself as “Korean.” Despite the fact that I was raised in America by parents who both grew up Irish-Catholic households, I never felt culturally or fully “American” either. The majority of the time, I refer to myself as Korean-American because it seems to be a fair balance of the two, but I still question whether I am enough of either of those categories to identify as Korean-American. My parents could dress me in a ³한복, take me to Korean restaurants, or help me learn ⁴한글, but it is still not and will never be the same as living in or growing up in Korea. I have learned to accept the intersectionality of my identity and understand that this cultural divide is natural for many internationally adopted children. However, nothing can change the fact that I will never feel fully Korean nor American. I will always exist between two worlds without feeling like I belong to either one.

³ (Hanbok). A traditional Korean dress, commonly associated with the rich history of Korean culture. It is also featured in the photograph at the end of the paragraph.

⁴ (Hangul) The Korean alphabet. Hangul was created during the 15 century under King Sejong during the Chosun Dynasty. Hangul has been used every since.





V. The “what if” years

Alternate universes are often referred to as a pieces of fictional work that change or “alter” specific elements outside of what is canon in the universe that they are writing about. Scientists refer to this concept as “parallel universes.” Similarly, parallel universes are universes

that exist within our own universe but function separately as a sort of multi-dimensional world where alternate realities can occur. The basis of all these hypothetical scientific theories is that there is an infinite number of timelines in which you can exist simultaneously. In many of these timelines you do not exist, but in some you do. Theoretical physicist Michio Kaku elaborates on this concept further, “Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg likens this multiple universe theory to radio. All around you, there are hundreds of different radio waves being broadcast from distant stations. At any given instant, your office or car or living room is full of these radio waves. However, if you turn on a radio, you can listen to only one frequency at a time; these other frequencies have decohered and are no longer in phase with each other. Each station has a different energy, a different frequency. As a result, your radio can only be turned to one broadcast at a time. Likewise, in our universe we are "tuned" into the frequency that corresponds to physical reality. But there are an infinite number of parallel realities coexisting with us in the same room, although we cannot "tune into" them. Although these worlds are very much alike, each has a different energy. And because each world consists of trillions upon trillions of atoms, this means that the energy difference can be quite large. Since the frequency of these waves is proportional to their energy (by Planck's law), this means that the waves of each world vibrate at different frequencies and cannot interact anymore. For all intents and purposes, the waves of these various worlds do not interact or influence each other.”⁵ The differences between these different universes may be subtle or they could be drastically different. Thus, where the idea that there is “another you” that exists somewhere within these universes originates from. Except, if you were to stick to this theory, then there would be multiple versions of yourself all existing in separate worlds but in the same overall universe. While these types of nonsensical theories often cause others to panic and worry endlessly about the vastness of the world, alternate universes are sources of comfort for me. Although, I tend to be an obsessive over-thinker and worrier, these alternate or parallel universes give me the opportunity to explore my adoption in ways I never thought possible. I often imagine one of these alternate versions of myself sitting somewhere in a cafe in Seoul, sipping bubble tea out of a pastel-colored straw while studying for an upcoming exam. Not many people get to say that they spend a significant portion of their life daydreaming about a life unlived. It is not that I am discontent with the life I am living with now, it is more about the closure that I have never gotten to feel. I often fantasize about this hypothetical “what if” type of life that I would be living if I had never been adopted.

I do not have any photos of my biological mother nor do I remember anything from the short few months I spent in South Korea. This leaves a significant gap in my memory and does not allow room for closure. Thus, the only way I can visit Korea is through my imagination. I can only visualize what life is like in Korea through photos, Youtube videos, and articles. So, I imagine my own reality. I imagine speaking Korean perfectly; the intonation and nuances all pronounced with the fluidity of a native speaker without the awkward pauses and the foreign feeling in my tongue. I imagine multi-colored illuminated city streets and neon signs all in Hangul, small, communal meals with my family while we all kneel by the low wooden table, and various Kimchi dishes, rice cakes, and red bean pastries as we celebrate Chuseok⁶. While these scenarios may seem childlike and silly, they serve a purpose: they are my own way of coping

⁵ *Parallel Worlds: A Journey Through Creation, Higher Dimensions, and the Future of the Cosmos*

⁶ Chuseok translates to “Autumn Eve”. It is often referred to as Korean Thanksgiving. Chuseok is a three-day holiday that celebrates the major harvest season. Families usually travel from far and wide to celebrate with their family, share food and stories, and give back to their ancestors. It is a very important holiday in Korean culture.

with my adoption-related grief. My whole life has been based off a “what if” and a possibility. Therefore, it is only natural that I am curious about examining a life full of possibilities that were previously unexplored. I am still searching for this final piece of emotional closure, though I am unsure if I will ever find it. I guess I will just have to leave that to possibility.



VI. Home

What defines home? Where is home? These essential questions are thoughts that I have kept in the back of my mind throughout the process of writing this memoir. In the past, I would have simply defined home as “the house that you live in.” Now, I would argue that the definition of a home differs depending on the person and their life experience. Home cannot be simply defined in a few words or a sentence; it is much more complex. I previously considered home to be a physical place or manifestation, but I now view home as a concept or idea based on people and the environment. How a person defines a home relies on more than one factor; home is multi-faceted. Home depends on a person’s roots, location, and their sense of family. How can you define home without first defining what a family is? This is a question I still have yet to answer. For me in particular, my definition of home has fluctuated frequently.

As a child who was born out of the country and has moved from one place to another at a relatively young age, I had to be accustomed to adaptation. This might explain why transitioning from old locations to new ones are not as daunting for me as they are for others. It is a weird phenomenon for me because I am still deathly afraid of change because I believe that change fosters people leaving which can, in turn, lead to abandonment, another fear of mine. However, it has only recently occurred to me, I have a tendency to adapt faster than most. It came up at a conversation at dinner one night with my parents. Much to my surprise, they informed me that I was “very adaptable.” Upon hearing this, I was shocked. The thought had truly never occurred to me before. In fact, I always thought that my resistance towards change made it impossible for me to be adapt anywhere. However, the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Compared to my peers, I have tended to adjust to new locations and lifestyles faster. I have undergone many transitions: living on campus at a boarding school, sleep-away camp, and living 2,441 miles away from home. I have adjusted to various family structures and dynamics. I have dealt with death, depression, and loneliness. Perhaps the reason that I am so accustomed to these changes is because I have never felt at home in any one place, but multiple places.

Home is many places. When I think of home, I think of a traditional brownstone on East 93rd street, and late-night, take-out dessert pizza eaten on the rug of the second floor the night that we moved in. I think of a camp in the Poconos Mountains; crowded wooden cabins, campfires, bittersweet goodbyes, and color wars. I think of the old apartment building on the Upper East Side and cheap Chinese steamed vegetable dumplings. I think of serene, lazy afternoons spent lounging on the lawn with friends, while the California sun illuminates my cheekbones and highlights the metal buttons on my light-washed denim overalls. Home has never been about the location. It has always been about the people and the environment. Home is not only a place or a person. Home is Oxbow. Home is Korea. Home is my mother and father. Home is New York City. Home is my sister. Home is Pennsylvania. Home is Martha’s Vineyard.

Home is anywhere or anytime I feel safe, loved, and supported.

Home is the closure that I have so desperately spent my life trying to find.

Home is my family.





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