



Wanted

Juni Desireé

When I introduced my sister to a friend, my friend laughed and said, 'No.'

My sister nodded, and my friend looked from me to my sister to me again. Her eyes narrowed as a half-smile pulled the left side of her lips up at the corner. She looked at us as if we were playing a prank on her.

'Yes, we're sisters,' I said, trying to help her out.

It reminded me that my sister and I don't look alike. We forget because we don't see a different race when we look at each other; we see family.

Since I look different, not only to the rest of my family but to most of the people in neighbourhood, school, country, I've always known I was adopted. My parents were always open about it: I was born on September 8, 1985, in South Korea. My mum and sister flew over to get me and brought me home to Australia where Dad and my brother were waiting. I was four months old. That was everything I knew about my adoption for the first twenty years of my life. Apparently when I cried and wouldn't stop, Dad joked that they should stuff me in a jiffy bag and send me back. Mum wasn't impressed.

Websites and brochures often have an answers-to-frequently-asked-questions section for businesses and organisations. I feel like I need one for me whenever people find out I was adopted.

One of the first questions I get is: ‘So, where are you from?’ If I was just answering that question, I’d say Melbourne, but I know they’re really asking a different question: ‘Why do you look the way you do?’

After I tell them I was adopted from South Korea, I usually get a question like: ‘Do you know your real parents?’ ‘Real’ might be a word others need, but I don’t. My parents are my parents — they are the ones who raised me. I don’t know my biological parents.

People might ask me: ‘What nationality is your family?’ They’re all Aussie. And that’s why I’m Aussie. When people refer to me as South Korean, I feel like they’re believing a lie and I have to hold back the urge to correct them. I was born in South Korea and my biological parents are South Korean, but I’m Aussie because I was raised in Australia by Aussie parents. So when people ask if I’ve been back to my birth country or if I want to go back, my answer is no.

‘It’s just another country on the map,’ I say. ‘If I’m going to travel, I want to see Australia first.’ And after Australia I’d love to go to somewhere tropical with aqua beaches because I’m a summer girl.

I told this to a lady I met a few years ago, and she told me her husband was adopted. She said that when he went to his birth country he found his roots and identity. She suggested it would be good for me to visit my birth country to find my roots and identity. For a second, I wondered if I should book a ticket to South Korea, but then I thought she didn’t know me at all.

Those who know adoption isn’t a taboo topic for me might ask: ‘Aren’t you curious to know more?’ Again, my answer is no. It may change in the future, but I have no questions because I’ve always known all I need to know.

When Mum gave me my adoption files when I was around twenty, I felt no need to read them. I put them in the bottom drawer of my filing cabinet and forgot about them. I had no interest in them.

When I found them a year later while I was cleaning my room, I thought I may as well check them out as a form of procrastination. I sat on my bedroom floor, spread the files on the carpet and sifted through the papers. There were interviews with my parents, booklets about cross-cultural adoption, social history papers, and handwritten notes.

The Social History papers recorded my admission to a Child Welfare Society:

Biological mother: eighteen and middle school graduated. Biological father: twenty and high school graduated. Marital status: unmarried couple.

Siblings: none.

Child status: orphan.

After graduation from middle school, bio-mother met bio-father Oct. '84, and she dated with him. But they came to quarrel as they could not accord in their different dispositions and ideas. So bio-mother, after much consideration, was parted from bio-father. But she got to know her pregnant very late, came to Pusan-city May. '85, resided at her friend's house. She gave birth to her baby on Sep. 8, 1985. Then she thought she could not raise her baby at all, as an unmarried mother with no means to earn her living, and that it would be good for the baby to be adopted and brought up in a family with much love. So she referred the baby to this Agency Pusan branch on Sep. 9, 1985.

The last thing the Social History papers recorded was the social worker's recommendation:

Eun Hee is a one-month and eight-day-old Korean girl. We hope she will be soon adopted to a family that would take care of her with much love, and grow more happily.

There were a bunch of letters recording the adoption process and I was able to piece together a rough timeline.

Department of Community Welfare Services, Victoria

Dear Mr. and Mrs. H.,

Thank-you for your interest in adopting a child from overseas.

An initial meeting for couples wishing to adopt children from overseas is held approximately every two months. This meeting provides couples with information about Inte-Country Adoption and the application forms are made available. The next meeting is in February/March.

Department of Community Welfare Services, Victoria,
2/4/85

Dear Mr. and Mrs. H.,

We wish to advise that we have received your application form and your names have been entered on the Inter-Country Adoption Waiting List.

Department of Community Welfare Services, Victoria

Dear Mr. and Mrs. H.,

We are arranging for Medical Reports, References and Police Checks to be sent out. When we have received these documents together with your current X-ray Certificates your file will be forwarded to International Social Services for allocation to the Social Worker who will carry out your assessment.

International Social Service

Dear Mr. and Mrs. H.,

Your application was considered on 3rd October, 1985 and we are pleased to advise that you have been approved as prospective parents for a female child aged 0-6 months from Korea.

International Social Service, 1/11/85

Dear Ms. S.,

I wish to advise you that Mr. and Mrs. H. have been approved as suitable parents for a child from Korea.

Child's name — PARK, Eun Hee.

My favourite paper in the files was a handwritten note from Mum:

19/9/85 Accepted for adoption

1/11/85 Allocation

7/1/86 Tari and Erna overseas

17/1 She's ours

19/1 Home in Oz

Tari is my sister, Erna is my mum, and the words 'She's ours' are all I've ever needed to know.

The word 'adopted' means 'to take as one's own,' and it's a paradox. To be adopted should mean you never have to say you're adopted. As soon as my parents adopted me, I became theirs and they became mine. My parents raised me, they loved me unconditionally, and they gave me my name. Their country, their language, their culture, their history — it all became mine. My adoption was so complete that it's as if I was never adopted.

I don't feel like two things in one. I used to be one thing but I became something else. I was born in South Korea, but I am Australian. I know my roots and identity are Australian, and if I wanted to find out more about them, then I'm looking to Australia because it's my country that shaped me. And I'm looking to Papua New Guinea, Canada, Norway and Britain because that's where my family's heritage is, and it's my family who shaped me.

Even my birth notice my parents put in the paper when I came to Australia tells me who I am:

HOEL (Harvey) — Neville and Erna are thrilled to announce the arrival of Juni Desireé, born Sept. 8. 1985. Arrived from Korea Jan. 19. 1986. A sister for Tari and Shiloh.

Desireé means 'desired' or 'wanted' in French. My parents gave me the name Desireé because they wanted me to know I was wanted. I always have.

And I've never wanted anything but this country, my family, and this life. No-one can love my Dad, Mum, sister and brother more than I do, and I know I won the country lottery. I have lost nothing but gained everything. I don't take it for granted because I know that things could have been different.

I both forgive and thank my biological mother for giving me up. She gave me the greatest gift. A family that loves me. I hope she knows her wish came true.